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Sermons on the Heidelberg Catechism

Rev C Bouwman

Held at the Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

1998-2004

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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**Sermon on Lord's Day 1 Q&A 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on
Sunday afternoon, 29 November 1998.**

(Institution of the Free Reformed Church of West Kelmscott & Ordination of Office Bearers)

***"IN THE CATECHISM COMMON PEOPLE RESPOND TO GOD'S GLORIOUS
PROMISES."***

Text:

Lord's Day 1 Q&A 1

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

A. That I am not my own,[1] but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death,[2] to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.[3] He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil.[5] He also preserves me in such a way[6] that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head;[7] indeed, all things must work together for my salvation.[8] Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life[9] and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him.[10]

[1] I Cor. 6:19, 20 [2] Rom. 14:7-9. [3] I Cor. 3:23; Tit. 2:14. [4] I Pet. 1:18, 19; I John 1:7; 2:2. [5] John 8:34-36; Heb. 2:14, 15; I John 3:8. [6] John 6:39, 40; 10:27-30; II Thess. 3:3; I Pet. 1:5. [7] Matt. 10:29-31; Luke 21:16-18. [8] Rom. 8:28. [9] Rom. 8:15, 16; II Cor. 1:21, 22; 5:5; Eph. 1:13, 14. [10] Rom. 8:14.

Scripture Reading:

II Corinthians 1:1-11

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalm 111:4,5

Psalm 40:4

Psalm 12:4

Hymn 49:1,2

Psalm 134:3 (After Ordination)

Hymn 53:1,2

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Today a tenth church may be instituted in the bond of the Free Reformed Churches of Australia. A church: that's not a club of like-minded people. Nor is a church a social organisation, a group of tightly knit family members who all get on well with each other. A church, we learn from Scripture, is the work of God; specifically, a church is a gathering of believers, of those washed in the blood of Jesus Christ and renewed by the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

A gathering of *believers*. What is it that the church *believes*? What faith binds the members together? What faith is to characterise the Free Reformed Church of West Kelmscott, what faith shall its office bearers cultivate – if this church is to remain a church of Jesus Christ? As we institute today the new congregation of West Kelmscott, this is the question I wish to lay before you. The faith that characterises the church is not a set of doctrinal truths and no more; the faith that characterises the Lord's church is the faith of Caspar Olevianus and Zacharius Ursinus so long ago, a faith that *lives*, is *practical* and *vibrant*. It's the faith confessed in LD 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

To draw out with you this afternoon the feel of that faith, I wish to read with you first the introduction given in our *Book of Praise* to the Heidelberg Catechism; it's on page 473. There I read the following:

"The Heidelberg Catechism, the second of our doctrinal standards, was written in Heidelberg at the request of Elector Frederick III, ruler of the most influential German province, the Palatinate, from 1559 to 1576. This pious Christian prince commissioned Zacharius Ursinus, twenty-eight years of age and professor of theology at the Heidelberg University, and Caspar Olevianus, twenty-six years old and Frederick's court preacher, to prepare a catechism for instructing the youth and for guiding pastors and teachers. Frederick obtained the advice and cooperation of the entire theological faculty in the preparation of the Catechism. The Heidelberg Catechism was adopted by a Synod in Heidelberg and published in German with a preface by Frederick III, dated January 19, 1563.

1563. We live in 1998, 435 years later. The authors of the Heidelberg Catechism lived in Germany; we live in Australia. More, the authors were theologians; we're normal, common people. The question jumps at us: how in the world can a document written 435 years ago –it's the age of the donkey and cart; they didn't so much as dream of bicycles, let alone cars and aeroplanes, computers and televisions and the internet and space shuttles- how in the world can a document written in such a remote past be of any assistance to us today?? We are *today's* people, instituting a new congregation in the midst of *today's* problems; don't we then *need today's answers*? How shall a church on the threshold of the 21st century survive with a faith that's centuries old?!

The answer, my brothers and sisters, is quite simple. The fact of the matter is that the *God* confessed in this confession *has not changed in the 435 years* since Caspar Olevianus and Zacharius Ursinus believed in Him and put their faith to paper. More, their God is today our God, Yes, this is the God who today causes His church to be instituted in West Kelmscott. Because this God does not change, yes, because this God is busy in our midst today must this confession of long ago be our confession today. God has made us today as rich as He has made them of long ago, and so we, like they, need to *respond* to His promises by confessing the faith. As our ways as one congregation part, it's quite in place to consider the nature and the need of this confession.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

IN THE CATECHISM COMMON PEOPLE *RESPOND* TO GOD'S GLORIOUS PROMISES.

- 1. what circumstances surround real-life people**
- 2. what promises do real-life people have**
- 3. what response do real-life people give**

1. LD 1, in fact, the entire Catechism, is punctuated by personal pronouns. Time and time again we meet the word 'I', the word 'my', the word 'me'. Who, I ask you, is meant by these personal pronouns? When LD 1 says that "I am not my own, but belong ... to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ" who is the 'I', the 'my', that's speaking here??

The correct answer, we all know, is: the 'I' and the 'my' refers to the believer, to you and to me. Yet I draw to your attention, beloved, the fact that neither you nor I wrote the Heidelberg Catechism. In first instance, the 'I' and the 'my' and the 'me' of our LD is a direct reference to Caspar Olevianus and Zacharius Ursinus. These two figures of church history worked with the promises of God as given to them in holy Scripture, and then, in their situation, echoed those promises as their only comfort. This afternoon I take you back into church history to observe how God deals with His real-life people.

Caspar Olevianus and Zacharius Ursinus are introduced for us in the Introduction we just read to the Heidelberg Catechism. Zacharius Ursinus, says this Introduction, "was twenty-eight years of age and professor of theology at the Heidelberg University." The other man, Caspar Olevianus, was "twenty-six years old and Frederick's court preacher." Both details paint to our minds pictures of these two men as arm-chair theologians, persons who don't breathe the air of daily living, who don't get their hands dirty with the nuts and bolts of normal life.

Yet that turns out to be quite incorrect. These two men –and their ages aren't that different from the average age of the present Kelmscott congregation- both very much had their feet on the ground, both were common, normal people who got their hands as dirty with the mud and misery of this broken life as anybody else. Consider.

It's a historically documented fact that Caspar Olevianus was a student. And, as students do, young Caspar studied..., and then got rid of his cramps and his cobwebs by a bit of adventure. He and some friends found themselves a dingy to cross the river. But a number of drunks climbed on board also, so that the boat capsized. One of Caspar's friends couldn't swim..., and drowned before Caspar's eyes.... Caspar himself passed on the sad news to the father of his drowned friend....

Again, it's a historically documented fact that Olevianus, once he finished his studies, returned to his native town (the people were still Roman Catholic) to tell his school friends and family members of the gospel he had discovered while studying, the good news of salvation not through works but through God's grace only through faith in Jesus Christ. The people of his home town received the gospel eagerly and joined the Reformation. The governor wasn't happy with that development, and sought to arrest the young preacher. When the town's folk refused to cooperate, the governor had their crops burned.... For us today, that may not be such a major disaster, for trucks will bring bread to Kelmscott from elsewhere. Not so in those days; the people's defence of young Caspar meant that they and their animals hungered throughout the next winter. The result was that Olevianus was arrested and gaoled. And again: as we consider Olevianus in gaol, we're not to think of a place like Casurina; we're to think instead of a dungeon, damp and dark, flea-invested and stinking. Make no mistake, beloved: Caspar Olevianus knew life from its dark side, knew what it was to suffer, and to suffer wrongfully. And who can tell what guilt burdened his conscience as a result of his friend's death? If only he hadn't suggested the boat..., if only he'd stayed with his books..., if only he'd dived for his friend sooner.... Isn't that human? Young Caspar, my brothers and sisters, was as human as you and I.... There was nothing artificial about this man, nothing protected. This brother of long ago felt the consequences of the fall into sin just as acutely as we do today. So, for that matter, did the other author, Zacharius Ursinus; a picture of his humanness is as real as Olevianus'.

Frederick III, ruler of a district called the "Palatinate", saw need for a Catechism so that the people of his realm might be taught the Word of God. At his request, two young men sat down to fulfil their mandate. And see: Olevianus and Ursinus do not begin their Catechism by asking what the doctrine of the Bible might be. They've got their feet on the ground, and they've got their hands dirty with the mud and misery of this broken life, and they know that Frederick wants to use this Catechism to teach people who are also burdened by the concrete trials and tribulations of their lives, and so they begin their Catechism with a question that's born from the actual pain characterising this broken life. Etched into young Caspar's mind is that horrible vision of his friend drowning in the river; in that concrete life-and-death tragedy, what, Caspar, is your only comfort?? Not all that long ago he spent time in that rat-infested, stinking dungeon; what, Caspar, in the midst of the horrors of this life, when you do not know whether the guard's opening of your cell door means freedom or execution, what is your comfort? How, Caspar, in such situations can you keep your chin up? How can you, no matter the horror of the circumstance, be at peace? Caspar knew, and Zacharius Ursinus did too, that the people out there in the fields of Frederick's little kingdom, had reason both to laugh and to cry, could be joyful as the harvest was ripening and devastated when the hail storm destroyed the ripened crop. They knew –they were as human as anybody else- that the people of the streets were faced with every possible temptation and gave in to temptations also and so had to cope with a guilty conscience and the bitter results of their sins. What these people needed was not dry doctrine from armchair theologians; what these normal, average people needed was the gospel of Jesus Christ set within a framework of the mud and misery of this real life. So Olevianus and Ursinus put to paper no truisms, but their own personal faith. As you, Caspar, sat there day in day out in the dark dampness of your dungeon, what was your only comfort? What hope would you cling to, how could you stay in good cheer?? And Caspar Olevianus, a real-life person, supplied his answer:

"That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ."

It's quite an answer Olevianus gives to the question. As he thinks back to the drowning of his friend, as he recalls the chill and the stench and the hopelessness of that prison cell, he doesn't say that there is no comfort, nor does he say that he could do nothing better than wish to be dead himself or drown his sorrow and anguish in a drinking binge. No, congregation, Olevianus could give a straight answer: I had comfort in the chill and the stench and the hopelessness of that dungeon because I knew that I was the special possession of "my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ". This Saviour

"has [long ago] 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."

And we wonder: how does Olevianus know this? How can anybody know this?? That's our second point: what promises do real-life people have?

2 Yes, congregation, how can Olevianus in prison know that he belongs to Jesus Christ?? The answer is actually very straight forward: *God told him so*. I'm thinking now particularly of the significance of the sacrament of holy baptism administered to young Caspar when he was still an infant. In that baptism, the Lord God from heaven above established His eternal covenant of grace with this little sinner; God claimed tiny Caspar as His. Though the "Form for Holy Baptism" as we find it in our *Book of Praise* had not yet been written, we understand that its Scriptural content was true for children over the centuries, for Caspar too. May I ask you, then, to turn with me to that well-known Form for the Baptism of Infants in your *Book of Praise*, pg 584. There the riches of the sacrament of baptism are explained as follows (middle of the page):

"Second, baptism signifies and seals to us the washing away of our sins through Jesus Christ. We are, therefore, baptised into the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

a. Just what God promises when He has a child baptised into the Name of the Father is set forth in the next paragraph, like this:

"When we are baptised into the Name of the Father, God the Father testifies and seals to us that He establishes an eternal covenant of grace with us. He adopts us for His children and heirs, and promises to provide us with all good and avert all evil or turn it to our benefit."

God from heaven above, then, reached down to that infant Caspar and adopted him to be His child and heir, promised to provide him with all good and avert all evil or turn that evil to Caspar's benefit. We understand: that's a most rich promise. In the course of young Caspar's life, almighty God in heaven placed in young Caspar's life the death of his friend, later placed the young preacher in the foul dungeon of the governor. Did the hurt and discomfort of the circumstances into which God led Caspar's life give the lie to God's promises?? Caspar was convinced: if God is God –sovereign, holy, gracious to sinners- the mud and misery of this life do not give the lie to God's promises; I remain God's child by covenant, precious in His eyes, and He continues to provide all good and turn all evil away or work the evil of being in prison or loosing a friend to my benefit. You see, congregation, br Olevianus *knew Who God was* – always reliable, trustworthy- and so did not give up hope as one dark day flowed into the next dark day in that cold, damp and smelly dungeon. He knew it: God *said* I belong to Jesus Christ, and so God is my Father, and that means that He "preserves me in such a way that without [His] will ... not a hair can fall from my head" – even in this rat-infested prison; "indeed, all things must work together for my salvation."

So he said it, with the words of LD 1. What we have then? This: with LD 1 Caspar Olevianus (and Zacharius Ursinus too) *responded to what God had said to them years ago in the covenant of grace He made with them*.

And let me ask you, beloved: is any other response fitting?? Given Who God is, is any other response acceptable to God? If He is the almighty, Who once spoke and this world came into existence, if He is so gracious that He gave up His only Son to save sinners, is any other response fitting to a promise from Him? Surely, it's clear: the only fitting response to the promises of God given at holy baptism is a confession in the vein of LD 1: God *said* I'm His, and *so I confess* that I "belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ." And so I'm sure: "without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation" – even if a friend drowns in my presence or I'm locked away in the king's dungeon.

b. God's promises to little Caspar at his baptism were greater still; Caspar was baptised also in the name of God the Son. The Form for Baptism gives us the Scriptural significance of baptism into the Son with these words:

"When we are baptised into the Name of the Son, God the Son promises us that He washes us in His blood from

all our sins and unites us with Him in His death and resurrection. Thus we are freed from our sins and accounted righteous before God."

That's to say: God promised to little Caspar that all his sins would be washed away, that he would in fact be considered righteous, without sin, in the courts of God the Judge. But see, in the course of his young life, Caspar gave himself to all the sins that you and I give ourselves to also; there was nothing unhuman about this man. But as Olevianus considers the events of his life, the death of his friend, the hunger of his town's folk, his time in prison, he doesn't chastise himself with thoughts of: God must be angry at me, I must have done something wrong, otherwise these evils wouldn't have happened. None of it; he instead clings to what *God has said* concerning him while still an infant. And when the question comes to him about what his comfort might be in the midst of the dirt and the damage of this life, Olevianus feeds back in his own words the words that God had earlier spoken to him, and he says:

"I ... belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. [Regardless of what my sins were], He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil."

We understand: then br Caspar does not have to go through life chastising himself for having left his desk and having gotten into that boat; whatever guilty conscience he might have on account of sin is relieved of its burden, simply because *God said* that He would freely wash away all sin for Jesus' sake and declare Caspar righteous before the throne of God. So trials and tribulations are not expressions of God's wrath on sin; instead, God, my Father for Jesus' sake, is busy working all things in my life for my salvation. Truly, what peace fills one's mind when the promises of God are embraced as br Olevianus could do! And make no mistake: given the identity of the God who gave such promises, no other response was fitting for Olevianus – no matter his circumstances!!!

c. God's promises are richer still. For God had little Caspar baptised also in the Name of the Holy Spirit. The wealth of that baptism is expressed in the Form for Baptism like this:

"When we are baptised into the Name of the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Spirit assures us by this sacrament that He will dwell in us and make us living members of Christ, imparting to us what we have in Christ, namely, the cleansing from our sins and the daily renewal of our lives, till we shall finally be presented without blemish among the assembly of God's elect in life eternal."

That God, instead of being angry, would make His home in the sinner, would renew him so that on the last day we may be perfected before God – surely, how marvellous is the gospel! There's Olevianus in prison, uncomfortably so. How can he keep a spark in his eyes? What's his hope?? *God has spoken*, and so there's only one fitting way to respond. And that's what Olevianus does in the dirt and difficulties of this life, and so echoes what God said to him as an infant: "by His Holy Spirit," he says, God "also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him." Dirt and damp and darkness, the mud and misery of this broken life: br Olevianus works with the words of God once spoken to him, and so has comfort, has hope, has perspective, has peace-of-mind in the real-life circumstances of daily existence. In the misery of his prison he *knows* –for God promised it- that the crown of righteousness is laid aside for him, that one day he'll enter the very presence of God Himself, and there there'll be no tears any more, and no pain or hunger or misery either.... For that's what God has promised him....

3. The very personal nature of the Confession drawn up by Caspar Olevianus and Zacharius Ursinus became in turn an example for the people of the Palatinate. After all, God's covenant of grace was made with so many of them too. So they also had to *respond* –how?- by taking God's words revealed in Scripture and underlined in the sacrament of holy baptism and *repeating these promises as true and fact for the self*. To *echo*, to *repeat after God as true for the self* what God has promised: given Who God is, there simply is no other acceptable way to respond to God! Countless of the Palatinate *believed* God's promises, and repeated those promises as their own with the words of LD 1. See there the church gathering work of the Lord centuries ago.

And we? God has made His covenant of grace with all of us also. That's to say: the Lord has claimed us as His, told us that we belong to Him, that He is our Father, His Son is our Saviour, His Holy Spirit is our Renewer. As such we're grafted into His church. That's what *God says to us* in the nitty-gritty of this life – including depression and cancer

and marriage strains, etc, etc. Now tell me, beloved: how do *you* respond to what God has said to you?? Will you, in the pain of your lives, keep God's promises at arm's length? Or maybe even judge them hollow, empty? Know it: it is true for us as much as it was for Olevianus and Ursinus, and it was true for Olevianus and Ursinus as much as it was for Abraham and David and Paul before them: given Who God is there is *only one response acceptable*. And that is this: Lord, if you say I'm your's, then *it is so*; "I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and death, no matter my circumstance, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ." It's to say: "Christ has fully paid for all my sins and set me free from all the power of the devil." Again, it's to say: "He also preserves me in such a way that [today] not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my heavenly Father; indeed, all things [even my mess at home] must work together for my salvation." And because I'm Christ's He "by His Holy Spirit ... also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him." That's the response of faith, that's to *accept* what God in mercy has said to me and *work* with it.

Is, then, the Heidelberg Catechism outdated?? Not at all, beloved, not at all. *For God does not change*, and so His promises to His children do not either. You and I at the end of the 20th century may take on our lips the very personal response of Caspar Olevianus and Zacharius Ursinus and make that response our own *simply because the promises of God to them are also His promises to us* and to His promises *one response only remains fitting* – and that's to repeat after God what He has said to us.

There, beloved, you have also the reason why we may not minimise the confessions, as if they are simply the work of well-meaning believers of long ago, but we today have our own problems that demand our own answers. A confession by definition is *man's response to God's promise*; the very word 'confession' in its Greek original means 'to say the same thing'. And God doesn't speak out of two sides of His mouth, does not give different promises to different people either; His promises are always the same, and so God's people over the ages can do nothing else than *echo* what God has said. That's why the faith of Olevianus and of Ursinus can be our faith today – just as it was Paul's faith centuries before.

Now we institute a new church. What faith may characterise this church? More, what faith *must* characterise every church of Jesus Christ? What faith shall the office bearers encourage in the flock? No, my beloved, the faith is a not a set of doctrinal truisms that we need to get straight in our minds and nothing more. The faith that's to characterise all churches of Jesus Christ is this: by God's grace I was once grafted by baptism into the church of Christ, and so God gave to me delightfully rich promises in Jesus Christ! So I *respond* to what God has said, and I –with the church of all ages- take that faith on my lips, using words borrowed from brothers of a previous century, and so *echo* the wealth that God has given to me. This is a faith that's intensely *personal*, a faith that *lives*, that has value and potency smack in the middle of the dirt and difficulties of this broken life.

A new church may be instituted in West Kelmscott, another congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers who expect, in their specific circumstances, their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed –no matter the nature of their sins- by the blood of Jesus Christ, sanctified and sealed by the Spirit of Jesus Christ. As long, my beloved, as you cling to this faith, not just in its various doctrinal details but in its power as a personal response to the promises God has once given to you in your baptism, you shall remain a true church of Jesus Christ. But if you cling to the various doctrinal points and at the same time divorce their wealth from the nitty-gritty of your daily lives, you simply don't have true faith – and so cannot claim to be church of Jesus Christ. Similarly, if you make light of the points of doctrine, and claim instead that you have personal bond with God and so all is well, you again cannot claim to be church of Jesus Christ.

The promises of God stand firm, my beloved. See to it, under the leadership of your God-given office bearers, that you respond, every day anew, in your concrete circumstances, in the only way fitting to any word that *God* has spoken. Then, Yes, you will be a blessing to one another, a blessing to the bond of churches, and a blessing in the community. And God Himself, at the right time, will speak to you another word of promise: "Well done, my good and faithful servant; enter into the joy of your Master." Amen.

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**Sermon on Lord's Day 1 Q&A 2 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on
Sunday afternoon, 6 December 1998.**

***"THE ONLY COMFORT SUPPLIES JOY IN THE MIDST OF THE SINS AND MISERY OF
THIS BROKEN LIFE."***

Text:

Lord's Day 1 Q&A 2

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

A. First, how great my sins and misery are;[1] second, how I am delivered from all my sins and misery;[2] third, how I am to be thankful to God for such deliverance.[3]

[1] Rom. 3:9, 10; 1 John 1:10. [2] John 17:3; Acts 4:12; 10:43. [3] Matt. 5:16; Rom. 6:13; Eph. 5:8-10; 1 Pet. 2:9, 10.

Scripture Reading:

Colossians 1:1-23

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Ps 4:3

Ps 126:1

Ps 84:3,4

Ps 119:5,6,7

Ps 63:2,3,4

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

It's all so wonderfully rich. Imagine: I was once enslaved to the power of the devil, but Jesus in boundless mercy "has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from" that evil power; I'm a slave to sin and Satan no more. That wonderful news, however, is not the extent of the gospel; the very Saviour who set me free from Satan's clutches has Himself restored me to God Almighty so that this almighty God is now "my heavenly Father" – without whose will "not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation." Truly, here's comfort, perspective, hope in the midst of the trials we encounter in this vale of tears! Yet even that is not the whole picture, for this same Saviour has also given me His Holy Spirit so that I'm today assured of eternal life, yes, today He "makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him." It's rich, so very, very rich.

But the riches one has are not necessarily a source of enjoyment. Many are the people of this world who have amassed a considerable amount of material wealth, but they are not happy, do not enjoy, do not receive joy from, the riches they have. These are misers, or maybe persons so troubled by other concerns (one can think of marriage breakdown or ill health) that they haven't the opportunity to enjoy their wealth.

The same, my beloved, can happen in relation to the riches of the gospel. It is quite possible to hang Q & A 1 of the Catechism quite prominently in your family room in order to underline what is the only source of comfort for yourself and your family, and yet not feel comforted at all yourself, go through life burdened by problems that very much push the comfort of the gospel well and truly into the background.

This is the problem, my brothers and sisters, that the fathers addressed in Q & A 2 of the Catechism. The fathers

learned from the Bible: no one should use the gospel of Q & A 1 simply as a decoration for the family room; instead, all should genuinely *enjoy* the riches God gives, enjoy these riches in the daily circumstances of this life. Shall we say: in the kingdom of God there is no room for spiritual misers, for persons who do not actually *enjoy* the riches God has given them.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

THE ONLY COMFORT SUPPLIES JOY IN THE MIDST OF THE SINS AND MISERY OF THIS BROKEN LIFE.

- 1. the inconsistency of this broken life**
- 2. the push to the gospel in this broken life**
- 3. the place of self-examination in this broken life**

1 It needs to be fixed in our minds first of all, my brothers and sisters, that the comfort confessed in LD 1 captures a *reality*. Here I draw your attention to Paul's word to the Colossians. He addresses a letter to persons in Colosse, specifically to "the saints and faithful brethren in Christ." That's to say: Paul addresses his letter to *believers*, to persons who accept as true the good news of God's redeeming work in Jesus Christ. So Paul can write in vs 3 these words:

"We give thanks to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of your love for all the saints" (vss 3f).

Notice it: Paul acknowledges that these Colossians have faith in Jesus Christ. It is because these saints of Colosse *believe* in the Lord Jesus Christ that Paul can also *include* them when he explains what happened to himself. Vas 13:

"He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love."

Paul speaks here of "us", and with that refers to himself and the saints to whom he writes. He himself, and the saints of Colosse too, were once slaves to sin and Satan, in bondage to "the power of darkness". But, he says (and he can think back to the sovereign working of God in his own life on the road to Damascus so many years ago), "God has delivered us from the power of darkness." No longer is he, and the Colossian saints with him, enslaved to "the power of darkness"; he, and they also, have been "delivered". More, the same God who delivered from the power of darkness has also (Paul continues) "conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love." That's to say: Paul, and the saints of Colosse also, have been restored to the God they rejected in Paradise; Paul and the saints of Colosse have a place again in the kingdom of God, are loved by the Lord, precious in His sight.

I repeat it: Paul speaks here of a *reality*. He does not speak of a theory, or of a wish, or of a hope or dream. This is *reality*; God "*has* delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love." That is why Paul in vs 3 has reason to give thanks for these saints, and he repeats it in vs 12; he "gives thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light." This deliverance is *reality*.

In the first Q & A of our LD we make the identical confession. In Q & A 1 we confess a *reality*; "I ... *belong* ... to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ." Fact, reality. I *am* incredibly rich. That's what you and I say in LD 1.

Now a question, my beloved. How does this confession receive colour in your life? Better put: how does that bold confession you make in Q & A 1 add shine to the very concrete life that you live within the four walls of your house?? You know what you yourself are like, and you know the environment of your home and your own contribution to that environment. Is the work of God confessed in Q & A 1 a cause of *joy*, or is it a teaching you take for granted?

I'll cast the question differently. How can the wealth of Q & A 1 come alive for you in *your* daily environment? The gospel it confesses is so wonderfully rich; how can this comfort be a source of *joy* for you in your situation? How does one bridge the distance we perceive between the wealth of the gospel (and we confess this wealth to be reality and not make-believe) *and* the daily lives we live?

The question is real. The apostle Paul considers it possible to *thank* God for the riches He's given to the Colossians. But truth be told: while we'll thank God for the comfort of LD 1, we realise well that there's a distance between the comfort confessed in that LD and our mood in daily life. There's a discrepancy between the wealth we confess in Q & A 1 and the look on our faces and the tone of our voices in the nitty-gritty of this life. What, then, do we need to know in order to live and die in the *joy* of this comfort?

2 Three things, says Q & A 2. We're quite familiar with the three: I need to know "how great my sins and misery are." I need to know also "how I am delivered from all my sins and misery." And I need to know "how I am to be thankful to God for such deliverance."

I need to emphasise with you, congregation, how *personal* this Q & A is. When this Q & A speaks about "my sins and misery" (and it does so twice) it does not utter a truism true for all people (though it certainly is true for all people); rather, in this Q & A the Catechism's authors put into words what they have heard God in Scripture say about *themselves*. And what God in Scripture said about Caspar Olevianus and Zacharius Ursinus he has equally said about you and me, for we are no different than they, and they no different from us. This is personal: when I take on my lips the words of Answer 2 I am speaking about *my* sins, the sins of Clarence Bouwman, and about the misery that *my* sins cause to me and to those around me. And again, with this Q & A I'm not speaking about the sins I committed years and years ago, say before I heard the gospel and believed it; I'm talking about "how great my sins and misery *are*." This is *present* reality. Look with me at the texts mentioned under this Q & A. In connection with the matter of "how great my sins and misery are", the Catechism refers first to Rom 3:9,10. There I read the following:

"What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin. As it is written: 'There is none righteous, no, not one....'"

Notice: Paul says this concerning *himself* and the *saints* of Rome. He says that he and the saints of Rome are not a dot better than anyone else who has never yet heard of God. "None is righteous, no, not one...." That's to say: Paul the *believer* does not shun from speaking of himself as a *sinner*, does not shy away from conceding that his sins are *still* as great as anybody else's.

The same point is made in the second text quoted by our LD to prove "how great my sins and misery *are*", I John 1:10. Here the apostle is moved by the Spirit of the Lord to write this:

"If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us."

The point of the passage is not that one would maintain that he has never, ever sinned; the point of the passage is that *believers* still sin. Here is the material of Rom 7, where the *believer* Paul writes about himself, in the present tense, like this:

"For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find. For the good that I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice" (vss 18f).

This reality is captured in LD 23 also; the person justified by faith in Jesus Christ confesses that he is "still inclined to all evil." We'll need to say more of this reality when we deal with LD's 2 & 3.

When you and I, then, congregation, take on our lips the words of Q & A 2, and so mention that our sins and misery are great, we are confessing a reality true of ourselves today. *My* sins are exceedingly great, and much misery results from my sins, misery that I feel in my home and in my work, and that misery is of such dark colour that I don't see the joy of the comfort of LD 1 any more. Those harsh words I spat out to my wife yesterday was sin, and it ruined the atmosphere in the home, brought into my day and her day and the children's day so much misery. And the result was that I didn't *enjoy* the comfort of Q & A 1.... That I went last night where my parents didn't want me to go was sin, and it strains the relation between my parents and me today, and one can feel it in the home and my conscience bothers me, and altogether it fogs over the bright sunshine of the only comfort of life and death. Make no mistake, beloved: those concrete sins of which we're guilty –and you can fill in for yourself the specific transgressions you committed this morning, last evening, yesterday, Friday at work, etc- are in God's eyes "great" and the misery that

results is equally "great", and the result is that we do not enjoy the riches God gives us in Jesus Christ.

"What do you need to know in order to live and die in the joy of this comfort?" The first thing I need to know is that, Yes, *my sins of today are great*, and the resulting misery is too.

How, you ask, does knowledge of "how great my sins and misery are" produce comfort? I grant: knowledge of how great my sins and misery are is not comforting of itself. Yet, my beloved, it certainly leads to comfort –how so?- *by driving us to seek deliverance anew in Jesus Christ*. You don't go to the doctor unless you're aware that you're sick. Again, one doesn't go to a doctor if you've got nothing worse than a cold. You need to be convinced that you've well and truly got a problem before you go to the doctor. So it is too with knowledge of sin. It's not sufficient that I know that I slipped up a bit yesterday. Rather, I need to know "*how great* my sins and misery are." It's awareness that I've got a major problem –I can will what is right, but I can't do it; in fact, I do what I don't want to do- that drives me to seek help. More, God makes me aware that I *need* help, so that I might *seek anew* the deliverance He's promised in Christ Jesus. See there how knowing how great my sins of today are, and my sins of yesterday too, is a source of comfort; *God drives me, again, to the Saviour He gave*.

It's not just knowledge of "how great my sins and misery are" that produces joy in the comfort God has prepared. The second element mentioned in our Q & A is "how I am delivered from all my sins and misery." The apostle Paul wrote to the Colossians that God had "delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love." This was a *reality* for the Colossian saints. Yet to enjoy the wealth of this gospel, those saints of Colosse had to know the sins they committed each day anew, had to know how great those sins were so that in turn they might seek deliverance *again* in Jesus Christ. And see, in the face of yesterday's sins there *is* redemption again in Jesus' blood; those specific sins of this morning, of yesterday, of Friday: there *is* forgiveness for them, there is deliverance from the wrath of God I've brought on myself through those sins. This deliverance is not a once-only thing; rather, the sins I've committed today, yesterday are *also* washed away. *And that in turn means that I need not walk around this afternoon with a guilty conscience!* So there's room for joy to pervade my life. And that in turn affects again the atmosphere around me, be it at home or at work or at school....

There's a third thing I need to know: "how I am to be thankful to God for such deliverance." Why I need to know that if I am to live and die in the joy of the comfort of God's redemption?? Simply, beloved, because you and I remain inclined to all evil. We do not properly know how to say thankyou to God. If the Lord would leave us to ourselves, we would immediately again transgress His commands – with all the misery that results in our homes and work environment as a result. And that in turn takes our comfort away. No, beloved, if we are to enjoy the comfort of God's saving work, we need to be eagerly ready to learn from God how to say thankyou for His blessings. That's why our LD impresses upon us that we need today also to know that third item; I need to learn, day by day, "how ... to be thankful to God for such deliverance."

3. I need to work this all out in greater detail still. You will be aware that next Sunday we shall, the Lord willing, celebrate the supper of our Lord. According to the command of the apostle Paul, we shall need to examine ourselves before we attend this table. The "Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper" outlines *how* we ought to examine ourselves; it's the well-known "three parts" listed on pg 595 of the *Book of Praise*.

But see: those "three parts" of this "true self-examination" *cover the exact points of Q & A 2*. If we are to enjoy daily the wonderful riches of Q & A 1, we shall need to submit ourselves daily to "true self-examination." How?? The Form spells it out:

"First, let everyone consider his sins and accursedness, so that he, detesting himself, may humble himself before God. For the wrath of God against sin is so great that He could not leave it unpunished, but has punished it in His beloved Son Jesus Christ by the bitter and shameful death on the cross."

We're quite used to the wording of this first part of the self-examination, and so its bite disappears. But notice what it says: let everyone –that's *you*, that's *me*- let everyone consider his own sins and accursedness. That is self-examination: I am to run my mind over my particular sins and so consider how I've earned for myself God's curse. That's to say: I'm to consider "how great my sins and misery are." The purpose of the exercise is not, though, to lead

me to despair; the purpose of the exercise is to lead me to *humility*. It's to lead me to humility because God in heaven can't stand sin, yes, He hates sin so much that He even gave up His only Son in order to do something about sin – how revolting sin must be then! Here's the punch of our LD: my mind is to go over my concrete transgressions so that I develop a sense of how cursed I ought to be before God, my mind is to go over my concrete transgressions so that I develop a sense of how much I need *God's redemption*.

And see: this redemption God has *supplied*. He *gave* His only Son to bear the wrath I deserved – that's the gospel! Now then, what's your *response* to this gospel? That's the second part of this self-examination:

"Second, let everyone search his heart whether he also believes the sure promise of God that all his sins are forgiven him only for the sake of the suffering and death of Jesus Christ and that the perfect righteousness of Christ is freely given him as his own, as if he himself had fulfilled all righteousness."

You wish, then, to delight in the redemption God supplied? Tell me, then: how do you *react* to what God has done in Christ Jesus? Do you accept as true that Christ has paid the price for the sins you've committed last week, so that there is no wrath left from God for you?? That's the punch of our LD: daily my mind is to go over my concrete transgressions in the realisation that God for Jesus' sake has washed *those particular sins away*; they're gone! And tell me: in the face of my concrete, awful sins, is such a message not *most exciting*?? Does such a gospel not invariably *move one to joy*?

Yet even that isn't all. For my remaining sinfulness means that I don't know of myself how to prevent God's wrath from coming on me again. Hence the last part:

"Third, let everyone examine his conscience whether it is his sincere desire to show true thankfulness to God with his entire life and, laying aside all enmity, hatred and envy, to live with his neighbour in true love and unity."

Again, beloved, it's a personal question: what is our intent in the week ahead? Ask not about your neighbour, ask instead about yourself: given the curse that you've earned through your sins, given God's mercy in that He has poured out that curse on Christ instead of on you, what are you going to do this week? More of sin? Or seek God's instruction and strength to fight against sin? That, again, is the punch of our LD: my mind is to go over my intent for tonight, tomorrow, Tuesday: shall I make it my business to show thankfulness to God for His wonderful deliverance?? What shall drive me as I go about my daily work tomorrow??

The gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ is so wonderfully rich. What do *you* need to know so that day by day *you* live in the *joy* of this comfort? We associate "true self-examination" with the celebration of the Lord's supper. But that, my beloved, is a mistake. Sure, let us examine ourselves before we go to the table; that's certainly the apostle's command. But this self-examination is something for *every day anew*. God "has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love." That glorious deed on God's part concerning us is not a wealth we can paste on the wall of the family room with the words of Q & A 1. God does not want His children to be misers; He wishes us to *enjoy* this glorious gospel, every day anew. How I can enjoy the wealth God has given me? By considering first my sins and accursedness, by embracing secondly the work God did in Christ Jesus to save a wretch like me, by determining in the third place to live every day, walk every step of my life, in conscience obedience to God's revealed will.

Let these three, my beloved, be before your eyes every moment of your day, and of your night. Then the wealth of the gospel shall not be locked away as a treasure you can't enjoy. Instead, then the good news God has prepared for you will give shine to each day – no matter the brokenness you witness around you and in you. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 2 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 13 December 1998.

"THROUGH THE LAW THE LORD TEACHES US HOW DESPARATELY MUCH WE NEED HIS SAVING WORK IN JESUS CHRIST."

Text:

Lord's Day 2

3.Q. From where do you know your sins and misery?

A. From the law of God.[1]

[1] *Rom. 3: 20;*

4. Q. What does God's law require of us? A. 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.[1] This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.[2]

[1] *Deut. 6:5. [2] Lev. 19:18.*

5. Q. Can you keep all this perfectly?

A. No,[1] I am inclined by nature to hate God and my neighbour.[2]

[1] *Rom. 3:10, 23; I John 1:8, 10. [2] Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Jer. 17:9; Rom. 7:23; 8:7; Eph. 2:3; Tit. 3:3.*

Scripture Reading:

Exodus 25:10-22

Matthew 22:34-40

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "*Book of Praise*" *Anglo Genevan Psalter*)

Psalm 123:1,2

Psalm 145:2

Psalm 32:1

Psalm 130:2,4

Psalm 103:4; Hymn 49:1

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

We received today the privilege to sit at the table of the Lord. At this table the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ was set before us in pointed fashion; as surely as the bread was broken before our eyes and given to us, so surely was Christ's body broken on the cross to pay for our sins. He received what I deserved – rich gospel!

Now that we've finished this celebration, we receive opportunity to listen to the word of our God. As it turns out, we need this afternoon to busy ourselves with LD 2 – about sins and misery. And we wonder: is this LD not completely out of step with the celebration of moments ago? Given that the celebration of the Lord's supper was joyful and spoke of redemption, forgiveness and salvation, is the topic of sins and misery not totally out of place this afternoon?

There is, brothers and sisters, a line of thought which argues that the three parts of the Catechism are three stages that follow each other. The thought goes like this: a sinner first needs to know how terrible his sins are and how hopeless

his misery is *before* He can appreciate the redemption God has provided in Jesus Christ. Similarly, one needs to appreciate how wonderful the redemption God gave might be before one can show one's gratitude. So: the three sections of the Catechism become three stages, and what stage you're in (whether you're still trying to come to grips with how great your sins and misery are, or whether you're grappling with the marvels of redemption, or whether you're striving to live the thankful Christian life) what stage you're in depends on your personal spiritual health. Those who could celebrate the Lord's supper are obviously past the first stage; if one were still trying to discover how great his sins and misery are, he cannot, of course, sit at the table of the Lord. Well now, we just sat at the table of the Lord; that would lead to the conclusion that we're past LD 2, we've come to grips with how great our sins and misery are, and so a sermon this afternoon on our sins and misery is out of place....

But the Catechism, my beloved, is not made up of three stages, along which the sinner progresses from stage to stage. The Catechism instead, in its entirety, is the treasure of the Christian. If I wish to live today, and tomorrow again, in the joy of the comfort spelled out to us at the table of the Lord today, I shall need today, and tomorrow again, to appreciate how great my sins and misery today are, to appreciate today, and tomorrow again, how I am today delivered from all my sins and misery, to appreciate also, today and tomorrow again, how I am now to be thankful to God for such deliverance. It is not true that 'sins and misery' is a stage that we ought by now to have passed; day by day we need to be aware of 'how great my sins and misery are' so that in turn I may rejoice at the redemption God in mercy has provided in Jesus Christ.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

THROUGH THE LAW THE LORD TEACHES US HOW DESPARATELY MUCH WE NEED HIS SAVING WORK IN JESUS CHRIST.

- 1. the place of the law**
- 2. the requirement of the law**
- 3. the satisfaction of the law**

1 To live and die in the joy of the comfort of LD 1, we need (said Q & A 2) to know "how great [our] sins and misery are." Well, if your misery is great, you will no doubt feel rather miserable. Hence my question to you: are you in fact miserable?? Do you feel miserable?

I suspect that most of us will answer that question with No. We're miserable when we're sick, we feel miserable when some disaster strikes. But on the whole, given the comforts of our society, given our general health and happiness, No, we're not miserable.

It needs to be fixed in our minds, congregation, that our feelings are not an accurate indicator of whether in fact we're miserable or not. Because of the fall into sin, we have become depraved from top to toe, so that we have no ability any more to judge rightly what our situation really is. If we were to place a hand on the red element of the kitchen stove, something would register in our brains that this is a miserable place to put your hand. But if the nerves do not function, no message comes to the brain to prompt the brain to think in terms of pain and misery. Through our fall into sin, our nerves on this point don't work adequately any more; we've become so depraved that we've lost our ability to judge whether something in fact is comfortable or miserable. So we *feel* comfortable, whereas in fact we may have our hand on that element....

How can we know whether we have a hand on a hot element? The God who established His covenant of grace with us has told us so. Listen to God's word in Dt 27. Says God to His covenant people Israel:

"Cursed is the one who does not confirm all the words of this law" (vs 26).

That's a loaded statement: God pronounces His curse upon any one who fails to keep every word of God's law. That God in fact would have us keep *every* letter of the law is echoed by James:

"For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you

have become a transgressor of the law" (2:10f).

"Cursed is the one who does not confirm *all* the words of this law...." That, beloved in Jesus Christ, is a daunting thought.... God's curse: that's not something to thumb one's nose at.... God's curse: that's *miserable*. And it's the *law* that drives home to us God's demands for us, the *law* that drives home to us how utterly we fail in doing what God requires....

The law. There's something in that notion of 'law' that does not sit well with us. The law: it sounds so negative, so burdensome, so condemning; it places upon us impossible "have-to's". And we're right; it is condemning. I shall need to draw out with you just how very damning the law really is. But before I do that, brothers and sisters, I want to show you first the gospel of the law. I'll do that by laying before you the *place*, the location of the law. To do that I need to ask your attention to passages from the book of Exodus.

Consider first Ex 20, where God gave the law to Israel. We know the opening words of the law so well:

"And God spoke all these words, saying:

I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

You shall have no other gods before Me.

You shall not make for yourself a carved image..." (Ex 20:1-4),

and the rest of the commandments follow.

Notice: what comes first here, the law or the gospel?? We understand: the gospel comes first. That's the opening line of the ten commandments: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." God does not say: obey these ten commandments, and then I'll be your God and set you free from bondage to Egypt; He rather says: I am your God, I set you free from Egypt's slavery, and *that's why* I want you to keep these commandments. It's not so, then, that Israel *earned* their deliverance from Egypt through their obedience to the law; rather, the law was given *after* God graciously took His people out of their bondage. It is *because* God made this people His own that He freely gave deliverance, it is *because* God made this people His own that He told them how they had to live before Him. Let it be fixed in our minds: the law comes *after* the gospel; the gospel comes first.

The same lesson is driven home by the Lord in the structure of the ark of the covenant. Ex 25 spells out God's wish that "the Testimony that I will give you" (vss 16,21) had to receive a place inside the ark. That's to say: the people had to place the two tables of the law that God wrote with His own hand (that's the 10 commandments) *in the ark*. But – and here's the point- to get at the 10 commandments inside the ark, one had to take the lid off the ark. But on the lid was ... the mercy seat. That seat: that, as it were, was God's throne, God's chair. He was sovereignly pleased to dwell with His people, and stipulated that His place of dwelling was in the Holy of Holies of the Tabernacle, where the ark was – and *on* that ark of the covenant was specifically where God was presented as sitting.

Notice: this seat on the ark was called a 'mercy seat'. That's to say: this was a seat of mercy, a seat characterised by mercy. The people were sinful, God was holy, and so God and man could not dwell together as long as sin remained. So the altar had to be placed between the people and God, and God for Jesus' sake forgave the sins of His people, dealt with them in mercy. That sins in fact were forgiven, that God *could* dwell with His people: that was the message of the mercy seat. This seat, then, proclaimed *gospel*, the good news of God dwelling with man – Immanuel.

Now, under this gospel, under the mercy seat, inside the ark of the covenant, the people had to place the Testimony, the two tables of the law. That location is not without significance; the law had a place *under* the gospel. What met the eye in the Holy of Holies was *good news*; that is, not the law stared them in the face (as in: you must do this and you must do that before God is really *your* God), but what stared them in the face was the *gospel* – as in: God has *mercy* on sinners. Then Yes, the law most certainly had a function, for it spelled out how the people of God were to live in their covenant relation with the God Who would give His Son to pay for their sins. But the law had its place *after* the gospel.

This relation between the gospel and the law is echoed in the Catechism. LD 2 asks, "from where do you know your

sins and misery?" The answer is, "From the law of God." But tell me: who is the "you" that asks this question? "From where do *you* know your sins and misery:" is a heathen asked to explain where his knowledge of sin and misery comes? Is an unbeliever asked to explain how he knows about his sins and the extent of his misery? Let there be no mistake: if Q 3 were asked of the heathen or the unbeliever, this heathen or unbeliever would certainly not give the Answer of the Catechism; the heathen and the unbeliever will not confess that he knows his sins and misery "from the law of God".

No, brothers and sisters, the pronoun 'you' in LD 2 refers to the *Christian*, refers to the person who gave the answer of LD 1 about your only comfort. And we heard it with LD 1: God in heaven came to you and me with His gospel of free grace, told us in our baptism (when we could yet do not a thing to impress God) that He was our Father for Jesus' sake, told us that He gave His Son to set us free from the power of the devil, told us that He gave His Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts. That's to say: with LD 1 we *responded*, in faith, to the immeasurable wealth of the gospel God graciously prepared for us and gave to us. Now in LD 2 the *believer* gets asked the question: "from where do you know your sins and misery?" This believer is not above sin, this believer is not above misery either; instead, this believer *possesses the wealth of the gospel*, and now inquires about how much he needs the gospel God has already given to him. This believer: he's so touched by the fall into sin that he does not himself fully perceive how great his sins are, he's so touched by the fall into sin that he does not himself perceive either how his sins make his life impossible, miserable. And he certainly will not enjoy the wonders of God's forgiving grace if he does not first know what God holds him guilty of. So, in order to enjoy the comfort God in mercy has given, the believer asks the Scriptures where one can find out about what he was delivered from, asks the Scriptures how great one's sins and misery are. And this believer gives answer of Scripture: I know my sins and misery "from the law of God."

Then, Yes, beloved, we'll find that the law condemns us; we'll get to that shortly. But let it be fixed in our minds: the law does not come before the gospel, as if we by our efforts in obeying the law had to earn for ourselves the right to enjoy the gospel. Rather, the gospel comes first, comes to us freely. *Now that God has given us redemption in Jesus Christ, we are allowed to look at the misery we're saved from.* That's no longer horrifying; that instead moves us to deep gratitude.

2 With that perspective in mind, we can move on now to our second point: what is the requirement of the law? It's our second Q & A: "what does God's law require of us?"

The answer is intriguing. The authors of the Catechism do not insert here the 10 commandments; they insert instead a summary. And yes, there's a good reason for that. You see, if you look at each of God's commandments by themselves, you could with a measure of justification conclude that you keep God's commandments reasonably well. God says in the first commandment that we're to have no other gods before Him. Well, I don't know any of us who worships Bhuddha or Allah or some other god. The Lord tells us in the second commandment to make no graven images. I don't suppose any of us have an idol standing in our houses. In the sixth commandment we're told not to kill. Again, I like to think that none of us has actually killed. You see: if we take the commandments at their face value, we could even be forgiven for thinking that we're pretty reasonable sort of people, that God couldn't really have much against us.

Those may be our thoughts. As it turns out, the Lord teaches us something quite differently in His Word. Do we keep the law? A Pharisee once asked Jesus which of the 613 laws they counted up in the Old Testament was the most important. Was it the first commandment? Or the tenth? Or the law about sacrificing every morning? Or about paying tithes? "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus' reply? The first and greatest is not the first or tenth commandment, or the one about making sacrifices; the first and greatest is the command to *love*, love God. And a second is on equal level: love your neighbour as yourself.

Love. That's devotion, total devotion. Love involves self-emptying, involves denying the self for the benefit of the other. Love is never half-hearted in giving to the other, love doesn't demand for the self. Love is what the Lord God did when He gave up His only Son; though He had but one Son, He sent Him from heaven to earth, to the anguish of the cross, in order to ransom the people of His choosing. Love is that Jesus did not mind to lay aside His heavenly glory to save the unworthy. That's love: total, all encompassing. That, says Jesus, is the greatest of the commands God gave: *love* God, and *love* the neighbour as oneself. And love God with *all* one's heart, with *all* one's soul, with *all*

one's strength. Love is absolute, love is radical.

Now tell me: can any sinner obey this command? Tell me: how have you fared today?? Yesterday? Last month? Every action, every word, every thought, yes, every attitude: has each been directed only and completely to God's glory and the neighbour's benefit – without regard to self?? Has ever a *word* come out of your mouth that in some little way did not show love for God or for the neighbour? Has ever an *action* come from your hands that in some little way did not show love for God or for the neighbour? Has ever a *thought* passed through your mind that didn't have God's glory central? And what shall we say of our *attitudes*...??

You see the point, beloved: on the surface we might find reason to conclude that we're pretty reasonable sort of people, not really ensnared in too much sin and misery. But through His law the Lord God would impress on us that *we've got it so very wrong!* Through His law God tells us to *love*, and we can't love the way God wants us to; instead, "I am inclined by nature to hate God and my neighbour." That's a lesson God sets before us in His word. Said God of the entire human race some years after the fall into sin:

"Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen 6:5).

How damning, how absolutely damning of the sinner's heart! *Every* intent of the thoughts..., *only* evil *continually*.... O God, have mercy on me a sinner! Woe is me, for I can't keep the law of God. And that's a major problem simply because God has declared cursed every one who does not keep every word of God's law. That's what we're up against: the horrid curse of holy God! Woe is me!! Talk about misery!!!

3. Is this to get us down?? Is this message to lead us to despair, to a sense of condemnation? I say it again, beloved: No, for *the gospel comes before the law*. God has come to us with the gospel so many years ago in our baptism, has come to us with the same gospel in the preaching over the years, has come to us again with the same gospel today in the sacrament of Lord's supper. Do you want to know how rich that gospel is, how wonderful God's redeeming grace is? Then compare the blessings God gives in this gospel with the curses God gives on those who can't keep the law! And true, we can't keep the law; we fail so miserably, fail so much that we ought to receive the full load of God's curse. But was this not the glorious message of the supper of the Lord today: *Christ took on Himself the curse we deserved?* Was the gospel of the Lord's table not this that Christ died *for us*?

And see: that's also what we confessed in LD 1 concerning Jesus Christ: "He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood." My circumstance today is not that I live under the curse of the law; were that the case, I'd truly perish under the burdens of the miseries of my daily life. God says: I've given My Son to take on Himself the curse you deserve, and on the cross My Son *has* taken that curse on Himself – that's the whole message of the Lord's supper. So the curse I deserve is lifted from me.

What, then, of the concrete miseries of my life? Sure, the miseries remain; it will not be until the day of Christ's return that we are freed from the consequences of our sins. But the impossible wrath of God upon our sins rests upon our shoulders no more! Though God's Word tells me of the divine curse I bring upon myself by my failure to love God and the neighbour as I ought, God's Word tells me too of the redemption that He has obtained for me in Jesus Christ. And it's exactly because I taste something of the damnation I deserve that I am the more thankful for the redemption God has given. It's understanding how great my sins and misery are that moves me deep thankfulness for the redemption God worked.

Now we go back to our daily labours, or maybe our holidays. What stands central in our minds and thoughts? The miseries of this life, the brokenness, the frictions, the darkness? Let it not be so, dear brothers and sisters. O yes, be aware of how great your sins and misery are – and then delight that God has granted redemption to a sinners like you and me. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 3 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 3 January 1999.

"THE REDEEMED BELIEVER CONFESSES HIS CONTINUING DEPRAVITY."

Text:

Lord's Day 3

6. Q. Did God, then, create man so wicked and perverse?

A. No, on the contrary, God created man good[1] and in His image,[2] that is, in true righteousness and holiness,[3] so that he might rightly know God His Creator,[4] heartily love Him, and live with Him in eternal blessedness to praise and glorify Him.[5]

[1] Gen. 1:31. [2] Gen. 1:26, 27. [3] Eph. 4:24. [4] Col. 3:10. [5] Ps. 8.

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

A. From the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise,[1] for there our nature became so corrupt[2] that we are all conceived and born in sin.[3]

[1] Gen. 3. [2] Rom. 5:12, 18, 19. [3] Ps. 51:5.

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

A. Yes,[1] unless we are regenerated by the Spirit of God.[2]

[1] Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Job 14:4; Is. 53:6. [2] John 3:3-5.

Scripture Reading:

Genesis 6:1-8

Galatians 5:16-6:5

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "*Book of Praise*" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalm 84:3,6

Psalm 130:2,4

Psalm 51:3,4

Psalm 34:7,8

Hymn 52:1,2,3

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

In LD 3, the believer of LD 1 continues his look into his past, this time to examine *what he once used to be*. In LD 3 that sinner-become-saint confesses three things about his past:

1. he was once created perfect, created able to image God (Q & A 6);
1. he threw away his perfection in the fall in Paradise (Q & A 7);
1. he became totally corrupt (Q & A 8).

In a word, in LD 3 the believer testifies of his tragic slide from perfection to corruption. Not –to repeat what we said with LD 2- not that LD 3 wishes to give each and everyone a guilt complex; it is the *believer* of LD 1, the person who has embraced in faith the gospel of redemption that God promised in the covenant, who now looks back at where he came from, what he's become, and at what God did about it. And that believer of LD 1 looks back at what he's made

of himself through the fall because that delivered saint wants to live and die in the joy of the comfort God has graciously granted.

Of the three subjects confessed in LD 3, I wish today to zero in on the last one alone: how corrupt man is – Q & A 8. I choose to zero in on that corruption because by nature we all have inflated perceptions of what we are really like. It lives deep in the hearts of so many of us: I've never had and don't have it in me to sell my little brother to slave traders. And I'm sure that I never could and never would do what Amnon did to Tamar. Others might, we think, but not me....

I need to correct that self-evaluation this afternoon, congregation, for two reasons. The first is this: as long as we think that we just couldn't do what Jacob's sons did to Joseph, as long as we think that we just couldn't rape a girl, we miss out on the wealth of the comfort of God's saving work in Jesus Christ. Recall LD 1: to live and die in the joy of the comfort God grants in Jesus Christ, we need first to know "how great our sins and misery are." Let's then not pretend that we're better than any other person that has lived on this earth – be that person dead for centuries or still alive today. The second reason I need to correct our self-evaluation this afternoon is that we cannot support those who have repented of grievous sin if we think ourselves above committing the same sins. Spiritual arrogance chokes the communion of saints. For our comfort and edification, then, I ask your attention today specifically to Q & A 8.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

THE REDEEMED BELIEVER CONFESSES HIS CONTINUING DEPRAVITY.

- 1. how great my corruption was**
- 2. how great my corruption is**

1 We find the subject of total depravity by definition to be depressive, negative. Who, after all, enjoys a picture of a deformed self. The way this doctrine is confessed in LD 3, however, is not at all negative; for the *believer* this doctrine is fully and totally positive. For in our LD it is *the person who belongs with body and soul, both in life and in death, to that faithful Saviour Jesus Christ* who now confesses what this same Saviour has once told him about the effects of the fall into sin. Because none less the *God Who saved us* has revealed the matter of total corruption, that believer embraces humbly not just the gospel that God saved us but *also what God says about how great the misery was from which He saved us*.

"Corrupt": that's the word we as believers lay on our own lips to describe what we became as a result of the fall into sin. The term is not flattering. That word 'corrupt' does not suggest that through the fall we developed an evil streak. It does not say either that we were weakened by the fall into sin. That word 'corrupt' is described in Q 8 to mean that "we are totally unable to do any good," more, we "are inclined to all evil." Such is what we became, such is what every person by nature is.

Where God has said that we are so corrupt? Consider, eg, God's words in Gen 6:5. God observed the human race as it lived before the flood, and "saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth." Yet where did man's wicked *deeds* come from? Says God: "every imagination of the thoughts of his heart is only evil continually." Notice, congregation, that the Lord does not describe the human heart as being *occasionally* given to perverse thoughts. No, God is radical: *every* imagination is *only* evil, and it's *always* evil. There's not a moment, says God, when the human heart produces good, not a moment when that heart refrains from evil; *every* imagination is *only* evil, *continually*.

And lest we think that this great corruption was restricted to the generation destroyed in the flood, consider the Lord's words to Noah after the flood. Said God: "the imagination of man's heart is *evil from his youth*" (Gen 8:21). We're to recall: when God spoke those words, there were but 8 people left on the earth, the 8 whom God had spared from the flood – Noah and his family, all covenant children. Of Noah himself we know from God's own word that he was "blameless in his generation" (Gen 6:9), and that he was driven "by faith" to build the ark (Heb 11:7). Yet of Noah and his offspring, God insists that each is corrupt from youth. The prophet Jeremiah echoes the same reality: "the heart is deceitful above all else, and desperately corrupt" (17:9). It's repeated again by Jesus in John 3: "men loved darkness more than light, because their deeds were evil" (vs 19).

In accordance with this revelation from God, the church has confessed in the Canons of Dort what the human heart is really like. Ch III/IV: as a result of his rebellion in Paradise, man has "brought upon himself blindness, horrible darkness, vanity, and perverseness of judgment in his mind; malice, rebelliousness, and stubbornness in his will and heart; and impurity in all his affections" (Art 1). It is of this reality that the redeemed makes confession in Q 8: "are we so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil?" And the answer is a loud, a clear YES. That's me: by nature I am so corrupt that I can do no good, am inclined to all evil.

It's one thing to confess the doctrine of total depravity as a general truism. To do so is to set the doctrine at a comfortable distance from where I am today. But that would not be Scripturally warranted, it would in fact be to cling to a lie. God's words to me in Scripture about depravity refer in first instance to *me*, and describe what *I* am like. When the Lord tells us in Scripture that righteous Noah after the flood gave himself to the control of alcohol and so lay naked in his drunken stupor in his tent for his boys to discover, then the Lord tells us you and I could do the same; there is no other explanation fitting to the Lord's words to Noah that "the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth" (Gen 8:21). When the Lord tells us in Scripture that Jacob, God's own child by covenant, could swindle and cheat like the best of them, then the Lord has us know that we have it in us to do the same; that is what the Lord means when He says of the human race that "every intent of the thoughts of his heart [is] only evil continually" (Gen 6:5). When the Lord tells us in Scripture that Jacob's ten covenant sons threw their little brother into a well, and after due consideration sold him to slave traders, then the Lord impresses upon us that you and I –children of God by covenant just as much as Jacob's sons- have it in us to do the same; no other conclusion is possible from God's evaluation of the human heart that it "is deceitful above all else, and desperately corrupt" (Jer 17:9). When the Lord tells us in His Word that David desired his neighbour's wife and so enticed her to his bedroom and thereafter killed her husband to save his own skin and all the while act as if nothing were amiss, then the Lord sets before us that you and I have it in us to do the same; that's the punch of God's evaluation of the human heart as we read it in Gen 6. When the Lord tells us that Amnon was so overcome with passion that he raped his sister Tamar (and we should know that girls in Israel married when they were some 12 to 14 years of age, and Amnon deflowered her), then the Lord sets before us that you and I have it in us to do the same – be it to a sister or a child down the street.

I know: we so dearly like to think that we certainly wouldn't do these sorts of things, we say that this just is not *us*. That such crimes happen in the world, OK, we can accept that. But if they happen in the church, we look down at that person as if he were the lowest of sinners imaginable and scarcely greet him; certainly, we feel, he's a number of notches below ourselves. And where the consistory still permits such a person to the table of the Lord, well, our regard for the consistory has dropped some notches too, for the elders ought certainly to ban such a person from the table....

But the Lord, my brothers and sisters, *has* spoken differently. The Lord has said of you the same as of the person in the next pew: the intent of the thoughts of our hearts are only evil continually, yes, your heart and my heart and the heart of each one of us is deceitful above all else and desperately corrupt; we're all on a level. Since that's what God has said, we humbly echo His revelation in our LD, and admit that we are "so corrupt that we are ... inclined to *all* evil." You name it, and it is in your heart and in my heart to do it. When I still studied at the Theological College, one of the professors made it his business to tell us students that once we were in the ministry we'd hear congregation members admit to all kinds of sins, beyond our wildest imagination. Then he paused, raised his finger, looked each of us in the eye, and added, "as you visit in the congregation, never, ever be surprised at what you hear." After numerous years in the ministry, congregation, I can testify to exactly that. God's word stands sure, also concerning the human heart: "the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth." Swindling, lying, adultery, rape, theft, murder, homosexuality: I have come across each of these gross sins in the congregations. The Bible gives us examples of such sins; in the years of my ministry I have seen examples also.

So I ask you: are you better than others? Do you really think that you could never do what David did with Bethsheba? Do you really think that you could never do what Amnon did to Tamar? Do you really think you could never murder an unborn child? Please, my beloved, do not, *do not* maintain that it's just not in you to give yourself to such sins. To cherish such a thought places you in opposition to God's Word. Well has the church summarised Scripture to teach in LD 3 that you and I are so corrupt that we are inclined to "all evil". In the Canons of Dort we make the same confession:

"... all men are conceived in sin and are born as children of wrath, incapable of any saving good, inclined to

evil, dead in sins, and slaves of sin" (III/IV, Art 3).

In LD 23 we put it like this:

"...my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all God's commandments, never kept any of them, and am still inclined to all evil...."

No other response is possible to God's revelation about human depravity.

So I confess that I am not above selling my little brother (or my child) to slavery. I find the thought revolting, to be sure, and cringe at its contemplation. But this is what my God –and He's without sin in His evaluation of human hearts- this is what my God has revealed, and so I accept it. Similarly, I confess that I am not above adultery. I confess that I am not above raping one who can't defend herself. I confess that I am not above killing my child through abortion. That's to say: I confess that there is nothing in me that would attract God to me, nothing that might prompt Him to embrace me in love and save me. Instead, my heart is so evil that there is every reason for God to damn me to eternal hell without asking a single question. This doctrine of total depravity implies that if I receive anything good from God at all, if there comes any positive act from God toward me, it is *strictly and totally grace*.

It's humbling, so very humbling. Yet, brothers and sisters, the believer confesses it, confesses it because it's something the Lord God has been pleased to reveal. Says the believer: I belong to Jesus Christ my Saviour, and so I've got great comfort in the midst of the ups and downs of life. How great that comfort really is? Look at what I by nature am: corrupt, so corrupt that I of myself am totally unable to do any good and am inclined to all evil. That's what I am, that's what I've always been by nature, and *yet God has claimed me for Himself, adopted a wretch like me to be His child!* O marvel of marvels: if I was a decent sort of person, a cut above the average so that I was in some way appealing to God, I would not so amazed that God saved me. But exactly because I'm so undeserving –not a dot better than any of Joseph's brothers, not a dot better than an Amnon, not a dot better than any person in the pew of this church- exactly because I'm so undeserving, I marvel that God yet gave His only Son *for me!* It's precisely because I confess in LD 3 the radical extent of my depravity that I'm the more thrilled that I, *I* am allowed to belong, with body and soul, both in life and death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ. God in heaven did not send His Son to save the righteous; God in heaven sent His Son to earth to save the wretches, He sent His Son to save people of the likes of Noah the naked drunk, of the likes of Moses the murderer, of David the adulterer and murderer, the likes of Amnon the rapist, of Peter the liar, of me, *me....*

Truly, what a God this is, what a God I am allowed to have! He knew the capacity of my heart for wickedness, He knew that every intent of the thought of my heart was only evil continually, *and yet He didn't despise me, reject me, damn me to the hell I deserve!* The Lord knew me, knew how absolutely and totally inclined I was to any and all evil, and so absolutely and totally unable to contribute a thing to attract God's compassion.... Yet the Lord had mercy..., and gave His Son to save a wretch like me.... O Lord my God, how wonderful is Your Name!

What comfort, what glorious comfort, beloved of the Lord, there is in such revelation from God. He knew your capacity for evil, and yet gave His Son to pay for your sins; will this God now really desert you when you have given yourself to sin? No, congregation, there is no sin too big for God to forgive. It matters not what I have done, what you have done: God gave His Son for the likes of Noah the naked drunk, for the likes of Moses the murderer, of David the adulterer and murderer, for the likes of Amnon the rapist, of Peter the liar, of me, *me....* And He gives forgiveness to all who respond in faith to His claim on the sinner in His covenant of grace.

But if this is so, beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ, if you and I without exception are on a level with Joseph's brothers, it follows that we may not, *can* not look down upon those of us who have given themselves to gross sin. Let us have no illusions: if the Lord would not hold on to us, every last one of us would kill in righteous (or not so righteous) anger as Moses did, every last one of us would demand the woman of our fancy as David did and kill to preserve our reputations too, every last one of us would do as Amnon did with the girl Tamar. No, my brethren, let there be no haughtiness in our midst, none of looking down our noses at the Noahs and the Davids and the Amnons in the congregation. God's church is not made up of persons who are reasonably righteous in themselves, is not made up of persons who stand above the sins that society frowns upon. The church is made up of sinners, plain sinners, persons

able to give themselves to any and every evil. That's why Paul in his letter to the Galatians can consider it a given that people shall be "overtaken in any trespass." No matter what sort of trespass, it could be there amongst the Galatians. But observe now how Paul wants the brethren of Galatia to respond to sin in their midst. He doesn't say: avoid the brother who has fallen into homosexuality because that's such low and despicable conduct. He rather says, "you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness" (vs 1). That is: reach out, help the brother who stumbled. Why reach out and help? Says Paul: "lest you also be tempted." Paul knows: the saints of Galatia can give themselves to exactly the same sin! As he says elsewhere: "let him who thinks he stands take heed, lest he fall" (I Cor 10:12).

Yes, our confession in LD 3 is Scripturally true, and accurate when measured to the reality too; there are in the midst of the churches persons guilty of lying, of incest, of abortion, of homosexuality, you name it. Never, dear brothers and sisters, never ever be surprised at the sins committed in the church of the Lord. Praise God instead at He gave His only Son for the salvation of *such* sinners. At the same time be aware that you are not a dot better yourself, and so do not, *do not* look down your nose at the brother, the sister who gave himself to grievous sin. To act as if you are better would be to deny your own confession in LD 3, and so rob yourself of the depth of the comfort that God has given in sending His Son for the lost. And such an attitude certainly does not help your brother in his struggles with his sense of guilt and his longing to know himself forgiven. Have mercy on each other, bear each other's burdens in a spirit of gentleness (Gal 6).

2 Now I hear you protest to the effect that I've done injustice to our LD; after all, Q & A 8 says that we are inclined to all evil "unless we are regenerated by the Spirit of God." That is true: depravity, total corruption, *is not the last word that's to be said on human nature*. God has ordained escape from this corruption; we are so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil *unless* we are regenerated.

What this regeneration is? LD 3 is not the place to go into great detail on the question of what regeneration is. Let it suffice for today, then, to refer to what the Canons of Dort say on regeneration:

"by the ... working of the ... regenerating Spirit, [God] ... penetrates into the innermost recesses of man. He opens the closed and softens the hard heart, circumcises that which was uncircumcised, and instils new qualities into the will. He makes the will, which was dead, alive; which was bad, good; which was unwilling, willing; and which was stubborn, obedient" (III/IV, Art 11).

The human heart is by nature bent away from God; it does not and cannot and will not do what God desires. Such, by nature, is your heart and mine. But the Spirit of Jesus Christ works sovereignly, mysteriously upon the heart inclined to all evil, and the result is this heart is bent away from sin, is bent *to* God. So amazing, so wonderful is this work that – say the Canons of Dort- it "is not inferior in power to creation or the resurrection of the dead" (III/IV, Art 12).

What concerns us this afternoon is the *effect* of this miraculous work. The effect is that the regenerated person is *not what he used to be*. Every person by nature is totally depraved, cannot do any good, is inclined instead to all evil . But the person regenerated by the Holy Spirit is made new, is no longer dead in sin, is made alive, and so is able to do good, able to resist evil. That's the meaning of the word 'unless' in our LD, that's the lesson God has told us in passages of Scripture as Gal 5. Listen to Paul:

'the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.... And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires."

So?

"If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit."

In other words: we're new creatures. This is the catalyst that drives the child of God to fight sin, to do the will of God even though his sinful flesh still desires something different. We're new creatures, and so *can* fight against sin, resist temptation. So we even confessed in LD 1: "by His Holy Spirit He ... makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him."

But, congregation, does this regenerating work of the Spirit mean that the people of God have been raised above the

level of sins as Noah committed, as Moses committed, and David and Peter too? The Spirit makes me heartily willing and ready to live for Him; does that mean that my capacity for gross sin is totally gone? The answer is plainly and simply No. For Noah was regenerated by the Spirit of God before he gave himself to drunkenness and nakedness; in Hebrews 11 I read that "by faith" Noah built the ark, and there is no faith without regeneration and Noah's drunkenness occurred after the flood (cf Heb 11:7). Moses was regenerated by the Spirit before he killed the Egyptian, for I read, again in Hebrews 11, that "by faith Moses ... refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God ..." and the murder occurred after he resolved to leave Pharaoh's court (cf vss 24ff). David was regenerated by the Spirit of God when he took Bethsheba to his bedroom and killed Uriah; how else could he have written such expressions of trust in the Lord as are recorded in the psalms he wrote when he was being chased by King Saul (cf Pss 3, 52, 54, 56, 57, 59, 63, 142)?! Well do I confess in LD 23 that the righteous man is "still inclined to all evil." And in LD 44: "even the holiest has only a small beginning of the obedience God requires." And the Canons again:

"Although the power of God whereby He confirms and preserves true believers in grace is so great that it cannot be conquered by the flesh, yet the converted are not always so led and moved by God that they cannot in certain particular actions turn aside through their own fault from the guidance of grace and be seduced by and yield to the lusts of the flesh.... The lamentable fall of David, Peter, and other saints, described in Holy Scripture, demonstrates this" (V.4).

Then yes, beloved, we may be O so thankful for the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and lives. But the regenerated *can* fall into "serious and atrocious sins" (Canons of Dort, V.4), and that includes me. The regenerated *can* fall, can fall into most grievous sins, and that is why –to say again with the words of Canons, V.4- the saints "must ... constantly watch and pray that they may not be led into temptation." Though the regenerated person is equipped to fight the evil desires of his heart, the fact of his regeneration does not mean that now he is *above* the worst evils imaginable. That is why, even *in* the church of Jesus Christ, the most lurid and atrocious of sins continue to happen. Let no one be surprised at what you hear! And equally: let no one be dismayed at sin, be it in the self or in the other, as if gross sin itself proves that one must not belong to God after all. And definitely: do not look down at the brother or sister who has given himself to sin, for you and I can still do exactly the same thing. Instead, let each of us see to it that we keep in mind the words of Paul to the *saints* of Galatia: support one another, encourage one another, specifically those who have been "overtaken in any trespass." Support the saints support the brother who has fallen, and do it with no arrogance. Equally, let the fallen brother happily welcome the support of the brotherhood, for his own benefit and for the benefit of the brotherhood – lest others fall into the same vice.

Life in this flesh comes to an end. When our Lord returns on the clouds of heaven, we shall be totally changed, perfected, glorified with Christ. Then, my brothers and sisters, the struggles and weaknesses and sins that now beset the child of God will be there no longer. Then the corruption of which we make confession in LD 3 will be history in every sense of the word. And all of our thoughts and words and deeds shall give perfect praise to the God of our redemption.

Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 4 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 7 February 1999.

"IN GOD'S JUST JUDGMENT ON SIN, ALL MEN ARE ON THE BRINK OF THE PIT OF HELL."

Text:

Lord's Day 4

9. Q. Is God, then, not unjust by requiring in His law what man cannot do?

A. No, for God so created man that he was able to do it.[1] But man, at the instigation of the devil,[2] in deliberate disobedience[3] robbed himself and all his descendants of these gifts.[4]

[1] Gen. 1:31. [2] Gen. 3:13; John 8:44; 1 Tim. 2:13, 14. [3] Gen. 3:6. [4] Rom. 5:12, 18, 19.

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

A. 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,[1] as He has declared:[2] Cursed be every one who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them (Galatians 3:10).

[1] Ex. 34:7; Ps. 5:4-6; 7:10; Nah. 1:2; Rom. 1:18; 5:12; Eph. 5:6; Heb. 9:27. [2] Deut. 27:26.

11. Q. But is God not also merciful?

A. God is indeed merciful,[1] but He is also just.[2] 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.[3]

[1] Ex. 20:6; 34:6, 7; Ps. 103:8, 9. [2] Ex. 20:5; 34:7; Deut. 7:9-11; Ps. 5:4-6; Heb. 10:30, 31. [3] Matt. 25:45, 46.

Scripture Reading:

Nahum 1:1-11

Luke 12:1-21

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalm 68:1

Psalm 95:2

Psalm 5:3,4,5

Psalm 38:1,2,10

Psalm 32:1,5

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

We are all aware, of course, that one day we shall need to appear before the judgment seat of the Lord God. On that day we shall need to give account to God of the things that we have done, and then will be assigned our eternal destination.

Not too many of us are overly concerned today about the verdict that God the Judge will voice when we enter His courtroom. I think there are two reasons why we are today not so very concerned.

1. In the first place, most of us think of this judgment day as being a long way off. We're young, we're healthy, we've got our minds filled with plans and hopes for this life; we haven't got time to bother our minds today with

what's going to happen on the day of our death.

2. In the second place, we know from Scripture that the Lord is a God of great compassion. We picture God in heaven as being somewhat like the aged man who observes the naughty antics of his dear grandchildren, and just hasn't got the heart to get properly angry with the grandchildren and give them the discipline they deserve and need. We say to ourselves: the Lord understands us, He knows that we're but flesh, He realises the pressures we're under, and so He's sympathetic to us.

The two thoughts together lead many of us to be but little concerned today about what might happen in years to come in the courtroom of the Judge of all the earth.

We come this afternoon to LD 4 of the Heidelberg Catechism. In this LD you and I seek to echo what the Lord has revealed in Scripture about His response to our sins. As we draw out this afternoon what the Lord teaches on this topic, we shall learn that we cannot think of Judgment Day being a long way down the track. We shall learn too that we cannot think of God as a soft grandfather who does nothing more than cluck his tongue at the sins of his grandchildren. If we this afternoon shall take seriously what we confess in this LD about the God's response to sin, we shall also be driven – this afternoon- to make decisions about our own response to the gospel.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

IN GOD'S JUST JUDGMENT ON SIN, ALL MEN ARE ON THE BRINK OF THE PIT OF HELL.

- 1. why all people are on the brink of the pit**
- 2. what all people can see in the pit**
- 3. what God has done to keep us out of pit**

1. Why all people are on the brink of the pit

All men –including me and you and the man across the road- stand on the brink of the pit of hell. That's not the way God created things. In the beginning God placed the whole human race in a Garden of Plenty, where there was no pain or crying, no shortage or anguish. The human race lived in happy togetherness with God; in the cool of the day the Lord Himself would come to Adam and his wife, and so there was opportunity for them to speak with God, listen to God.

That changed with the fall into sin. God had explicitly said that we could eat from every tree of the Garden except the one in the middle; we were to stay away from the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But Satan said to us that it was OK to eat from that tree, he told us that God wouldn't carry out His threat to have us die the day we ate from that tree; instead, we'd become like God, knowing good and evil. We fell for his lie. Though we knew better, "at the instigation of the devil, in deliberate disobedience" we shunned the command of our God, rejected God, sided with the devil.

What that concretely means, congregation? This: our rightful place is directly alongside the devil. In Paradise we had a choice: side with God or side with Satan. We chose for Satan. We may not today, then, think of ourselves as being naturally on neutral ground, as being naturally far removed from Satan. Though we were able to say No to the devil, we deliberately said Yes to him, and the result is that Satan can rightfully claim us as his; we belong with him, *his home is our home*. And where is Satan's home? That's in hell. That is the abode God has assigned to the devil. Hell, then, is where you and I and every person on this earth today ought to be. No, hell is not naturally far away from us!

As it is, though, the Lord after our fall into sin did not send the whole human race to hell. O Yes, He sent us out of the garden, out of His presence. But give us the damnation we deserved: No, God did not do that. Instead, He allowed the human race to continue to live on this earth – be it that on this earth we would very much taste in small degree what hell itself was like.

Why did God not send us directly to hell? Is that because God is soft on sin? Is it because He is too merciful, too compassionate to drop us into that burning pit? Let us make no mistake, brothers and sisters: God is not soft on sin. David was moved by the Spirit of God to describe God like this – Ps 5:

"For You are not a God who takes pleasure in wickedness,
Nor shall evil dwell with You....
You hate all workers of iniquity.
You shall destroy those who speak falsehood" (Ps 5:4f).

And Ps 7:

"God is a just judge,
And God is angry with the wicked every day" (vs 11).

In the words of our LD: God "is terribly displeased." And no, congregation, that terrible displeasure is not directed only at the sin of the beginning; "He is terribly displeased with our original sin *as well as our actual sins*." That which I did wrong today –and surely you can think of sins you committed today too- incites the terrible displeasure of holy, almighty God.

And again, congregation: do not dare to thumb your nose at the terrible displeasure of almighty God! Listen to what Nahum had to write upon God's command.

"Who can stand before His indignation?
And who can endure the fierceness of His anger?
His fury is poured out like fire,
And the rocks are thrown down by Him" (Nahum 1:6)

And again:

"...with an overflowing flood
He will make an utter end of its place..." (vs 8).

How graphic! "His fury is poured out like fire," says the prophet. You've seen pictures, no doubt, of how steel is made from iron ore. The raw material is heated in enormous buckets to some 3000 degrees, till the iron in the ore separates from the waste material and rises to the surface. Then the bucket is tipped, its boiling contents, red hot, poured out. Tell me: how long would you last with a bucket full of such fire poured out over you? Says the prophet: God's "fury is poured out like fire." Truly, "who can endure the fierceness of His anger?!"

The prophet uses another picture. He says, "with an overflowing flood [God] will make an utter end...." "An overflowing flood." The picture is of rising waters, and we're sandbagging as fast as we can to prevent the waters sweeping us away. But the higher you make the dyke, and the higher the waters rise, the more pressure builds up – until there's just no stopping the flood and the water washes over you like a wall. Escape that? We realise that that's impossible; we're swept away! So is the wrath of God.... None can endure the fierceness of His anger....

It's hell we deserve, each and every one of us. But we are not at this moment in hell; we are now in church. That does not mean that hell is a long ways away; the door to hell is wherever we are. At any moment God can snuff out our lives, can call us to His judgment seat; the Almighty is able to end our lives any moment. Then what? You and I deserve hell; through our fall into sin we have chosen for Satan's company instead of God's! Through our daily sins we confirm that choice every day again. Is hell far off? Be not deceived; we may be sitting in church, but the gates of hell are not thousands of miles away from here, are not many decades away either. Each of us, old and young, stand at the brink of hell! It requires no more than God's decision that our time is up. An accident, heart failure, you name it: if God wills, you or I shall not be here tomorrow. Like the fool in Jesus' parable; God can require our soul tonight. Hell is not far off; only God's sovereign pleasure has kept us on this earth so far, kept us out of hell so far.

2. What all people can see in the pit

We stand, then, at the brink of hell. In His word God has told us what there is to see as we look down into the pit below. The Lord in His Word describes hell as a "fire". I think of Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats. Says Jesus

in the parable:

"Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels'" (Mt 25:41).

We all know from hard experience that a fire is not comfortable; a fire is a source of pain, of anguish. That's the point of hell. That holy God would pour out His wrath against sin on the sinner means that this sinner invariably experiences the worst of pain, intense *suffering*. Nor is it a suffering that will last for a moment only. Jesus speaks about "the everlasting fire". That is: it knows no end. Evolutionists would tell us that the world has been millions upon millions of years in the making; they stretch the time line infinitely into the past. The Bible doesn't do that..., but does stretch the time line infinitely into the future. The fires of hell, the fires of God's judgment are not short-lived; God's judgment is eternal, goes on and on and on.... And there's never any respite, never a holiday from the just judgment of the God we offended through our fall in Paradise and through our sins of this afternoon.

That the suffering is intense is also specifically pointed up by the Lord. In His parable of the wheat and the weeds, Jesus describes what will happen to "those who practice lawlessness." He says:

"[the Son of Man] will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth" (Mt 13:41f).

In the two thousand years since Jesus spoke these words, many people have heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and rejected it. The Bible is clear: these people have tasted the just judgment of God. At the time determined by sovereign God, they were called from this life and "punished with the most severe, that is, with everlasting punishment of body and soul." We stand on the brink of the pit of hell, and the Lord tells us what we can see in the flames below, tells us too what we can hear: the "wailing and gnashing of teeth" of those who have left this life before us.

Truly, how the inhabitants of hell would love to escape the anguish of hell, the horrors of God's terrible displeasure against their sins, to escape it even for a moment! How they would love to have again the opportunity to sit in your pew, to listen to the preaching just once more, and *have the opportunity to repent of sin and embrace the promises of God in faith!* How they would love, as the rich man of Jesus' parable, to send a message to their loved ones urging them to repent of sin, to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ lest they come to this same place of torment! But nothing, congregation, nothing shall come from hell to you or me – except the sound of the wailing and the gnashing of teeth, and one can hear that awful sound only by believing the pages of Scripture.

You and I stand on the brink of the pit from which comes the sound of anguished gnashing of teeth. Satan beneath has a claim on us because we sided with him in Paradise, and we listen to his enticements still. Thousands upon thousands have stood where we now stand, and God was pleased to keep them on this earth no longer. Their souls were required of them, and in the courts of God they were found too light, and so they today taste the "just judgment" we all deserve, and cry out in their anguish and gnash their teeth. Their wailing is a *warning* to us that hell beneath is a most awful place imaginable. The just judgment of God: it's no trifle!

How come you and I have not been dropped into the pit we deserve? You, I, our neighbours, all Australians, the people of the whole world are not in hell today only because of God's good pleasure. He is pleased still to give life. But that can change at any moment. Who knows God's plan for me? Do you know how long God will keep *you* on this earth? That is why Jesus says in Luke 12:

"And I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power to cast into hell; yes, I say to you, fear Him! (vss 4f).

One alone "has power to cast into hell", and that One is God Himself. It is He who today keeps you out of hell; it is He who tomorrow is able to cast you into hell. So: *fear Him!*

3. What God has done to keep us out of the pit

Why has the Lord Jesus told us to fear God? For that matter, why has the Lord told us about the horrors of the pit of hell? Why would He have us hear the wailing and the gnashing of teeth of persons who died before us? For this reason, brothers and sisters: *He would have us marvel at the wonders of the gospel of Jesus Christ!* Recall that second Q & A of LD 1: "What do you need to know in order to live in the joy of this comfort?" I need to know first "how great my sins and misery are." It's by peering over the edge into the horrors of the bottomless pit, and it's by hearing the anguished cries of so many who have gone from this life before me –their wailing and gnashing of teeth- that I am driven to "fear God". In His good pleasure He can at any moment call me from this life. And then..., then He's free to do with me whatever He wills. And yes, drop me into that pit *is* a distinct possibility; this is the sentence I brought on myself through my sins.

But see: the same Jesus who told us to "fear God" because He "has power to cast into hell" also said that He will confess before God whoever confesses Him before men (Luke 12:8). For Jesus came not to condemn the world, but to save the world. That was His mission: to seek and to save the lost. His mission was to rescue those who stood at the brink of the bottomless pit. His mission was to take on His own shoulders the "just judgment" that sinners earned through their transgression. His mission was to go to hell *in place of* the sinner who deserved hell. Where that good news is embraced in faith –and then the tongue shall speak of it too- there is forgiveness of sin so that God does not drop us into the damnation we've earned for ourselves; Jesus Christ in heaven will plead before the Father for that believer.

This gospel of Jesus' saving work has been laid, congregation, at your feet. So many years ago, the same God whom Jesus tells us to fear claimed you for Himself at your baptism. In that covenant of grace, He promised that His Son would "wash us in His blood from all our sins" so that you might be righteous before God. Because of this work that Jesus Christ would do *for* you, God promised to your caring and faithful Father, promised to adopt you as His children and heirs.

Well, now, congregation, need one who has promises like that still be afraid of hell? Afraid to die? Afraid of God? God has power to cast me into hell, O yes; that's what Jesus says. Need I be afraid that He will do so to me? Beloved of the Lord, *it all depends!* Depends on what? Listen: "every covenant contains two parts, a promise and an obligation." We know what the promise is, and we know too that this promise is glorious. In fact, in contrast to the horrors of hell the glories of the promise stand out in boldest relief. But what's the obligation? This: that we "cleave to this one God..., trust Him..., love Him...." He gave His Son to set us free from all the power of the devil, gave His Son so that Satan might no longer have a claim on us. More, He gave His Son so that Jesus might bear the burden of God's eternal wrath *in our place*. Now what do you think: are you safe in the hands of this God? When He determines that your time is up and you appear before His judgment seat, will God drop you into that burning pit? Is that God – promises you heaven and gives you hell?

You see, congregation, *this is the critical question*. It's OK to confess in LD 4 what the Lord has revealed about His just judgment, but *what are you going to do about it?* Just shake in your boots and await the day? Or *trust* that the God who prepared such a gospel will for Jesus' sake surely pull you away from the edge of the pit and bring you to Himself into glory? This is the question: do you *believe* the promise God gave you at your baptism?

Only God stands between you and hell. God alone keeps you alive, only God has prevented you from falling into the pit so far. God alone determines when your soul shall be required of you. And when that moment comes –it can be tonight- God alone can prevent eternal damnation. And God has told you what He did to keep you out of hell. In Jesus' words:

"For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (Jn 3:16).

So: do you believe the gospel God prepared for you? Do you believe that your sins of today are washed away in Jesus' blood and that's why God will not push you into the pit of hell?

Answer the question today, my brothers and sisters, for tonight your soul could be required of you.

Blessed are those who believe, for they shall never experience the horrors of God's just judgment themselves. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 5 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 14 February 1999.

"GOD FREELY GIVES ESCAPE FROM THE PIT TO UNWORTHY AND BROKEN SINNERS."

Text:

Lord's Day 5

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

A. God demands that His justice be satisfied.[1] Therefore full payment must be made either by ourselves or by another.[2]

[1] Ex. 20:5; 23:7; Rom. 2:1-11. [2] Is. 53:11; Rom. 8:3, 4.

13. Q. Can we ourselves make this payment?

A. Certainly not. On the contrary, we daily increase our debt.[1]

[1] Ps. 130:3; Matt. 6:12; Rom. 2:4, 5.

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

A. No. In the first place, God will not punish another creature for the sin which man has committed.[1] Furthermore, no mere creature can sustain the burden of God's eternal wrath against sin and deliver others from it.[2]

[1] Ezek. 18:4, 20; Heb. 2:14-18. [2] Ps. 130:3; Nah. 1:6.

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

A. One who is a true[1] and righteous[2] man, and yet more powerful than all creatures; that is, one who is at the same time true God.[3]

[1] I Cor. 15:21; Heb. 2:17. [2] Is. 53:9; II Cor. 5:21; Heb. 7:26. [3] Is. 7:14; 9:6; Jer. 23:6; John 1:1; Rom. 8:3, 4.

Scripture Reading:

Romans 2:1-11

Isaiah 57:14-21

Ephesians 2:1-10

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "*Book of Praise*" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalm 8:3,4,5

Psalm 130:2

Psalm 34

Psalm 145

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

What do you think of yourself? Any number of times in a day, each of us looks in a mirror. Are you pleased with what you see? Or disgusted?

Reactions differ on that question. There are those in our midst who are rather pleased with what they see. They know themselves acceptable to others, know the self able to tackle the challenges of the day; such persons have what we call

a positive self-image. Numerous others in our midst don't like what the mirror shows. Such persons feel inadequate to the challenges of the day, feel shy, insecure, disliked; such persons have what we call an inferiority complex, a low self-esteem.

What do you think of yourself? Who do you think you are? That question is central to our confession in LD 5. In fact, in this LD we answer the question differently than we are commonly used to answering it. Here we acknowledge that no one is better or worse than another, acknowledge that all of us are equally damnable before God, acknowledge that each of us is freely loved by God despite what we think of ourselves. In this LD our struggles with matters of self-esteem come into focus – and we can walk away thankful with what God in mercy has made of us.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

GOD FREELY GIVES ESCAPE FROM THE PIT TO UNWORTHY AND BROKEN SINNERS.

- 1. I cannot stand tall in God's presence**
- 2. God makes me stand tall in His presence**

1. I cannot stand tall in God's presence

1 The horrors of my circumstance

I attempted last week with LD 4 to give some colour to the notion of the "just judgment" of God that we deserve on account of our sins. I asked you to consider the pit of hell, with the self standing at the brink of this pit. With the eyes of faith we may see what the pit is like; in His Word God has describe its horrors with the word "fire", everlasting fire. He tells us that "the smoke of their torment goes up forever", and He even lets us hear the sounds of "wailing and gnashing of teeth" arising from this bottomless pit. We're given to understand, then, that this pit is most horrible. Yet we stand on the edge of this pit, and it's only God Himself who has kept us out of that pit so far. We stand on the brink of that pit, and cringe at the horrors beneath, the horrors –God says- that we deserve. So we brace our feet, we do what we can to prevent falling over the edge, and we have but one thought on our minds: *escape!* How do we get away from here? What can we do to turn away the just judgment of God, prevent being pushed over the edge?

Escape. On top of LD 5 one finds in bold print the words "Our Deliverance"; LD 5 introduces the second part of the Catechism: how we are delivered from our sins and misery. The LD pictures us on the brink of the pit – that's Q 12: "according to God's righteous judgment we deserve temporal and eternal punishment," and that punishment is the pit- the LD, I say, pictures us on the brink of the pit with only one question in our minds: *"how can we escape this punishment and be again received into favour?"* Escape, deliverance: that's what we want, desperately!

What can we do? Run? But we can't. Beside us on the edge of that pit is God, holy God, and He will not allow our disobedience and apostasy to go unpunished; we can't sneak past Him and get away. God is **God**, and so we have no option but to face Him; we can't get away. God Himself has said so. Listen to His revelation through Paul to the Romans:

"...do you think this, O man ... that you will escape the judgment of God?"

The Lord answers the question like this:

"...in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath,"

for God

"will render to each one according to his deeds" (Rom 2:3ff).

God's Word is clear: there is no getting away from God. As we stand on the brink of the pit of hell, *we need to face Him*. That is why we confess in our LD that "*God* demands that His justice be satisfied." God: we can't get around

Him, we need to face Him, need to make good with God....

2. Human response to the circumstance

So, congregation, what shall we do? Square our shoulders and walk brazenly into God's presence, confident that we can handle our problem with God and persuade Him to keep us out of hell?

We understand: that all depends on who I think I am, who I am specifically in relation to God. As long as I have pretty positive thoughts about myself, as long as I think that I can somehow handle God, then Yes, I could consider marching into God's presence and try to change God's mind about that "most severe ... punishment of body and soul." If I imagine that I am big enough to impress God, if I think that I've got it in me to do something to make God happy with me, then I don't have to be so afraid of the pit. Then I can cast about for things to do to make God happy. I could, for example, think in terms of obeying God's commands; that will make God happy with me. Or I could try to pray much and go to church faithfully and read the Bible a lot, and surely God will be happy with me. Or I could get into meditation, or denying myself certain comforts, or even giving myself and my time and energy to an overseas mission project; surely that will make God happy with me!

It's true, congregation: this is the kind of thing that's said around us. All religions of the world insist that people are inherently good, but we sin because of weakness or ignorance or circumstance. In any case, we're in a position to make God happy. So we're told to develop a positive self-image, told to stand tall; we're told we can handle the problems of life, and of death. We can handle what the deities throw at us.

But tell me: is this what the Lord Himself says on the point? What does He say about us? Does He give us reason to think that we can do something to make God happy with us? Can we escape His righteous anger – be it in this life or the life to come?

3. The Lord's evaluation of fallen people

Twice the question 'What is man?' is asked and answered in the Old Testament. On both occasions the question expresses surprise, amazement, that God should even pay attention to His human creation. Consider Ps 8: David is amazed that the God who made the moon and the stars would give to man an exalted position on earth - let alone even bother Himself with man. Job too asks what man is, and then marvels that God would bother to exalt a human being (7:17). In fact, one of Job's friends describes men in a most unflattering manner. Bildad says:

"How ... can man be righteous before God?
...If even the moon does not shine,
And the stars are not pure in His sight,
How much less man, who is a maggot,
And a son of man, who is a worm?" (Job 25:4ff).

"Be righteous before God?" Bildad is sure; there is nothing a man can do to achieve God's satisfaction. Before God sinful man is but a maggot, a worm.... That's as unflattering as what Paul writes to the saints of Ephesus. He's moved by the Holy Spirit to describe us as "dead", a corpse....

High thoughts of self? Cocky enough to stand tall in God's presence? The day came that Moses saw this burning bush. He approached it, heard God tell him to take off his shoes because this was holy ground. Moses' response? Did he take off his shoes and then stand tall in God's presence; he was, after all, the "Prince of Egypt"? No, congregation, Scripture tells us something different. I read: Moses "hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God" (Ex 3:6). That's to say: he has his head bowed, his face covered. Here is no smugness in God's presence, no thought that 'I can handle whatever God wants'.

Isaiah saw a vision of God seated on His throne, high and lifted up and His train filled the temple. Around God's thrones stood Seraphim ready to do His bidding, all singing to one another: "Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God of hosts; all the earth is full of His glory." Isaiah's response? An air of smugness? Listen. Says the prophet:

"Woe is me, for I am undone!
Because I am a man of unclean lips,
And I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips;
For my eyes have seen the King,
The Lord of hosts" (Is 6:5)

"I'm undone," he says, I'm coming apart at the seams, I'm cracking to bits. How come? Because Isaisah sees **God** in His glory. And he knows: in the presence of this God I can only shrivel up; in His presence I'm no more than a worm, a maggot. You see, congregation: when Isaiah saw the greatest of the God of heaven, he straightaway saw also who he himself was – before God he was *nothing*.

Shall Isaiah, then, try to impress God, make God happy? Make no mistake: Isaiah stands *with you and me on the brink of the pit of hell*; he's not a dot better than you or me, and not a fig worse either. He sees the Judge of all the earth, he recognises himself for what he is, and straightaway bewails his misery; "woe is me, for I am undone!" Woe is me; it's hell that I deserve, hell that I shall receive! Before such a God I'm but a worm, a maggot who hasn't got a single positive thing to contribute to impress God; my doom is sealed!

You and I, my brothers and sisters, are no different than Moses or Isaiah. Shall we, then, be satisfied with what we see when we look in the mirror? Shall I think that I'm quite something, that I'm able to care for myself, that I've got what it takes to fight my own battles – including escaping from the just judgment of the righteous Judge of all the earth? Shall I be content with what I am in God's presence, smug about my abilities to sort out my problem with God? It's true: I may have my thoughts about myself, but *my thoughts don't count* and *other people's thoughts about me don't count either*, simply because we all are sinful and sinful minds are not good judges. The critical question is: *what does God say about us?* And God's answer is clear in His Word: before Him we are nothing. We stand on the brink of the pit of hell, and there's not a thing we can do to impress God, to make Him happy with us. Instead, ever effort, ever thought and word and deed serves only to demonstrate how much we deserve the "just judgment" of God; more, every act we do gives to God greater reason to push us over the edge into the eternal fires of hell. I cannot escape; *shall I then cherish high thoughts of myself?!*

4. My efforts to impress God are futile

Nevertheless, congregation, it's in us still to seek a way to escape the just judgment of God. The Lord Himself has said to us that we do not have it in us to impress Him in any way; we can't win His favour, can't make Him happy with us, can't pay off our debt. Yet we want escape from this horrid sentence.... So we cast about for some other way that we can encourage God not to push us over the edge....

Now we read in the Bible about God's instruction to Israel to offer animals in the tabernacle for a sin offering. So we wonder: could we maybe collect a donkey from the paddock, and sacrifice it? Isaiah mentioned angels in God's court; they're without sin and have God's favour. Could I maybe cast about for some way to tee up an angel of heaven – Gabriel, maybe- to speak with God on my behalf, urge God not to push me into the fires of hell I deserve?

But see, congregation, God does not leave us in our vain hopes. Do I do well to round up a donkey to assist me in escaping the wrath I fear? Or an angel in heaven? It's true: God told Israel to offer animal sacrifices for sin. But never did God give to Israel grounds to think that the animal negotiated with God on the sinner's behalf, so that God let the sinner off the hook. Nor did God ever give reason to think that the animal paid for sin so that the sinner went free. What the Lord did say in Scripture is that the animal directed God's attention away from the sinner to another who would stand in His place. But that other one still had to come; sin still had to be paid, else the sinner would still receive the just judgment of holy God.

Besides, the Lord says very categorically to Ezekiel that "the soul that sins shall die" (Ezek 18:4,20). A man may sin, but the Lord will not accept payment from his neighbour for that sin; the sinner himself must make good with God. Well, if my neighbour cannot satisfy God's wrath against my sin, how shall my donkey be able to satisfy that wrath? I seek for a way to escape God's judgment in the pit of hell, but God tells me from the word go that I waste my time and energy looking for some person or animal or angel to stand in my place before God; I sinned, and therefore I must

face the just consequences of a righteous God.

In fact, the Lord gives further reasons why no sheep or donkey or even angel can stand in my place. Last week we read a portion from the prophecies of Nahum. The prophet had said this:

"The mountains quake before Him,
The hills melt,
And the earth heaves at His presence,
Yes, the world and all who dwell in it.
Who can stand before His indignation?
And who can endure the fierceness of His anger?" (1:5f)

The point is: if even mountains quake and hills melt and the earth heaves in the face of God's anger, how shall a creature survive that anger and get me off the hook? It doesn't matter which creature I line off to get me off the hook; "no mere creature can sustain the burden of God's eternal wrath against sin and deliver [me] from it."

O, how I wish I had the insight and the imagination and the ingenuity to think up some way to escape that judgment of God! If I had that insight and imagination and ingenuity I could put my shoulders back in God's presence and stand tall; I could be a Somebody....

But the Lord is clear: it's futile for any sinner to dream of trying to make God happy with that sinner. All the Bible reading in the world, all the praying in the world, all the self-denial and free giving and self-castigation help not a dot in getting out from under the righteous judgment of God. All the imagination and ingenuity of the world will never find an animal or an angel that can pay the debt I have with God. Neither does bluff nor bullying help a fig in the courts of God. For God on high looks down on fallen man, and tells you and me that we are in His sight nothing more than worms, maggots. Make God happy and so escape His righteous judgment? God Most High is emphatic: it simply is not possible.

That reality has a consequence. *There is no room for cockiness, smugness in God's presence.* In the courts of the God with whom I have to do every day, there is only one fitting posture, and that is *humility, brokenness, self-loathing*. It is true for you, beloved of the Lord, and it's true for me. We like to think that we're something, we like to have man and God look up to us and be pleased with us; it makes us feel so very much better. But the Lord is emphatic; in His presence there is no room for a lifted nose, no room for squared-back shoulders, no room for thinking we're something. In the sight of this God we are nothing, *nothing*.

Does that mean there is no escape possible from this God? No, not at all. It does mean that *we can't contribute a thing* to our deliverance. That is: we are *dependent on His grace*. All we can do is cry out with the tax-collector of Jesus' parable: "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner," and cast our lot into His hands.

2. God makes me stand tall in His presence

And see: what does the Lord say in His Word? Listen. David is moved by the Spirit of God to sing like this in Ps 34:

"The Lord is near to those who have a broken heart,
And saves such as have a contrite spirit" (Ps 34:18).

And in Ps 51 David the sinner can rejoice in the deliverance God has given because:

"A broken and a contrite heart—
These, O God, You will not despise" (Ps 51:17)

Through the prophet Isaiah God Himself says it like this:

"For thus says the High and Lofty One
Who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy:

'I dwell in the high and holy place,
With him who has a contrite and humble spirit'" (Is 57:15).

Does God, congregation, esteem those who esteem themselves? Does God have regard and appreciation and respect for those who are smart or strong or can talk their way out of trouble? Make no mistake: God esteems only those who come to Him with empty hands, with a broken heart and contrite spirit. He esteems only the humble, only those who know themselves to be unworthy, only those who don't try by their own ingenuity and abilities to wriggle out from other God's righteous judgment. He esteems only those who cry for mercy.

I know: we don't like being on the ground, don't like needing to cry out for mercy. Ask any teenager caught in a fight at school; it's so *humbling* to have to beg for mercy, and nobody likes that. But let it be fixed in your minds, brothers and sisters: your sins and misery are so great that you cannot escape God's judgment by any achievement on *your* part. That's what you and I confess in LD 5. Then we can keep on fighting and we can keep on trying, but *we are pinned under the heavy burden of God's wrath against sin*. Deliverance from that burden can *not* come from ourselves, *neither* in the sense that we pay for our sins ourselves, *nor* in the sense that we can manage to scrounge up somebody else willing to pay for us. The first step to escaping the judgment of God and the eternal fires of hell is a sense of humility, of brokenness, of crying out to God the judge to have mercy on me the sinner.

And the promise of God is this: *He has mercy on the broken hearted!* Ps 34: God "*saves* such as have a contrite spirit" (vs 18). Isaiah 57: "I dwell," says God, "with him who has a contrite and humble spirit" (vs 15). That is: it's the *broken-hearted* who are rescued from the fires of judgment and receive a place in the eternal dwellings of God. *Not* the proud, *not* those with high thoughts of self, *not* the independent, *not* the smug are spared the anguish of the pit. It's the little people, the humble, the contrite, those with no regard to self and their own reputation and ability that inherit the kingdom of heaven. They escape the judgment of God *by God's grace alone*. And these broken-hearted, these little people: they are the ones that God in heaven adopts to be His children for Jesus' sake, and make them heirs of life eternal, righteousness and glory.

What, my brothers and sisters, do you think of yourself? We all like to feel good about ourselves. But the sinfulness of our hearts means that we are inadequate judges of what we really are. Important is not what we think we are. Important is what *God* says we are. And God says that we are all deserving of His eternal wrath, says that of ourselves we are before Him no more than maggots and worms – dead in sin. Let me keep that in mind when I look in the mirror.... Despite what people say, despite how I feel about myself, before the judge of all the earth I am of myself nothing, *nothing*. *Dependent* on His *grace*....

What, my brothers and sisters, do you think of yourself? O marvel of marvels! - God has made His covenant of grace with *you*, with *me*! From heaven on high He reached down to this detestable creature, claimed me as His, promised to be my Father and care for me always, promised to give His Son to pay for my sins, promised to dwell in me by His Holy Spirit! So: I'm not *nothing* any more; now I'm *a child of God*! This is God's grace, that *He freely loved me*, and therefore set me free from the curse I deserved.

Now tell me, beloved of the Lord: if God says that He loves you, *shall you then not love yourself*? If God says that He freely saved you for Jesus' sake from the damnation you deserved, shall you still walk with bent shoulders and a low self-image? Freely, graciously, mercifully He received you again into His favour. So God gives you reason to stand up straight!

So, congregation, as you greet yourself in the mirror morning by morning, remember what God says of you: for Jesus' sake you're Mine, freely I save you and love you. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 6 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 21 February 1999.

"GOD IN MERCY SENT HIS ONLY SON TO EARTH FOR THE BENEFIT OF THOSE ON THE BRINK OF THE PIT."

Text:

Lord's Day 6

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

A. He must be a true man because the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should pay for sin.[1] He must be a righteous man because one who himself is a sinner cannot pay for others.[2]

[1] Rom. 5:12, 15; I Cor. 15:21; Heb. 2:14-16. [2] Heb. 7:26, 27; I Pet. 3:18.

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

A. He must be true God so that by the power of His divine nature[1] He might bear in His human nature the burden of God's wrath,[2] and might obtain for us and restore to us righteousness and life.[3]

[1] Is. 9:5. [2] Deut. 4:24; Nah. 1:6; Ps. 130:3. [3] Is. 53:5, 11; John 3:16; II Cor. 5:21.

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

A. Our Lord Jesus Christ,[1] whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption (I Corinthians 1:30).

[1] Matt. 1:21-23; Luke 2:11; I Tim. 2:5; 3:16.

19. Q. From where do you know this?

A. From the holy gospel, which God Himself first revealed in Paradise.[1] Later, He had it proclaimed by the patriarchs[2] and prophets,[3] and foreshadowed by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law.[4] Finally, He had it fulfilled through His only Son.[5]

[1] Gen. 3:15. [2] Gen. 12:3; 22:18; 49:10. [3] Is. 53; Jer. 23:5, 6; Mic. 7:18-20; Acts 10:43; Heb. 1:1. [4] Lev. 1:7; John 5:46; Heb. 10:1-10. [5] Rom. 10:4; Gal. 4:4, 5; Col. 2:17.

Scripture Reading:

John 6:22-40

I John 1:1-4

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalm 105:1,3

Psalm 14:5

Hymn 21:1,3,7

Psalm 103:1,4

Psalm 85:1; Hy 54:1,2

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Two weeks ago, with LD 4, I had us consider the discomforts of the position into which we had put ourselves through our fall into sin. We stood, I said, on the brink of the abyss. God has told us what we can see and hear in that pit; hell is the place of eternal anguish, of torment and horror, of wailing and gnashing of teeth. That horrible picture gives us

an indication of how great our sins and misery are....

The fact that we're standing on the edge of that bottomless pit with its endless horrors drives us to cast about for ways to escape. We want to run, get away from this pit..., but we can't because we have to deal with **God**. His justice demands that sin committed against the most high majesty of God be punished with most severe, that is, with everlasting punishment of body and soul. God will not let us get away from that abyss unless we can make good with the God we've offended through our fall. But try as we might –that was the material of last- we are not able to make good with God. Instead, we daily make matters worse..., so that all we can rightly expect is that this holy and just God will push us over the edge into the eternal punishment we deserve.... So there's no cause for us to stand tall in God's presence, no cause for us to think big of ourselves; the only attitude fitting in our circumstance is to cry out with the tax-collector of Jesus' parable: "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner!"

We come today to LD 6. And see: what's the point of the LD? This: that God *has mercy*! The point is that we are given escape from the horrors of hell, not on grounds of our earning it, but on grounds of *God's mercy*. Escape is a *gift*; deliverance from the pit of hell is prepared for us from heaven! Here is a message, then, brothers and sisters, that is calculated to fill us with awe, to make us marvel at the God who gave so much to rescue you and me from the horrors of the hell we earned.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

GOD IN MERCY SENT HIS ONLY SON TO EARTH FOR THE BENEFIT OF THOSE ON THE BRINK OF THE PIT.

1. who God sent
2. why God sent Him

1. **Who God sent**

The heart of LD 6 is found in Q & A 18. We ask here who this Mediator might be who is true God and at the same time a true and righteous man. The answer is this: "our Lord Jesus Christ." But we hasten to add, with reference to Scripture itself, that not we ourselves have rustled up this Mediator and presented Him to God to pay for our sins. Rather, with appeal to I Cor 1, we confess what God has told us in His Word: *God Himself* has put forward a Saviour in order to rescue the unworthy from the eternal anguish of the pit. This is the express message of I Cor 1: Jesus Christ became for us wisdom "from God". This is the origin of the Saviour: He comes not from man but from *God*. Since this message brings us from the depths of our misery to the heights of God's gospel, I need to spend some time drawing out the significance of what this means.

The Son in heaven's glory

God Most High is triune, three in one: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The three Persons of the Godhead have existed together from all eternity. So Jesus, on the night in which He was betrayed, could pray to the Father like this; He said:

"And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was" (Jn 17:5).

Notice: here the Lord Jesus reminds the Father of how things used to be before He came to earth. He had, Jesus says, glory with the Father long before the world was made. From eternity, then, the Father and the Son were together in glory

At the time of Jesus' prayer on the night He was betrayed, Jesus was not enjoying the presence of the Father, was not enjoying glory with the Father either. That's not, though, because of friction with the Father. In that same

prayer, Jesus testified of the closeness, the unity, remaining between the Father and the Son. He asked that all God's own might "be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You..., that they may be one just as We are one" (vss 21f). A couple of verses later Jesus reminds the Father of the love there is between the Father and the Son. He says: "You have loved Me before the foundation of the world" (vs 24; cf vs 23). That Jesus could be sure of God's continued love follows from what God Himself had said to Jesus at the time of His baptism. Said a voice came from heaven: "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased" (Lu 3:22). That message was repeated some months later on the Mt of Transfiguration: "This is My beloved Son" (Lu 9:35).

The Son sent to earth

How was it, then, that the Son was separated from the Father? Why was the Son not enjoying the glory of the Father's presence any more? This, dear congregation, was because of a decision in the Godhead. God in heaven saw on earth the fall of man, saw that man had placed himself on the brink of hell, had to make good with the God he'd offended *and could not*. Triune God in heaven saw the misery of fallen man, and was moved to compassion, was touched in the very core of His holy being by the horrible plight of the man with whom He had made His covenant. So the Father in heaven *sent* His only, dearly beloved Son out of the glorious presence He had enjoyed from eternity, *sent* this Son to earth. It was not friction between the Father and the Son that prompted the Son to leave the glory of heaven; it was rather love within the Father and the Son together, love for the fallen human race, that prompted the Father to send His Son to earth.

This notion that He was *sent* is a central theme in Jesus' own words. John quotes Jesus saying some 30 times that He was sent by the Father to earth. Consider the passage we read from Jn 6. The people pursue Jesus, because they are taken in by the miracles He does. But Jesus directs their attention away from the miracles ("the food which perishes"), and asks them to consider instead "the food which endures to everlasting life" (vs 27). When the people ask what they need to do to do the works of God, Jesus replies like this:

"This is the work of God, that you believe in Him *whom He sent*" (Jn 6:29).

That's the key to the remainder of the passage: believe that God *sent* Jesus and you shall have life. Look at vs 32:

"...Jesus said to them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, ... My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world'" (vss 32f).

Note in this one verse the pile up of terms emphasising God's deeds. "My Father," says Jesus, "*gives you the bread*." He adds: this bread is "from heaven". Again, this "bread of God" is "He who *comes down from heaven*." Who that bread is? Vs 35: "*I am the bread of life*." Jesus elaborates on the thought in vs 38ff:

"For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.... And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life."

The emphasis of the passage is very much on the work of God; God "sent", Jesus comes "from heaven". Jesus on earth has a commission, and it's a commission originating in heaven. Jesus is on earth *by God's sovereign will*. It is *through the One He sent* that God would give life to persons on the brink of hell eternal. Listen to Jesus' words elsewhere:

"... God ... *gave* His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (Jn 3:16).

And why did God do it? Because of *love*. That's what Jesus said: "God so *loved* the world that He gave His only begotten Son." What was most dear to Him He sent from heaven to earth..., because He *loved*.

Marvel, my brothers and sisters, at Who this God is! To send His only, dearly beloved Son out of the glories of heaven because of His compassion for persons on the brink of hell: *what a God this is!* Truly, Lord, there is

none like You, infinite in compassion, tender in mercy, boundless in grace and love!

The Son on earth

So the Son of God left the glories of heaven and the presence of His Father. The Son of God came to earth, and here remained what He had always been: true God. He had to remain true God because only true God can sustain the burden of God's eternal wrath against sin (Q & A 17). He remained what He was, and became what He was not: a true man. Such too was God's decree: God the Son would not only need to leave the glories of heaven, but would also need to take on Himself the true human nature of the people He came to save. After all, "the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should pay for sin" (Q & A 16). He became one of us, subject to all the ailments and pains and frustrations that mark our broken lives. Yet He was different in this one thing: He was without sin. For God –and the Son on earth remained true God- cannot sin. He was a righteous man, and so could enter God's courts to pay for our sins (Q & A 16).

We marvel, congregation, at what God gave for the benefit of those on the brink of hell: His only, dearly beloved Son. We marvel the more when we realise what God gave His Son *to*. That His beloved Son should walk on this earth *as a fallen man*, that His Godhead should be hidden under His humanness, that people would not readily see His glory but see instead a man like any other – yet all of that did not hinder the Father from *sending* His Son to us! We would say: God the Father was not driven by thoughts of own comfort and own happiness; He was driven by compassion for sinners on the brink of hell, and so *gave*, freely *gave* His most precious possession to the humility of living with sinners on earth, *gave* so that sinners might hang this dear Son on the cursed cross of Calvary. Who, beloved, who, can grasp the mind of God?? Who, beloved, who can understand the way of the Almighty?! But this is **God**, congregation, this is the God who established His covenant of grace with *you!!!* This is *your God!* Tell me: shall you not *marvel* that such a God would reach out to *you??*

2. Why God sent Him

That brings us to the next question we need to consider: why would God do this? Why, really, would He give so much for us? The answer breaks down into three parts.

a. to declare the Father

The first reason I want to consider is echoed in Q & A 19 of our Lord's Day. From where do we know just how much God has given for our benefit? Of course, we look in the Scriptures God gave. The Old Testament is full of the compassion and the greatness of our covenant Father. Already in Paradise the Lord God, when He gave His promise of redemption to Adam and Eve, outlined something of Who He was; sovereignly, graciously He would see to it that the Seed of the woman would crush the seed of the serpent. And when the Lord spoke to the patriarchs, and gave His instructions to the Israelites around Mt Sinai, He revealed more of Who He was and to what lengths He would go to save a people on the brink of hell. The whole system of sacrifices outlined for the tabernacle taught the notion that sin had to be atoned for, taught that sin would be atoned through the substitutionary work of another. The prophets too proclaimed more of God's goodness, of how true God would die for the sins of man.

But it wasn't laid out in plain language until "the time had fully come," the time when "God sent forth His Son, born of a woman" (Gal 4:4). Then, when God the Son lay in the manger of Bethlehem's stable and the naked eye could see no difference between this baby and any other, *then* it was apparent *to what astounding lengths* God in heaven would go to save those who "in deliberate disobedience" had rebelled against Him. Then, when God the Son was hung on the cursed cross and the sins of God's people were piled onto Him and the awful anger of holy God against our sins was poured out on God the Son, *then* it was apparent in boldest relief what God really meant when He promised in the beginning to crush the seed of the serpent.

How shall one know Who God is? Certainly, one can bend over the Old Testament Scriptures, and learn so very much about the identity of the God with whom we who stand on hell's brink have to do. But remember, congregation what

John was moved by the Holy Spirit to say. Says John:

"No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him" (Jn 1:18).

Tell me, congregation, who else could make known, could explain God the Father better than God the Son? If God the Son was so close to the Father's heart so as to be in His bosom from all eternity, does He not know best Who God is? So what did Jesus do? Obediently He carried out the will of Him who sent Him. Jesus on earth knew why God in heaven had sent Him from the splendours of heaven to the squalor of earth, and that is why Jesus obediently and submissively went along the road stipulated by the Father – though that road had to end up on the cruel cross. So Jesus, by His words and His actions in the course of His earthly ministry, made clear *how much* God would give for sinners, made clear *what kind* of God there is in heaven. Jesus of Nazareth, Son of God and son of man, was walking proof of how much God in heaven would *give* for the redemption of the lost.

Observe then the Christ, my brothers and sisters, and learn from Him Who the God is Who has compassion on *you*! Then marvel, marvel without end that God would go to such lengths to redeem you from the pit you deserve!

b. to redeem us from the pit

That's the second aspect to the reason why God gave so very much in sending His only Son. Jesus says it in Jn 6:

"For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.... And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day" (vss 38ff).

Did you hear it? "This is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life." That's it, beloved of the Lord: God has no delight in the death of a sinner, but rather that the sinner should turn and live! God has no delight in pushing anyone over the edge of the abyss into the bottomless depths of hell, there to wail and gnash one's teeth forever; God instead wishes the man He created to live forever in His holy courts. *That* is why He sent His Son from the splendours of heaven to the squalor of earth – so that persons standing precariously on the brink of that horrid abyss might be rescued! God's justice demands that sin committed against the most high majesty of God be punished with the most severe punishment of body and soul, and no human being on the face of the earth is able to escape the righteous judgment of holy God. All, then, by God's holy standard, must receive from the Judge of all the final push over the edge into the depths below. *But God has no delight in that*, and that is why He sent His Son from heaven. On this earth the iniquities of us all should be laid on Him, He should be smitten by God and afflicted by God on account of our transgressions (Is 53). In a word: He should suffer *in our place*, He should suffer what we deserve *so that we might go free from the sentence we've earned*. That's the intent of holy God: to rescue us from the horrors of the pit. In Jesus words:

"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45).

And Paul's words:

"For He [that's God the Father] made Him [that's God the Son] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (II Cor 5:21).

c. to restore us to the Father

There is yet a third component to the matter of why God sent His only dear Son from heaven to earth. Through our fall into sin we not only placed ourselves on the edge of the abyss so that we deserved the agonies of hell eternal. Through our fall we also made God our enemy, provoked His wrath, earned *His* damnation. God sent His Son not only to rescue us from the pit of hell; He sent His Son also to *reconcile* us once again to the Father. Listen to Jesus' words for His people in His high-priestly prayer of Jn 17:

"Father, [He says], I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me" (vs 24).

Where was Jesus to be? Indeed, after His work on the cross He was to return to the presence of the Father, return to the glories of heaven. It is Jesus' express wish that His people may be there with Him. That is: it is Jesus wish that those redeemed from the horrors of the pit may share in the splendours of God's presence! We understand: none shall share the splendours of God's presence if God's wrath still abides on him. This, then, is the point of Jesus' words: He came to *restore sinners to the Father*. John put it like this:

"But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name" (Jn 1:12).

And children belong in the house of the Father!

So, when the same apostle John writes his first letter, he says this to his readers:

"that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ" (I Jn 1:3).

Reflect on those last words, congregation: "truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." God the Father: He'd been most angry with us on account of our sins, so that we fully deserved and should fully expect Him to push us over the edge of the abyss. But John speaks of no anger; He speaks only of "fellowship ... with the Father"! What was broken by the fall is restored: fellowship with God exists again!

Conclusion

Truly, congregation, can you imagine a bigger *contrast* between what we deserve and what we receive?! This is the glorious gospel of LD 6: the righteous and severe Judge of LD 4 *Himself supplies the answer to our problem!* And the answer He supplies comes at great cost – not to us, but to *Himself*. Sovereignly, graciously, *He made* His own Son to be our salvation.

Tell me now, brothers and sisters: what do you think of this message? Does this leave you cold? Is this material that sits well with the intellect –it's dogmatically all straight in a row- but doesn't stir the heart to thankfulness and awe? Dear congregation: where a gospel so rich as this does not fill you with gratitude, I tell you, you remain on the brink of the abyss, in danger of being nudged over the edge after all. So there's need to consider again the horrid reality of LD 4, and then to cry out with the tax collector of Jesus' parable: "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner!" And then embrace in faith the mercy of God confessed in LD 6: God so loved *you* that He gave up His only dearly beloved Son to obtain *your* salvation.

What, my brothers and sisters, do you think of this mercy? Does it fill you with awe for such a glorious God? Blessed are you; you may know your sins of today and your sin of Paradise - they've earned you the horrors of hell beneath- to be forgiven, washed away in the blood of the Son of God. And your fellowship is with the Father and the Son, forever. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 7 Q&A 21-23 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday Morning, 14 March 1999.

"TO LIVE BY FAITH IS TO ACCEPT ALL GOD SAYS AND ACT ACCORDINGLY."

Text:

Lord's Day 7 Q&A 21-23

21. Q. What is true faith?

A. True faith is a sure knowledge whereby I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in His Word.[1] At the same time it is a firm confidence[2] that not only to others, but also to me,[3] God has granted forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation,[4] out of mere grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits.[5] This faith the Holy Spirit works in my heart by the gospel.[6]

[1] John 17:3, 17; Heb. 11:1-3; James 2:19. [2] Rom. 4:18-21; 5:1; 10:10; Heb. 4:16. [3] Gal. 2:20. [4] Rom. 1:17; Heb. 10:10. [5] Rom. 3:20-26; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8-10. [6] Acts 16:14; Rom. 1:16; 10:17; I Cor. 1:21.

22. Q. What, then, must a Christian believe?

A. All that is promised us in the gospel,[1] which the articles of our catholic and undoubted Christian faith teach us in a summary.

[1] Matt. 28:19; John 20:30, 31.

23. Q. What are these articles?

A. 1. I believe in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.BR> 2. I believe in Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, our Lord;

3. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary;

4. suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell;

5. On the third day He arose from the dead;

6. He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty;

7. from there He will come to judge the living and the dead.

8. I believe in the Holy Spirit;

9. I believe a holy catholic Christian church, the communion of saints;

10. the forgiveness of sins;

11. the resurrection of the body;

12. and the life everlasting.

Scripture Reading:

James 2:14-26

Hebrews 11:1-10

Ephesians 4:11-16

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalm 100:2,4

Psalm 143:1,5,6

Psalm 52:5,6

Psalm 20:3,4 (after ordination)

Psalm 3:1,2,3 (after collection)

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Not all men, we learned from Scripture last week, are saved by Christ. Yes, God "sent" His only Son into the world to save sinners, but the persons Jesus came to save are only "His people", the ones whom the Father has given to Him. This, we learned, was the doctrine of election.

Yet this doctrine of election, we learned too, does not provide for us material assuring us of *our* salvation, for we simply are not able to look into God's book of life in heaven to discover whose name is written in that book. Instead, we may and must work with the doctrine of the covenant – the gracious fact that God sovereignly claimed us for Himself, gave us rich promises in Jesus Christ. We need to work with this good news by *responding* to it –how?- by *accepting, receiving* what God graciously *gives* to us. With the hand of the body I accept the chocolates you give, and after I've received them I can enjoy them; with the hand of the soul I accept the forgiveness of sins, righteousness and salvation God grants in Jesus Christ, and only then can I enjoy these gifts. The hand of the soul: that is faith. To accept God's gift, to embrace it as my own: I do that *by faith*.

I want today, congregation, to give greater colour to the matter of what faith is. For we all have our specific lives to live, and each day, in our personal circumstances we need to live 'by faith'. Just what does that concretely mean? What does it mean to live 'by faith'? How does my faith affect my daily existence?

To answer the question properly, I need to give you a more complete definition of what faith is than I did last week. Last week I told you that faith is *accepting* what God gives. Today I want to develop that further. For faith is not only accepting what God gives; faith is *accepting* whatever God says *and acting accordingly*. That brings the matter directly into our daily lives, for day by day we *do* things, we *act*. And our actions show whether we live by faith or not.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

TO LIVE BY FAITH IS TO ACCEPT ALL GOD SAYS AND ACT ACCORDINGLY.

1. What is faith?
2. Who has faith?
3. What happens to faith?

1. What is Faith?

All of us, brothers and sisters, are familiar with the Bible. So we know that the world did not come into being through a process of evolution; instead, a few thousand years ago God spoke a word and the world came into existence. We do not dispute that fact, we accept it for true. Question: does that mean that we have faith?

Again, we accept that Noah once built an ark, we believe that the animals of the world entered the ark two by two, and all flesh perished in the waters. *Does that mean we have faith?* We accept as true that God gave Israel manna in the desert, accept as true that David killed Goliath, accept as true that Mary gave birth to the Son of God in the stable of Bethlehem, accept as true that Jesus of Nazareth died on the cross to save sinners. *Does this mean that we have faith?*

We might be tempted to say that the answer is Yes, to accept as true that Jesus died on the cross to save sinners means we have faith. But the correct answer, congregation, is No. To accept as true the factuality of what happened 2000 or 4000 years ago does not mean that we have faith. I accept as true that Guido deBres lived four centuries ago, wrote a Confession, and died a martyr's death on account of the faith. Accepting this historical event as true does not mean that I have faith. I accept as true that nearly 50 years ago the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour. But accepting this historical fact does not mean that I have faith.

Over the years, theologians have given a name to the concept of accepting as true the events recorded in the Bible. They've called it *historical faith*. But it's to be clear in our minds that 'historical faith' is no more 'faith' than a box car is actually a car or a road train actually a train. Stronger, 'historical faith' is not faith at all. It can

look like the real thing, and can make people say the right things, but in fact it *is not* the real thing. It is sham of the evil one, and many are the victims who are happy to say that the Bible is true and Jesus paid for sin the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost – but they do not have true faith.

James 2

Why I say that this so-called ‘historical faith’ is a sham, is not the real thing at all? Consider what James wrote in chap 2. He says in vs 19:

"You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!"

That's to say: the demons accept as fact that "there is one God." In fact, the demons know only too well that everything recorded in the Bible is fact. They know that Jesus died for sinners, know that God has poured out His Holy Spirit. But that does not mean that the demons have faith. For –and this is the point of the apostle- true faith by definition *is accompanied by works*. Look at vs 14:

"What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?"

And the apostle gives the example of the person who receives a visitor in desperate and obvious need, and you wish him a good day and God's blessing, and close the door on him – and leave him in his hunger and nakedness. Is that faith? Not at all; that's the sort of conduct one expects from a person still dead in his sins. It brings the apostle to this conclusion:

"Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (vs 17).

The point? You cannot separate works from faith, you cannot separate faith from works. Faith by definition involves *action*. What action? This: one acts in *a fashion consistent with what one believes*. That is faith; faith is to *accept* what God says *and act accordingly*.

Hebrews 11

So, when the apostle to the Hebrews sets out to explain to his readers what faith is, he describes it like this:

"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen" (Heb 11:1).

What the apostle means by that difficult sentence is made clear by what he writes further in the chapter. He mentions Noah, for example. The man was told to build an ark because, God said, He would send a flood to destroy the whole world. Noah, of course, had never before seen a flood that size, and the whole thought of building a huge boat on dry land is ridiculous. Yet Noah did what God said. He did not wait till he saw what God had foretold; rather, he accepted God's word for true and acted accordingly. This, says the author of Hebrews, is faith. He writes: "by faith Noah ... prepared an ark..." (vs 7). Faith, you see, is not just accepting as true whatever God says, and then putting God's words on the shelf; faith includes that one *acts according to God's word*. That's what Noah did; he fetched his axe, chopped down some trees, and began building that ark, did so because God said He should. *That is faith*.

In the same way God told Abram to leave Ur of the Chaldeans, and go to a land that God would show him. What is faith? To stay put until Abram knew exactly where he had to go and what things would be like and how things would turn out in this foreign land? Is faith that Abram would send out an investigative team to discover which foreign country might be most receptive, most prosperous, most attractive? No, that's not faith. Faith is to accept what God says –go to a foreign land- and act accordingly – without even knowing where he'd end up. So I read in vs 8: "*by faith* Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going." He went, blind to the future, trusting that the God who told him to go would provide for his needs.

Faith: is that simply that I accept as true whatever I read in the Bible? Is faith this, that I accept that I'm by

nature on the edge of the pit, and I can't escape God's just judgment, and God send His Son to pay for sin so that I go free? Is that faith?? No, congregation, NO! That is not faith! Faith is that I accept whatever God says *and act accordingly* in the specific circumstances in which I find myself. You cannot, you cannot separate faith from works, or works from faith.

2. Who has Faith?

Now I hear you say: if this is faith, surely, I don't have faith. If God were to tell me to build a huge boat in the middle of the paddock, would I do it? If God were to tell me to pack my bags and travel to an unknown land without giving me a clue where I'd end up or what things would be like, would I go? And we say: if that is faith, we must not have true faith....

Who, congregation, has faith? Beloved of the Lord, I am constrained to *impress* on you that not all who say 'Lord, Lord' in fact have faith. Let there be no uncertainty on the point. Just because we accept the truth of the Bible, just because we maintain that God in fact created the world and Noah built an ark and Abram left Ur of the Chaldeans and God's Son paid for sin does not at all mean that all of us in fact have faith. I say this on the basis of Jesus' words in Mt 7. He said this:

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'" (vss 21ff).

Let nobody here today take for granted that you have faith; let each instead examine the self. I urge it because no one shall be saved unless he *believe*. As we said last week: "only those are saved who *by a true faith* ... accept all [Christ's] benefits." None of us shall benefit from God's gift of His only Son to save sinners from the pit *unless* that person *believe* in Jesus Christ. Faith is imperative! And what is faith? Not that I consider God's word true and do nothing with it; faith is that I consider God's word to be true *and act accordingly*. That's what Jesus says: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who *does* the will of My Father in heaven."

Who has faith? Noah did. God told him to build an ark, *and he did so* – foolish though the project was to the human mind. Abram had faith. God told him to travel, and he did so – though he didn't have a clue where he would end up.

Who has faith? Have I? Have you? *They* had faith, *you* have faith, *I* have faith *as often as*, in the heat of our circumstances, *we accept* whatever God has said and, in our circumstances, *act accordingly*. Who has faith? He who accepts what God has said about obeying the authorities of the land, and so sticks to the speed limit – though he's late for work. Who has faith? He who accepts what God has said about marriage, and so sticks to the spouse – though humanly speaking the marriage is a mess. Who has faith? He who accepts what God said about His providing a Mediator in Jesus Christ, and so not being anxious any more about whether my sins are forgiven – though past sins were O so horrendous. Who has faith? He who accepts *anything* God has said, and in the nitty-gritty of daily life *acts accordingly*.

Have you faith, my brothers and sisters? That is: are you, in the dirt and grim of your lives, *working* with all that is promised us in the gospel? As you confront the sins of your life, are you comforted with the promise of God given to you in the covenant, the promise to forgive *your* sins through the blood of His only Son? As you face the disappointments of your life, are you comforted with the promise of God given to you in the covenant, the promise to be *your* Father who cares for you well, averts all evil or turns it to your benefit? As you tangle with the challenges of your life, are you comforted with the promise of God given to you in the covenant, the promise to give *you* His Spirit so that you receive the strength and wisdom you need to handle the challenges He lays on your path? Certainly, we have only a small beginning of the obedience God requires, also in the area of *trusting* in Him. But be not surprised on the point, beloved; Abram too, when he came to the land of Egypt, failed to trust his God and, lest Pharaoh demand his life, said that Sarai was his sister.... He too, like we, had only a small beginning of the obedience, the trust that God required. But tell me: do you see in yourself the *wanting* to do God's will in your circumstances? (cf Rom 7). Do you

see in yourself the *striving* to work with God's promises and to obey God's commands in whatever situation you find yourself?

These, my brothers and sisters, are questions you can and must answer for yourself. Next week, the Lord willing, we hope to celebrate the supper of the Lord, for the *strengthening* of our faith. But surely, faith cannot be strengthened if faith is not there to begin with. Who, then, may come to the table? Those with faith. That is: those who accept what God has said, and act accordingly. Shall you come to the table next week? Shall I? That depends on how we answer that question about whether or not we have faith. This, then, is our homework for this week: do I believe what God has said? That is: do I accept His words and live that way in the nuts and bolts of my life?

3. What happens to faith?

One question still requires our attention today. It's this: the faith God works in our hearts does not remain static, dormant; rather, it *grows*. That's our third point: what happens to faith?

I read in the Bible of 'great faith'; I read also of 'weak faith'. Jesus was once approached by a centurion with the request to heal his suffering servant. Jesus volunteered to come to heal him. But the centurion said not to bother coming; only speak the word from a distance, he said, and the servant will be healed. Then Jesus said: "Assuredly, I say to you, I have not found such great faith, not even in Israel!" (Mt 8:10).

Some time later, Jesus' disciples were in the boat at sea, and a big storm came upon them. Jesus came to the disciples, walking on the water. Peter asked for permission to come to Jesus on the water, and received that permission. So he got out of the boat, and began walking to Jesus on the water. Then we read,

"But when he saw that the wind was boisterous, he was afraid; and beginning to sink he cried out, saying, "Lord, save me!"

Jesus' reply? This: "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?" (vs 31).

Here, let's say, are two extremes. Here's a reference to "great faith"; here's a reference also to "little faith". No doubt we may think of a whole range in between.

Does the fact that Peter had "little faith" mean that in fact he had no faith, that he would be lost? Not so, congregation; the fact that "he cried out, saying, 'Lord, save me!'" shows that he knew where his salvation lay. But the thing is: 'little faith' has to *grow*. Peter may not be content with 'little faith'. He has to become a *man of faith*, so his every action is determined by the promises of God to him. That God is his caring Father for Jesus' sake, that his sins are washed away through the blood of the Saviour, that God the Holy Spirit works in his heart to renew it more and more: these are promises that Peter needs to work with, promises that determine Peter's actions.

But how is Peter's faith to grow? We know: by Peter listening to the words of Jesus Christ, digesting those words, working with His teaching.

So it is also with us. How shall our faith grow? Our LD says: "this faith the Holy Spirit works in my heart by the gospel." Yet, congregation, God the Holy Spirit uses the preaching of the gospel not only to *work* faith, but also to *strengthen* faith. We look at ourselves, and find our faith so weak; though we'd love to speak and act like the centurion, we time and again catch ourselves acting like Peter. Well now, what shall we do? Despair? No, not at all. God would have our little faith to *grow*. How is it to grow? Says God: *through the work of the office-bearers!* That is the instruction of the apostle in Eph 4. At His ascension the exalted Christ gave gifts to men. Vs 11:

"And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers."

What for?

"for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature

of the fullness of Christ."

Notice those phrases describing growth. Paul speaks of "coming to", speaks of "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ." The images of growth continue. Look at vs 14:

"that we should no longer be children ... but ... may grow up in all things into Him who is the head—Christ...."

See, congregation, God knows that His people "do not have perfect faith and ... do not serve God with such zeal as He requires." So what does He do? He gives us office-bearers, so that through their labours we may grow in faith. Today we receive more office-bearers from God's gracious hand. Is this gift not delightful evidence of God's love for you?

So, beloved of the Lord, receive these brothers not simply as men who need God's saving work as much as you do (they do!), but receive them as tools God is pleased to use for your growth in Him.

And, dear brothers, see there the work given to you to do in God's flock. Exhort, admonish, teach, rebuke – that the people of God may grow in faith, may grow in accepting whatever God has said in His word, and acting accordingly. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 7 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 7 March 1999.

"IN INFINITE MERCY GOD IS PLEASED TO SAVE SOME FROM HELL."

Text:

Lord's Day 7

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

A. No. Only those are saved who by a true faith are grafted into Christ and accept all His benefits.[1]

[1] *Matt. 7:14; John 1:12; 3:16, 18, 36; Rom. 11:16-21.*

21. Q. What is true faith?

A. True faith is a sure knowledge whereby I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in His Word.[1] At the same time it is a firm confidence[2] that not only to others, but also to me,[3] God has granted forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation,[4] out of mere grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits.[5] This faith the Holy Spirit works in my heart by the gospel.[6]

[1] *John 17:3, 17; Heb. 11:1-3; James 2:19.* [2] *Rom. 4:18-21; 5:1; 10:10; Heb. 4:16.* [3] *Gal. 2:20.* [4] *Rom. 1:17; Heb. 10:10.* [5] *Rom. 3:20-26; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8-10.* [6] *Acts 16:14; Rom. 1:16; 10:17; I Cor. 1:21.*

22. Q. What, then, must a Christian believe?

A. All that is promised us in the gospel,[1] which the articles of our catholic and undoubted Christian faith teach us in a summary.

[1] *Matt. 28:19; John 20:30, 31.*

23. Q. What are these articles?

A. 1. I believe in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.BR> 2. I believe in Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, our Lord;

3. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary;

4. suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell;

5. On the third day He arose from the dead;

6. He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty;

7. from there He will come to judge the living and the dead.

8. I believe in the Holy Spirit;

9. I believe a holy catholic Christian church, the communion of saints;

10. the forgiveness of sins;

11. the resurrection of the body;

12. and the life everlasting.

Scripture Reading:

John 17:1-10

Genesis 17:1-8

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "*Book of Praise*" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalm 121:4

Psalm 138:4

Psalm 105:1,3

Psalm 89:1,7,8

Hymn 49:1,2

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

The material of the last number of weeks engendered in our minds a picture of the bottomless pit, with all its horrors. As a result of our deliberate disobedience in Adam, it's the eternal punishment of this pit that we deserve. God, though, has not dropped us into this pit; today, by His good pleasure, we still live on this earth. That was the material of LD 4.

Of course, we want *escape* from the horrors of this pit. So, with LD 5, we cast about for ways and means to get away from under the judgment we brought on ourselves. But we recognise straight away: to get away from that pit we first need to make right with God. And there's the problem; try though we might, we are not able to pay our debt with God. Nor can we find some other creature to make the payment for us. So we're stuck; all we can do is cry out with the tax-collector of Jesus' parable: "Lord, have mercy on me a sinner!"

And see: God *does have mercy!* That was the material of LD 6; God in heaven *sent* His only, dearly beloved Son from heaven to earth so that the Son of God might make the payment we could not make. Through His work on Calvary, we are delivered from the just judgment we deserve; because of Christ our destiny is not the pit but life forevermore!

But now a question. I'm not the only person standing on the edge of the pit. Standing there with me is the entire human race, all 5 billion of us on the face of the earth today. And that's to say nothing of those who have lived before us or who will live after us. We're all in the same position; because of our fall in Adam we all deserve hell eternal. God sent His Son to save the lost; well now, "are *all men* saved by Christ just as they perished through Adam?" That is: does God's mercy in Jesus Christ benefit all men? If not, who does it benefit? And what conditions might apply? See there the material we need to consider today.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

IN INFINITE MERCY GOD IS PLEASED TO SAVE SOME FROM HELL.

1. God's sovereign election
2. God's gracious covenant
3. God's boundless comfort

1. God's sovereign election

"Are all men, then, saved by Christ just as they perished through Adam?" In our LD we answer the question with an emphatic No. That is: not all men are saved by Jesus Christ.

We learned this answer from the Scriptures. I draw your attention to the words of the angel to Joseph about the baby he and Mary would receive. Said Gabriel to Joseph:

"And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Mt 1:21).

Note what the angel says. He does not say that Jesus will save *all* people from their sins; rather, "He will save *His* people from their sins." Implicit in the phrase "His people" is the notion that the human race is divided into two parts, of which one part is "His" and the other part is not.

When Jesus was about to go to the cross, He prayed His high-priestly prayer – Jn 17. In that prayer, Jesus prayed as follows:

"Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to *as many as You have given Him*" (vss 1f).

Again, note that formulation. Jesus came to give eternal life *not* to anybody-and-everybody, but "to as many as [the Father] have given Him." Jesus repeats it in vs 6:

"I have manifested Your name to *the men whom You have given Me out of the world.*"

Jesus sees the human race as comprised of two parts. There's "the world" *and* there's "the men whom You have given Me out of the world." The objects of His saving work are *not* the persons of "the world"; no, the people whom Jesus came to save are limited in number, they are specifically those whom the Father has given to Him. So, in vs 9 Jesus says:

"I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours."

And let us make no mistake: if Jesus refuses to pray for those whom the Father has not given to Him, He's not about to lay down His life for them either!

God, then, has give *some* to Jesus so that Jesus might save them; these are "His people" whom Jesus will "save from their sins." Let it be fixed in our minds: this is a marvel of God's grace! I say this because our natural reaction to the notion of God saving some only is this: why does God not save *everybody*? But that question is the wrong one to ask. The right question to ask is this: why does God bother to save *anybody*? The point is, as we confessed in LD 3, that the whole human race "*in deliberate disobedience*" deserted God and joined the devil. God would be most just to leave all of us in the misery into which we plunged ourselves. Given our rebellion against God Most High, it certainly is not in place for any of us to challenge His decision to save *some* instead of *everybody*. Rather, it is for us to marvel that He saves *any*.

To save some from eternal damnation: this was His sovereign decision before He created the world. This is the doctrine of election, of which the apostle writes with such enthusiasm in Eph 1:

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will..." (vss 3ff).

Sovereignly, graciously, simply because God was pleased to, He chose certain persons from those who had rejected Him and joined Satan. He chose Johnny and left Peter; He chose Susie and left Mary. And those whom He chose He gave to Christ, and Christ in turn laid down His life to pay for the sins of those God chose to life. These are the ones rescued from the pit, the ones to whom God grants life eternal with Him.

And the others? They are *left*, they are passed by in God's decision to save. They receive the just sentence all men deserve, and so become eternal testimony of God's righteous judgment (cf Rom 9:22). The fact, then, that some are passed by serves to point up to us the more how marvellous is "the eternal and undeserved grace of our election" (C of D, I,15). Truly, how marvellous, how awesome is the mercy of God that He should be sovereignly pleased to pluck some from Satan's clutches!

Here, congregation, is a matter of enormous comfort. If God has chosen to life, *there is not a force in all the world able to undo what God has determined to do!* It's exactly because God has chosen a definite number of persons to salvation in Jesus Christ that Satan cannot destroy the church of God. For God shall accomplish what He set out to do!

But now a question, congregation. Can you know whether you are one of God's elect? Can I know whether I am one of His elect? Can I find out whether my neighbour is elect? I read in the book of Revelation about God in heaven having a "Book of Life" in which are written the names of the elect (Rev 13:8; 17:8). Are we able to take a peak in this book and learn whose names are written in it?

We know the answer. We cannot ascend to heaven to sneak a look in that book. Nor has God revealed to anyone on earth which names He has placed in the book of the elect, and which names He has passed by. So we don't know. But

what happens now? This: we make a problem out of this absence of information. And one hears questions as: if Johnny is elect, does it really matter how his parents bring him up or how he lives; if his name is in the Book, he'll be saved in the end anyway? Or: if Johnny is not elect, if his name is not in the book, he can try all he wants to get to heaven but it won't help, so why should he try? You see: we act as if somehow it's important for us to know whose name is in that book. And if we know our names to be written in that book we're comforted, and if not, well, there's nothing you can do about it.

We need to realise, congregation, that the question of whose names are written in that Book is simply not our business. It's not our business, and therefore in no way may our actions be determined by what may or may not be in God's Book of Life. I remind you of the Lord's word in Dt 29:

"The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (vs 29).

The point? Certain matters are God's business, other matters are our business. God has not told us whose names are written in the Book of Life, has not told us whether Johnny is elect or not. So it's not for us to try to find out either. Nor is it for us to draw any conclusion as in: maybe Johnny isn't among the elect, so why should he try to be saved? Or: surely our Johnny is elect, so he'll get there in the end; let's not be too particular about how he lives.

No, brothers and sisters, there is enormous consolation in the doctrine of election, for Christ's work is guaranteed not to be in vain. But you cannot work with the doctrine of election in the sense of: look, I'm elect, so it doesn't matter how I live, or: I'm not elect, so why bother trying. That is drawing conclusions on the basis of something God has not revealed, that is sticking our nose in God's business.

2. God's gracious covenant

What, then, is my business? We have learned from Scripture that not all men are saved by Christ as they perished through Adam. How shall I know whether I am saved by Christ?? How *can* I be rescued by Christ from the judgment of God?

I refer again to Dt 29. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God," that passage had said, and that includes the matter of who is elect. But the passage said more:

"those things which are *revealed* belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (vs 29).

What has God revealed about your salvation and mine? Has God said anything to you and to me about plans He might have to rescue us from the pit? Yes, He has. He said this: He established His covenant of grace with us. God was very personal when He established His covenant with us; He left us no doubt that His covenant extends to *us*. So this is our business.

To determine what that covenant is all about, we need to recall Gen 17. That passage told us that God in heaven, holy and righteous, reached down to earth and addressed the sinner Abram. Remember: Abram the sinner had, through his fall in Paradise with Adam, placed himself on the edge of that pit of hell. Holy God spoke to him on the edge of that pit, and did *not* say: 'I condemn you to the pit you deserve'; no, holy God instead addressed that man on the edge of the pit and said to him:

"And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you" (Gen 17:7).

A covenant is a bond, an agreement. What's the agreement that holy God lays upon Abram, that sinner-deserving-hell? This: I will be your God (cf vs 8). We understand: this does *not* mean that God is going to push Abram into the pit, hand him over to Satan. It means instead: God promises to give Abram life, redemption, deliverance from the pit, salvation. Instead of God being Abram's enemy, instead of God being the righteous judge who will punish Abram with the just judgment he deserves, God will be Abram's friend (Is 41:8), Abram's shield (Gen 15:1). To say it in New

Testament terms: in the covenant He graciously established with Abram, God promised to be his Father and so supply for his every need, adopt him as His child and heir. In that covenant, He promised to wash Abram's sins away through the Saviour He would send. In that covenant He promised to renew the depraved Abram so that he could live as a child of holy God.

This man Abram, then, though so deserving of the just and eternal judgment of God in the pit, was *told* that this righteous Judge would be *his* God. Freely, graciously, God *told* him this. And lest Abraham would forget, God told him to place a mark on his own body so that he would be reminded time and time again of the gracious gift God prepared for him. He should never forget it: instead of sending him to the pit he deserved, God claimed Abram for Himself. Truly, congregation, there is no gospel so gracious and awesome as this! Talk about comfort, reassurance for Abram!

Nor was this wonderful news valid for Abraham alone. For God said to Abram that He established His covenant not just with the individual Abram, but established it also with any children God might be pleased one day to give to Abram. That's what God said: "I establish My covenant between Me and you *and your descendants after you*." So, in time to come Abram could put his son Isaac on his knee and tell his boy with God's authority that God claimed the lad for Himself, that the righteous Judge of all the earth was *his* God, that this Judge would not consign Isaac to hell. For that's the content of the covenant: sinners on the edge of the pit are addressed by God and *told* that He graciously frees them from the sentence of damnation they deserve, makes them instead His children and heirs, He is *their* God.

So, when Isaac in turn became the father of two sons, Isaac and Rebekah, upon authority of God Himself, could know these two infants in their nappies to be God's children – separated from the children of unbelievers. Isaac could set his two boys on his two knees and say to both of them, on God's authority, that God gave to them the gift of deliverance from the horrors of God's just judgment. Isaac could insist: God had said that both were children of God, both heirs of righteousness and life.

In the course of the centuries since, my brothers and sisters, nothing has changed (cf Acts 2:38; I Cor 7:14). When we in turn consider our own place before God, and consider the place of our children, we too may know with Abram and Isaac that God has made His covenant of grace with us and the little ones He has entrusted to us. Though we and our children, through our fall in Paradise, placed ourselves on the edge of the pit, God –in the covenant signified and sealed at our baptism- imposed on us His divine decision to be *our* God. So: our future and our children's future is not hell but heaven, is not death but life, is not judgment but grace. See there the glorious comfort of the covenant.

Does this mean that the names of each person in this congregation in fact is written in God's book of life in heaven? Does the fact that God has established His covenant of grace with us mean that we and our children in fact are elect? Does the circle denoting God's covenant people overlap exactly the circle denoting who are elect? From what I said concerning Isaac –he could tell his boys that both of them were God's children, that both had the gift of deliverance from the horrors of God's judgment- we might be tempted to conclude that Yes, the group of the covenant is identical to the group of the elect.

Yet it is not so. For the Lord has told us in His Word that Isaac's two children –though both had the identical covenant promises- did not both escape the pit. For the Scripture says:

"Jacob I have loved;
But Esau I have hated" (Mal 1:2f).

Paul in Romans 9 refers back to this verse from Mal 1 to make clear that Esau was passed by in God's decree of election (cf Rom 9:10ff). Here, then, is distinct warning for us not to confuse the doctrine of election with the covenant. The two are not identical. Though in the covenant God gives very rich promises, so that I may know myself and my children to belong to God and be promised forgiveness and life (deliverance from the pit), that fact in itself does not mean that my name and my children's names are written in God's book of life. *The two are not identical!*

What then? How, then, are we to understand this? We need to remember that the covenant God made with us contains *two parts*. That is: there's a promise and an obligation. The promise is clear: God promises redemption from the pit,

deliverance from the judgment we deserve. And the obligation? Allow me an illustration to make the point.

Suppose I should decide for no cause to give you a present. I've prepared the matter well, to the point of writing your name on the gift. Now I come to you with my gift, and I tell you what my gift is: a most mouth-watering box of chocolates. I approach you, I hold it out to you, you can see what it is, you can see your name on it; it's obvious that it's for you.

Does that mean you can actually sink your teeth into the chocolate? Not really, for there is something between me giving that box of chocolates to you and you enjoying its taste. Between those two steps you need to do something. Do what? Earn the gift? No, for I'm standing before you holding the box out to you. What you need to do? This: *accept* my gift. If you keep your hands behind your back, you will not receive what I'm giving – and so won't be able to enjoy its taste.

So it is with God's promises in the covenant. His gift is glorious in its content; He declares that particular sinners on the edge of the pit are His, declares that the work of the Son He sent would cover their debt with Him so that these sinners can be reconciled to God. That's what God gives – freely. And Isaac could tell both Jacob and Esau of God's gift to them. But now both boys had to *receive* what God gave, both boys had to *accept*, embrace it. One receives the box of chocolates by stretching out the hand of the body, closing your fingers around the gift, drawing it to oneself. One receives God's promises in the covenant by stretching out what Calvin called the hand of the soul. That action of stretching out the hand of the soul, embracing the gift God gives, drawing it to oneself – that is faith.

And that's the reference of our LD. "Are all men, then, saved by Christ just as they perished through Adam?" The answer is "No". Explanation? "Only those are saved who *by a true faith* are grafted into Christ and *accept* all His benefits." Note that word "accept". There's your notion of *receiving* what God gives. This is what faith is; faith is the hand of the soul that reaches out to accept, to embrace, to receive what God in mercy gives.

Then certainly, you're not going to stretch out your hand to accept my box of chocolates if you work with the principle of Stranger Danger and I've got this sinister look about me. You won't accept what I give unless you have some knowledge of who I am and what motivates me to give the gift. Again, you won't stretch out your hand to receive what I give if you're filled with doubt that the chocolate indeed is for you; you need confidence that my gift in fact is meant not for another but specifically for you. That's Q & A 21: true faith has two aspects. The first is "a sure knowledge" that God's revelation about Himself is true, I know He's genuine in giving to me His gift of salvation. The second is "a firm confidence" that God's gift of forgiveness and righteousness and salvation is for *me* and not for others only. Faith: because I know who God is and what He's giving and why He's giving it, because I'm sure that God is giving this gift to *me*, I *accept* what God gives me, *receive* it, *embrace* it.

See, beloved, that's what Esau did not do. He left his hands in his pockets, he didn't accept what God gave. And so couldn't sink his teeth into it either, couldn't enjoy God's gift. So he remained on the edge of the pit, and on the day of his death appeared before the judgment seat of God and was found wanting. There was with him no faith, there was with him no appetite to accept God's gift of salvation promised in the covenant. This was according to God's eternal decree; God had passed him by in his election.

Jacob was different. Though he remained a sinner, he accepted what God gave, embraced it as a treasured gift freely given to himself, and so could enjoy the riches of that gift; according to promise God for Jesus' sake declared him righteous and gave him deliverance from the pit, life eternal. This was according to God's eternal decree; God had chosen him to life everlasting.

No, brothers and sisters, covenant and election are not the same. Election is God's business; the covenant is ours. How we respond to the promises of God in the covenant demonstrates whether or not our names are written in God's Book of Life. This, then, is the obligation God lays before each of us – covenant children as we all are: *receive*, *accept*, *embrace* the riches God in mercy has prepared for us, gives to us.

3. God's boundless comfort

What, now, is my comfort? This, that I've had a peak in God's Book of Life? No, for I can't climb into heaven to

check that Book. What then? This: God established His covenant of grace with me! He *said*: you are Mine! He *said*: I will be your God. If God has *said* that, if He *gives* me such wealth, shall I consider myself still standing on the edge of that pit and fearing God's eternal judgment? O yes, if I keep my hands in my pockets and refuse to accept what God gives. But I'm not refusing to accept what God gives; though with much weakness I'm *accepting* what God gives to me. And with a great deal of awe in my voice I echo what God has said in that covenant He made with me, and I confess in the brokenness of this life that "I am not my own, but [I] belong with body and soul, both in life and death, to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ." I know that my rightful place is on the edge of the pit, and I know that God would act most justly if He would topple me over the edge into the pit below. But God has said that He'd be my God, and so with a voice breaking with joy I confess that Jesus Christ "has fully paid for all my sins and set me free from all the power of the devil."

And the God with whom I have to do to get away from the pit? I fear Him not! Why not? Because He *said* that He's my God, and so cling to His promise and I call Him Father, and I am sure that "He so preserves me 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."

"Are all men, then, saved by Christ just as they perished through Adam?" No, they're not. To escape the just punishment of holy God one needs to *accept*, embrace in faith, the redemption God prepared in Jesus Christ.

Am I saved by Christ just as I perished through Adam? Yes, yes I am! My name is written in God's Book of Life in heaven. How do I know that I'm elect? No, I haven't peaked in the book. But I know because God promised me "forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness and salvation" – and He gives me grace to accept His gift. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 8 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 21 March 1999.

"THE GOD TOO GREAT FOR US TO UNDERSTAND ADOPTS SINFUL PEOPLE TO BE HIS CHILDREN."

Text:

Lord's Day 8

24. Q. How are these articles divided?

A. 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. Q. Since there is only one God,[1] why do you speak of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? A. Because God has so revealed Himself in His Word[2] that these three distinct persons are the one, true, eternal God.

[1] Deut. 6:4; Is. 44:6; 45:5; I Cor. 8:4, 6. [2] Gen. 1:2, 3; Is. 61:1; 63:8-10; Matt. 3:16, 17; 28:18, 19; Luke 4:18; John 14:26; 15:26; II Cor. 13:14; Gal. 4:6; Tit. 3:5, 6. *God the Father and Our Creation*

Scripture Reading:

Ezekiel 1

Ephesians 1:1-14

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Hymn 3:1,2,3

Psalm 135:2 (Athanasian Creed)

Psalm 3:3

Hymn 4:1,2,3,4

Hymn 27:1,2,3,4

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

The last number of weeks had us consider our unhappy place on the edge of the pit of hell. Only God's patience –for He gives life and breath- keep us on this earth today, and hence out of the pit. But we can't live forever; one day we shall need to face the judgment of God. And God would be most justified to cast us forever into the pit of weeping and gnashing of teeth (LD 4).

As it is, though (we heard also in the last number of weeks), this very God whose justice demands that sin committed against Him be punished most severely, has freely 'sent' His only Son to earth in order to ransom 'His people' from the horrors of hell (LD 6). Instead, then, of seeing our future in the bottomless Pit, we may know ourselves forgiven of sin, righteous before God, and heirs to life eternal. This most glorious gospel God would have accept, embrace, receive, believe – and then act accordingly (LD 7).

Who, now, is this God who has prepared such deliverance for you and for me? Is this a God that somehow *needed* us? Was there a sense of loneliness in Him that prompted Him to seek company for Himself – and so He deigned to rescue us from hell? What sort of a God is this?! With LD 8, congregation, we make confession of God's greatness – and so are prompted only to marvel that *God* would actually have mercy on us.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

THE GOD TOO GREAT FOR US TO UNDERSTAND ADOPTS SINFUL PEOPLE TO BE HIS CHILDREN.

1. Who this great God is
2. What this great God does

1. *Who this great God is*

Ezekiel 1

We've read together the first chapter of Ezekiel's prophecy. As we read it, what, may I ask, did you think the chapter was about? Ezekiel tells us of four-faced men with four wings each. He tells us of living creatures running back and forth, of wheels inside wheels, of a firmament above the living creatures, of awesome noise and sparkling colours. What is this about? To ask the question differently: now that we've read this vision, do you have a clear picture in your mind of what Ezekiel saw? Could you maybe draw a picture capturing the information of Ezekiel 1?

I suspect, brothers and sisters, that not one of us, after reading this chapter, has in our minds a clear picture of what Ezekiel saw; I certainly don't. Why that might be? No, congregation, it's not because we're too simple, or that we need to do more studying. We catch the significance of this vision precisely when we admit that the vision is beyond our understanding.

For: the vision Ezekiel saw is *God*. That's what Ezekiel says in vs 1: "I saw visions of God." It's repeated in vs 28: "This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord." More: throughout the chapter there are numerous references to fire (vs 4, 13, 27), to an amber colour (vs 4, 27), bronze colour (vs 7), sapphire (vs 26), references too to lightning (vs 13f). Each of them –fire, amber, bronze, sapphire, lightning- appear elsewhere in the Bible as concrete indicators of God's glorious presence. There can be no doubt about it: what Ezekiel saw was a vision of *God*. But so awesome is this God that the prophet is not able to find words to craft a fitting picture of what this God is like; He's too great to be captured by human words. Yet it's not just human words that can't capture what this God is like; the human mind itself is not able to wrap itself around the whole concept of *Who* this God really is.

It's an amazing thought. The human mind could figure out how to build an ark big enough and strong enough to carry two of all creatures through the turbulent waters of the flood. The human mind could figure out how to build the tower of Babel, how to build the pyramids still standing in Egypt. We'd say today: the human mind can comprehend how to get a man to the moon, how to explode the atom, how to build a computer. There's so very much the human mind can do, can understand. But there is a limit. The things of this earth we can investigate, research, analyse, understand. But the creature shall never understand the Creator. This is the message that God impressed upon Ezekiel in the vision He showed him; this is the message that God impresses upon us today as we read Ezekiel. *God is too great for human minds to comprehend*. "Even the vision cannot fully comprehend the total majesty of the living God." This is *God*, so different from us, so beyond us.

LD 8

This, brothers and sisters, is what we confess in LD 8. In this LD you and I echo what we learn from Scripture about Who God is. And we're left with an incomprehensible riddle: "three distinct Persons are the one, true, eternal God."

O yes, that's Scriptural. I read in Dt 6:

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!" (vs 4).

And I Cor 8:

"for us there is one God" (vs 6).

So we confess in Q 25 that "there is only one God," and in A 25 we speak again about "the one, true, eternal God."

But we've also learned from the Bible that God is more than one. In the beginning God said: "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness" (Gen 1:26).

The very use of the plural –"Let Us make man in Our image"- is revealing of Who God is. The matter becomes far clearer in the New Testament, for Jesus, for example, says: "I and the Father are one" (Jn 10:30) and "the Father is in Me, and I in Him" (vs 38). And Peter testifies of the Holy Spirit that He is true God also (Acts 5:3f). So, at Jesus' baptism a Voice spoke from heaven (God), declaring of Jesus on earth that "This is My beloved Son," and meanwhile the Holy Spirit came upon the Son in the form of a dove (Mt 3:16f). When Jesus at His ascension told the twelve to make disciples of all nations, He added the instruction that they were to baptise the converts "into the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19). Three divine Persons are mentioned, and all three placed on an equal level; every convert is to be baptised into the name of each of the three. And when the apostle Paul closed his letters to the churches, he repeatedly laid a blessing on the congregation by words to this effect:

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (II Cor 13:14).

Father, Son and Holy Spirit: the Lord has told us that all three are God. So we speak in Q & A 25 of "three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" as being God. Yet we do not say that there are three Gods because –Dt 6:4- God has said that He is one. So the facts are simple, though difficult to comprehend. The facts are simple: there is one God, and yet the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. The facts are simple, and so we echo in A 25 what we've learned from the Bible: "God has so revealed Himself in His Word that these three distinct persons are the one, true, eternal God."

But it's a riddle to me; I can't understand it. From childhood I've learned that 1 is not the same as 3; maybe it's my tongue, but I was never yet able to convince a shop-keeper that my one dollar perfectly covered the price of a 3 dollar item. It's a riddle to me: how can those two facts of the Bible –God is one and God is three- stand side by side?? I don't understand, but that's OK; to accept both facts is the language of faith. Faith does not try to understand how in God 3 is one; faith accepts what God says and works with it.

And precisely here is pointed up again how *great* this God is! That He is one God and yet three Persons: I can't get my limited mind around that. But that doesn't mean that God is not 3 in 1! You see, congregation: the more I can understand of God, the less God He is! It is as with the vision of Ezekiel: we catch the significance of the Trinity precisely when we admit that the Trinity is beyond our understanding. The point of LD 8 is not to explain how God is Triune, how God is put together; the point of LD 8 is simply to *confess* that God is too great for human minds to comprehend.

Earlier in this service we confessed the faith by means of the Athanasian Creed. Tell me: after you heard that Creed again, did you have a clear picture in your mind of how God is One yet Three, Three yet One? It's the same as with Ezekiel's vision: I for one, after hearing that Creed, do not have a clear picture in my mind of how Triune God is put together. And that's exactly the point: this creed was put together by the church many centuries ago in an effort to resist attempts to understand the Trinity. God is too great for me to wrap my human mind around Him. God is too great for me to comprehend how He is put together. God is so great that I can do nothing else than adore Him in His greatness.

Through my fall into sin I placed myself on the edge of the pit of hell. *Who, congregation, is the God Who rescued us?* See here the glorious material of our LD! The God who rescued us is not a small God who bumbles along with good intention but is not able to guarantee what He promises. The God who rescued us was not motivated by thoughts of self-pity or loneliness. No, the God who rescued us from that horrifying damnation is *so great* that no human mind can comprehend Him. The doctrine of the Trinity, like the vision of Ezekiel 1, sets

God totally in a class by Himself; this is **God** and there is no other, this is **God** and there is none like Him – incomprehensible, eternal, majestic, not at all of this earth, *divine*. *He* reached down to rescue you and me; tell me, then, *are you in fact rescued?? Such* a God intervened in our crisis; tell me, then, *are you truly saved or not?*

You see, congregation, the vision of Ezekiel 1 was able to give such enormous comfort to the Israelites of Ezekiel's day because in their exile in Babylon everything looked so hopeless; surely, the exiles thought, God has forsaken us. And now receive a vision of God's **Godness**? Surely that points up *how safe* the Israelites are in God's hands! If this God is so great that words can't describe it, so great that the human mind can't get around it, then surely the exiles don't have to understand why God does precisely what He does.

"For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways,
And My thoughts than your thoughts" (Is 55:8f).

This is equally the enormous comfort of our LD for us today. If our Deliverer is a God *so great*, who, congregation, "who can be against us?" If a God *like this* justifies us, tell me, beloved of the Lord, *who shall condemn you?* If such a God has been pleased for reasons of His own to choose you to life, is there anything in all the world able still to push you into that bottomless pit? If *such* a God has set His heart on you, shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword sever His love for you? It's exactly because He's **God**, congregation, that you and I are safe, completely safe in His hands. In the words of Paul:

"For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38f).

2. What this Great God does

We come now to our second point: what this great God does. From the glories of heaven on high, this high and lofty God Who is so far beyond human understanding, saw on earth the plight of fallen man. The justice of this high and lofty God demanded that the sin we committed against His most high majesty had to be punished with the horrors of hell eternal.

God the Father and our Creation

But this God –for no reason other than His good pleasure- chose from the fallen human race a certain number to life eternal. In the words of the apostle Paul in Ephesians 1:

"...the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love" (vss 3f).

More, the Father chose "us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself" (vs 5). Here, then, is the work of God the Father: from eternity He has chosen a people for Himself from among those worthy of damnation. He formed a people for Himself, resolved to adopt these persons to be His children, to write them in His will as His heirs. This awesome God –words can't describe His splendour- grafted sinners into His family so that He might be their Father and they might be His sons and daughters.

Marvel, congregation, at the thought! If a small god would condescend to make sinners his children, we could maybe understand it; it might supply security to this little god, or a sense of purpose. But for the God Who has been there from all eternity, for the God Who has no needs at all, for the God Who is so vastly superior to us than our minds can comprehend: that *such* a God would make sinful humans *His children* – congregation, there's not words to capture

adequately the marvels, the glories of such a thought! But that's what He'd resolved to do from eternity: make lost sinners *His children!*

And if that awesome thought is not enough, what shall you say of this that He made *you His child*? What shall I say that He made *me* His child? Have you ever heard of something more breathtaking, more glorious than *that*?

God the Son and our Redemption

But God the Father did not Himself make the payment that had to be made to satisfy God's justice. God the Father determined to make sinners His children. So God the Son – "I and the Father," He said, "are one" – left the glories of heaven to come to earth and here make the payment that we could not make. You see: the Father adopts sinners to be His children, and the Son – in perfect harmony with the Father (for they together are true God) – acts in agreement with the plan of the Father and lays down His life so that sinners can become children of God.

In his letter to the Ephesians Paul draws out how close the Father and the Son work together. God's election itself, he says, was an election "in Christ" (vs 4). More, God's electing work is effective, has results, because of the work of God the Son. Says Paul:

God "has made us accepted in the Beloved [that's Christ]. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins" (vs 7).

That's to say: the Father and the Son work in perfect harmony in obtaining our salvation!

God the Holy Spirit and our Sanctification

So it is too with the Holy Spirit. For the persons God the Father has chosen to life, the persons God the Son has ransomed from Satan's power, are of themselves not fit to be children of God. After all, they act like true children of their father the devil; by nature they are unable to do any good and are inclined to all evil (LD 3). Yet God the Father has chosen them to be His children, and God the Son has redeemed them from Satan's power; so God the Holy Spirit, in perfect harmony with the Father and the Son (for they together are true God), sanctifies those chosen to life, renews them in the image of God. More, the God the Holy Spirit makes His home within their hearts. That's why Paul can write to the saints of Ephesus also about the work of God the Holy Spirit: "you," he says to them,

"were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance" (vss 13f).

In a word: the Father and the Son and Holy Spirit work together in perfect harmony to bring about the salvation decided upon by the Godhead before the foundation of the world. Triune God labours together for your salvation and mine.

Conclusion

Who, congregation, is the God who saved you from the pit you deserved? So great is the God who had mercy on you and on me that words cannot capture His *God*-ness. This is the God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – Who loves you, me, with a love that no force in all the world can break. This is God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – Who works together in perfect unity to bring about the salvation He has determined to bestow upon me.

No, I cannot understand this God, cannot fathom His Person, His ways. But I *believe*: if such a God has set out to save me from the bottomless pit – and I was assured today at the Lord's table that He indeed saves *me* – then I'm safe, so perfectly safe, in His divine protection. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 10 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 18 April 1999.

"MY SOVEREIGN FATHER ALWAYS SEEKS MY GOOD."

Text:

Lord's Day 10

27. Q. What do you understand by the providence of God?

A. God's providence is His almighty and ever present power,[1] whereby, as with His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures,[2] and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty,[3] indeed, all things, come not by chance[4] but by His fatherly hand.[5] [1] Jer. 23:23,24; Acts 17:24-28. [2] Heb. 1:3. [3] Jer. 5:24; Acts 14:15-17; John 9:3; Prov. 22:2. [4] Prov. 16:33. [5] Matt. 10:29.

28. Q. What does it benefit us to know that God has created all things and still upholds them by His providence?

A. We can be patient in adversity,[1] thankful in prosperity,[2] 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;[3] for all creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move.[4]

[1] Job. 1:21, 22; Ps. 39:10; James 1:3. [2] Deut. 8:10; I Thess. 5:18. [3] Ps. 55:22; Rom. 5:3-5; 8:38, 39. [4] Job 1:12; 2:6; Prov. 21:1; Acts 17:24-28.

Scripture Reading:

Ps 139

Job 2:1-10; 3:20-26; 42:1-6

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "*Book of Praise*" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalm 62:1,3

Psalm 42:4,5

Psalm 23:1,2,3

Psalm 139:1,3,9,10

Hymn 53:1,2

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

The God Who saved you from the pit of hell: what kind of God is this? Last week, with LD 9, we confessed that the God who gave His only Son for our salvation is the Almighty; He once spoke and the world came into existence. The stars of heaven, the fish of the sea, Bluff Knoll and the Gloucester Tree: all are His handiwork. Our Father in Jesus Christ is not a little God, but the Sovereign of all.

We find it comforting to know that our Father in Jesus Christ is the Almighty. But, truth be said, that confession gives us some problems. If our God is in fact the Almighty, that surely means that He is in a position to prevent that bad things come to us. Yet bad things happen to us. Why? Why does He let bad things happen to us? Did He save us from the Pit, only to afflict us with evil and torment in this life?

The question is important. For there are many children of God by covenant who have turned their backs on God precisely because they got entangled in the web of questions that arise from experiencing bad things coming from an

almighty God. One can understand the question: why serve a God who lumbers you with evil afflictions??

Yes, the question is important. But the answer, my brothers and sisters, is not one that I can explain to the satisfaction of limited and sinful human minds. Please, then, do not expect from me this afternoon an explanation that satisfies all questions in our minds concerning how a sovereign and caring Father can let evil happen to us. All I can do is open for you the Scriptures, and ask of you to accept with humility what your Father in Jesus Christ says.

What He says? That Yes, He does control all things, so much so that no dog nor demon can so much as blink unless God permit. And this sovereign God directs things in our lives with such perfect wisdom that through both good and bad we are increasingly conformed to His image. I can't understand this, but I can believe it.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

MY SOVEREIGN FATHER ALWAYS SEEKS MY GOOD.

1. The sovereignty of my Father
2. The response of God's child

1. *The Sovereignty of the Father*

"In the beginning God created heaven and earth." After God finished creating, what did He do? For argument's sake, let's consider a tree God made on the third day of creation. God spoke, and the tree was there. If, now, after creating that tree God had left it to itself and given His full attention to something else (or deserted His work), what would have become of that tree? It would, congregation, have disintegrated into the nothingness it was before God created it. I say that because of what the apostle says to the people of Athens: "In [God] we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Elihu in Job 34 says it too:

"If [God] should gather to Himself His Spirit and His breath,
All flesh would perish together,
And man would return to dust" (vs 14f).

That is: without God no one –and no thing- can live or move or even exist. After God created that tree, then, He did not leave it to itself; God continued to involve Himself with that tree, gave it continued existence. That action of God whereby He keeps His handiwork existing is described in our LD with the word 'upholds'. Top of page 484: "as with His hand, He still *upholds* heaven and earth and all creatures."

God, though, does more than keep His creation existing. God also cause His handiwork to change, to develop, to make progress. So, that tree He created on the third day grew some more leaves in the days that followed, developed fruit, generated seed. Here is development in the tree. But that development too is God's active work. The Bible is filled with references to the effect that it is God who causes crops to grow, God who gives wind and rain, etc, etc. That action of God whereby He causes development in His created works is described in our LD with the word 'governs'. Again on page 484: God "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 not by chance but by His fatherly hand." Together, this 'upholding' and this 'governing' is called the Providence of God.

Is God, then, far removed from His creation? Do we do well to think that God in heaven is very, very far away from us on earth? You've all heard of the clock-maker; after days of labour he had his clock together. With satisfaction he wound it up, listened for a while to the musical tick-tock of the new clock, then set it on the shelf and went home for the night. Next day he came back, and the clock was still ticking along merrily; all the clock-maker had to do was return once or twice a week to wind it up again. Is God like that? Has He made a world, wound it up (so to speak), and so can absent Himself from His world while that world ticks on by itself? Can we consider ourselves and our environment the clock, and God the absent clockmaker? Is God far removed from His creation, detached from it – be it that He comes back once in a while to check up?

Let it be clear in our minds, brothers and sisters: if the Lord would retreat from His handiwork and leave us on

our own even for the shortest of moments, *the world and we with it would disintegrate into nothingness!* "In Him we live and move and have our being." "If [God] should gather to Himself His Spirit and His breath, All flesh would perish together." God is not far away, ever. God is always *actively involved* in every aspect of the world He made. That is why Jesus could remind His disciples of the sparrows. Listen:

"Are not two sparrows sold for a copper coin? And not one of them falls to the ground apart from your Father's will. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows" (Mt 10:29ff).

Sparrows: they were so common to the disciples; there were thousands of them around. And not one falls to the ground "apart from your Father's will"? Truly, what a thought! Talk about God's active involvement in the world He made! In fact, Jesus says, "the very hairs of your head are all numbered." I really don't know how many hairs are on my head, let alone on your heads. I really don't know either how many hairs I lost when I showered this morning. Jesus says that God knows! And the point of His knowing is that He controls even the most insignificant things so that not a hair gets stuck in the comb unless God permits.

Can you fathom that, beloved? Truly, I can't! But this is the Word God revealed to you and to me: the Creator of heaven and earth remains today very actively involved in every aspect of His creation. It gives something to think about. When the dice is thrown, who determines which number will come on top? Who determines in a game of Monopoly whether I land on Sydney Station or Kings Avenue or get to pass Go? Says the Lord in His Word: all is in His control.

"The lot is cast into the lap,
But its every decision is from the Lord" (Prov 16:33).
Big things, small things "come not by chance but by His fatherly hand." Truly, what a God!

With all this in mind, may I invite you to look with me at Ps 139. David begins the psalm with a confession that God knows all things happening in David's life. That's vs 2:

"You know my sitting down and my rising up."

I don't recall how many times I've sat down today and risen again from my chair. Nor do I know exactly why I sat down or got up. But David confesses that God does know David's sitting down and rising up. In fact, this God knows David's every thought; vs 2:

"You understand my thought afar off."

Even before David can get a word out of his mouth, God knows what he's going to say. Vs 4:

"For there is not a word on my tongue,
But behold, O Lord, You know it altogether."

All of that together is to say that God is never distant from David; God is rather so close that there's no place where David is absent from God. Vs 7ff:

"Where can I go from Your Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Your presence?
If I ascend into heaven, You are there;

If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there.
If I take the wings of the morning,
And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
Even there Your hand shall lead me,
And Your right hand shall hold me."

Notice those last words:

"Even there Your hand shall lead me,
And Your right hand shall hold me."

David knows: his every step is governed by the God Who is always with him, the God Who controls all things perfectly. Yes, so much so is this God involved in David's life that –says David- it is God who determined long ago all that would happen in David's life. Look at vs 16:

"...in Your book they all were written,"

- what was written?-

"The days fashioned for me,
When as yet there were none of them."

How amazing! That David would have a ruddy complexion, that his father would be Jesse and his mother be Mrs Jesse, that he would have seven older brothers, that he'd be a shepherd boy, would meet up with a bear and a lion and kill them both, that he'd be anointed king, would kill Goliath, would be chased up and down the countryside by King Saul, would have an affair with Bethsheba, would kill Uriah, would refuse to repent for some time, would be confronted by Nathan – all that, and so much more, was determined by God for David's life long before he was conceived! And if God determined that all these things were to happen, and they in fact did happen – that's simply to say that every aspect of David's life was fully and completely controlled by God; nothing happened to David by chance! No wonder David expressed holy awe:

"How precious ... are Your thoughts to me, O God!
How great is the sum of them!" (vs 17).

Who, my brothers and sisters, is the God who rescued you from the pit of hell through Jesus Christ and made you His child? No, He is not a small God; we heard that last week. More, He is not a God-afar-off; His revelation about His upholding and governing the world He made –including every area of my life and yours- presents Him as very involved in every single aspect of our existence. It's true: I am no more successful than you are in understanding how God can control every aspect of my life, and your's too, let alone the other 5 billion persons on the planet today – and that's to say nothing of the animals and the plants and the insects and the fish and the molecules and the atoms.... My education and my experience tells me that it's simply impossible for one Mind to control the exact conduct of every atom, every molecule, on this planet and in this universe, and I instinctively reject this teaching as unacceptable. That is why I need to remind myself, again, that I am but a creature and my God is the Creator. With my limited and finite mind I shall never, ever fathom God's greatness, God's sovereignty, never comprehend how this God can control all things in all creation. But that's OK; I don't have to understand. My Almighty Father in Jesus Christ tells me that in all creation there's never a sparrow nor a stealth bomber falls out of the sky apart from His involvement. Since He says it, I accept it, believe it. And so I'm comforted; my times are in His hands.

This sense of comfort is the more reassuring when I recall God's word in a passage as Rom 8. For the Lord gives in that passage this guarantee:

"... all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren" (vss 28f).

Notice: God promises to cause every event He allows in our lives to benefit us –how?- by using it to make us conform more and more "to the image of His Son." Elsewhere in the Bible God describes this concept as "sharing His holiness" (Heb 12:10). God, then, has a goal in mind for us, and that goal is that we increasingly act like children of God, increasingly image the Son of God, increasingly share His holiness. How shall God get us

from where we are –unable to do any good, inclined to all evil- how shall God get us from where we are to where He wants us to be? In the school of life He reaches into our lives in His wise way, giving us this, withholding us that, in order that through these experiences we grow the more in Him. Since the God who controls every event in my life loves me so much that He gave His Son to rescue me from the pit I deserve, I *believe* that He makes no mistakes in whatever He does in my life. It is as He says: God works all things together for good....

2. The Response of God's Child

That brings us to our second point: the response of God's child to this sovereignty of the Father. As it is, our LD mentions two reactions that now require our attention. In the words of A 28: "we can be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity". Let us be honest: we find it so exceedingly difficult to be patient in adversity.

The Lord tells us of Job, a man "blameless and upright, and one who feared God and shunned evil" (Job 1:1). The man was rich; besides 10 children,

"his possessions were seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred female donkeys, and a very large household, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the East" (vs 3).

In one day, he lost the lot. No, he didn't know that God and Satan had had a conversation about him in heaven, and that God had given Satan permission to impoverish Job. But Job did know his total and utter dependence on God. Hence his reaction to his adversity:

"Then Job arose, tore his robe, and shaved his head; and he fell to the ground and worshiped. And he said:

‘Naked I came from my mother's womb,
And naked shall I return there.
The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away;
Blessed be the name of the Lord’" (1:20f).

Notice: Job concedes that his riches had come from God in the first place, concedes also that God took the riches away. With this reaction, Job gave us a concrete application of the material of our LD. Here is how we all need to respond in the adversities of our lives: "the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; Blessed be the name of the Lord."

Not so long afterwards Job's skin broke out into painful boils, from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Result:

"And he took for himself a potsherd with which to scrape himself while he sat in the midst of the ashes" (vs 8).

And while he sat there in his misery, his wife came along, and advised him to "Curse God and die!" (vs 9). His friends came too, and mocked him, told him he must be a very sinful man for God to do this sort of thing to him.... The men of town came also, and –they used to respect Job- now spit in his face (17:6)....

What does this bag of bones (19:20) do in his misery? Ah, how we can understand it! In the anguish of his ash heap, as his body and his soul hurt him so persistently, so cruelly, he throws his question into the face of God: Why?! Why do you do this to me? Sixteen times in the course of his speeches Job demands an answer of God: Why?! And no, Job doesn't ask his question in a humble manner, as of a child of God who knows himself safe in the hands of his Almighty Father. Rather, he is petulant, he is demanding, he is accusatory of God; Job would have God know that God has made a mistake in letting this evil befall Job. There is nothing of patience with God in Job's response! And how we can understand that reaction! In our adversities, we find ourselves asking the same question....

Page with me, then, through the words of Elihu and the words of God. Elihu: he's that youngest friend who held his peace until the older three had said their bit. Then, in 33:12f, he says to Job this:

"Look, in this you are not righteous.
I will answer you,
Why do you contend with Him?
For He does not give an accounting of any of His words."

God Himself confirms that Elihu is completely correct, that it's not for any person to contend with God, to demand from God an account of what He does. Chap 38: "the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said:

"Who is this who darkens counsel
By words without knowledge?"

There's God's challenge to Job: Job, you've had a big mouth against me; come now,

"prepare yourself like a man;
I will question you, and you shall answer Me" (vs 3).

Then God refers to His works in the beginning:

"Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?
Tell Me, if you have understanding" (vs 4).

And God refers too to His works on each and every day since He made the world so long ago. Vs 12:

"Have you commanded the morning since your days began,
And caused the dawn to know its place?"

In other words: are you big enough to make the sun rise morning by morning, and always at the right time? Says God: when you're still sound asleep, I'm busy upholding, governing this world so that you can live, can have another day. And, Job, can you make it rain? Vs 34:

"Can you lift up your voice to the clouds,
That an abundance of water may cover you?"

All of it together overwhelmed Job, so that he could only stammer out a reply:

"Behold, I am vile;
What shall I answer You?
I lay my hand over my mouth.
Once I have spoken, but I will not answer;
Yes, twice, but I will proceed no further" (Job 40:4,5).

But even that humility on Job's part wasn't enough for God. God had a point to make to the man with the big mouth, and so He began again, two more chapters of evidence about the greatness of His might, how it is that He sovereignly upholds and governs the world He once made. And throughout the two chapters the absolute contrast between the greatness of the God who controls every breath and every action of even the biggest animals and the littleness of man who hasn't got a ghost of a change of controlling the beasts of the bush comes out in radical relief. In the face of all that greatness, Job's reaction is so instructive for us. Chap 42:

"Then Job answered the Lord and said:
I know that You can do everything,
And that no purpose of Yours can be withheld from You.
You asked, 'Who is this who hides counsel without knowledge?'
Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,
Things too wonderful for me, which I did not know.

Listen, please, and let me speak;
You said, 'I will question you, and you shall answer Me.'
I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear,
But now my eye sees You.
Therefore I abhor myself,
And repent in dust and ashes" (vss 1-6).

Shall we, then, congregation, complain about what God in His wisdom puts on our path? Is complaining not arrogance in the extreme – as if we actually have a right to question *God* for what He does? No, beloved, let us instead bear patiently whatever our loving Father in Jesus Christ puts on our path. It is not for us to get bitter at the events of our lives, and it's not for us either to get frustrated or angry or depressed; it's instead for us, with Elihu, to admit that God makes no mistakes (Job 36:22f). Even if He were to let Satan have a go at us, there's no mistake in it, for He has His divine purpose in mind: His glory and our salvation.

Do I understand the details, the whys and wherefores of whatever my Father in Jesus Christ gives – be it adversity, be it prosperity? No, I don't understand all God permits; my limited and sinful mind cannot grasp God's ways. But I know what God says: He loves me with a perfect love – witness the fact that He gave His only Son for me. So He – sovereign Father as He is- will let nothing happen to me unless He in wisdom determines it's good for my salvation and His glory.

So, in adversity *and* in prosperity, I make it my business day by day and moment by moment to cling to His promises – and *believe* that in His mighty hands I am perfectly safe, no matter where He leads me. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day Lords Day 11 Q&A 29 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 2 May 1999.

"JESUS THE SAVIOUR REMOVES THE CURSE OF GOD FROM DAILY TRIALS."

Text:

Lord's Day 11 Q&A 29

29. Q. Why is the Son of God called Jesus, that is, Saviour?

A. Because He saves us from all our sins,[1] and because salvation is not to be sought or found in anyone else.[2]

[1] *Matt. 1:21; Heb. 7:25. [2] Is. 43:11; John 15:4, 5; Acts 4:11, 12; I Tim. 2:5.*

Scripture Reading:

Leviticus 26:14-26

Luke 4:16-21

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "*Book of Praise*" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalm 103:1

Psalm 146:3

Psalm 32:2,5

Psalm 34:6,7,8

Hymn 49:1,2

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

That Jesus is the Saviour is surely the heart of the Christian faith. Take away Jesus, and there is nothing left of the good news of the Bible.

But if that is so, brothers and sisters, then I have a question for you. My question is this: how does the fact that Jesus is Saviour benefit you *today*?

Please take a moment, congregation, and think about it. So Jesus is Saviour. How does that fact help you in the specific circumstances of your struggles – whether they be struggles of doubt, or struggles with the self, or struggles with the spouse, or struggles with the law, or struggles with the boss, or struggles with health, etc, etc. *How does the fact that Jesus is Saviour benefit you today?*

Almost automatically we answer the question in terms of the last day. Then we say to ourselves in the midst of the strife of this mortal life that we have comfort in this that one day all the trials and suffering will end, because when we die we shall go to be with the Lord. Jesus is Saviour and so we won't ever have to go to hell....

But that answer, congregation, is much too shallow. I grant: it's comforting for me today to know that in time to come I shall be spared the anguish of hell. But let's be honest: my struggles with ill health, with contrary children, with financial pressures are very real *today*, and the thought of going to be with the Lord in years to come does not really take the pressures off my struggles today. Must I conclude, then, that the Christian faith is relevant and comforting only with a view to eternity, is not really all that practical and helpful for *today's* troubles?

I put it to you this afternoon, brothers and sisters, that the gospel God prepared for us touches *today* in a very concrete

and happy manner. For it is because of Jesus' work as Saviour that the curse of God is taken out of the trials we daily face.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

JESUS THE SAVIOUR REMOVES THE CURSE OF GOD FROM DAILY TRIALS.

1. God's curse in daily life
2. Jesus' deliverance in daily life
3. My responsibility in daily life

1. Daily life tastes God's curse

The name 'Jesus', says our LD, means 'Saviour'. More precisely, the term means "Yahweh saves". What does the Lord save from? The angel told Joseph to give the baby the name 'Jesus' because, he said, "He shall save His people from their sins." That's it: Jesus saves His people from their sins.

Question: why do we need to be saved from our sins? In what way are our sins a problem for us?

With LD 10 we noted that it is God Who keeps this world existing. He upholds this world so that it does not collapse into the nothingness it once was. More, He causes development, change, growth He the world He made so that things today are not exactly the way things were yesterday. All of that, we learned with LD 10, is to say that God is not far away from this world; instead, God is close by, God is present here, is beside us in every step we take.

But this God is not just beside us in the sense that He upholds and governs all. This God also evaluates what we do, makes a judgment on our actions, and *responds*. How God responds? He hates all sin, punishes iniquity with His just judgment. He sees every deed we do, He hears every word we speak, He discerns every thought we think, evaluates it all according to the standard of His holiness, and in turn acts towards us according to His righteous evaluation.

Let me illustrate. God told Adam and Eve that they could eat of every tree of the Garden, except that one in the middle. God added, "In the day that you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen 2:17). God would observe Adam's and Eve's every move, would surely notice if they ate of that tree, would evaluate that act as disobedience, and respond with a death sentence. Adam and Eve lived in the presence of holy and sovereign God, and so could never get away from His just judgment.

As it is, Adam and Eve ate. God responded as He had said He would. So Adam and Eve learned from experience that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23). Immediately they died spiritually; their bond with God was broken, they became slaves of sin, dead in sin.

Yet they did not immediately die physically. Adam lived another 930 years. That's not to say, though, that death did not enter into his life. We all know that, unless one has an accident, the move from 'alive' to 'dead' involves a process. Along that road of being fully alive, healthy, vibrant on the one hand to being dead, a corpse, on the other, one meets various degrees of sickness, one meets hunger, stress, aging, war, etc. There was no death in Paradise, and so Adam and Eve never had to contend with sickness, with hunger, with stress, with war, etc. But once sin entered the world, death entered too, and with death came everything that moves a person from being fully alive and healthy to being fully dead. Sickness, hunger, stress, death itself: it is God's judgment on the fall into sin, it is God's judgment on sin itself.

The Lord God spelled that out for Israel in most graphic language in the covenant He made with Israel at Mt Sinai. He said in Lev 26 that

"If you walk in My statutes and keep My commandments, and perform them, then I will give you rain in its season, the land shall yield its produce, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. Your threshing shall last till the time of vintage, and the vintage shall last till the time of sowing; you shall eat your bread to the full, and dwell in your land safely. I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none will make you afraid; I

will rid the land of evil beasts, and the sword will not go through your land" (vss 3ff).

Notice the direct connection God established between obedience on the one hand and blessing on the other. Then God continued:

"But if you do not obey Me, and do not observe all these commandments, and if you despise My statutes, or if your soul abhors My judgments, so that you do not perform all My commandments, but break My covenant, I also will do this to you: I will even appoint terror over you, wasting disease and fever which shall consume the eyes and cause sorrow of heart. And you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it. I will set My face against you, and you shall be defeated by your enemies. Those who hate you shall reign over you, and you shall flee when no one pursues you" (vss 14ff).

Again: notice the direct connection God established between disobedience and curse. God is beside His people, present with them, He observes what they do, evaluates, and responds. Says God: sickness and meagre crop, war and stress are a direct result of sin.

So, in the days of the Judges, when the people of Israel chose to disregard God's commands and worship Him in a self-styled manner or worship the idols also, God responded in a predictable fashion. It's a refrain throughout the book: God sold them into the hands of their enemies. The result was war, was oppression, was hunger, and hence weakness, sickness, death.

In his letter to the Corinthians Paul makes the same connection between sin and sickness. I Cor 11:

"Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body" (vss 27ff).

Those words are well-known to us. But listen to the apostle's very next words:

"For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep" (vs 31).

You see: Paul lays a connection between the sicknesses and deaths in the congregation of Corinth on the one hand and their hum-ho manner of celebrating the Lord's supper on the other. That's to say: God sees what the Corinthian believers are doing, evaluates it, and responds according to the pattern He foretold. He punishes sin with His judgment – in this instance sickness.

It remains true, as the apostle wrote to the Romans, that "the wages of sin is death" – and death includes all that brings one from vibrant health to being dead. In the words of LD 4:

God "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...."

With this perspective in mind, we do well to look at the events of our own lives as well as the events of our world today. In the congregation of Kelmscott are persons contending with illness, be it cancer or handicap or arthritis, etc. There are persons too battling with broken marriages, battling with having to raise the children alone. There are persons who would love to receive children and don't, others for whom the thought of more children gives nightmares. There are those too involved with legal proceeding, business unpleasantness, crisis with employees, etc, etc. Given the connection that God has laid between human sin and God's judgment, are we not to conclude that God's judgment rests on us and our loved ones? Surely, congregation, we can come to no other conclusion! Yet that thought is most terrifying! The apostle says that "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb 10:31). And that's to say nothing of the thousands upon thousands of displaced persons in Kosovo, of the shooting in Denver, last month's cyclones up north.... No, congregation, God is not far off; He sees our every deed, hears our every word, discerns our every thought, evaluates according to the standard of His holy law, and responds....

2. Daily life tastes Jesus' deliverance

Now I ask you again the question I asked earlier: how does the fact that Jesus is Saviour benefit you *today*? I take it, congregation, that the answer is now clear to you. Jesus saves, that is, He saves His people from their sins. Precisely *how* Jesus does that we'll discuss with LD 13. Suffice it for now to say that Jesus takes our sins *away*. The result is that they are *gone*. Holy God, then, when He looks at me does not see a *sinner*, does not see a person guilty of this sin and that sin and that. He sees instead a person who is righteous for Jesus' sake.

But, congregation, if God does not see you and me as sinners, as guilty of this wrong deed and that hurtful word and that sinful thought, tell me, will He pour wrath on us?? If Jesus has taken my sin away, if God for Jesus' sake no longer sees me as guilty of sin, *then He will not pour His curse out on me any more*; instead, He'll pour out His blessing! Because of Jesus' work on my behalf, God in heaven sees me not as an object of His wrath, but instead as an object of His mercy! Instead of cursing me, this God promises to *love*, to adopt me as His child, to be my Father. And as Father He promises –it's part and parcel of the covenant He made with me- He "promises to provide [me] with all good and avert all evil or turn it to [my] benefit."

Sure, then things still happen to me that I consider are bad. Sickness, accident, strife, disappointment: it remains part of this broken life. But this is the gospel: *in my strife and sicknesses and trials I need not think that God is cursing me!* Trials are for the child of God *not* evidence that God is angry with us. Jesus delivers His people from their sins, has taken away the cause of our eternal hunger and misery, has reconciled us instead to God, and so there's only grace, abundant grace for those washed in the blood of Jesus Christ. As Paul writes in Rom 8:

"there is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit" (vs 1).

"No condemnation" refers not just to the pronouncement which the righteous Judge will utter on the last day; it refers also to the way in which God looks at His own today. And surely, if "there is therefore ... no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus," then we need not fear God's judgment in our lives, need not think in the midst of tribulation that 'God must be angry, very angry with me; I must have done something awfully wrong.'

Yet it's fact that sicknesses befall us, and so do legal proceedings and marital strife and exhaustion and fires and so on; it is fact that such trials are part and parcel of this life. But these calamities are not evidence of divine anger; instead, as we heard last time with LD 10, a wise Father in heaven wants to bring us from where we are to a goal He has determined for us (we are to share His holiness) and He in wisdom determines that to accomplish that purpose it is right and profitable to take us along a particularly difficult track. And while we're on that difficult track, this God who made Himself our Father for Jesus' sake has us fully in His protective hand. *That's* why we can be patient in adversity; for Jesus' sake my sin is taken away, God is not angry with me, He is instead my Father, busy in my life for my good.

God never angry??? Cf Ps 32, II Sam 24

Consider now with me the passage we read from Luke 4. Jesus would preach in the synagogue of Nazareth, and chose as His text some verses from Is 61:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me,
Because He has anointed Me
To preach the gospel to the poor;
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Lu 4:18).

In the synagogue of Nazareth on that Sabbath were persons who tasted the hardships and questions of life as truly as we do. There were people in Nazareth battling with the hardships of poverty – and Jesus reads from Scripture that there is gospel for the poor. There may well have been a young widow in the synagogue that day who had just buried a

loved husband – and Jesus reads something about healing the brokenhearted. For all I know there were persons present who had a family member locked up in the local prison – and Jesus reads something about "liberty to the captives." And maybe there was a blind man amongst the audience – and Jesus reads something about "recovery of sight to the blind." And we can imagine the question on the minds of the widow, of the poor, of the blind: what's this got to do with me? How does this touch *me* in the grind of my life?

See, Jesus closes the book, begins His sermon. His theme? Vs 21: "today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Today fulfilled: does that mean that the brokenhearted widow is healed of her brokenheartedness, that the captives in jail receive the promised liberty, that the blind can see? We know better; the widow didn't find her husband home after the service, the doors of prison did not swing open, the blind did not receive his sight. What then did Jesus mean with those words: "today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing"? This: the *curse of God* that we see in poverty, in dead, in imprisonment, in blindness – that *curse* is gone. For here is *Jesus*, Saviour, and He's going to *take away the sins of His people*, and the result can only be that there's no room any more for the wrath of God. But if the wrath is gone, *then I'm always safe in His hands no matter where or how He in wisdom leads me!* And poverty is *not* a shame, and burying a family member is *not* a display of God's anger, and imprisonment is *not* a punishment for sin, and blindness is *not* a just reward on iniquity. See there the wealth of Jesus' words: the *sting* of death is gone, the *bite* of adversity taken away. For Jesus *takes away my sin*, and so "there is ... now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."

What gospel, beloved, for the people of Nazareth as they sought to cope with the brokenness of this life! And what gospel for us, congregation, in the midst of the pains and tribulations that characterise our daily living. Am I up against God's wrath when things go wrong? No, No, No! That's my only comfort in life and death; "I belong to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ" who "has fully paid for all my sins," and now "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" (LD 1). Truly, that's comfort, that gives perspective!!

3. Daily life tests my faith

To the wealth of this gospel, brothers and sisters, I need to add a warning. The people of Israel at the time of the Judges tasted the displeasure of God on their sins, as did too the saints of Corinth when they celebrated the Lord's supper. Notice: the Israelites were *God's people* just as you and I are. And the saints of Corinth were *saints*, God's redeemed people too. So: it *is* possible for God's people to experience the heavy hand of God, to taste the wrath of God in this life. How it's possible?

We said already: God's wrath comes upon people when there's sin. When Jesus takes that sin away, there is no wrath any more; there is only blessing. Now the question is: when does Jesus take sin away? In other words: who benefit from Jesus' redeeming work? Here we're back to the material of LD 7. Only those persons who are grafted into Christ by faith and accept all His benefits actually receive the removal of sin for Jesus' sake. So we're confronted with the question whether I *believe* what the Lord has told me about Jesus' work. That is: do I *accept* the promise God gave me in Jesus? Do I accept –and I'm not to do it once only but *day by day* as my circumstances change and I commit more sin- do I *accept* time and again the promise God has given at my baptism to wash my sins away for Jesus' sake? And, part and parcel with that, am I sorry for my sins and determined to fight against sin? Where that faith in Jesus Christ isn't there, where there isn't sorrow for sin, I may –yes, must- expect God's anger in my life.

So the trials of this life are also catalyst to prompt me to self-examination. Do I, in the face of the sins I've committed, still believe that Jesus is *my* Saviour? Am I, in the face of what I've done, truly *sorry* for my transgressions, repentant? Where the answer is No, I've got work to do; I need to repent, be sorry for those specific sins, fight them in the strength of the Lord – lest I bring upon myself and my loved ones more wrath from God. Make no mistake, beloved: our God is a "consuming fire" (Heb 12:29), and His wrath will plague the unrepentant both in this life and in the life to come. Then the trials of this life are a small foretaste of the eternal weeping and gnashing of teeth to come.

But where there is sorrow for sin, where there is a clinging to the promises of God to wash sin away in Jesus' blood, *there* there is no wrath, no condemnation, no judgment from God; where there is repentance there is only grace, God's favour every day. Then the trials of this life are not expressions of God's anger; they are rather the care of a loving and wise Father who wants His child increasingly to grow in Him, to share His holiness. And the peace that perspective

gives today is a small foretaste of the eternal joy God has prepared through Jesus' work. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 11 Q&A 30 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday Morning, 9 May 1999.

"JESUS ALONE PROVIDES HAPPINESS FOR THIS LIFE AND THE LIFE TO COME."

Text:

Lord's Day 11 Q&A 30

30. Q. Do those believe in the only Saviour Jesus who seek their salvation and well-being from saints, in themselves, or anywhere else?

A. No. Though they boast of Him in words, they in fact deny the only Saviour Jesus.[1] For one of two things must be true: either Jesus is not a complete Saviour, or those who by true faith accept this Saviour must find in Him all that is necessary for their salvation.[2]

[1] *I Cor. 1:12, 13; Gal. 5:4.* [2] *Col. 1:19, 20; 2:10; I John 1:7.*

Scripture Reading:

Galatians 5:1-6

Psalm 62

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "*Book of Praise*" *Anglo Genevan Psalter*)

Psalm 30:1,7

Psalm 34:6,7 (Ps 25:6)

Psalm 62:3,4

Psalm 37:1,2,3

Psalm 73:8,9

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Last Sunday, with Q & A 29, I drew out for you that Jesus' saving work does not benefit us only for the life to come; instead, His work touches the very here and now of our daily existence. That's because the problems of this life are a result of our fall into sin; death and all that leads to death –including sickness and accident, adversity and tribulation– are God's response to our sin in Paradise and sins of today. Jesus, though, has taken away "the cause of our eternal hunger and misery, which is sin." So there is no curse of God left for God's own in the grind of this life; God is instead my caring Father who leads me in wisdom from where I am to where He wants me to be – and that road along which He in wisdom leads me can include discipline from God intended to make me grow in Him. This is the gospel that touches the here and now of daily existence: Jesus is my Saviour *today*.

Now there's a Q & A in the Catechism that sets before us an attitude that's found in the hearts of everyone. The question is this: "Do those who seek their salvation and well-being from saints, in themselves, or anywhere else also believe in the only Saviour Jesus?" We hear in that question a reference to how one goes about making good with God, obtaining His forgiveness - and so our thoughts go straightaway (again) to Judgment Day and what shall happen after this life; what else, we say, is meant by the term 'salvation'. But here again, congregation, we cannot be so narrow as to restrict this Q & A to the day of Judgment. Jesus' work as Saviour touches the here and now, takes the curse of God out of the trials that we encounter today – that's Q & A 29. Q & A 30 has the same scope in mind. Q 30 does not ask us to think of Judgment Day, of seeking salvation and well-being from saints or in oneself or anywhere else so that we might survive the final Judgment. Rather, Q & A 30 asks about what you and I are doing *today*: how do we *today* find relief from tribulation, what do we *today* do to find a sense of peace and serenity.

We will all, I trust, answer that question by referring to Jesus Christ. After all, we are Christians. And we know too: if we don't look to Jesus Christ for salvation, for relief, if we look instead to Hinduism as a source of happiness today, we are simply pagans, idolaters.

I take it for granted, then, that we know very well that we need to look to Jesus Christ. But the question that our LD places before us today is this: may a person who confesses that Jesus is Saviour look to *alcohol* to find a sense of well-being in the nitty-gritty of life? May a person who confesses that Jesus is Saviour seek a sense of security in *money*? If I need alcohol in order to have a sense of well-being, if I need a spouse in order to be happy, if I need material comforts in order to feel content, do I then in effect believe in the only Saviour Jesus? Those are the questions of this part of our LD.

The answer of our LD is a breath-taking No. The Lord has told us in His Word, and so we confess it in our LD, that Jesus is a *complete* Saviour, and so those who seek salvation, well-being, happiness via any means other than Jesus alone "in fact deny the only Saviour."

I preach to you the gospel of the only Saviour as source of well-being in daily life. I summarise the sermon with this theme:

JESUS ALONE PROVIDES HAPPINESS FOR THIS LIFE AND THE LIFE TO COME

1. the historical background to this confession.
2. the challenge for today in this confession.

1. The Historical Background

May a person who confesses that Jesus is Saviour seek a sense of security in alcohol, in money, in sex, etc, etc? To give the question some colour, to focus the question, I think it worthwhile to look for a moment at the historical background to Q & A 30. Why did Caspar Olevianus and Zacharius Ursinus included Q & A 30 in the Catechism they wrote for the Elector of the Palatinate? As we draw out the answer to that question, please remember that the Elector wanted a Catechism in order to instruct and comfort the common people of his kingdom – people like you and me.

These little people had been taught through the generations that God was a vengeful judge, hating and punishing sin. So –the Roman Church had taught these people- something had to be done if you wished to escape God's punishments, *both in this life and in the life to come*. What had to be done? Simple, said the church to the people of the land: in order to appease this just and vengeful God, you must *do good works*. By doing good works you could stay on God's good side, keep God happy with you, and so keep the way open for divine blessings both in this life and in the life to come. The people were taught: that Jesus is Saviour is fine and dandy, but if you want happiness in this life and in the life to come, if you want God's favour to shine upon you, you must keep God happy through your works.... So you had to say your prayers so many times a day, and you had to go to mass so many times per week, and you could buy an indulgence from the local indulgence merchant, and through means of activities as these your conscience would be relieved of its burdens, you'd know God was happy with you, and you could receive a sense of well-being and of His blessings in this life....

But we know what happened. Try though they might to keep oneself in God's favour through works, the common people did not come to the point where they felt happy and content, felt God's hand of blessing upon them.... Here was a slavery, here was an oppressive exercise in futility; by good works one could not achieve a sense of happiness, a sense that holy God was pleased with you.

By the grace of God, the Reformation swept through Europe. Persons and families for years enslaved to the notion that a sense of well-being, a sense of God's pleasure depended on themselves, were set free from this slavery with the glorious gospel of Q & A 29: Jesus is Saviour, Jesus Christ has taken our sins away and so satisfied the justice of God! So there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus!

This, now, is the gospel the Elector of the Palatinate wanted his people to hear and to know and to believe – so that

they might have comfort, might have a sense of well-being and peace in the struggles of daily living. And that's what the Elector got; Caspar Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus wrote Q & A 29 in the Catechism the Elector asked them to write.

But see: the two men, and the Elector with them, were not satisfied with that. They added also Q & A 30. Why? Because the matter of how one receives a sense of well-being in this life had to be spelt out in more detail. These little people of the Palatinate had been fed the leaven of Roman Catholicism for years and generations, and so the gospel confessed in Q & A 29 had to be more precisely focused on the specific habits of the people. It was in them still – they'd been raised with it- to seek God's favour by appealing to saints for help, by sweating at good works, etc. But if Jesus the Saviour delivered from sin and its consequences, what concrete implications does that gospel have asking a saint for a share of his extra good works? Was there still room for that thought? In practice, the people thought Yes. Hence the question: do those believe in the only Saviour Jesus who seek a sense of well-being from the good works you borrow from saints? Do those believe in the only Saviour Jesus who seek God's favour through buying some indulgences?

The people of the Palatinate received a clear NO in answer to that question. The LD is insistent: anyone who seeks his temporal or eternal well-being through the good works of himself or another, or through the buying of indulgences or some other such gimmick, *does not really believe that Jesus alone* saves from sins and the consequences of sin. That is simple Scripture. Paul faults the Galatian saints –they believe in Jesus Christ- for thinking that they need to do a particular set of works in order to gain God's favour, and he says to them, "you have fallen from grace" (5:4). Yes, it's that simple: the implication of confessing the wealth of Q & A 29 is that I do *not* seek to make God happy with me through any action on my part, I do *not* seek to obtain a sense of well-being, of divine approval, through anything I do. If I somehow do not find in Jesus all that is necessary for my salvation –both for the life to come as well as for this life- then I in fact deny the only Saviour Jesus. Then I remain stuck in my sins, I live still under the load of God's wrath on sin, and so face not heaven but hell. That's what Paul says; "you have fallen from grace."

Q & A 30, then, was a *call* to the people of the Palatinate to *make sure* that they looked for salvation and well-being not to saints or themselves or anywhere else, but that they looked for God's favour only through Jesus' blood. *This Q & A is a call to self-examination*: I say that I believe in Jesus; am I then in fact also consistent, banking on Jesus *alone*, seeking my daily well-being and my eternal salvation with no one else, nothing else?

With that bit of history in mind, we move on now to our second point: the challenge for today.

2. Today's Challenge

In the time the Catechism was written, the people took God's presence seriously; they knew God was real, was everywhere present all the time. They also saw a connection between the struggles of this life and the God of heaven and earth; they knew from Scripture that God was responding to the things they were doing. So, in the face of their sins, they set out to appease this God, make Him happy with them through good works, and so obtain His blessing for their daily lives – a sense of well-being.

Our times are different. Society teaches us to think of God as absent from the nitty-gritty of this life. That's our society, and so we too are conditioned to divorce religion from daily struggles. So when we have a problem, be it with marriage or work or health or the tax department, what do we do? In typical, late 20th century, western mentality, we cast about for ways and means how *we* can solve the problem. The habit of our day has grown onto us: we look within *this* life to find ways and means to solve the problems of this life. So: your marriage doesn't glow? Seek a counsellor in the city. You can't make your payments? Tell your tale of woe to CentreLink. You're distressed because you see no purpose in life, don't like yourself and your lot, can't handle the crisis you're in? Find a drink, a drug, a girl – it'll give relief, drown your anxieties.... That's how our society seeks salvation and well-being, seeks relief from troubles today.... And we in the church are learning to do the same.... In the congregation are brothers and sisters convinced that the way to a sense of happiness and well-being is to have a big car, or to have one up over a brother, or to win that court case, or to win the heart of that particular girl, or to find the right doctor to work healing. Let no one be fooled, my brothers and sisters: we are as much children of our times as were the people of the Palatinate.

Since that's the case, congregation, it is imperative for us to realise that God is not far from this life; it will not do to divorce religion from daily life. The God of heaven and earth is busy in the lives of one and all moment by moment. In every trial in which we find ourselves, it's not with the contrary neighbour that we have to do, or with the pressures of poverty or sickness; in every trial we face in this life it is first of all with *God* that we have to do! Always is He *here*; never are we outside of His nearness. Ps 139: "If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in hell, behold, You are there. If I take the wings of the morning, And dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, Even there Your hand shall lead me..." (vss 8ff).

That is why, congregation, it is so foolish, in the face of the trials that be, to fail to consider *Him*. To bank on own strength to solve the problem, to turn to the support agencies of our day to help us handle the problem, to bury the problem under a flood of alcohol: all have this one fundamental error in common, and that is that salvation from the pressures of the problem is sought *in the wrong place*. Sickness, struggles, strife: it all comes from *sin*, is God's response to sin, and that's why in the midst of sickness and struggles and strife it is to *God* that we must turn; it is with *Him* that we have to do.

That is also why the first thing the Christian must do in the face of trials is to go to God in prayer. It is with God that we have to do, it is He Who sends this trial on our path, and that is why we must ask God for *His* answer to the problem He set before us. And God's answer, brothers and sisters, is invariably this: 'I gave My Son to take your sin away. Now, My child, will you believe, in the face of the trial I put on your path, that there is still no condemnation for you? It's My promise to you in the covenant signified and sealed to you in holy baptism; will you *now* believe that you are safe in My fatherly hands, will you trust that *I* will carry you, that *I* provide relief? OR will you today, in the heat of your trial, decline to believe My covenant promises to you, decline to entrust yourself to Me, and instead seek relief from the pressures through devices of your own making?

You see, congregation, every affliction is a test from God, a test as to whether we seek our help in the name of the Lord, yes or no. That is: every trial confronts me with the question whether I believe that Jesus in fact is Saviour, whether I believe that the Son of God in fact paid for my sins so that there is no condemnation for me, believe that even in the pressures of this God is my Father for Jesus' sake and so I'm totally safe with Him. That's the question that God lays before me every time I think I have evidence that God is angry with me: do I in fact believe that the crisis I'm in is the work of my loving Father prompting me to greater growth in Him? Do I believe that my Father has the answers for my question in His Word, and the only way to well-being and relief in my trial is to seek His answers? OR do I think in terms of God being detached from my circumstance, (He doesn't really involve Himself with the nitty-gritty of daily life) think in terms of *me* needing to find my own answers to my problems? Each affliction is a test: do I pursue happiness and well-being by leaning on my own capacities, leaning on the capacity of my lawyer, on the liberality of support agencies, on the strength of my mind, my money, my mouth, my muscles? That's the question: do those who seek relief and well-being from government agencies or their own abilities or the bottle believe in the only Saviour Jesus?

The Lord's answer, brothers and sisters, is categorical. It is with God that we have to do, every moment of our existence. So it is to God that we need to turn, time and time again, for relief, for help, for well-being. Every time we fail to do that we in effect deny our own confession, deny that Jesus in fact is Saviour, is so complete a Saviour that "those who by true faith accept this Saviour must find in Him *all* that is necessary for their salvation." It just will not do to think that Jesus gives salvation for the life to come, while the bottle gives a sense of well-being today. It just will not do to think that Jesus reconciles to God, and meanwhile depend on your clever mind or smooth tongue or good connections to obtain relief from the problems God sends in this life. It is with God that we have to do, no matter the circumstance, and so always, always it's to Him that we need to turn – and then seek His favour through the saving work of Jesus Christ. And then, with our hand in His, walk the way He has specified in His Word – and trust that He will ensure that not a hair falls from our heads unless it serve for our good. That trust – Jesus has reconciled me to God and so I'm safe in His gracious hands – prompts the very sense of well-being and peace that the Elector of the Palatinate wanted for the people of his realm.

Does this mean that there is in this life no place for seeking help from support groups or doctors or counsellors? Please do not hear me to suggest that. But I trust, congregation, that you recognise now that there is an *order* in things. Neither support groups or counsellors or lawyers or any such thing can provide relief from my trials, for it is first with

God with I have to do; my trials come from Him. And to have a good relation with God: that's a question of whether my sins are forgiven in the blood of Jesus Christ. As long as God remains angry with me, I can throw all the money and resources of the world at my problem, but I shall not get out from under God's anger. And as long as His curse remains on account of my sins, my problem shall ultimately not go away; as I solve a problem in one area of life, His curse shall express itself somewhere else. It is only when I am reconciled to God through the sacrifice of *Jesus* that the *curse* is gone from the problems I face. And that reconciliation through *Jesus*' work produces a sense of peace, well-being, salvation – for there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus.

And then, once that forgiveness is there with its resulting peace, then, congregation, I'm also able to *accept* what the Lord in wisdom has put on my path. For when I know Jesus as my Saviour, then I know God as my Father, yes, then I see a loving Father at work in my life, a Father who gives me what He in wisdom determines I need. So I don't despair at my trials, and I don't strike out in desperation to solve the problem this way or that way. Instead, there's a *peace* from God that settles, that comforts; I know I'm safe in Father's gracious hands. That peace, that contentment: that's the sense of *well-being* described in the LD.

And when that peace is there, a peace rooted in the work of Jesus Christ, then, congregation, *then* we may count on the blessing of the Lord as we seek to make use of the opportunities that God places on our path to solve the needs we have. Prayerfully, in keeping with the instructions of God's Word, we then may make use of our minds, our money, our mouths to overcome the troubles we face, may use resources in the church, in the community, etc. But, we understand, using these resources is then no longer a matter of seeking to *obtain* well-being; we *have* salvation, we have well-being, a state of "no condemnation" because of the work of Jesus the Saviour. And because we have that well-being, we may work with the opportunities the Lord places on our path, opportunities to improve our lot in life.

This, dear congregation, is the thrust of David's words in Ps 62. The urge of the whole psalm is to lean on God, and God alone, in the trials of life. Fill in how you will what David's trial was; the psalm is so vague that any suggested difficulty will suffice. But David's answer is always the same: "My soul, wait silently for God alone, For my expectation is from Him." Politicians, lawyers, business men: on the scales they are lighter than vapour. Oppression, robbery, riches: they're any empty hope. Relief, peace, well-being, salvation: *it comes from God alone*. So:

"O people, trust this God of grace,
Pour out your heart before His face
And hope at all times for His favour."

The people of the Palatinate long ago had this gospel set before them in the words of our LD, to their comfort and well-being. The saints of Kelmscott confess the same today – to our comfort and well-being. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 12 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 23 May 1999.

"GOD ANOINTS HIS PEOPLE WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT TO EQUIP THEM FOR THEIR TASK."

Text:

Lord's Day 12

Q. Why is He called Christ, that is, Anointed?

A. Because He has been ordained by God the Father, and anointed with the Holy Spirit,[1] to be our chief Prophet and Teacher,[2] who has fully revealed to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption;[3] our only High Priest,[4] who by the one sacrifice of His body has redeemed us,[5] and who continually intercedes for us before the Father;[6] and our eternal King,[7] who governs us by His Word and Spirit, and who defends and preserves us in the redemption obtained for us.[8]

[1] Ps. 45:7 (Heb. 1:9); Is. 61:1 (Luke 4:18; Luke 3:21, 22. [2] Deut. 18:15 (Acts 3:22). [3] John 1:18; 15:15. [4] Ps. 110:4 (Heb. 7:17). [5] Heb. 9:12; 10:11-14. [6] Rom. 8:34; Heb. 9:24; I John 2:1. [7] Zach. 9:9 (Matt. 21:5); Luke 1:33. [8] Matt. 28:18-20; John 10:28; Rev. 12:10, 11.

Q. Why are you called a Christian?

A. Because I am a member of Christ by faith[1] and thus share in His anointing,[2] so that I may as prophet confess His Name,[3] as priest present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him,[4] and as king fight with a free and good conscience against sin and the devil in this life,[5] and hereafter reign with Him eternally over all creatures.[6] [1] I Cor. 12:12-27. [2] Joel 2:28 (Acts 2:17); I John 2:27. [3] Matt. 10:32; Rom 10:9, 10; Heb. 13:15. [4] Rom. 12:1; I Pet. 2:5, 9. [5] Gal. 5:16, 17; Eph. 6:11; I Tim. 1:18, 19. [6] Matt. 25:34; II Tim. 2:12.

Scripture Reading:

Exodus 30:22-33

Luke 3:21,22; 4:1-21

I John 2:18-29

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Hymn 36:1

Hymn 41:4

Psalms 37:9,10

Psalms 139:4,5,13

Psalms 25:2; Hymn 36:2,3

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Jesus once asked His disciples who they thought He was. Peter answered for them all, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16). It's an intriguing answer. We are so used to the term "Christ" that we see it simply as another name for the Saviour. But to Peter's mind the term was not just another name. The word 'Christ' is the common Greek word for 'an anointed one'. Peter, then, says of Jesus that He is the anointed one, and by so saying explains what to his mind Jesus *is*. And yes, that makes his answer intriguing. What does Peter mean by calling Jesus a 'Christ', an 'anointed one'?

We need an answer to that question. After all, the people of our community know us by the same name; we're known as 'Christians'. What's that term 'Christians' really mean? *What are we?*

I want to give particular attention this afternoon not to the three offices of Prophet, Priest and King mentioned in our Catechism; I want instead to give particular attention to the notion of anointing. What's it mean that Jesus is called the Anointed One – Christ? What's it mean that we are called anointed ones – Christians? How are we anointed? I choose to focus on the concept of anointing simply because this concept confronts us fully with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit – the focus of Pentecost day.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

GOD ANOINTS HIS PEOPLE WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT TO EQUIP THEM FOR THEIR TASK.

1. Anointing in the Old Testament
2. The anointing of Jesus
3. The anointing of God's people in the New Testament

1. *Anointing in the Old Testament*

Peter called Jesus "the anointed one", "Christ". Peter knew his Old Testament. It stands to reason, then, that in Peter's mind the term 'anointed one' received its loading from the Old Testament practice of anointing. That practice has its roots in Ex 30.

We read the passage. The first so many verses give us the recipe for the anointing oil (vss 23-25), the next number of verses relate what Moses had to do with this anointing oil (vss 26-33). The recipe itself does not need our attention today. What is important for us, though, is what Moses was told to do with this anointing oil. Says the passage: with it Moses had to anoint the tabernacle of meeting and its furniture, had to anoint also Aaron and his sons the priests.

Why? Why did the tabernacle have to be anointed, and Aaron and his sons also? In finding an answer to that question, we need some understanding of the situation in which the instruction was given.

The people of Israel, we are to know, were camped at this point in time at the foot of Mt Sinai. Holy God had come to them in chap 19 in His splendour and majesty, and established with this nation of sinners His covenant of grace (Ex 20). Part and parcel of this covenant God established with Israel was the fact that He wanted to live amongst them; holy God and sinful man should be *together*. Hence the instructions of chaps 25-31; God told Moses to build a tabernacle, told him how to build this tabernacle, what it had to be made of, what furniture had to go inside, what had to be done in the tabernacle day after day, etc.

It's material, congregation, with which we're familiar. The tabernacle itself was to include a Most Holy Place behind the curtain; that's where God was enthroned on the mercy seat of the ark. In the Holy Place on this side of the curtain stood the incense altar, the lampstand and the table for the showbread. In the courtyard outside the tent was the altar of burnt offering and the laver where the sacrifices were washed before being offered.

The whole setup proclaimed the gospel. At the foot of the mountain were thousands of tents of the Israelites, and God's wish from on top of the mountain was that He would have a tent in the midst of this camp of sinners where He would have a place to live amongst them. Immanuel: God *with* His people. Yet the only way holy God on top of the mountain could dwell in the camp of sinful people at the foot of the mountain was that the sins that stood between the people and Himself were taken away. That's why the altar of burnt offering was placed strategically *between* God and the people; the daily sacrifices of that altar spelled out how God could live amongst sinners. For the message of the altar was that sins were washed away through the blood of Another; God, therefore, would see the people as free of sin and therefore be able to live with them and they with Him.

Still, there was a problem with the whole thing. The *purpose* of the tabernacle is clear; it's to spell out *that* God lives with His own, to spell out *how it's possible* for God to live with His own. But tell me, congregation, can a

construction made with sinful hands, made from materials of a fallen creation, be home for *God*? Can furniture made with sinful hands, made from materials of a fallen world, serve to proclaim the gospel of *God's redemption*? We understand: that cannot be. For God is too holy to have in His presence anything that reminds of sin. There, congregation, is the material of Ex 30. This place and its furniture, and the priests who labour there too, need to be *set apart*, need to be *sanctified*, need to be *equipped* so as to be made able to carry out the honourable function for which it's all intended. How is the tabernacle and its furniture and its priests to be set apart for God, equipped to be the house of God? See there what the anointing commanded in Ex 30 is all about.

That's what happened. When the tabernacle was completed, Moses made it his business to anoint the tabernacle, the ark, the altar of incense, the lampstand, the altar of burnt offering, etc (Lev 8:10f; cf Ex 40:9-16). And when the priests were to be ordained to their office, Moses anointed them with the holy oil (Lev 8:12).

So we know, congregation, what the purpose of the anointing was. But to get to the bottom of it we also need to appreciate what the oil of anointing symbolised. This anointing oil turns out to be a symbol of the *Holy Spirit*. I know: that's not said in so many words in God's revelation to Israel at Mt Sinai. But in His later revelation God did make that clear. For example, many years later the Lord told Samuel to *anoint* Saul as king in Israel (I Sam 10:1). And behold the result: at his anointing the Spirit of God came upon Saul (vs 10). The same is true of David; when David was anointed "the Spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day forward" (I Sam 16:13). And the prophets make clear that where the Spirit is poured out a renewal occurs so that the decay resulting from the fall into sin is taken away and replaced with renewal and life.

The anointing in the tabernacle, then, symbolised that the Holy Spirit was now present in the tabernacle and so dominated that building and its furniture and people that each could carry out the task in God's kingdom to which each was called. Hearts by nature dead in sin were renewed so that Aaron and his sons could live in God's presence and serve Him at the altar. Materials gleaned from a fallen, sinful world were so sanctified by the Spirit that this tabernacle could be a fitting place for God to dwell. The anointing with oil symbolised the mighty working of the Holy Spirit.

That, of course, also explains why the tabernacle and its furniture were anointed once only, and not a second time. For what the Holy Spirit has sanctified and renewed for God's service needs not be renewed and sanctified time and again.

2. The Anointing of Jesus

Peter, now, says of Jesus that He is "the Christ", is "the anointed One." We understand it now: Peter is saying of Jesus of Nazareth that the Holy Spirit has come upon Him, has sanctified Him, has set Him apart for His special task. Peter is saying that ultimately the same thing has happened to Jesus as happened in the tabernacle at Mt Sinai. Jesus: in His human nature He tasted all the consequences of the fall into sin. With His anointing, He was enabled, equipped to carry out the task God set for Him in His kingdom.

Of course, for us the question then is: when did the Holy Spirit come upon Jesus, when was He anointed? Our LD directs our attention to Jesus' baptism in the Jordan, Luke 3 – an event of which Peter surely was familiar. True, at Jesus' baptism nobody came on God's command with a horn of oil to anoint Jesus with that anointing oil. But God Himself was there, and He poured out on His beloved Son the Holy Spirit Himself. Jesus did not receive the *symbol*, the oil; Jesus received the *real thing*, received what the oil symbolised. As such, Jesus was set apart, ordained by God the Father to do the specific task God laid upon Him. More, through that anointing with the Holy Spirit Jesus of Nazareth was *equipped* to carry out the task received.

That Jesus indeed was equipped to do the work given to do is precisely what Luke writes. After Jesus' anointing in the Jordan, Luke interrupts his account with inserting Jesus' genealogy (Lu 4:23-38). But after the genealogy, Luke picks up the story again in chap 4:1, and what's he say? This: "then Jesus, being filled with the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness." That's to say: the Spirit who had come upon Jesus at His baptism now *dominates* Jesus, *directs* Jesus. Jesus has a task to perform, and the Spirit *enables* Jesus, *equips* Jesus to carry out that task. So He's driven into the desert, there to fight against sin and the devil.

And see, He *can* do the task God gave; in the desert He resists sin and the devil, does not give in to temptation.

Then we read in 4:14 that the same Holy Spirit with whom God had anointed Jesus directed the Lord back to Galilee. And what task does He enable Jesus to perform there? Vs 15: "He taught in their synagogues." Vs 16ff gives an example. Under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, Jesus comes to Nazareth, goes to the synagogue, and is asked to read the Scriptures and speak. He finds the portion of Scripture which says –vs 18- "the Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me." And of that text Jesus says, vs 21: "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." In other words: Jesus tells the people of Nazareth that the Holy Spirit has come upon *Him*, tells them that He's been *anointed* – here's a reference to His baptism. And what's the work to which He was anointed? Vs 18:

"To preach the gospel to the poor;
He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to the captives
And recovery of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed;
To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

Do you hear it, congregation? Here is His work as *Prophet*; He must preach the gospel, must proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord. Here is His work as *Priest*; He must heal the brokenhearted, must atone for the sins that stand between sinners and God. Here is His work as *King*; He must battle with sin and Satan in order to set at liberty those who are oppressed, ensnared by the bonds of sin. Prophet, priest, king: the three terms are fitting handles to lay hold of all that this anointed One is given to do.

And what happened? Precisely that! Under the direction of the Holy Spirit Jesus of Nazareth laboured for three years to carry out the task given to Him, and He performed it with perfection. The result is that sinners through the ages can know the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption, sinners throughout the ages are redeemed by the one sacrifice of this anointed Jesus on the cross, sinners throughout the ages are governed by the ascended King and always defended and preserved in the salvation He obtained for us. Anointed He was, and therefore in the power of the Spirit enabled to carry out His God-given task in this sin-filled world. See there what Peter at heart was saying when he said of Jesus that He was "the Christ".

3. The Anointing of God's People in the New Testament

This anointing, brothers and sisters, is promised to you and to me also. In the covenant God established with us, not the Father and the Son alone come with riches promises, but the Holy Spirit does too. Listen to the Form for Baptism:

"When we are baptised into the Name of the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Spirit assures us by this sacrament that *He will dwell in us* and *make us living members of Christ*...."

That's to say: at our baptism already you and I were promised the anointing of the Holy Spirit! That's the identical promise of which Peter spoke on Pentecost day, when he said to the crowds before him that "the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call" (Acts 2:39). And it's precisely this promise that was fulfilled when these very same person repented of their sins and came to faith in Jesus Christ; they were anointed with the Holy Spirit. That is why Paul could say to the saints of Corinth that "you are temples of the Holy Spirit" (I Cor 3:16; 6:19), and again: "He who ... has anointed us is God, who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts..." (II Cor 1:21f). That is equally why Paul could write to the Romans that the Spirit of God dwelt in them (Rom 8:9,11). And John could say to his addressees that "you have an anointing from the Holy One..." and "the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you" (1 John 2:20,27). Yes, and that is why in Antioch "the disciples were ... called Christians" (Acts 11:26) – "anointed ones". For the Holy Spirit, promised in God's covenant of grace and foreshadowed in the anointing oil of the tabernacle, is poured out on all God's own –didn't we hear this morning that Pentecost denotes that God has shifted house from the Holy of Holies in the temple to the hearts of His children?– and equips these children of God for the task God gives them in His kingdom.

Then it's true: so much sin remains in us, and the effects of our fall into sin are so evident still. But the anointing of the Holy Spirit sets us apart—despite the sins that remain—so that by God's judgment we're acceptable homes for the Lord God, and that anointing equips us too to carry out the task that comes with being temples of the Lord.

What that task is? This: God's act of making us temples of God in the Spirit gives to us the task, the responsibility, to *be* temples of God, dwelling places of God in the Spirit. The Old Testament tabernacle, dwelling place of God in Israel, was itself not a living thing; it could not defile itself. But the priests who laboured in the tabernacle could defile both themselves and that tabernacle. How? By embracing sin in their lives and by tolerating sin in the tabernacle. Hence the instruction of God to the priests to ensure that they kept themselves far from sin and whatever reeked of sin. You, brothers and sisters, are temples of the Holy Spirit, and therefore need to *be* temples of the Spirit. Concretely: keep yourselves from sin. That's exactly the apostle's point in those verses we read this morning from I Cor 3: "you are the temple of God and ... the Spirit of God dwells in you." Then Paul adds these words:

"If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are" (vs 17).

To give oneself to sin while God has anointed you with His Holy Spirit is to invite God's condemnation. He tolerates sin in His temples today no more than He tolerated sin in His temples in the Old Testament; recall how God struck dead the two sons of Aaron because they offered unholy fire to God in the tabernacle, recall too how God struck King Uzziah with leprosy because he transgressed God's commands in the temple. It is so instructive that right after God the Spirit made His homes in His own, Ananias and Sapphira fell dead because they lied to the Holy Spirit.

What, then, since God dwells within, what shall come out of my mouth? God has said: "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Mt 12:34). Well now, if God dwells within, shall I permit foul language to come out of me? If God dwells within, shall I permit my mouth to speak words that show that I'm excited about idols—be it idols of money or sport or recreation? If I share Christ's anointing so that the Spirit of God dwells in me, shall my mouth not speak the things of the Spirit? In the words of the LD: "as prophet [I] confess His Name."

Again: if God dwells within, what is it that I'll give my eyes to behold? What shall I give my hands to do? Where shall I have my feet take me? If God dwells within, shall I permit my eyes to behold evil? If God dwells within, shall I let my hands do what God says is sin? If I am a temple of the Holy Spirit, shall I let my feet carry me to a place where the Spirit of God is absent? We understand the answer is No. Since I share the anointing of Christ, since the Spirit of God has made His home in me, I shall "present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him."

Once more: if God dwells within, how shall respond to sin around me and to Satan's attacks against me? Shall I cave in to the pressures of my peers and give myself to sin? Shall I offer Satan no resistance, let sin dominate me? We know: if God dwells within, that won't do! If God dwells within, I'll "fight with a free and good conscience against sin and the devil in this life."

Can we do it? Truth be said: we find it so hard to *be* the Christian God wants us to be.... To guard the tongue always, to keep our eyes and hands from evil, to resist every temptation: we find it hard, tiring, frustrating.... And we think: I mustn't have enough of the Holy Spirit...., I'm not good enough a Christian.... And we say: no, we can't do it....

But that's not true, beloved! You and I *can* fight against sin and Satan. Jesus the Christ was anointed with the Spirit and in that strength resisted the devil, overcame the devil, defeated sin and Satan. The same Spirit has made His holy home in your heart and mine. Will He not equip you and me to *be* temples acceptable to God?!

Let there be no mistake, brothers and sisters: once the Old Testament tabernacle was anointed, it *was* anointed. This anointing did not come in degrees, as if the one item in the tabernacle was better anointed than others. So too today. The Spirit is poured out in fullness. The apostle says that "you *have* an anointing from the Holy One" and "the anointing which you have received from Him *abides* in you" (1 John 2:20,27). Here is not language of partial anointing, or of anointing that needs to be 'done' again. Rather, congregation, the very fact that you have been anointed guarantees that you *are equipped for the task God has given*. This is promise: by the power of the Spirit you have received, you are enabled to confess His name, you are made able to present yourself as a sacrifice of

thankfulness to Him, you are made able to fight against sin and the devil in this life (cf Rom 6). I know: we have only a small beginning of the obedience God requires. But do not, do not let your failures get you down. Rather, take to heart the promise of Pentecost and fight on!! Let it be fixed in your mind: you *are* a temple of the Spirit of Jesus Christ –that's the gospel- and He strengthens you to *be* a temple acceptable to Him.

"Do you *believe* all this? Do you *accept* the wealth God has promised you in your baptism? The question is important because not every one in the congregation *works* with the reality of Pentecost. And therefore is not driven by the Spirit promised at baptism either.

Who, then, is a Christian? Those who are *anointed* by the Holy Spirit. And that anointing cannot be hidden; an anointed one, a *Christian*, is Prophet, Priest and King *in deed*." Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 16 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 4 July 1999.

"CHRIST'S DEATH IS OUR LIFE."

Text:

Lord's Day 16

40. Q. Why was it necessary for Christ to humble Himself even unto death?

A. Because of the justice and truth of God[1] satisfaction for our sins could be made in no other way than by the death of the Son of God.[2]

[1] Gen. 2:17. [2] Rom. 8:3; Phil. 2:8; Heb. 2:9, 14, 15.

41. Q. Why was he buried?

A. His burial testified that He had really died.[1]

[1] Is. 53:9; John 19:38-42; Acts 13:29; I Cor. 15:3,4.

42. Q. Since Christ has died for us, why do we still have to die?

A. Our death is not a payment for our sins, but it puts an end to sin and is an entrance into eternal life.[1]

[1] John 5:24; Phil. 1:21-23; I Thess. 5:9, 10.

43. Q. What further benefit do we receive from Christ's sacrifice and death on the cross?

A. Through Christ's death our old nature is crucified, put to death, and buried with Him,[1] so that the evil desires of the flesh may no longer reign in us,[2] but that we may offer ourselves to Him as a sacrifice of thankfulness.[3]

[1] Rom. 6:5-11; Col. 2:11, 12. [2] Rom. 6:12-14. [3] Rom. 12:1; Eph. 5:1, 2.

44. Q. Why is there added: He descended into hell?

A. 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[1] but especially on the cross, has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell.[2]

[1] Ps. 18:5, 6; 116:3; Matt. 26:36-46; 27:45, 46; Heb. 5:7-10. [2] Is. 53.

Scripture Reading:

Luke 23:39-46

Romans 6:1-14

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalm 18:2,15

Psalm 30:2,7

Psalm 16:5

Psalm 116:1,2,5,8,9

Hymn 51:1,2,7,8

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

We are a rather young congregation, with but few senior members. That in itself could make us wary of concentrating in this service on death. Yet we shall spend time today considering death, and there are two reasons for doing so. The

first is that the Lord in His Word has revealed much about death, and so we're to know it and believe. The second reason is that death *is* very much a reality in this life, for loved ones have died whether they were older or younger, yes, we shall all one day die and we haven't a clue when that will be.

In the Bible, the Lord speaks of death in two ways. He speaks of "the second death", and implicit in that designation is that there is also a "first death". The "first death" is understood to refer to that which we see happening at the end of life; the heart stops, the person has departed, is here no more. The "second death" is described for us in Rev 20 as "the lake of fire" (vs 14) and in Rev 21 as "the lake that burns with fire and brimstone" (vs 8). This is hell, the place where God's wrath is poured out on sinners, where sinners are rejected by the God they have offended.

First death, second death. The Scriptures speak of both, and so I wish today to consider both concepts with our treatment of LD 16. To do so, we need to pay attention to the place of the first and second deaths in the life of Jesus Christ, as well as the place of the first and second deaths in our own lives. I summarise the sermon with this theme:

CHRIST'S DEATH IS OUR LIFE.

In developing this theme, I ask attention for

1. the two aspects of Christ's death
2. the two results of Christ's death

1. *The Two Aspects of Christ's Death*

Scripture, then, speaks of two deaths. Where, brothers and sisters, do these two deaths come from? As it turns out, both have their origin in our fall into sin. When the Lord God placed Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, He told them straightaway what would happen if they should disobey His command. Said God: "in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen 2:17). That promise from God directs our thoughts immediately to the first death, that parting of body and soul when one breathes his last. As it turns out, though, Adam and Eve did not die this "first death" as soon as they sinned; they rather died the "second death". They were guilty of sin, and as such deserved the awful *wrath* of God on their sin. God caused them to taste what this second death was all about, for He –holy that He is- sent these sinners out of His presence, out of the Garden, exiled them into a world of thorns and thistles, into a *cursed* world. No, Adam and Eve were not cast into a "lake of fire and sulphur" as Rev 21 describes the second death. But the cursed world outside the Garden of Eden was symbolic of the horrors of hell they deserved on their sin. Indeed, the only reason why the Lord God did not straightaway cast them into the fires of hell prepared for the ungodly was because He in mercy planned to work salvation, and so redeem these sinners from the misery into which they had plunged themselves. That is: God *delayed* casting sinners into the hell they deserved until He had finished gathering to Himself all those chosen to life. Meanwhile, though, Adam and Eve in their exile from Paradise did taste what the second death was all about. For they were barred from God's gracious presence, were given over to His wrath. So in essence they experienced that second death as soon as they fell into sin. As to the first death, Adam tasted it some 930 years after the fall into sin when "he died" (Gen 5:5).

I said already: it pleased the Lord God to spare Adam and Eve the full weight of His wrath in the second death outside Paradise because He intended to work salvation for these sinners. This was God's promise on the day of the fall:

"I will put enmity between [Satan] and the woman,
and between [his] seed and her seed..." (3:15),

and the result would be that the seed of the woman –Jesus Christ- would crush the head of the seed of the serpent, of Satan.

So it was that years later the Lord God sent His Son to earth as a man. In the course of His life, Jesus Christ suffered the consequences of sin, suffered on account of sin. But it wasn't until He was fixed to the cross that He tasted the full load of God's terrible wrath against sin. While on the cross, He experienced what the "second

death" was all about. For on the cross He "descended into hell".

Here we need to correct the common thought we have about Christ's descent into hell. The Apostles' Creed mentions that Christ "suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried," and *then* adds that "He descended into hell." That leads us to conclude that Jesus went to hell after He died. In other words: first He died the first death, and afterwards He went to hell, died the second death. Yet we've got the order wrong here; the Apostles' Creed is not meant to be strictly chronological. Consider what Jesus said while on the cross. To the robber who asked Jesus to remember him when He came into His kingdom, Jesus said:

"Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Lu 23:43).

"Today", Jesus said. Jesus would not go to the Father three days from now, after He had been in hell; no, "today" you will be *with Me* in Paradise. So too just before He died. "Father," said He, "into Your hands I commit My Spirit!" (Lu 23:46). What else does that mean than that immediately upon His death He returned to the Father in heaven?

When it was, then, that Christ went to hell? That, congregation, was in those three hours of darkness that enveloped the cross before Jesus died. Light is in the Bible a symbol of God's presence; darkness is a symbol of God's absence. During those three hours when the Lord God turned the sun off on Calvary, God distanced Himself from His Son, rejected His Son, poured on Him His terrible wrath. That rejection of the Son meant that Christ was handed over to hell; God wished to have nothing to do with Him, He gave His Son into the hands of Satan. All the groaning and the weeping and the gnashing of teeth that Scripture associates with hell were experienced by Jesus Christ in those hours of rejection by God; on the cross Christ tasted what Scripture calls the "second death". That text from Rev 21 says that the second death is the "lake that burns with fire and brimstone", and according to the symbolism of the book of Revelation this burning with fire and brimstone describes the immense wrath of God against sin. Well, *that's* what Jesus experienced in those three hours of darkness. The anger of holy God was poured out on Jesus Christ, and that's why He was handed over to hell, to Satan and his demons, was handed over to the "second death". It's as the Catechism summarises Scripture in Q & A 44. Concerning the Saviour's descent into hell, the Catechism says:

"my Lord Jesus Christ... [endured] His unspeakable anguish, pain, terror, and agony... [not only] throughout all His sufferings *but especially on the cross....*"

That's when Christ went to hell. Or better said: in those three hours of darkness before He gave up His spirit, hell broke loose around Jesus and Satan and his evil demons did all in their wicked power to cause the Son of God to curse His God and die.

But –and this is the gospel- Christ's descent into hell does not mean the end of our salvation. For Christ, even while He was subjected to the "lake that burns with fire and sulphur," did not succumb to this horror. Yes, on Calvary He experienced the second death. *But He did not stay in the grip of the second death*; He arose from it, escaped the clutches of the devil. In those three hours in hell He paid for sin, satisfied God's holy wrath against sin, reconciled sinners to God. God was pleased with His sacrifice, and so accepted His Son again, looked upon His Son with favour, let the lights come on again. So it was that Jesus could cry out with a loud voice that "it is finished" (Jn 19:30). This second death had no hold of Him any more; He had satisfied God's wrath and therefore could Satan have no claim to Jesus any longer. More, Jesus had shown Himself to be stronger than Satan, and so He could leave the "lake that burns with fire and brimstone", could escape hell to re-enter the presence of His holy Father. That's why Jesus, after He had died the second death and conquered it, could pray to the Father to receive His spirit, and then could sovereignly die. He had triumphed over the second death, and that's why the first death was not at all a fearsome thing for Jesus Christ. Notice the way Luke records what Jesus did after He prayed that prayer to the Father about receiving His spirit. Says Luke:

"And having said this He breathed His last" (vs 46).

John says it even more pointedly:

"...and He bowed His head and gave up His spirit" (19:30).

Here it's not so that Death came to pluck this exhausted and weakened man out of this life. Jesus rather gave Himself sovereignly to death. After the torment of the cross and those three hours of darkness, Jesus was not tired and defeated; rather, as triumphant Lord, He made a point of bowing His head and giving up His spirit. Death did not take Him; sovereignly He went to death, at His time. For He was master over that first death, master because He had triumphed over the second death.

And still there's more here, beloved. We know –for the Bible tells us so- that death places us before the judgment seat of God. That was true for Jesus too. Yet He had no reason to fear this Judge. In those three hours of darkness, while Jesus experienced that second death, *then He did* have reason to fear God's judgment. And that judgment from God was for Jesus a terrible thing; He was cast by God into "the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death." But He satisfied God's anger, and therefore could escape the second death, and so there was no more reason to fear God. He could now die, and with death appear confidently before God's judgment seat. For He could be assured –because of His victory over the second death- that He would be royally received in the kingdom of His Father. And so it was. Death for Jesus was no enemy; it was rather the door to being with the Father again. It was through the door of death that Jesus could move from the shame of the cross to the glory of His Father's presence. Jesus could calmly give Himself to the first death –why? because He had earlier defeated the second death.

2. The Two Results of Christ's Death

What, now, are the results of Christ's triumph on Calvary? What benefit may we receive from His victory over the second death and from His giving Himself sovereignly to the first death? LD 16 mentions two of these results. The first result is mentioned in Q & A 43, where reference is made to "our old nature" having died with Christ; the second is mentioned in Q & A 42, where reference is made to "our death" being "an entrance into eternal life." First, then, the thought of Q & A 43, about "our old nature" having died with Christ.

Our old Nature

I mentioned earlier that with the fall into sin in Paradise, Adam and Eve (and we with them) straightaway died the second death. The separation from God implicit in this dying was symbolised by the exile from Paradise, by being sent into a cursed world. We need to carry that thought farther now. For the fact of the matter is that with the fall into sin we not only deserted God; we also joined Satan, made hell our abode. As such, we were slaves to sin, able only to do what was both evil in God's sight and harmful to ourselves. Slaves to sin we were, it was a cruel slavery, and all of it together was God's judgment on our sins.

God in mercy sent Christ to pay for sin, to make the payment by Himself experiencing the depths of the second death into which we had plunged ourselves, experiencing it in a far worse degree than we had so far. Christ triumphed, satisfied the wrath of God, and so could escape the second death again and be received by God. The thing is now that *Christ was not the only one who escaped the second death*, was not the only received by God again. With His victory over the second death and His resulting escape from its clutches, *God's chosen escaped also*. These chosen have been taken from Satan's side and transferred to God's side, have been set free from the snare of the devil and adopted to be God's children. After all, Christ came to the cross, experienced the "unspeakable anguish, pain, terror, and agony" of the second death not for His own sake, but rather so that many might be redeemed.

It's of this that Paul writes to the Romans. There he says that the believers of Rome –yes, the saints of all ages- have shared in the death of Christ. Rom 6:6: "...our old self was crucified with Him" –result?- "that the sinful body might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin." Paul says it in different terms to the Galatians:

"I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me..." (2:20).

Paul considers himself and all Christians to have benefited from Christ's victory over Satan during those three hours of darkness –how?- by being brought by Christ into God's favour, into God's presence again.

This reality in turn, congregation, has consequences. The apostle brought up the whole matter of believers dying with Christ in order to make an ethical point. The apostle had written in Rom 5 about how Christ had come to pay for sin. That gospel prompted the reaction recorded in Rom 6:1: Given that Christ has died to pay for sin, should we not "continue in sin that grace may abound?" If there's forgiveness, why should we not sin?!

It's this question that prompted Paul to write about believers being included in Christ's death. Christ had been rejected by God, given over to Satan, but He paid for sin, escaped that second death and so was accepted by God again. Now Paul says: *with Christ* the child of God also has escaped bondage to Satan and been accepted by God. The child of God has died to sin, died to Satan, and has been raised to a new life with God. So: *the child of God can no longer act like a child of Satan*; exactly because the child of God has died to sin with Christ and been raised to a new life must that child of God *live like a child of God* in all he does.

This is the point that Paul makes when he comes to the end of this section about death. Vs 12, he ties it all up, he says:

"Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts."

"Therefore," he says. This, in other words, is the conclusion of God's instruction about the death of Christ. *His* death means *our* death, our death *to sin*. So:

"Do not present your members (ie, the parts of your body) as instruments of unrighteousness to sin, but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead..." (vs 13).

It comes down to this: what we do with the various parts of our body –be it our hands or our eyes or our feet or our sexual organs- is not to be conduct characteristic of Satan's children; what we do with the various members of our bodies is instead to be conduct characteristic of God's children, of those who have died to sin. Others may use their mouths to curse or to speak foul language; the Christian is to use his tongue only to glorify His Lord and Maker. Others may feast their eyes on pornographic literature and movies that stimulate one's senses; the Christian is to let his eyes see only that which glorifies His Redeemer. Others may use their hands to labour for the sake of getting wealthy; the Christian is to use his hands to labour for the coming of God's kingdom. In a word: the first result of Christ's victory over death is that His people have a *lifestyle* distinctly different from that of the world. As LD 16 says it:

"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."

For our part, brothers and sisters, we content ourselves in being Christians, persons who benefit from Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Well now, the Lord God tells us the concrete consequences of the Saviour's victory. Where that concrete consequence is not visible in your lives, beloved, in a lifestyle distinctly different from your neighbours and workmates, you cannot –for the Scriptures say so- you cannot continue to assume that you share in the benefits of Christ's sacrifice. If you can enjoy the average television program as your neighbour next door, if you labour to amass capital for yourself, if you can utter foul talk like anybody else at work, I tell you that you have no part in the death of Christ. You have, in other words, not escaped the second death yourself, are still dead to God. And that means wrath! But those, on the contrary, who struggle against the evil desires of the flesh, who strive –be it with many failures- who strive nevertheless to speak no evil, see no evil, do no evil, may therein see the assurance that Yes, they have escaped the second death, been reconciled to the God they offended in Paradise.

Our death

That brings me to the second benefit we receive from Christ's victory on Calvary, the one mentioned in Q & A 42. Christ triumphed over the second death, and so was received again into God's favour. The result was that He was Master over the first death, could give Himself to death in the conviction that He would be welcomed into heaven by His Father.

So too the sinner who has been taken with Christ from Satan's side to God's. The redeemed sinner has been freed from the wrath of God, freed from the curse of being in bondage to Satan, has instead been accepted by God. The

result is that the believer need never be afraid of appearing before the Judge of heaven and earth, need not be afraid because he knows he's already been accepted by God. So the Judge will not condemn that sinner to hell; the Judge will instead receive that sinner into His eternal kingdom. In other words: the person who has been freed from the wrath of God through the sacrifice of Christ need not be afraid to die; for such a person death is the door to life with God in heaven. That's so because through Christ he has already escaped the second death, escaped bondage to the devil. So Paul says to the Philippians:

"...to me, to live is Christ, *and to die is gain*.... [I have] a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better"(1:21ff).

The Catechism sums it up:

"Our death is not a payment for our sins, but it puts an end to sin and is an entrance into eternal life."

It's *life* that we've received from God through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, life as we had it in Paradise too. That life never ends for the child of God. Because of Christ's victory is death now nothing else than the door leading from life in this sinful world to life in a world without sin. That is why the child of God need not fear death; "to die is gain", for it means "to be with Christ."

Two deaths there are, the first and the second death. Christ on the cross endured the second death so that we might be ransomed from the hell we deserve, the lake that burns with fire and sulphur. He died that second death *for us*, and the blessed result for us is *life forever*. So we need fear no death at all any more, neither the first death nor the second. It's as the prophets of old could say:

"Death is swallowed up in victory."

"O death, where is Your sting?" Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 13 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 6 June 1999.

"SINNERS BOUGHT BY JESUS' BLOOD ARE SLAVES OF GOD."

Text:

Lord's Day 13

33. Q. Why is He called God's only begotten Son, since we also are children of God?

A. Because Christ alone is the eternal, natural Son of God.[1] We, however, are children of God by adoption, through grace, for Christ's sake.[2]

[1] *John 1:1-3, 14, 18; 3:16; Rom. 8:32; Heb. 1; 1 John 4:9.* [2] *John 1:12; Rom. 8:14-17; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 1:5, 6.*

34. Q. Why do you call Him our Lord?

A. Because He has ransomed us, body and soul,[1] from all our sins, not with silver or gold but with His precious blood,[2] and has freed us from all the power of the devil to make us His own possession.[3]

[1] *1 Cor. 6:20; 1 Tim. 2:5, 6.* [2] *1 Peter 1:18, 19.* [3] *Col. 1:13, 14; Heb. 2:14, 15.*

Scripture Reading:

Colossians 1:9-23

Romans 6:15-23

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "*Book of Praise*" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Hymn 19:1,2,3,4

Psalm 23:1

Psalm 119:1,3

Psalm 50:1,8,11

Hymn 19:5,6

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

May a person redeemed by the blood of Christ live in sin? As an example, may a redeemed sinner let his body and mind be controlled by alcohol, be addicted to erotic literature, etc?

The question is important. It's important because we say of ourselves that *we* are redeemed from Satan's power through Jesus' blood. Yet we see in our midst persons who give their minds and bodies –every week again- to the control of alcohol. The question is important because in this congregation of persons redeemed through Jesus' blood from Satan's power are persons who enjoy music and movies that disregard God at best and blaspheme Him at worst. The question is important because in Christ's church are persons who spend money freely, for own pleasure, instead of considering how God would have the money be used in His kingdom. In a word: in this congregation of persons redeemed by Jesus' blood are those who live in sin. Hence the question: may that be so?

The church has learned from the Word of God that this may not be so. It's of this reality that we make confession in LD 13. We are set free from bondage to Satan *not* so that we might be free to partake of some morsels Satan offers us; we rather are set free from bondage to Satan so that in turn we might become "slaves of God". And slaves of God are Jesus' property, and hence take instructions from their Owner alone. That in turn makes us persons of prayer, persons always seeking from their Lord and Master what His will for them is.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

SINNERS BOUGHT BY JESUS' BLOOD ARE SLAVES OF GOD.

1. Who are bought
2. Who bought us
3. the consequence for those who are bought

1. *Who are bought*

It pleased the Lord in the beginning to establish with the entire human race God's covenant of grace. In that covenant of grace, our parents Adam and Eve lived in blessed communion with God. This communion was so good that God Himself said of it too that it was "very good".

At the instigation of the devil we deserted God and joined Satan. So much was this act on our part an offence to God that He pronounced His curse upon us; all who would sin (and we all did) would *die*. That's to say: we'd become dead in sin, slaves to sin. That's the phrase Paul uses in his letter to the Romans; he speaks in Rom 6:17 of being "slaves of sin" (cf vs 20). And a slave, we need to remember, has no freedom, he is not his own possession, he is owned by his master and therefore must do as he's told. This is God's punishment on our sin of the beginning; we were handed over to the devil, became his property, made slaves of Satan. And our hearts are so included to evil that we readily do what this evil master would have us do. Truly, "slaves of sin".

Here is a thought, congregation, we need to have very straight in our minds. We had it so good in Paradise. But *deliberately, in wilful disobedience*, we thumbed our noses at God, chose against Him in favour of Satan. On that score alone, there's surely nothing in us that attracts God to us, that moves Him to deliver us from our bondage to Satan.

Further, Satan is a cruel, an evil Master. Sure, Satan is crafty and so does not wish to make the evilness of his bondage too apparent. But recall, brothers and sisters, the man whom Jesus met in the land of the Gadarenes. Of this man possessed by the unclean spirit Scripture reports: "always, night and day, he was in the mountains and in the tombs, crying out and cutting himself with stones" (Mk 5:5; cf 9:17f,22). See there some evidence of this master's cruelty.

Israel's bondage to Pharaoh in Egypt is a representation of what slavery to Satan is really like. The men of Israel had to slave from dawn till dark, always with the whip of their task masters threatening them. When finally they dragged their dog-tired bodies home in the evening, and then found out that during the day a son had been born at home, it was their duty before Pharaoh to carry the infant to the Nile to drown.... Their lives were bitter with hard bondage (Ex 1:14). That cruelty, that oppression, that down-trodden feeling: that's a picture of how the devil deals with those in his camp. He's an evil master, cruel beyond description – whether people realise it or not.

Such down-trodden people invariably have the down-trodden look. Slaves don't put their shoulders back, don't carry themselves with an air of pride. They're by definition a broken people, unattractive. Such was Israel, and such were you and I. Slaves of Satan, slaves of sin, and the cruelty of our evil master was written all over us. On this score too, there was nothing in us, nothing at all, that attracted God to us, that moved Him to deliver us from the power of the devil.

In light of that unworthiness, congregation, the price paid for our redemption is astounding. One natural Son God has, His "only-begotten". This Son ransomed us –how?- not with the currency of the market place, but with His "precious blood" (I Pet 1:19). On Calvary He laid down His life, shed His blood to wash our sins away, and in so doing satisfy the justice of God. That act of redemption cost Him His life, but that's what He was willing to pay to rescue us from Satan's bondage. In the words of Col 1:

"He has delivered us from the power of darkness and conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love, in

whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1:13f).

What, then, is the conclusion of our first point: who are bought? The persons bought, congregation, are down-and-outers, are persons with nothing attractive to them. The very fact, then, that we can speak today about being bought, about being set free from the power of the devil, about being delivered from our slavery, points up the wonderful marvels of God's immeasurable grace. That the price to be paid for the redemption of such people had to be so high: that points up still more how marvellous is this grace of holy God. That He should go so far to rescue the unworthy is expression of His infinite compassion, His boundless mercy! And therefore it's reason to praise this God with adoration unending.

2. Who Bought Us

That adoration, brothers and sisters, is drawn from us the more as we consider Who it is that bought us – our second point. In our LD, we refer to Him as "our Lord". Why do we call Him 'Lord'? What is a 'lord'?

A 'lord', we need to know, is an *owner*, a *master*. A lord can do with his property whatever he pleases. History knows of instances where lords owned slaves –think only of Potiphar- owned them to the extent that the lord could do with his slave whatever he wills – even sell the slave, whether married or not. That is a lord; he is master of his property, yes, the slave is his property; the lord is the slave's owner.

At the ascension of Jesus Christ into heaven, God Almighty gave to Jesus a throne over all the universe. It's what Jesus said to His disciples: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Mt 28:18). So Peter on the day of Pentecost could say this of Jesus:

"Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36).

Notice that: by His triumph on the cross over the devil and his demons, Jesus is made the "Lord", that is, the Owner of all, the Master of all. Paul says it like this:

"...God ... has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:9ff).

See there what it means that Jesus is 'Lord'!

In the passage we read from Col 1, the apostle Paul draws out just how extensive the domain of this Lord actually is. The Lord of whom the passage speaks is the only Son of God, "the firstborn of all creation" (vs 15). That's to say: Jesus Christ has *inherited* the kingdom of His Father as Isaac –Abraham's first-born- inherited the possessions of his father. As first-born all in this world lies at his feet, all is His possession – whether things in heaven or on earth, whether visible or invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. Man and beast, demons and angels, rocks and clouds: all are His property, He is Master of all. This Lord, then, is no small lord, is not just owner of 50 hectares, 18 head of cattle and 2 slaves; this Lord is Lord of lords, is Master of the Universe, Owner of all that exists in heaven and earth. God has put all things under His feet so that every creature in heaven above and on the earth beneath and in the waters under the earth are subject to Him. He is what the Bible calls the "Lord of glory" (I Cor 2:8; James 2:1).

Of this exalted Christ, my brothers and sisters, we confess that He is "*our* Lord". That's to say: we acknowledge that we are property of this Lord of lords. In the words of our LD: "He has ransomed us ... to make us His own *possession*." He *owns* us as I *own* my shoes.

This is Paul's point in Rom 6. Paul spoke in that passage of being "slaves of sin" (vs 17, 20). But, he continued, you've been set free from your slavery to sin. *We* like to think that being set free means that we are now free to do our own thing; we're our own boss. But the apostle would correct us. We're set free from slavery to sin, yes, and what have we become? Says Paul: we've become ... slaves! That's vs 22: "But now having been set free

from sin, and having become slaves of God...." That's it, brothers and sisters: we have been *purchased* so that we are no longer the property of our first owner—we are set free from his cruel tyranny- and in the process we receive a *new Owner*. I remind you here of the terms used in LD 1. In that LD we say:

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

Notice the language of possession in that LD. "I am not my own," we say. My own what? Implicit in LD 1 is the word 'property'. "I am not my own property"; I do not possess me, I do not own me. What then? I "belong with body and soul ... to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ." The word 'belong' is again vocabulary of *ownership*. As my shoes *belong* to me, so I *belong* to Jesus Christ. He owns me, I am His property. Let no one, then, think that Christ's redeeming work in freeing us from Satan's bondage means that we are free, free as in: we are now our own, and hence we can do our own thing. That simply is not true. You are not your own; you were bought with a price in order to become the personal property of Jesus Christ, Lord of lords, King of kings. In the words of Rom 14: "whether we live or die, we are the Lord's" (vs 8).

Let this be fixed in our minds, congregation: there is no such thing as a neutral position. One is *either* the property of the devil *or* one is the property of the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no in-between. And Yes, that means too that ultimately one is never on top of the ladder, is never one's own boss. The fact of the matter is that one is a slave of one or the other. Through our fall into sin we all joined the devil and made ourselves his property – and it's cruelty to be a slave of the devil. The gospel in the matter is that God sent His Son to ransom from Satan's clutches all those chosen to life and make them His own possession – and it's a privilege to be a slave of the Lord Jesus Christ. You can refuse to accept the notion that you're somebody's slave, but that doesn't change the facts any; it simply means that you've fallen for the deceit of the liar from the beginning.

No, brothers and sisters, you are either slaves of sin and Satan or slaves of God in Jesus Christ. And in the covenant God made with you so long ago, God promised to be *your* God, to ransom you from Satan's bondage through the blood of Jesus Christ, to dwell in you through His Holy Spirit. He has promised, then, to include you among His blessed slaves. And since He does not change, you may know yourself in fact to be a slave of Jesus Christ; God does not lie.

3. *The Consequences for the Bought*

What consequences follow, now, for the bought? I draw out with you two consequences. The first relates to the Owner's responsibility to His possessions. In other words, what kind of Master have we? Joseph was sold in Egypt to Potiphar, who first raised Joseph to great heights in his house, then at a whim locked him in prison. Is our new Master like that? Israel came to Egypt at the time of the famine, and received a red carpet treatment, the best land was for them. But in the course of years the attitude of the Pharaoh changed, so that the Israelites had to slave from dawn till dusk, and then drown their newborn sons. Can our Lord change like the Pharaohs? Those who fall into the hands of the devil initially perceive their master to be gentle, soothing, providing pleasures. But in the course of time those ensnared to idolatry come to taste the vanity of false religions; there is no comfort, no perspective, no hope. And in the course of time those who thought that the approval of their peers was so great, and the taste of the bottle so exhilarating, and the kick of the drug so stimulating, come to realise that addiction to alcohol and enslavement to drugs is cruel, so cruel. And so, for that matter, is one's hunger for public approval. Is our Lord like that? Would He give us a pleasant sensation today, only to drop us tomorrow into pits of agony? Our Owner is Master of the Universe, can do with us what He wants. Well now, are we safe with Him? Will He care well for us?

This, now, *beloved of the Lord*, is His good news: He has delivered us *from a cruel master*, so that we might become the property of a *Lord who so loves us*, yes loves us so much *that He laid down His life for us!* That is the nature of our Lord: what drives Him is not cruelty, but *love*. We are in no danger, then, of being imprisoned at a whim, in no danger of finding ourselves tomorrow weighted down by impossible burdens He impulsively lays on us, at no risk of finding ourselves enslaved to cruel, life-draining evils. You and I are the property of a Master who loves, and therefore He protects and tends His property with gentle care. Here is the material of Ps 23:

"The Lord is my Shepherd,
I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters...."

And again, let's make no mistake: this loving Lord is almighty to save. If He's Lord of the universe, with all creatures at His feet, then no creature can harm me without His will; yes, then He is in a position to mobilise anything and everything –including 12 legions of angels- to secure my protection and well-being. Truly, beloved of the Lord, there is such wealth, such comfort in the confession that Jesus Christ is "our Lord"!

There is a second consequence that needs to be drawn out. I have a loving Owner in whose hands I am completely safe. In His love and care for me, this Master gives to me particular instructions, commands I'm to carry out for His glory and for my good. This, then, is the second consequence: that I *obey* this Lord.

This is again the instruction of the apostle in Col 1. For he records in vs 9 that he prays for the saints of Colossae that they may be filled with the knowledge of Christ's will. And why should they be filled with the knowledge of Christ's will? Vs 10: "that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him." The point here is that if the ascended Christ is in fact 'Lord', then there is a particular way for His people to 'walk', to live. His people are owned by the Lord, and therefore subject to His commands. To "walk worthy of the Lord" is then a life of *obedience*, a life of *submission* to this Lord, a life of *acknowledging* that He is your Lord. It's only the person on top of the ladder who determines His own activities, but once one is *under* another, once one is *slave* to another, one needs to act as a slave, one needs to *do what he is told to do*.

And "our Lord" has given us instructions as to what to do. He is Lord of *all*, and therefore *there is not a square inch of life of which Christ does not say 'Mine'*. He is Lord of all, and that is why His Word is a guide for our behaviour *in every area of life*. Society may suggest that the law of the land has no right to reach into our bedrooms, but the law of Lord of lords most certainly does. Society may have us think that what we do in the shop with the boys after work is finished on Friday afternoon is simply up to us, but "our Lord" would have us know that He wants to be acknowledged as Master in the workshop too on Friday afternoon also – and that's to say nothing of Saturday nights. Society may teach us that we have individual rights, that we can make certain decisions fully on our own, but the law of the Lord of lords has no room for individual rights; that law would have each of us to know ourselves slaves, owned by Another.

Hence the thought that's to be on our minds always is not 'what would I like?', but the thought that's always to be there is this: 'Lord, what do You want me to do?' Whether I'm choosing what job to do next or deciding what to do on Saturday evening, the question needs to be in my mind: 'Lord, what do you want me to do? Shall I do this job or that one, shall I go to the soccer finals or watch a movie, shall I drink this bottle of beer or not: Lord, what do you want me to do?'

It's said that Christians are to be people of prayer, and so it is. But there, brothers and sisters, is the prayer that is daily to be on our lips, Yes, to be on our lips moment by moment: 'Lord, what do you want of me? Are You pleased if I do this, is it Your will that I do that?' Slaves of a Master need to obey their Owner. Slaves we are, and so seeking His will and then doing it is imperative for us.

And the laws of your Owner, beloved, are not hard, nor are they restrictive or cruel. You may think they are, but our perceptions –tainted as they are by the fall into sin- do not determine realities. The laws of your Master are gentle, are helpful, are given in love and directed to our well-being.

I realise: something in us bucks against the notion that we're slaves, bucks against the notion too that the laws of our Owner –they're given to us in the Bible- are in fact good for us. But this is faith, that we accept what God says. And God *says* we are slaves, and He *says* that His laws are good for us. Let us then not be wise in our own eyes, and go our own way; let's listen with humility to Him whose possession we are.

What, now, congregation, is the conclusion of the matter? I put to you again the question of the beginning. Can a person redeemed by Jesus' blood live in sin? I'll ask the question differently. *Can a slave of the Lord Jesus Christ*

listen submissively to instructions from the devil? Once more, may a person who disobeys God's commands and obeys Satan's wishes consider himself the property of Jesus Christ? The answer jumps at us: a slave of Jesus Christ may not listen submissively to the instructions of the devil. In fact, one who disobeys God and obeys Satan's wishes *has run away from his Lord Jesus Christ, has snuck back to His old master the devil.* That's plain enough.

Why is it, then, dear brothers and sisters, that in this congregation are persons who freely and regularly *disobey* the instructions of the Lord God, and *obey* the wishes of the evil one? And say not that it does not happen. Too many deliberately drink enough alcohol to affect the mind – and that is sin, and you can know it is sin. Too many watch movies – be it on TV or through videos or in the theatre- which blaspheme God's name or display sexual sins or promote a world-view contrary to Christ's Lordship, and quite enjoy such movies too. Too many have a gripe with a brother and do nothing about it – though the Lord has told us to do something about it, told us what to do about it too. Too many spend the pay cheque as if the money were our own and not the property of the Lord of lords. We know these things are sin, for we're not strangers to the Bible.

But you see the contradiction, then, brothers and sisters, is it not? Sunday by Sunday we confess that Jesus Christ is "our Lord". And that simply means that every moment of our existence that prayer needs to be on our lips, "Lord, what do you want me to do?" It simply means that always, always we submit ourselves to the instructions of "our Lord", that always, always we resist the suggestions the old master whispers into our ears.

If you will confess, congregation, that He is your Lord, then "walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him" (Col 1:10). Remember Paul's word to the Romans: "Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?" (Rom 6:16).

May a person redeemed by the blood of Christ live in sin? It is not for obedience to Satan that Jesus Christ has freed you from Satan's bondage. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 14 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday Morning, 13 June 1999.

"THE SON OF GOD EMPTIED HIMSELF TO BECOME ONE OF US."

Text:

Lord's Day 14

35. Q. What do you confess when you say: He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary?

A. The eternal Son of God, who is and remains true and eternal God,[1] took upon Himself true human nature from the flesh and blood of the virgin Mary,[2] through the working of the Holy Spirit.[3] Thus He is also the true seed of David,[4] and like His brothers in every respect,[5] yet without sin.[6]

[1] *John 1:1; 10:30-36; Rom. 1:3; 9:5; Col. 1:15-17; I John 5:20.* [2] *Matt. 1:18-23; John 1:14; Gal. 4:4; Heb. 2:14.*

[3] *Luke 1:35.* [4] *II Sam. 7:12-16; Ps. 132:11; Matt. 1:1; Luke 1:32; Rom. 1:3.* [5] *Phil. 2:7; Heb. 2:17.* [6] *Heb. 4:15; 7:26, 27.*

36. Q. What benefit do you receive from the holy conception and birth of Christ?

A. He is our Mediator,[1] and with His innocence and perfect holiness covers, in the sight of God, my sin, in which I was conceived and born.[2]

[1] *I Tim. 2:5, 6; Heb. 9:13-15.* [2] *Rom. 8:3, 4; II Cor. 5:21; Gal. 4:4, 5; I Pet. 1:18, 19.*

Scripture Reading:

John 1:1-18

Hebrews 2:14-18

Phillipians 2:1-11

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "*Book of Praise*" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Hymn 16:1,2

Hymn 21:1,3

Psalms 37:3,5

Psalms 41:1,2,3,4

Hymn 20:1,2,6

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

When the Lord God caused Adam to appear on the earth in Gen 2, Adam was not an infant of, say, 7 lbs; he was instead a full-grown man – strong, robust, healthy, handsome. Truly the crown of God's creation. *Why, congregation, did God not send His Son to earth in the same noble fashion?* After all, God is sovereign. He fully had it in His power to send His Son to earth in the form of a strong, robust, handsome man of, say, 25 years. Would that not have been far more impressive than sending Him as a *helpless baby*?

God, we confess, makes no mistakes. It is no accident that almighty God sent His Son to earth via the womb of the virgin Mary. In fact, brothers and sisters, it is for us a source of enormous comfort that the Son of God became *completely* like one of us; His oneness with us is the source of our salvation. More, that the Son of God *emptied* Himself so totally is catalyst for us to empty ourselves for the sake of others; His self-emptying is an example for us to follow.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

THE SON OF GOD EMPTIED HIMSELF TO BECOME ONE OF US.

1. Who emptied Himself?
2. Why did He empty Himself?
3. What example are we to follow?

1. *Who emptied Himself?*

God has always been; He has no beginning, is eternal. That is true of all three Persons of the holy Trinity; Father, Son and Holy Spirit all have no beginning, are eternal.

I cannot understand that. I cannot fathom how God can have no beginning, cannot fathom how He could be there *always*. I cannot fathom either how it's possible that the Father and the Son have *both* always been. My experience tells me that fathers exist before their sons do. But from Scripture I learn that the Son is *eternal* God just as much as the Father is. Together they and the Spirit were always there, Triune God in perfect co-existence.

John tells us of the relation between the Father and the Son. In Jn 1:18, John describes the Son as "the only-begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father." That's to say: the eternal Father has one Son, and this Son is His dearest possession. To be in the bosom speaks of intimacy, closeness, love. That's the relation between the eternal Father and His eternal Son: they are close, intimate, beloved. And together with the Holy Spirit, the Father and the Son enjoy eternal glory (Jn 17:5).

It pleased this Triune God to create a world. He spoke from heaven on high, and in six days the creation appeared. By His decree the crown of His handiwork arose out of dust on the sixth day; a handsome man, strong and able to look after the garden. With this creature Triune God established His covenant; this man was His child. From heaven above God observed all He had made, and declared it all "very good".

Who created this world? Yes, within the Trinity God the Father first of all is the Creator. That's what we confess with the Apostle's Creed Sunday by Sunday: "I believe in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." But Scriptures would have us know, congregation, that the Son was also involved in creation. The apostle John begins his gospel of Jesus Christ by stating emphatically of the "Word" (this is the Second Person of the Trinity) that "all things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made" (Jn 1:3; cf Col 1:16). That's to say: the Son of God was directly involved in creating the world; He is Creator with the Father, for "all things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made."

Some time after Triune God finished creating His world, He from heaven above observed what the man did in the Garden; in deliberate disobedience he ate of the tree of what God had said he was not to eat! In so doing, this man-in-the-prime-of-his-life broke that covenant with God, and joined that Liar from the beginning.... The noble creature man became ignoble, lost all his good qualities, became dead in sin, subject to death and decay. The work of Triune God was fallen....

The reaction of Triune God? In heaven above, my brothers and sisters, Father, Son and Holy Spirit counselled together, then the Father *sent* the Son to earth. No, He did not send the Son immediately. Rather, at a time determined by God to be right, "when the fullness of time had come, God sent His Son ..., to redeem those who were under the law" (Gal 4:4). See there the response of Triune God to our fall into sin.

But God did not send His Son as a second Adam in the sense that the Son of God received a mature human body formed as Adam's was from the dust of the earth. Instead, God in heaven sent the Holy Spirit to earth, and the Holy Spirit "overshadowed" the virgin Mary (Lu 1:35) so that she became pregnant. After the normal nine months, the time came for her to give birth....

And sovereign God on high saw to it that Mary did not have the comforts of home at the time the baby was due,

was instead away, travelling. Husband Joseph knocked on the door of Bethlehem's inn to seek a place of comfort for his indisposed wife. But the door was shut before him.... By the leading of sovereign God, the best Joseph could find for his labouring wife was a cattle shed.... There "she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger" (Lu 2:7).

I do not know whether there were cattle in the shed, or whether a cow had licked out the manger before Joseph and Mary arrived. But I do know this: there is such a radical *contrast* between the glory which the Son of God had with the Father from all eternity in heaven and the poverty in which He was now born in the cattle shed! In heaven was glory and angels ever singing their 'Holy, holy, holy', and in heaven too was the nearness of the beloved Father. The Son of God traded that glory for ... No, not to be an adult Prince on earth in knightly armour astride a majestic stallion, nor to be an infant Prince on earth wrapped in royal blankets and laid on a mattress of feathers in a luxurious crib. The Son of God traded that glory for ... poverty, abject poverty! His mother had no more than rags in which to wrap Him, had no more than a cold stone feeding trough in which to lay Him! Make here no mistake, my brothers and sisters: that helpless baby in that feeding trough was *God the Son* – second Person of the holy Trinity!

How absolutely staggering the thought! The apostle John says of the Word that He "was with God", more, "the Word was God". To point up the majesty and the glory and the divinity of this Word, John adds that "all things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made" – Creator. Of *that* Word, true God, John says in vs 14: "And the Word became flesh." Flesh: that term captures in Scripture the notion of brokenness, of frailty, of being subject to the bitter effects of the fall into sin (cf Is 40: 6f). Flesh: it's weak, it's sickly, it's mortal, it's finite. A baby, helpless, dependent, vulnerable: that's flesh. To be laid in a manger with not a shred of luxury: that's flesh. And see: that's what God the Son became! He laid aside the glory of heaven, and He took on Himself true human nature from the flesh and blood of the virgin Mary; He became flesh, vulnerable. How awesome the thought!

No, this is not to say that the Son of God ceased to be the Son of God. Though no human eye could see anything exceptional in that infant in the feeding trough, He was and He remained the Son of God. But even as He remained true and eternal God, He became what He had not been before; He became a true man – with all the weaknesses that characterise fallen man. True God, true man: to my mind one can't be both. But that's what the baby in the manger was: true God, Creator, and true man, created. Certainly, He as it were laid a veil over His divinity; in His infancy and childhood and youth He caught the same illnesses as the other boys of Nazareth, was winded by running as the other children were, had to sleep His normal hours, etc. It wasn't till He began His public ministry that the veil of His Godness was lifted somewhat by the way He spoke and the miracles He performed. No, His divine nature was not apparent in His youth, and yet He was very God of very God. Immanuel, God with us, in every sense of the word!

In truth, congregation, how staggering the thought. In the feeding trough was ... *God*, God the Son! That vulnerable, dependent baby was ... the One through whom all things were made! In the dirt and muck of the animal shed was ... He Who had enjoyed glory with the Father from all eternity! Do you, congregation of the Lord, sense something of the *awe* that must accompany Christmas?? That low-key event is so stunning in its significance; who could imagine that holy, glorious, Triune God would send One from Himself to earth, who could imagine that God the Son would lay aside the glory of heaven for the poverty of flesh? Truly, how awesome!!

2. *Why did He empty Himself?*

We wonder: why did He do this? Why did He leave behind the glory of heaven and become flesh? The angel answered the question like this: "He will save His people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). Paul words it like this:

"For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us..." (Rom 8:3,4).

And John answers the question with these words:

"In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (I Jn 4:9f).

Notice, congregation, the accumulation of phrases. God in the flesh will "save His people from their sins", He will "condemn sin", He will cause us to live, He will "be the propitiation for our sins." Those expressions all come down to this: those who rejected God in Paradise will be *restored to God*. See there the reason why God the Father sent His Son into the world; it was to *redeem* sinners from Satan's bondage and *reconcile* them to Himself!

In order to achieve *that* goal, it was necessary that the Son of God enter the world not as Adam did, a mature man in the prime of his life. Had God formed from dust another human being as He did in Paradise, one to be known as Jesus Christ, then this second Adam would have no direct link (accept for His physical looks) with the human race. Yet the justice of God required that the same human nature that had fallen into sin should itself pay for sin. If the Son of God, then, was to reconcile sinners to God, the Son of God of necessity had to be as human as those who fell in Paradise, as human as those He sought to save. That true human nature He could take upon Himself by having as fully a human mother as any one of us. See there, congregation, why God the Son did not come into the world as a fully grown, mature man; He came as an infant, as human as the rest of us, *so that He might be able to save us*. In the words of the apostle to the Hebrews:

"Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same" (Heb 2:14),

and

"Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (Heb 2:17).

It altogether, then, congregation, points up how marvellous is the grace of God. Through the fall into sin we deserted our Creator, thumbed our nose at His covenant with us. But Triune God in heaven above did not sit to wait for fallen man to reach out to Him. So full of compassion is this Triune God at the plight of fallen man, so moved with pity, that He sovereignly, graciously, reached out to redeem the fallen. And how did He reach out to save? By *emptying* Himself! God the Son, by whom all things were created, partook of our flesh and blood to the extent of sharing even the frailties and poverty of this broken life, so that in turn He might save the frail, the broken, the empty.

This, my beloved, is as clear a picture of what grace is as you'll ever see! God the Son laid aside His glory, deserted the bosom of the Father, humbled Himself to the uttermost by taking on the form of a bondservant..., in order that wretches might be made children of God. Yes, that is grace is all its grandeur, is grace in all its glory. For the unworthy and undeserving, for the damned and the wretched, God the Son gave absolutely *everything* in order to raise the unworthy and undeserving to a position of nobility, to make the damned and the wretched into children of God and heirs of salvation! This is grace, that God freely did so much, gave so much. This is grace, that the empty and the destitute are *filled*. In John's words:

"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, *full of grace* and truth" (Jn 1:14).

And:

"of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace" (vs 16).

That's to say: God's gift of the law through Moses was very much grace, but God's gift of His only Son is *added* grace, is grace upon grace. Truly, that the "Word became flesh" is a development "full of grace" (vs 14).

Away, then, beloved of the Lord, with the thought that we need to do something ourselves to win God's favour! The very gospel of Christmas drives nails into the coffin of the notion of our needing to earn God's favour. LD 14 draws out how totally and completely salvation is God's gift, God's grace. That Triune God would send One of Their Own into the frailties of this life of tears in order to reconcile sinners to holy God: that fact in itself abolishes the doctrine of salvation through works. Human approach to God is possible only through God's infinite *grace*, and *that is what the coming of the Son of God into this world is all about*. Stand in awe, then, beloved, at the marvels of Christmas, yes, stand in awe at the gospel of free grace that comes out so clearly in the good news of the birth of the Son of God!

3. *What example are we follow?*

I come now to the last point I need to draw out for you today. I draw to your attention what the apostle Paul does with the gospel of the Word becoming flesh. For he is moved by the Spirit of Triune God –Yes, the same Holy Spirit Who overshadowed Mary!- he was moved by the Spirit of Triune God to hold up the coming of the Son of God in the flesh as an example for the saints of Philippi. Listen to his words in Phil 2:

"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men" (vss 5ff).

You understand: Paul contrasts "being in the form of God" with "taking the form of a bondservant", and with those terms contrasts the glory the Son had with the Father in heaven with the humility He received in Bethlehem's manger. Here's what John calls "the Word became flesh".

Observe, now, what Paul does with this action on the part of the Son of God in becoming a man. What he does? He holds it up to the saints of Philippi as an *example they are to follow*. That's vs 5: "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God..., made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of bondservant." That mind of self-emptying which God the Son displayed at Christmas: that's what the saints of Philippi were to take on board for themselves.

The problem amongst the Philippian saints was that they were internally divided. Instead of standing shoulder to shoulder in the battles of faith, they stood over against each other in an effort to maintain their own credibility, in an effort to promote their own interests. That's what I conclude from the instruction of Phil 1:27:

"Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that ... you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel."

And 2:3:

"Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself."

Over against the being-busy-with-self so evident in the congregation of Philippi, the Holy Spirit sets the example of Jesus Christ. *Without* thought for self, in total self-emptying, He gave up the splendours of heaven and the nearness of His Father, in order to *serve* those lost in sin. This is an attitude Paul desires to see throughout the congregation of the Philippians; more, this is an attitude that is to characterise all those who call themselves children of God. The gospel of Christmas is to prompt more than adoration for a God Who gave so much for sinners; the gospel of Christmas is to prompt within God's people an attitude of self-emptying equal to the self-emptying displayed by God the Son.

Please do not hear in this instruction, brothers and sisters, a command to *others*, that *they* need to deny themselves in order to give you the place you deserve. The instruction of the Spirit through Paul is not meant first for the other person; this instruction in self-emptying is meant first for *you* personally. As you confess Sunday by Sunday, then, that the Son of God was conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born of the virgin Mary, do not irritate yourself on somebody else's selfishness. Confront instead your own conduct and your own attitude. What motivates you in your conduct and

your approach to others, your talk about others? Is there thought of maintaining your own reputation, promoting your own interest? Or are your words and deeds rooted in your earnest desire to see your brother grow in stature – never mind cost to yourself? That is the approach God the Son displayed at Christmas, and that is that approach which God the Holy Spirit would lay on all those redeemed by the blood of the Son of God.

And do not say, beloved, that you cannot deny yourself to that extent. Remember, please, that the same Holy Spirit Who overshadowed Mary has made His home in the hearts of all those redeemed by the Son of God. In the strength of that Spirit, you certainly can deny yourself for your neighbour's benefit.

Why did Triune God not send the Son to earth as an impressive man of stature and dignity? We know it now: He emptied Himself *completely* for the sake of our salvation. As we confess His holy conception and virgin birth, this emptying is an example we shall gratefully follow - for the benefit of others. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 17 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 1 August 1999.

" WHEN CHRIST AROSE LONG AGO, WE ALSO WERE RAISED TO A NEW LIFE.. "

Text:

Lord's Day 17

45. Q. How does Christ's resurrection benefit us?

A. 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.[1] Second, by His power we too are raised up to a new life.[2] Third, Christ's resurrection is to us a sure pledge of our glorious resurrection.[3]

[1] Rom. 4:25; 1 Cor. 15:16-20; 1 Pet. 1:3-5. [2] Rom. 6:5-11; Eph. 2:4-6; Col. 3:1-4. [3] Rom. 8:11; 1 Cor. 15:12-23; Phil. 3:20, 21.

Scripture Reading:

Ecclesiastes 2:1-11

Colossians 3:1-17

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Hymn 26:1,2

Psalm 17:4,6

Psalm 30:1,2

Hymn 28:1,2,3,4

Psalm 39:3,6 & Hymn 51:1,8

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The subject of Christ's resurrection is well-known to us; it's part and parcel of the Christian faith we've been taught over the years. In what way, though, does that resurrection affect *you*, brothers and sisters? Yes, we believe that one day we shall arise out of our graves even as did Christ, but: we live today, today we go about our daily affairs. What effect does Christ's resurrection of long ago have upon your life today? To ask the question differently: would your life be any different if Christ were still in the grave?

With our LD we acknowledge that the Saviour's resurrection makes a great difference to us. In fact, the LD mentions three distinct benefits for the believer flowing from the resurrection of Jesus Christ from His tomb. Of the three, I wish today to lift out the second for special attention. That second reads as follows: 'by His power we too are raised up to a new life.' That's to say: because Christ arose from the dead long ago, we today are also no longer dead but truly alive.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

WHEN CHRIST AROSE LONG AGO, WE ALSO WERE RAISED TO A NEW LIFE.

1. the need for our resurrection
2. the reality of our resurrection

3. the response to our resurrection

1. The Need for our Resurrection

“We too were raised up to a new life,” we confess in our LD. That sentence in our confession implies, congregation, a rather unpleasant thought. Inherent in that formulation is the thought that somehow it is *necessary* for us to be raised up to a new life; implicit here is the fact that our natural life is not good enough. The natural life, the old, must be replaced by a new life, and we cannot obtain that new life unless we are raised with Christ from the dead....

To understand the new life God’s people receive as a result of Christ’s resurrection, we need to have straight in our minds what the old life is all about. What kind of existence is it that we’re raised up from? That question takes us back to the Garden of Eden.

In Paradise those two people, Adam and Eve, were *alive* in the Scriptural sense of the term. That’s to say: those two lived under the blessing of God day by day. They were safe in His Fatherly hand, they had no lack; there was no curse, no pain, no frustration, and no sorrow.

It all changed when they ate of the forbidden tree. God had already said that on the day they ate of that tree they would die. At the instigation of the devil, in deliberate disobedience, Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit. According to God’s promise these two persons died that same day. True, physical death did not come to take them until many years had passed. But they died straightaway in that they died spiritually. They became what Paul calls “dead in sin”.

But what does that mean: they died spiritually? How did this new condition affect their lives? What did their lives become? Listen to what God said to them. To the woman God said:

“I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception;
In pain you shall bring forth children;
Your desire shall be for your husband,
And he shall rule over you” (Gen 3:16).

With those words God describes what shall characterise the life of the woman. We can pick up the key words; her life shall be characterised by ‘sorrow’ and ‘pain’ and frustrated ‘desire’. We realise: that’s not the *life* Eve enjoyed in Paradise. This is something very *different*. In fact, this is the life of one dead in sin, the life of the ‘living dead’.

God pronounced something similar for the man. Said God to him:

“Cursed is the ground for your sake;
In toil you shall eat of it
All the days of your life.
Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you,
And you shall eat the herb of the field.
In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread
Till you return to the ground,
For out of it you were taken;
For dust you are,
And to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:17-19).

The key words are telling: ‘cursed’, ‘toil’, ‘thorns and thistles’, ‘sweat’, ‘dust’. It’s a life of grief, of suffering, of frustration, and it will invariably end in death.... Again, such a life is a far cry from the life Adam enjoyed before the fall. This too is the life of one dead in sin, the life of the ‘living dead’.

This, congregation, is the life which the Preacher of Ecclesiastes describes as ‘vanity’. “Vanity of vanities,”

says the Preacher; “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity” (1:2). But that wasn’t a conclusion the Preacher reached blithely. He very much tried to enjoy to the full the life-of-frustration he was given to live, very much tried to overcome that frustration and brokenness and toil and heart-break. We read his efforts as he describes them in chap 2:

I said in my heart, “Come now, I will test you with mirth; therefore enjoy pleasure”; but surely, this also was vanity. I said of laughter - “Madness!”; and of mirth, “What does it accomplish?” I searched in my heart how to gratify my flesh with wine, while guiding my heart with wisdom, and how to lay hold on folly, till I might see what was good for the sons of men to do under heaven all the days of their lives. I made my works great, I built myself houses, and planted myself vineyards. I made myself gardens and orchards, and I planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. I made myself water pools from which to water the growing trees of the grove. I acquired male and female servants, and had servants born in my house. Yes, I had greater possessions of herds and flocks than all who were in Jerusalem before me. I also gathered for myself silver and gold and the special treasures of kings and of the provinces. I acquired male and female singers, the delights of the sons of men, and musical instruments of all kinds” (1-8).

We’d say: the man must have been happy as could be. Fancy having at your disposal all the women, wine and song your heart desires. Add to that a big house, a summer cottage, a pool, a private garden; the man must have been happy as Larry. But listen to what he says in vs 11:

“Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done
And on the labor in which I had toiled;
And indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind.”

What a letdown! Why does he conclude that all his vanity? Why isn’t he happy with his abundance? That, my brothers and sisters, is because any effort to overcome the sorrows and toil and frustrations of Gen 3 is doomed to fail, to fail because no effort can get a sinner away from the *curse* of God! Life in the full sense of the word is out of our reach for fallen man simply because God’s heavy hand weighs down upon us on account of our sins. We are spiritually dead, and so we can’t *live* in the full sense of the word. And that’s what the Preacher learned after years of frustrating efforts to find happiness and contentment in what this life has to offer.

And the Preacher, we need to know, was not the only one to come to this conclusion. The apostle Paul describes for the believers of Ephesus what their lives were like before they came to faith in Jesus Christ. He says:

“... you ... were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air..., among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind...” (Eph 2:1ff).

Paul speaks here of a life of following one’s passions, of fulfilling the lusts of the flesh. That’s precisely Ecclesiastes 2, the sort of life that the Preacher declared was “vanity”. More, it’s precisely the life described by God in Gen 3 as a life of sorrow and heart-ache, of toil and frustration. For to be a slave to the lusts and passions of the flesh is to experience the curse of God. Well now, this sort of life is what Paul calls ‘death’! “You ... were *dead* in trespasses and sins,” he says. Following the passions of the flesh, giving oneself to whatever excess one fancies –be it sex or drink or expressions of anger or vengeance, etc, etc- is not *life*, says Paul; it’s instead *death*. Such a person is not *alive* in the full sense of the word; such a person is in effect dead even while he lives. That is why it’s so necessary that one be raised up to a new life! There is no other way to truly *live*!

2. The Reality of our Resurrection

And see: this new life is what’s given to us in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead! I don’t know how Jesus arose from the dead, for the Lord has not told us. But we do know the *fact* of the resurrection (cf I Cor 15:3ff). And the apostle is emphatic: when Christ arose from the tomb on that Easter Sunday so long ago, *He was not the only one who arose!* Listen to his inspired words in Eph 2. After he has described how the saints of Ephesus used to be dead in sin, not alive in the full sense of the word, he says this:

“But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, *made us alive together with Christ* ... and raised us up together” (Eph 2:4ff).

Paul does not say that the believers of Ephesus were “made alive” and that’s it; no, he says that they were “made alive *together with Christ*”. That is: when Christ arose, these Ephesians arose also. Here is the same thought as in Romans 6. The apostle maintains that there is union between the believer and Christ, a union which implies that when Christ was crucified the believer was crucified also, and when Christ was buried the believer was buried also, and when Christ was raised the believer was raised also. No, the apostle does not mean that the believer was physically nailed to the cross with the Saviour, bodily buried in with Christ in the tomb of Gethsemane. The apostle speaks instead of a spiritual presence. In a way I can’t understand, I was present with Adam when he fell into sin so that I fell into sin also. Similarly, in a way I can’t understand I –together with all believers from Adam to the end- were present at Christ’s death, were included in His death; I died with Him. In a way I can’t understand, I –together with all believers from Adam to the end- were buried when Christ was buried. So too, in a way I can’t understand, I –together with all believers from Adam to the end- was raised from the dead when Christ was raised. I grant: I can’t understand this for it goes beyond what my mind is able to comprehend. But that doesn’t matter; if God says it, then that’s the way it is.

Christ, God would have us know, arose from the dead for a *purpose*, and that purpose was not simply to demonstrate His power over death as such; it was also to *obtain new life* for the people of God. This is what the Old Testament had said –the saints would not remain in the clutches of Sheol (Ps 30)- and it’s this that the apostle draws out in Rom 6 under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. So we’re told that Christ’s resurrection was not just the resurrection of Jesus Christ alone; that resurrection implied our resurrection, implied not just our glorious resurrection on the last day, but implied our resurrection now. In *this* life already the believer is raised to a new life; behold, the old has passed away, the new has come.

What then, concretely, does our resurrection to a new life mean for us? What is this new life all about? This: we are made *alive to God*! Recall: that sin of the beginning resulted in Adam and Eve (and we with them) becoming dead in sin. Because we had become dead in sin we could no longer expect God’s blessings; that deadness drew upon us the wrath of God, His curse. Hence the ‘sorrow’ and ‘pain’ and frustrated ‘desire’ and ‘toil’ and ‘sweat’ and ‘dust’ of Gen 3, hence also the drone of the Preacher that all is vanity.

But the child of God has been raised to a new life by the power of Christ. That’s to say: God considers the raised sinner to be *alive* in the full sense of the word! The curse of Gen 3 is gone!! Then yes, the children of God still experience much ‘sorrow’ and ‘pain’ and ‘toil’ and ‘sweat’ and frustration, and death still takes the children of God so that we return to the dust from which we were taken. But the heavy hand of God’s displeasure is removed from the ‘sorrow’ and ‘pain’ and ‘toil’ that characterise our earthly lives. Instead of living under the frown of His displeasure, we may know ourselves to live under the smile of His favour. So whatever evil He sends upon us in this life of sorrow He turns to our good. Life has perspective again, has purpose, has meaning!

3. The Response to our Resurrection

How shall I respond to God’s Word about my resurrection? Concretely, shall I follow the example of the Preacher and set out to taste the opportunities this earthly life can offer me? Let it be clear, brothers and sisters: one raised to a new life, one restored in his relation to God, one no longer dead in sin but alive to God, focuses his whole being fully on *Him*. No longer, therefore, do the things of this life excite me (be it the Preacher’s houses and cottages, or the pleasures of woman and wine and song, or the pursuit of laughter for the sake of laughter or a party for the sake of a party); instead, the focus of my living is the God who restored me to life. Paul puts it like this:

“For the death that He died [Paul says of Christ], He died to sin once for all; but the life that He lives, He *lives to God*. Likewise you also [Paul says to the saints of Rome], reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but *alive to God* in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 6:10f).

“Alive to God”, he says, and with that term would impress upon the Romans that their lives are *God-directed*. The object, the purpose of living is no longer the self, is no longer anything of *this* world, is no longer the dollar or the boat or the drink or the holiday or the reputation or whatever aspect of this earthly life upon which one can set his heart.

Rather, the object, the purpose of living is *God*, the glory of *God*, the praise of the *God* who created us for His glory and sent His Son also for the praise of His glory. The Christian is included in the resurrection of Christ, and the Christian responds to his own resurrection by focusing his new life fully on the *God* of his salvation. To the Colossians Paul says it like this:

“If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory” (Col 3:1ff).

Congregation, I need to impress the apostle’s emphasis on you. Paul insists that the fact of one’s resurrection with Christ prompts a new set of priorities, a set of priorities focused in heaven and not on earth. In fact, in the verses that follow Paul gives concrete instructions which, he says, necessarily follow from being raised to a new life. Vs 5: “*Therefore* put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness.” Notice, please, the overlap with the topics mentioned by the Preacher. In his pursuit of happiness, the Preacher obtained his male and female servants, and we should not be so naïve as to think that these male and female servants were only to do his gardening and his housekeeping. But of the fornication implicit in Eccl 2 the Preacher also says that it’s ‘vanity’, and Paul in Eph 2 echoes that when he insists that the person who truly *lives* cuts all fornication out of his life. But that’s not all, for the apostle continues:

“... you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth” (vs 8).

Instead,

“as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection” (vss 12ff).

Do you see, congregation, what the apostle does? He connects the resurrection of Christ from the grave with the life-style of the Christian. Christ was not the only one who arose on Easter Sunday, and those raised with Him invariably show their renewed life, yes, need to make it their business to live as persons raised to a new life. Those raised from the dead have no room for anger in their hearts, have no room for hatred or blasphemy, for these are all works characterising the spiritually dead. Those raised to a new life are kind to one another, merciful to one another, forgiving of the other, understanding of the other’s weaknesses, longsuffering in love. Those raised with Christ to a new life do more than recite the Apostles’ Creed Sunday by Sunday in grateful confession that Jesus was not only crucified, dead and buried but also arose on the third day; those raised with Christ to a new life adorn that confession with a lifestyle that’s very much God-directed.

That, congregation, is why it dismays me to see judgmental, condemning attitudes in the congregation, that’s not the tender mercy and kindness and humility and meekness of which the apostle spoke. That is why it dismays me to hear strong language about one another, dismays me to observe a lack of compassion toward all who hurt. That is why it dismays me to notice more concern about maintaining the comforts of this life and preserving our reputations intact and pursuing our pleasures than reaching out in gentleness and compassion to the other in his need. Let it be clear to us: there is no more room in Kelmscott than there was in Colossae for lying to one another, and there is no more room in Kelmscott than there was in Colossae for anger and hatred towards each other, “for you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3). Tender mercies and kindness and humility and meekness and longsuffering and bearing with one another and forgiving one another are as necessary for every member of Kelmscott to demonstrate as they were for the saints of Colossae to demonstrate –why?- “for you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is not a doctrine we can divorce from our daily living, nor a doctrine valuable only on our deathbeds. The resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is the catalyst for how we ourselves live day by day. Let each of us do more than confess with the mouth the gospel of Jesus’ resurrection; let each of us confess this resurrection also in our deeds.

What difference, my brothers and sisters, would it make for your life today if Christ were still in the grave?

We understand it now: if Christ were still in the grave, we would still live under the heavy hand of God's curse. But as it is, the Lord arose, and we did too, and so we may live in the gentle hands of Father's almighty care. Here is comfort in the sorrows of this life, a comfort we want to share with the other – for mutual encouragement and God's glory. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 15 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 20 June 1999.

"CHRIST BORE FOR US THE WRATH OF GOD AGAINST OUR EVERY SIN."

Text:

Lord's Day 15

37. Q. What do you confess when you say that He suffered?

A. 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.[1] Thus, by His suffering, as the only atoning sacrifice,[2] He has redeemed our body and soul from everlasting damnation,[3] and obtained for us the grace of God, righteousness, and eternal life.[4]

[1] Is. 53; I Tim. 2:6; I Pet. 2:24; 3:18. [2] Rom. 3:25; I Cor. 5:7; Eph. 5:2; Heb. 10:14; I John 2:2; 4:10. [3] Rom. 8:1-4; Gal. 3:13; Col. 1:13; Heb. 9:12; I Pet 1:18, 19. [4] John 3:16; Rom. 3:24-26; II Cor. 5:21; Heb. 9:15.

38. Q. Why did He suffer under Pontius Pilate as judge?

A. Though innocent, Christ was condemned by an earthly judge,[1] and so He freed us from the severe judgment of God that was to fall on us.[2] [1] Luke 23:13-24; John 19:4, 12-16. [2] Is. 53:4, 5; II Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13.

39. Q. Does it have a special meaning that Christ was crucified and did not die in a different way?

A. Yes. Thereby I am assured that He took upon Himself the curse which lay on me, for a crucified one was cursed by God.[1]

[1] Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13.

Scripture Reading:

Romans 1:18,24-32

John 18:28-19:16

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalm 24:1,2

Psalm 57:1

Psalm 68:12

Psalm 97:1,2,3,6

Psalm 32:1,5

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

It's a dangerous thing to live today on planet earth. No, it's not dangerous simply because of potential nuclear war or the depletion of the ozone layer or the erosion of morals in society. There's a much bigger danger. Earth is today a dangerous place to live because holy God in heaven is –in Habakkuk's words- "of purer eyes than to behold evil" (Hab 1:13). Yet God looks down on earth and sees ... evil. Abortion, divorce, genocide, swearing – the list goes on and on....

God's reaction? Says Paul to the Romans:

"... the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men..." (Rom

1:18).

How God reveals His wrath from heaven against the ungodliness of today's world? Vs 24:

"Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves...."

Note it: sexual liberty is not freedom for a society but is instead expression of God's wrath upon that society! And in turn, because a people gives itself to the accesses of sexual passions, God's wrath is roused the more and –vs 26- He gives them up to "vile passions". So:

"... even their women exchanged the natural use for what is against nature. Likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust for one another, men with men committing what is shameful..." (vs 26f).

We understand: here's a reference to lesbianism, homosexuality. Sydney's annual Mardi Gras is part of God's wrath on Australia! And where divine curses as homosexuality do not bring forth repentance, God visits the society with more evil still. The details of God's visitations are given in vss 28f....

That's what is happening around us: Australian society, yes, Western society as a whole, languishes under the heavy hand of God's wrath against evil. He is of purer eyes than to behold evil, and *that makes living on this sin-filled earth a dangerous place to be!*

We live on this sin-filled earth. How shall we escape the terrible anger of holy God against the evils of today? One way alone, congregation. We can escape the crushing hand of God's anger only through faith in the Christ who "bore in body and soul the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race." For this Christ, "by His suffering as the only atoning sacrifice," has redeemed the believer "from everlasting damnation and obtained for us the grace of God, righteousness, and eternal life." That deliverance from damnation and the enjoyment of God's grace begins already in *this* life. That's the material of LD 15.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

Christ bore for us the wrath of God against our every sin.

1. Christ was innocent, yet guilty.
2. We are guilty, yet innocent.

1. Christ was innocent, yet guilty

You and I, congregation, were placed on earth in order to *live*. Though so many of us suffer in some way, we were not put on earth *in order to* suffer. Not so Jesus Christ. He came specifically to *suffer*. His whole life long, from the beginning in Bethlehem's manger to the end on Calvary's cross, was for Him suffering. The climax of that suffering was at the end of His life, and to get a taste of the what His suffering was all about, we need to focus on what happened at the end. Our LD lifts out for us two moments of this suffering that need our attention; the first is His conviction by Pontius Pilate, the second His sentence to crucifixion. Both point up that Jesus suffered *for our benefit*.

Innocent

Pontius Pilate was the governor of Judea from the ten year period spanning the years 26 to 36. He received his position as governor of Judea from the Caesar of Rome, and so was his representative in Jerusalem.

The Jews hated Pilate greatly. They hated him because he symbolised Roman sovereignty over them. They hated him the more because he was inconsiderate and unfeeling in carrying out his office. Nevertheless, the Jews knew from their Bibles that Pilate was more than just a lackey for the Roman authorities. They knew from the fifth

commandment that behind Pilate was the Lord their God; Pilate, ultimately, was *God's* ambassador. God, after all, was sovereign, was the King of glory, was the Lord of hosts (Ps 24), so that the rulers of this earth were so many pawns in His hands (Is 10:5ff). To say it in New Testament terms:

"There is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God" (Rom 13:1).

In Jesus' own words to Pilate:

"You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above" (Jn 19:11).

Behind Pilate, then, was God; Pilate was God's servant, a tool in His hands to govern the affairs of men in Judea.

There came the day when a dignified group of priests and elders of the people sought a hearing with Pilate the Governor. They had in tow a plain Jew of 33 years old. The apostle John describes Pilate's investigation into the accusations –we read them- and then relates Pilate's finding in vs 38: "I find no fault in Him at all." That's to say: by Pilate's judgment, Jesus is innocent of the charges against Him.

But Pilate, by the sovereign leading of God, needs to *repeat* that finding twice more. Says Pilate in 19:4:

"Behold, I am bringing Him out to you, that you may know that I find no fault in Him."

And in vs 6 Pilate says the same words again:

"Pilate said to them, 'You take Him and crucify Him, for I find no fault in Him.'"

Why, congregation, this repetition? Why must Pilate declare three times over that he finds no fault in Jesus? We understand: what you repeat you want to underline, you want to put into bold print, you want to emphasise. There's the point: Pilate has no doubt, and he wants the priests and the elders to have doubt either: Jesus is *innocent*.

With that ruling, though, congregation, we are to see not just the opinion of the man Pontius Pilate. Behind this earthly judge stands the heavenly Judge whom Pilate represents. When Pilate makes his emphatic, thrice-repeated ruling known, he speaks from his office as Governor, speaks on God's behalf. Pilate *as God's ambassador* rules that Jesus of Nazareth has "no fault", and so we for our part are to hear in his emphatic pronouncement the *judgment of heaven* on Jesus of Nazareth: this man, says God, is without personal sin.

Guilty

But see: Pilate does not push through to administer justice agreeing with his findings. The man is a coward, and so buckles under the pressure of the Jews around him. Sure, he tries to wash his hands of his failure to carry out his office as he ought, but the fact remains that Pilate the Governor hands over an innocent man for crucifixion. This is sin on his part, something for which he shall need to give account before the God whom he represents.

Yet, congregation, even while Pontius Pilate distinctly retains his responsibility for handing over for crucifixion a man he first finds innocent, we need to see behind Pilate's act the hand of sovereign God. For the fact of the matter is that Yes, God in heaven saw Jesus *as innocent of the charges levelled against Him by the Jews*. But that does not mean that God saw Jesus as innocent altogether! For all the sacrifices of sins offered throughout the many years of the Old Testament cried out for this one awful moment in the history of the world. All those sacrifices demanded the death of man, the death of *the Man*; all those sacrifices meant that sins had been transferred from the sinner to.... Well, here was now the Son of God who had come to save His people from their sins (Mt 1:21). All those sins of ages past that had provoked the awful anger of holy God so much, and all those sins of times to come that would also provoke the awful anger of holy God, were now gathered together and loaded onto the shoulders of that single man whom Pilate declared faultless. Innocent He was of Himself, free of sin. But by God's just decree He was not innocent at all, for the sins of the people of God of every time

and place were piled onto Him. Here it came to pass as the prophet Isaiah had foretold:

"... the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (Is 53:6).

And because God laid on Him Abraham's doubts and lies, laid on Him David's adultery and murder, laid on Him Paul's persecutions and threats, laid on Him my evils and yours, Jesus was to God's holy eyes *most* guilty! God in heaven above is of purer eyes than to behold evil, and here in Pilate's court God saw *the* Sinner, the Man upon Whom were piled the sins of all those chosen to life. God cannot stand sin, He pours out His holy wrath upon sin, and so Jesus of Nazareth *had* to suffer the worst of sufferings possible; He had to be stricken, smitten by God and afflicted on account of our transgressions, our iniquities (Is 53:4ff). "I find no fault in Him," said Pilate on God's behalf, and so it was; Jesus was innocent, free of sin. "But take Him nevertheless and crucify Him yourselves," said Pilate on God's behalf, for God saw Jesus loaded with your sins and mine, and God is of purer eyes than to behold evil. Innocent He was, and yet guilty..., and therefore to be damned....

2. We are guilty, yet innocent

Guilty

Your sins, my sins: how *does* God react to them? Our blatant lies and white lies, our thefts and our acts of selfishness, our anger and desires for revenge, our sins of adultery and greed: how *does* God respond? He is so holy, congregation, that He explodes on earth-shattering anger when our sins come before Him. The prophet Nahum said it like this:

"Who can stand before His indignation?
And who can endure the fierceness of His anger?
His fury is poured out like fire,
And the rocks are thrown down by Him" (1:6).

Indeed,

"The mountains quake before Him,
The hills melt,
And the earth heaves at His presence,
Yes, the world and all who dwell in it" (vs 5).

Precisely *that* is why earth is such a dangerous place; our God is a consuming fire, and He pours out His anger on *this* earth. And just how awesome that holy anger is –you and I deserve it!- was so vividly displayed on the cross of Calvary.

Sovereign God appointed the heathen, Pontius Pilate, to be Governor under Caesar in Israel. The Romans had learned a most cruel way to put someone to death. So cruel was death by crucifixion that the Romans were unwilling to let anyone die via this means except traitors to the state and runaway slaves – and then only if they had no Roman blood in them. The two who were crucified with Jesus are described in the Bible as murderers and robbers; we need to understand that these two did not rob a corner store and murder the shop-keeper in the process, but instead rebelled against the Roman empire and in that capacity killed and looted. Traitors and runaway slaves: these were, we understand, the scum of society, dogs. Such folk could be crucified.... For others this form of death was too cruel...

What crucifixion actually was? From sources outside the Bible we learn that the person to be crucified was first publicly humiliated by being striped naked. He was then laid on his back on the ground, and his hands and feet either nailed or roped to the cross under him. Yonder a hole was dug, then a number of soldiers would pick up this cross-plus-victim, walk the cross-plus-victim to the hole, then drop the foot of the cross into the hole. To prevent that the hands and feet tear loose from the nails due to the weight of the body, a peg or small cross plank was fixed to the cross to provide a seat of sorts. There the crucified person would hang, helplessly exposed to intense physical pain, public ridicule, daytime heat and night-time cold. It could take days before death delivered the victim from his suffering. The whole thing was cruel beyond understanding.... Add to this cruelty the fact that God Himself had years earlier declared His curse on all who were hanged. That's Dt 21: "he who is hanged is accursed of God" (vs 23).

Why did sovereign God allow Pilate to hand Jesus over to something so cruel as crucifixion? Why not a sentence of stoning, or imprisonment followed by beheading? This, my brothers and sisters, is because nothing but the *worst* was bad enough for a man so vile in God's holy eyes! And what made Jesus so vile in God's holy eyes? Your sins, beloved, your sins and mine made Jesus so vile in God's holy eyes! You want an indication of how much God loathes sin, your sins? Look simply at what Jesus experienced on the cross! That excruciating pain of having your weight rest on feet pierced by a spike, the wrenching agony that comes with muscles and ligaments continuously stretched: truly, "who can stand before His indignation? And who can endure the fierceness of His anger?" How would you, beloved, like to be on the receiving end of such heated wrath?! But make no mistake: that's what you and I should expect! Such is God's holy reaction to sin. God from heaven on high looks down upon the sons of men and sees what you and I do and say and think..., and He's of purer eyes than to behold evil...; *woe be to us!* How enormously great is our guilt before God if *this* is the sort of penalty we ought to expect!

Innocent

But see: this is *not* the sort of penalty God in fact promises to you and me! In the covenant He made with each one of us He promises instead to be gracious to us, to give us life with Him. That's to say: He promises that *we're innocent before Him!*

How come? Simply because, congregation, our sins were laid on Jesus Christ. He suffered the terrible anger of God on our sins *so that we don't have to suffer His anger on our sins*. He suffered *in our place* so that we might be freed from God's curse and receive instead His blessing. Recall what we read this morning from the Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper. Listen:

"From the beginning of His incarnation to the end of His life on earth, [Jesus] bore *for us* [=in our place] the wrath of God under which we should have perished eternally. By His perfect obedience He has fulfilled *for us* all the righteousness of God's law. He did so especially when the weight of *our* sins pressed out of *Him* the bloody sweat in the garden of Gethsemane. There He was bound –why?– that He might free us from our sins. He suffered countless insults –why?– that we might never be put to shame. He was innocently condemned to death –why?– that we might be acquitted at the judgment seat of God. He even let His blessed body be nailed to the cross – what for?– that He might cancel the bond which stood against us because of our sins. By all this He has taken *our curse upon Himself* that He might *fill us with His blessing*."

You see the purpose, congregation, for Christ's suffering? "Though innocent, Christ was condemned by an earthly judge" so that we, though guilty, might be acquitted by a heavenly Judge. Though innocent, Christ was declared guilty by God and so loaded with the worst of possible suffering so that He might free us from the severe judgment of God that was to fall upon us. So, in the words of our LD, "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." So speaks the believer, the one who embraces as true the good news of God that Jesus on the cross suffered *in my place*, who clings to the gospel of God's grace that our sins were piled on Him so that there might be no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Is earth today a dangerous place? Make no mistake: 5 billion people on this earth today transgress daily against the God of heaven. This God today remains of purer eyes than to behold evil, and when He comes in His indignation it shall not go well for any person whose sins have not been washed away in the blood of the Lamb. Where there is an unwillingness to admit sin and be broken because of sin, where there is an unwillingness to cling to the gospel of Christ's atoning work on the cross, where there is an unwillingness to show true thankfulness with one's entire life, *there* sin remains and therefore the holy anger of God shall most certainly descend in its awful severity. Forget not, congregation, how the King of kings has described to John the panic that will overwhelm every sinner at the return of Jesus Christ. You can see the panic:

"... the kings of the earth, the great men, the rich men, the commanders, the mighty men, every slave and every free man, hid themselves in the caves and in the rocks of the mountains, and said to the mountains and rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of Him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the

great day of His wrath has come, and who is able to stand?" (Rev 6:15ff).

What horrifying fear that must be if one begs an entire *mountain* to fall on you – so desperate you are to get away from the indignation of this God! Most certainly is earth a dangerous place for those not repentant of sin, those who cannot confess the wealth of LD 15! And the plagues on earth today are but a foretaste of the greater evils to come.

But blessed is the man whose trespass is forgiven, whose sins are covered in the sight of heaven! For such a one earth is not a dangerous place to be, not at all. For the humble, the repentant, the believing, face no terrible prospect of God's severe judgment, face no terrible prospect of the curse of God. The humble, the repentant, the believing receive today the grace of God, righteousness, and eternal life; it's precisely of that gospel we were assured at the Lord's table today. Today the repentant receive the beginning of eternal bliss; tomorrow, when Christ returns, they receive the fullness of God's wonderful grace in life eternal with Triune God.

For the believer knows: I deserve to suffer most agonising torment because of my sins against holy God, *but Jesus Christ suffered that torment in my place*. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 18 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday Morning, 22 August 1999.

"BY HIS ASCENSION, JESUS HAS OPENED FOR US THE WAY TO THE FATHER."

Text:

Lord's Day 18

46. Q. What do you confess when you say, He ascended into heaven?

A. That Christ, before the eyes of His disciples, was taken up from the earth into heaven,[1] and that He is there for our benefit[2] until He comes again to judge the living and the dead.[3] [1] Mark 16:19; Luke 24:50, 51; Acts 1:9-11. [2] Rom. 8:34; Heb. 4:14; 7:23-25; 9:24. [3] Matt. 24:30; Acts 1:11. 47. Q. Is Christ, then, not with us until the end of the world, as He has promised us?[1] A. Christ is true man and true God. With respect to His human nature He is no longer on earth,[2] but with respect to His divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit He is never absent from us.[3] [1] Matt. 28:20. [2] Matt. 26:11; John 16:28; 17:11; Acts 3:19-21; Heb. 8:4. [3] Matt. 28:18-20; John 14:16-19; 16:13.

48. Q. But are the two natures in Christ not separated from each other if His human nature is not present wherever His divinity is?

A. Not at all, for His divinity has no limits and is present everywhere.[1] 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.[2]

[1] Jer. 23:23, 24; Acts 7:48, 49. [2] John 1:14; 3:13; Col. 2:9.

49. Q. How does Christ's ascension into heaven benefit us?

A. First, He is our Advocate in heaven before His Father.[1] Second, we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that He, our Head, will also take us, His members, up to Himself.[2] Third, He sends us His Spirit as a counter-pledge,[3] 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.[4]

[1] Rom. 8:34; 1 John 2:1. [2] John 14:2; 17:24; Eph. 2:4-6. [3] John 14:16; Acts 2:33; II Cor. 1:21, 22; 5:5. [4] Col. 3:1-4.

Scripture Reading:

Hebrews 9:1-15

Hebrews 10:19-25

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 142:1,4

Psalms 47:1,2

Psalms 66:7,8

Hymns 33:1,2,3,4,5,6

Hymns 55:1,2

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Suppose that our Lord had died on Good Friday and was buried, then arose on Easter Sunday from the dead – but thereafter never ascended into heaven. What difference would the absence of His ascension mean to you today? I put it to you, my brothers and sisters, that the Christian faith would be vain and worthless if Jesus had not ascended into heaven.

The lives we are given to live on this earth include much of sweat and tears, much of sorrow and pain, much of toil and frustration (cf Gen 3:16ff); we reap the fruit of our fall into sin. As we busy our minds with the trials of this life, as we're deep in thought in searching for solutions to the dilemmas we face, we walk around with our eyes on the ground. That's symbolic, I would suggest, of our natural inclination to see the problems of this life as being problems of this life alone, problems of this earth, this world-as-we-see-it. It's a natural thing to our sinful minds to forget or ignore the God of heaven who involves Himself with every event of this life. Our eyes and our minds are focused on the here-and-now, and not on the reality of His sovereign leading in our daily lives.

But as it is, brothers and sisters, every step we take is made in the presence of sovereign God. Whether we acknowledge it or deny it does not change the reality one dot; God *is* very directly involved in the bits and pieces of our daily lives. That is why, in the face of the trials that be, we need to lift our eyes off the ground, need to lift our eyes to heaven where Christ our Advocate is as the right hand of the Father. You see, Jesus' ascension means that now we can *pray*, speak to God about the struggles of our lives. And the promise is that our covenant Father *will hear us*.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

BY HIS ASCENSION, JESUS HAS OPENED FOR US THE WAY TO THE FATHER.

1. The wealth of this ascension
2. The consequence of this ascension
3. The duty in this ascension

The wealth of this ascension

The disciples were standing with Jesus on that mountain near Bethany. As Jesus had His hands raised to bless His disciples, Jesus began to rise from the earth, to go up, up, up. As the disciples watched with mouths agape, a cloud reached down to enfold the ascending Master and carry Him aloft; He disappeared from their sight. They stood there, staring after their departed Master..., till two angels informed them that Jesus would one day return as they saw Him go.... The event was so amazing; what, O what might this mean?!

This ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ into heaven, congregation, had been foreshadowed for Israel hundreds of times in the Old Testament dispensation. To draw out the significance of what the disciples saw before their eyes on that mountain near Bethany, I wish to set before you today how the Lord God foreshadowed this ascension in Israel's tabernacle.

The tabernacle God told Moses to build included first of all a courtyard. Just inside the door to this courtyard was the big altar where sacrifices were to be made for the peoples' sins. Beyond the altar inside this courtyard was the tabernacle itself. That tabernacle was divided into two rooms, the Holy Place in the front and the Holy of Holies (or Most Holy Place) in the back. The Most Holy Place in the back was exactly 10 cubits in length, 10 cubits in width and 10 cubits in height; it was a perfect cube. It contained the Ark of the Covenant, where God dwelt on the mercy seat. On the ark were two cherubim, and on the veil separating the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place more cherubim were embroidered with gold thread. The ark itself and the cherubim on it were also overlaid with gold.

What it was that this Most Holy Place symbolised for Israel? This Most Holy Place, brothers and sisters, was as it were a little piece of heaven, was heaven on earth. Here was God's dwelling, on the mercy seat of the ark. Here were cherubim, angels, even as there are countless angels gathered around God's throne in heaven. Here was all gold, a representation of the glory of heaven. And the shape of the room was a perfect cube, representation of the perfection that abounds in heaven. That Most Holy Place in the back of the tabernacle: it was a little piece of heaven on earth!

The Lord God gave instructions that every year, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest was to enter this Most Holy Place, to enter this little piece of heaven. As he did so, he had to wear on his breastplate the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. That's to say: he entered God's presence once a year as representative of the people, came into God's presence *on behalf of* the people. Yet he could not enter as he was; the High Priest had to take with him blood from the altar of burnt offering in the courtyard outside. For he and the people he represented were sinful persons while God was holy; so blood had to be shed, had to be brought before God, lest He reject the High Priest, reject the people represented by the High Priest. As the High Priest made his way from the courtyard where the people were into the heaven of the Most Holy Place, the High Priest also had to pause at the altar of incense and take along some incense. This incense –it was a symbol of prayer- had to be brought into the Most Holy Place, into heaven, before God.

The whole thing was so rich..., and at the same time it was so poor. It was so rich because here Israel was taught that man could enter heaven, God's holy presence. Through the shedding of blood it was possible for a man to come to God, and when he came into God's presence in that little piece of heaven known as the Most Holy Place he could come with the prayers of the people. This was so different from the words God spoke to Adam and Eve after the fall into sin, when He told them to get out of the Garden, out of His presence. In the tabernacle, in that Most Holy Place was delightful gospel; sinful Israel, through the person of the High Priest as their representative, could enter God's holy presence and not perish!! Yes, this is rich!

But at the same time it was so poor. For the people themselves had to stay outside in the courtyard, they could not enter into God's presence themselves, could not come into this piece of heaven. Distance remained between God and themselves.... And the High Priest too could enter the Most Holy Place no more than once a year, and then not when he thought the need was great but only when God stipulated – on the day of Atonement. Again, the High Priest could not stay in the Most Holy Place either. Was he there for five minutes, ten, twenty? I do not know. But I do know this: he could not stay. After he put the incense before the Lord and sprinkled the blood on and around the mercy seat, he had to leave the presence of God again, had to leave heaven..., return to the brokenness of life on earth, return to the sweat and tears and toils and weeds of this earthly life....

It was rich, and it was poor. It was a foreshadowing of the reconciliation that Jesus Christ would one day obtain between God and men; sinners could again one day enter into the presence of God in heaven. But it was only a foreshadowing; the real thing was not here yet.... The High Priest's annual trek into the Most Holy Place, into that piece of heaven-on-earth, foreshadowed Jesus' ascension into heaven, yes, it cried out for that ascension to occur.

On the hill near Bethany the disciples watched as Jesus ascended from the earth into heaven. What this ascension was? This: here Jesus was *fulfilling* the annual pilgrimage of the High Priest into that little piece of heaven-on-earth in the Most Holy Place! As did the High Priest every year anew, so Jesus did today: He left the community of men in order to go the presence of God. But Jesus did not go to that little piece of heaven-on-earth in the back of the tabernacle; Jesus went to heaven itself! And lo, as the disciples stood to watch Jesus was not dismissed from heaven after five or ten or twenty minutes. More, the angels who came from heaven announced that Jesus had arrived and would one day return in glory on heaven's clouds! Here was a man in heaven, fulfilment of what the Lord had prophesied to Israel in the annual journey of the High Priest!

Do I say too much when I consider the ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ into heaven as the fulfilment of the High Priest's annual journey into the Most Holy Place? But this, congregation, is precisely what the Scriptures say. It's the point of the author of Hebrews in chap 9. "Then indeed," he says in vs 1, "even the first covenant had ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary." That's to say: the Old Testament dispensation with its tabernacle and sacrifices –that's the "first covenant"- had something divine in it (the Most Holy Place, that little piece of heaven) and something earthly (the people with their sins). In that tabernacle, the author continues, were two rooms, "the first part" (vs 2) "in which was the lampstand, the table, and the showbread, which is called the sanctuary; and behind the second veil, the part of the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of All" (or the Most Holy Place), which had the golden censer and the ark of the covenant overlaid on all sides with gold..., and (vs 5) above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat...."

Once that tabernacle was built, the author continues in vs 6, "the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. But into the second part (the Most Holy Place) the high priest went alone once a

year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people's sins...." What that meant? Vs 8: "the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest," had not yet been opened for the public, "while the first tabernacle was still standing."

"But," the author continues in vs 11, "Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come.... Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption." So it is –vs 15- that Jesus Christ "is the Mediator of the new covenant..., that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance." You see: Christ's ascension into heaven is presented by the apostle as the fulfilment of the High Priest's annual journey into the Most Holy Place. Vs 24: "For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us." This is what the disciples on that mountain near Bethany saw before their eyes. This fulfilment is what we confess in our LD.

With the pilgrimage of the Old Testament High Priest in mind, we can, brothers and sisters, move on to our second point: the significance of Jesus' ascension into heaven.

The consequence of this ascension

Jesus was true man, like the High priests of the Old Testament, true man like you and me. Because of our sins, there is no way that we can stand in God's holy presence, no way we can enter into heaven without God consuming us in His holy anger. Yet Jesus was not consumed! Instead, the angels reported to the disciples that Jesus would come again in God's own time, and meanwhile He could stay in the presence of God. How this is possible? Recall: the high priest of the Old Testament took with him blood from goats and bulls, and sprinkled that in the presence of God in the Holy of Holies. But Jesus –Heb 9:11- "came as High Priest.... Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption." In the presence of the Father in heaven, Jesus offers the work He did for sinners on Calvary. That is to say: by appearing before God with the work done at Calvary on His record, Jesus reminds the Father unceasingly that sin is atoned for. The Old Testament tabernacle spelled out distance between God and man, distance since God was holy and man was sinful; there could be on earth a little piece of heaven only because of the altar that stood between God and man. It's the prophecy of that altar that Christ has fulfilled on Calvary, and through His presence in heaven before God He reminds the Father continually that this altar has finished its work; the distance between God and man is bridged. The very fact that Jesus –unlike the high priest of the Old Testament- may *remain* in heaven, in the presence of God, is all the evidence one needs that the distance truly is bridged.

Then it's true: Jesus alone has ascended into heaven, we have not. Yet the apostle to the Hebrews is emphatic that Jesus' ascension is not for Jesus' benefit as such; He has ascended for our benefit. When the high priest of the Old Testament entered the presence of God in that little piece of heaven-on-earth, he carried on his breast the names of the twelve tribes of Israel. The high priest was the peoples' representative; he entered heaven on their behalf, brought blood before God for the people. Jesus has done so much more. He has "appeared in the presence of God *for us*", says the apostle in vs 24. More, Jesus has opened for us the new and living way to the Father so that we can join Jesus in God's holy presence. When Jesus died, we in some way died with Him. When Jesus was buried, we in some way were buried with Him. When Jesus arose from the dead, we in some way we can't comprehend were raised with Him to new life (Rom 6; Eph 2:4ff). Similarly, when Jesus ascended we in some way ascended with Him into the presence of holy God! It's what Paul says to the Ephesians: God "made us sit together [with Christ] in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (2:6). Here is a wealth that far surpasses the wealth of the Old Testament tabernacle; God is pleased today already to welcome all His people into His holy presence, to give us free access into His holy courts! No longer are we sent out of God's presence, away from the Holy One; today for Jesus' sake we have free access to the Father! That, congregation, is the glorious significance of Jesus' ascension; He opened for us the way so that we might freely come to God.

Incense; intercessor!

Given such wealth, there follows, of course, a most delightful duty – third point.

The duty in this ascension

For of course, if Jesus has done so much for us in opening the way to the God who controls every aspect of our daily lives, it is for us to *make use of this open door*. Every step we make on this earth is made under the watchful eye of the God of heaven and earth. Every step we make is with His approval or His disapproval, and He in turn grants His blessing on our acts of covenant obedience and His curse on our acts of covenant disobedience. What shall we do then: ignore this God? Shall we walk with our eyes on the ground, look at life as we see it with our human, limited, earth-bound eyes? We know: that won't do! Here it's for us to *work* with the reality of Jesus' ascension. He has opened for us a way to the Father, and so it's for us to make us of this road. That is: it's for us to approach this God, to come into His presence in order to tell Him of the challenges and the struggles of this broken life. This God is not uninterested in us; No, He sent His Son specifically to open up the way for us to approach God again. His death on the cross, His resurrection on Easter Sunday: these were steps leading to His ascension. As the high priest of the Old Testament had to pause at the altar to gather blood before He could enter into the heaven of the Most Holy Place, so Jesus had to go to the cross of Calvary to shed His blood before He could enter into God's presence in heaven. That is why He came to earth: in order to go back to the Father, yes, to open *for us* the way to the Father. Well then, let us *use* the open door Jesus Christ has created into the presence of His Father.

How shall we go through that door? No, we cannot ascend into heaven as Jesus did. Yet enter God's presence we may – in our prayers. Freely talk to this God, commune with Him about the things important to our minds: this is what God wants from His children. Openness on our part with Him, free conversation with Him, a warm and close relation with Him: this is the will of God for His children.

This is what the apostle draws out in Heb 10. "Therefore, brethren," he says in vs 19, [we have] boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus." That "holiest" of which he speaks here is, we understand, the Most Holy Place of the Old Testament tabernacle, is –in New Testament terms- heaven itself. The argument of Chap 9 was that Christ has opened the way; well, then, says the apostle in 10:19: travel that way! Vs 22: "let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith." That's to say: speak freely to God! Do not be afraid to approach God, to tell Him what is on your mind. For Christ has opened the way to you to enter heaven, and in heaven He intercedes for you. So: speak to God, openly, freely, boldly. Tell the Father the concerns of your heart as you live the lives you're given to live. Converse with Him, have communion with Him. Given the ascension of the Lord, *be people of prayer!*

I know: today we do not see the glory of heaven as Jesus does; we are not physically in God's wonderful presence. In that sense we too, like Israel of the Old Testament, have not yet received the fullness of God's redemption. But soon, brothers and sisters, the Christ who ascended into heaven shall return to earth. And with Him shall come the dwelling of God, the New Jerusalem. And God shall make His dwelling with on this earth. No, He'll not dwell in another temple, in a Most Holy Place out of reach for common people. God shall dwell with us, there shall be open access to God Most High, and nothing shall hinder the perfect communion we shall have with our Lord and Saviour.

For that day we long eagerly. And as we long for that day, we reach toward it in our communion with God, already speaking freely with the God of heaven and earth about the things that keep us busy day by day. And as we pour out our hearts to the God we love, we are assured: for Jesus' sake He'll most certainly hear us. After all, He sent His Son to earth to reconcile us to Him. And the ascension points up the reconciliation. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 18 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev W VanderJagt held on Sunday afternoon, 29 March 1998.

(Rev W VanderJagt is Minister of the Word of the Free Reformed Church of Byford)

"FOCUS YOUR LIFE ON CHRIST IN HEAVEN."

Text:

Lord's Day 18

46. Q. What do you confess when you say, He ascended into heaven?

A. That Christ, before the eyes of His disciples, was taken up from the earth into heaven,[1] and that He is there for our benefit[2] until He comes again to judge the living and the dead.[3] [1] Mark 16:19; Luke 24:50, 51; Acts 1:9-11. [2] Rom. 8:34; Heb. 4:14; 7:23-25; 9:24. [3] Matt. 24:30; Acts 1:11. 47. Q. Is Christ, then, not with us until the end of the world, as He has promised us?[1] A. Christ is true man and true God. With respect to His human nature He is no longer on earth,[2] but with respect to His divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit He is never absent from us.[3] [1] Matt. 28:20. [2] Matt. 26:11; John 16:28; 17:11; Acts 3:19-21; Heb. 8:4. [3] Matt. 28:18-20; John 14:16-19; 16:13.

48. Q. But are the two natures in Christ not separated from each other if His human nature is not present wherever His divinity is?

A. Not at all, for His divinity has no limits and is present everywhere.[1] 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.[2]

[1] Jer. 23:23, 24; Acts 7:48, 49. [2] John 1:14; 3:13; Col. 2:9.

49. Q. How does Christ's ascension into heaven benefit us?

A. First, He is our Advocate in heaven before His Father.[1] Second, we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that He, our Head, will also take us, His members, up to Himself.[2] Third, He sends us His Spirit as a counter-pledge,[3] 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.[4]

[1] Rom. 8:34; 1 John 2:1. [2] John 14:2; 17:24; Eph. 2:4-6. [3] John 14:16; Acts 2:33; II Cor. 1:21, 22; 5:5. [4] Col. 3:1-4.

Scripture Reading:

Ephesians 4: 1-16

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalm 68: 1 and 2

Psalm 68: 11 and 12

Hymn 35: 1 and 2

Hymn 35: 3 and 4

Psalm 47: 1,2 and 3

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

It is not that long ago that the Russians sent their first manned spacecraft into outer space. After their exciting voyage

through the universe the two cosmonauts returned safely to earth. And - as you can imagine - a brief a press conference followed. They told the gathered press: 'We have seen beautiful things. We looked around closely. We were really impressed. But nowhere did we see God.' They jauntily drew the conclusion: the heavens are empty. There is no God.

Their conclusion did not appear out of the blue. After all, we live at the end of the twentieth century. Science has reached an unprecedented height. Scientists have made countless discoveries. Our world view has been completely changed. They have discovered stars which are millions of light-years away. Thanks to the newest devices of science only they can explore only a very little part of the universe.

Does the ascension of Christ make sense then? Can we as modern people accept the ascension of Christ? Can we in our time still believe that Christ, as a kind of super-cosmonaut, has been lifted up from the earth into the stratosphere without any technical aid? Or is it necessary to relegate the ascension of Christ to the world of fantasy as a kind of fairy tale?

But wait a minute! Remember that facts are often stranger than fairy tales or fictions. Because we write fiction to suit ourselves. Stories that are invented for mass consumption are usually molded to what the public is likely to believe. True stories, facts, on the other hand, are not invented for the public.

And indeed, it is incomprehensible to us that the ascension could happen. This does not mean that the incomprehensible things do not happen in reality. If that would be the case then more recognised facts would fall! And the Lord has given reliable eye witnesses who reported the fact of the ascension. Without the ascension even a great deal of Scripture will be incomprehensible. The Scriptures make clear that through the fact of the ascension of Christ the work of Christ assumes enormous proportions. In heaven Christ continues with His work of deliverance. And being in heaven Christ involves us here on earth. He went to heaven to be with us always. Therefore He urges you to focus on Him in heaven.

FOCUS YOUR LIFE ON CHRIST IN HEAVEN

- 1 Christ's parting from the earth;**
- 2 Christ's presence on the earth;**
- 3 Christ's preparation of the earth.**

FOCUS YOUR LIFE ON CHRIST IN HEAVEN

- 1 Christ's parting from the earth.**

I assume that everybody here in church has heard about the wave of emigration in the years after the second World War. Thousands upon Thousands of Dutch people, for instance, decided to seek a new future outside the border of their country. They left the Netherlands for Canada, the United States, Brazil and so on. For the majority of you, your parents or grandparents came to Australia. And emigration always means: you have to say farewell, good-bye. And remember, or ask your parents or grandparents, saying 'good-bye' in those days was very emotional. They often thought: 'we shall never see each other again.' They often cried buckets. quite a few handkerchiefs came in handy. To say farewell causes grief.

Therefore the happiness of the disciples is striking at the parting of Christ. We read after the ascension: 'The disciples worshiped Christ, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple praising and blessing God.' [Luke 24: 52f]. Their sadness because of the suffering and death of Christ was only temporary. 'Your sorrow will be turned into joy', Christ had said. 'Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you.' [John 16: 20.22]. The joy of the wedding-guests, interrupted by the suffering, will return and remains.

What's the joy at this parting? During the forty days after His resurrection Jesus taught His disciples. He explained a few things about the kingdom of heaven. In this way they got insight into the nature of this parting. And they knew His work was not finished yet. Christ had laid the foundation. And now He continues building on this foundation. He

says farewell. But He parts in order 'that He might fill all things' [Eph 4:10]. It is not a final farewell. Soon everything will be finished. Then He will return. "Let your heart not be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you also may be." [John 14: 1-3].

The Lord Jesus uses here a word that not so much emphasises His forthcoming departure, but rather emphasises His acts for the benefit of His congregation. He goes to get the mansions ready, which He has destined for His children in His Father's house.

Imagine a bridal couple in our midst. They look forward to their wedding. They have made their plans. They have bought a house. However, they have a long way to go yet. They have to get everything in readiness. However, time and again the bridegroom has to say farewell. But every time again he can rightfully say: 'I go to prepare a home for you and me.' And for that reason, the parting every time again, does not bother His bride. No way! If He kisses her goodbye, she knows: he sets forth to work for the benefit of our marriage. He prepares everything so that we get on married later. This makes her happy and this certainty stamps her expectations.

Well, happiness and certainty stamps the expectations of the disciples too at the parting of Christ. Jesus had said farewell and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And they knew: 'Christ enters into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us' [Hebr. 9: 24]. 'For us', the apostle said. Christ did not go into heaven for His own sake. Christ did not go into heaven because He had nothing to do on earth. Rather, He entered into heaven for our sake, for our benefit.

What might be meant by the fact that He entered into heaven for our sake? Well, says the apostle, Christ the High Priest 'is able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him since He always lives to make intercession for them' [Hebr. 7:25]. Christ has gone into heaven to labour for the benefit of His children or, to say it more specifically, to intercede on their behalf; to continuously intercedes on their behalf!

That is, I think, what we really need. For what does the apostle John say? "And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." [1John. 2:1]. John tries to encourage us to fight against our sins and to keep God's commandments. But he also knows that if we try to do so, it is impossible that there is no sin. Even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin. So, if you try to serve the Lord and try to meet His norm and if you, in so doing, sin, then you can be sure that you always have an Advocate with the Father. That is what Christ does for you in heaven. There He always pleads on behalf of sinners before His Father. So it is not necessary to be desperate because of your sins.

Now we have to be careful, for some people will misuse this text in this way that it is not necessary to fight their sins seriously. They think that they will always receive forgiveness of their sins as long as they pray and ask forgiveness. It does not really matter how we act or live: the Lord will inevitably forgive us. They think: that is His job. And you will see this in the behaviour and lifestyle of those people. Their is no real struggle to fight against their sins and to please the Lord. If that is the case, there will be no forgiveness of your sins at all.

But the secret of true repentance is found in the word 'if'. The apostle says: 'My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin.' "But nevertheless, if this will be the case; if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." If you are really sorry because of your sins and you confess your sins sincerely, then Christ will appear for the defendant and He will plead for you, because the blood of Christ cleanses you from all sin.

Now I ask you: where else do you find that? At home? I don't think so. Even if your parents are very patient and compassionate, in the end they will come with their punishment when you continue in your disobedience. Do you find this at school? I can't imagine. After the teacher has warned you three time, he will write your name on the whiteboard and then you have to do lines. The government perhaps? Take for instance traffic offences. You can plead if you like, but the law is unrelenting in that respect. In the end you will lose all your points and your licence.

Only in heaven will you find an Advocate who continuously pleads for you and will forgive all your sins. Not only for

a short moment. But He remains busy with this task 'until He comes again to judge the living and the dead'. And therefore the Lord urges you to focus your life on Christ in heaven. The ascended Christ remains busy in heaven, interceding tirelessly before God for our benefit. In this way He will continue day by day, until the day when Christ returns. If we daily resort to Christ, He will daily be active in God's presence pleading on our behalf. Therefore, focus your life on Christ in heaven and He will forgive all your sins.

No wonder that the disciples rejoice at the parting of Christ from the earth. Yes, it is still a departure. We are on the earth, Christ is in heaven. But with this parting, this farewell, God did not leave us to fend for ourselves. On the contrary, we will find an Advocate in heaven and He continues in heaven with His work. For that reason: rejoice! Only on the basis of the excellence and worthiness of Jesus Christ in heaven, will we receive the forgiveness of our sins. His righteousness is yours by faith!

FOCUS YOUR LIFE ON CHRIST IN HEAVEN

2 Christ's presence on the earth.

I have to point to a striking difference between with the last Lord's Day. Lord's Day 17 spoke about the resurrection. And the catechism gives only one question: 'How does Christ's resurrection benefits us?' But in our Lord's Day we find no less than four questions about the ascension. You hear as it were the catechism student anxiously asking: 'When Christ ascended into heaven, what happened to His presence here on earth? Is Christ then, not with us, until the end of the world as He has promised? If that would be true, then we would feel faint at heart. Christ has then disappeared and if that is the case, there is an infinite distance between Christ and us.'

The Catechism will find an answer to this question because of the considerable differences of opinion between the Roman Church and the Lutheran Church on the one hand and Scripture and Calvin on the other. The Lutheran as well as the Roman Church will insist that Christ isn't only present on earth with His Divinity. In their opinion Christ does make constant physical appearances on earth. He does so in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. Although there are important differences of opinion between themselves, the Romanists and the Lutherans agree on this point: Christ is indeed physically present on earth. He makes constant appearances in the flesh, and must therefore be worshipped and adored in bread and wine.

The Catechism refutes their arguments in the saying that, as a matter of course, Christ is present on earth. However we have to realise that also after the ascension an important distinction has to be made. The distinction between Christ's divine and human nature remains. With respect to His human nature He is no longer on earth. Before the eyes of His disciples Christ's body, His human nature, was taken up from the earth into heaven. With respect to His human nature He really said good-bye. He, His body, is in heaven. No doubt about that. He has been true man. And He remains true man. As man He said farewell. And now as man He is in heaven.

This is important to know. Because now I am sure that my flesh, the same human body as I have, is in heaven already. Christ carried my body into heaven at the moment of His ascension. Now I am convinced and it is sure that Christ came to deliver me completely, not only my soul, but also my body. Soon my body will live in glory. Christ, our Head, will also take us, His members, up to Himself. Our body will not sink into the filthiness of the rubbish tip in this world. We expect a glorious future. The body we have is not a useless covering for the time being only. Our bodies are precious in God's eyes. Because of my body too Christ went to the cross. He bought my body with His precious blood.

All of a sudden I see my own body in a different way. When I see my body in a mirror, when I think about tattooing, body piercing, alcohol, drugs, my sexual desires, then I have to focus my life; then I have to focus my body on Christ; on the body of Christ in heaven. And I know, because they pierced the body of Christ on the cross because of my sins, I can't pierce my body in a sinful way anymore. Because they tattooed Christ's back with whiplashes and His head with a thorn-crown, I can't tattoo my body in a sinful manner. The apostle Paul does not say for nothing: "How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it? ... just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of His Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. ... knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Christ, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin ... therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts. And do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin,

but present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God. For sin shall have no dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace." [Romans 6: 1-13]. And in 1 Corinthians 6: 15 we hear: 'Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a harlot? Certainly not! ... Flee sexual immorality. ... He who commits sexual immorality sins against his own body.' And I'll add here: He who pierces his body or is tattooed; he who uses drugs or alcohol in an excessive way sins against his own body. "Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's." [1 Cor. 6:18ff].

This already indicates how Christ is present on the earth. Focussing your life on Christ in heaven, that does not mean that He is absent from the earth. Certainly not. Christ said, after my ascension I will intercede with My Father, and 'He will give you another Helper, that He may abide in you forever ... you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.' [John 14: 15ff]. Christ will not leave you orphans. He is present in a better way than ever before. The catechism says: 'with respect to His divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit He is never absent from us'. It is clear from the passage of Scripture I quoted before: 'do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you'. Christ is with His Spirit with you, but He is also in you. That is close!

It is as Calvin wrote [Institutes II,16.14]: 'Being raised to heaven, Christ withdrew His bodily presence from our sight, not that He might cease to be with His followers, who are still pilgrims on the earth, but that He might rule both heaven and earth more immediately by His power;...'

The physical distance between Christ and us is immensely great. He has penetrated all heavens. Yet, He is closer to us than ever before. From heaven Christ rules the earth. Till He makes all His enemies His footstool and His victory becomes visible on the earth too.

FOCUS YOUR LIFE ON CHRIST IN HEAVEN **3 Christ's preparation of the earth.**

Sometimes I'd like to take a glance into heaven. What is happening there? Is there only one big chorus of God's children singing the glory of God. Is it silent in heaven, or are all the people laughing? It can be dangerous to add our own fresh fantasies to God's Word. I don't know exactly what is happening in heaven. But Calvin once said: 'Don't be so stupid that you imagine the Lord sitting in heaven and that He is only busy counting the little stars!' It is true, at the moment of His ascension Christ had finished His work here on earth. But He had not retired. For at the same moment He started His work in heaven. Christ is there, in accordance with the word of the apostle, "that He might fill all things". He sits at His Father's right hand, not to rest, but to rule. We hear in Scripture that He is standing ready to act. That is how Stephen the Martyr saw our Lord: 'Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!' [Acts 7:56] He shows His sympathy with His children and acts accordingly with His almighty power. We hear that Christ is walking between His people. He walks between the seven golden lampstands and says: 'I know your works, your labour, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil.' [Rev. 2:1] . He is riding to battle and in His righteousness He judges and makes war. [Rev. 19: 11-16]. So, if you wanted to have some key-words about Christ's activities in heaven, then you have to think of: 'progress', 'motion', 'active service', 'Sympathising with His children', 'judging His enemies'. He reigns and rules. Determined in all His activities He aims at the fixed target of God: the fullness of the whole creation. In His divine power He is busy, building the Kingdom of His Father.

For that reason starting from heaven, He sets everything in motion on earth. He does not sit by and watch from a distance. He does not look down His nose at our earthly jostle. He is with us; here, on earth. He is with us today, tomorrow, till the end of the world. He takes the initiative in everything. He helps, He is in charge, He protects, preserves and safe guards His people. He pushes everything towards the Last Day. He keeps you in His Father's name. Not one of God's children will get lost [John 17:12]. He has bought them all with His precious blood. As the Head of the Church He prepares the earth for the Last Day.

And now, tomorrow you will go and buy a newspaper, or you will listen to the news. But you will have a completely different view about the facts in history and world. Focussing on Christ in heaven you can see that He is busy preparing everything for the Last Day. Everything that is inexplicable to man, becomes transparent in faith. No, it does

not mean that I can explain everything. But I know by faith in the ascended Christ that He uses people and circumstances. Leaders of the government, revolutions, political intrigues, wars, fanatics and peacemakers; Saddam Hoessein, Clinton and the United Nations, the abortion discussion in our own country, He uses all that to come to His own aim: the new earth where righteousness dwells. He will destroy all His enemies.

The parting of Christ from earth, is really an enjoyable fact. Christ went to heaven. He has chosen a strategic position. As King of the world He surveys the whole world. He knows what is in each heart. He sits on His throne, He rules. His throne, is still in heaven. However, soon the throne will be on earth. And everyone who overcomes will sit with Christ on His throne, as 'Christ also overcame and sat down with His Father on His throne' [Rev. 3:21]. And you may rule over the entire creation of God.

For that very reason, rejoice in your exalted Lord. He has been crowned with majesty and honour. Soon you will see Him like He really is. Then our lowly body will be made identical to His glorious body [Phil 3:21]. Yes, then the whole creation comes to its aim.

The ascension, a joyful good-bye to be with us. He made a new beginning. And the highly exalted Lord took you with Him to that future. The glory is waiting for you. This glory is waiting for everyone who focuses His life on Christ in heaven. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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**Sermon on Lord's Day 19 Q&A 50 and 51 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman
held on Sunday afternoon, 29 August 1999.**

" OUR SAVIOUR CONTROLS THE ENTIRE WORLD FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE CHURCH ."

Text:

Lord's Day 19 Q&A 50,51

50. Q. Why is it added, And sits at the right hand of God?

A. Christ ascended into heaven to manifest Himself there as Head of His Church,[1] through whom the Father governs all things.[2]

[1] Eph. 1:20-23; Col. 1:18. [2] Matt. 28:18; John 5:22, 23.

51. Q. How does the glory of Christ, our Head, benefit us? A. First, by His Holy Spirit He pours out heavenly gifts upon us, His members.[1] Second, by His power He defends and preserves us against all enemies.[2]

[1] Acts 2:33; Eph. 4:7-12. [2] Ps. 2:9; 110:1, 2; John 10:27-30; Rev. 19:11-16.

Scripture Reading:

Eph 1:15-23

Psalm 110

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 96:1,2

Psalm 110:1,2

Hymn 32:1,2

Psalm 97:1,4,5

Hymn 35:1,2 3,4,5

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

In this big world of important people and impressive developments, we feel so insignificant, so unable to make a worthwhile contribution. It bothers us. For it's in us to think that the church should have more *influence* in this world, should be able to affect society more strongly, make a positive and appreciated contribution. But we're all busy with our own responsibilities, and the world is not interested in what the church has to offer..., and so the faithful church finds herself sidelined from society, her contribution negligible. We don't like that, that state of affairs gets some of us down..., and we find ourselves looking for ways and means for the church to be more meaningful in today's society....

I put to you this afternoon, brothers and sisters, that this thought tackles the matter from the wrong angle. Certainly it is necessary for the church of Jesus Christ to be contemporary, to know too what goes on in the world of today. And it is necessary for the church membership to live the Christian life day by day and to speak the Christian faith as opportunity presents itself. But it is not so that the church needs to strive to be a mover and shaker in the world. That role belongs to the Head of the Church, the Lord of lords and King of kings. And –though the media do not report it– He is *the* Mover and Shaker of today's world. For the benefit of the church.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

OUR SAVIOUR CONTROLS THE ENTIRE WORLD FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE CHURCH.

1. The fact of the Saviour's sovereignty
2. The purpose of the Saviour's sovereignty
3. The evidence of the Saviour's sovereignty

The Fact of the Saviour's Sovereignty

From that mountain near Bethany, our Lord Jesus Christ ascended from earth into heaven. Upon His arrival in heaven, what did Jesus do?

Last week, with LD 18, we could learn of Jesus' high priestly work for us in heaven; Jesus has entered the Most Holy Place for our benefit, with as result that we are able freely to pray. With LD 19, now, we confess that our Lord is not only high priest in heaven for us; He is also King. That's the notion captured in the phrase, "and sits at the right hand of God."

That Jesus at His ascension in fact sat down at the right hand of God is the plain teaching of the Bible. I think, for example, of Mark 16:

"So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God" (vs 19).

Paul echoes that reality in Col 3:

"If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God" (vs 1).

The question that needs our attention now is this: what is meant by the phrase, "sits at the right hand of God"? The Bible uses the phrase to capture primarily the notion of power, of authority. Consider the words of Ps 110. Says the psalmist:

"The Lord said to my Lord,
'Sit at My right hand,
Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.'
The Lord shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion.
Rule in the midst of Your enemies! (vss 1f).

We know well what is symbolised by making your enemies your footstool. To have your feet resting on your enemy is to say that you are in control of them, you are lord over them. That's precisely the point of the phrase, "sit at My right hand"; God would give to David's Lord authority, power over His enemies so that He rules over them (vs 2). That is why at the end of the same psalm this Lord at God's right hand is described as executing kings in the day of His wrath, as judging the nations (vss 5f).

Christ at His ascension into heaven sat down at the right hand of God. That's to say: God gave to Him a place of power and authority. God has placed both the people of God as well as the enemies of God under the control of the ascended Christ. Here is fulfilled the word spoken by the Lord just before He ascended: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Mt 28:18). It is as Peter explicitly says after the Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost:

"Therefore *being exalted to the right hand of God*, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself:

"The Lord said to my Lord,
"Sit at My right hand,
Till I make Your enemies Your footstool." '

Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both *Lord* and Christ" (Acts 2:33ff).

You hear it: Peter quotes Ps 110 on the day of Pentecost, and claims that this psalm is fulfilled in Jesus' ascension – fulfilled how? – by Christ being made "Lord". See there, brothers and sisters, what His sitting at the right hand of God really means: Christ is crowned Lord of lords and King of kings.

We're accustomed to thinking that God the Father is sovereign over all, not God the Son. We confess in LD 9 that God the Father Almighty controls all things so totally that leaf and blade, rain and drought, food and drink, health and sickness, indeed all things, come not by change but by His fatherly hand. And so it is. With LD 19 we acknowledge that God has crowned His Son to be Lord of all, and that's to say that leaf and blade, rain and drought, food and drink, health and sickness, indeed all things, come from *His* hand. No, the two thoughts do not contradict. It is fact that Father governs all, indeed, but He is pleased to do so *through* the Son. Authority has not been transferred from the Father to the Son so that now the Father sits idly by; rather, the Father has mandated the Son to govern the world *in the Father's name*. That's the point of the Catechism: "Christ ascended into heaven to manifest Himself there as Head of His Church, *through whom the Father governs all things*."

What we confess here, brothers and sisters, is no small thought. We've learned from Scripture that your Saviour and mine has received all authority, He is the means by which the Father governs all the world. So: Pres Clinton is a servant to the King of kings, the Saviour of the world, your Lord Jesus Christ. Pres Yeltsin is equally a servant to the Saviour of the world, your Lord Jesus Christ. Some weeks ago, *TIME* magazine ran a whole series of stories about the persons it considers to have been the principle movers and shakers of the century now drawing to its close. They mentioned some very influential names, persons who have well and truly set their stamp on our century – Adolf Hitler, Henry Ford, Albert Einstein, Nehru Gandhi, to name a few. But *TIME* did not report that every mover and shaker was himself moved and shaken by *the* Mover and Shaker, your Saviour, Jesus Christ. God has crowned Him Lord of lords and King of kings, and the result is that every influential figure of our century has been and remains but a tool in His sovereign hands.

TIME magazine doesn't know that. But you, congregation, do know it, for your God has told you so. And I put to you, beloved, that this reality gives enormous comfort for the church. It's a fact that the people of God today feel sidelined in the world, and not a little threatened by the world. That is part of the reason why some people of God feel need for the church to do more, for the church to become more influential in society as a whole. But let it be clear, congregation: the church of God, though much hated and attacked by the devil and the world, is *not threatened* by the world. The Saviour who bought the Church with His own blood is today the Lord of lords! Before His coronation in heaven, He battled on the cross of Calvary against the powers of hell and smote them; by the end of the three hours of darkness Satan and his demons had to acknowledge defeat. By that triumph over the devil, our Saviour delivered God's own from Satan's power; we were set free from Satan's bondage, and transferred into the kingdom of God's beloved Son (Col 1:13). That very same Son of God –precisely *because* of His triumph on Calvary- was taken into heaven and there crowned by God to be Lord of lords; He received that throne at God's right hand, was made Master even over the devil and every demon, yes, Master over authority and government and strongman Satan can raise up on this earth. Make no mistake: the evil one serves as footstool for your ascended Redeemer! So too every ungodly ruler on this earth serves as footstool for your Saviour, the Head of the Church. Truly, this is no small thought! This is some highly exciting material – especially when we're given to getting a bit down because we see so little influence from the church in this world.

The Purpose of the Saviour's sovereignty

I move on to our second point this afternoon: the purpose of the Saviour's sovereignty. To what end does He rule over kings and princes, economic developments and juridical rulings, the arts and the media, tornadoes and earthquakes? To answer that question I'm going to ask you first another question. That's this: does this sovereign Lord love all men equally? Is your Saviour neutral to all men so that He treats them all the same? Or is there a prejudice in the way He governs, a bias favouring some people over other people?

I learn from Scripture that Jesus Christ laid down His life not for all men but only for those whom the Father has given

to Him (Mt 1:21; Jn 17:6). Precious to the Lord of lords are the people God has given to Him, those for whom He laid down His life. And those whom the Father has not given to Him are not precious to Him; they are in fact His enemies who are described in Ps 110 as forming His footstool. Sure, He makes the sun to shine on the just and the unjust alike, and the just and the unjust alike benefit from the peace and the economic prosperity the Saviour grants in a given country. But the fact that He causes His sun to shine on the just and the unjust alike does not at all mean that the Lord of lords loves all men, let alone loves them equally. He simply does not.

But tell me, then: who is going to benefit particularly from the Saviour's rule? Those whom He loves, or those whom He does not love? Those for whom He has laid down His life, or those for whom He has not laid down His life? It's clear: if Jesus Christ loved so much those whom the Father gave to Him that He laid down His life for them, then today too He will do what He can for the benefit of those for whom He died on the cross long ago! You see, congregation, you cannot separate Christ's sovereignty today from His work on the cross long ago. Very much on purpose do I speak in this sermon not of *Christ* being sovereign, but of *your Saviour* being sovereign. The very same One who two thousand years ago bought a people for Himself, is today the Ruler over all the world, with principalities and authorities subject to Him. Invariably, His rule is going to favour the redeemed over the damned! More: His rule is specifically directed to the *benefit of the people for whom He died!* This is precisely the apostle's point in Eph 1. He tells us that God has

"seated [Christ] at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come."

Then he adds:

God "put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things *to the church*, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (vss 20ff).

That's to say: God has placed all things under Christ's feet, God has made Christ head over all things *for the benefit of His church!* Make no mistake: the Lord of the world is *your Saviour*, and He rules *with a bias in favour of His church*. The King of kings is not neutral, but He directs the film industry for the advantage of His church, He directs the tectonic plates under the earth for the advantage of His church, He causes a tornado to drop into East Fremantle for the advantage of His church. No, do not ask me for details to explain how this all fits together, do not ask me how Hollywood benefits the church, how Turkey's earthquake benefits the church. I am too limited, and so are you, and so we can't see the big picture, can't understand why God does what He does in this world, does to my neighbour, does to me. But I *believe* that my Saviour is sovereign, and I *believe* –because He says so- that He rules with a distinct bias in favour of His church.

Let no one, then, congregation of the Lord of lords, think in terms of the church being insignificant in this world. It may well be true that the church's contribution to the salvation of the world is little. But that is no surprise! What is your own contribution to your own salvation?! Then why should the church seek to be influential? It is the *Head of the Church* who is influential in this world; He is *the* Mover and Shaker of this world, and His every move is directed to the benefit of His Church. What's reported in the newspapers revolves around the church! Talk about influential! But the influence comes not from you or me; the influence comes from the Head of the Church, your Saviour.

So: Australia's present peace and economic prosperity is the work of our ascended Saviour, Jesus Christ. Why does He grant this peace and prosperity in Australia? Is it because He loves all Australians, and simply wants them all to live comfortably, and that's it? Not so, for Jesus Christ does not love all Australians. But He does love the Church for which He laid down His life! And He rules over all in Australia for the sake of His church (Eph 1:22). Is that to say that Lord grants this prosperity so that *we* might live comfortably? Is that Christ's motive? True, He does not mind that His people live in comfort; God has given His entire world to us to enjoy. But *that's* not why He grants peace and prosperity. Recall what Jesus said to His disciples just before He ascended to that throne at the Father's right hand. Jesus said this, Mt 28:

"All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." (vss 18f).

Notice the direct connection Jesus has placed between His having received all authority and the mandate He gives for mission work (see also I Timothy 2:1-4). He says: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go *therefore* and make disciples of all the nations...." As sovereign Lord in Australia, our Saviour grants peace and economic prosperity, and *as a result* there is opportunity for His church to involve itself in mission work. Does He grant the prosperity simply so that we can live comfortably? Absolutely not, beloved. Out of the whole human race God has given a certain number of people to Christ, and He has laid down His life to ransom these people from Satan's power. This same Christ Jesus is crowned ruler over the entire world so that He might gather into His Church all those given to Him by the Father. For the benefit of these elect persons –and we do not know in what tribe or nation these elect are- it is His will that His church makes disciples in all nations. In today's prosperity and peace, Jesus gives to us now opportunity to do precisely that.

That is why it is not at all a negative thing that the Free Reformed Churches of Australia are involving themselves in *three* mission fields. None else than our Lord Jesus Christ has put Lae on our path as a place for mission work, for there are people in Lae for whom Christ had laid down His life. And none else than our Lord Jesus Christ has put Mr Jacob on the path of the Mt Nasura church to do mission work in India, for there are people in India for whom Jesus Christ has laid down His life. And none less than our Lord Jesus Christ has put Frank on our path for possible mission work in China, because there are people in China for whom the Lord has laid down His life. Sure, three projects will cost money. And exactly for that reason the Lord has given the economic prosperity our country now enjoys. Your wealth and mine is not given to us so that we can all go travelling, nor so that we can all have a big house and a boat. Your Saviour and mine gives us economic prosperity in our country for the benefit of the church. Christ would gather into His church all those whom the Father has given to Him, and for that reason He grants the peace and prosperity we enjoy today – so that we may involve ourselves deeply in mission work. So it is for us to get ourselves involved, deeply, use our resources for the reason it's given. It is for us to follow where the Head of the Church leads. And as to tomorrow, and the finance mission tomorrow requires, it's for us to trust that the Lord of lords –He is sovereign, is He not?- will continue to supply the means required to gather His people into His church. Let's make no mistake: if we do not see the purpose for the prosperity the Saviour today grants, if we shall use our prosperity for our comfort, the Head of the Church will ... spew us out of His mouth... (Rev 3:14ff). But His church gathering work around the globe shall continue.

In a word: it is for us to work concretely with the confession we make Sunday by Sunday that at the right hand of God sits our Saviour.

The Evidence of Christ's Sovereignty

Now the final point: can we see evidence of His sovereignty in this world? It is to be clear to us, congregation, that the evidence of our Saviour's sovereignty is not obvious for the eye of sinful man to see. That is not because the evidence is not there, for it is. That is rather because the eye of sinful man is too darkened by sin to see that evidence. One needs the eye opened by the renewing work of His Holy Spirit to see the evidence of His lordship.

And see: what evidence is there of His lordship? In a world where every person is by nature hostile to God, where none is righteous and none seeks for God (Rom 3:10f), *there is a church*, people who believe in Jesus Christ the only Saviour, flee from sin and pursue righteousness, love the true God and their neighbour as themselves (*Belgic Confession*, Art 29). In a world where every person is by nature out for himself, there is a church, people who love one another, are patient with one another, live in peace with one another, show kindness to one another, etc. O true, there is so very much need for further growth in love for one another, for more patience with one another, etc. *But the beginning is there!* How come? Is that because these people are by nature so nice to each other? Is that because office-bearers work so hard? Make no mistake: that fruits of the Spirit appear among men, that there is love in the congregation and patience with one another and gentleness and kindness and so on are *evidence of the work of the Lord of lords*. Before you very eyes, brothers and sisters, is evidence plain and simple that the Saviour is King on high! That *you* may believe in Jesus Christ, that *I* may believe in Jesus Christ, is itself the encouragement we need to acknowledge in today's society that our Saviour is Lord of all.

Exactly because that evidence is there, let us open our eyes to *see* the evidence around us of the Saviour's sovereignty. He rules over all for the benefit of His church, sovereignly He has brought you and me –and our children too- into His

church, and let that be enough. Sure, we'd like to see more joined to His church, but let us not stare ourselves blind at the growth that to us seems to be so little; let us instead fix our gaze at the Saviour who sovereignly gathered *us* into His church in this world, yes, and directed world history to bring us together in Kelmscott.

But if the Head of the Church rules the world for the sake of the church, it is not for us to think that *we* have to gather Christ's church. Certainly, we need to engage in mission work, but we need to remember that we are no more than tools in the Saviour's sovereign hands. He will bless as He sees fit. Equally, office-bearers need to labour in the congregation with preaching and teaching, with admonitions and warnings, but office-bearers too cannot change hearts; they are but tools in the Saviour's sovereign hands. Again, congregation members need to look after one another, admonish one another as the need might be..., but it's for each of us to remember that the ascended Christ alone can change a heart. To put pressure on each other just will not do; the Saviour is sovereign, and He will change the hearts of all those given to Him by the Father – at His time and in His manner.

Channel 9 News did not report Christ's hand behind the earthquake in Turkey, nor behind the oil spill in Sydney harbour, nor behind Mr Bogucki getting lost up north and the authorities spending so much to find him. The authorities of the world do not know either that it was Christ who brought Frank & Jian-Hui out of China, the Saviour who brought Jian-Hui's mother to Hamilton for His own divine reasons. The world doesn't know it, but you and I do. So it's for us keep this glorious reality in mind both as we read the church bulletin and as we listen to the news.

Let it be fixed in our minds: whatever He lets happen in this world is geared to the well-being of His church. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 19 Q&A 52 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 5 September 1999.

"CHRIST'S RETURN SHALL BE ACCORDING TO THE PROMISES OF THE COVENANT ."

Text:

Lord's Day 19 Q&A 52

52. Q. What comfort is it to you that Christ will come to judge the living and the dead?

A. 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.[1] 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.[2]

[1] Luke 21:28; Rom. 8:22-25; Phil. 3:20,21; Tit. 2:13, 14. [2] Matt. 25:31-46; I Thess. 4:16, 17; II Thess. 1:6-10. God the Holy Spirit and our Sanctification

Scripture Reading:

Deuteronomy 28:1-8; 15-26; 58-68

Revelation 6:1-8

I Thessalonians 5:1-11

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Hymn 50:1,7

Psalm 96:8

Psalm 12:4

Psalm 1:1,2,3

Hymn 57:3,4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

There is so much speculation about the future. Things of the past are fixed, they're done, they've happened, and so there's very little room for speculation about the past. But the future: it's wide open for our imagination to roam where it will.... And it does.

Of all the doctrines of the Christian faith confessed in the Apostles' Creed, the confession about the return of Jesus Christ is the first that pertains to the future. Like anything else about the future, we find the subject intriguing. Imagine: Jesus on the clouds of heaven, then the dead in Fremantle will rise from their graves, and so will the thousands buried under the rubble of the collapsed buildings of Turkey's earthquake. Truly, it grabs the imagination! What will it be like? How will it happen? When will it be? We've got so many questions, and we'd love just as many answers. So books about the end abound.... And people take action too; I gather there's a group convinced that Jesus will come back in four months time, at the turn of the millennium, and so they'll be in Jerusalem for the New Year – because that's where they expect Him to appear.... I trust that we for our part do not think that the turn of the millennium is a special day on God's calendar; let's remember that the Lord Jesus will come at a time we don't expect, like a thief in the night.... Our Saviour could appear this evening, or as we're engaged in our New Year's party, or ... it could be in 500 years time....

We don't know when He'll appear. But there's much speculation about when it might be. And how it will happen. So we hear of pre-millennialism, and we hear of post-millennialism. We hear of a 1000-year reign, of Christ setting up His throne in Jerusalem, of Jews returning to the Lord and His Christ. There's speculation about the Signs of the Times, about the significance of earthquakes and wars, of pollution and global warming and salination and you name it. We're told also: Christ can't come back yet, because all the evils mentioned in the Bible have not yet occurred....

How, brothers and sisters, do we arm ourselves against all this chatter? What are we to think about the return of our Saviour? What *will* it be like? When should we expect Him?

The antidote to all the speculation on the topic, congregation, is a proper understanding of the role given in Scripture to the doctrine of the covenant. For that reason I want this afternoon to open with you the Bible, and look at the return of our ascended Lord in the light of the covenant.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

CHRIST'S RETURN SHALL BE ACCORDING TO THE PROMISES OF THE COVENANT.

1. the events before His coming
2. the events after His coming

The Events Before His Coming

That Christ comes back is beyond all doubt for anyone who takes the Bible seriously. After all, the angels on the day of Jesus' ascension spoke these words to the disciples: 'This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven' (Acts 1:11). Meanwhile, the Lord rules from heaven over all the earth; from His place at the right hand the ascended Saviour is King of kings and Lord of lords.

According to what principle, now, does the Lord rule over all the world? Certainly, He rules over all for the benefit of His church, He is busy gathering His church from every tribe and tongue and nation. But has the Lord revealed by what pattern He is ruling?

As it turns out, He has. We read a portion from the Lord's words to Israel in Deut 28. What was very clear from these words is that God's actions in the midst of Israel are directly connected to Israel's actions. That's to say: God claimed Israel for Himself and established with this people His covenant. Then God said to His own: if you obey, I will bless; "Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country," etc. Equally, if you do not obey, I will curse; "Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the country." We know the history that followed. When Israel obeyed God's commands (as in the days of David and Solomon), things went very well for the people; they prospered and lived in happiness and peace. But more often Israel chose to ignore God's commands, with as result that the history recorded in the Old Testament tells us time and again of the difficulties the people found themselves in, be it the difficulties of famine or of plague or of war or of oppression. Think of the horrors of the book of Judges, think of the unrest and the wars and the famines in the days of the kings, think of the climax of God's judgment in the exile. It's to be fixed in our minds: all those difficulties were nothing else than *God being faithful to the covenant* He made long ago: if you listen I will bless, but if you will not listen I will curse.

But the covenant did not cease with the coming of Christ. True, the Jews are no longer the special covenant people. In the New Testament dispensation, the covenant is made instead with the *spiritual* seed of Abraham, with believers and their seed. And because the gospel has spread over the face of all the earth, many from over all the world have come to faith in Jesus Christ. Well now, *with these believers and their seed God has established His unchanging covenant*. And that in turn means that the saints of the New Testament dispensation have also received –like Israel of old- God's promise of blessing upon obedience and His promise of punishment upon disobedience. Indeed, if it should be that believers and their children should turn from the Lord, if in other words they would break the covenant God established with them, God will pour out His wrath upon them - covenant wrath. And this wrath is expressed in the New Testament in terms borrowed from the Old Testament, ie, this wrath is expressed in terms of earthquakes, of wars, of the sun being darkened, of the moon turning to blood, and so on. So the plagues prophesied in chapters of

Scripture as Rev 6 are the plagues also mentioned in the Old Testament, the plagues Israel experienced when they turned from the Lord, were unfaithful to His covenant.

The chapter tells us of a white horse, whose rider has a bow in his hand and a crown on his head; this ruler went out conquering and to conquer. That is: here is one nation rising against another, making war against another – even as God prophesied upon covenant disobedience in Dt 28. The chapter tells us of a red horse, whose rider took peace from the earth so that people would kill one another. That is: here is the notion civil war, of rebellion – even as the Lord mentioned in Dt 28. The chapter tells us of a black horse, whose rider had in his hands a pair of scales to weigh food for sale. The price is exorbitant; a litre of wheat for a day's wages. Here is the famine foretold on covenant disobedience in Dt 28. The chapter tells us of a pale horse, and the name of the rider was Death, with Hades following behind. The rider has power to kill with sword, with hunger with death and by the beasts of the earth. Here are the plagues of Dt 28 again, war and hunger and pestilence and being overrun by wild animals. You see: the plagues that God prophesied in the Old Testament in response to covenant disobedience appear on the pages of New Testament Scripture as well. For the promises of the covenant – blessing on obedience and curse on disobedience – forms the pattern for who the ascended Saviour rules the world.

Well now: what is it that has happened in the New Testament dispensation? Paul says that the gospel has been proclaimed to the ends of the earth in his day . Col 1:23: "...the gospel which you heard ... was preached to every creature under heaven" (cf Rom 16:26; II Tim 4:17; Mk 16:20). But how have people responded to that gospel? Some rejected it, others accepted it. Those, now, who accepted that gospel: have they and their descendants maintained the covenant God made with them and their seed after them? We know enough of history to know that men have time and again turned away from the gospel. In one of his first letters, those to the Thessalonians, Paul wrote that the falling away had to come before Christ could return (II Thess 2:3). That falling away *has* come, yes, it appeared already in the days of Paul. His last letter, the second to Timothy, relates this: "Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world" (4:10). And: "Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm" (4:14). And: "Hymenaeus and Philetus ... have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past" (2:17f). And so I can continue. Paul makes it clear that already in the first generation of New Testament believers saints fell away from the Lord and His service. Well now: to fall away is to break the covenant made with believers and their seed, and on such falling away, on such apostasy, on that attitude of rebellion and lawlessness *there necessarily had to come the wrath of the God of the covenant*.

Indeed, through out New Testament church history there has continually been *covenant people breaking that covenant*, children of believers wanting nothing to do with the Lord and His service; always in the course of New Testament history there has been that attitude of rebellion, of lawlessness, of knowing it better than God Himself. So it is too that throughout New Testament history the world has seen so many of God's chastisements, so many expressions of His covenant wrath, a wrath provoked by the thousands who fall away, the children of a believing generation that want nothing to do with the Lord and His service. Apostasy is a continuous theme in our dispensation, and that is why earthquakes and wars, famines and disasters are also persistent themes in our dispensation. This is what it means that history is church history. Would that we would learn to read both history text books and the newspapers in light of God's *covenant* promises!

Can we say, then, that much must happen yet before Christ can return; there must first come wars and earthquakes, and we must be persecuted and imprisoned? Not so, beloved. It was 2000 years ago, when the New Testament was first written, that the church was told that there must come apostasy before Christ can come back. That apostasy with its resulting horrors has occurred, and that is why Paul expected the Saviour to come back in *his* day already (cf I Thess 5:6). That falling away has continued through the centuries, and is even now occurring. So it is not for us to say that Christ cannot come back yet. He surely can. And He will, as soon as "the number of the elect is complete" (Art 37). And when *that* is, we do not know, and certainly cannot even begin to guess. That is why we are not to imagine that the return of Christ will surely be in the hazy future far off. No, "the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night," (I Thess 5:2), and I have yet to hear of the thief who tells his victim ahead of time when he's coming. Hence the instruction of the apostle: "let us not sleep..., but let us watch and be sober" (I Thes 5:6ff).

Since that is so, congregation, it is for us to *be ready* to meet the Lord, *now*. That means that each and every one of us needs to make it our business to be repentant of every sin of which we're guilty. One can hide things from people, one

can mislead people too, but none of us can hide a thing from the Judge who weighs the hearts. He comes at an hour we do not expect; "When they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them" (I Thess 5:3) – unannounced. "And they shall not escape." Let no one think that repentance can wait till tomorrow, that fixing up a broken relation can be done next week, that resolving a grudge can wait till next month. We are deceived if we think that we need to see much more of wars and persecutions and earthquakes and apostasy before Christ can come back. Make no mistake, beloved: the Lord of lords most certainly can come back this evening, *and that fact gives urgency to the need to be ready*. And please: do not now busy your mind with whether your neighbour is ready for the Lord; busy your mind with that only after you are sure that you are *yourself* ready to meet the Judge.

That brings us to our second point: what shall happen *after* His return?

The Events After His Coming

The return itself, congregation, will turn out to be according to the promises of the covenant. For those who have broken God's covenant, that return will be most awful, will mean for the reprobate that they will be cast eternally into the fires of hell. That's why they will seek to escape from the Judge of all the earth, will cry for the mountains to fall on them, and for the hills to cover them ... (Rev 6:15). And for the believers it shall be covenant blessing; they shall receive the bliss of Paradise restored, life with God forever.

Judgment

Judgment. Scriptures tell us that the books will be opened, every deed done by each individual will pass in a flash before the Judge. And each person will have to render account for every deed done, for every word uttered. All must explain why they did what they did, why they said what they said; all must justify themselves before the Judge of heaven and earth. But *let it be fixed in our minds*, congregation: not a single person shall be *able* to justify himself! Those with faith in Jesus Christ shall *be justified* by the blood of the Lamb, while those who despised the Son of God in this life shall not be justified at all. In a word: what shall be judged on the last day is whether one's deeds have demonstrated *obedience to the covenant* God made, or *disobedience to that covenant*; what shall be judged is whether one has accepted the covenant obligations or rejected them. And it is those with *faith* that have accepted the covenant obligations, and those with no faith who have rejected them. So it is that those with faith in Jesus Christ receive life eternal, and those with no faith are cast into everlasting hell. In the words of the catechism: "He will take me and all His chosen ones to Himself into heavenly joy and glory" but "will cast all His and my enemies into everlasting condemnation." Allow me to expand on those two options.

Hell

According to our LD, the future set aside for the enemies of God and His people is "everlasting condemnation." What is this 'everlasting condemnation' actually all about? This: it is the curses experienced on this earth on covenant breaking *drawn to their ultimate degree*. Take the time at home to read through the entirety of Dt 28, and notice how the section in that chapter dealing with curses on covenant breaking mentions punishments of greater and greater severity, punishments harder and harder to bear. It ends up at the end of the chapter like this: "the Lord will give you ... a trembling heart..., and a languishing soul...; night and day you shall be in dread.... In the morning you shall say: 'Would it were evening!' and at evening you shall say, 'Would it were morning!' because of the dread which your heart shall fear..." (vss 65ff). And what now is hell? Says Jesus: hell is that place where men 'will weep and gnash their teeth' (Mt 25:30). And that, beloved, is the final punishment of Dt 28 *intensified*! What is hell? The chastisements God promised in Scripture upon covenant breakers are but a foreshadowing of the terrors of that awful place! Hell is *unending covenant wrath*; that's what makes hell so terrible!

Christ comes to judge, and you and I do not know when He'll His Day will be. We do know what will happen on that day. He will cast all "His enemies" –and that's those who reject His covenant- "into everlasting condemnation." That's why *now is the time* to ensure that none of us rejects the covenant God has made with us; *now* we still have opportunity to answer with faith to the demands God has laid upon each one of us in our baptism. Well does Jesus tell His disciples –and so His people of all ages- not to fear persons (for the worst they can do is kill the body) but rather to fear God. For, said Jesus, God is able to "destroy both soul and body in hell" (Mt 10:28). And He *will* too if those

whom He has claimed as His children persist in rejecting the covenant He made with them.

Heaven

Our LD speaks also of the other side of the coin. All His and my enemies He shall cast into everlasting condemnation, but "He will take me and all His chosen ones to Himself into heavenly joy and glory." What this heavenly joy and glory is? This: it is the blessings experienced on this earth upon covenant obedience *drawn to their ultimate degree*. Take a moment at home to read that section of Dt 28 listing the blessings God promises on obedience to the covenant, and compare that with the bliss of the New Jerusalem described by the Lord in Rev 21 and 22. Just as hell with its weeping and gnashing of teeth is the extension of the covenantal curse pronounced in the Old Testament, so also heaven with its joy and glory is the extension of the covenantal blessings promised to Israel in the Old Testament. God promised blessings in city and field, blessings on the fruit of the body, the fruit of the ground, of the animals, etc, etc. Abundance there would be, with resulting happiness and opportunity to praise God spontaneously. And exactly that is what Scriptures say also about the heavenly joy that awaits the saints of God. For there shall be no more tears and no more sorrow. And there shall be no shortage of fruit from the land and no concerns about the fruit of the body. Covenantal blessing, perfected.

"He comes to judge the living and the dead." No one knows when the Judge will return; it could be tonight. No one wants to miss out on the fullness of the covenant blessings the Lord promises for those who love Him. That is why we want *today* to be ready. For "His covenant stands from age to age unbroken" – whether the promises be of blessing or of curse, in this life or the life to come. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 20 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 19 September 1999.

"THROUGH HIS GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, GOD EQUIPS HIS OWN TO RESIST THE DEVIL'S ATTACKS."

Text:

Lord's Day 20

53. Q. What do you believe concerning the Holy Spirit?

A. First, He is, together with the Father and the Son, true and eternal God.[1] Second, He is also given to me,[2] to make me by true faith share in Christ and all His benefits,[3] to comfort me,[4] and to remain with me forever.[5]

[1] Gen. 1:1, 2; Matt. 28:19; Acts 5:3, 4; I Cor. 3:16. [2] I Cor. 6:19; II Cor. 1:21, 22; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 1:13. [3] Gal. 3:14; I Pet. 1:2. [4] John 15:26; Acts 9:31. [5] John 14:16, 17; I Pet. 4:14.

Scripture Reading:

I Corinthians 6:1-11

Galatians 5:13-6:5

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 25:1,2

Psalm 51:4

Psalm 37:9

Hymn 37:3,4

Psalm 139:4,13

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Our Lord Jesus Christ left the earth, ascended into heaven and received a seat at God's right hand. This glory of Christ our Head, we confessed in LD 19, benefits us directly. After all, "by His Holy Spirit" the ascended Christ "pours out heavenly gifts upon us, His members." The first of these heavenly gifts is none less than His Holy Spirit. With LD 20, it's the wealth of this gift that is laid before us.

And Yes, the wealth is great. In a world with devils filled, all threatening to undo us, the Lord has equipped His own so that we may have the wherewithal to resist the devil's attacks. That equipping comes through the Holy Spirit – for He is true *God*, dwelling within *us*.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

THROUGH HIS GIFT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT, GOD EQUIPS HIS OWN TO RESIST THE DEVIL'S ATTACKS

1. The marvel of the Spirit's presence
2. The result of the Spirit's presence
3. The mandate of the Spirit's presence

The Marvel of the Spirit's Presence

Who first of all, or what, is the Holy Spirit? We are adequately well informed to realise that the Holy Spirit is somehow divine, God. I want to emphasise, though, that the Holy Spirit is not a power going out from God, is not the influence or muscle of God. Rather, the Holy Spirit is True God Himself, as much true *God* as the Father and the Son. He is not less than the first or the second Persons of the Trinity, but equal with the Father and the Son.

So it is that I read in the Bible that God the Holy Spirit was involved with the Father and the Son in the creation of the world (Gen 1:2). I read also that the Spirit is everywhere; David in Ps 139 acknowledges to his comfort that he can never get to a place where the Spirit of God is not present. And I read in Scripture that the Holy Spirit knows all things, even the deep and hidden things of God (I Cor 2:10ff). So Peter, when he tells Ananias that he lied to the Holy Spirit, can explain the seriousness of the sin by saying that Ananias in fact lied to *God* (Acts 5:3f). It all points up that the Holy Spirit is as much true *God* as the Father and the Son.

If the Holy Spirit is *true God*, brothers and sisters, the material of our LD puts us distinctly on holy ground. Whatever one might say of God is true also of the Holy Spirit. So we need to watch what we say, need to guard our thoughts as we busy ourselves with God's revelation about the Holy Spirit – lest we take God's name in vain....

Of this Holy Spirit, true God with the Father and the Son, we confess in our LD that "He is also given to me." We touch here, congregation, a most awesome thought. The word 'me' in our LD refers to *you*, to *me*. And what are we?

In the beginning holy and eternal God created this world. On the sixth day, the Lord God Himself "formed man of the dust of the ground" (Gen 2:7). The picture is of the sovereign Potter gathering clay together, and fashioning with His own eternal hands a being called man. Into this clay vessel the Lord breathed the breath of life so that man became a living being. What, then, is man? Man is dust, man is clay, a vessel fashioned by the hand of almighty God, and therefore *dependent*, fully dependent on his divine Maker. Some days or weeks after his marvellous creation, this man and his wife rebelled against God in favour of serving the devil. Besides being finite and creaturely, then, vessel of clay became rebellious, evil, sinful and inclined to every sin.

This, brothers and sisters, is the picture the Lord presents of human beings, of you and of me. Now we say in our LD that the Holy Spirit – "He is, together with the Father and the Son, true and eternal God" – is "given to me", is given to persons of clay and dust, more, is given to persons of *sin*. Here is a thought so marvellous and incomprehensible that we can scarcely get our minds around it! *God* in the Spirit ... is given to *me*, a creature, a sinner: truly, how's *that* possible!

Yet even that is not the depth of the marvel. For the Scriptures speak of more than that the Holy Spirit is "given" to us; the Scriptures speak of the Holy Spirit making His *home* in sinners (cf Jn 14:23). So the apostle writes to the Corinthians this:

"Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" (I Cor 3:16).

In the Old Testament, the Lord God was pleased to dwell amongst His people Israel in that tabernacle they had to build for Him. But God was unapproachable; between God in the Holy of Holies and the vessels of clay outside was a *distance*, and that distance could be overcome only by the sacrifices on the altar. And never, never could the people come into the presence of God in the Holy of Holies; only the High Priest, and he but once a year, could come near to God.

But that's not how it is today, says Paul. He says to each believer of Corinth individually that each one is a *temple* of the Holy Spirit, yes, that the Holy Spirit dwells in each one of the Corinthian believers. Here, then, is no longer distance as there was in the Old Testament; here is nearness, closeness!

This, of course, is the blessed result of Christ's work on the cross. When He paid for sin and reconciled God's own to God, the distance there was between God and man was overcome, bridged, removed. So on Good Friday the veil of the temple was torn (Mk 15:38). We may approach God in prayer, boldly speak to Him (Heb 9,10), and *God also comes to us again, now in the Holy Spirit*. See there, brothers and sisters, the wealth of Pentecost; the distance between holy God and the sinful creature man is overcome, and so the Holy Spirit – "He is, together with the Father and the Son, true

and eternal God!" - has come to live in vessels of clay, to dwell in the hearts of those for whom the Son of God died. So Paul can say emphatically to the Romans that "if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not His" (Rom 8:9). That is: everybody washed by the blood of Christ also 'has' the Spirit of Christ; you cannot benefit from Christ's blood shed on the cross without also benefiting from Christ's Spirit poured out on Pentecost. That is why our LD says that the Holy Spirit "is also given to *me*." For in the Catechism the *believer* confesses what God has done for him and in him. And every believer without exception benefits from both the blood of Christ *and* the Spirit of Christ (cf LD 1).

Let none of you, congregation, ever cease to marvel at the riches God has given in the outpouring of His Holy Spirit. That God Most High, eternal and holy, should make His home in the hearts of sinners –you, me!- is cause for ceaseless praise and unending delight. What a God, that He should draw sinners so close to Himself!

The Result of the Spirit's Presence

What, now, might the effect of God's coming be? Think about it: if true and eternal God would make His home in the hearts of sinful vessels of clay, what must happen to these people? Can it leave them cold, untouched, unchanged? The Bible is emphatic: the vessels in which the Spirit of holy God makes His home are *healed*, their brokenness repaired. That is: the coming of the Holy Spirit into the hearts of sinners causes *change* in these sinners, radical change. To draw out the reality of the change that comes upon those in whom the Spirit makes His home, I ask your attention to three examples.

After God made His covenant with Israel at Mt Sinai, the Lord gave to Moses instructions to build a tabernacle, instructions too about how to build it. The purpose of the tabernacle was that holy God might dwell among His covenant people (Ex 25:8).

Amongst the thousand of Israel assembled at the foot of the mountain, there were undoubtedly numerous who were gifted tradesmen, very able to prepare the frames for the tabernacle, able to weave the clothe required for it, able to do the required embroidery work, able to make the altar, the ark, the basin, etc. Still, can *creaturely* hands, *sinful* hands build a dwelling place fit for *God*? We realise: that cannot be. So God, after He had given the details of how to build that tabernacle spoke to Moses like this:

"See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah. And I have filled him with the Spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, to design artistic works, to work in gold, in silver, in bronze, in cutting jewels for setting, in carving wood, and to work in all manner of workmanship. And I, indeed I, have appointed with him Aholiab the son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan; and I have put wisdom in the hearts of all who are gifted artisans, that they may make all that I have commanded you..." (Ex 31:2ff).

The point? Bezalel and Aholiab are *changed* from average, maybe gifted craftsmen, into men able to make a house fitting for *God to dwell*. By the coming of the Holy Spirit in their hearts, these men are *changed*, made able to do what otherwise they could not do.

My second example comes from the events of Pentecost day. After the Holy Spirit was poured out, and Peter had preached his Pentecost sermon, "about 3000 souls" repented, came to faith, and joined the group of disciples. These 3000 persons included undoubtedly 20 year olds and 70 year olds, and everything in between, and possibly their children too. Some of these 3000 persons had worked for years and years in the labour force, and built up for themselves their little kingdoms – a house or two, a summer cottage, a team of donkeys and a flash cart, a respectable wardrobe, etc. Like anybody else would do....

But hear now what these people did. Acts 2:

"Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need" (vss 44f).

What this selfless generosity is? We understand: the Holy Spirit has come upon these people so that they

are changed. They are changed, they are not what they used to be. Instead of clinging to the treasures they had acquired over the years, they freely gave for the benefit of others in need.

The point is again: where the Holy Spirit comes to make His home, there invariably comes *change* in the persons concerned. You cannot separate the Holy Spirit from *change*.

My third example comes from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, the portion we read. We need first to know that the city of Corinth had a notorious reputation in the days of Paul. So notorious was the reputation that the peoples around the city took the name of the city –"Corinth"- and cast it into a verb – to corinthise. That word was used to describe gross sexual behaviour. For that's what the people of Corinth readily gave themselves too: gross sexual pleasures.

To a city notorious for its prostitution and its homosexual behaviour and its sodomy, the apostle Paul came with the good news of grace in Jesus Christ. By the working of almighty God, various in the city came to faith. But now what: did these corinthians-come-to-faith continuing with their corinthising? Listen to Paul:

"Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God" (I Cor 6:9-11).

I repeat what Paul says: "such *were* some of you." Notice the *past tense*. Among the saints of Corinth washed in the blood of Jesus Christ were persons who used to be true corinthians, who gave themselves to the passions of the flesh, to homosexuality, to adultery, to sodomy, etc. But they don't any more –why not?- because of the work of the Holy Spirit in their hearts. *For where the Spirit is there comes change, radical change.*

Our ascended Saviour has poured out His Holy Spirit. This Spirit of our Lord Jesus Christ –true God with the Father and the Son- has been "given to me", we confess in LD 20. That marvellous grace of God must by definition, then, result in *change in my life*, radical change. That is why the apostle also speaks in Gal 5 of "the fruits of the Spirit", and speaks of these fruits as *normal* for each believer.

We read the passage. The apostle contrasts the "works of the flesh" with the "fruit of the Spirit". The works of the flesh include such vices and attitudes as

"adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like" (vss 19ff).

Paul repeats to the Galatians what he said to the Corinthians: those who give themselves to such vices cannot inherit the kingdom of God, simply because giving oneself to such vices shows that one is not changed, not renewed by the Holy Spirit. And if one is not changed, then the Holy Spirit is not present. And if the Spirit of Christ has not made His home in you, you are not washed by the blood of Christ either. So: "those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God" (vs 21).

But those in whom the Holy Spirit –true God with the Father and the Son- is pleased to dwell are *changed* so that they bring forth fruit particular to the Holy Spirit. This fruit, says Paul, is as follows:

"love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (vss 22f).

We need to notice how this list *contrasts* with the "works of the flesh" Paul mentioned earlier. For example, a work of the flesh is to hate, to explode in wrath, to be selfishly motivated. In place of such attitudes and conduct, the Holy

Spirit causes the child of God to produce *love*. And love, he says to the Corinthians,

"is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres" I Cor 13:4ff – NIV).

A second example. The person in whom the Spirit has made His home is characterised by joy. Instead of being driven by selfish ambition or envy or revenge (works of the flesh all), the person changed by the Spirit sets that aside in favour of joy. Again, instead of dissensions and contentions, the person changed by the Spirit exudes peace and longsuffering. So I can go through the whole list. The point is that the person in whom the Spirit dwells is *changed*, radically changed so that his behaviour is distinctly the fruit of the Spirit.

We understand: for the Corinthians this difference in behaviour will have been most obvious for one and all to observe. That is: the folk of town could see plain as day that the friend with whom they'd grown up and frequented all the nightclubs was now different, changed; he no longer hung out with them, no longer joined them in their fornication. The change was *obvious*. Yet we may be sure, congregation, that when this changed man became the father of covenant children, he did not permit his covenant children - God's children!- to have a youth like he himself did. Rather, he will surely –like we do with our children today- have taught his children after him to live as holy children of God from their early childhood. When these children in the course of time, then, produce fruits of the Spirit, the neighbour across the road doesn't see a change in them, simply because those children were taught to be different from the start. But the fact remains that the heart and its inclinations is changed by the Spirit nevertheless, changed from being bent to do evil to being bent to desire the will of God. No person in whom the Holy Spirit dwells is void of this fruit. That is why there is no contrast between the work of the Holy Spirit and our work as parents; rather, it is primarily through the labours of the parents as His tools that the Holy Spirit changes the hearts of the next generation. That is why we as parents indeed need to make it our business to teach our children to produce the fruits of the Spirit mentioned in Gal 5, from childhood already, and produce them abundantly.

The Mandate of the Spirit's Presence

Now our last point, the mandate of the Spirit's presence. The change worked in sinners' hearts by the Holy Spirit is a radical change; the homosexuals and sodomites of Corinth who came to faith in Jesus Christ were homosexuals and sodomites no longer. Instead of adultery and fornication, the Spirit caused them to produce faithfulness (in their marriages) and self-control (cf Gal 5:19,22f); that's a radical change. Question: does that mean that the change worked by the Spirit was *total*? That is: does the person changed by the Spirit produce *only* fruits of the Spirit, and produce them *all the time*?

The answer is No. The change worked by the Spirit is radical, Yes, but it is not total. The child of God is *supposed* to love all the time and never hate, is *supposed* to be at peace with one another all the time and never show dissension and conflict. But the fact of the matter is that in the brokenness of this life, no child of God does that.

That's why we need to notice, congregation, how the apostle began the section to the Galatians about the fruit of the Spirit. Within the church of Jesus Christ in Galatia were children of God who were biting and devouring each other (vs 15). Acceptable for those changed by the Spirit? Definitely not. That is why Paul issues the *command* of vs 16: "I say then: Walk by the Spirit...." Let's be honest: if producing the fruit of the Spirit always came automatically to the person in whom the Spirit dwells, there would be no need for this instruction. But Paul gives the instruction, and explains why also. Vs 17:

"For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish."

That's to say: to show the fruit of the Spirit is a *challenge*. Though the renewed child of God *ought* to show the fruit of the Spirit in all he does, and is *made able* to show the fruit of the Spirit in all he does, the child of God in fact *does not* show the fruit of the Spirit in all he does. Though David was a man after God's heart, and the Spirit of God dwelt within him (cf Ps 51:11), in the affair with Bethsheba as well as his refusal to repent David did not show the fruit of

the Spirit. When Peter was afraid of the circumcision party, this man in whom the Spirit of God dwelt *did not show the fruit of the Spirit* (cf Gal 2:11ff). When the saints of Corinth were taking each other to court, they were not producing the fruits of the Spirit befitting children of God (I Cor 6:1ff). When the believers of Galatia were biting and devouring one another, these saints of God were not producing the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:13ff). And when the believers of Galatia showed no gentleness in their efforts to restore a man overtaken in any trespass, they were not producing the fruit of the Spirit (6:1). And when these same saints of Galatia looked down on a brother in their midst because of his sins, they again were not displaying the fruit of the Spirit (6:3).

Similarly, it is possible in our midst today for a person renewed by the Spirit to fail in a given circumstance to bring forth the fruit of the Spirit. It is wrong, for the person changed by the Spirit of God should obey God's commands perfectly. But the fact of the matter is that God the Holy Spirit has not and does not change God's children *totally* in this life. We're *radically* changed, O yes, but not *totally* changed. So, in the words of LD 44, "even the holiest have only a small beginning of the obedience God requires." Let no one be dismayed, then, to be told that in a given circumstance he's not showing the fruit of the Spirit. Let each of us instead remember *why* Paul had to instruct the Galatians to "walk in the Spirit", and so take his admonition to heart, and daily make it our business to resist the urges of the flesh that remain within us and produce abundantly the fruit of the Spirit – be it in our bedrooms and bathrooms, be it in our kitchens and lounges, in our offices and factories and classrooms, be it when we talk over a cup of coffee or do our daily work. Producing the fruit of the Spirit is not automatic for us; we need to make it our business to produce this fruit.

And here's the comfort of it all: in the strength of the Spirit who dwells within us *we are able* to resist the attacks of the devil against us, are able to produce the fruit of the Spirit. We remain weak, true, and the lusts of the flesh are strong. But: the sovereign, ascended Christ has given us His Holy Spirit, and so we **can** resist the urges of the flesh. The Lord has given us His Holy Spirit, and so vessels of clay can fight against being homosexual both in practice and in inclination (so, No, you cannot blame homosexuality on the brain!). The Lord has given His Holy Spirit, and so we can fight against both feelings of hatred and actions of hatred, can fight against both emotions of jealousy as well as words or deeds driven by jealousy. The Spirit has made His home in us, and this Spirit is none less that "true and eternal God". So then, we may be confident that no desire of the flesh, no inclination to evil, is too much for us.

It's a fact: in the strength of the Spirit of almighty God, vessels of clay can shine like the Son. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 21 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday Morning, 3 October 1999.

"GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT GATHERS CHRIST'S REDEEMED INTO ONE BODY.."

Text:

Lord's Day 21

54. Q. What do you believe concerning the holy catholic Christian church?

A. I believe that the Son of God,[1] out of the whole human race,[2] from the beginning of the world to its end,[3] gathers, defends, and preserves for Himself, [4] by His Spirit and Word,[5] in the unity of the true faith,[6] a church chosen to everlasting life.[7] And I believe that I am[8] and forever shall remain a living member of it.[9]

[1] John 10:11; Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11-13; Col. 1:18. [2] Gen. 26:4; Rev. 5:9. [3] Is. 59:21; I Cor. 11:26. [4] Ps. 129:1-5; Matt. 16:18; John 10:28-30. [5] Rom. 1:16; 10:14-17; Eph. 5:26. [6] Acts 2:42-47; Eph. 4:1-6. [7] Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:3-14. [8] I John 3:14, 19-21. [9] Ps. 23:6; John 10:27, 28; I Cor. 1:4-9; I Pet. 1:3-5.

55. Q. What do you understand by the communion of saints?

A. First, that believers, all and everyone, as members of Christ have communion with Him and share in all His treasures and gifts.[1] Second, that everyone is duty-bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members.[2]

[1] Rom. 8:32; I Cor. 6:17; 12:4-7, 12, 13; I John 1:3. [2] Rom. 12:4-8; I Cor. 12:20-27; 13:1-7; Phil. 2:4-8.

56. Q. What do you believe concerning the forgiveness of sins?

A. I believe that God, because of Christ's satisfaction, will no more remember my sins,[1] nor my sinful nature, against which I have to struggle all my life,[2] but He will graciously grant me the righteousness of Christ, that I may never come into condemnation.[3]

[1] Ps. 103:3, 4, 10, 12; Mic. 7:18, 19; II Cor. 5:18-21; I John 1:7; 2:2. [2] Rom. 7:21-25. [3] John 3:17, 18; 5:24; Rom. 8:1, 2.

Scripture Reading:

Romans 12

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 16:1

Psalm 103:4

Psalm 65:2,3

Psalm 122:1,2,3

Hymn 36:1,2,3

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Our society knows countless clubs and organisations, be it a Labour Union, a political party, a Parents-Teachers Association, a Chamber of Commerce, a soccer club, etc, etc. All these organisations are established by people and are run by people. So, if you are unhappy with some decision or action of your club, you complain to the right people and, if you don't get the justice you seek, you take action. You boycott the meeting, or you undermine the credibility of the leaders, or you cease your membership altogether. Human organisations allow for that kind of behaviour.

The world around us sees the church as just another social institution, just another human organisation. So: as long as members can get on with each other, and as long as members like the direction set by the leaders, all will be happy with the church, happy with each other, happy retain their membership. The flip side is: when office-bearers handle matters differently than the members would like, if the deacons don't give enough money or the elders place a family member under discipline ... - yes, then what, congregation? This: since the church is a human organisation, the members are allowed to get upset with the deacons or with the elders. And then? I won't accept the deacons at my place any more. Or I fix in my mind, and tell others also, that the elders are all simple school boys who don't know what they're doing. In a society where the church is seen as just another human organisation, this sort of behaviour is acceptable, predictable....

Now: we'd like to think that we know better. Surely, we tell ourselves, we wouldn't act like that in the church of Jesus Christ... But, my brothers and sisters, let us not kid ourselves, or each other. The deacons of this church have experienced it: because they didn't give enough money, they were no longer warmly welcomed at the address of need. The elders of this church have experienced it too: because they did not act as the members of a given address thought was appropriate, those elders have been termed proud, or incompetent. In this church we've seen it over the years: people are not in church, members have withdrawn because they feel offended by the actions of the office-bearers.

These things happen, in our midst. For that reason, beloved of the Lord, it is imperative that we come to grips with what, according to God's Word, the church really is. According to the Bible, the church is not a friendship club (though it's members are to be friendly), nor is the church a human organisation (though it is made up of many people). Instead, the church is the product of the work of Christ's Holy Spirit. When one speaks of the 'church', one speaks by definition of the Holy Spirit, and the work that He is doing. That is why standards of behaviour acceptable in human associations have no place in the Church. I need to work this out today.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT GATHERS CHRIST'S REDEEMED INTO ONE BODY.

1. the holy, catholic Church
2. the communion of saints
3. the forgiveness of sins

The Holy, Catholic Church

We read together Romans 12. The third word of the chapter is the little word 'you'. Who does Paul describe with that little word? We say: that's the Romans. And so it is. Yet, congregation, Paul does not speak in this verse to every Roman in the city of Rome. He speaks to some Romans only. Specifically, he addresses the *saints* of Rome, the believers (1:7). The fact that he can address these Roman saints *together* shows that these believers were *together*, were the church of Rome.

How come there was a church in Rome? For that matter, what actually is a church? From before the foundation of the world, God the Father chose out of the whole human race which had fallen into sin, a certain number of persons to salvation in Jesus Christ (cf Eph 1:4f). These specific persons from every tribe and tongue and nation God the Father sovereignly gave to His Son (Jn 6:37; 17:6). For the benefit of these persons God the Son in turn laid down His life on the cross of Calvary. As a result, the elect are redeemed from Satan's power and their sins are washed away; they are justified before God.

What, now, becomes of the elect for whom Christ died? Christ Jesus Himself has left the earth to go to heaven. Does He in heaven still concern Himself with those on earth that He redeemed? Most definitely He does. On Pentecost Day He poured out His Holy Spirit for the benefit of those for whom He died. This Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ received the mandate to *apply* to the elect the salvation Christ obtained on the cross.

How does the Holy Spirit apply that work to the elect? The tool He uses to apply that saving work is the *Word*. Through that Word the Spirit works faith in the hearts of God's chosen ones (Rom 10:14,17). With respect to the elect of Rome this means this: the Holy Spirit caused the good news of Jesus Christ to come to the ears of those people of

Rome whom the Father had chosen to life. More, the Holy Spirit opened the hearts of those elect Romans to receive this gospel. This is material that will receive, the Lord willing, more attention with LD 25, and so we need spend no more time on it today.

The city of Rome in Paul's day numbered hundreds of thousands of people. God chose to salvation in Jesus Christ one from this street, three from that address, four from the next suburb, a handful from across the river. For these Christ died, in these elect Romans the Holy Spirit has worked faith. Well now: what becomes of them? Does the Holy Spirit leave them as so many unconnected individuals scattered throughout the city of Rome, all alive to God but uninterested in each other, separate from each other? Not at all. For the work of the Spirit of Jesus Christ is not only to work faith in the chosen, but also to *gather together* those in Rome chosen to life and redeemed by the Son. And see: that is what the Holy Spirit does. Sovereignly He takes one person from this address, three from that address, four from the next street, a handful from the other side of town, and He brings these together in the name of Jesus Christ. Those believers of Rome whom the Spirit gathers together form the *Church* of Jesus Christ in Rome.

See there, congregation, what the Church is. The Church of Rome is *not* all the believers of Rome as such, scattered individually around town, possibly ignorant of each other. The church of Rome is the *gathering* of that one believer from this street, those three from that address, the four from the next suburb, the handful from across the river. Those chosen of town, gathered together by the sovereign work of the true God the Holy Spirit: that is the church. For the notion of *gathering*: that is essential to what the Church is. I say that because that is what the Greek word for 'church' –it's the word 'ecclesia' - literally means. The Greeks had regular 'ecclesias' to discuss relevant matters of town (cf Acts 19:32,41), and that's to say that people of town *gathered together* to talk matters through. It is because the church is the *gathering* of the people of God that we confess in our LD that the Son of God *gathers* His Church by His Spirit and Word. And that's equally why in the *Belgic Confession* we confess that the Church is "a holy *congregation* and *assembly* of the true Christian believers" (Article 27).

What we confess here, brothers and sisters, is most marvellous. We confess here that the work of the Holy Spirit is not restricted to the inner recesses of the heart, to working faith in this person, in that one, and in that one. Certainly He works faith. But where? How? Sunday by Sunday the careful observer in Rome could see the Holy Spirit at work. One person from this street, three from that address, four from the next suburb, a handful from the other side of town, were drawn together to one address in the city. Amongst those drawn together were (let's say) some Romans, a German who settled in Rome, an Egyptian businessman stationed in Rome, some Jews who'd lived in Rome for numerous generations. Persons from any tribe and tongue and race, persons from every level of Roman society, persons who never knew each other before – look, Sunday by Sunday they come together in that one place. How come? Because they were sick of watching the games in the arena, and had nothing better to do? Because they were all so enthusiastic Sunday after Sunday to sit in a stuffy building? Because they all felt so comfortable with each other, had the same interests, hobbies, political leanings? Not at all. They came together because the Holy Spirit *drew* them together, and did so not once but Sunday by Sunday. The Holy Spirit drew them irresistibly together because He wanted to work faith in their hearts, wanted to strengthen the faith He'd worked. The careful observer in the city could see it; *here was the Holy Spirit at work!*

And what, now, if a believer or two in Rome chose not heed the Spirit's working to meet together? What if a believer preferred to stay on his own? What if he didn't like some of the others of those whom God chose to salvation and for whom the Son laid down His life, and so stayed away? What if he used to come, but over time got to see that some in the congregation had been guilty of pretty awful sin or had some unpleasant knobs on their characters – and so distanced himself from the assembly of the redeemed? What do you think, brothers and sisters: would declining the call of the Holy Spirit be pleasing to God? We understand it: at bottom, declining to assemble with the redeemed boils down to *resisting the Holy Spirit!* The Holy Spirit would *gather together* all those chosen by God the Father, all those ransomed by God the Son. The Spirit would bring them together so that one can say of *this* group: this is the new people of God. And since the Holy Spirit does not treat us as stocks and blocks, but instead appeals to the sense of responsibility God has worked in us, it is the duty of the redeemed of Rome to *make it their business* to heed the Spirit's call and come together Sunday by Sunday. In the words of Hebrews 10: do not neglect to meet together (vs 25).

This material, brothers and sisters, cannot but speak to us. Do you wish concrete evidence of Spirit's work today? The

very fact, congregation, that the saints of Kelmscott are here together is the work of the Holy Spirit. Let us be honest: how is it that you came to be in church this morning? How many of you actually came because you were bubbling over with eagerness to hear God's Word, to call publicly upon the Lord, and to give Christian offerings for the poor? How many of you had to make an *effort* to get out of your chair and ready yourself to go to Church? More: how many of you would be happier to come to church if certain others of us were not here? Truth be said, we've got some hurdles to cross in order to come!

But see: *we are here!* How come? That, brothers and sisters, is because the Holy Spirit was at work in Kelmscott this morning, taking one out of this house, three out of that house, seven out of another, some from this side of town and some from that, of various social levels and ethnic groups and friendship circles, and *He brought each of us together this morning*. That we are here is not our own doing, but the work of God the Holy Spirit! He drew us together this morning because He wanted to speak to us, wanted to work and strengthen faith in us. From a community that does not want to serve God He drew us together so that it might be said of this group: *this* is the new people of God in Kelmscott, *this* is the people God the Father chose to life eternal, the people for whom the Son of God died on Calvary's cross.

But if the Holy Spirit brings us together, how, congregation, how *dare* we absent ourselves from the assembly of the redeemed? Yet that is what happens. Look around you. Is everybody joined by the Spirit to Christ's church in Kelmscott in fact here this morning? I grant: to some God has given a sickness to bear, and so they cannot attend. But that's not true of all who are absent. And what about this afternoon? Will we all be here? I reveal no secret when I note that the churches throughout the metro area are emptier in the afternoon than in the morning, and the reasons are not noble. Let it be fixed in our minds, congregation: in our absenting ourselves from the assembly of the redeemed, we are not working together with the Holy Spirit; on the contrary, we resist the Holy Spirit. Here is need for repentance.

The Communion of Saints

We move on to our second point. The Holy Spirit, we said, gathered together those sinners of Rome whom the Father had chosen from eternity and for whom the Son had died. These believers gathered by the Spirit: are we to imagine that they were gathered into a pile, a cluster as so many disconnected peas in a bag? The Bible says No. Rather, the Spirit Who gathers makes these redeemed into a body. Rom 12:5: Paul speaks of the gathered saints of Rome as "one body in Christ".

We all have bodies. What's immediately obvious to us about a body is the interaction between members of the body. Each member is dependent on the other. The nose needs the hand to scratch its itch, the stomach needs the feet to fetch the needed drink, etc. The body is one unit, a living organism with each part assisting in supplying the needs of other parts of that one body.

The Holy Spirit gathers a Church, the redeemed of the Lord. But once the redeemed of the Lord are gathered together, the Spirit's work is not finished. No, the Spirit transforms those gathered individuals into *a body*. Sovereignly, wisely, the Holy Spirit makes one member comparable to a hand, another to a knee, a third to an ear, etc, etc, so that the gathered saints of Rome become a functioning body in which each Roman believer plays a role in supplying the needs of other parts of that body. The believers the Spirit has gathered are not disconnected from each other as peas in a bag; no, the saints the Spirit has gathered together are a *communion*. By His sovereign working, these gathered saints form a unit, where one is dependent on the other.

It is because the Holy Spirit worked as He did amongst the saints of Rome that Paul in vs 6 can instruct the Roman Christians to *be* members of one body, each interested in the other, helping the other. We have, says Paul, "gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us." Since that's the case, he adds, "let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness." It would simply not do for the members of Christ's Church in Rome to act as if they were not one body together, to act as if they were so many individuals who had no responsibility for each other.

Paul continues: by the working of the Holy Spirit, we are one body together, and therefore need to foster attitudes towards each other that reflect that reality. In a body it is just not possible for a elbow to despise the hand. The hand and the elbow are dependent on each other, and so must co-exist in a relation of peace and cooperation. So it is too in the communion of saints. Add on top of that the fact that God from eternity set His holy love on those specific individuals whom the Spirit later on gathered into one body. If *God* loved these persons, was any saint in Rome allowed to pull up his nose at someone *God* loved? If Jesus Christ laid down His life for a particular sinner, so that the Holy Spirit worked faith in his heart and gathered him into the church of God, was any other saint allowed to despise such a one?

See, brothers and sisters, that is why Paul in Rom 12 underlines the need to love one another, and to love without hypocrisy. Vs 10: "Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another." And that attitude wasn't to be shown just once in a while; Paul tells the saints of Rome not to be "lagging in diligence"; instead, they're to be "fervent in spirit, serving the Lord" (vs 11). And when a brother does something to you that hurts you much? What attitude is to dominate? Vs 14: "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse." What, you say, can't I get even with the brother who hurts me? Say evil things of him, think evil things of him? The Holy Spirit is insistent, brothers and sisters, and moves Paul to write that in the one body formed by the work of the Holy Spirit, there is no room for putting the self first, for defending the self. Vs 19: "do not avenge yourselves, but rather leave room for the wrath of God" (NASB). In the church gathered by the Holy Spirit, there is room only for self-denying love. Think good of the other, and not evil.

Here again, my brothers and sisters, is much for us to learn. The Holy Spirit has gathered you and me together into one Church, more, He's sovereignly made us into one body, a communion of saints. Because of His work in our midst, it is for us in Kelmscott to *be* one body together. It will not do to absent ourselves from the gathering of the saints, for that's resisting the work of the Holy Spirit. Equally, it will not do for any of us to harbour hard feelings toward others of us, nor is it for any of us to stand up, in the face of perceived wrong, for what we consider to be our own rights. It is for us instead to show love, only love as members of one body, and so do good to the other with a spirit of humility and concern. Attitudes and conduct of hatred against another, being unable to visit together or to sit together around one table, amount to resisting the work of the Holy Spirit in our midst, and that will not do. The church is the work of the Holy Spirit, the communion of saints included, and so we need to cultivate attitudes and actions that are spiritual, that are Spirit-pleasing.

Forgiveness of Sins

But see: in the church of Jesus Christ in Kelmscott –that product of the Spirit's labour in town- there is so much that is not spiritual, not Spirit-pleasing. There is sin in resisting the Spirit's work of drawing us together, there is sin in resisting the Spirit's work of making us into a communion of saints where each loves the other without hypocrisy, where each denies himself for the benefit of the other; we see so much sin in the other! And those sins we see in others –be it sins of action or sins of non-action, be it sins of character or of attitude- make it so very difficult for us to appreciate that the Holy Spirit has made us one body together, make it so difficult too to accept one another, to show to each other the love God in Christ has shown to us.... Those sins: don't they blow the communion of saints apart? Doesn't sin destroy the church gathering work of the Holy Spirit?

Let it be fixed in our minds, beloved: the Holy Spirit –true God that He is- gathers together into one body *the people for whom Christ died*. Christ died in order to *wash sins away*, to remove those sins from His own as far as east from west extends. What characterised the church of Jesus Christ in Rome, then, was the *reality of the forgiveness of sins*. In fact, forgiveness of sins *characterises* the Church, just as much as the communion of saints *characterises* the Church.

Those saints of Rome: what sort of track record did they have? Let's make no mistake: Rome as a city was not far behind Corinth in its perversity. Those Romans God had elected from eternity and for whom Christ laid down His life on the cross: they had grown up, and so no doubt partaken in, a culture of immorality. They knew from close by what the homosexuality and lesbianism described in Rom 1 were all about. But they were washed in Jesus' blood, their sins forgiven. Their misdeeds of the past then? None in the congregation was to hold against any other in the congregation any of those sins of years ago; those sins were washed away, gone. None of those sins of long ago, even if knowledge of those sins still turned one's stomach, was to hinder any one from showing love to the offender of long ago. The

love described in Rom 12 was *made possible* by the reality of Christ's work on the cross; He washed sins away, and so those whom the Spirit joined to the Church of Christ in Rome were to consider sins of youth as *gone* – their own as well as the transgressor from the next suburb whom God the Spirit joined to Christ's church. *For the Church of Jesus Christ is characterised by the forgiveness of sins!*

But suppose there was in the congregation a brother with a history as Noah had, a man who drank himself drunk and then exposed himself? Suppose there was in the congregation a man with a history as Abram had, who lied that his wife was his sister? Or a brother with a history as Judah had or Simeon or Issachar – they sold their little brother? Or a Moses who killed the Egyptian? Or an Aaron who made a golden calf? Or a David who took his neighbour's wife to bed and then killed the neighbour? Let's make no mistake: Noah and Abram and Moses and David and the rest sinned terribly, as badly as you do and I do. But Noah and Abram and Moses and David were persons chosen by God from eternity to life in Jesus Christ. The Father gave them to the Son so that the Son might lay down His life to wash their sins away. The Holy Spirit gathered them into the church of their day. Yet they fell so tragically. Does that make them worthy of being cut off from the Church into which the Spirit has gathered them? Absolutely not. Certainly, they had to repent, just as we need to repent of any sin we commit. But the Church of Jesus Christ is made up of *sinner*s, not righteous folk; Christ died to take away the sins of *sinner*s. None in Rome, then, should be surprised to learn of a Noah in their midst, or an Abram or a Moses or a David. And none in Kelmscott should be surprised either. More importantly: none in the church of Rome, and none in the church of Kelmscott either, should hold these sins against the other, simply because *the church is characterised by the forgiveness of sins*.

And what if we do remember the sins of brothers and sisters gathered with us into one body? What if we hold their sins against them? Then, brothers and sisters, we *resist the work of the Holy Spirit!* The Church He gathers is characterised by the forgiveness of sins; very well, it is for each of us to look at the other as *forgiven*, both by God and by ourselves – until, of course, the evidence is there that there isn't the desired repentance from sin. Then there's the route of Mt 18 to follow. But meanwhile: the church gathered by the Spirit of Jesus Christ is characterised by the forgiveness purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ. So I look at myself and I look at my brother as forgiven.

It's acceptable behaviour in any human organisation that a person unhappy with the treatment he receives may boycott the meeting, or undermine the credibility of the leaders, or cease your membership altogether. We see the same sort of thing happening in church also. I trust, brothers and sisters, that you understand how very wrong such action is. Instead of resisting the Holy Spirit, let each cooperate with the Holy Spirit. Only then can we expect His blessing – in this life and the life to come. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 22 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 17 October 1999.

" GOD'S COVENANT LOVE IS STRONGER THAN DEATH ."

Text:

Lord's Day 22

57. Q. What comfort does the resurrection of the body offer you?

A. Not only shall my soul after this life immediately be taken up to Christ, my Head,[1] but also this my flesh, raised by the power of Christ, shall be reunited with my soul and made like Christ's glorious body.[2]

[1] *Luke 16:22; 23:43; Phil. 1:21-23. [2] Job 19:25, 26; I Cor. 15:20, 42-46, 54; Phil. 3:21; I John 3:2.*

58. Q. What comfort do you receive from the article about the life everlasting?

A. Since I now already feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy, [1] 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.[2]

[1] *John 17:3; Rom. 14:17; II Cor. 5:2, 3. [2] John 17:24; I Cor. 2:9.*

Scripture Reading:

Romans 8:31-39

Revelation 21:1-5

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 17:3,5

Psalm 103:6

Psalm 16:4,5

Hymn 27:1,2,3,4

Psalm 73:8 & Hymn 55:2,3

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Years ago the Lord God graciously established His everlasting covenant with us. At our baptism –for most of us in our infancy- He told us that He would forever be our gracious Father, for Jesus' sake nevermore imputing to us our sins. Over the years we've delight in God's wonderful promises, and today we still find much comfort in the grace He's extended to us.

As the years go by, however, we observe a reality that questions the comfort of God's covenant of grace with His children. That covenant is everlasting, God had said. But we notice loved ones *die*. And death: the loved one is here no more, is instead buried. And bitter experience impresses upon us that in death the body of the loved one is subjected to the humiliation of decay. After a matter of months or years, there's nothing left of the loved one... We wonder: is *that* evidence of God's eternal love?! It certainly doesn't look like it....

There's the problem. God has said that His love for His own is everlasting; He never breaks His covenant. But as the naked eye sees it, death in fact *does* break that covenant. And that's to say that there are forces in this world *stronger* than God's love; death is stronger than His covenant promises. *What, then, has become of our only comfort in life and death?*

As it is, brothers and sisters, the Lord has told us in His Word that death is not what we observe it to be. *We observe a*

lifeless body, *we observe* a funeral, *we observe* decay. But when all is said and done, it's not human observations that count for anything but *God's promises*. He tells us that much more happens at death than meets the eye. So we have boldness today to speak not about death itself or the decay that follows, but about the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. And as we confess the good news about the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, we in effect confess the unchanging faithfulness and love of our almighty covenant God.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

God's covenant love is stronger than death.

1. The love of God in death
2. The love of God after death

The Love of God in death

The Lord does not hesitate to confirm in His Word what we also observe about death. Job reflects on the death of the rich and the poor alike, and says that "they [both] lie down alike in the dust, And worms cover them" (21:26). The word God spoke in the beginning is fulfilled: "Dust you are, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19). The writer of Ecclesiastes puts the matter so painfully plain:

"For what happens to the sons of men also happens to animals; one thing befalls them: as one dies, so dies the other. Surely, they all have one breath; man has no advantage over animals, for all is vanity. All go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust" (Eccl 3:19f).

Yet the believers of Scripture, congregation, confessed more than the reality of the grave and the resulting decay. The men and women of Scripture knew their God to be an everlasting God and His covenant to be eternal too. And that confession, they understood, had consequences in relation to death.

The sons of Korah, for example, penned a psalm, Ps 49. They recorded what they saw: "wise men die" and "likewise the fool and the senseless person perish" (vs 10). And then: "Like sheep they are laid in the grave; Death shall feed on them; ... And their beauty shall be consumed in the grave..." (vs 14). All the effort spent on bodybuilding, all the skin creams and vitamins and health foods: "their beauty," says the psalmist, "shall be consumed in the grave." Decay, worms, dust....

But directly on the heels of that cold reality the psalmist makes this confession: "But God shall redeem my soul from the power of the grave, For He shall receive me" (vs 15). He knows: his God is more than death, his God is greater than the grave. The power of the grave - that decay, those worms, that dust- is not the end; this almighty covenant God "shall receive me".

Asaph confessed the same thing. He acknowledges that his "flesh and heart may fail", be it a heart attack or simply that the body is worn out. But beyond the heart attack Asaph does not see simply the grave with its shameful decay; rather, he says that "God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (vs 26). Notice that last word, "forever". To Asaph's vision, death is not the end of things, nor does death break God's covenant promises. Somehow God remains Asaph's portion "forever", despite the decay of death.

David confessed it too. He knew that death lay ahead. But, he says, "my flesh shall rest in hope. For You will not leave my soul in Sheol, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption" (Ps 16:9f). That's to say: David knew that God had claimed him as His, knew that even death could not break God's claim on him. So the grave cannot be all there is to death.

The prophet Isaiah took the matter further still. He was moved by the Spirit of God to announce that God would "swallow up death forever" (Is 25:8). Indeed, "Your dead shall live; Together with my dead body they shall arise" (26:19). Hence the command to the dead: "Awake and sing, you who dwell in dust; For ... the earth shall cast out the dead." The angel told Daniel that "many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake" (12:2). Through Hosea the Holy Spirit says it like this:

"I will ransom them from the power of the grave;
I will redeem them from death.
O Death, I will be your plagues!
O Grave, I will be your destruction!" (13:14).

What we have? The saints of the Old Testament knew death to be a hard reality indeed. But by the grace of God these saints of old could testify that God's love and faithfulness extends beyond death; death cannot put an end to God's love and God's care for His own. They knew: there must be life after death; more, death itself shall be overcome, defeated.

This revelation of God to the saints of the Old Testament receives greater clarity in the New Testament. Jesus told the Sadducees that God was God of the living and not of the dead, and so they should count on a resurrection from the dead; death could not be the stone end of things (Mk 12:27). In agreement with that teaching, Jesus when He was about to go to the cross, implored His Father in that Highpriestly prayer that "they also whom You have given Me may be with Me where I am that they may behold My glory which You have given Me" (Jn 17:24). That's to say: Jesus asked the Father to grant that *all His own shall be with Him in heaven*. In the words of our LD: Jesus asked the Father to grant that Christ's members should be taken up to Christ the Head. And the Father, Jesus knew, would answer every petition the Son would make. So, the very next day, when the criminal on the cross requested Jesus to please remember him when He came into the kingdom, Jesus said this: "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Lu 23:43).

This, my brothers and sisters, is a statement that needs our attention. For what was about to happen to that criminal on the cross? We know it, Jesus knew it: certain death awaited him. But see: *Jesus does not speak to this criminal of death; Jesus speaks of Paradise!* Yet it's not one or the other, death *or* Paradise. It's instead one *through* the other; death is *the door that leads to Paradise*. And we're to realise too that Jesus does not speak of death holding the criminal captive until a resurrection in the distant future, so that *at that time* the criminal shall enter Paradise. No, Jesus explicitly says, "*today* you will be with Me in Paradise." That's to say: by nightfall both Jesus and the criminal would be dead, more, by nightfall both Jesus and the criminal would be in Paradise, in heaven with God. For God would answer Jesus' prayer; every one whom the Father gave to Jesus would be with Jesus where He was to behold Jesus' glory in heaven. That's to say: the criminal on the cross after this life would be taken up to Christ his Head!

This is material, congregation, with which Stephen, that first Christian martyr, worked. As the crowds around him pelted him with stones, he worked with the promise of the gospel that death was not the end, worked with the promise of the gospel that God's love and faithfulness persists even in death. He believed that God would make death the door to life eternal in His glorious presence, and so he called on God saying, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 8:59).

The apostle Paul worked with the same glorious gospel. He wrote to the Philippians that he longed to depart from this life – No, not because he was tired of this life, but rather because he knew death to be the door to being with Christ forever (1:23). He knew: God was faithful always, and so death could be not that terrible enemy any more. He knew: departure from this life would not mean that Paul would disappear into the world of memories, knew too that Paul would not disappear into some grey limbo of non-existence till the day of Jesus' return and the resurrection of the dead. No, Paul knew that the God Who made His covenant with Paul would be faithful to Paul even in the face of death. To leave this life was to "be with Christ"; after this life –O glorious gospel!- his soul would immediately be taken up to Christ his Head (cf II Cor 5:8).

Because of all this material, dear brothers and sisters, the apostle Paul could write so passionately of God's faithfulness in Rom 8. Who, he asks in vs 35, "shall separate us from the love of Christ?" That love of Christ: that's the love that God displayed by sending His Son to pay for our sins, it's the love that the Saviour displayed by laying down His life for us on the cross. That's the question: what is there in all the world that can axe God's love for us, that can stop God from loving us, that can prevent God's love from reaching us? Paul asks: can tribulation separate us from that love of God in Jesus Christ? That's to say: is it true that the pressures we experience in this life can function as the tap that cuts off the flow of God's love for His own? Or can distress do that? We know from experience: pressure and distress can lead to health problems, and those health problems can bring us to the brink of death, yes,

can lead to a heart attack, death. Well now: does that pressure that leads us to death stop the flow of God's love to us?

Or what shall we say of persecution or famine or nakedness? In this present world there are countless who are persecuted on account of their faith in Jesus Christ, and suffer the martyr's death. There are famines in Africa because of religious wars, famines that leave thousands upon thousands of believers starved, dead. And the media have reported how those soldiers raped the women and girls of Kosovo, and then killed their victims. Paul asks whether "persecution, or famine, or nakedness" can separate us from the love of Christ, and it's of these sorts of horrors, beloved, that we need to think. Persecution, famine, nakedness: in such horror we see no evidence of love from God at all, in such horrors God is gone, His love for His own effectively hindered, rendered powerless....

But listen, congregation, to Paul's conviction in vs 38. "I am persuaded," he says, "that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." We would say: death –and especially death via persecution or rape- would surely separate us from God's love; where, we say, is God's love in the face of such horrors? But Paul is adamant: death, no matter how it comes to us, can never, ever serve as the tap that shuts off the flow of God's love to us. Paul is convinced: the covenant God made with His own *stands forever*; even death cannot undo that grace!

Then we might think, brothers and sisters, that death (or what leads to death) might cut us off from God's love. But Paul is absolutely convinced: nothing, not even death, can shut off the flow of God's love for His own. It's something of which Paul is absolutely persuaded –on what grounds?- because he knows *Who God is*. This God is faithful always to His promises; nothing can prompt Him to renege on His covenant.

And that in turn, congregation, is why Paul himself was not distressed when he had to go to prison, and why Paul was not distressed when he was whipped or scourged or stoned or denied food or imperilled by robbers or by countrymen or soldiers, etc (cf II Cor 11:25ff). He knew: if the Lord God would use the dangers that be to push Paul through the door of death, it would be gain alone. He knew: his Father in Jesus Christ would surely take Paul directly to Himself into heavenly joy and glory. He knew: *God would not fail, not matter the difficulty of the crisis!* Death is not the end, death is not the enemy it once was; on the other side of death is *life, life forever with God!*

That brings us to our second point:

The Love of God after Death

My Saviour's love surpasses the power of death and the grave so that the moment I pass through the door of death I am taken into His glorious presence; my soul after this life is immediately taken up to Christ my Head. What it's like in the presence of our God? In the period between one's death and Christ's return, there is a time of waiting. The Scriptures speak little of the circumstance today of those who have already died. Certainly, it's Paradise already (Lu 23:43), it's gain (Phil 1:23), it's joy beyond compare (Ps 16). But it's an incomplete perfection; the souls John saw under the altar cried out saying, "How long, O Lord, holy and true, until You judge and avenge our blood on those who dwell on the earth?" And these souls were told to "rest a little while longer... (Rev 6:9ff).

And while the souls of the departed cry out in the glory of Jesus' presence for the day of vengeance, their bodies waste away in this earth, till they return to the dust from which God made them. But God has declared: one day "the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first" (I Thes 4:16f). This body of mine –now wasted by disease, destroyed by bombs, or burned with fire- shall be raised from the dead; "the dead will be raised incorruptible" (I Cor 15:52). And body and soul shall be reunited and made like Christ's glorious body.

And then? Lift up your eyes, congregation, and behold the splendour that your Father in heaven has prepared for you! No, no, you cannot today look into the splendour of life everlasting; for we can't see beyond the horizons of this life. But the God Who made with you an everlasting covenant has promised to be God to you forever, and so enfold you with eternal care. How so? Says David:

"In Your presence is fullness of joy;
At Your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Ps 16:10f).

What this fullness of joy and everlasting pleasures may be? The Old Testament speaks in figurative language, like this:

"The wolf ... shall dwell with the lamb,
The leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
The calf and the young lion and the fatling together;
And a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze;
Their young ones shall lie down together;
And the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole,
And the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den.
They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain,
For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord
As the waters cover the sea" (Is 11:6-9).

We understand: here's no danger, no pressure, no hurt, no hunger. Here is peace, the peace of God's blessings, the peace of God's nearness. Here's what John describes with those glowing words of Rev 21:

"And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying.
There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (vs 4).

Words fail us, congregation, as we attempt to capture the splendours of God's eternal care for His own on the new earth. The Catechism can go no farther than to speak of a "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." Yet even as we seek for words to capture what the new earth is like, this much is so very clear: *God's covenant love endures forever*. That's the overriding theme of what's to come: the love for God displayed on the cross of Calvary will overflow eternally in perfect evidence of deepest affection for unworthy sinners. We'll see God face to face, and live with Him in eternal blessedness – forever praising His glorious name.

How it all shall be? What the details are? The Lord has not told us everything; we shall have to wait and see. Meanwhile, beloved, let's not busy our minds with the details of the splendours that lie ahead. Instead, let's take on board for today the gospel that's embodied in God's Word about the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting, and that gospel is this: *our God is faithful*, His love is eternal. In the pressures and the trials of this broken life, this is news that encourages us on, ever onward until God grants us the crown of eternal glory. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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**Sermon on Lord's Day 23 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday
Afternoon, 31 October 1999.**

***"TO THE DELIGHT OF HIS CHILDREN, GOD FREELY DECLARES THE SINNER
NOT GUILTY.."***

Text:

Lord's Day 23

59. Q. But what does it help you now that you believe all this?

A. In Christ I am righteous before God and heir to life everlasting.[1]

[1] *Hab. 2:4; John 3:36; Rom. 1:17; 5:1, 2.*

60. Q. How are you righteous before God?

A. Only by true faith in Jesus Christ.[1] Although my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all God's commandments, have never kept any of them,[2] and am still inclined to all evil,[3] yet God, without any merit of my own,[4] out of mere grace,[5] imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ.[6] He grants these to me as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and as if I myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me,[7] if only I accept this gift with a believing heart.[8]

[1] *Rom. 3:21-28; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8, 9; Phil. 3:8-11.* [2] *Rom. 3:9, 10.* [3] *Rom. 7:23.* [4] *Deut. 9:6; Ezek. 36:22; Tit. 3:4, 5.* [5] *Rom. 3:24; Eph. 2:8.* [6] *Rom. 4:3-5; II Cor. 5:17-19; I John 2:1, 2.* [7] *Rom. 4:24, 25; II Cor. 5:21.* [8] *John 3:18; Acts 16:30, 31; Rom. 3:22.*

61. Q. Why do you say that you are righteous only by faith?

A. Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith, for only the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ is my righteousness before God.[1] I can receive this righteousness and make it mine my own by faith only.[2]

[1] *I Cor. 1:30, 31; 2:2.* [2] *Rom. 10:10; I John 5:10-12.*

Scripture Reading:

Romans 3:9-31

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 112:1

Psalm 43:3

Hymn 24:1,2,5

Psalm 138:1,2,3,4

Hymn 46:1,2

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

The newspaper does not often report on matters religious. But some of you may have seen the brief item in the *West Australian* of October 22 about the meeting planned for today. The *West* informed us that "after 32 years of talks, the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation will sign a common statement on the issue which drove them apart in 1517 – the doctrine of justification." With that, the paper adds, "one of the main causes of the Reformation which split the Christian Church has been resolved."

The event is to take place today. That's striking. Today is Reformation Day, for October 31 was the day that Martin Luther back in 1517 nailed his 95 theses on the door of that church in Wittenburg – the event that is widely regarded as the beginning of the Great Reformation. Today "a common statement on the issue which drove [Lutherans and Catholics] apart in 1517" will be formally signed, "one of the causes of the Reformation ... resolved." It sounds like reason for gratitude....

The event is to take place in Augsburg, an old city in Germany. That's as striking as the date, for Augsburg is the place where the first Confession of the Reformation was publicly released in 1530. The Augsburg Confession, we need to know, was an attempt to make plain to the Roman Catholics what the Protestants believed. As such, that Confession spelled out the differences between the Protestants and the Catholics, spelled out that Protestants could not live with Catholics under one roof. In that city of Augsburg, Protestant and Catholic leaders today will sign, after 32 years of talk, "a common statement on the issue which drove them apart" 482 years ago. Surely, it's reason for gratitude!

Is it really? We shall do well today to look carefully at that question. As it turns out, brothers and sisters, this event in Augsburg today is no cause for celebration. Instead, this joint signing today shows how little the doctrine of justification is really understood by so many who call themselves Christians. To demonstrate that, I ask your attention first for the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification as Luther experienced it, and then what the Lord says about the matter in His Word. And the Lord says that He freely, without contribution from man, declares sinners innocent before Him.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

TO THE DELIGHT OF HIS CHILDREN, GOD FREELY DECLARES THE SINNER NOT GUILTY.

1. This doctrine twisted in Church History
2. This doctrine taught in Scripture
3. This doctrine treasured by the true Church

This Doctrine Twisted in Church History

The church into which Martin Luther was born more than 500 years ago officially laid before the people of Europe the need to do good works in order to escape hell. So, Martin Luther's parents taught their little lad the need to do good works. And when little Martin received instruction from his priest, he was taught again about the need to do good works. It was hammered into little Luther's mind: God was angry with him because of his sins, but God was willing to forgive, to spare him hell and grant His grace, if young Luther could meet the required conditions.

The Roman Church spelled out how Luther could meet those conditions. Luther could receive most of Rome's seven sacraments, he could try to perform prescribed works of mercy, might even enlist the support of saints long dead. He could become a monk also; after all, in the monastery he'd be shielded from the temptations of the world, in the monastery each looked after the other to make sure you stayed holy in all your conduct, in the monastery you received an ideal place to do what Jesus said: sell all your possessions, forsake father and mother, wife and children, and devote yourself totally to Christ. So, when Luther as a young man was caught in that thunder storm and thought to be killed by a lightning strike, it was his fear of having to appear before God that drove him to his oath: "St Anne, help me! I will become a monk!" And so he did – because he wanted comfort for his soul, the assurance that he had met the conditions of salvation, the assurance that God was happy with him because he tried so hard....

But Luther was so disappointed. Even in the monastery he found no peace. The fear that God rejected him, that Christ condemned him, that hell was his eternal future pressed upon him. He knew from the Bible that God was holy and could tolerate no sin, no failure, and he knew also that his own thoughts and words and deeds fell so very far short of God's holy standard. So he thought to compel his sinful body to holiness; he ate little, made sure he slept little, kept himself cold by wearing inadequate clothing – all in an attempt to win God's favour. But even these efforts helped nothing; Luther gained no peace, no assurance that God was pleased with him. He travelled to Rome and made it his business to visit shrines and view sacred relics and so make himself acceptable to saints who could intercede for him in heaven. He climbed on his bare knees up the stone stairs of Pilate's judgment hall and kissed each step as he went.

But it gave him no peace, no sense that God was happy with him....

To make matters worse: the church taught him that he had to make confession of all his sins, and the confession had to be accompanied by a heart-felt sorrow for sin; then there would be forgiveness. That was fine, Luther thought, with regard to his open, known sins; he'd happily and humbly confess them. But what about those sins he didn't realise? So Luther would confess to a priest for hours on end ever possible sin he could think, walk away, and then come rushing back with some little foible he had forgotten to mention.... It had to be mentioned, had to be confessed, otherwise there was no forgiveness..., and one unconfessed sin was enough to earn God's damnation....

I can go on, brothers and sisters, setting before you the torments and struggles of this man who tried so very, very hard to impress God, to win God's favour, to make himself acceptable to God. But enough has been said, I think, to make clear to you what the Roman Catholic church before the Reformation taught on the matter of justification, the matter of how a sinner becomes righteous before God. It was a doctrine –as last week's paper correctly summarised- in which man had to cooperate with God to become righteous before God. And Luther experienced to his enormous disappointment that all his efforts helped him not a dot in gaining God's favour; time and time again Luther was convinced that he had failed, failed so miserably to meet God's holy standard. So he remained scared of God, scared of death, sure his eternal future was hell....

Then one day, by the grace of God, Luther understood what Paul meant in the book of Romans when he wrote that the just shall live by faith. He understood: justification is God's gift *freely* given, by grace *alone*, without our effort or contribution. That gift is *freely* given, without regard to how often we pray or attend church or afflict the body. It's *freely* given on the basis of Christ's work on Calvary.

Once Luther understood the riches of this glorious truth, and perceived that his specific sins that bothered him so much were now gone, he made it his business to tell the world of the riches he found in God's Word. Hence the 95 Theses which he nailed on the door of that church 482 years ago today. And in the Augsburg Confession released in Augsburg 13 years later (in 1530), this doctrine was worded like this:

"[The churches] teach that men can not be justified [...] before God by their own powers, merits, or works; but are justified freely [of grace] for Christ's sake through faith...."

This is the doctrine echoed in our Catechism, LD 23. "How are you righteous before God?", we ask in Q & A 60. And the reply is so fully Luther: "Only by true faith in Jesus Christ." The explanation is so fully Luther too: "Although my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all God's commands, have never kept any of them, and am still inclined to all evil" –and how bitterly Luther experienced the soul-eating terror of that sense of failure!- "yet God, without any merit of my own, out of mere grace, imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ." There it is: righteous through Christ! And yes, beloved, that, *that* is so Scriptural! This is the gospel – second point.

This Doctrine Taught in Scripture

The Lord God has revealed that He in heaven is holy, while the creature man on earth is sinful. This Luther rightly understood. The result of our fall into sin in Paradise is that we daily sin against God, and God's response to sin is wrath. It's what Paul writes to the Romans in chap 1: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men" (vs 18). In chap 2, Paul confronts sinners with the certainty of the coming day of wrath when God –vs 16- will judge the secrets of all men. Hence the pressing question: how can we bridge the distance between ourselves and God? "How can we escape this punishment and be again received into favour?" (LD 5).

Paul is emphatic that no man can contribute so much as a sigh to winning God's favour. Rom 3: Jews and Gentiles alike "are all under sin". To prove the point, he lists some 6 quotes from the Old Testament, all of which point up the total depravity of each and every person on the face of this earth. It leads to the conclusion of the apostle in vs 19: "all the world [is] guilty before God." And vs 20: "Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight." No matter what I do, I can't impress God, can't win His favour. I can't, because I haven't got in me what it

takes to impress this God of infinite holiness. Luther experienced that too, to his great dismay.

Yet Paul would not have us despair. For he carries on in vs 21 with the glorious little word 'but'. "But," he says, "now the righteousness of God ... is revealed..., even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ." In what follows, Paul explains how this righteousness of God is revealed in Jesus Christ. Look at vs 24. Paul says that the sinner is

"justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood."

Here, brothers and sisters, are a number of thoughts that require our attention. Paul says of Jesus that God set him forth "as a propitiation by His blood." That term 'propitiation' describes the notion that we need to die on account of our sins, but we don't because *Christ died in our place*. You will recall from the Old Testament that the people of Israel, when they became aware of a particular sin in their lives, had to bring a sacrifice to the tabernacle. Then the sinner had to lay his hand on the animal and confess his sin. That action symbolised that the sin of the sinner was transferred from the sinner to the animal. The animal in turn was killed..., and the sinner could go home. You see, the animal died *in the place of* the sinner (Lev 4).

This is the notion of propitiation. God determined that our sins should be transferred to His Son. So God "set [Jesus] forth to be a propitiation." On the cross of Calvary, God as it were transferred our sins onto Christ, and Christ suffered the infinite wrath of God that was to fall upon us. In the words of Rom 5: "Christ died for us" (vs 8).

But now what? Now that our sins have been transferred onto Christ and Christ has died "for" us on the cross, is God still angry with sinners? Need we, like Luther, still to fear His wrath? The answer is No. For the good news that our sins are transferred from us to Christ so that He might die instead of us is only half the wonderful truth. The other half is that on the cross Christ satisfied the justice of God, Christ paid for sin, Christ stilled God's anger against my sins, Christ obtained for me the righteousness of God. *And those gifts God now gives to me* – imputation.

Result? God in heaven looks down upon me, that sinner on earth. What God sees? O yes, He knows very well that I'm a sinner, knows very well that "I have grievously sinned against all God's commandments, have never kept any of them, and am still inclined to all evil." In fact, this God in heaven above knows my sins far better than I shall ever know them – no matter how carefully I look. But what's He say in the face of my continuing depravity and sins? Damn me to hell? No, beloved, no; *God the Judge issues a declaration*, a judicial statement that I am Not Guilty of the sins that God knows I've committed! That's to say: God promises not to punish us for our sins, promises never to hold those sins against us. As Paul says in Rom 5: "therefore, having been justified..., we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (vs 1). And Rom 8: "there is therefore now condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus" (vs 1). And later in the same chapter: "It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns?" (vs 33f). You see, beloved, with that declaration God indicates that He looks upon us and treats us –to say it with the Catechism- "as if I had never had nor committed any sin."

This, my brothers and sisters, is the glorious doctrine of Justification. That term captures the notion of God making, declaring a sinner just, righteous, free of sin. The term does not mean that I commit no sins - for God knows differently! The term means instead that God the Judge has issued a verdict of Not Guilty, and He's issued that verdict on the grounds that my sins have been transferred from myself to Jesus Christ (who washed those sins away on the cross) and Christ's satisfaction, righteousness and holiness have been transferred back to me. This is what Paul means when he speaks in Rom 3 about the "righteousness of God", and this is what Paul means when he speaks in our chapter about 'justification'. This "righteousness of God" comes from God and is given to me; it is righteousness from God for me.

What my contribution might be to God's declaration of righteousness? Our contribution, says Paul in vs 27, is *zero*. To be declared righteous is a free gift, is totally and only God's grace. I don't earn it, I do nothing for it; it's given, freely *given* on account of Christ's atoning work on the cross 2000 years ago. And because it's freely given, and the blessed result is peace with God today and forever, this doctrine is material calculated to excite the believer; how glorious is God that He freely declares me righteous, innocent, not guilty before Him – though He knows the sins I've

committed!

We understand: how different is this doctrine from the way young Luther was brought up. He was cast onto himself, he was told that he himself had to earn the approval God was willing to give to those who satisfied the conditions God set. But Paul speaks in Rom 3 of no conditions; he speaks only of God's free grace, a grace God gives to the unworthy for Jesus' sake. Truly, the two doctrines are different, so different.

But I have a question for you, brothers and sisters. My question is this: what are you doing with this doctrine? As you listen to the sermon, how do you react? What do you intend to do with this doctrine tomorrow, what did you do with it yesterday?

The question is an important one. You see, it's possible to have an ear open for Scriptural accuracy, be satisfied that what's said is doctrinally sound, then leave church and carry on with the cares of this life. Then the material has gone through your mind..., and no more. It's also possible to listen to this material with the concrete sins of yesterday, last week, last year in mind – and know *those particular sins* transferred from yourself onto Jesus Christ, and the gifts Christ obtained on the cross *given to you the sinner-guilty-of-specific-sins*, and the glorious result is that God on high issues a declaration concerning *you* that *you are Not Guilty*, that God will not condemn you for yesterday's sin! See, congregation, if you personalise it that way, then this doctrine doesn't just enter the *mind* but touches the *heart*! And where it touches the heart, this doctrine will prompt immense gratitude and praise for God; what a God this is who freely issues a statement of innocence concerning me the sinner! If I may say it with words borrowed from Luther:

"Read with great emphasis these words, 'me,' 'for me,' and accustom yourself to accept and to apply to yourself this 'me' with certain faith.

The words OUR, US, FOR US, ought to be written in golden letters – the man who does not believe them is not a Christian."

Clear words, indeed. For yes, beloved, a Christian is the man who sets this glorious doctrine beside the sins of which he's guilty, and then cling to the good news that God the Judge sovereignly declares *him* Not Guilty of those particular sins (no matter how horrid); *that* is a Christian, and *that* persons has faith. For faith is nothing else than that I *accept* what God says – including, *in the context of my specific sins*, His declaration of innocence for Jesus' sake. Equally: the person who does not set this glorious doctrine beside the particular sins of which he's guilty, the person who sets this doctrine at a distance from himself and his sins, and look at this doctrine only to examine its Scriptural accuracy – is not displaying faith. And that person will not get caught up by the riches of this delightful doctrine either.

Here, then, is the challenge before us, congregation: what are you going to do with this sermon, with the material of LD 23? Does it enter your head alone, or touch your heart? Do you set it at a distance from yourself, or do you set it squarely beside your sins and then know God's declaration of innocence to be true in relation to those sins you've committed? Only you, my brothers, my sisters, can answer those questions. And I plead with you to do so. For the Christian is not the person who claims forgiveness because he feels so sorry for his sins, or is so humble because of his sins, or has suffered so much. The Christian is simply the person who embraces God's declaration of Not Guilty for Jesus' sake.

This Doctrine Treasured by the true Church

And now: what's happening today in Augsburg? Official followers of Martin Luther –the Lutheran World Federation– will sign a common statement on Justification with the official followers of those who excommunicated Martin Luther and cursed those who believed the teachings he gleaned from the Bible.

Will the Roman Catholic Church in this Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification make clear that what young Luther learned from his priest and from the abbot of his monastery was Scripturally wrong, heresy? Will the Roman Catholic Church in this Joint Declaration concede that the wealth Luther discovered in the Bible and the church confessed in LD 23 is the truth? Would, would that it were so! But there is no repentance in the Roman Catholic Church; the Vatican continues to insist that more is needed than God's free grace for the sinner to become righteous before God; there remains the need for human contribution.

But that's not the worst part of this Joint Declaration. The worst part is that those who call themselves by Luther's name are content to sign a Statement which gives up the gains of the Great Reformation! The Lutheran World Federation –it represents numerous of the Lutheran churches around the world- is willing to accept that Justification is not strictly God's gift, is willing to accept that there's room for human contribution.

It raises a question. Why might it be that numerous of the churches belonging to the Lutheran World Federation are happy to embrace this Declaration – and so leave room for the doctrine of salvation through works? Surely, brothers and sisters, it is because these Lutherans of the world –they call themselves Christians- have never *tasted* the bitterness, the hopelessness, the uncertainty that results from the thought that *we* need to win God's favour, God's grace. Surely it's because these Lutherans have never *tasted* the sweetness, the richness, the security that comes from God's sovereign declaration that your sins are freely forgiven, without it costing you so much as a sigh. Let us be clear on it: those who will take the doctrine of Justification as we confess it in our Catechism and do no more than examine it for its Scriptural accuracy, will never get upset when someone suggests that room ought to be left for human contribution. But the person who knows himself a sinner utterly and totally unable to satisfy the justice of God, who embraces as truth the declaration of God that He considers the sinner is Not Guilty of his sins for Jesus' sake – that person will never leave room again for himself contributing to his salvation. He'll leave no room for it because he finds the doctrine of LD 23 simply too splendid, too exciting, too rich for the poverty of salvation through human effort.

There, congregation, is the fine point of it. So many in our day who call themselves Christians have never tasted the freedom that comes with the conviction that "God, without any merit of mine, out of mere grace, imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ," and so they leave room for the error of Rome. That's why I repeat for you the challenge I laid before you earlier: what are you going to do with this sermon, with the material of LD 23? Does it enter your head alone, or touch your heart? Do you set it at a distance from yourself, or do you set it squarely beside your sins and then know God's declaration of innocence to be true in relation to those sins you've committed? You need, my brothers and sisters, to answer those questions. *Else you*, like those Lutherans in Augsburg today, *have no resistance against the continuing efforts of Rome to collect the world's churches under her ungodly wings*.

Any day now, the Judge of all the earth will return. What shall you extend to Him? A hand nervously grasping your contribution to your righteousness? Or an empty hand that calmly holds on to God's gift of free grace?

The answer has eternal consequences. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 24 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 7 November 1999.

"IN NO WAY DOES OUR RELATION WITH GOD DEPEND UPON OUR EFFORTS."

Text:

Lord's Day 24

62. Q. But why can our good works not be our righteousness before God, or at least a part of it?

A. Because the righteousness which can stand before God's judgment must be absolutely perfect and in complete agreement with the law of God,[1] whereas even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin.[2]
[1] Deut. 27:26; Gal. 3:10. [2] Is. 64:6.

63. Q. But do our good works earn nothing, even though God promises to reward them in this life and the next?[1]

A. This reward is not earned; it is a gift of grace.[2]

[1] Matt. 5:12; Heb. 11:6. [2] Luke 17:10; II Tim. 4:7, 8. 64.

Q. Does this teaching not make people careless and wicked?

A. No. It is impossible that those grafted into Christ by true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness.[1]

[1] Matt. 7:18; Luke 6:43-45; John 15:5.

Scripture Reading:

Luke 18:9-14

James 2:14-26

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 24:2,3

Psalm 63:1

Psalm 86:1,2

Psalm 143:1,4,5

Psalm 146:1,2,3

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Imagine a person who labours under a sense of deep unworthiness. He believes the doctrine of justification as we confess it in LD 23, knows that the Lord God had given His only Son to die for sinners. But he feels that his sins form a barrier between himself and God, deny him access into God's holy presence. That sin of yesterday afternoon, for example –let's say he lost it again with the children, really went on a rage- loom so big in his mind that he's sure: I'm not worthy at all to meet God, not worthy to ask for God's time in prayer, not worthy to be a child of God and forgiven of sin.

What would you do in that situation? I suspect that most of us would give ourselves to trying our best to make things good with the child we hurt. And some of us conclude that we must not be trusting Christ enough and not loving God enough; otherwise we wouldn't lose it like that. The net result: our sense of unworthiness hinders us from praying, hinders us from delighting in the gospel of LD 23. So what do we do? We determine to love God more, to trust Jesus more, and we show that by helping the children with their homework, kick the ball around with the boys, read them a story before we put them to bed.... We think: the Lord will see how sorry we were for our wrong, and how hard we try

to set matters right.... The Lord sees how hard we try and so will grant us more faith, more trust, more love for Him....

With LD 24 we address the thought that our relation with God depends in some way on our effort or conduct, depends in some way on our love for God or the strength of our trust in Him. The LD summarises Scripture to teach that our relation with God does *not depend in any way on our efforts*, but depends strictly and completely on *God's grace in Jesus Christ*. LD 24 drives us back to LD 23, to the good news that we are acceptable to God *only* on account of Jesus' saving work, without any merit of our own. That gospel is the source of our comfort, and leads to the assurance that we can come boldly to God always – no matter what we have done wrong.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

IN NO WAY DOES OUR RELATION WITH GOD DEPEND UPON OUR EFFORTS.

1. Our good works help us nothing
2. Our good works are necessary

1. Our Good Works help us Nothing

LD 23 & LD 24 are actually two sides of one coin. With LD 23 we confessed the glorious gospel of justification, the good news that God declares sinners Not Guilty of the sins He knows we've committed, declares us not guilty on the grounds that our sins have been transferred to Jesus Christ and Christ's righteousness in turn imputed to us. For the person who knows himself guilty of sin (and we all know ourselves guilty, I trust), this gospel is glorious indeed. By the grace of God we reach out with the hand of the soul –faith- to receive this wonderful deliverance God has presented to us.

LD 24 flips the coin to its other side. LD 23 says: we are righteous before God on account of the work of Jesus Christ. LD 24 says: we are righteous before God *not* through our works. That makes it clear: when all is said and done, we don't really need LD 24. For if the cause of our righteousness before God is the work Christ did for us, then it follows logically that the cause of our righteous before God is *not* our works. If I say to you that the light is off, then I don't have to tell you any more that the light is not on. For that's understood, that's the implication of saying that the light is off.

Well now, with LD 23 we said that we are righteous before God only by faith in Jesus Christ. But the minute you say that your righteousness before God depends only on Jesus' work on the cross, you're also saying that your righteousness before God does *not* depend on anything else – like, for example, your own works. Just like you can't have the light off and on at the same time, so you can't claim righteousness before God on the basis of Christ's work *and* our own work at the same time; it's one or the other. When all is said and done, then, LD 24 isn't really necessary; the material of this LD is implicitly captured in LD 23 already.

Yet the LD is included in the Catechism. Of course, we can understand why. After all, in the days the Catechism was written, the Roman Catholic Church taught expressly that good works played a role in one's righteousness before God. In Roman Catholic teaching, righteousness was the happy product of Christ's work on the cross *plus* your own works. Hence Q 62: "But why can our good works not be our righteousness before God, *or at least a part of it?*" LD 24 is included in the Catechism for historical reasons.

Yet that does not mean, brothers and sisters, that we ought to consider deleting this LD from the Catechism. Rather, we may be thankful today that this LD is included. I say this because each one of us remains sinful, and as a result of that sinfulness we hear that little voice within us that tells us –like the brother I mentioned before- that through our conduct we've strained our relation with God *and so we need to do some repair work*, some works-of-obedience to make ourselves worthy again of God's attention. *We* need to do the right thing, *we* need to love God more, trust God more before God will really hear us. Our LD would tell us to forget it, would tell us that it's impossible and a waste of effort to try.

Why attempting some repair work, why trying to make ourselves worthy of God's attention is a waste of effort? A 62 mentions two reasons. The first reason is this: "the righteousness which can stand before God's judgment must be absolutely perfect and in complete agreement with the law of God." That's something the Lord has taught us in His Word. Think, for example, of the Lord's word to Israel through Moses:

"You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, which *if a man does, he shall live by them*: I am the Lord" (Lev 18:5).

And:

"Cursed is the one who does not confirm all the words of this law" (Dt 27:26).

That's to say: if you obey the statutes and judgments of God perfectly, you can live, but if you don't abide by *every* word of the law, you're cursed. In plain English: God's standard is absolute perfection. He tolerates no evil; even *one* sin is sufficient to damn a person, to destroy the relation between God and that sinner. And the Lord is very clear in His evaluation of people: every last one is a sinner; on this earth there are no exceptions (cf I Kings 8:46; Ps 19:12; Ps 143:2; Rom 3).

Now, I don't suppose any of us think in terms of being free from sin; we're too steeped in Biblical thinking for that notion. But what about this thought: surely, we think, I'm not sinning right now. I mean: I'm sitting in church, listening to a sermon, listening carefully too..., surely, I'm not sinning now? And helping the children with their homework, bringing them to bed with tenderness and patience, praying with them..., surely there's no sin when I do that?

In our LD we disagree with that thought. Our good works cannot contribute to our righteousness before God for two reasons, we said. The first was that the standard God demands is perfection. The second, says our LD, is that "even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin." That confession is rooted in a passage of Scripture as Is 64. There the prophet is moved by God's Holy Spirit to say this:

"But we are all like an unclean thing,
And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags" (Is 64:6).

"Our righteousnesses" –so, our most righteous deeds- "are like filthy rags", says the prophet. The term "filthy rags" refers literally –please don't be shocked at the prophet's bluntness- to soiled undergarments, soiled by menstruation. I don't have to tell you that soiled undergarments are repulsive, smelly, offensive; we prefer to steer well clear of somebody else's soiled undergarment. Says the prophet here: to God that's what our best works are like. It's hardly a compliment to our noblest efforts....

But if that's the case, brothers and sisters, if God demands perfection and at the same time He compares our best works to a soiled undergarment, it's clear, obviously, that there is no way in the world that our good works will contribute to developing or restoring or maintaining a good relation with God. *We* may think that our works are pretty good, *we* may think that God will surely be happy with our efforts, but God Himself speaks differently. And in as much as it's a relation with Him that we seek to restore, it's *His* standards we need to acknowledge.

What do we do, then, when a sin we've committed sits on our conscience so that we feel most unworthy to approach God? What do we do when we think we're not trusting Christ enough? Shall we listen to the thought Satan whispers into our ear, the thought that now we've got to do some repair work to fix our relation with God? We've got to trust more; else there's no chance God will hear? We got to spend more quality time with the children; else God won't listen? Make no mistake, brothers and sisters: any effort on our part to do some repair work is futile, absolutely a waste of time. Whatever we would do to attract God's favour must be "absolutely perfect and in complete agreement with the law of God, whereas even our best works ... are all imperfect and defiled with sin."

See, congregation, *that relation we have with God never depends on us, but always and only on God's grace in Jesus Christ*. He established His covenant of grace with us, promised us forgiveness of sins, a verdict of Not Guilty on the basis of Jesus' saving work on the cross, and that gospel needs to be enough for us. I know the thought of soiled

undergarments is offensive, and yet it's healthy for us to see our best works as precisely that in God's eyes. That is healthy because it impresses on us that our contribution to a healthy relation with God is *zero*.

So: what *do* we do when a sin we've committed sits on our conscience so that we feel most unworthy to approach God? What do we do when we think we don't trust Christ enough, don't love God enough? All we can do, brothers and sisters, *is to cling to the gospel confessed in LD 23!* By definition your contribution to God's happiness with you is zero. So you are dependent for the full 100% on *God's grace*. And therefore the only attitude befitting a sense of unworthiness is the example of the tax collector in the temple. He didn't come with achievements of his own, no matter how pious and worthy in human eyes. He didn't inform God that he'd done this or that, or trusted God so much. He did nothing else than utter that groan-of-bankruptcy, "God, be merciful to me a sinner" (Lu 18:13).

In the face of our sense of unworthiness on account of our sins, as we feel we don't trust Jesus enough or love the Lord enough, that's the example God would have us follow. He doesn't want to see hands callused by efforts to do more good works, nor does He want to see hearts bloated by feelings of adequate trust in Him and love for Him. He wants us to take our eyes *off ourselves*, and wants us to fix our eyes *on the work of the Saviour* on the cross of Calvary. He wants us to admit that His declaration of Not Guilty depends in not even the slightest fashion upon our works or upon the strength of our trust in God or the warmth of our love for Him.

Here we need to fight against the sinfulness that remains in us. Our sinful flesh so readily accepts the notion Satan whispers in our ears, the notion that our faith isn't strong enough, our trust not good enough, our love for God not deep enough, our works not good enough. It surely is true that our faith needs to grow, that our trust in Christ needs to grow, that our love for God needs to grow, that our works need to improve. *But all of that is beside the point in the matter in question!* The question is how one is righteous before God. The question is how one obtains God's verdict of Not Guilty. The answer is *not*: stronger faith or greater love or better works. That can't be the answer because stronger faith and greater love and better works *focus on the self*, and the faith, the love, the works that *I* present to God are to God like a soiled undergarment – offensive, repulsive. Let each of us cut out of our minds, then, the notion that our faith has be stronger, our love for God deeper, our trust greater, our works better before God will justify us, bless us. As if God would be content with my soiled undergarment after I've cleaned it a little....

How are you righteous before God? LD 24 drives us back to LD 23. Our relation with God does not depend on us, but depends fully and only on *God*, on His grace in Jesus Christ. In the words of the apostle Paul: "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Eph 2:8f).

And of course: that gospel gives comfort and encouragement. My conscience accuses me that I've grievously sinned against God's command, and so I think that God is no longer interested in me – unless I show my remorse by doing some good works. My conscience accuses me that I don't trust enough in the Lord Jesus Christ, don't love God enough. But: when do I love God enough? When do I trust my Saviour enough? When have I done enough to satisfy God, to repair my relation with God? If things mattered on the strength of my faith, the depth of my love, the value of my works, I'd be endlessly restless – as Luther experienced. But as it is, my relation with God does not depend on myself, but on God's grace, *and He is faithful always*, He forgives abundantly – no matter what I may have done or how weak my faith. Yes, that gives comfort, encouragement.

2. Our Good Works are Necessary

We move on to our second point. The fact that our good works help not a dot leads to another question, and that is this: then why in the world should I bother with good works? Why should I strive to grow in love, in faith, in hope if my faith and love and hope do not contribute a thing to God's verdict about me?

The apostle James addressed that question in the passage of Scripture we read together. He addressed a group of people who worked with the doctrine of justification by faith alone as described by Paul in Rom 3 – that passage of Scripture we read together last week. The persons James addressed had it fixed in their minds: our salvation depends on Christ's work on the cross, where He paid for our sins and obtained righteousness and life for us. We embrace this gospel as true for us, we accept God's Word, believe it, and so we are saved through faith in Christ. We'd say: they

clung to the material of LD 23. Then they added: because we are saved by faith in Jesus Christ, we don't need to bother with good works.

James' answer to these people is instructive for us. Why are good works necessary? The apostle is insistent: you cannot separate faith from works. He draws attention to Abraham, the man who was justified by His faith in God's promises. But, says James, "was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?" The point: God told Abraham to go and sacrifice his son. If Abraham had responded to that instruction by saying, 'Yes, Lord, I know You are able to raise Isaac from the dead,' and then had stayed in bed and done nothing, would he not show thereby that his faith was empty? It's exactly because he trusted that God was faithful and would even raise Isaac from the dead (if it would come to that) that Abraham got out of bed, woke Isaac, saddled his donkey, and set off for the designated mountain. *Faith in God is demonstrated by obeying this God.*

We confess in LD 33 that good works are those deeds which agree with God's commands. Well now, it's easy enough to say that I love the Lord and believe in Him, but if I don't dare to obey His commands I show that I don't trust this God, don't trust that His commands are good for me. No, brothers and sisters, doing good works does not impress God or gain His favour. But the faith that embraces God's saving work in Jesus Christ cannot be separated from works; that faith in God, that trust in God, invariably leads to doing works of obedience to God's law.

Must I do good works? Most definitely, yes. But *not* in order to shore up my relation with God. Instead, exactly because I trust the God who loves me so much that He gave His only Son to obtain my salvation, I shall listen to the commands He gives me in His Word. *Faith and works are inseparable.* In the words of our LD: "it is impossible that those grafted into Christ by true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness."

Must I strive to grow in love for the Lord? Should I strive to have my faith become stronger in Him? Should I spend time with my children, teach them to love the Lord and how to live as His children? Most definitely. But my reason for striving to grow in the Lord and my reason for strengthening my faith may not be because I want God to be happier with me, I want God to forgive my sins, declare me righteous, earn Jesus' saving grace. To strive to grow in order to obtain God's favour is a cruel, devilish heresy, a form of slavery dreamt up in hell. God wants His people free, and that's why He freely imputes to His own the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ – *without price to us.*

Why shall I bother with good works? Satan would dearly love to have me think that my relation with God depends in some way upon me. And I admit: my sinful ego likes that thought. But I've understood the good news of LD 23, and that's why I cease to try to impress God through my works. And I give up thinking that God's Not Guilty verdict in the face of my concrete sins depends on the depth of my sorrow for sin or the strength of my faith in Christ or the intensity of my love for God. Instead, I believe that God is happy with me *for Jesus' sake*, never mind the evils I've committed. Apart from how hard I try, He declares me Not Guilty because His Son took my curse upon Himself.

This is the gospel God prepared for sinners, the gospel God gave to me in the covenant He established with me. It's mine; God said so. To that gospel I cling; that's the good news I *believe*. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 25 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday Morning, 14 November 1999.

"FAITH COMES FROM THE HOLY SPIRIT THROUGH THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL."

Text:

Lord's Day 25

65. Q. Since then faith alone makes us share in Christ and all His benefits, where does this faith come from?

A. From the Holy Spirit,[1] who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel,[2] and strengthens it by the use of the sacraments.[3]

[1] John 3:5; I Cor. 2:10-14; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29. [2] Rom. 10:17; I Pet. 1:23-25. [3] Matt. 28:19, 20; I Cor. 10:16.

66. Q. What are the sacraments?

A. The sacraments are holy, visible signs and seals. They were instituted by God so that by their use He might the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel.[1] And this is the promise: that God graciously grants us forgiveness of sins and everlasting life because of the one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross.[2]

[1] Gen. 17:11; Deut. 30:6; Rom. 4:11 [2] Matt. 26:27, 28; Acts 2:38; Heb. 10:10.

67. Q. Are both the Word and the sacraments then intended to focus our faith on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation?

A. Yes, indeed. The Holy Spirit teaches us in the gospel and assures us by the sacraments that our entire salvation rests on Christ's one sacrifice for us on the cross.[1]

[1] Rom. 6:3; I Cor. 11:26; Gal. 3:27.

68. Q. How many sacraments has Christ instituted in the new covenant?

A. Two: holy baptism and the holy supper.[1]

[1] Matt. 28:19, 20; I Cor. 11:23-26. *Holy Baptism*

Scripture Reading:

Romans 10:14-21

Markk 4:1-20

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Hymn 29:1

Psalm 65:2,3

Psalm 19:3

Psalm 85:3,4

Hymn 44:1,2

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

How can one become a believer? The question is important (we recall from LDs 23 & 24) because the only way we and our neighbours can be made righteous before God is through the work Jesus Christ did on the cross. And one can make that work his own "only by true faith". So: from where do we get this faith?

We're contemporary people, living in a very modern society. In this modern (and in many ways post-modern society) we need an answer to that pressing question. The temptation is to look for a modern answer, to look for an answer that includes the use of TV and computers and the internet. The temptation is to look for a modern answer, and so to settle for each of us having our own opinion about how one can become a believer.

One needs faith to become righteous before *God*. We can strive to find out ourselves how to get this faith. Better would be to ask the God with whom we have to do what *He* says where faith comes from. As it turns out, His answer to that question has not changed despite all the progress in technology since the days the Bible was written. He tells us that faith does not come to us via technology, but faith is the work of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit –true God– is pleased to use a particular tool to work faith in the sinner's heart. Since the days the Bible was written, the Holy Spirit has not updated His choice of tools – despite the technology the ascended Christ has allowed throughout the world. The Spirit's tool-of-choice is still the preaching. And the preaching still comes through the spoken human voice. To receive the faith needed to become righteous before God, we need to cherish that preaching.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

FAITH COMES FROM THE HOLY SPIRIT THROUGH THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL.

1. The first tool the Spirit uses
2. The responsibility of those on whom the Spirit uses this tool
3. The second tool the Spirit uses and our responsibility

1. The First Tool the Spirit Uses

Years ago the Holy Spirit prompted certain men to write the Bible. The human authors were guided by the Holy Spirit in their writing so that each word they wrote was in fact not the word of men but the Word of God. This is called *inspiration*. That's why the Bible has no mistakes in it.

The Holy Spirit works faith in sinners' hearts through the preaching of the gospel. The question now is this: is that preaching also inspired? The words that are read on the pulpit from the Bible are God's inspired Word. Once the Bible reading is finished and the sermon begins, is that sermon also God's inspired Word? Can there be mistakes in the sermon?

Let it be clear to our minds, congregation: the sermon is *not* inspired. It is not so that the Holy Spirit guides the minister in such a way that from the pulpit he speaks without any error. What the minister says remains the work of a man, and therefore has all the short-comings that characterise any work of a man. That is why the elders, in the Form for Ordination, are "charged with the supervision over the doctrine and conduct of these fellow servants." The Form continues: the elders "shall permit no strange teaching, so that in every respect the congregation is edified by the pure doctrine of the gospel" (pg 630). If the labours of the minister from the pulpit were inspired by the Holy Spirit, the elders would not have to supervise what the ministers say. Here is also reason for the congregation to pray faithfully for the ministers of the gospel; because they are sinful, human beings, ministers need the guidance of the Lord's Spirit so very much in preparing the sermons. Let the congregations pray for the ministers – and not just on Saturday evening, for by then the sermons are finished.

The marvel is now this. *The Holy Spirit is pleased to use the broken labours of sinful preachers as His tool-of-choice in working faith in sinners' hearts.* The preachers' words are not inspired. But as that word comes from the pulpit to the pew, the Holy Spirit accompanies that spoken word with His power and grace. That is why one can speak of the preaching as the Word of God (cf I Thes 2:13). It's not inspired, but it is accompanied by the power of the Holy Spirit, and so the preaching is effective, is a powerful tool of the Spirit in accomplishing the task He wants to do with that preaching. So the prophet Jeremiah could speak of the Word of God as "a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces" (vs 29). As a hammer is a tool in the carpenter's hand to do a particular job (say, drive a nail into the timber), so the Word of God is a tool in the Spirit's hand to do a particular job – and in this case the job is to break hearts of sin and cause belief in the Lord God. Similarly, David in Ps 19 speaks of the "law of God" (the references is to all the sacrifices and ceremonies outlined in the books of Moses; those sacrifices and ceremonies all proclaimed the gospel of Jesus Christ)

as "reviving the soul", as brightening our hearts with joy, as enlightening the eyes of man. You see: that Word *gets things done*; by the power of the Spirit who accompanies that preached word, sinful hearts are broken, downcasts hearts are revived, faith is worked (cf Heb 4:12). So Paul could write what he wrote to the Romans. He said this:

"How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written:

‘How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace,
Who bring glad tidings of good things!’" (Rom 10:14f).

His conclusion is this:

"So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom 10:17).

The prophet considers the feet of the preacher of the gospel beautiful, not because he likes feet so much, but rather because the feet carry the preacher and hence bring the preaching, and it's that preaching you need in order receive the faith needed to be righteous before God; "faith comes by hearing." The preaching is so central because that's the tool the Spirit is pleased to use to make a person righteous before God. Granted, the Holy Spirit will use also personal Bible reading, the parental teaching in the home, catechism instruction, school, etc, to work faith and make faith grow. But the apostle is clear that the Spirit's tool-of-choice in working and strengthening faith is the preaching of the gospel.

Truly, congregation, this is a marvel! A tradesman worth his salt wants *good* tools, up-to-date tools in order to do his job. *But the Spirit is content to use broken tools!* Every preacher in this world is a sinful man, and that will become evident through his preaching also. As Paul said it to the Corinthians: "we have this treasure in earthen vessels" (II Cor 4:7), pots that crack and chip. But the Spirit does not discard these broken tools in favour of, say, angels from heaven who can bring the gospel perfectly. It remains His good pleasure to use the preaching of sinful men in order to work and strengthen faith. Truly, how wonderful is the wisdom of God; He uses as His tools-of-choice what men consider foolishness (cf I Cor 1:18ff).

2. The Responsibility of those on whom the Spirit works

Now a consequence follows. If the Lord God is pleased to use the preaching of the gospel as His tool-of-choice in working faith, what responsibility might we have?

At the boss's request, sheets of particleboard are brought into the cabinet-maker's shop, and placed in designated racks. There they stay, until the boss decides to make them into a cabinet. At that time he gets his tools, works upon the boards, cuts, nails, glues until he has the cabinet he wants.

Is that how it goes in the matter of getting faith? Faith comes from the Holy Spirit, and the tool the Spirit is pleased to use is the preaching. Are we to consider ourselves dead blocks of wood that need to wait for the good pleasure of the boss before anything happens to us?

The answer is No. For God has made people different than blocks of wood. Wood is dead, and can do nothing. People, though, are endowed with a sense of responsibility. God has told us that we can become righteous before Him only through faith in Jesus Christ, and He's told us too how one can get this faith, ie, only the Holy Spirit can work this faith, and He does so through the preaching of the gospel. *Now it is God's wish that we work with this aspect of God's revelation.* We may be very modern people, and the technology available to us may be marvellous, but over the generations and centuries God has not changed His way of working the faith needed to be righteous before Him. So we need to make it our business to make use of the means God the Spirit is pleased to use.

So the question becomes: where is the Holy Spirit at work? Where does He use His tool-of-choice? We know where a cabinet-maker works, and we know where a baker works too. But where does the Holy Spirit work? Where is His workshop? That, of course, is in church. For the preaching of the gospel is entrusted to the church.

So: whoever wishes faith, whoever wishes to grow in faith, needs to present himself at the place where the Holy Spirit is working. That's to say: you need to be in church. The apostle told the Hebrews not to neglect to assemble together (Heb 10:25), and that instruction received the more urgency, the apostle added, as the Day of the Lord draws nearer. We can understand that: on the Day of the Lord all men shall face the Judge of the entire world. As one stands before Him, one shall be condemned or justified, depending on whether there is faith in Jesus Christ. And where is faith available? Faith is available in church; the church is the workshop of the Holy Spirit. Hence the command: do not neglect to meet together!

How often should we come together on the Sunday? How often should you be in Spirit's workshop? Allow me to answer the question with another question. Do you think your faith is strong enough to handle the challenges you'll meet tomorrow? Or would you wish the Holy Spirit to work on you so that you are better equipped for tomorrow's challenges? *To the degree that you want the Spirit to work on you, brothers and sisters, to that same degree you will make it your business to be in the workshop of the Spirit as often as possible.* That is the disappointing part in relation to those who are content to come once only; consciously or unconsciously they indicate that they do not really see need to grow more in faith, they indicate that they see themselves as adequately strong to handle the challenges of living as God's children in an unbelieving world. It's the more disappointing because more often than not one sees too much worldliness in those brothers and sisters content to come to church once only. Truly, if they saw *need* to grow more, they'd make it their business to be there where the Holy Spirit is using the tool of His choice.

How often should we come together on the Sunday? As often, brothers and sisters, as the Holy Spirit is at work in His workshop. That persons are content to be in church once only on a Sunday is a sign of spiritual ill-health. It is our responsibility to be present where the Holy Spirit works and strengthens faith.

But the responsibility is not only to be physically present in the workshop of the Holy Spirit whenever the Spirit has His workshop open. We are not lifeless machines that need a screw tightened from time to time, so that the Holy Spirit goes around all those in His shop and adjusts the one here and the other there. God has endowed us with responsibility, and that means that our attitude, our frame of mind is critically important as we are in the Spirit's workshop. Jesus draws out this point in the parable of Mk 4.

The sower of the parable spreads his seed in his prepared field. The people of town have trampled a narrow path through the field, and as he spreads his seeds some fall on that path. Yonder is a patch of shallow, rocky soil, and some seed falls there too. On the other side is a patch where the cootch was thick and the plowing didn't kill the root system, and some seeds fall there too. And elsewhere the ground was fine, productive. The seeds that fell on the path, Jesus said, didn't get a chance to germinate; the birds - Satan- picked it away. The seeds that fell on the rocky soil germinated, began to grow, but then withered; the trials and tribulations that characterise this earthly life snuffed out the young plants. The seeds that fell among the cootch germinated too and grew, but were choked in the cares of this world and died. The seeds that fell on good soil grew, and bore fruit, some 30-fold, some 60, and some 100.

The question: was there a difference in seeds? Where the seeds that fell on the good soil better than the seeds that fell among the weeds? We understand: not so. The seed was the same, but the *soil* onto which the seeds fell differed.

The application is this. The preaching one hears from the pulpit is the same for all in church. It's not so that Johnny in church gets to hear one message, and Mary another; rather, they hear the same sermon. And the sermon comes to both accompanied by the power and grace of the Holy Spirit. Yet not all people in church come to faith, nor do all in church grow in faith. Why is that? That's because *the soil of the heart is not the same with each person*. The apostle tells us in Rom 10 that the people of Israel heard the gospel for years and generations and centuries, be it through the preaching in the tabernacle or through the prophets or through Jesus Christ or through the apostles. Yet countless in Israel who heard the preaching did not come to faith. Why not? Because, says Paul, they are "a disobedient and contrary people" (vs 21). You see: the Holy Spirit works faith through the preaching. But He does not treat people as lifeless machines that He automatically adjusts in church. He wants us to open our hearts to that preaching, Sunday after Sunday. He wants us to adopt an *attitude* that welcomes His work in our hearts. Those who come to church smug and content within themselves will normally not grow in faith. Those who come to church critical of the preacher or his preaching will normally not grow in faith either; they will instead shrivel up. Like Israel, "disobedient and contrary people" do not grow; they perish.

That is why Jesus tells His disciples in Mk 4 to "take heed what you hear" (vs 24). For what you hear depends on what you *want* to hear. The teenage fed up with doing homework will certainly hear Mom's announcement from the other side of the house that it's coffee time. But the same teenager engrossed in a gripping novel will not hear Mom's identical announcement about bedtime. It's a question of what you want to hear. That's why Jesus says: "take heed what you hear". Your attitude to the preaching, your hunger for the Word determines how much you pick up from the sermon, determines how much you grow in faith. The Holy Spirit does not cause that growth where the heart is hard like that path or infested with material interests and the cares of this world. *The attitude of the heart is our responsibility*. And that is why we do well to pray not only for the preacher whose labours the Spirit is pleased to use; we do well to pray earnestly during the week also for ourselves, that the Lord would grant us hearts hungry to hear the Word, hearts sufficiently humbled to be corrected, taught. Then, Yes, the Holy Spirit will cause faith to grow.

3. The Second Tool the Spirit Uses and our Responsibility

I've concentrated so far on the preaching as the tool-of-choice used by the Holy Spirit to work and strengthen faith. As it is, the Holy Spirit has a second tool, the sacraments. This second tool, though, does not do a different job than the first tool (as a hammer and a spanner have two different purposes). Rather, through both tools the Holy Spirit strengthens faith. The first tool, the word that comes from the pulpit, enters our hearts through the *ears*. That same Word comes to us also through the sacraments, and then reaches us through the *eyes*. But the purpose of both tools is the same. That's Q & A 67: both the Word and the sacraments are *intended to focus our faith* on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation. Both are tools of the Holy Spirit to direct our faith and trust to Christ's perfect sacrifice.

That raises the question: why might it be that God has given sacraments besides the preaching of the gospel? Why does the Holy Spirit use two different tools? Why do we need to be worked upon by two different tools? Art 33 of the *Belgic Confession* gives this answer:

"We believe that our gracious God, *mindful of our insensitivity and infirmity*, has ordained sacraments...."

God the Holy Spirit, you see, takes seriously the sense of responsibility He has given to us, the responsibility to believe the gospel. He knows we are weak, He knows that we incline to doubt the truth of His promises to us, and for that reason He works upon us by means of two different tools. Given our weaknesses, *we* need the sacraments.

To address our weaknesses, the sacraments the Spirit uses have two aspects, viz, sign and seal. Holy baptism and the Lord's supper function as pictures beside the text, as illustrations making plain what the gospel is all about. As water washes away the dirt of the body, so the blood of Christ washes away the dirt of the soul. That's a clear, graphic picture making clear to my sinful mind the gospel of Jesus Christ. But sacraments are more than signs, pictures; they are also seals. For: how do I know that the good news of Jesus' saving work is true for *me*? God does not want us to doubt, and that's why He gives the sacrament of baptism *to me*; the Holy Spirit had water placed on *my* forehead so that I might not doubt that *my* sins are washed away. God does not want us to doubt, and that's why the bread of the Lord's supper is given *to me*; through the minister the Holy Spirit extends that bread to me at the Lord's table so that I might not doubt that Christ died *for me*. The Holy Spirit knows our weaknesses, and so in His workshop He uses these sacraments specifically to strengthen further the faith He has worked in our hearts.

That's why we can understand that the Lord in His Word makes the use of the sacraments *compulsory*. *How* the Spirit uses the sacraments to strengthen faith will, the Lord willing, receive our attention in weeks to come as we deal specifically with the sacraments of baptism and Lord's supper. For now the point that needs our attention is simply the fact that God the Holy Spirit is pleased to use the sacraments as His tools for our growth in Him, and so, as with the preaching, we are responsible *to use* the sacraments.

It's interesting that the Bible is emphatic on this point. I think, for example, of God's command to Abraham in Gen 17. After God commanded Abraham to circumcise himself and everyone born in his house, God added these words:

"And the uncircumcised male child, who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant" (vs 14).

Those are strong words. The person who avoided, for whatever reason, the sacrament of circumcision in Israel was to be "cut off" from God's people, excommunicated. How insistent God was on the point is made clear by what happened to Moses. In the land of his exile he had neglected, for Zipporah's sake, to circumcise his sons. So God met him on his way back to Egypt to speak with Pharaoh, and sought to kill him (Ex 4:24). There is no reason why the matter is different in the New Testament dispensation; baptism has replaced circumcision as sign of the covenant, and the Holy Spirit would still use this visible preaching of the gospel to strengthen faith. There is the reason why infants "must" be baptised, and unbaptised believing adults also.

The same is true of the second sacrament. Jesus at the last Passover "took the bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples." Then He did not tell them that they were welcome to the bread if they felt need for extra strengthening. Instead, He gave a *command*; "take, eat," He said, "this is My body" (Mt 26:26). And commands of the Lord are to be obeyed. So also Paul, when he repeated this instruction for the benefit of the Corinthians, put it like this: "*Take, eat*; this is My body which is broken for you; *do this* in remembrance of Me" (I Cor 11:26). That is why, in LD 28, the church confesses that "Christ has *commanded* me and all believers to eat of this broken bread and drink of this cup...." For the Holy Spirit would use not just the preaching you *hear* but also the preaching you *see* and *taste*. That is why I say that failure to use the sacraments is *to our peril*. Even protesting is definitely no ground to disobey the Lord's call to subject yourself to the tool of the Spirit.

The church is the workshop of the Holy Spirit. We don't see Him there; we see only people. And the people we see are sinful. Satan dearly loves us to focus on the sins we see in others. Their sins make us negative and critical, maybe tempt us to stay away from using the sacraments. Then Satan has what he wants. For where we are critical of the preaching or focus on the weaknesses of the preacher, our hearts are not open to the working of the Holy Spirit. The Satan plucks away the seed that is sown. Similarly, where we choose to abstain from the use of the sacraments, we cut ourselves off from the work the Holy Spirit would do in us through that chosen tool of His.

The church is the workshop of the Holy Spirit. That is why we need to get our eyes off the people He draws into church, and their weaknesses and sins. That is also why we need to keep our eyes off the persons He uses to bring His Word and administer the sacraments. We need instead to fix our gaze on the work our God is doing in church. There is one way to be righteous before God and that through faith in Jesus Christ. All our technology notwithstanding, there is one way to obtain that faith, and that is through the Holy Spirit. And His tool-of-choice is the preaching of the gospel, the preaching that you hear and the preaching that you see.

This is what we have learned from God's Word, and so this is our confession in LD 25. Now we all shall need to act accordingly – and let no temptation from Satan hinder us. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 26 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday Morning, 5 April 1998.

"AT BAPTISM GOD ALMIGHTY ASSURES SINNERS OF HIS SOVEREIGN DECISION CONCERNING THEM."

Text:

Lord's Day 26

69. Q. How does holy baptism signify and seal to you that the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross benefits you?

A. In this way: Christ instituted this outward washing[1] and with it gave the promise that, as surely as water washes away the dirt from the body, so certainly His blood and Spirit wash away the impurity of my soul, that is, all my sins.[2]

[1] *Matt. 28:19.* [2] *Matt. 3:11; Mark 16:16; John 1:33; Acts 2:38; Rom. 6:3, 4; I Pet. 3:21.*

70. Q. What does it mean to be washed with Christ's blood and Spirit?

A. To be washed with Christ's blood means to receive forgiveness of sins from God, through grace, because of Christ's blood, poured out for us in His sacrifice on the cross.[1] To be washed with His Spirit means to be renewed by the Holy Spirit and sanctified to be members of Christ, so that more and more we become dead to sin and lead a holy and blameless life.[2]

[1] *Ez. 36:25; Zech. 13:1; Eph. 1:7; Heb. 12:24; I Pet. 1:2; Rev. 1:5; 7:14.* [2] *John 3:5-8; Rom. 6:4; I Cor. 6:11; Col. 2:11, 12.*

71. Q. Where has Christ promised that He will wash us with His blood and Spirit as surely as we are washed with the water of baptism?

A. In the institution of baptism, where He says: Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). He who believes and is baptized will be saved, but he who does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:16). This promise is repeated where Scripture calls baptism the washing of regeneration and the washing away of sins (Titus 3:5; Acts 22:16).

Scripture Reading:

Romans 6:1-14

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "*Book of Praise*" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalm 9:1,6

Psalm 34:2 (Psalm 12:4 after baptism)

Psalm 40:2

Psalm 30:1,2

Psalm 56:4,5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Not many of us forget our birthdays. That annual 'increment in age' is an occasion, we're told, that needs celebration. So we celebrate, bring out the cake and the candles, and with friends and family recall that important event of so many years ago - our birth.

We don't give to the day of our baptism the same attention we give to the day of our birth. Baptism: very few of us,

I'm sure, can remember when we were baptised. Yet I wonder, beloved, whether that's really the way it ought to be. The day of one's birth is important, certainly, and worth celebrating. But baptism: isn't that the day God publicly claims us as His own, as His child by covenant? Birth: that's exciting, sure, but all who are born shall one day die, all who are born enter a vale of tears - and that's not really worth celebrating.... But baptism: that God publicly claims me as His, and so promises to me life eternal through Jesus Christ - O yes, that's worth celebrating, time and again!

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

AT BAPTISM GOD ALMIGHTY ASSURES SINNERS OF HIS SOVEREIGN DECISION CONCERNING THEM.

1. baptism marks a radical change.
2. baptism gives a deep assurance.

1. The term 'baptism' prompts us to think of that which we see time and again in front of the church; a child receives some water on its forehead. The term 'baptism' itself, however, used to mean something different. Before the days of the New Testament, the verb "to baptise" was known in the Greek speaking world, was used in everyday conversation, and meant what our English word "to dip" means. So the evangelist Luke used the word in Luke 16 in the request of the rich man suffering in Hades; "Father Abraham," that rich man said in his arrogance, "have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame" (vs 24). Dip the finger in water is literally: baptise the finger in water.

The meaning of the word, however, went beyond a mere dipping in and out so that the finger was damp. The word refers specifically to being overwhelmed, being swamped. We read, eg, of a ship sinking, a ship being *overwhelmed* by the sea such that it sinks. This is more than a mere dipping in the sea; it's rather being so dipped that the ship was overwhelmed by the sea, became part and parcel of the sea, for it lay now at the bottom of the ocean. That connotation of being overwhelmed, swamped, we find back in the Bible in a passage as Jn 13. Jesus wishes to point out who the betrayer shall be, and to do so He dips a morsel and gives it to the offender; the text uses the verb "to baptise". The piece of bread which Jesus dipped in the drink, 'baptised' in the drink, was not 'slightly damp' as a result of that dipping; no, that piece of bread was *soaked* in the drink, was overwhelmed by the drink, became part and parcel of the drink such that it was a soggy piece of bread (vs 26; cf Rev 19:13).

In the minds of the early users, then, the word 'baptism' implied a *radical change*. That morsel of bread was dry, was plain bread. It was baptised, dipped in the drink, and as such was *changed*; though still bread, that morsel took on properties of the drink, it tasted like the drink, had the colour of the drink, no longer felt like a dry piece of bread. So too that ship baptised in the sea; it was overwhelmed by the waves such that the life of the ship was forever changed. Whereas it used to sail the waters from port to port, its baptism meant that from now on it would sail no more but would rather lie at rest at the bottom of the sea. Baptism implied *change*, implied the end of one existence, the beginning of something different. Radical change.

It's that word that was used in the New Testament to denote the sacrament of washing with water. To understand the sacrament rightly, then, we need to keep in mind that basic meaning of the term.

That is specifically so of the passage we read from Rom 6. And if we want to understand what the Scriptures say about baptism, we must listen attentively to this particular passage of Holy Writ. Not for nothing does Rom 6 appear twice in the proof-texts mentioned in LD 26. For that reason I want to spend some time on Romans 6 today.

It is in vss 3 & 4 that the apostle mentions holy baptism. Of this sacrament, he says this:

"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death? We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life."

These words arise in a particular context. They were written in response to a problem Paul noticed among the Romans. The problem he noticed was this: some of the Christians of Rome did not mind to commit sin; after all, there

was forgiveness in Jesus Christ, was there not? It's that background that prompted the apostle to write the words of vs 1 & 2: "shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" To which Paul stated the emphatic: "By no means!" Says the apostle: it is impossible for you Christians of Rome to continue in sin - why?- because "how shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?" There's the apostle's point: according to him, the Roman Christians *have died to sin*.

"Have died to sin." Just what might those words mean? Is Paul saying that the Romans have become perfect, they have passed the stage of sin, have died to sin such that they do not sin any more? No, that cannot be what the apostle means. I say that because in the next chapter the apostle discusses the struggle which every Christian has with sin, and he says concerning himself: "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (vs 15). More: "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do" (vs 18f). No, the apostle is clear; the phrase "have died to sin" does not mean that the Christian is in fact perfect in this life.

Paul has something else in mind. With those words of vs 2 - "we...have died to sin" - the apostle records *how God now sees us*. The apostle does not describe how things are in the heart of the Christian; he instead describes how holy God in heaven views His people. Says the apostle here: God is pleased to view His people not as people still immersed in sin - sinners; He is pleased instead to view His people as having died to sin, there being no sin with them any more.

But how is that possible? How is it possible for holy God to view the Christians of Rome not as the sinners they in practice still are, but instead as persons who have died to sin? That's what the apostle explains in vs 3. God views the believer as having died to sin - how come- - because "all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death." That text may be difficult at first reading, but this much is clear: somehow, the way God views the Christian is affected by that Christian's baptism. It's affected by that baptism because that baptism somehow connects that Christian with Christ's death: "all of us who have been baptised in Christ Jesus were baptised into His death."

How are we to understand these words? We are to recall what the verb 'to baptise' originally meant. The Christian is "baptised" into Christ Jesus, the Christian is dipped into Christ Jesus, is overwhelmed in Christ Jesus, is soaked through and through with Christ Jesus. That ship baptised by the sea became part and parcel of the sea (it lay covered with water on the seabed), that morsel baptised in the drink became part and parcel of the drink (the bread became soggy, tasted like the drink), that Christian baptised in Christ Jesus became part and parcel of Christ Jesus, shared in what Christ was, what He had obtained (cf Heb 2:14; 3:14). That, then, is the point of holy baptism: *by baptism one is taken up into Christ, by baptism one is made to share in Christ and all His benefits*. Baptism implies that the believer *died with Christ*, died when Christ died.

It's precisely this point that is worked out in what Paul writes next. So he can speak in vs 8 about having "died with Christ", and in vs 6 about the old self being "crucified with Him". In this way the one who has died "is freed from sin" (vs 7). That death of ours is a comparison with the death of Christ; ours, says the apostle is "like His" (vs 5). Then Yes, the death of Christ was totally unique - none has died or shall die like He did- and yet the dying of the Christian referred to in Rom 6 is associated so closely with the death of Jesus Christ.

When it was that "our old self was crucified with Him"? When it was that "we died with Christ"? That can only be when Christ Himself died. When He was crucified, *the Christian was crucified also*; when He died, *the Christian died with Him*. In a manner that we cannot understand, *we were present with Christ* on Calvary when He died, were present with Him so that He was not the only one who died; *we died also*. We were present with Adam in Paradise when he sinned so that Adam was not the only one who sinned; *we sinned too* (Rom 5:12). Similarly we were present with Christ on Calvary so that He was not the only one who died; *we died to sin with Him*. Sovereign God is pleased to consider us to have been present in Paradise; sovereign God is equally pleased to consider us to have been present at Calvary.

What all of that has to do with baptism? This: *baptism into Christ means that we become part and parcel of Christ!* It is in the picture of holy baptism that the Lord God spells out to us what He decided long ago concerning us, and what He decided is this: that He views us in Christ, that He reckons us to have been present with Christ on Calvary. All who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into His death; in baptism God tells us that He associates us with Christ, and central to Christ is of course His death. If in baptism God tells us that He associates us with Christ, counts

us with Christ; if in baptism God tells us that we are dipped into Christ, are overwhelmed with Christ, have become part and parcel of Christ, then by so doing God tells us that - as far as He is concerned- we are involved in Christ's death, we share in that death, we benefit from that death.

That in turn means that a radical change has come over our lives; whereas we used to be *dead in sin* (and therefore hopelessly guilty before God), we have now with Christ *died to sin* and so are free before God, counted as righteous. Our past was one of sin, of guilt before God because of our fall in Paradise and our sins day by day. But God reckons that past as *past*, as gone, and in its place has come something new. The new is this: we are righteous before God, are forgiven of our sins; we receive His grace. It's what the apostle says in vs 11: "so you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." *God* is sovereignly pleased to consider you to be alive in Jesus Christ; very well, then *you also* must consider yourselves to be alive in Jesus Christ. And what does it mean to be "alive"? In the context of Rom 6, to be "alive" means to be righteous before God, to be acceptable to God - and that's all possible because of Jesus Christ. In the words of LD 26: by the blood of Christ poured out for us in His sacrifice on the cross our sins are washed away.

Yet the new signified by the radical change that is baptism is not just the fact that we are righteous before God, alive in Jesus Christ. The new includes also *living* a life of grateful obedience to God. The Christians of Rome thought to continue in sin that grace might abound. But Paul derides the notion; "how can we who died to sin still live in it?!" And after the apostle has pointed out the message of holy baptism, he says this to his readers: "therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. Do not yield your members to sin as instruments of wickedness" (vss 12f). And why not? Because, he says, you "have been brought - sovereignly brought by God- from death to life" (vs 13). And why has God done so? "That...we too might walk in newness of life" (vs 4). In the words of the Catechism: we are "sanctified to be members of Christ, so that more and more we become dead to sin and lead a holy and blameless life." And therefore the instruction of the apostle follows: "let not sin therefore reign in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions." Do not let sin be your boss because before God you have been *changed*, have died to sin with Christ, are a new person.

So all of it, my brothers and sisters, is so rich, so very rich. What is baptism? This, that God spells out to His people what He has sovereignly determined about those people. What it was He determined about those people? This, that we should be partakers of Christ, that we should be considered to have died with Christ, to have risen with Christ, so that we share in all His treasures and gifts. God from eternity was pleased to immerse us in Jesus Christ, to soak us in the Saviour so that we are overwhelmed by Him, are made part and parcel of Him. Such was God's holy will concerning us, and *in the sacrament of holy baptism He illustrates that glorious gospel to us*. Here is gospel, here is something so incredibly rich: God graciously tells us what He has sovereignly decided concerning us!

And there's why I spoke too of baptism implying that radical change. No, baptism doesn't tell us that a fundamental change has occurred in the heart of the sinner so that he is regenerated. Baptism tells us rather that *in the courts of God* a fundamental change has occurred. That change is this: God used to see me as sinful, I used to have on my account before God so many sins both original and actual, and all of that meant that I was sure to receive condemnation eternally. *But that's changed*; God reckons me in Christ, sees me through the blood of Christ, and so my account before God is wiped clean, my sins washed away, I'm forgiven so that my future is one of life eternal. Yes, talk about a change most radical! It's exactly what the apostle has said elsewhere: you were immoral, you were idolators, you were adulterers, sexual perverts, thieves, greedy, drunkards, etc. "*But you were washed, [baptised], you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ*" (I Cor 6:10f). **CHANGE!** In baptism God tells us what He has sovereignly determined concerning us, tells us how He now sees us and why He sees us that way.

2. We come now to our second point: baptism gives a deep assurance. After all that's been said about the radical change spelled out in baptism, we can be brief on this second point. *How do you know*, brothers and sisters, whether you are really a child of God? How do you know whether your sins are forgiven, whether God is gracious to you, whether you have life with Him? I trust that you understand now that it has *nothing at all* to do with how you feel about things, nothing at all to do with how you experience things. We may well feel that God is distant from us, may experience all kinds of troubles that all seem to point up that God is angry with us, punishes us for our sins. And so there is no comfort left, no assurance that we really do belong to God. After all, we don't experience God as near, as dear....

God would have us know, beloved, that seeking reassurance from our experiences is foolishness. God has once set each of us aside, has once said to each of us in turn: I baptise you. By so doing God *told* us - more, God *showed* us - *what He has sovereignly decided concerning us*. In our baptism He told us of His sovereign decision to view us through the blood of Jesus Christ, told us of His decision to make us share in Christ and all His benefits. He had us baptised because He sees us as overwhelmed by Jesus Christ, taken up into Jesus Christ, soaked with Jesus Christ, made part and parcel of Jesus Christ. In a word, He had us baptised because He views us as having died to sin. So where are our sins? As far as God is concerned, those sins are *gone*. Between me and God there are no sins; I am righteous before Him. That's the message of the baptism God gave to me so many years ago. And God was dinkum when He said it, genuine when He illustrated to me His decision concerning me. God meant it so many years ago, and - because He is the same yesterday and today and forever- does He mean it with equal fervour today. Assurance that I belong to God, that my sins are gone? Assurance that God is gracious to me despite the trials and tribulations of life? It's all included, beloved, in that baptism God sovereignly gave to me so long ago. Such is the grace of my Father in Jesus Christ that He would not have any of His children doubt, would not have any of us tossed to and fro with uncertainty.

See there your God, beloved. Now the question is: *do you believe it??* Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 27 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev A VanDelden held on Sunday afternoon, 12 April 1998.

"All those who are in Christ share in His saving merits."

Text:

Lord's Day 27

72. Q. Does this outward washing with water itself wash away sins?

A. No, only the blood of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sins.[1]

[1] *Matt. 3:11; 1 Pet. 3:21; 1 John 1:7.*

73. Q. Why then does the Holy Spirit call baptism the washing of regeneration and the washing away of sins?

A. God speaks in this way for a good reason. He wants to teach us that the blood and Spirit of Christ remove our sins just as water takes away dirt from the body.[1] But, even more important, He wants to assure us by this divine pledge and sign that we are as truly cleansed from our sins spiritually as we are bodily washed with water.[2]

[1] *1 Cor. 6:11; Rev. 1:5; 7:14.* [2] *Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Rom. 6:3, 4; Gal. 3:27.*

74. Q. Should infants, too, be baptized?

A. Yes. Infants as well as adults belong to God's covenant and congregation.[1] Through Christ's blood the redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, who works faith, are promised to them no less than to adults.[2] Therefore, by baptism, as sign of the covenant, they must be grafted into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers.[3] This was done in the old covenant by circumcision,[4] in place of which baptism was instituted in the new covenant.[5]

[1] *Gen. 17:7; Matt. 19:14.* [2] *Ps. 22:11; Is. 44:1-3; Acts 2:38, 39; 16:31.* [3] *Acts 10:47; 1 Cor. 7:14.* [4] *Gen. 17:9-14.* [5] *Col. 2: 11-13.*

Scripture Reading:

Acts 2:29-42

Mark 10:13-16

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "*Book of Praise*" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Hymn 15:1,3

Hymn 47:4

Psalm 78:2,3

Psalm 105:3,4

Psalm 103:7

Beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ:

When farmers used to plough their fields, it was a matter of pride to have the furrows straight. That wasn't very easy when you had to guide, not only the plough, but also the oxen or mules or horses that pulled the plough. To keep the furrows straight, the farmer had to fix his gaze on something in the distance, and keep his eyes glued to that object. If he did, his furrows would be straight. If he turned his eyes away from that object, and looked down to the plough or to his animals, his furrows would be crooked. To keep a straight line, he had to keep his eyes fixed on that distant object that served as his marker..

In a way, that is how it is with us when we speak about matters of doctrine. We have to keep our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ. If we take our eyes off of Jesus, then our doctrine gets twisted.

That's what happened in the course of church history. The church of Rome took their eyes off of Jesus, and focused their eyes on the sacrament of baptism. As a result, their doctrine concerning baptism became crooked, twisted.

That's what happened to the Anabaptists as well. They took their eyes off of Jesus, and focused their eyes on what lived in the hearts of their children. As a result, their doctrine concerning baptism became crooked and twisted as well.

In Lord's Day 27 we are taught to focus our faith upon Christ. By doing so, we will avert the errors of both Rome and the Anabaptists. This morning (afternoon) I preach to you the gospel with this theme:

All those who are bonded to Christ share in His saving merits

We confess that:

1. only those bonded to Christ receive grace
2. all those bonded to Christ receive baptism

only those "in Christ" receive grace.

Shortly after the outpouring of the Spirit on Pentecost, Peter stood before the crowds and preached the gospel to them concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Lord granted immediate fruit to the preaching: three thousand souls were cut to the heart when they heard this sermon, and they said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, *"Men and brethren, what shall we do?"* Then Peter said to them, *'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins'*" (Acts 2:37-38).

Further on in the book of Acts we read of Paul's conversion. God sent Ananias to speak with Paul, and Ananias said, *"Arise and be baptized, and wash away your sins, calling on the name of the Lord"* (Acts 22:16).

In both of these places, there is the closest connection between baptism and the forgiveness of sins. Peter said: *"Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins."* Ananias said: *"Be baptized, and wash away your sins."* It would seem when we read these texts that forgiveness of sins comes through baptism. It would appear that baptism itself effects this spiritual cleansing.

It is on the strength of texts such as these that the church of Rome teaches that the forgiveness of sins is granted through baptism. They teach that original sin—which is the sin which we all committed in and inherited from Adam—they teach that original sin can only be removed by means of baptism. When the water of baptism touches the forehead, sins are immediately forgiven. Rome teaches that the grace of forgiveness is contained in the water of baptism. Rome teaches that baptism automatically makes a person share in the grace of forgiveness.

Logically, Rome feels that it is of extreme importance that a child receive baptism. For a child who is not baptised is condemned, but a child who is baptised is saved. A child must be baptised at all costs. If a child in the hospital stops breathing before the priest can baptise the child, then anyone present can baptise it—doctor, nurse, mother or father. But the child must be baptised, or it is condemned.

But this is not what Scripture teaches. Nowhere does Scripture teach that the washing with water itself removes sin. When Christ instituted Holy Supper He said, *"For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins"* (Mat 26:28). John wrote the same, *"the blood of Jesus Christ ... cleanses us from all sin"* (1 Jn 1:7). And John the Baptist pointed out that while he baptised with water, Jesus would baptise them with the Holy Spirit (cf. Mat 3:11). So it is clear: water itself cannot effect any cleansing. Only the blood and Spirit of Christ can cleanse us from the guilt and pollution of sin.

What do texts mean, then, that we referred to earlier, upon which the church of Rome basis its doctrine? Why did Peter

say, "*Be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins*"? Why did Ananias say: "*Be baptized, and wash away your sins*"?

It clear from the context that both Peter and Ananias were speaking to adults. It would be good to pay attention what is entailed in adult baptism? If you were to read through the Form for Adult baptism, you would find that the questions asked in adult baptism are more numerous than those asked in infant baptism. What our forefathers have done was combine both the questions of baptism and the questions for profession of faith. We can learn from this that when adults are baptised, they are actually making profession of faith at the same time as they are baptised.

Those adults who were baptised by Peter and Ananias were making public profession of faith by means of baptism. The forgiveness of sins does not come through baptism. Rather, the forgiveness of sins comes through faith. What does baptism do, then? Baptism signifies and seals the forgiveness of sins. Baptism serves as proof of God's grace. The grace of God does not lie in baptism, but in Christ. And we share in Christ only through faith. Baptism is nothing more and nothing less than the proof of God's grace.

We want to emphasise this. Forgiveness of sins comes, not through baptism, but through faith in Christ. When Peter baptised Cornelius he said, "*...whoever believes in [Christ] will receive remission of sins*" (Acts 10:43). When adults present themselves for baptism in the name of Jesus Christ, they profess their faith and trust in Christ. They profess their dependence upon the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ. It is through this faith that they receive the forgiveness of sins.

Back in Lord's Day 7 we learned what faith does. Faith grafts us into Christ. In horticulture, they sometimes take a branch of one plant, and attach it to the stem of another plant. The branch is attached by wrapping a band of cloth around the branch and stem, binding them together. In due time the branch attaches itself to the stem. This is called grafting. As a result of this grafting, the new branch receives the nutrients and water which it needs through the stem and roots of that plant into which it was grafted.

Faith is like that cloth that binds us to Christ. Through faith, we are spiritually bonded to Christ. And this faith is more than just intellectual knowledge about what Christ has done. Faith can be described as a personal relationship wherein we show our love, trust, dependence upon and joy in Christ. By this faith we are grafted into Christ. By means of this personal relationship we are bonded to Christ. And only those who are bonded to Christ by means of this personal relationship of faith will share in His benefits of grace.

Let me use an example. A young man loves a young women and asks her to marry him. His love is such that he wants to sacrifice himself for the well-being of wife. He wants to provide a home for her. He wants to provide her with nice clothes and good food. He wants to make her happy. These benefits are given within the framework of a relationship between the husband and his wife. These benefits are enjoyed by the wife within the marriage.

But suppose after a period of time the wife separates herself from her husband. Do you think the husband still wants to provide her with these gifts? Do you think that if she divorces him, he would happily keep making the mortgage payments for her house? Do you think he would happily purchase her food and clothing, put them in a box and send them to her? I doubt it. He does not want to provide a home for her where he is not welcome. He doesn't want to provide her with food and clothing which he cannot share or appreciate. Rather, he wants to give these within the framework of the marriage bond, within the framework of a loving relationship.

So it pleases Christ to give his benefits to those who are personally and intimately united with Him through faith. He does not put His benefits into the water of baptism as in a box, and give them to people who are happy to receive these gifts, but don't want to live with Him in a living and loving relationship. Those, and those along enjoy the benefits of Christ who are bonded to Christ by that personal and intimate bond of faith.

There is the difference between Rome's view of the sacrament of baptism, and ours. Rome sees baptism as a container in which God has put the benefits of Christ. You don't need a personal relationship of faith with Christ to share in them. You only need to be baptised. You can have the benefits without the bond.

We view the sacrament of baptism differently. Baptism is not a box containing the benefits of Christ. Rather, baptism

is like a wedding ring. When a man gives a ring to his wife, he gives her a symbol of his love. In giving that ring, he promises to love her, care for her, protect her. He gives this ring as a token of all these things that he wants to give her. But the ring itself does not contain her husband's love. The ring itself cannot provide for her or protect her. This love, provision and protection can only be enjoyed in a warm, personal relationship, and not through a cold, impersonal piece of gold.

So it is with baptism. We do not receive any life-saving or life-giving power through that ring. Christ does not send His benefits to us in baptism. He gives His benefits are communicated to those who are intimately bonded to Him in faith and love. Baptism is a constant reminder of Christ's love. As surely as He gives us this ring, so surely He loves us. We need not doubt that He will share His benefits with us. We need not doubt that He will forgive us all our sins. We need not doubt that He will give us new life. He loves us. Baptism is a wonderful pledge of His love.

Are you bonded to Him in an intimate relationship of faith? Do you rejoice in the love and mercy that He has shown you? Do you love Him in return? Have you seen your Saviour's heart? Is your heart bonded to His? If you are personally bonded to Christ through faith, then you may be sure that you share in the grace of God in Christ Jesus. For only those who are bonded to Christ receive His grace.

Now the Anabaptists would agree with much of what we have said in opposition to Rome. For they stressed strongly the need for a personal and intimate relationship with Christ in order to share in His redeeming work. But in doing so, they have overlooked the fact that the children of believers are bonded to Christ long before they come to faith. Thus they refused to baptise their children, denying thereby their participation in Christ. Let us now turn to this matter.

all those bonded to Christ receive baptism

The Anabaptists agree that only those enjoy the benefits of Christ who are bonded to Him in a personal relationship of faith and love. On this basis, they argue that children do not share in grace, because these children do not have faith. There is a major flaw in their reasoning, however. They overlook the fact that faith is not the only way to be bonded to Christ.

Let me clarify this. For us as adults, the only way to be bonded to Christ is through faith. But when it comes to infants, there is another way. It is the way of the covenant.

Allow me to draw on the example that I have used already. We mentioned that the only way a man will provide a home, food and clothing to a woman is within the framework of an intimate relationship in marriage. Without this response of love, he doesn't really want to provide her with all the benefits that we spoke of.

But consider this. If the love between a man and a woman should produce a baby daughter, will there not be an immediate bond between father and his infant daughter? Oh, she doesn't love her father. She doesn't even know her father. But that doesn't bother the father. He loves his daughter regardless. That love is only one-sided, but still he will care for the child. He will provide and protect the child. All this happens though there is not yet any love in the heart of the child for his father.

In the same our Lord Jesus Christ embraces the children of believers in love. Jesus binds the children of believers to Himself. He is happy to provide them with His saving merits. We read together from Mark 10. As mothers are inclined to be, these mothers were very concerned for their children. They rejoiced in the fact that they themselves should receive a blessing from Christ through the words which Christ spoke. But what about their children? They wanted their children to be blessed by Christ, even as they had been. Thus they brought their children forward, hoping and praying that Christ might lay His hands upon them and bless them.

The disciples pushed them away, thinking that Christ was far too busy to be bothered with little children. *"When Jesus saw it, He was greatly displeased."* Not a little ticked off—no, greatly displeased. He *"said to [His disciples] 'Let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God'.... And He took them up in His arms, put His hands on them, and blessed them"* (Mark 10:14,16).

Christ knew that they were citizens of God's kingdom no less than their parents. Christ knew this because of what God

has said to Abraham so many years before. *"I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you"* (Gen 17:7). Just as a husband does not repudiate the children which a wife bears to him, so God does not repudiate the children of believers. God claims them as His children, and He proclaims Himself to be their God.

This is true also in the new dispensation. Knowing that the covenant was established with believers and their children, Peter baptised the whole household of Cornelius (cf. Acts 10:2, 11:14f.) when Cornelius came to faith. When Lydia came to faith, her whole household was baptised with her (cf. Acts 16:15). When Crispus came to faith, his household was baptised with him (cf. Acts 18:8). We cannot say with certainty whether there were children, but it seems likely that out of three households there would have been some children. But that is not the most important point. What is important is the fact that Scripture shows the continuation of what was accepted in the old dispensation. Abraham and all his household was circumcised. So the whole household of Cornelius, and the household of Lydia and of household of Crispus were baptised. Those who were included in the covenant in the old dispensation are also included in the new dispensation. And that includes the children.

By way of the covenant, the children of believers belong to the household of God. They are God's children. They share in all the treasures and riches which God gives parents in Christ. Yes, they are grafted into Christ and share in all His treasures and gifts. Paul emphasises the truth of the covenant when he says in 1 Corinthians 7:14 that the children of believers are holy. They are sanctified in Christ.

What a wonderful comfort for us, especially if the Lord should take one of our children to Himself in infancy. They might not have come to faith yet. Nevertheless, they are grafted into Christ and share in His saving merits. Their sins are forgiven them, and they inherit eternal life.

You, children, are bonded to Christ by way of the covenant. You, children, share in all the benefits of Christ. And because you are bonded to Christ, you have received the sign and seal of baptism. There is a bond of love between you and Christ, although in the beginning it is only one sided—from Christ to you. That has to change, of course. You children must come to know Christ, and to love Him. God expects that this love, which begins one-sided, become two-sided.

Again I return to the example. A father loves his infant children, and provides and protects them even though they do not respond to His love yet. But it doesn't remain that way. A father will care for his children when they are infants, and he requires nothing in return. But in time the father begins to expect things from the children. At first the relationship might be one-sided, but in the course of time it must become two-sided. He expects his children to respond—to love and trust and obey him.

So it is with you, children. First Christ your Saviour embraced you, though you didn't believe in Him yet. But as you grow older, Christ demands that you stretch out the hand of faith and embrace Christ as your Saviour. At first Christ loved you though you did not love Him. But as you mature Christ requires that you respond by loving Him in return. As infants you were grafted into Christ by way of the covenant, but as adults you will remain in Christ only by way of faith.

It is this demand for faith that lies behind the need for us as parents to make a vow when presenting our children for baptism. The fact that our children must respond in faith requires us as parents to instruct our children in the faith. We must instruct them so that they learn what their baptism means. They must be shown the love of Christ portrayed in this sacrament. Although they are grafted into Christ as infants by way of the covenant, they will remain in Christ as adults only by way of faith.

Do you see, children, that you must respond to the promises that God has given you in your baptism? If you will not respond to Christ's love—if you will not embrace Him as your Saviour with the arms of faith—if you will not live with Christ in intimate fellowship and friendship, then you will be cut off from Christ. You know what happens if a branch is cut off from the stem, don't you? It doesn't get the water and the nutrients that it needs, and it dies. So you also will die an eternal death if you do not remain in Christ by way of faith.

Let this demand for faith encourage us as parents to be useful instruments of the Holy Spirit who works faith. Let us

Speak with our children about the riches that they have in Christ, about their unique status within the family of God. Let us encourage them to respond to Christ's love in love.

Let this demand for faith also incite you, our children, to listen carefully in Church, to reflect upon the meaning of your Baptism, to study well in Catechism class, to seriously participate in Youth Club, to read your Bible at home and to pray. The Holy Spirit works faith through these means, and you must not resist the work of the Spirit by turning your mind off during the preaching, and doing the least that you can get away with in Catechism, or mucking around in Youth Club, or forgetting to read your Bible and neglecting to pray. Now you are in Christ, as your baptism signifies. But remember that you will remain in Christ only by way of faith.

So you see, brothers and sisters, that all those and only those who are bonded to Christ will share in His benefits. You have proof of Christ's love for you. You have this proof in your baptism. If you respond to Christ's love in faith and love for Him, then you may be sure that you share in His grace. AMEN

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Sermon on Lord's Day 28 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 21 November 1999.

"AT HIS TABLE THE LORD ASSURES US THAT HE HAS ESTABLISHED A WARM RELATION BETWEEN HIM AND US."

Text:

Lord's Day 28

75. Q. How does the Lord's Supper signify and seal to you that you share in Christ's one sacrifice on the cross and in all His gifts?

A. In this way: Christ has commanded me and all believers to eat of this broken bread and drink of this cup in remembrance of Him. With this command He gave these promises:[1] First, as surely as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup given to me, so surely was His body offered for me and His blood poured out for me on the cross. Second, as surely as I receive from the hand of the minister and taste with my mouth the bread and the cup of the Lord as sure signs of Christ's body and blood, so surely does He Himself nourish and refresh my soul to everlasting life with His crucified body and shed blood.

[1] *Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19, 20; I Cor. 11:23-25.*

76. Q. What does it mean to eat the crucified body of Christ and to drink His shed blood?

A. First, to accept with a believing heart all the suffering and the death of Christ, and so receive forgiveness of sins and life eternal.[1] Second, to be united more and more to His sacred body through the Holy Spirit, who lives both in Christ and in us.[2] Therefore, although Christ is in heaven[3] and we are on earth, yet we are flesh of His flesh and bone of His bones,[4] and we forever live and are governed by one Spirit, as the members of our body are by one soul.[5]

[1] *John 6:35, 40, 50-54. [2] John 6:55, 56; I Cor. 12:13. [3] Acts 1:9-11; 3:21; I Cor. 11:26; Col. 3:1. [4] I Cor. 6:15, 17; Eph. 5:29, 30; I John 4:13. [5] John 6:56-58; 15:1-6; Eph. 4:15, 16; I John 3:24.*

77. Q. Where has Christ promised that He will nourish and refresh believers with His body and blood as surely as they eat of this broken bread and drink of this cup?

A. In the institution of the Lord's supper: The Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes (I Corinthians 11:23-26). This promise is repeated by Paul where he says: The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread (I Corinthians 10:16, 17).

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 26:17-30

Exodus 12:1-28

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 42:4,5

Psalm 105:2

Psalm 4:1,2,3

Psalm 77:2,4,5

Hymn 44:1,2

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

What is your 'personal relation with God' like? That's a question we hear from time to time, and the question makes us feel a tad guilty. With regards to a close friend, we understand what a personal relation looks like, and the thought of that relation makes us feel good. We can relate to these friends, we feel comfortable with the friend, feel we can talk with him, do things together; it's a pleasant thought. It's the same in family relations; we have a personal relation with parents or children, and that means we can talk together, enjoy each other's company, relax together.

Now we hear of a 'personal relation with God'. We all like to think we have such a relation, but – how do you measure it? That's what generates a guilty feeling, for we sense that our relation with God isn't quite what it ought to be, but we're not sure how to improve that 'personal relation with God'. Somehow it doesn't feel all that personal; time and again we sense distance between God and ourselves so that we find praying, eg, rather a chore. Too often we catch ourselves not even thinking about God or His will in the decisions we have to make, and a pang of guilt floods over us. 'Personal relation with God'? The phrase reminds us of our deficiencies, and so we hear in the phrase that we've got work to do.

There is undoubtedly, brothers and sisters, much to say about our 'personal relation with God', much that would be very worthwhile and instructive. The Lord, though, has a more pressing topic to speak about and that is *His relation with us*. Sunday after Sunday in the preaching of the gospel He tells us time and again what He did for us in Jesus Christ, tells us that He gave His only Son to the shameful death of the cross so that we sinners might be made children of God, tells us that He for Jesus' sake declares us righteous, not guilty before Him. That's to say: God tells us of His relation to us. He tells us that He is our Father for Jesus' sake, and now cares for us perfectly; we're safe in His almighty and merciful hands.

But - in the brokenness of this life, with the sinful hearts we have, this is a gospel we repeatedly minimise..., or even forget. We tend to think that the critical question is our relation to God, instead of God's relation with us. God knows that we get the critical question mixed up, knows "our insensitivities and infirmities", and *that's why He gave the sacraments* – including the Lord's supper. As we prepare ourselves to go to the table of the Lord in a couple weeks' time, it is this *gospel of the Lord's supper* that I set before you today. What is this coming table all about? What would the Lord impress upon us there?

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

AT HIS TABLE THE LORD ASSURES US THAT HE HAS ESTABLISHED A WARM RELATION BETWEEN HIM AND US.

1. The assurance come through remembering
2. The assurance involves certainty

Remembering

The last Q & A of our LD quotes the apostle's words in I Cor 11. In that passage the apostle relates what Jesus said when He instituted the holy supper on the night when He was betrayed. He took bread, broke it and said, "This is My body which is for you; Do this in remembrance of Me" (vs 24). Similarly, He took the cup and said, "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me" (vs 25). That is why, in the first Q & A of our LD we confess that "Christ has commanded me and all believers to eat of this broken bread and drink of this cup *in remembrance of Him*." The concept of remembering is critical. What, then, is 'remembering' all about?

I could tell you that I remember that I once was the proud owner of a pink tie. And you say: So what. For we realise: that kind of remembering means nothing. We're sure too that Jesus meant much more than calling to mind some insignificant fact of long ago. And we're correct. A couple of illustrations will draw out what the word 'remember' really means.

Some ten days ago the world paused for "Remembrance Day". Aged veterans pulled out their uniforms, polished their medals, and marched. Around the world the customary two minutes of silence was respected –why?– so that we might *remember*. Remember what? The soldiers who gave their lives in the two world wars of our century. Yet why should we remember that? Simply so that we might recall the soldiers' bravery? Not so. We realise well that we're asked to remember that, had these soldiers not battled as they did, the entire world would have fallen under the control of totalitarian governments, and we could today still be languishing under the heathen hand of Nazi control. To 'remember', then, is to *recognise the difficulties of the circumstances as they were, so that in turn one appreciates the privileges one has now*.

This common understanding of the word 'remember' was part and parcel of the events on the evening the Lord instituted the holy supper. From Mt 26 we learn that Jesus instituted the holy supper while He and His disciples were eating the Passover. Central to that Passover was the notion of *remembering*. That's what God said; the Passover was to be an annual event, a "memorial" to be kept throughout Israel's generations - Ex 12:14. How it was to be a memorial, a remembrance? In practical terms: every year Dad had to pick out a lamb from the flock, kill it, and prepare it for eating. Every year Mom had to clean all yeast out of the house, then bake bread without yeast for the Passover feast. And she had to prepare a salad too, made of bitter herbs. One can imagine that the children would be less than impressed with having to eat a lump of heavy dough, unrisen, less than impressed too with that platter of bitter herbs. The inevitable question was certainly: "what's this feast all about?" Why do we have to eat this? In answer to that question, the fathers of Israel –God said- had to tell their children about Egypt, about how their fathers and mothers, their grandfathers and grandmothers were slaves to Pharaoh, how they had to slave under the whip of the task-master from dawn till dark, had to drown their sons in the Nile, etc. The fathers had to tell the children too how they escaped this slavery, escaped not by their own efforts but rather because the God of the covenant had pity on them and so interfered in the peace of Egypt by sending His ten plagues. The fathers had to tell the children also of the marvel of the Red Sea, how the Lord opened up a path through the sea so that the fathers could walk across without getting wet and their children and animals and possessions too, had to relate how the Pharaoh and his army drowned in that same sea. Year after year the people had to eat this Passover, and the purpose of the Passover was specifically to *remember*, was to *compel* remembering. Yet that remembering was not a senseless calling-to-mind without significance for today; Israel's annual *remembering* at the celebration of the Passover was meant to draw out in the minds of the coming generation *how privileged* they were with the freedom and prosperity they enjoyed in the land of Canaan. That Passover reminded the Israelites of *where they'd come from*, reminded the Israelites too of *how they got to the peace they were now*. That's to say: it reminded them that by nature they were slaves, but God had set them free in His boundless mercy towards them. So the Passover taught the people of Israel too that God loved them, they were precious to Him; God was personally interested in each of them, reminded them of the riches of the covenant.

Well now, on the night of the last Passover, the Lord Jesus Christ told His disciples to 'remember'. They knew that word very well, knew also that this 'remembering' at the Passover was much more than a simple 'recalling to mind' of long-forgotten events. Slavery to Pharaoh, gracious redemption by a merciful God, freedom as His children: these were the things they could and should think about as they ate the Passover. They knew: it was for them to *recognise the difficulties of the circumstances as they used to be, so that in turn they might appreciate the privileges they now had*.

But listen: Jesus uses the loaded word 'remember', but does so in a different context. He uses the word not as they are eating the bitter herbs – that harsh reminder of the bitterness of Egypt's slavery. Instead, Jesus picks up some bread, gives thanks, breaks it, and says, "This is My body which is for you; Do *this* in remembrance of Me." That is: Jesus would have the disciples remember not the bitterness of Egypt per se; He'd have them remember instead His own broken body. And look, Jesus uses the word again. He takes a cup, told them all to drink from it, and then says, "Do *this* ... in remembrance of Me." The disciples knew what the word 'remember' meant alright, knew that they had to recall the misery of the circumstances as they used to be, recall too how they were delivered from those evil circumstances so that in turn they might appreciate the redemption, the freedom, the blessings they had now. But Jesus' reference to the bread and the cup drew their attention away from the misery of Egypt and the Exodus that resulted; Jesus' reference to that bread and cup directed their remembering to the fact that His body would be broken and His blood would be shed.

Yet this new focus of remembering was not totally new. The disciples knew their Bibles, knew that Israel's slavery in

Egypt was in fact a symbol of slavery to sin and Satan. The disciples knew too that Israel's deliverance from Egypt through God's mighty hand was a picture of the deliverance every pious Israelite longed for, that deliverance from bondage to sin. Jesus speaks of His body *broken* for them, of His blood *shed* for them, and with that He tells the disciples that His coming death on the cross was the *fulfilment* of all that the Exodus from Egypt symbolised. No longer should the word 'remember' in Israel's liturgy direct God's people to the Exodus from Egypt; from now on that term should direct the minds of God's own to the deliverance Christ worked on Calvary from Satan's power.

This remembering, of course, was meant to be more than recalling the fact that Jesus once died. It was a remembering intended to impress on the disciples where they'd come from, and how come their circumstances were now so different. That brings us to our second point: the certainty Jesus would give His disciples at the Lord's table.

Certainty

As Jesus told His disciples to 'remember' He held up for them the bread and the cup. The bread: it was one piece. But before their eyes He broke it into two. The disciples –and we see it at the table too- witnessed that breaking. That's to say: the disciples couldn't deny it any more; with their own eyes they had seen that the bread was broken. But that bread, Jesus said, was His body. And that body, Jesus added, "is for you." As certain, then, as the disciples could be that the bread in Jesus's hands had actually been broken, so certain could they be that Jesus' body was broken, broken for them. How could they be certain that the bread had been broken? They'd seen it with their own eyes, and so it was not disputable. How could they be certain that Jesus' body was broken for them? Jesus had *said so*, and that's why it was not disputable.

The same is true in relation to the cup. The disciples saw that cup in Jesus' hand, saw the wine which had been poured into it. They couldn't deny it, they'd seen it with their own eyes, that this cup of wine was in Jesus' hands. But the contents of that cup represented Jesus' blood, and (Jesus added), "This is My blood..., which is shed for many for the remission of sins." As certain, then, as the disciples could be that the cup in Jesus' hand contained wine poured into it, so certain could they be that Jesus' blood was poured out, shed for them. How could they be certain that wine was in the cup? They'd seen it with their own eyes, and so it was not disputable. How could they be certain that Jesus' blood was shed for them? Jesus had *said so*, and that's why it was not disputable.

This, brothers and sisters, is the promise that Jesus gives at His table. "As surely as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup given to me, so surely was His body offered for me and His blood poured out for me on the cross." The point of comparison is the degree of certainty; as surely as I see the bread of the Lord broken for me, so surely His body was offered for me. It's *certain*. As the disciples remember, they should not doubt the reality of what happened, should not doubt its value either; Christ's death on the cross was *for their benefit*.

But that's not all. Jesus gave bread to each disciple, each was told to "take, eat; this is My body." Why was each disciple given a morsel of bread and told to eat it? Because Jesus' body was broken *specifically for them*. So too the cup; each was told to "drink from it, all of you." Why was each disciple to drink from it? Because Jesus' blood was shed *specifically for them*. Jesus *personalises* the gospel of redemption, Jesus impresses upon each disciple that His sacrifice on the cross was *for them*, was for Peter and for James and for Thaddeus and for Nathanael and for them all. Peter and James and Thaddeus and Nathanael could taste that bread in their mouths, could feel the sensation of swallowing the wine. There could be no doubt; they'd truly eaten bread, they'd truly swallowed wine. Well now: *as surely as* they ate *they* bread and drank the wine, *so surely* Christ's sacrifice on the cross was *for them*. O yes, such were their sins that *they* ought to die; it's what God said in the beginning. But Jesus' body is broken and His blood shed "*for them*", and that's to say that Jesus dies *instead of them*, dies *in their place*, dies *for their benefit*. In the words of our LD: "as surely as I receive from the hand of the minister and taste with my mouth the bread and cup of the Lord as sure signs of Christ's body and blood, so surely does He Himself nourish and refresh my soul to everlasting life with His crucified body and shed blood." *God would leave no room for doubt*; He wants certainty, wants assurance of faith.

But is it not here, my brothers and sisters, that the challenge lies? In truth, through this meal of remembrance the Lord would comfort His own with the assurance that He died for them. But we see sin in ourselves and we find God far away and it's so difficult to pray..., and as a result we're so very convinced that we're not worthy of God's grace and

therefore God won't give it; our relation with God is weak, we must do something about it....

The Lord our God, beloved, is a step ahead of us. In our moments of doubt and hesitation, what does He do? This: He sets before us *repeatedly the same sacrament time and again*, and He tells us time and again to eat, to drink. By giving us His broken bread to eat, and giving us the cup to drink, the Lord God would impress upon us just how close we are to Christ and Christ to us. For we eat *His* body, and we drink *His* blood. Sure, Christ is in heaven and we are on earth. More, in the midst of our weaknesses we feel distant from the Saviour. But Christ in heaven, brothers and sisters, would impress on us how close He is to us, and therefore how close we really are to Him. The Bible somewhere describes our relation with Him as "members of His body" (I Cor 6:15). Truly, to can't get much closer than that! In the Catechism we reflect the closeness embodied in that concept by referring to the song Adam sung when God gave Eve to him. "This," he said, "is now bone of my bones And flesh of my flesh; She shall be called Woman, Because she was taken out of Man" (Gen 2:23). In the perfection of Paradise nothing came between the first husband and his wife; they were *one* in every sense of the word. *That* is the picture Scripture portrays of how close Christ is to us, and therefore how close we are to Christ. Christ may be in heaven and we on earth, but the fact of the matter is that we are united with Christ through the work He did on the cross of Calvary. By setting us at His table and having us eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord, our Saviour impresses that *closeness* upon us.

Then we may feel that *our* relation with God is weak, and we may think that we've got work to do here. And it may all be true. But the Lord sets a more fundamental truth before us, and that's the fact that *He* is close *to us*. And if *He* is close *to us*, then it follows that *we are close to Him* – even if we don't feel that way. If we then bear in mind that our feelings are sinful and therefore never the measure of reality, we are comforted. Despite our sins, the Lord our God for Jesus' sake is close to us, has a personal relation with us; how marvellous is the gospel of Jesus Christ! Yes, by having us eat, drink and *remember* at His table, the Lord drives home to us the *certainty* of His grace toward us.

With what eagerness, then, shall we await the table next month! Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 29 & 30a of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 12 December 1999.

"AT THE TABLE OF THE LORD, GOD DIRECTS OUR ATTENTION AWAY FROM THIS BROKEN LIFE AND ONTO OUR ASCENDED SAVIOUR."

Text:

Lord's Day 29 & 30a

78. Q. Are then the bread and wine changed into the real body and blood of Christ?

A. No. Just as the water of baptism is not changed into the blood of Christ and is not the washing away of sins itself but is simply God's sign and pledge,[1] so also the bread in the Lord's supper does not become the body of Christ itself,[2] although it is called Christ's body[3] in keeping with the nature and usage of sacraments.[4]

[1] Eph. 5:26; Tit. 3:5. [2] Matt. 26:26-29. [3] I Cor. 10:16, 17; 11:26-28. [4] Gen. 17:10, 11; Ex. 12:11, 13; I Cor. 10:3, 4; I Pet. 3:21.

79. Q. Why then does Christ call the bread His body and the cup His blood, or the new covenant in His blood, and why does Paul speak of a participation in the body and blood of Christ?

A. Christ speaks in this way for a good reason: He wants to teach us by His supper that as bread and wine sustain us in this temporal life, so His crucified body and shed blood are true food and drink for our souls to eternal life.[1] But, even more important, He wants to assure us by this visible sign and pledge, first, that through the working of the Holy Spirit we share in His true body and blood as surely as we receive with our mouth these holy signs in remembrance of Him,[2] and, second, that all His suffering and obedience are as certainly ours as if we personally had suffered and paid for our sins.[3]

[1] John 6:51, 55. [2] I Cor. 10:16, 17; 11:26. [3] Rom. 6:5-11.

80. Q. What difference is there between the Lord's supper and the papal mass?

A. The Lord's supper testifies to us, first, that we have complete forgiveness of all our sins through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which He Himself accomplished on the cross once for all;[1] and, second, that through the Holy Spirit we are grafted into Christ,[2] who with His true body is now in heaven at the right hand of the Father,[3] and this is where He wants to be worshipped.[4] But the mass teaches, first, that the living and the dead do not have forgiveness of sins through the suffering of Christ unless He is still offered for them daily by the priests; and, second, that Christ is bodily present in the form of bread and wine, and there is to be worshipped. Therefore the mass is basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ, and an accursed idolatry.

[1] Matt. 26:28; John 19:30; Heb. 7:27; 9:12, 25, 26; 10:10-18. [2] I Cor. 6:17; 10:16, 17. [3] Joh. 20:17; Acts 7:55, 56; Heb. 1:3; 8:1. [4] John 4:21-24; Phil. 3:20; Col. 3:1; I Thess. 1:10.

Scripture Reading:

Hebrews 9:11-28

John 6:48-59

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 143:4,5

Psalm 27:6

Psalm 84:3,4

Psalm 62:1,4

Hymn 46:1,2

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

There was very little of pomp and ceremony at the Supper of the Lord today. There was even less to eat and drink. In fact, we spent more time at the table watching and reading Scripture and singing than in actually eating, chewing, swallowing. Truly, it wasn't much of a meal....

Shortly we go home again, and tomorrow back to our work. Home and work: both at home and at work we're confronted with so much sin, so much brokenness, so much vanity, so many disappointments. Sure, we look forward to the holiday season, and we intend to enjoy those holidays too, but the fact of the matter is that we know today already that even in the holidays we'll face more of brokenness, of sin, of the vanity of life. Before we return to the brokenness of this life, we may this afternoon reflect on the Supper we ate today. For that's the purpose of this Supper; the Lord would strengthen us so that we can handle the disappointments and challenges of this vale of tears.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

AT THE TABLE OF THE LORD, GOD DIRECTS OUR ATTENTION AWAY FROM THIS
BROKEN LIFE AND ONTO OUR ASCENDED SAVIOUR.

1. We by nature stare at our brokenness
2. God in mercy pulls our gaze to heaven

We Stare at our Brokenness

The Lord in His Word is very clear that the human heart is deceitful to the very depths of its being. The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is that God forgives sinners without it costing sinners so much as a single sigh. But that doesn't go down well with us. Human nature wants to contribute something to salvation. We're sure: God does not truly forgive unless we go to church faithfully or read the Bible regularly or spend enough time in prayer. These little actions: they are our little contribution to obtaining - or maintaining- God's favour.

This bent of the human heart to look at self received mature expression in the course of Church History in the Roman Catholic Church. This church developed and taught a doctrine of salvation by grace in Jesus Christ *plus* your own contribution. So: one was not saved by God's grace *alone*; one had to perform particular *works*. Reformers as Martin Luther and John Calvin understand that this heresy lay at the heart of the Roman Catholic celebration of the Mass. That in turn is why the churches of the Reformation went out of their way to criticise the Roman Catholic mass, and to make clear to the people of the day why the mass was an "accursed idolatry". Even till today, this Roman Catholic mass remains as a symbol of how eager the human heart is to making some contribution to our salvation.

The mass is characterised by magic. The magic I speak of goes under the official term 'transubstantiation'. This is the notion that the bread in the hand of the celebrating priest becomes the actual and real body of Jesus Christ, and the wine becomes Christ's real blood. It happens through a process of words spoken by the priest. For centuries on end, whenever the officiating priest held up the bread and uttered a string of Latin words, the bread in his hand became (it was said) the actual and real body of Christ. That is also why the priest alone ate the bread, lest a crumb of the Lord's body fall to the ground..., and then a mouse eat it....

We chuckle at that teaching, but there was, brothers and sisters, a reason why the bread had to become the real body of Christ and the wine His blood. The reason is that this teaching focuses the human mind on *self*. Listen. When the priest broke that bread, he was breaking not actual bread; he was breaking instead the actual body of Christ. And when the priest poured the wine, he was pouring not real wine but the actual blood of Christ. *That's to say that the priest was offering Christ again as a payment to God for the sins of those in church at the time*. Certainly, the Lord's body was broken and His blood was shed *on the cross*; no self-respecting Roman Catholic would deny that. But, official Roman Catholic doctrine teaches, that sacrifice on the cross 2000 years ago is by itself not sufficient; Christ needs to be offered *again* for the benefits obtained on the cross to become your own.

How, then, does one become righteous before God? According to Roman Catholic teaching, God will declare a person

innocent of sin on the grounds of Christ's sacrifice on the cross *plus* the work of the priest at the mass. Without that mass, Christ's work on Calvary helps you nothing; people need to do something – offer Christ again. To gain God's approval more is needed than Christ alone; to gain God's approval you need to make some contribution.

Now, it is fact that this is contrary to what the Lord has taught in His Word. Think, for example, of the passage we read from Heb 9. The apostle writes in vs 12 like this:

"Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption."

Note the past tense, the references to work completely done. In fact, it's because Jesus "obtained eternal redemption" that He entered the Most Holy Place –that's heaven- "once for all." Done is done. The same point is drawn out in vs 25:

"not [writes the apostle] that [Jesus] should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood of another - He then would have had to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now, once at the end of the ages, He has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself."

The decisive sacrifice, says that apostle, was made on Calvary. That sacrifice happened once, now 2000 years ago, and as a result Jesus has "put away sin" and so God was pleased to receive Jesus into His own holy presence. Need Christ be offered today still? The Bible is clear: absolutely not. The Saviour's work on the cross so long ago is sufficient to pay for the sins of all who call on His name. LD 30:

"We have complete forgiveness of all our sins through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which He Himself accomplished on the cross once for all."

So, brothers and sisters, there is no need at all for any sinner to think in terms of ourselves making a contribution to God in order to obtain His approval. Heb 9 is clear as a bell: Christ's work is both finished and absolutely sufficient. That is why we could confess in LD 23 that God "imputes to [us] the perfect satisfaction, righteous and holiness of Christ." That is also why in turn we confessed in LD 24 that we don't have to do good works to win God's approval; we *have* that approval. That's what we repeat at the very end of LD 29: "all [Christ's] suffering and obedience are as certainly ours as if we personally had suffered and paid for our sins." His work 2000 years ago spells out that our sins today are gone, gone forever *and our contribution to that is zero!*

But it's not only so that the Roman Catholic teaching does injustice to our Saviour's work on Calvary. That teaching also draws our attention to *self*. For the self needs to *do* something to impress God. And given the amount of brokenness there is in this life, given the sins I commit (and I commit so many I don't even see as sin), I must –by this thinking- attend mass time and time again, day after day, hour after hour.... For always I need to look at myself; did I do enough, must I do more, should I try this, that, something else.... That whole system compels the sinner to keep his eye on his sins, on the brokenness of this life... Yes, how poor....

And please, congregation, do not think that in a Reformed Church the thinking behind the papal mass would never arise. I said it before: such is the sinfulness of the human heart that it's in us to want to do something to gain God's favour. My sins: was I humble enough for God to forgive them?

That is why it is so imperative today that we understand well what we actually saw and ate at the table today. That's our second point:

God in mercy pulls our gaze to heaven

What God did today? Sovereign God set broken sinners at His table. Before He set us at His table today He knew how sinful we were, knew what sins we'd committed this past week – be it sins of action or of words or of thoughts. He knew too, before He drew us to His table, whether we were sufficiently humble, whether we longed for the table much

or not, knew how well we're going to fare this coming week in the battle against sin. *And God passed all of those considerations by!* He did not ask of us sacrifice Christ again, nor did He ask us to pray for half an hour before we came to church, or put an extra amount in the collection bag to show our need for forgiveness.... He asked from us nothing that might be understood as making ourselves worthy to attend His table. Rather, He sovereignly took us from our homes, brought us to church, set us at His table, and then freely *gave* us that piece of bread, and that taste of wine.

What that was? Q & A 78: that bread was and remained real bread, and that wine was and remained real wine; it did not change into the body and blood of Christ. Yet it was more than bread and wine; that bread and wine we ate and drank today prompted us to remember *Christ*. That's to say: it reminded us of His work 2000 years ago. But the Lord's purpose is not simply that our thoughts go back to what Jesus did for our benefit so long ago, for the very same Christ who died so long ago arose from the dead and *labours today still*. This Jesus is today in heaven, and at the right hand of God He intercedes for us. That's to say: in heaven today Jesus reminds the Father of what He did so long ago for our benefit. Jesus in heaven does not today impress on the Father how good *we've* been or how hard *we've* tried or how often *we've* come to church or how humble *we* were at the Lord's table. No, in heaven today Jesus reminds the Father time and again of the work *He* did for our benefit on the cross of Calvary. As we eat that broken bread and drink the cup at the Lord's table, this is where He would direct our attention; the focus has to be not on *our* sins or on *our* efforts or on *our* achievements but on *Him in heaven*. In the words of the Lord's Supper Form:

"we must not cling with our hearts to the outward symbols of bread and wine, but lift our hearts on high in heaven, where Christ, our advocate, is, at the right hand of His heavenly Father."

There is where our focus must be. And to get our focus *away from ourselves*, to get our focus *onto Christ in heaven*, the Lord gave us today the bread and the drink.

Here I draw your attention to Q & A 79. Christ calls the bread His body and the cup His blood - why?- because "He wants to teach us by His supper that as bread and wine sustain us in this temporal life, so His crucified body and shed blood are true food and drink for our souls to eternal life." The point here is that (in the words of the *Belgic Confession*, Article 35) that believers have "a twofold life. One is physical and temporal, which they received in their first birth and it is common to all men. The other is spiritual and heavenly, which is given [to believers] in their second birth...." We all know that "for the support of the physical and earthly life God has ordained earthly and material bread." That's why we eat sandwiches for lunch (or maybe tea); bread sustains, re-energises our bodies. But, "for the support of the spiritual and heavenly life, which believers have, [God] has sent them a living bread which came down from heaven, namely, Jesus Christ." This living bread must be eaten, and that's what we did at the table of the Lord. We ate a small piece of bread and a quick taste of wine, and yet we understand that we ate and drank much more than simply that. For in the bread and the wine was *our Saviour*, and it's Him we need to eat. In Jesus' words:

"I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world" (vs 51).

How one eats Christ? We're not cannibals; we don't eat actual flesh. Besides, Christ is in heaven and we can't pull Him down to eat Him. But He comes to us *in the bread and wine*, and commands us to eat so that our spiritual beings may be nourished through Him, the only heavenly bread. With the mouth of the body we eat the bread of mother's table and so nourish our bodies, and with the mouth of the soul we eat the bread of the Lord's table and so nourish our souls. Using that mouth of the soul is an exercise of faith; *I believe* that when I eat the bread at the Lord's table and drink from His cup I in effect receive the gospel of Jesus Christ for the strengthening of my spiritual life, my soul. The very Christ who is today in heaven, pleading with the Father for my benefit, reaches down to me on earth to assure me that my sins are truly forgiven, reaches down to assure me that I have part in the gospel of redemption. By that bread and drink, He would impress upon me that the sins of which I know I'm guilty, the sins of which I'm repentant, are washed away *without cost to me*. Freely I get the bread and drink at His table; I don't have to pay for it. Freely I get the Christ symbolised by the bread and drink; I don't have to pay for Him and His saving work – be it the work He did for me on the cross so long ago or the work He does for me in heaven today.

Shall I, then, focus on the sins of my life? Shall I stare myself blind at what I need to do to obtain God's favour? Shall I come to God with the sacrifice of His Son, whom I've offered to Him again and again? Shall I send Him a thousand

prayers? Or ten thousand sighs of how sorry I am and how much I regret what I did? The Lord, brothers and sisters, would have us tear our focus off ourselves, off our sins, off our sorrow for sin, off our efforts to win His approval, off our achievements, and the Lord would have us focus our attention solely and only on the Christ in heaven. Once for all He sacrificed Himself on the cross of Calvary, and there obtained complete salvation. Today He intercedes with the Father for the salvation of those for whom He died. And those for whom He died He today places at the table of the Lord in order to nourish and refresh their hungry and thirsty souls.

That's what you saw today, beloved: *your Saviour hard at work*. In His workshop He set you at His table in order to impress upon you that His body was broken 2000 years ago and His blood was shed *in order to pay for your sins*. Today He laboured to get your focus off yourself and onto Him, laboured in order to impress upon you the absolute need to lift your eyes off your own brokenness and the brokenness of this life, and lift your eyes instead onto the salvation He has obtained for you and is today applying to you in the courts of heaven.

We leave church, return to the challenges of our homes, our work, our holidays. We take our sinful selves with us, take with us our memories of sins committed, take with us selves that are sure to sin tomorrow. But now we know: there is no place for despair, no place for staring blindly at the brokenness we see in ourselves, no place for staring blindly at our repeated failures to impress God. Christ has set us at His table, and nourished us with heavenly food and drink. So there is room only for praise to such a God of boundless mercy, room only for deep gratitude for His deliverance.

And the sins that continue to sit on my conscience? I'm assured –for at His table Christ said so- that they're gone, all gone – at no cost to me. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 30 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday Morning, 8 March 1998.

"THE LORD HAS PREPARED HIS SUPPER ONLY FOR HIS BELIEVERS."

Text:

Lord's Day 30

80. Q. What difference is there between the Lord's supper and the papal mass?

A. The Lord's supper testifies to us, first, that we have complete forgiveness of all our sins through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which He Himself accomplished on the cross once for all;[1] and, second, that through the Holy Spirit we are grafted into Christ,[2] who with His true body is now in heaven at the right hand of the Father,[3] and this is where He wants to be worshipped.[4] But the mass teaches, first, that the living and the dead do not have forgiveness of sins through the suffering of Christ unless He is still offered for them daily by the priests; and, second, that Christ is bodily present in the form of bread and wine, and there is to be worshipped. Therefore the mass is basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ, and an accursed idolatry.

[1] Matt. 26:28; John 19:30; Heb. 7:27; 9:12, 25, 26; 10:10-18. [2] I Cor. 6:17; 10:16, 17. [3] Joh. 20:17; Acts 7:55, 56; Heb. 1:3; 8:1. [4] John 4:21-24; Phil. 3:20; Col. 3:1; I Thess. 1:10.

81. Q. Who are to come to the table of the Lord?

A. Those who are truly displeased with themselves because of their sins and yet trust that these are forgiven them and that their remaining weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and amend their life. But hypocrites and those who do not repent eat and drink judgment upon themselves.[1]

[1] I Cor. 10:19-22; 11:26-32.

82. Q. Are those also to be admitted to the Lord's supper who by their confession and life show that they are unbelieving and ungodly?

A. No, for then the covenant of God would be profaned and His wrath kindled against the whole congregation.[1] Therefore, according to the command of Christ and His apostles, the Christian church is duty-bound to exclude such persons by the keys of the kingdom of heaven, until they amend their lives.

[1] Ps. 50:16; Is. 1:11-17; I Cor. 11:17-34.

Scripture Reading:

I Corinthians 5:1-8

I Corinthians 10:14-22

I Corinthians 11:17-32

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalms 16:1

Psalms 99:5,6

Psalms 130:2,3,4

Psalms 134:3

Hymns 44:1,2

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Last week, as you will recall, we received opportunity to listen to the Word of God as we confess it in LD 28. Today I ask your attention for LD 30. The reason for considering today LD 30 is simply the fact that next week we hope to celebrate the supper of the Lord - and the question LD 30 asks is: who should and who should not attend the table of the Lord. As we prepare ourselves this week to attend the supper of the Lord next Sunday, it's most in place to listen to what the Lord in Scripture says about who should attend His table. Next week we deal, if the Lord wills, with LD 29.

This morning we also may receive from the Lord two new elders in our congregation. The question of who may attend the Lord's Supper very much involves the work of the elders. Q 82 asks whether the "unbelieving and ungodly" are "to be admitted". Those last words, "to be admitted", describes a task given to elders; they are to guard the table of the Lord. In the words of the Form for Ordination of Elders, "They shall watch that the sacraments are not profaned." As we set ourselves to ordaining the two appointed brothers, we do well to give some consideration to this task of the elders.

Well, now, who should attend the supper of the Lord next Sunday? Should the elders open the table for all in church next Sunday who wish to attend? Or would the Lord have there be some sort of fence around the table? If there should be a fence, where should that fence be? And whose responsibility is it to abide by the fence? And why??

It's easy to ask questions. In His mercy, though, the Lord also gives answers. In fact, He tells us in His Word that He sets the table before us next Sunday out of love for His people. He knows our circumstances and struggles, and so in grace sets the table before us in order to strengthen our faith. There, then, is the answer as to who of us may attend the table next Sunday; God would have those of us attend *who have faith in Him*. And faith, we know, cannot be hidden. *Next Sunday, all those of us with faith in Jesus Christ must attend the table of the Lord.*

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

THE LORD HAS PREPARED HIS SUPPER ONLY FOR HIS BELIEVERS.

We consider three questions:

- 1. who is to attend this table?**
- 2. how am I to prepare for this table?**
- 3. must the elders guard this table?**

1. Q & A 81 begins with a well formulated question: "Who are to come to the table of the Lord?" Note that the question is not: who are *permitted* to attend the Lord's table? The question is: who *are* to come to that table. The question is worded this way because attendance at the supper of the Lord is not a matter of choice; it's a *command*. Recall what we read from I Cor 11, where Paul reminds the Corinthian believers (cf I Cor 1:2) of Jesus' words at the first Lord's Supper celebration: "Take," said Jesus, "eat". Those two words are commands, instructions the disciples were obliged to obey, and the Corinthian believers were too. After all, the commands come from the *Lord*. That's why we could confess with LD 28: "Christ has commanded me and all believers to eat of this broken bread...." Christ died for sinners, sinners through the work of the Holy Spirit believe, and at His table the Lord would strengthen their faith. No believer, then, may choose to stay away from the table of the Lord. All are commanded to come.

There is a reason why God has commanded His believers to come. We read Paul's words to the Corinthians in chap 10. He says: "the cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" That is: those who drink from the cup of the Lord *share* in what the Lord is all about - is the purpose of the sacrament not that God would impress upon us that we share in Christ and all His gifts? (cf LD 28). So too: those who eat from the bread share in what Christ obtained by dying for us. It's as it was, says Paul, with Israel in the Old Testament: those who brought sacrifices in the temple also ate from those sacrifices, and that eating drove home to the Israelite that the forgiveness signified in the sacrifice was really *his*.

So: God would set us face to face with the fact that His Son's body was broken and His blood poured out *in order to pay for our sins*; we *share* in Christ and His benefits. As we are attacked by Satan in the storms of life, as we struggle

with our doubts and our sense of unworthiness and our sins themselves, the Lord *commands* us to sit at His table so that He might take all doubt away from us, might impress on our sin-filled minds that indeed "we have complete forgiveness of all our sins" - and maybe we can name some of them- "we have complete forgiveness of all our sins through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which He Himself accomplished on the cross once for all."

See there, beloved, the depth of the Father's love for us. We receive no choice in the matter; we are *told* to attend - why?- because God would impress on us that *our* sins are really forgiven!

Here, dear brothers elders, is a wonderful task you receive. For you may repeatedly lay before the congregation, in the ups and downs faced by the members, that God *commands* them to come to the table - why?- because He would convince them that His Son really died *for them*. Truly, here is a privilege beyond compare: to be allowed to remind sinners of God's promises for them!

At the same time, brothers, the Lord commands also *you* to come to the table. And yes, the reason is the same as for others to come there: God would convince you too that *you* "have complete forgiveness of all [your] sins." And truly, here is a gospel as wonderful as is the privilege of encouraging others: there is actually forgiveness for *our* sins, brothers, forgiveness even for the sins we commit as we strive to carry out the office God has laid upon us. Indeed, how gracious is God in His mercy to us!

2. God commands *believers* to attend next Sunday, commands the believers in our midst to attend *because* they share in the benefits of Christ's sacrifice, commands these believers to attend *in order to convince them* that they share in the benefits of Christ's sacrifice.

This reality tells us straightaway too, beloved, that *only* the believers in our midst may attend. At the table of the Lord next Sunday, the Lord would demonstrate before our eyes that His body was broken, His blood was poured out, and that it was done specifically for *you*, as Christ says. That means clearly: those for whom Christ did not die have no right to be at that table; in fact, they are forbidden to be there. As the Lord's Supper Form says: "Christ has ordained this food only for His believers."

Before one can sit at table, then, there must first be union with Christ. Union with Christ, faith in Him: that's the condition to attendance. Now, we *could* take it for granted that we belong to Christ, share in all His treasures and gifts. After all, we go to church every Sunday. And we've been to the table for years.... But page with me for a moment, beloved, through the letter of Paul to the Corinthians.

- a. Consider first the words of Paul in I Cor 5. The passage tells us that there was in the congregation of Corinth a brother - and yes, in vs 11 he's called a "brother- who gave himself to blatant sin - and (O terrible tragedy!) nobody in the congregation condemned him for it! In that context the apostle writes in vs 8 that the Corinthians are to "keep the feast", and his reference is to the Passover - yet not the Old Testament Passover as such, but its New Testament replacement (for Christ has died), and that replacement is the Lord's supper. They are to "keep the feast", he says, but are to do so after they have purged out the old leaven (vs 7), after they have cut out all "malice and wickedness". What's to remain, he says, is only "sincerity and truth". That means specifically: the brother of the congregation who "has his father's wife" - and I repeat: he claimed he was a believer, he *was* a brother of the congregation!- was not to attend the table of the Lord. Though he was one of the "saints" of Corinth, he was not to attend in his current situation.
- b. Again, this same point is drawn out in the apostle's words in chap 10. Vs 16: "the cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" That is: those who drink from the cup of the Lord share in what the Lord is all about; those who eat from the bread share in the forgiveness Christ obtained by dying for us - Christ's benefits are *his*. But *how can one claim forgiveness if one is not repentant of sin??* It's the implication of what the apostle writes: if you continue in sin - or, to put it in the apostle's words, if you "have fellowship with demons"- if you continue in sin, you cannot and you may not partake of the Lord's table. Says Paul: "You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons; you cannot partake of the Lord's table and of the table of demons" (vs 21). And he adds: to do so is to provoke the Lord to jealousy (vs 22). So: none of us in this congregation can *automatically*

go to the Lord's table next Sunday; the table is prepared next Sunday only for the repentant, the humble, those who seek their salvation in Jesus Christ alone.

- c. Later in the same letter to the Corinthians Paul even draws out what consequences followed in Corinth from the fact that various attended the table who should not be there. Paul tells us that members of the congregation appeared at the table of the Lord to celebrate His sacrifice, but they were not convinced of their own depravity, of their absolute need for Christ, nor did they live a life of repentance and faith. It appears that the congregation of Corinth would come together for the preaching of the gospel, then bring out their picnic baskets for a bite to eat, and after that celebrate the Lord's supper. Some in the congregation were well-to-do, and so brought big baskets full of the best, while others were poor and had nothing more than, shall we say, a cracker. And what happened was that the well-to-do sat in the one corner and ate their fill, while the poor sat in the other corner and watched. When the rich had eaten their fill, and the poor were still drooling over what the rich had pulled out of their baskets, they pushed the tables together to celebrate the death of the Saviour for the strengthening of faith. That's the conduct that brings upon the congregation the reprimand of the apostle in vs 22: "What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you in this? I do not praise you."

Then the apostle proceeds to explain what this supper of the Lord is all about (vss 23-25). He ties it all together in vs 26: "as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death." But why did the Lord die? Was it not for sin? How, then, can one treasure sin - and the conduct of the Corinthian brethren toward each other certainly did not demonstrate brotherly love!- how can one treasure sin if one confesses at the table that Christ died to pay for my sin?! That's simply contradictory! To eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord while maintaining a lack of brotherly love is, says Paul, to "be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord". That is: to eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord while living in sin is to be guilty of killing Christ yourself! (cf Heb 6:4-6). But then judgment must invariably follow, as indeed it did in Corinth. "For this reason," says Paul in vs 30, "many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep" - and 'sleep' is a polite way of speaking about death. You see, beloved, they died because the anger of a holy God was provoked by their attending the table without being repentant of sin, without showing concretely their gratitude for the redemption Christ had obtained for them on the cross (cf 10:22). And we should know: God has not changed.

The conclusion of the matter? This: do not say too quickly - even if you've attended the table for years already- do not say too quickly that you are *entitled* to attend the table next Sunday. The instruction of Paul to the "saints" of Corinth to *examine* the self before they "eat of the bread and drink of the cup" - and who knows how many years *they've* been to the table already!- surely tells us that we too must "first rightly...examine ourselves" before we go to the table. So we have work to do this week.

But how, congregation, are we to do this examining? What does this actually include for us this week?

To take away all misunderstanding, let me tell you first what it does *not* include. This self-examination does not imply that we ask ourselves time and again whether or not we really are children of God, whether or not Christ really died for us. That's a question *we are not allowed to ask*. Has God not established His covenant of grace with us, and so had us baptised as a sign and seal of His promises? Has He in the covenant not *promised* to be our Father, and to forgive our sins for Jesus' sake, and to dwell in us by His Holy Spirit? God's words are never hollow; I am, therefore, to *accept* what God has said. So: I am not allowed to question whether I really am a child of God. God has said I am, and that's all there is to it.

The question I *am* to ask is this: do I *believe* what God has said? And that, brothers and sisters, is what examining oneself comes down to. God in His Word has told me that day by day I sin grievously against all God's commands, never keep any of them, and tomorrow I shall commit evil again. The question is: do I *accept* this sorry state-of-affairs, *accept* that I am empty before Him, worthy only of His wrath? God has told me in His Word that He has also given His only Son to pay for my sins; out of mere grace He freely imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ. That's what God says; now the question is: do I *accept* this gracious gift? Or do I reckon that I don't need Christ, or Christ hasn't died for me, or God's words are nonsense? God has said that His Holy Spirit would renew my heart so that I live more and more for Him. Well now, do I *accept* this promise, and see in

myself a desire gratefully to serve the Lord more and more?

Those three elements I've mentioned come from what Paul in his letter to the Romans laid before the believers of that city; the book of Romans is built around three truths embraced by all believers, and the three are these: believers embrace 1. the reality of their personal sin and misery, 2. they embrace the reality of God's deliverance in Jesus Christ, and 3. they embrace the reality that gratitude invariably appears in their lives through the renewing work of the Holy Spirit.

The Heidelberg Catechism follows the pattern of the book of Romans, and is divided into these same three parts; to live and die in the joy of the only comfort in life and death, the believer must know "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" (LD 1.2). These are equally the three items that appear in our LD in answer to the question about "who are to come to the table of the Lord." Says our LD: those must come "who 1. are truly displeased with themselves because of their sins and 2. yet trust that these are forgiven them and that their remaining weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who 3. also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and amend their life." And these three, beloved, are also the items that appear in the Form for the Celebration of the Lord's supper, in the section on self-examination.

And these were the items lacking in Corinth. Do you really think that the brother of I Cor 5 was displeased with himself on account of his sin? And did the people of I Cor 10 who partook of the table of demons seek their deliverance and salvation only in Jesus Christ? And did the well-to-do of I Cor 11, while they let the poor hunger, demonstrate a desire more and more to amend their lives?

No, beloved, if you would come to the table of the Lord next Sunday, you shall first need to examine yourself. Just because you come to church every Sunday and have made profession of the faith - or even are ordained to the office of elder!- does not mean that you may automatically attend. You shall need to see to it that you have *faith* - how can faith ever be strengthened if there is no faith?!- and the presence of faith is *demonstrated* by 1. an admission of my sins and therefore an attitude of humility because of those sins, it's demonstrated further by 2. fleeing to Christ as the only way out from under the wrath of God that must otherwise come upon me, it's demonstrated also by 3. a hearty desire to live more and more in obedience to God in all the circumstances of my life. Without sorrow for sin in my heart, without fleeing to Christ in the midst of my sins and failures and weaknesses, without a desire in my heart to obey the Lord more and more, there is no place for me at the table of the Lord. LD 30 says it like this: "hypocrites and those who do not repent eat and drink judgment upon themselves."

3. Now our last point: my attendance at the table of the Lord is first of all my own responsibility; that's the instruction of Paul in Corinthians (cf 11:28). Still, the apostle also realises that there is a communal responsibility here. I refer again to I Cor 5, that passage about the man of the congregation "who has his father's wife". The apostle gives the instruction to "deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus" (vs 5). Who is to deliver this man to Satan? That is: who is to "purge out the old leaven", who is to ensure that he does sit at the Lord's table? The apostle, beloved, gives the command *to the entire congregation!* That's 1:2: this letter is written to the "saints", the believers, the church of Christ in Corinth. So: it is first of all the responsibility of the congregation as a whole to ensure that the table of the Lord is not profaned.

And again, we can appreciate that fact. If abuse of the table results, as it did in Corinth, in sickness and even death, I shall do my utmost to ensure not only that *I* can rightly attend, but also that *my brother* rightly attends! That is love for the brother, and such love is evidence of thankfulness for God's redemption.

Yet - and this is material to which we'll come back in LD 31- it is the elders in particular who have received from the Lord the responsibility to ensure that none comes lightly to the table, comes without being repentant of sin, comes without fleeing to Christ for forgiveness, comes without being determined more and more to amend ones life. I quote again the words of the Form for Ordination of Elders, "They shall watch that the sacraments are not profaned." When our LD, in Q 82, asks whether "those also to be admitted to the Lord's supper who by their confession and life show that they are unbelieving and ungodly?", the Catechism has the elder in mind. It is the elder who guards the table.

You cannot, dear brothers elders, look inside the hearts of any of the flock over which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. But you have read in the Bible that you know a tree by its fruit (Mt 7:16ff). The congregation is to engage in self-examination. And you, my brothers, need to be content - as much as it is humanly possible- that those who would go to the table are indeed sorry for sin, repentant, broken of heart before God because of the concrete iniquities they have committed. You, my brothers, need to be content - as much as it is humanly possible- that those who would go to the table indeed flee in their midst of their sins to the only Saviour Jesus Christ, and seek His grace. You, my brothers, need to be content - as much as it is humanly possible- that those who would go to the table are fully determined to fight tomorrow against the sins into which they've fallen yesterday. No, you can't look in the heart. But sorrow for sin cannot be hidden, and fleeing to Christ for redemption cannot be hidden either, nor can a struggle to fight against weaknesses. You'll not dare to provoke God to jealousy (I Cor 10:22), and so may cannot permit to the table those who do not show themselves *in deeds* to be Christians.

Certainly, to read a persons conduct rightly requires much wisdom from the Lord. And to close the table to those who show no evidence of having done true self-examination takes much courage. Altogether we shall need much forgiveness for sin ourselves. But set yourselves to your work this week, dear brothers, and every week that God gives work in the office, set yourselves to guarding the Lord's table in the conviction that the Christ who loved His own so much that He died for them - and isn't that what the Lord's supper teaches?- will give the wisdom and the courage you need.

And you, brothers and sisters of the congregation, give yourselves this week and every week to humble self-examination. Then, when your elders come to visit you, you will be able to receive them warmly and they for their part will be privileged to encourage you to attend the table of the Lord. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 31 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 19 April 1998.

"NONE IN THE CHURCH OF GOD MAY BE DEPRIVED OF THE BENEFITS OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE."

Text:

Lord's Day 31

83. Q. What are the keys of the kingdom of heaven?

A. The preaching of the holy gospel and church discipline. By these two the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers and closed to unbelievers.[1]

[1] *Matt. 16:19; John 20:21-23.*

84. Q. How is the kingdom of heaven opened and closed by the preaching of the gospel?

A. According to the command of Christ, the kingdom of heaven is opened when it is proclaimed and publicly testified to each and every believer that God has really forgiven all their sins for the sake of Christ's merits, as often as they by true faith accept the promise of the gospel. The kingdom of heaven is closed when it is proclaimed and testified to all unbelievers and hypocrites that the wrath of God and eternal condemnation rest on them as long as they do not repent. According to this testimony of the gospel, God will judge both in this life and in the life to come.[1]

[1] *Matt. 16:19; John 3:31-36; 20:21-23.*

85. Q. How is the kingdom of heaven closed and opened by church discipline?

A. According to the command of Christ, people who call themselves Christians but show themselves to be unchristian in doctrine or life are first repeatedly admonished in a brotherly manner. If they do not give up their errors or wickedness, they are reported to the church, that is, to the elders. If they do not heed also their admonitions, they are forbidden the use of the sacraments, and they are excluded by the elders from the Christian congregation, and by God Himself from the kingdom of Christ.[1] They are again received as members of Christ and of the church when they promise and show real amendment.[2]

[1] *Matt. 18:15-20; I Cor. 5:3-5; 11-13; II Thess. 3:14, 15. [2] Luke 15:20-24; II Cor. 2:6-11.*

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 18:10-22

Colossians 3:12-17

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalms 5:2,3,4

Psalms 6:1,6 (Ps 89:1 after baptism)

Psalms 141:4

Psalms 119:17,18,21

Psalms 34:5,6,7

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Church discipline: does the concept sound pleasant to you, or horrible? I put it to you that to many ears the words "church discipline" has a very negative ring to it. Church discipline: that's what you apply when someone has sinned, has failed to obey God's law. Church discipline: that's meddling in someone else's life, judging him, even

condemning him to hell.... Church discipline: it's an offensive concept....

Church discipline, my brothers and sisters, is one of the marks of the true church. So: any church lacking church discipline - or, for that matter, any church which takes church discipline too lightly- cannot claim to be a church of Jesus Christ. To our ears church discipline may have something negative about it, but church discipline is Jesus' gift to His people! If we wish to be a church of Jesus Christ, we shall need to appreciate what the Lord has given in this gift, shall need also to consider whether we exercise this discipline sufficiently. And: how can we improve on our use of church discipline?

I mentioned already: church discipline tends to be understood as referring to correction, as a not-very-pleasant thing that must be done when there is sin. For that very reason I want to draw out today that church discipline is in fact a blessing. Further, we shall have to know that church discipline is not only *corrective* in character; church discipline is first of all to be *preventive*. In fact, one can speak of two kinds of discipline, the first being preventive, the second being corrective. Both preventive discipline as well as corrective discipline involves both the consistory as well as the congregation as a whole. And all of it has as purpose: mutual edification, the salvation of all of us since we are all inclined to sin.

NONE IN THE CHURCH OF GOD MAY BE DEPRIVED OF THE BENEFITS OF CHURCH DISCIPLINE.

1. preventive church discipline

2. corrective church discipline

1. In modern English, the term "discipline" means basically 'punishment'; discipline is what you direct to the child when he has been disobedient. And since nobody likes receiving discipline, nobody likes receiving church discipline either. 'Punishment', though, is not what the word originally meant. To understand 'church discipline' we do well to come to grips with what the word meant when it was first used in the English language. A dictionary will tell you that the word 'discipline' actually means instruction. The word 'discipline', in fact, comes from the same Latin word as the biblical word "disciple". And a disciple, we know, is a student, is someone who is taught. The term discipline used to capture the same concept; a disciple was disciplined, a student was instructed. Jesus had twelve disciples, twelve men who had been called from their daily work to follow Jesus full time and learn from this Rabbi. Beside these twelve were also many other disciples, students, people who followed Jesus around to learn from Him. All of these, both the twelve as well as the crowd of followers, were disciplined by Jesus, were taught by Him, instructed. All were disciples. So it was that Jesus, on the day of His ascension, told the inner circle of eleven disciples that they were to go and "make disciples of all nations ..., teaching them to observe" all that God had commanded (Mt 28:19). "Make disciples," they had to do, round up students for Jesus Christ from all nations, people who could be taught, instructed in the ways of the Lord, disciplined. Similarly, Jesus Himself once issued a call to sinners everywhere: "Come to Me, all who labour and are heavy laden." Come to Me, "take My yoke upon you, and *learn* from Me" (Mt 11:28f). They had to learn, had to become disciples of Jesus, and it was through becoming disciples, being disciplined, instructed by the Lord that they would receive rest and peace. The term 'discipline', then, does not refer strictly to what must be done when there is sin. We are all disciples, students, are all to be disciplined, to be taught, to learn. What we are to learn? Surely, the content of the instruction, the discipline we are to receive, is the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, reconciliation with God. But it's not just the content of the Bible itself; what we're to learn is also the *practical implications* of this gospel, what this gospel means for everyday existence. As such, one is never finished learning, for the Word of God is so exceedingly rich. Who has ever, despite countless years of study, been able to understand the glorious ways of God? Who, despite years of instruction, has come to the point that he knows exactly what God would have him do in every circumstance of life? Nay, all of life is a school, always are God's people students, never are God's own finished learning what there is to know about God. Instruction, discipline: it's an ongoing, unending thing. And who teaches? Disciples of Jesus Christ we are, students of the Saviour. So it is Christ Himself who is our chief Prophet and Teacher. Yet we do not hear the actual voice of Jesus Christ Himself, for He is now in heaven. Yet instruct His disciples Christ does; with the outpouring of His Holy Spirit Christ has given gifts to His church. These gifts, says Paul in his letter to the Ephesians, includes apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. And the task of these prophets, pastors and teachers? They are "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God..." (Eph 4:11f). Such was the task of officebearers in Old and New Testament alike; each officebearer was to teach the people the

wealth of God's Word, to instil in the people an awareness of what redemption in Jesus Christ means for daily life. That's the way it is also today; God has given elders to the congregations, both teaching elders and ruling elders, and it is by means of the work of these elders - be it through the preaching or through the visits in the homes- that Jesus Christ disciplines, instructs, encourages His people. Through the preaching "it is proclaimed and publicly testified to each and every believer [present] that God has really forgiven all their sins for the sake of Christ's merits, as often as they by true faith accept the promise of the gospel." Here is official, formal instruction for the congregation, discipline in action, in church. But this discipline, instruction, is not only the responsibility of the officebearers. Besides the official discipline of the officebearers, there is the unofficial, the informal instruction of the congregation members amongst each other. God does not wish His people to be so many individuals who have no concern for each other; God desires His people to form a communion of saints, and so encourage each other in the service of God. In the words of Art 28 of the Belgic Confession, each and every believer is obliged to join the church - why?- so that each may be instructed, may also edify each other according to the talents which God has given to each as members of the same body. That thought of mutual encouragement and edification is very much present in the Bible. I think of a text as Heb 10: "let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works" (vs 24). And later: "do not neglect of meet together..., but encourage one another" (vs 25). That's the task given to each believer: speak together about the Word of God and the implications of that Word for daily living. This thought of the one disciplining, instructing the other is repeated in Col 3: "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly, teach...one another in all wisdom" (vs 16).

How is this communal instruction to be done? One may think of Bible study clubs. Clubs: they provide a golden opportunity to speak with each other about God's work of redemption in Jesus Christ, and so to encourage each other in Christian living, to comfort and assist each other in the various challenges of life. That, incidentally, also points up the *need* for clubs, and the need for *faithful attendance* at club. Disciplining, teaching each other, learning from each other, is something God would have us to do; very well, it is for us to use the opportunities available. So there is place, both from the pulpit and in private conversations, place for encouragement to attend club, and attend well prepared, so that the most can be made of the opportunity to teach each other, encourage each other to live a God-fearing life.

But this mutual encouragement and teaching is not to be restricted to club. Congregation members see much of each other, and these various social interactions provide opportunity to speak together too about the Word of the Lord. In fact, when all is said and done, it is in the sphere of social interaction that this mutual discipline, this instruction, is to take place first of all. In this regard I draw your attention to what Israel was told to do in Dt 6: "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." Indeed, Israel was to love the Lord so much that "these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart." And what's the consequence of having God's commandments upon one's heart? The consequence is that "you shall teach [these commandments] diligently to your children." How diligently? You "shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise." Such was to be Israel's love for God and appreciation for His law that the people were to make a point of teaching that law to their children. Yet it was not just the children who were to be taught that law. If the command was that Israel was to make a point of speaking about the Lord when they sat down for coffee, when they went out for a stroll, when they laid down to rest, when they got up to work, then it follows that the Israelites were *always* to be busy with the Lord and His Word, whether the children were around or not. God was always to be a part of the conversations in Israel, part of the conversations because of one's love for this God.

That principle has not at all changed in the New Testament. Says Paul to the Colossians: "let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly." How richly? So richly that "you teach...one another" (Col 3:16). Teaching: that's to characterise God's NT people - why?- because God's people are full of the wealth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. So it follows too that that teaching cannot be restricted to club, or the sermon discussions with the children on Sundays. This speaking about the Lord, be it with the children or with one another, is an *ongoing* thing. For there is so much wealth in the gospel, a wealth that fills the heart, and so overflows through the mouth.

This mutual instruction, discipline-in-the-old-sense-of-the-word, has specific and inevitable consequences. Speaking positively of the wealth there is in the Bible, be it in preaching and home-visits, or in our general conversation with each other, invariably serves to discourage sin and encourage holiness. A sermon on, say, Ananias and Sapphira - at least if one works with the preaching- will make one more cautious about what one says, simply because one is made

aware again of the great holiness of our God. A discussion about the marvels of God's handiwork while one walks through the bush serves to discourage foul language and crude jokes, if only because the setting no longer allows for such conversation. The point of it all is this: such discipline, such mutual instruction, prevents sin, discourages sin. In a word, such instruction is *preventive discipline*. And given that we are all inclined to evil, it follows that such instruction - preventive discipline- is a great blessing for the entire congregation; *no child of God is allowed to be deprived of this discipline!* It is for our common good that the gospel is preached, that home-visits are made, that we speak repeatedly with each other about the Lord and His service. *None may be deprived of this privilege!!*² But what happens when someone commits a sin despite the various discouragements to sin around him, whether those encouragements come via the preaching or home-visits or mutual instruction from within the congregation? Certainly, one may not give up on the sinner, and suggest that there is no longer any room for preventive discipline. After all, the fact that one has sinned once does not mean that he should be allowed to sin again. No, even after sin is committed, preventive discipline continues; you keep talking together to encourage greater holiness. *But this preventive discipline is now to be coupled with corrective discipline.* For the sin committed requires correction, requires repentance and forgiveness. That brings us to our second point: corrective discipline.

We understand what the point of corrective discipline is. Paul says to the Colossians not only that they are to "teach" each other; they are also to "admonish" each other. Someone has become guilty of sin, that sin may not be left untouched, and for that reason must admonition be made to the sinner. It's also what Christ has said in Mt 18: "if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault" (vs 15). That, incidentally, does not mean that we're to approach another on his sins only if we have been personally hurt by those sins; elsewhere Christ makes it very clear that any sin requires addressing, whether we were personally affected by that sin or not. Says Jesus: "if your brother sins, rebuke him" (Lu 17:3). Corrective discipline.

But before we go into this matter any further, we may do well to ask what kind of sins it is that require this corrective discipline. Is it only "big" sins that require this correction? Or also so-called "little" sins? The answer of the Bible on this question is clear. A man in Israel collected sticks on the Sabbath, and had to be put to death (Num 15:32). Aachen stole some gold and a couple of coats from the multitude of riches found in Jericho, and had to be stoned. Ananias and Sapphira told the sort of lie we find quite common - they got, say, \$39,000 for their block of land but *said* that they got, say \$37,000, so that they could pocket the \$2,000 with nobody knowing- and God struck them dead. Let it be clear: God is holy, before Him there is no difference between big sins and small.

But then the question is: what is a sin? Ananias' and Sapphira's deception was sin, granted. So is theft, adultery, big-mouthing and so on. But what about things like laziness, greed, neglect of prayer, gossiping, unkindness, materialism, failing to carry out one's responsibility to spouse and children? Or what about such harmful habits as being critical, being grouchy, lacking Christian openness, manipulating votes, refusing to carry responsibility, being selfish, insisting on one's own way, and so on? Are things as this sin? And if they're sin, are we to correct another of such sins?

Let it be clear, beloved: yes, such attitudes and conduct is sin, and there is no sin that God tolerates. I grant: by human standards such attitudes may be insignificant, but before God it is and it remains sin. And on all sin God's wrath invariably falls - unless there comes repentance, for Christ's blood washes away the sins of the *repentant*. So it is of crucial importance that we admonish each other not just when we see in another a 'big' sin as adultery or blatant lying; no, we are to admonish each other also when we hear foul language, when we notice white lies, when we see pride, materialism, grouchiness, secrecy, etc. Corrective discipline is not to be restricted to the so-called "big" wrongs we commit; corrective discipline is to zero in first of all on the numerous "small" sins we daily commit. That in turn means too that corrective discipline is to be far more common among us than it now is; whereas the general practice would be that corrective instruction is reserved for 'big' sins, it ought to be so that we speak to each other also about the sins we see the other commit day by day.

Yet it will be understood that if such corrective instruction is to become more common amongst us, it will have to begin with *oneself* repenting of the sins he's committed today, *oneself* being personally sorry before God and before the brother or sister hurt by the sins committed, *oneself* striving to fight those sins with all we have. For let us face it: if there is no hatred for all sin within oneself, no struggle against daily sins - including things as pride, materialism, greed, grouchiness, gossiping and so on- we not only make it impossible for another to respect our admonitions and

repent of their sins; we also bring God's wrath upon ourselves. *Yes, corrective discipline begins with the self.*

It doesn't sound easy to do: admonish a brother or sister when we witness sin in his talk, his actions, his attitude. But that may not deter us; we are to be convinced of this Scriptural truth that God's hates all sin intensely. So *we* are to hate all sin with equal intensity. Why might it be, though, beloved, that we find it awkward to speak with each other of the sins we see in the other? Might this awkwardness flow, my brothers and sisters, from our hesitancy to speak with each other about God and His Word to begin with? Surely, if there is a lack in preventive discipline (and preventive discipline, we said, involves encouraging each other in the service of the Lord, instructing each other about the wealth of the gospel and its implications for daily living) - if there is a lack in preventive instruction, *it follows that corrective instruction will seem a bit forced, somewhat out of place.* Here, then, is where we are to start: do more of speaking openly and positively with each other about the Lord and His Word. And when we then see a brother or sister fall into sin, including sins of adultery or lying or big-mouthing *or* sins of pride or grouchiness or slyness or slander and so on, then there is a natural opportunity to address the brother on his sins, to admonish in all wisdom.

What shall be the result of such corrective discipline between brothers and sisters of one faith? Says Christ: "if he listens to you, you have gained your brother" (Mt 18:15). And let us be honest: if the brother is serious in his service of the Lord, such repentance is the beautiful response one *will* get. More, exactly because the sinner we address is a brother in the Lord is this the response we may expect. So the result is joy, joy with yourself because the sin you witnessed is taken away, joy with the God-fearing sinner because he has been saved from carrying on further down a path of sin and eventual destruction, and joy in heaven because one of God's fragile sheep was brought back from straying. So it is too that we are not to be afraid of applying corrective church discipline. It's true: even the most respected and holy in the congregation may not immediately thank you for drawing their attention to a sin they committed, for such a reprimand runs counter to our nature. That reality may be reason to come with tact, sure, but is certainly not a reason to fail to speak with a sinner. We're not to forget that *God* is upset because of his sin, and wrath from heaven will come upon the sinner unless he repents of his big-mouthing or his pride or his deceit or his grouchiness or whatever his sin may have been. And that wrath will come down not only on the sinner himself, but also on ourselves who know of the sin and do nothing about it. For failing to apply corrective discipline is itself sin....

And if the brother or sister refuses to repent of his pride or his gossiping or his neglect of prayer? Says Jesus: "if he does not listen, take one or two others with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses" (Mt 18:16). "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church." The implication of that is, brothers and sisters, that it is not only sins of fraud and adultery that are to be brought to the attention of the consistory (assuming there was no repentance); even a sin an "innocent" as foul language or materialism is to be brought to the attention of the consistory. Yet the actual sin that is brought to the consistory is not so much foul language or materialism; it is rather the *refusal to repent* of such sins, the refusal to humble oneself before God. That means too that if the sinner refuses to repent of his foul language, despite repeated admonitions from the consistory, he may be withheld from the Table of the Lord and eventually be excommunicated, because of his hardening in the sin of foul language or pride or bitterness or slander, etc. God hates *all* sin, whether big or small in human opinion. Refusal to repent of any sin implies that one closes the gates of heaven to oneself.

Church discipline is listed in the Belgic Confession as one of the marks of the true church. Well now: may we rightly know ourselves to be church of Jesus Christ? Think for yourselves, my beloved: in our families and at our coffee klatches, words are spoken about each other and attitudes are fostered against each other that do not edify the brother nor glorify the Lord. Words of unkindness, a combination of secretiveness and gossip, critical spirits, lack of Christian openness, manipulative tendencies, slander, etc, are certainly present. Now the question is: *what do you do about such sins?* For yes, such sins require repentance, a repentance encouraged by corrective discipline. Such sins are also to be discouraged, and such discouragement is possible only through preventive discipline.

We may be humbly thankful that we are allowed to be the true church of the Lord Jesus Christ. But what do you do with your own sins of deed, word or attitude? And what do you do with the sins of deed, word or attitude you see in your brother? Make no mistake: where we fail to exercise church discipline among each other, we lose the privilege of being *Christ's* church.

Why does the Lord instruct His people to exercise discipline among each other, be it preventive or corrective, be it via

the consistory or through the congregation? This reason sticks out, beloved: it is not the will of the Father in heaven that any for whom Christ died should perish. It is through mutual discipline within the church that God goes in search of the sheep that stray. In a word: the whole matter of church discipline is a matter of love, of love for the sinner, of a divine desire that we should all be saved. *That is why none of us may be deprived of the blessed benefits of church discipline.* Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 32 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday Morning, 13 February 2000.

" CHRIST HAS MADE US HOLY BEFORE GOD."

Text:

Lord's Day 32

86. Q. Since we have been delivered from our misery by grace alone through Christ, without any merit of our own, why must we yet do good works?

A. Because Christ, having redeemed us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit to be His image, so that with our whole life we may show ourselves thankful to God for His benefits,[1] and He may be praised by us.[2] Further, that we ourselves may be assured of our faith by its fruits,[3] and that by our godly walk of life we may win our neighbours for Christ.[4]

[1] Rom. 6:13; 12:1, 2; 1 Pet. 2:5-10. [2] Matt. 5:16; 1 Cor. 6:19, 20. [3] Matt. 7:17, 18; Gal. 5:22-24; 11 Pet. 1:10, 11. [4] Matt. 5:14-16; Rom. 14:17-19; 1 Pet. 2:12; 3:1, 2.

87. Q. Can those be saved who do not turn to God from their ungrateful and impenitent walk of life?

A. By no means. Scripture says that no unchaste person, idolater, adulterer, thief, greedy person, drunkard, slanderer, robber, or the like shall inherit the kingdom of God.[1]

[1] 1 Cor. 6:9, 10; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:5, 6; 1 John 3:14.

Scripture Reading:

Ephesians 1:1-6

Ezekiel 36:16-32

1 Corinthians 6:9-11

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 25:1,2

Psalm 51:3,4

Psalm 26:4,7

Psalm 119:33,35,36

Psalm 40:3 & Hymn 56:4

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

We've arrived at the Third Part of the Catechism, the section entitled "Our Thankfulness". So it is that in the coming months we shall need to listen to God's Word as it comes to us in the Ten Commandments and in the Lord's Prayer - those being the two topics the Catechism deals with in this third section. It's material, we understand, that very much touches the way we live - in the circumstances as they are at home, at work, at school, in church, etc.

But before we get to the Ten Commandments themselves in LD 34, the Catechism spends two LD's dealing with sanctification. That's to say: in LD's 32 & 33, the Catechism sets before us why it is that the Christian *must be* and *is* different from the people of this world. Though believers and unbelievers face the same challenges in the home, in the office, at school, or in the community, the believer handles these challenges differently, responds differently, acts differently. With LD 32 we confess *why* this is the case. The Christian, we are taught in the Bible, has been *changed*, has been touched by the Spirit of Christ so that the Christian has a whole new outlook on life itself, a whole new

motivation for existing, for acting. For, we confess in our LD, the Spirit makes the child of God *God-centred*.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

CHRIST HAS MADE US HOLY BEFORE GOD

1. our holiness is a present reality
2. our holiness requires a response

Our Holiness is a Present Reality

We are all well aware of Jesus' work for us on the cross. Our Sin & Misery is so great that we are hopelessly lost before God; we do not have within ourselves the capacity to pay for our sins and so achieve God's favour. If, then, matters were left to us, we would forever be burdened under the impossible load of God's eternal wrath.

But, we know, the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is that God sent His Son into the world to pay for our sins. The Son of God suffered and died on the cross of Calvary, and so washed our sins away and reconciled us to God. When God in heaven, then, looks at us today, He does not see us as the sinful creatures we are, but He sees us instead through the blood of Christ, sees us as forgiven and therefore as righteous. So –we confessed it in LD 23- God in heaven issues a declaration concerning us; He says of His elect that they are righteous, are Not Guilty of the sins He knows we've committed, are innocent because Christ has taken those sins away. This is the doctrine known as Justification, and this is the material that straightaway comes to mind when we consider Christ's work on the cross. As Paul says to the Corinthians: Christ is our righteousness (I Cor 1:30). We understand that here is much comfort.

But the Bible, beloved, tells us more than the glorious news that we are *righteous* before God on account of the work of Christ on the cross. The Bible tells us that on the cross Christ did a second thing; He also obtained *holiness* for us.

The point is this. As a result of our fall into sin, we became *guilty* of particular sins. The sharp observer, then, could make a list of the sins we'd committed. These are the sins that Jesus has washed away, so that of these sins God declares that we are Not Guilty. But the fall into sin resulted in more than that we became guilty of particular sins. The fall into sin resulted also in a corruption of our entire being; we became filthy, polluted, rotten through and through. It's not just that we *do* particular things wrong; the problem is deeper for the heart is corrupt, we wreak of the stench of sin even when we can't say exactly what we've done wrong. We've got this bad odour of sin about us, and that bad odour of corruption in us is always offensive to God. That, by the way, is why in the tabernacle of the Old Testament God commanded that sacrifices be accompanied by sweet smelling incense; the foul odour of human depravity had to be covered.

Concerning the sins of which we're guilty, we've confessed with LD 23 that these sins are washed away; God declares us Not Guilty for Jesus' sake, and so sees us as innocent of these sins. *But what about the foul odour that clings to sinners?* God declares us innocent of our sins for Jesus' sake, but (if I may say it this way): does He still hold His nose when we come near, hold His nose because of the bad odour of sin we continue to carry with us?

The answer, brothers and sisters, is No. Paul said to the Corinthians that Christ is our righteousness. But he added right away that Christ is also our holiness (I Cor 1:30). The term 'holy' captures the notion that we're made different, made pure, without sin. That Christ is our holiness, then, means that when God looks at us He does not see filthy, corrupted sinners; instead, He sees Christ and His perfect sacrifice on the cross, and sees us *through Christ*. That is: Christ's holiness, Christ's purity, is extended to us so that God sees us as holy for Christ's sake. It's not the stench of our sinfulness and corruption that enters the Lord's nostrils, but the sweet aroma of Christ's perfect sacrifice. That is why the Bible can insist that God's people *are* holy to Him; no longer are we offensive, repugnant to Him, but we're instead pleasing to Him *because of Jesus' work on the cross*.

We read together a portion from Eph 1. We need to note the rich phrases the apostle uses to describe how God sees the saints of Ephesus – and so the saints of all ages. Vs 3:

"...the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the

heavenly places in Christ."

Think on that, congregation! Who has God blessed with "every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places"? None other than "us", says Paul. And who is the "us"? Why, that's first of all Paul himself and the saints of Ephesus. And who are they? *Sinful* people, people by nature depraved to the core of their being, people who wreak with the odour of sin as much as you and I. Paul says of himself that he remains the foremost of sinners (I Tim 1:15). And he makes clear in his letter to the Ephesians that they remained very sinful people (else there would be no need for Paul to give all the pointed reprimands of chaps 4 and 5). But God doesn't hold His nose at any of them; He's rather "blessed them with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ." And yes, cling to those last two words; God has blessed them with every spiritual blessing not because Paul and those sinners of Ephesus had found the right D-O; God rather blessed them because of Christ. That is, Christ's work on the cross was the cause of these sinners being blessed in heaven; for Christ's sake those sinners are not just righteous before God but also holy, attractive – and therefore eligible for His blessing.

The same message comes through in vs 4. The apostle tells the saints of Ephesus that God chose them in Christ before the foundation of the world –why?- "that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love." Note it: the purpose of God's electing work was that sinners "should be holy and without blame before Him." Yet being holy and without blame before God is not our work; it is the gift of God through Jesus Christ. Christ has finished His work on the cross and so sinners are blessed with every spiritual blessing, and that includes the gift of being holy in God's eyes.

That sinners in fact are for Jesus' sake already holy in God's eyes is drawn out too by the apostle to the Hebrews. He writes in Hebrews 10:10 that "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all." "Sanctified", says our translation. And that's to say that we've been "made holy"; that's what the word 'sanctified' means. But notice the tense the apostle uses; he says, "we have been sanctified." That's a *present reality* based on the completed work of Christ on the cross.

That God's people are *today* holy before God for Jesus' sake is also the point of our LD. In A 86 we confess that Christ did two things. The first is this: He "redeemed us by His blood." That's, of course, is a reference to Jesus' work on the cross whereby He washed our sins away so that God declares us innocent – justification. But, we continue, Christ "also renews us by His Holy Spirit." I'll say more about this renewal momentarily, but note for now, congregation, that the Catechism does not say that Christ *will* renew us – and so put the whole matter of renewal, of holiness, into the distant future. No, the Catechism describes here something true for today. Christ's work on the cross is two-fold, including both justification and sanctification, and from the Bible we learn that both justification as well as sanctification have been given to us in Christ already.

So it is that God in heaven sees us today as holy, pure, blameless for Jesus' sake. And, brothers and sisters, if that's how God sees us, that's also how we need to see ourselves and each other. We have those moments that we look in the mirror, and don't like what we see; we pull up our nose at ourselves because we see so many faults in ourselves, we recall our particular sins and are aware of our inclination to sin. So too when we see each other; we have those moments when even the sight of a certain person turns us off because all we see is his sins.

But, congregation, if God for Jesus' sake has declared us innocent of sin, we are allowed –yes, we must- see ourselves and each other as innocent of sin too, righteous before Him. And that's why we're not to cling to our sins either any more; they're gone. So we forgive ourselves, and each other.

And the same, brothers and sisters, *is true with regards to the matter of holiness*. If God says we for Jesus' sake are holy, pure, in His eyes, if God doesn't pull up His nose at us, then we are not allowed to pull up our nose at ourselves or at each other either. Certainly, we're still inclined to all evil, but *our own* evaluation of ourselves is not the critical question, nor is the *neighbour's* evaluation of us critical; critical is what *God* says. And God says that He considers His people to be holy in His eyes, pure.

I repeat: God does not see us as holy because He's so impressed with our efforts to lead a holy life. It is fact that even one sin on our part is enough to turn God off from us forever. So don't try to impress God with your deeds either. But

God sees us as holy because of the work Jesus did on the cross so long ago. His work not only made us righteous in God's eyes; His work also made us holy in God's eyes. Here is a truth we may *believe*, to our enormous comfort.

Our Holiness Requires a Response

Christ's work on the cross so long ago, then, obtained our holiness before God. As with anything else in the Bible, this gift of God requires a response from our side. The response God wants is that we make it our business to *be holy*. Better put: we are to *believe* His Word about us being holy for Jesus' sake, and we show that we believe it by *living* as holy people. And living as holy people means that we rid our lives of sin, that we hate sin, flee from sin, and live with God and His glory in the centre of our minds. The details of how that's to be done will receive attention in the coming weeks with the 10 Commandments.

But, truth be said: this command to be holy arouses in us somewhat of a protest. For we experience the command to be holy as a hard thing to do, since sin is still so strong within us and the attractions of the world so real. That is why, congregation, I want to spend some moments now considering just what Christ's renewing work comes down to.

We confess in our LD that Christ "also renews us by His Holy Spirit to be His image." The point of the expression is that we are some how *made able*, through the Spirit's work, to image Christ, to act as Christ acted, to reflect what He is like. The question now is: how can sinful people love as Christ loved, how can sinful people speak the truth as Christ spoke the truth, how can sinful people stay clear of coveting as Christ stayed clear of coveting? Possibly the clearest picture the Bible gives to explain how it's possible for a sinner to image Christ is its reference to the heart transplant God gives to sinners.

I think here of Ezek 36. The passage relates how Israel was odious to God; "to Me," says God in vs 17, "their way was like the uncleanness of a woman in her customary impurity." Here was filth, a repugnant people. Yet God was not going to hold His nose against these people forever, for, said God in vs 25:

"I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols."

The filth investing this people, the uncleanness that wreaks so disgustingly shall be washed off. Then God adds that He is going to reach down to the very root of their depravity, for He continues in vs 26 and says that He will

"give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh."

Now, in our day of advanced technology, we know enough to realise that a calcified heart represents a big problem for its owner. A calcified heart doesn't do the job it's supposed to do; the body has no energy because the heart doesn't pump sufficiently. So you're lethargic, bed-ridden, sick.

Then a new heart represents a new life. To have a sick heart replaced by a healthy heart means (if God blesses the surgery) that one receives new energy, one can be up and about, can be back to work. That's to say: a heart transplant results in *change*, radical change. Sure, you're still the same person; somebody who looks at a photo of the past can still see it's you. Yet anybody can see too that you've changed.

So it is too with the heart-transplant the Lord promises in Ezek 36. This renewing work of the Holy Spirit would result, says God in vs 27, in Israel walking in the Lord's statutes and keeping the Lord's judgments and doing them. God's law would be written on their hearts, says a different prophet (Jer 31), and that's to say that when the Spirit renews the heart He works in the heart an appetite to do the will of God as revealed in His Word. Talk about change!

So: can we be holy today? God says we are holy before Him for Christ's sake; can we, then, live in a fashion consistent with the holiness Christ imputes to us? God says, brothers and sisters, that the answer is Yes. It is simply not true that obeying God's commands is too hard for us. That is why David says of himself in Ps 40 that he "delights to do Your will, O my God" (vs 8). And Paul says in Rom 7 that he delights in the law of God according to the inward man (vs 22). It is equally why John writes that God's commandments are not burdensome (I Jn 5:3).

In fact, in his letter to the Corinthians Paul describes the sort of lifestyle to which some of the saints of Corinth had given themselves before they heard the gospel of Jesus Christ. He writes in I Cor 6:9 about fornicators and idolaters and adulterers and homosexuals and sodomites and thieves and covetous persons and drunkards, etc, and then adds these words:

"And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God" (vs 11).

Notice those words, brothers and sisters, for they are critically important. A homosexual washed of his sin and made holy by the Spirit does not remain a practicing homosexual. A child molester washed of his sin and made holy by the Spirit does not remain a child molester. A drunkard washed of his sin and sanctified by the Holy Spirit does not remain a drunkard. That's the significance of the opening words of this verse: "and such *were* some of you." "Were," says Paul. That is past tense! See there what the renewing work of the Holy Spirit is all about.

So: it is biblically not true to maintain that a person who has given himself to sin in the past will, once he's renewed by the Spirit, likely still given himself to the same sins again. Hear Paul well: he does not say that the regenerated, the sanctified drunk will never be tempted by drink again. He does not say that the renewed homosexual will never fall into sin again. The possibility is certainly there, simply because we are not renewed perfectly in this life. But to assume that one guilty of gross sins in the past will probably commit those sins again later in life despite the renewing work of the Holy Spirit is simply not according to the Bible.

God for Christ's sake sees sinners as holy, pure, and with that gift He also gives sinners the ability to fight sin. Do not think, then, my brothers and sisters, that your fight against sin is impossible, do not think that giving in to sin's temptation is inevitable. Paul said plainly to the Romans that "sin shall not have dominion over you" (Rom 6:14). The Christian's boss is not Sin any more; the Christian's boss is His Lord and Master Jesus Christ, and that Lord has given His Spirit so that the child of God is not just holy in God's eyes but can also be holy in conduct. So keep fighting against the temptations that rise against you, fight in the strength of the Spirit given to you.

That also explains, brothers and sisters, why it's such a horrible thing when one who calls himself a Christian has given himself to a lifestyle of sin. The Christian who delights in a closet homosexual lifestyle gives by his delight in his lifestyle the lie to his Christian confession; he is not a Christian at all, is not renewed by the Holy Spirit, is not holy, changed – as all Christians by definition are. The sister of the congregation who enjoys on the quiet a love affair with her neighbour gives by her pleasure in her lifestyle the lie to her claim to God's salvation; she is not a Christian at all, is not renewed by the Holy Spirit, is not holy – there is need for repentance. The brother in the church who harbours feelings of hatred against another gives by his attitude the lie to his confession that he is holy before God; he too needs to repent. Very correctly do we confess in our LD that "Scripture says that no unchaste person, idolater, adulterer, thief, greedy person, drunkard, slanderer, robber, or the like, shall inherit the kingdom of God"; for such a one there is no salvation unless there comes repentance. After all, everyone for whom Christ died is not only justified by His blood but also sanctified by His Spirit, is not only seen by God as *righteous* for Jesus' sake but also seen by God as *holy* for Jesus' sake – and therefore needs to *be* holy.

Here is why each one of us, congregation, needs to make it our business this year to be judges – judges first of all of ourselves. Do we see in ourselves the fruits of faith? Do others see in us those fruits of faith? If we are not holy in our own conduct, then God does not see us as holy in Jesus' blood either – and we remain lost. Let this be the challenge that we're all busy with this year: does the way I live indeed confirm my confession that I'm holy before God for Jesus' sake?

Christ's work on the cross is so very rich; His work is our holiness before God. How rich is that gospel; we don't have to earn our holiness, God instead graciously *sees us as holy*. That wonderful wealth gives the mandate to *be holy*, to show that we are renewed by the Spirit of Christ. And we *can* be holy; the work of the Spirit is real.

Maybe this year the Lord of the Spirit will return on the clouds of heaven. Then it is that we'll be perfectly renewed, and the battle against sin will be over. Then it is too that we'll taste fully the holiness the Lord has obtained for us.

Meanwhile, we *believe* His Word of promise: you are Mine, righteous *and* holy, forgiven of sin *and* washed of your offensive filth. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 33 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 20 February 2000.

" THE REGENERATED CHILD OF GOD MUST REPENT OF HIS EVERY SIN."

Text:

Lord's Day 33

88 Q. What is the true repentance or conversion of man?

A. It is the dying of the old nature and the coming to life of the new.[1]

[1] Rom. 6:1-11; I Cor. 5:7; II Cor. 5:17; Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:5-10.

89. Q. What is the dying of the old nature?

A. It is to grieve with heartfelt sorrow that we have offended God by our sin, and more and more to hate it and flee from it.[1]

[1] Ps. 51:3, 4, 17; Joel 2:12, 13; Rom. 8:12, 13; II Cor. 7:10.

90. Q. What is the coming to life of the new nature?

A. It is a heartfelt joy in God through Christ,[1] and a love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works.[2]

[1] Ps. 51:8, 12; Is. 57:15; Rom. 5:1; 14:17. [2] Rom. 6:10, 11; Gal. 2:20.

91. Q. But what are good works?

A. Only those which are done out of true faith,[1] in accordance with the law of God,[2] and to His glory,[3] and not those based on our own opinion or on precepts of men.[4]

[1] Joh. 15:5; Rom. 14:23; Heb. 11:6. [2] Lev. 18:4; I Sam. 15:22; Eph. 2:10. [3] I Cor. 10:31. [4] Deut. 12:32; Is. 29:13; Ezek. 20:18, 19; Matt. 15:7-9.

Scripture Reading:

Colossians 3:1-17

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 25:8,9

Psalm 34:8

Psalm 35:1,2,4

Psalm 26:2,3,4

Psalm 32:1,2,3

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

It's a rule of thumb that action from God demands reaction from God's people; that's what the covenant is all about. Last week, with LD 32, we made confession of the fact that Jesus Christ not only redeemed us by His blood, but also renews us by His Holy Spirit. That renewing work of the Holy Spirit, we said, is compared in the Scripture to a heart transplant. As a heart transplant *changes* the patient so that he has a new lease on life, with new energy and outlook, so the Lord's renewing work *changes* the sinner. His appetite for sin is replaced by an earnest desire to seek and to do the will of God.

Well now, in LD 33 we confess what *response* the Lord wants from us to His renewing work. God's renewing work in our hearts means that we need to make it our business to *be renewed*, and that's what the true repentance or conversion of man is all about.

Having said that, I need to make very plain for each of us that repentance or conversion (the two terms mean essentially the same thing) is required of every sinner. The material of our LD –and therefore this sermon this afternoon- is not first of all for the unbeliever who needs to repent and come to faith. Nor is it for the person in the next pew who has fallen into sin and needs to repent of that sin. Rather, the material of our LD –and therefore this sermon- pertains to each and every one of us. We all have need of repentance, day by day. Please, then, do not let your thoughts this afternoon travel to the person in the next pew; let your thoughts stay with *yourself*.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

THE REGENERATED CHILD OF GOD MUST REPENT OF HIS EVERY SIN.

1. Definition
2. Mortification

Definition

What, congregation, is true repentance or conversion? We confess in Q & A 88 that it involves two aspects, viz, "the dying of the old nature and the coming to life of the new." I hope to say more about these two aspects in our second point. First, though, we need a clear understanding in our minds as to what this repentance really is.

As a result of our fall into sin, we have become depraved and so –in the words of LD 3- "inclined to all evil". That's to say: our faces are pointed away from God, are pointed towards sin. At the same time, there is a drive deep within us that urges us further away from God, that urges us to do the sin before us. Not only, then, do we do what is evil; we are also guilty before God of that *urge* to sin.

As it is, though, the God to whom we've turned our backs has reached into our sin-filled heart by His Holy Spirit and *renewed* that heart – regeneration, that heart transplant of last week. How, now, shall we respond to this renewing work the Spirit has done in our hearts? Shall we keep our faces pointed away from God and toward sin? Shall we continue to answer the urges within us to give ourselves to sin and not to God? This, now, is repentance, that we do a 180 degree turn, that we turn our backs to sin and turn our faces to God.

Note it well: there are, then, two aspects to repentance. The first is that we turn away from sin. The second is that we turn to God. Those two aspects we find back in Q & A 88: repentance involves "the dying of the old nature" (that involves this turning away from sin); it involves also "the coming to life of the new nature" – and part of that is turning your face to God.

To give an example. I read in I Sam 7 of Samuel's words to Israel after the ark had been returned from the land of the Philistines. The passage says this:

"Then Samuel spoke to all the house of Israel, saying, 'If you return to the Lord with all your hearts, then put away the foreign gods and the Ashtoreths from among you, and prepare your hearts for the Lord, and serve Him only; and He will deliver you from the hand of the Philistines' (vs 3).

Note: Samuel speaks of turning to the Lord, and describes this repentance in two-fold terms. It involves first of all, he says, that the Israelites "put away the foreign gods"; it involves in the second place that the Israelites "serve Him only". That's repentance or conversion: turning away from sin and turning to God.

Frequency

How often, then, is one to repent? How often is one to turn from sin and turn to God? One would wish that this would

be a once off thing, like when the apostle Paul repented on the road to Damascus; instead of persecuting the church of Jesus Christ, he from now on gave himself to preaching the gospel of Christ. But repentance, congregation, is not a once-only thing. Certainly, there will be a first time that one repents, when one first comes to faith in Jesus Christ. And that first-time repentance may or may not be dramatic – as it was with Paul. But those born and raised with the gospel have been taught from childhood to repent of sins, and so numerous of us in church today cannot recall the first time we repented.

No, brothers and sisters, repentance is not a once-only thing. For the renewing work of the Holy Spirit is not perfected in this broken life. Though the child of God receives a new heart, the sin within is not stamped out altogether. The result is, says Paul to the Galatians, that there's a struggle going on inside the Christian. I quote:

"... the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish" (Gal 5:17).

The result of the flesh lusting against the Spirit is that the child of God gives Himself repeatedly to sin. That's why Paul says of himself as a Christian that he can will what is right but can't do it (Rom 7), is still in fact the foremost of sinners (I Tim 1:15). That is why in turn the church confesses in LD 23 that even the righteous person "is still inclined to all evil". Let us make no mistake, brothers and sisters: we speak here of *you and me*. None of us is above sin; in fact, each of us gives himself to sin day by day, whether the sin be big or small (in our eyes), whether the sin be performed consciously or unconsciously. *And that is why we all need to repent of sin, repent day by day*. That is why I say that this sermon is not for the person in the next pew; this sermon is for each one of us. We all need day by day to repent of sin, need day by day to turn away with shame from the evil we've committed in our deeds, in our words, in our thoughts – or even the evil we're committed in our attitudes. We all need day by day to turn again to God to seek His will for our actions, our words, our thoughts – and even our attitudes. Repentance is for *each of us*, is for each of us *daily*.

Manner

How? The Lord commanded Israel to set aside one day per year as the Day of Atonement. On that day the people (be it through the priest) had to confess their sins before God. That confession had to be accompanied, said God, by particular action. Said God: "... you shall afflict your souls, and do no work at all" (Lev 16:29; cf vs 31). "Afflict your souls," said God. The point is that the people were to show *sorrow* for sin; their sins were to bother them to the extent that on that day they should have no appetite to eat.

The Lord does not ask us to set aside one day per year as a Day of Atonement, one day per year to confess our sins. Instead, repentance is to be a daily thing. But the sorrow for sin that Israel had to show belongs still to repentance. Inherent to repentance is an attitude of *humility*, of being broken-before-God on account of the sin we've committed. Hence the mood of a psalm as Ps 51. That's why we confess in our LD that repentance involves that we "grieve with heartfelt sorrow that we have offended God by our sin." As we repent daily from the evil thoughts, words and deeds of which we're guilty, we do well to do so with an attitude of humility, of sorrow. And yes, that may bring its tears also.

Yet repentance is not only tears and sorrow and humility. Israel was commanded only on that one day of the year to "afflict [their] souls". Beyond that, there was so very much room in Israel for rejoicing in the forgiveness God granted. And so it is to be today. There is certainly room for the broken heart, for humility and tears. But it is not right that one *keeps on* crying and afflicting oneself. Repentance involves also that one grasps eagerly the forgiveness of sins Christ obtained on the cross. And that gospel of forgiveness gives cause for rejoicing. That too is confessed in the Catechism; repentance involves "a heartfelt joy in God through Christ".

This, congregation, is something we need to keep in mind for ourselves as well as for our expectations of others who we know have sinned. It is not for us to stay in our tears and remorse, and it will not do for us either to demand of others that they keep on crying for their sins. There is need for humility in the face of our sins; no doubt of that. But after grief comes joy and that joy is to continue, and it's that joy that to predominate at the good news of forgiveness. In our marriages, in our families, yes, and in the congregation as a whole, let's encourage each other to move in repentance beyond the grief and sorrow at sin to the joy of forgiveness in Jesus' blood. Without that joy at the

forgiveness of sins in Christ, our repentance is not complete.

We move on to our second point:

Process of

Repentance, I'd said earlier, involved two aspects: turning away from sin and turning to God. Our Catechism echoes these two aspects with different terms. I read in A 88 about "the dying of the old nature" and "the coming to live of the new".

With these words, congregation, the Catechism expands on the simple notion that repentance is turning away from sin and turning to God. The phrase "the dying of the old nature" describes a *process*, and so does the phrase "the coming to life of the new". In this second point, it's this process I need to draw out with you.

The Catechism has borrowed the phrase "the dying of the old nature" from Paul's letter to the Colossians. In chap 3, the apostle reminds the saints of Colossae that they died with Christ when Christ died, and were raised with Christ when Christ arose. That, at bottom, is the regeneration of which we spoke last week. Paul adds in vs 5 what response the Lord requires of the Colossians. "Therefore," he says, "put to death your members which are on the earth." There's the phrase "put to death". Here is an instruction the regenerated Colossians are given; they must see to it that they kill, that they "put to death" those aspects of themselves which remain directed to things of this earth, directed to sin. That instruction, and the process implied in it, is captured by the Catechism when it speaks of "the dying of the old nature." And, as turning over a coin not only hides one side but enlightens the other, so the Catechism mentions straightaway "the coming to life of the new"; to put to death the one is to encourage life in the other.

But how can one speak of repentance as a process? Does one not repent from specific sins? Yes, one does. But the point is this. It will not do to be sorry for a particular sin, and then leave oneself wide open to committing that same sin again. To repent of sin means also that one does what's possible to make sure that you don't commit the evil tomorrow again. And how does one do that? Here is where the matter of "putting to death" your earth-oriented urges enters the picture.

Recall: the renewing work of the Holy Spirit has not made us perfect yet. Gal 5:

"... the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish" (vs 17).

There's a war going on inside the self (cf Rom 7:23). War requires *battle*, requires determination, requires self-denial. That's the point of Paul's words in Col 3: there's a battle, and you have to *kill* the enemy – lest he kill you. Who that enemy is? That's your own flesh, those evil desires that remain within us. And that's who we are told to kill: our own flesh! "The flesh lusts against the Spirit", and it's for us to *fight back*, to do so resolutely, doggedly.

Now, it's one thing to fight the enemy across the river. From the safety of your bunker you lob a bomb into his lap, and that should be that. But what do you do when the enemy is *within*, is your own flesh? The enemy across the river gets no sympathy from us; we do what it takes to defeat him. *It is the Lord's will that we be equally ruthless in fighting the enemy within*. Listen to Jesus' words in Mt 5:

"If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell. And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell" (vss 29f).

Yes, those are radical words. If that hand eggs you on to listen to Sin instead of to God, if that eye of yours sets temptation before you that you can't handle, cut it off, pluck it out – radical!

Gospel: the battle is possible.

How are we to do that concretely? I'll come to that in a moment. First, though, I want to set before you the promise of the Scripture that we *can* wage this battle and be radical about it; it's not too hard. After all, our Lord Jesus Christ has conquered sin and Satan on the cross of Calvary; He has "freed us from all the power of the devil to make us His own possession" (LD 13). Satan, then, is not our boss, and sin is not either. Further, the Lord who delivered us from Satan has also poured out His Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts. This Spirit has renewed our hearts so that we are made "willing and ready from now on to live for Him" (LD 1). Here's a gospel we are allowed to believe, yes, are commanded to believe, a gospel we need to work with very concretely when it comes to the material of LD 33.

Christ has defeated sin and Satan, and through His Spirit united us to Him. That is why, says Paul in Rom 6, we are no longer slaves of sin (vs 6, 11). That's something we *were*, but are not any more (vs 17). So: don't let sin be your boss, he says, (vs 12), for "sin shall not have dominion over you" (vs 14). Conclusion? When sin whispers in our ear that we should do this or that (which God has forbidden), we are able to say No to sin's temptation! Truly, beloved of the Lord, *we can say No to sin!* That's a thought we need to fix firmly in our minds: it is simple not true that we have no choice in the face of sin's temptations, simply not true that giving in to a particular temptation of sin is inevitable. Christ defeated sin and Satan, and the Spirit of Christ dwells within us, and so we are *made able* to say No to sin. Here's a very encouraging gospel.

Still, that doesn't make saying No easy. For we remain full of sin and inclined to evil. Here's where the mandate to "put to death" what's earthly in you remains so very important. And killing requires a fight, requires ruthlessness and even radical behaviour; witness Jesus' words about the eye and the right hand. Is it too hard to pluck out the eye, or to cut off the hand? *We* say, Yes it is. But the Lord says No, it's not *too* hard. Why not? Because Christ has defeated sin and Satan, and His Holy Spirit has made His home in our renewed hearts. So, in His strength, we can do it.

How put to death?

How, concretely? Jesus means literally exactly what He says, congregation. If that eye of yours somehow leads you to commit again the sin you committed yesterday, *pluck it out!* If your friends egg you on to commit the sin you fell into last week, *drop those friends* - and never mind if that means you end up without friends. It is better to enter the kingdom of heaven deserted by friends, then to have a row of friends accompany you to hell. If uni or TAFE presents you with more temptation than you can handle, leave uni, leave TAFE; it is better to enter the kingdom of heaven without a degree than to enter hell with a row of letters behind your name. Dare to be radical, dare to acknowledge that temptation from a certain quarter is too much for you, dare to cut your income, to cut your entertainment, to cut your friends out of your life, if that's what's required to stay clear of sin. For let it be fixed in your mind: repentance of a sin is not genuine if you leave yourself wide open to falling into the same sin tonight again.

Paul lists in Col 3 a number of transgressions and struggles to which we can all relate. He says:

"Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (vs 5).

Indeed, "fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire": how close that lies to our sinful hearts. And time and again we find our minds obsessed with unclean thoughts – and by the grace of God it bothers us so that we repent.... What would the Lord have us do now? This, beloved: *put to death* that appetite for evil passions. How do you do that? By staying miles away from temptation. Specifically: does the drive for uncleanness in our thoughts get a boost from TV? Or from the newspaper? Or from the internet? Does what you see on TV or read in your Women's Weekly take away the sharp edge from your conscience so that seeing sin doesn't bother you any more – and sin comes a bit easier to you? Then, brothers and sisters, be adult enough to throw the TV out and the Women's Weekly too; that's concrete application of Jesus' word about the eye and the right hand. Does your connection to the internet provide sin with an opportunity to goad you into accessing pages that display sin so that you in fact do access pages that fuel greed or selfishness or fornication or some other evil? Then be man enough to cease your internet access; that's what repenting is all about, that's what the battle against sin is all about, that's how you starve the old nature and make alive the new. Radical action, action that recognises we're involved in deadly war; either I kill sin or sin will kill me – eternally. And I repeat: the battle is not too hard, for Christ has triumphed, and He has sent His Holy Spirit to renew our hearts. Only: don't put those aspects of faith on the shelf as interesting and worth talking about; rather, work *concretely* with that

gospel in the struggles of your life.

Truly, congregation, the battle requires radical action. Read again through Col 3 at home, and reflect on how difficult you find it to put off *all* anger, all wrath, all malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth, all lying, etc. And contemplate on how difficult *you* it always to put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, forgiving one another, etc. Yes, the battle requires radical action, requires determination to seek and do God's will, requires ceaseless prayer, requires full concentration on the battle at hand. Repentance, putting to death the old nature and making alive the new is *work*.

But believe it, beloved, believe: you can fight the battle, you can repent in the deep sense of the word, because your Lord and Saviour triumphed on Calvary, broke the back of Sin and Satan. You may *believe it*, and therefore fight the doggedly. And God shall grant that at His time you shall see progress in the struggle too; you shall see evidence that your appetite for a particular sin decreases and your delight in God's will increases. And that's the evidence of the Spirit's renewing work in your heart. Amen

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Sermon on Lord's Day 34 Q&A 92-93 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 5 March 2000.

" THE CHRISTIAN MUST OBEY THE LAW OF GOD."

Text:

Lord's Day 34 Q&A 92-93

92. Q. What is the law of the LORD?

A. God spoke all these words, saying: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

1. You shall have no other gods before Me.

2. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

3. You shall not take the Name of the LORD your God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His Name in vain.

4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

5. Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the LORD your God gives you.

6. You shall not kill.

7. You shall not commit adultery.

8. You shall not steal.

9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

10. you shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbour's.[1]

[1] Ex. 20:1-17; Deut. 5:6-21.

93. Q. How are these commandments divided?

A. Into two parts. The first teaches us how to live in relation to God; the second, what duties we owe our neighbour.[1]

[1] Matt. 22:37-40.

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 5:17-30

John 14:15-23

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 11:1,2

Psalm 16:3

Psalm 25:6,7

Psalm 119:26,27,29

Psalm 19:3; & Hymn 29:1

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

As happens on every other Sunday, so too this morning: we heard, again, the law of our God. But what do you think: is that law really binding on you and me today? All of it? The question is important. You see, it would please our sinful selves to no end if we were free from the law of God....

There are theologians who have insisted that Yes, we are indeed free from the law today. They remind us of Christ's word, how He said that He has fulfilled the law, and the conclusion would be that we don't have to be so particular in obeying it ourselves. More, we're told, the Holy Spirit has been poured out, and He will show us what He wants us to do in this and that circumstance; all shall be well if we but listen to His heeding. In truth, these are thoughts one hears in our midst also.

That's why I draw to your attention, brothers and sisters, the fact that the Catechism includes a copy of "the law of the Lord." And it does so because the Catechism has learned from the Bible that obedience to the law of God remains the mandate of the Christian. But: the law is not mentioned in Part 2 of the Catechism, that section on Deliverance; the law is printed in Part 3, in that section on Gratitude. That's because the Christian is not to obey the law in order to win God's favour; the Christian is to obey the law because he *has* God's favour – it was freely given for Jesus' sake- and now the Christian is to obey the law because he *must* be –and therefore *wants* to be- thankful to God for the deliverance he's received.

I proclaim to you the word of God about His law, and use this theme:

THE CHRISTIAN MUST OBEY THE LAW OF GOD

1. Obedience to the law is required in the New Testament era
2. Obedience to the law is to be rooted in trust in God
3. Obedience to the law results in glory for God

Obedience to the law is required in the New Testament era

LD 34 prints for us a copy of the law of the Lord. It does so, we understand, for a reason. In fact, the reason is given in the last Q & A of LD 33. That Q & A queries what good works are, and gives this answer: "Only those which are done out of true faith, in accordance with the law of God, and to His glory." One of the three criteria, then, that make a particular deed a good work is that it's "in accordance with the law of God," and that in turn explains why LD 34 asks what the law of God is.

Yet to get the need for keeping the law in better perspective, brothers and sisters, I need to take you further back in the Catechism. LD 32 had asked why we "*must* do good works"; that was Q 86. The answer given to that question was that we were not only redeemed by Christ's blood but also "renewed by His Holy Spirit to be His image." That renewing work of the Lord in our hearts, in other words, made it *possible* for us to do good works. With LD 33 we confessed what response God desires to this renewing work in our hearts, and that response is our repentance from sin. And that repentance in turn was not just that we turn *away from* sin and its temptations; that repentance involved too that we turned *to* God. And turning to God involved, we confessed in Q & A 90, "a love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works." And –Q & A 91- good works involves living "in accordance with the law of God."

So there it is, congregation. One cannot claim to be renewed by the Holy Spirit, cannot claim to be repentant from sin, if one doesn't take seriously the law of God. Obedience to the law is the inevitable result of the renewing work of the Holy Spirit; obedience to the law is *necessary* for the Christian.

But, I hear you say, has Christ not fulfilled the law? Didn't Jesus say in Mt 5, "I came ... to fulfil" the Law? (vs 17). And does Paul not write to the Romans that "you are not under law but under grace" (6:14)? In fact, to the Galatians Paul says, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free..." (5:1). Do texts as these not prove that the Christian should not feel bound to keep the law of the Lord?

I want to look more closely at a couple of these texts. But before I do that, I want to make very plain to you, congregation that the Lord definitely wants His New Testament people to obey the law of the Lord still. I want to make that clear to you in order to squash straightaway any thought that Jesus might teach in Mt 5 or Rom 6 that the law is somehow removed from the Christian's life. Scripture, after all, can't contradict itself. What, then, does the Bible say about the New Testament believer obeying the law still? Listen.

In that very same chapter where Jesus says that He has come to fulfil the law (Mt 5), Jesus sets forth how *particular* God remains in insisting on full and perfect obedience to the law. Jesus said:

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.' But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment. And whoever says to his brother, 'Raca!' shall be in danger of the council. But whoever says, 'You fool!' shall be in danger of hell fire" (Mt 5:21f).

We understand: when Jesus speaks of the command not to murder, He's speaking of the sixth commandment of "the law of God" – the law quoted in our LD. Jesus doesn't say that obedience is not so important in the New Testament; if anything, Jesus demands *more* from the New Testament saint than from the old – for even anger and name-calling now falls under the sixth commandment.

Similarly:

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt 5:27f).

Here, too, Jesus doesn't relax the seventh commandment of God's law; He instead *sharpens* it – not just the deed of adultery but the lust is sin. That Jesus in fact sharpens the law is pointed up further by what He says in vs 19:

"Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."

No, congregation, Jesus did not set His disciples free from the law; instead, He tied them more tightly to it!

In line with the instruction of the Lord, the apostle Paul did the same. Consider that well-known passage from I Cor 6:

"Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God" (vss 9f).

Paul, congregation, did not make up willy-nilly that list of persons who shall not be saved. He's found that list of sins in "the law of God", the Ten Commandments. Each of those sins is an application of one or other of those Ten Commandments. And Paul is adamant: whoever lives in sin against any of these commandments "will not inherit the kingdom of God". Conclusion: obedience to the law of God remains very much a *necessity* for the New Testament church.

In fact, obedience to the commands of God is so much a necessity that Jesus repeatedly laid a very direct connection between obeying the law and one's love for the Lord. Consider the following texts. Jesus said in Jn 14:

"If you love Me, keep My commandments" (vs 15).

Again:

"He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me" (vs 21).

Vs 23 also:

"If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word...."

And vs 24 the flip-side:

"He who does not love Me does not keep My words...."

Notice it: in each of these statements, the Lord lays a direct link between love for God and keeping the Lord's commandments, the Lord's words. To say, "I love God" and at the same time to be careless about the law is to prove that you don't really love God. Love for God is *demonstrated* by making it one's business of obey the law.

Lest we still miss the point, hear what John writes in his first letter. In chap 2 he says emphatically:

"Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, 'I know Him,' and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him" (vss 3ff).

That's not open to misinterpretation, brothers and sisters. John sums up what Jesus said: we are assured of our belonging to God by the way we live. A godly lifestyle, a happy eagerness to obey the commandments of God, supplies evidence that "we are in Him."

Does the law of God pertain to us today? Or is the Christian to say that Christ has fulfilled the law so that the Christian is "not under law but under grace"? Make no mistake, congregation: the law most certainly pertains to us today.

What it means, then, that Christ has fulfilled the law? The point is that He has Himself performed to the minutest detail every demand of the Lord – and so obtained our righteousness before God. He fulfilled the law, and that means that we need not attempt to earn God's favour through obeying the law; that effort would be most futile anyway since "even our best works in this life [remain] imperfect and defiled with sin" (LD 24). He fulfilled the law, obeyed it perfectly, and His perfect obedience is our righteousness before God. He fulfilled the law, and so "we have been delivered from our misery by grace alone *through Christ* without any merit of our own" (LD 32). That is why Paul says to the Romans that we are no longer "under law but under grace." No longer are we "under law" in the sense that we need to obey its details in order to win God's favour; we have that favour, we're "under grace", because obeyed that law perfectly. Yes, His perfect obedience is our life.

But just because we don't have to earn God's favour through careful obedience to the law does not mean that we don't have to obey the law any more. There is a *different reason* for obeying the law, and that different reason is there for saints of all times and places – including the Old Testament. God demands obedience to the law not because He wants us to earn His favour; He wants us to obey the law because He's freely given His favour *and He wants us to show our gratitude*. Careful obedience to the law is our way of saying Thank You to God for His free grace. That is why Jesus could place that strong connection between the keeping the commandments and love for God; keeping the commandments is driven by love for God, keeping the commandments is *evidence* of our love for the God who gave so much to us.

And what shall we say, then, of the thought that the Holy Spirit shows us what to do? Won't the Holy Spirit show us what to do in this situation and that? Most certainly He will, brothers and sisters. But the Lord has not given us His Spirit to *replace* the law. In fact, it is wrong to *contrast* the law and the Spirit. The Spirit most certainly shows us today what we need to do in whatever circumstance we're in, *and He does that by the law*. Through that law of God the Spirit of God shows the child of God what he's to do in this situation or that or that. The law of God is the Spirit's *tool* to guide us on the path of life (cf Gal 5:18ff). Please, beloved, fix it in your minds: it's not the Spirit *or* the law, the law *or* the Spirit. To emphasise the law and disregard the Spirit produces legalism. But equally, to emphasise the Spirit and disregard the law produces libertinism. God's grace in Jesus Christ, and therefore His gift of the Holy Spirit, needs to be set side by side with God's gift of the law. Giving to both their rightful place leads one to see that the child of God is moved by the Spirit of God to obey the law of God – because he is thankful for the grace of God.

Obedience to the law is to be rooted in trust in God

I move on to our second point: Obedience to the law is to be rooted in trust in God. The point here is this. In the rough and tumble of this broken life, we all experience time and again that obedience to God's laws just does not strike us as the right thing in our circumstance. Shall I really speak the truth when I know that the certain result will be that Dad's going to ground me? Shall I really stay with my spouse when a new relationship with another *feels* so right? It's a fact: our feelings and our minds tell us time and again that obedience to the law is sometimes the wrong thing to do....

But look, my brothers and sisters, at the law itself. LD 34 prints not just the Ten Commandments themselves, but also the introduction to these Ten Commandments. That's lifted straight out of what God said to Israel at Mt Sinai:

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Ex 20:2).

That is: the Lord did not lay His law before Israel until He had first revealed to His people-by-covenant *who He was*. First by His deeds He proved that He could be trusted, that His care for His people was faultless. Sovereignly, graciously, He delivered a nation of slaves from their hard bondage. Sovereignly, graciously, He led them to the Red Sea, to a spot where it was clear as day that they were trapped and had no place to turn. Then *He* opened the sea and gave them escape from their enemy. Sovereignly, graciously, He led them to a spot in the desert where there was nothing to drink, and *He* supplied for them the water they needed. Sovereignly, graciously, He led them further into the sand and the stones till their food ran out and the desert supplied them nothing, then *He* gave them daily bread – every day again, for one day at a time. He taught His people to trust Him, impressed on them that He was trustworthy. Then at Mt Sinai He gave His people His law, told them what He wanted them to do and what not. Think now, brothers and sisters: would this God really give commands that were bad for Israel? Would He really give instructions that would, if Israel obeyed them carefully, result in His people getting hurt? Is that the kind of God you have?!

No, congregation, in the opening lines to the Ten Commandments the Lord reminded Israel of Who He was, what He had done for His own; He was the Lord who brought an unworthy people out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. And *therefore*, given Who He was, it was so obvious that the people had to know themselves safe with Him, had to believe that any instruction He gave was good for them. If *this* God set a fence and told His people not to commit adultery, then it was obvious: to commit adultery is going to hurt, somehow. This God *loves* us, and *in His care* He tells us not to commit adultery, and so I *trust* –though adultery may feel so right- I *trust* that His care in giving me this command is good for me. You see: obedience to the law is a matter of *trusting God*.

How much more is this fact true for us in the New Testament dispensation! The Lord has not delivered us from a physical Egypt, with physical slavery; through Jesus Christ He's rescued us from bondage to sin and Satan, and that bondage was much worse. If this God now says that obeying His commands displays love for Him, tell me, would you dare to disagree? If the God who went so far as to give His only Son for your salvation deems it right and wise for us not to lie, would you dare to say that your circumstance is different, is so hard that lying is the right thing to do? Do you really think that God made a mistake in the instruction He gave? Or made a mistake in leading your circumstances as they are? Is that your God?!

No, beloved, when the pressure is on and the temptation is great to transgress God's law, it is simply because the Lord your God is testing you to see whether your love for Him is present only on good weather, or also in bad. He's testing to see whether you trust more in Him than in the thoughts of your mind and the feelings of your heart. He's testing: do you really believe that His care for you as He gives it in His commands is sufficient. Or do you at bottom think that God can't be trusted in the commands He's given.

Obedience to the law results in glory for God

There, brothers and sisters, is also our third point. If obedience to the law is rooted in trust in God, it follows that obedience to the law also results in glory for God. For obedience to the law is evidence of trust. And when sinful people show their trust in God, Yes, that points up to all men everywhere who this God really is. And the angels of heaven sing their praises to God when the sons of men on earth live for the glory of God.

And how much more praise is there when in His grace is pleased to crown the gift of obedience and trust with His

further blessings? Yet that too is His promise. The covenant blessings He promised to Israel in the desert speak volumes of His plans for those who trust Him. Sure, speaking the truth may get us grounded. And staying with a tired spouse may strike us as boring. But God's promise is sure. To trust God in the midst of pressure, to obey His command in the sure conviction that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ knows very well what He's doing in our lives, yes, God shall reward such trust with His further blessing – to His glory and praise.

Ought the child of God redeemed by Jesus' blood and reconciled to the Father still to obey the law of God? Most definitely, congregation, most definitely. No, not to impress the Lord God, nor to chalk up points with Him. But obedience to the law displays love for God, displays the trust in Him that the Spirit works in our hearts. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 34 Q&A 94-95 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday Morning, 12 March 2000.

" THE ONLY GOD INSISTS THAT PEOPLE HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE HIM."

Text:

Lord's Day 34 Q&A 94-95

94. Q. What does the LORD require in the first commandment?

A. That for the sake of my very salvation I avoid and flee all idolatry,[1] witchcraft, superstition,[2] and prayer to saints or to other creatures.[3] Further, that I rightly come to know the only true God.[4] trust in Him alone,[5] submit to Him with all humility[6] and patience,[7] expect all good from Him only,[8] and love,[9] fear,[10] and honour Him[11] with all my heart. In short, that I forsake all creatures rather than do the least thing against His will.[12]
[1] I Cor. 6:9, 10; 10:5-14; I John 5:21. [2] Lev. 19:31; Deut. 18:9-12. [3] Matt. 4:10; Rev. 19:10; 22:8, 9. [4] John 17:3. [5] Jer. 17:5, 7. [6] I Pet. 5:5, 6. [7] Rom. 5:3, 4; I Cor. 10:10; Phil. 2:14; Col. 1:11; Heb. 10:36. [8] Ps. 104:27, 28; Is. 45:7; James 1:17. [9] Deut. 6:5; (Matt. 22:37). [10] Deut. 6:2; Ps. 111:10; Prov. 1:7; 9:10; Matt. 10:28; I Pet. 1:17. [11] Deut. 6:13; (Matt. 4:10); Deut. 10:20. [12] Matt. 5:29, 30; 10:37-39; Acts 5:29.

95. Q. What is idolatry?

A. Idolatry is having or inventing something in which to put our trust instead of, or in addition to, the only true God who has revealed Himself in His Word.[1]

[1] I Chron. 16:26; Gal. 4:8, 9; Eph. 5:5; Phil. 3:19.

Scripture Reading:

Isaiah 44:1-23

I John 5:19-21

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 135:2,3

Psalm 38:1,2

Psalm 40:2,7

Psalm 146:1,2,3,4,5

Psalm 115:4,5

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Some 3300 years ago, in mountainous and barren country, the Lord God from the top of the mountain addressed the people gathered at the foot, and told them to have no other gods before Him. That command given to the rag-tag mass of freed slaves at the bottom of the mountain was introduced by an explanation of why Israel should serve God alone. Said God from the mountain top:

"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Ex 20:2).

And since God had done that for Israel, this people was to serve only Him.

That was some 3300 years ago. We're modern people living in a modern society, many miles and many millennia removed from the revelation of God to Israel at Mt Sinai. That begs the question: what have we today got to do with the first commandment? Should we today truly have no other gods before Him? Why not? And if we shouldn't have other gods, how, concretely, do we go about doing that? Is idolatry actually a problem for modern Australians – let alone today's Free Reformed Australians?

In fact, congregation, idolatry is truly a problem, a sin rampant throughout Australia – even amongst Free Reformed Australians. To turn your focus away from God, and to look for answers to life's problems somewhere other than God, is to be guilty of idolatry. And looking elsewhere than God, yes, it's so common in our land, even in our midst....

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

THE ONLY GOD INSISTS THAT PEOPLE HAVE NO OTHER GODS BEFORE HIM.

1. Why people may have no other gods before Him.
2. How people have other gods before Him.

Why people may have no other gods before Him.

The first verse of the Bible reads like this: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." My question is this: what existed before Gen 1? The phrase "the heavens and the earth" is in the Bible a catch-all phrase meaning 'everything'. If God in the beginning "created the heavens and the earth," the point is surely that God created *everything*. Of course: if God created everything, He is Himself excluded from the 'everything' He made. From the very beginning, then, all that exists can be divided into two categories; the one is what we call 'creation' and refers to all created things as trees, stars, rocks, man, animals, etc, while the other is the Creator Himself, eternal and Triune God. Those two categories are not a level at all; Triune God is the Creator, while everything else – 'creation' - is His handiwork, under Him. In fact, it's by His continued involvement in His handiwork that creation continues to exist. More, it is He who controls and directs all that happens in every area of His creation; "leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things come not by chance but by His fatherly hand."

The Creator of heaven and earth took one of the creatures He'd made in the six days of creation, and established with this creature His covenant of grace. That covenant was made not with giraffes but with man; the Creator of heaven and earth –eternal God- adopted the creature man to be His child. That is why God equipped this creature with the ability to image Him. Man was set apart, then, from the rest of creation; though a creature himself, he was given a place above creation, told to care for God's handiwork, rule over it on God's behalf (Gen 1:26,28).

This ruling over God's creation involved answering hard questions. How could man best care for the soil so that it brought forth a good crop? How could Adam and Eve best have dominion over animals and plants? We understand: to find answers to their questions Adam and Eve had to turn to the Creator of all things. Their faces had to be directed to God, and always the question had to be on their minds: Lord God, how do *You* want us to care for *Your* creation? Lord, will *You* show the way, and will *You* bless.

We find that obvious. Had Adam turned to a stone and asked it to show the way how Adam should care for the soil – we'd find that laughable. For the stone is but a creature (and dead at that), while the Creator who made all things and therefore knows all things is at hand. Equally, to ask a frog for the answers to the questions of life, or to ask a beetle for help in difficulty is ludicrous. Man should not look to *created things* for help, but look for help to the *Creator who made all*. Instruction, direction, blessing is to come from Him.

But see: there came the day that Eve was walking in the garden. One of the friendly animals God had made approached her, with the loaded question: "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden?'" (Gen 3:1). And then: "God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God..." (vs 5). Eve listened to the serpent; "she took of its fruit and ate" (vs 6). That's to say: she took her cue from the serpent instead of from God, she listened to a creature instead of to the Creator. Though it was God's will that she (and all men) direct

their faces to Him, "trust in Him alone, submit to Him with all humility and patience...", she turned her face away from the Creator and submitted to instruction from a creature. That turning the face away from God, and looking instead to the creature, that, beloved, is *idolatry*. By obeying the creature instead of the Creator, Eve placed more trust in the word of the creature than in the word of the Creator.

And Yes, I am very aware that the serpent was possessed by the evil one, and spoke Satan's hellish whispers. But that makes no difference to the point. If all that exists is to be divided into two categories –on the one hand the Creator and on the other His creation- tell me, in which of those two categories does the devil belong? Make no mistake; he is a creature. For God made not just trees and stars and rocks and animals; in the beginning He also made angels. Some of them rebelled against God, and these rebellious angels are known in Scripture as 'demons'. And the captain of the demons is known as the devil, as Satan. No, congregation, the devil too is a creature. And therefore is not to be worshiped! Nor is help or counsel to be sought from him. When Eve listened to the voice of the *creature*, the serpent, she listened to the voice of the *creature* the devil. To turn your ear away from the Creator and lend it instead to a creature –no matter who that creature is- is *idolatry*. This is the sin of the beginning: in looking for answers to the questions of life, Adam and Eve listened to a creature instead of to the Creator.

But see: what did the Creator do with His fallen child? Leave him in the misery into which he plunged himself? No, He didn't. Instead, the Creator sought out the creature who had turned his back to God, and came to him with the gospel of redemption. The Creator promised to send to earth His only Son, who would give Himself to the curse of the cross to pay for the sins of mankind. In the face of idolatry, in the face of man's sin of depending on creatures instead of on the Creator, the Creator in infinite mercy determined to seek out the sinner and provide atonement.

That is precisely what happened. When the time had fully come, the second Person of the holy Trinity became a creature, a man. It's a thought on which to meditate: the Creator in the garb of a creature! And He came to earth simply and only to save the fallen creature, to reconcile us to the Creator.... Yes, this is gospel, and reason to praise this Creator forever!

Why, now, should Israel at Mt Sinai and we today have no other gods before the Lord? Sure, we may say that there are no other gods, and that should answer the question. True enough. But the matter is more profound, there's more at stake. The point is: in living this life on this earth, all men are faced with questions, hard, practical questions. Questions like: I have sinned, how can I be reconciled to God and my neighbour? Or: I've got a life-threatening illness, how can I be healed? Or: I can't get on with my spouse, how can I overcome that problem? Or: I don't like my job and my boss doesn't like me, what shall I do? That's life: lot's of hard, practical questions. Well now: where do we seek the answers to those questions? Shall we turn to a creature for guidance, for answers, *or* shall we turn to the Creator who made the creatures? Ultimately, this is the point of the first commandment: do you think that a creature is better able to answer your questions than the Creator? Can you *trust* a creature to help you more than the Creator who even gave His only Son for your redemption? Is God exalted about His handiwork as sovereign and wise, or are there better answers within creation than with the Creator? That's the matter behind the first commandment.

God told Israel to seek their answers from Him alone. He, after all, the Creator of heaven and earth, was their God who delivered them from bondage in Egypt – talk about giving an answer to Israel's practical problem! But see, in the course of the years, God's redeemed people repeatedly considered creatures more reliable than the Creator. Time and again they gave themselves to idolatry..., and the result was that eventually the Lord sent His own into exile. Yet even in their exile the Lord sent His Word to His own, and confronted His people with the utter foolishness of their idolatry. Consider the prophet's word in Is 44.

The chapter breaks down into two main parts. The first section, vss 1-8, relates how great the Lord God is. Vs 6:

"Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel,
And his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts:
'I am the First and I am the Last;
Besides Me there is no God.'"

That God is "the First" is to say that all things come from God; He is the Creator. That He's "the Last" is to say that all

things exist *for* God, He is the purpose of all things. All things, then, come from Him and are for Him (cf Rom 11:33). God is very much in a class of His own, totally different from whatever He made.

But after the prophet has pointed up the greatness of this God in the first section of the chapter, Isaiah continues in vss 9-20 to draw out what idolatry is really all about. In fact, the Creator of all moves His prophet to show His people how *silly* it is to trust in a creature. Vss 14ff, for example, pictures a man going bush to find himself a nice tree. He cuts the tree down, takes some branches from it to make for himself a fire; he cooks a meal, rubs his tummy in contentment, then enjoys the heat of the embers.... Eventually he goes to work on the rest of the log, carves it into a shape to suit his taste, sets it in a corner, then ... bows down to it and says, "Deliver me, for you are my god" (vs 17). The absurdity of this idolatry comes out in two ways:

The very tree from which this man carved his god first supplied the man's firewood to cook his meal. Firewood and a god: does that really come from the same source? What kind of a god is this if his extras – the branches and chips of his log- are good for firewood!

Can a tree –for that's what this man's god is; simply half a log on which he spent some hours of labour- can a tree really deliver, help you in the face of life's big questions? Think on it: a tree is simply part of God's handiwork, a created thing.

Truly, to take a part of God's creation, spend some hours carving it and then call it a god is simply absurd. Yet people do it, they make a god out of a log..., and don't even realise how daft the concept is. Vs 18: "They do not know nor understand." Why not?

"For [God] has shut their eyes, so that they cannot see,
And their hearts, so that they cannot understand."

They are blinded by the curse of God on sin, so that sinful people do not of themselves see the folly of serving the creature rather than the Creator (cf Rom 1).

Why may people have no other gods beside the Creator? Fix it in your minds, my brothers and sisters: it is a norm for all peoples of every time and place in history that help, deliverance –no matter the problem- can come from the Creator alone and never, ever from a creature. Exactly because He's the Creator of all –and Redeemer too in Jesus Christ- is it God's holy and righteous will that all men everywhere acknowledge Him alone as God and so seek their help in the name of the Lord alone.

Now, I don't know of any of us who have gone bush, chopped down a tree, and from its log fashioned an image, then bowed down to it and said, 'You are my god.' That brings us, then, to our second point:

How people have other gods before Him.

No, we don't have carved logs in our homes of which we say: you are my god. Yet that does not mean that we obviously obey the first commandment. I remind you that all that exists can be divided into two categories: the Creator on the one side and all created things on the other. Idolatry, I said before, is that one looks for help in the face of life's questions and problems *not* from the Creator but from the other category, any created thing.

The man of Is 44 turned to a log he carved, and asked it to "deliver me." We smile at the simplicity of that. But we need to consider, congregation, whether in practice we do anything different. You see, if in the midst of life's problems your face is not turned to the Creator for help, but turned instead to any created thing, then it makes no difference whether you seek your help from a carved tree or from medicine drawn from the leaf of a tree; in both instances you are looking at *created things* to help you. Similarly, in principle it makes no difference whether you look to a timber log for the answers to your problems or whether you expect your help from a silicon chip, or a politician, or a saint. In both instances you're looking for help from a created thing instead of from the Creator.

Yet this is precisely what people do, people in the church too: in the face of problems we look to medicine for

answers, or to technology, or to science. I have sinned; how shall I make good with God? There's those who say that you need the extra good works of saints to set you on your feet before God. There's others who say that you need to try harder yourself to impress God through your works. Either way, you're looking to people –a saint or yourself- to overcome the problem you have with God – and that's idolatry. But God's will is that we look to Him, and the answer He gives in Christ's work done on the cross.

Or: how shall we solve the environmental crises of our day – be it problems of salination or global warming or plain pollution? The culture in which we live tells us that we need to look to technology for the answers. Science, we're told, and the ingenuity of man in working with the potentials of nature, will get us over the problems. But that's to say that we're looking at the creature –be it human brains or science or nature- instead of to the Creator – and that's idolatry. God's will is that we look to Him, acknowledge what He has said in His Word about environmental crises, and act accordingly. And what does God say about things as environmental crises? Time and again the Bible describes such crises as expressions of God's covenant wrath on sin. So the answer is not to turn to the brains of scientists and the technology of computers. The answer is instead to turn to God in repentance –even national repentance- and then trust that God will give relief from the crisis – and He may give that relief through the labours of scientists and the research of technology. But then you're depending on God to give deliverance, and not depending on created things – the scientist- to deliver.

So it is too with the problems our population faces in relation to marriage breakdown, street-children, etc. How shall we solve such problems? Our society –and we, automatically, too- look to and depend on our politicians and our social organisers to supply answers. Counsellors, more money for the poor, better housing, education: we throw lots at the problem in an attempt to solve it. But we have our faces turned to the creature –counsellors, money, housing, education- instead of to the Creator, and that's idolatry. God has said that the problems of life are rooted in the fall into sin, and the fall into sin is an affront to God. We need, then, to deal with the Creator, and seek His answer to the problems we have. And His answer is first of all faith in Jesus Christ, and then the conviction that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ will supply our every need. And He even tells us how He supplies our needs, and that is through obedience to Him – also in our marriage and with our children. And then in His good pleasure He may bless the work of scientists and counsellors and doctors so that through them He supplies our needs.

I need to bring the matter closer to home. Consider the person who wants to be happy, and is convinced that the way to happiness is to have a flash car, a fast boat and a fancy house. It's his dream: those are the things I want, and then I'll surely be happy. Yet he's guilty of idolatry because he has his face turned to created things, he depends on created things to make him happy.

Consider the person who wants to be happy, and is convinced that the way to happiness is marriage – perchance to that particular person. To be married, to be married to *that* girl: it's his dream, and he's sure then life will be good.... Yet he's guilty of idolatry because he has his face turned to created things, he depends on created things to make him happy.

I can continue in the same vein. But you catch the point. To keep the face turned to the creature instead of to the Creator is and remains idolatry. Not many in our modern country will go bush like the man of Is 44, carve up a log and then ask it to "deliver me". But the *principle* of what the man did –have his face turned to created things and expect his help there- is common indeed. Whenever we turn to creatures for deliverance –be it deliverance from hunger or from pressures of war or from the weight of sin or from the burden of loneliness or grief or illness or whatever- whenever we turn to creatures for deliverance, we are guilty of idolatry.

And let us be honest: since this is what idolatry really is, we all are guilty, daily, of the sin of idolatry. So we need to repent. And repentance involves not just acknowledgment and confession of sin; repentance involves also that we turn our faces away from creatures and look instead to the Creator of heaven and earth – our Father in Jesus Christ.

Next week, the Lord willing, the Creator of heaven and earth shall set before us again the table of the Lord. The purpose of the table is to impress upon repentant sinners that their sins are truly forgiven them for Jesus' sake – including sins against the first commandment. That's to say: that celebration would drive us to acknowledge that our

deliverance comes from God alone, and not from any creature. It would drive us to get our eyes off people –be they doctors or politicians or ministers or counsellors or scientists- to get our eyes off technology or trees or computers, etc, etc. The only true God alone can help us in any and every problem we may have; no creature, no matter who or what, can help as the Creator can.

After that celebration, the Form for Lord's Supper will press this question upon our hearts:

"He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Rom 8:32).

With that question, my brothers and sisters, God Himself would impress upon us that He –our Creator and Redeemer!- shall most certainly supply our every need as He in wisdom determines we have needs. You battle with poverty, and seek deliverance? You struggle with the sins you've committed, and how to appease an angry God? You battle with loneliness and seek deliverance? You are confronted with hungry creditors or marriage tensions or unemployment? It is the promise of your Creator and your Redeemer: He will supply all your needs. Fix your attention on Him –not on creatures, for that's idolatry- fix your attention on Him, and seek His will for you in your circumstances. Recall His sure promise:

"But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you" (Mt 6:33).

Yes, that requires knowing God well, knowing His will, knowing His Word. It means too that we be more busy with the Word of God than with, eg, technological journals or medical encyclopedias. Sure, I know, there's place for technological journals or medical encyclopedias, but not *instead* of the Word of God. No matter our problem, *our attention has to be fixed always on the Creator*. That's the instruction of the first commandment. And it's promise.

The command was first voiced 3300 years ago. In fact, the command was obvious from the day God created the world. Today, He is the Creator still. And His creation is His creation still. And that shall never change. So the word of John remains true, including his word about faith in Jesus Christ: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols. Amen" (I Jn 5:21).

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 35 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 19 March 2000.

"CREATURES CAN COME TO KNOW HOW TO SERVE THE CREATOR ONLY BY LISTENING TO HIS WORD."

Text:

Lord's Day 35

96. Q. What does God require in the second commandment?

A. We are not to make an image of God in any way,[1] nor to worship Him in any other manner than He has commanded in His Word.[2]

[1] Deut. 4:15-19; Is. 40:18-25; Acts 17:29; Rom. 1:23. [2] Lev. 10:1-7; Deut. 12:30; I Sam. 15:22, 23; Matt. 15:9; John 4:23, 24.

97. Q. May we then not make any image at all?

A. God cannot and may not be visibly portrayed in any way. Creatures may be portrayed, but God forbids us to make or have any images of them in order to worship them or to serve God through them.[1]

[1] Ex. 34:13, 14, 17; Num. 33:52; II Kings 18:4, 5; Is. 40:25.

98. Q. But may images not be tolerated in the churches as "books for the laity"?

A. No, for we should not be wiser than God. He wants His people to be taught not by means of dumb images[1] but by the living preaching of His Word.[2]

[1] Jer. 10:8; Hab. 2:18-20. [2] Rom. 10:14, 15, 17; II Tim. 3:16, 17; II Pet. 1:19.

Scripture Reading:

Leviticus 9:15-10:7

Hebrews 10:24-31

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 95:3

Psalm 35:4

Psalm 25:2

Psalm 43:3,4

Psalm 89:3,4,5

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

All that exists, we said last week, can be divided into two categories, with the Creator in the one category and all His creation in the other. The instruction of the first commandment is that we trust and serve and worship the Creator alone, for no creature is worthy of the praise He deserves, nor can any creature be counted on to deliver us from our pressures.

The second commandment takes the matter a step further. The first commandment told us *who* to serve and trust; we're to serve and trust the *Creator* and not a *creature*. The second commandment tells us *how* to serve this Creator. We're told that in service to this Creator we're not to turn to any created thing in order to seek guidance or help in *how* to serve the Creator. Instead, we're told to get to know the Creator from His revelation in Scripture, and then serve the Creator only as He has commanded in His Word.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

CREATURES CAN COME TO KNOW HOW TO SERVE THE CREATOR ONLY BY LISTENING TO HIS WORD.

1. God is particular in how He is served
2. Careless service comes from not knowing God well
3. Knowing God well comes through listening to His Word

God is particular in how He is served

We read together the account of the deaths of Nadab and Abihu. Why, congregation, did these two men die? The first two verses of the chapter make it plain; these two priests died because they "offered profane fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them" (Lev 10:1).

To be honest, we find this striking, and not a little troublesome. We think: these two brothers are doing their best, striving to serve the Lord, and that should be encouraged; let worship be spontaneous. Surely the Lord should be happy with their efforts.... Yet the Lord struck them dead. Yes, we find it harsh. But here is instruction that we, brothers and sisters, need to heed if we are to understand God's will for us in the second commandment. To uncover that instruction, I will attempt to draw for you a picture of the setting in which their deaths occurred.

The nation of Israel was congregated around Mt Sinai. After the Lord had established His covenant with Israel in Ex 20, He gave His people instruction about how to build the tabernacle; in that tabernacle holy God would dwell in the midst of His sinful people. The instruction on how to build it, and the description of how in fact Israel built the tabernacle, is given in the remaining chapters of the book of Exodus. The last chapter of Exodus tells us that the tabernacle was completed, and that God Himself came to dwell amongst His people in the Holy of Holies; "the cloud," we read, "covered the tabernacle of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Ex 40:34).

Now that God dwells among His people, though, sacrifices are required. So God gave the instruction of the book of Leviticus. The first seven chapters of that book give the Lord's detailed commands about how those sacrifices in the tabernacle had to be performed. The Lord was specific; the animal had to have certain qualities, the person making the sacrifice had to perform certain rituals, the officiating priest had to do specific things. It was a refrain throughout these chapters: it has to be done like this, and like this, and like this. In other words: neither the people nor the priests could determine for themselves how they would serve God; no, the Creator instructed the creature how He was to be worshiped.

Then follows chap 8, where the priests the Lord had specified were consecrated into their office. And hard on the heels of chap 8 comes chap 9, where the newly ordained priests presented the first offerings to the Lord in the new tabernacle. I draw to your attention particularly ch 9:16: "And [Aaron] brought the burnt offering and offered it *according to the prescribed manner*." Note those last words: "according to the prescribed manner." That is: as Aaron began his priestly work, he performed the required ceremonies *carefully*, not as he himself thought was fitting, but as God had stipulated in the earlier chapters of Leviticus.

The Lord tells us His response. Vs 23f: "the glory of the Lord appeared to all the people, and fire came out from before the Lord and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar." That's to say: the Lord was pleased with the sacrifices, pleased too with the way in which Aaron and his sons had performed the ceremony; He would live with His people and bless them.

Then we read the words of 10:1:

"Then Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, each took his censer and put fire in it, put incense on it, and offered profane fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them."

You notice the contrast. In chap 9 the priests had been careful to serve the Lord as He had commanded in His Word in

chap 1-7. But once the prescribed ceremony was finished, Nadab and Abihu became careless, and did what they themselves thought was reasonable in God's service; they would offer some more to the Lord. But God wasn't pleased. His displeasure now is as plain as His pleasure was in chap 9. Vs 2: "fire went out from the Lord and devoured them, and they died before the Lord." Why they died? Simply because they thought they could serve the Lord in a way that seemed good to themselves. They forgot that their hearts were sinful, and so they themselves did not know how to serve holy God; they needed to be told, yes, had been told. So it was for them to submit to God's revealed will about *how* He be worshiped.

Now, to be complete I should mention that Nadab and Abihu were not the only ones who were sloppy or self-willed in their service of the Lord. I read at the end of Lev 10, for example, that Aaron's two remaining sons, Eleazar and Ithamar also did not do precisely as God had stipulated (cf vss 16ff). Yet God did not destroy them, nor so many thousands of Israelites after them who were guilty of the same sin. That puts the deaths of Nadab and Abihu into perspective. They died *as an example* to all the people that God was particular in how He was served. Recall: Lev 9 & 10 relates the very *first* occasion that the sacrifices were offered in the tabernacle. Straightaway, the first time the tabernacle is in use, the Lord spelled out to His people that Yes, He was particular in how they serve Him. Throughout the years every Israelite deserved to perish as Nadab and Abihu because of trying to serve God in a self-styled manner. But in mercy for Jesus' sake, countless thousands did not experience God's jealousy. Just these two, because of their place in the history of the church, tasted God's jealousy – and so all Israel was taught how particular God is in how His people serve Him.

We live many centuries later, live in the New Testament dispensation. The temptation for us is to think that the Lord is today not as particular as He was in the Old Testament. Yet, congregation, to think that is to make a mistake. I draw your attention to the passage we read from Hebr 10.

In vs 24, the apostle gave instruction to his readers to stir up one another to love and good works, and in vs 25 gave the instruction not to forsake "the assembling of ourselves together", ie, going faithfully to church. Now, *why* should the Hebrew Christians –and so we today too- stir up one another to love and good works, and go faithfully to church? Vs 26 begins with that little word 'for', and that's to say that vs 26 gives the *reason why* the instructions of the preceding verses need to be obeyed. Says the Holy Spirit:

"For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries" (vss 26f).

Then the author of our letter draws attention to the law of Moses, draws attention too to the developments in the history of salvation. The fulfilment of the sacrifices of Leviticus has come, Christ has died, paid for sin. If now we take liberties with the service of the Lord, will God really consider it a light thing? Not at all, says the apostle. Vs 31: "it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." To consider the blood of Christ "a common thing", nothing to get all that excited about, to treat the Lord as a buddy who is pleased with your contribution regardless of how you serve Him – no, that insults "the Spirit of grace". "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. And that means nothing else than that the Lord will find out the person who is careless in His service, who is self-willed in how he would serve the Creator.

Make no mistake, my brothers and sisters: in the New Testament dispensation God remains particular in how He is served. He said to Israel in Dt 12 that "Whatever I command you, be careful to observe it; you shall not add to it nor take away from it" (vs 32). And He repeats the same thought in Rev 22:

"For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life..." (vss 18f).

And we well know how one can take away from what God has said. You can take away from God's instructions by ripping a page out of the Bible. Equally, you can take away from God's instructions by ignoring commands God has given about how to worship Him. For Old Testament and New Testament saint alike this makes no difference; God

remains the Creator, and no creature has the right to determine of himself how the Creator is to be served. The lesson of Lev 10 remains valid for us too. Hence our confession in LD 35: we are not "to worship Him in any other manner than He has commanded in His Word."

That brings us to our second point: what prompts careless service of God?

Careless service comes from not knowing God well

In His second commandment to His people, brothers and sisters, the Lord instructs us not to "make for yourself a graven image of anything that is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters under the earth." The point here is this. As I said last week, it is God's will that mankind turn his face to the Creator and not to the creature; it is for man to trust the Creator in his every circumstance, to serve the Creator, to praise and worship Him. He, after all, is the Creator; no creature is worthy of the praise and trust and worship He deserves.

We can't see God, and God has not revealed to us what He looks like (cf Dt 4:15ff). For that reason alone it is not possible (in the words of our LD) to portray God visibly in any way (Q & A 97). Nevertheless, being the creatures we are, and sinful too, we want in our minds a picture of what God is like. So the temptation is great to turn to something in creation and say: God is like that. If you ask the average Australian what picture they get in their minds when they think of God, I suspect the answer you'll get is this: He's an old man on a cloud. Certainly where cartoons make reference to God, that's how they picture Him. It's an understanding of God based on something we see in creation – a wise, old man.

But now think for a moment, congregation. Does a mental image of God as an old man do justice to who God really is? Consider only this: it's true that the picture of an old man conjures up notions of wisdom, and somehow we find that that's a reasonable portrayal of God. But the picture of an old man certainly does not produce in our minds notions of strength or of being able to help in moments of crisis. Yet we learn from the Bible that God is the Almighty, and you never catch him napping. You see: to compare God to an old man invariably does injustice to God. In fact, to compare the Creator to any aspect of His creation is *to produce a distortion of what God is really like*. That's the express instruction of God's Word. Consider Is 40: God measures the waters off the coast in the hollow of His hand, measures the distance from Earth to Mars with a span, weighs Bluff Knoll in a scale (vs 12). Given that that's what God is like, "to whom," says the prophet, "will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare to Him" (vs 18; cf vs 25). The point is this: there is nothing in all His handiwork that accurately portrays what He is like. More, this God is so far above anything He's created that any comparison does gross injustice to Him, yes, any comparison produces a grossly distorted view of what God is like.

Israel at Mt Sinai portrayed God as a young bull. Sure, a young bull has strength, has energy. But a young bull lacks somewhat in mercy, in love. By looking at the image Aaron made, did the youth of Israel get a proper impression of what God was really like? And from their impression they received, did they really learn how to serve this God? Let it be fixed in our minds, brothers and sisters: every image of God, whether molten or mental, distorts what God is really like. Every comparison of God with a creature from heaven above or the earth beneath or the waters under the earth fails to capture everything that God is; none spell out fully His power and His justice and His love and His mercy and His vengeance, etc, etc. All fail, and *that* is why the Lord told His people in no uncertain terms to make no image of God, to take nothing from creation in an effort to portray what God was really like. A portrayal of God that you can set in a corner –like a molten image, say, a young bull- or a portrayal of God that you can put to paper –like a mental image, say, an old man on a cloud- *fails* to make clear what God is really like. Hence Q & A 97: "God forbids us to make or have any images of [creatures] in order to ... serve God through them."

Now back to our point. What is the result of having in your mind a twisted view of what God is like? The result, congregation, is this: what you think God is like determines the way you worship Him, more, determines the way you live. Be honest: if God were an old man, wise, yes, but basically bound to His chair, you couldn't really believe any more that God was with you everywhere and all the time. Nor could you believe that He could and does help you in your every circumstance – let alone determine your every thought.... I mean, an old man bound to a chair is a picture of *limitation*, not a picture of being *almighty*. So when bad things happen..., you conclude: that's because God couldn't do anything about it, He's old you see.... Do you see, congregation, how such a distorted view of God affects

your life, affects your comfort?

Now back for a moment to Nadab and Abihu. How come they could offer fire God had not commanded? Surely, beloved, that's because these two men had in their minds an earthly understanding of who God was. That is: they had a mental image of God, they compared God to something of this creation – say, a father who gives his children instructions, but has understanding when his sons *with good intent* go somewhat beyond his instructions. Aaron was careful to offer "according to the prescribed manner", and that reflects that Aaron had in His mind an understanding of God agreeing with God's identity as *God*, Creator and Redeemer. He knew: it was not for a creature, not himself either, to serve God in a self-chosen fashion; that's high-minded, and shows lack of respect for God's position as *God*, as the Creator who may call all the shots. From the fact that Nadab and Abihu saw room for their own input into the service of God, it's evident that they did not work with the fact that God was the Creator and they but creatures; they did not work with the reality of His *God-ness*.... So they perished, according to the promise of the second commandment: the Lord is a jealous God, visiting iniquity upon those who sin against Him.

That makes the instruction of God for us clear as a bell. There isn't room for us to serve God as we see fit, and that means in turn that we need to know our Creator well – lest we become sloppy in our service to Him. So the question becomes urgent: how are we to come to know God? That's our last point:

Knowing God well comes through listening to His Word

There was a time in church history that the church tried to teach people about God by means of images. Throughout the churches of the Middle Ages –now some 500 to 600 years ago- the churches were filled with images – one over there of a man on a cross, meant to depict the gospel of Christ crucified for sinners, another of there of a man carrying a lamb, meant to depict Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and so on. The intent was to teach the people about the Lord God and His saving work in Jesus Christ.

The Reformers –persons like Martin Luther and John Calvin- saw no place for images in the churches as "books for the laity", as teaching tools for the common people. The reformers knew: a man on a cross could never give the full message of Christ's true sufferings, nor did such an image do justice to the good news that Jesus Christ was more than simply a man. They knew: no image of a created thing –whether from heaven above or from the earth beneath or from the waters under the earth- adequately portrayed the gospel of Jesus Christ, or the greatness of the God who sent His only Son to earth; every comparison of God to a created thing resulted in a distortion of what God was like. That is why the people of their day torn these images from the churches.

But what did the reformers put in place of these images? In place of these images the reformers put a pulpit, and on the pulpit a man who could open the Scriptures, could preach the good news. Why they did that? They did it because the Bible says that "faith comes" not from observing creaturely portrayals of God, but "faith comes by *hearing*" the Word of God (Rom 10:14). Not a creaturely portrayal of God is needed to get to know God well, but a divine *proclamation* of God and His mighty deeds. And what does the Bible tell us of God? What must the preaching pass on about God? It tells sinners what God really thinks about sin, and tells sinners about His holiness and hatred of evil, tells sinners how much God gave to reconcile sinners to Himself. That Bible –and therefore the preaching- tells sinners that God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that this eternal Son came to earth as a babe, suffered the curse of God on the cross, paid for sin, died, rose from the dead, ascended into heaven. This Bible –and so the proclamation of the Bible- sets before sinners what the work of the Holy Spirit is, how the Holy Spirit unites sinners to Christ so that God considers these sinners to have died with Christ and been raised with Him, so that in turn these sinners are today righteous before God. The preaching of the gospel spells out God's holiness and His love, God's justice and His mercy, God's kindness and His vengeance. It's by setting before sinners the mighty works of God for our salvation –be it through the preaching you hear or the preaching we saw today in the sacrament- that people come to know who God really is. So people receive in their minds not an earthly understanding of what God is like (be it an old man or a bull or whatever), but a heavenly understanding – a God great in majesty, awesome in power, infinite in compassion, tender in love, and holy at the same time. Such an understanding of who God is produces in turn a lifestyle that accords with godliness, a lifestyle that takes God seriously, that understands that creatures can't determine how to serve this God, understands that creatures need to ask God how He wants to be worshiped. Yes, it produces a

lifestyle that agrees with God's revealed will.

So we're back, congregation, to the material of Heb 10. Why was it that God stipulated in that chapter that the saints were not to neglect to assemble together? They were not to neglect to assemble together because in their assembling the Word of God was opened, and through the proclamation of God's Word the people of God were taught Who God was and therefore how to serve Him. And that's so important because God remains particular in how He is worshiped. It's true in the New Testament dispensation still: "it's a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."

That, beloved, is why nothing is to hinder the preaching, nothing to keep us from listening and submitting to the preaching. The devil would love it: keep people from church, and they won't get to know their God well. Or: keep those who are in church from receiving the preaching, from humbly listening to it or working with it..., and they won't get to know their God well. Then they'll still serve God, O yes, but in their own manner – and you have a recipe for bringing God's wrath upon His children. Let's not fool ourselves: the devil knows the second commandment well, how the Lord says that He is

"a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments."

In truth, how the devil would love people to develop a twisted, an earthly, creaturely perception of God, and worship Him accordingly. It will bring God's wrath on the generations that follow....

No, my brothers and sisters, our Creator and Redeemer would have us to recognise that we are but creatures, and so it's for us to submit to His way of teaching us what He is like. He is particular about how He is served, and He would instruct men on the matter through the living preaching of His Word. Treasure that preaching, and work with it. And impress it on your children too. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 36 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 2 April 2000.

" GOD'S GLORIOUS REPUTATION IS NOT TO BE DEGRADED BUT EXALTED."

Text:

Lord's Day 36

99. Q. What is required in the third commandment?

A. We are not to blaspheme or to abuse the Name of God by cursing,[1] perjury,[2] or unnecessary oaths,[3] nor to share in such horrible sins by being silent bystanders.[4] In short, we must use the holy Name of God only with fear and reverence,[5] so that we may rightly confess Him,[6] call upon Him,[7] and praise Him in all our words and works.[8]

[1] Lev. 24:10-17. [2] Lev. 19:12 [3] Matt. 5:37; James 5:12. [4] Lev. 5:1; Prov. 29:24. [5] Ps. 99:1-5; Is. 45:23; Jer. 4:2. [6] Matt. 10:32, 33; Rom. 10:9, 10. [7] Ps. 50:14, 15; I Tim. 2:8. [8] Rom. 2:24; Col. 3:17; I Tim. 6:1.

100. Q. Is the blaspheming of God's Name by swearing and cursing such a grievous sin that God is angry also with those who do not prevent and forbid it as much as they can?

A. Certainly,[1] for no sin is greater or provokes God's wrath more than the blaspheming of His Name. That is why He commanded it to be punished with death.[2]

[1] Lev. 5:1. [2] Lev. 24:16.

Scripture Reading:

Leviticus 24:10-23

Revelation 5:8-14

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 99:1,2

Psalm 93:13

Hymn 47:2

Psalm 135:1,2,6

Psalm 96:1,2,3,4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The young man of Lev 24 "blasphemed the name of the Lord and cursed," we read. God's penalty was severe: "whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death." That's what happened; "the children of Israel ... took outside the camp him who had cursed, and stoned him with stones."

Honestly, we find the penalty hard. One word of blasphemy, and that in the heat of a fight..., and God demands death.... Numerous of us can no doubt recall moments when we've uttered words that boil down to blasphemy.... Do we deserve to die?! Then we read in our Lord's Day that "God is angry also with those who do not prevent and forbid [blasphemy] as much as they can." We recall the environment of work and TAFE, recall the cursing and blasphemy we heard last week, recall too how little we said about it..., and we are nearly ready to despair.... If the first and the second commandments were hard to obey, we find this third one impossible.... We know: we deserve to die with the man of Lev 24....

The Lord, my brothers and sisters, knows our sins and failures. But that has not prompted Him to drop His anger upon us. Instead, though He knows our weaknesses and transgressions, He has brought us to church..., in order to tell us Who He is, to tell us of His mercy in Jesus Christ, to tell us too of the strength He gives in the Holy Spirit. As we listen to His instruction this afternoon in the third commandment, this is the gospel I may set before you.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

GOD'S GLORIOUS REPUTATION IS NOT TO BE DEGRADED BUT EXALTED.

1. Why this name is not to be degraded.
2. How this name is being degraded.
3. What God does to exalt His name.

Why this name is not to be degraded

A person's name is the word we use to call him. Peter, John, Mary: these are the names by which we know particular people. We know God as 'God' or 'the Lord' or 'Jesus' or 'the Creator', and various other names revealed in the Bible.

The term 'name', though, has a second meaning. If I ask you whether you have a good name in the community, I'm not asking whether the community thinks the word 'John' is a good name for you; I'm asking instead whether you have a good *reputation* in the community.

With people, our reputation is not necessarily connected to the name by which we're known. I mean, the fact that your name is 'John' does not mean that the community thinks a lot of you. But with the Lord God the matter is different. It's different in this sense that God's reputation is captured in the names He has.

He is, for example, known as *God*. The very first time the Bible uses the word 'God', it's placed in the context of God's *creating greatness*. That's Gen 1: "In the beginning *God* created the heavens and the earth" (1:1). From eternity He had been, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He determined to create, and did so; He spoke and the world was there. See there who *God* is – Creator! The very fact that He could speak and the world appeared points up how exalted His name is. So it was that when God laid the foundations of the earth the angels of heaven burst forth into songs of praise (I read in Job 38:7). And David for his part, when he observes the things God has made –the trees and fish and birds and animals- bursts forth into songs of praise for God the Creator too and says:

"O LORD, our Lord,
How excellent is Your name in all the earth,
Who have set Your glory above the heavens!" (Ps 8:1; cf vs 9).

He knows: this is *God*, the *Lord*, the Master and Owner of all by virtue of His creating work, and so it's fitting that all creation –angels and man also- give praise to this God, exalt that most excellent reputation displayed in His handiwork. No wonder that the angels of Isaiah's vision cry out ceaselessly their chorus of "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!" (Is 6:3). And no wonder too that the psalms time and again encourage all creatures of heaven and earth to adore this God of gods (cf Ps 29, 96, 99, etc). God He is, Creator, awesome in power.

But this God has done more than create a world. The people He created fell into sin, and *God made it His business to redeem a people for Himself*. He displayed His redeeming work –His mercy and compassion- to that nation of slaves in Egypt. Ten plagues He poured out on Egypt, and each plague was a display of His power and His glory. The Egyptians worshiped the sun, but God most high spoke a word and the sun didn't shine on his worshipers for three days; instead darkest night settled on the land! That's to say: Israel's God was obviously so much more exalted and praise-worthy than Egypt's gods. This same God opened a path through the Sea to lead His people out, and thereby displayed again His majesty and glory. So it was that once the people were on the other side of the Sea they broke out into a song of praise for this God:

"I will sing to the LORD,
For He has triumphed gloriously!
The horse and its rider
He has thrown into the sea!
The LORD is my strength and song,
And He has become my salvation;
He is my God, and I will praise Him..." (Ex 15:1f).

You see: His reputation was exalted, and the people saw that. They speak of Him as 'LORD', and that's His covenant name, that's the name that identifies Who He is in His compassion to Israel; in mercy He's made this people His. His name and His reputation: the two come together, for the word 'God' captures Who He is –the exalted Creator- and the word 'LORD' captures Who He is – the merciful Redeemer, Savior of unworthy slaves.

At Mt Sinai, now, this God came to Israel with the instruction not to take His name in vain. "In vain": the phrase means to 'make empty', make hollow. The name of God, His reputation, is exalted to highest heaven; it's for all creation –angels and men and beasts alike- to sing the praise of this glorious Creator/Redeemer. Shall Israel, now, take that glorious name of God, haul it down from its exalted heights, and drag it through the mud?! Shall the people who have seen so much of God's greatness use His name in a way that gives no praise to Him? See there, congregation, the point of the third commandment. God the Lord has sovereignly, mercifully, redeemed a people from slavery in Egypt, from the house of bondage. And shall this people belittle God's reputation, empty it of its glory?! That's the command to this people; never may the people of Israel speak of God in a way that does not do justice to God's greatness, God's glory.

But see: not so long after the Lord had given this command to Israel at Mt Sinai, two of God's covenant children got caught up in a fight. In the heat of the tussle, the one took on his lips the name of the Lord, and did so in a way that did not give honor to the God of gods; "he blasphemed the name of the Lord and cursed." God's response was a death sentence; the people should stone him. Harsh? We think so. But *at stake was the honor of God!* In heaven on high the angels ceaselessly sing their songs of praise to this exalted God, and shall people on earth do less?! While the angels of heaven endlessly praise the Creator and Redeemer, shall God's children on earth stomp all over His name?! Well do we realise that *that cannot be!* This is the point that God drives home to Israel in the penalty He demanded for the blasphemer. And notice: God Himself did not strike them dead. The people themselves had to do it, for it should be fixed in the people's minds that dragging God's name down from its exalted position is to God a most serious offence; never should they commit the sin this brother in Israel committed – lest they too perish.

That brings us to our second point:

How this name is being degraded

Yes, what, brothers and sisters, is sin against the third commandment actually? Almost automatically we answer the question in relation to Lev 24, and say that swearing and cursing (as so many in society around us do) is the obvious point of this command. And that will be true, beloved. To use God's name as an exclamation mark is obviously contrary to the third commandment, for such use of any of God's names belittles God's reputation. That is equally true of words that are purposefully twisted so that God's names are not actually used but instead words uttered that sound like one of the names of the Lord. 'Golly' instead of God, 'Jez' instead of Jesus, 'Gee Whiz' instead of Jesus, etc. One may think too of references to God as 'O heavens' or 'Glory be'. To use such phrases takes something away from the awesome reputation that belongs to the Lord our God.

But the Scriptures, congregation, know of different ways in which God's name is blasphemed. To help us understand the third commandment, and so give to our God the glory due to Him, we do well to give some attention to these other ways of abusing God's name.

I read in Isaiah 36 about the siege of Jerusalem by Sennacherib, king of Assyria, when Hezekiah was king of Judah. Sennacherib's Rabshakeh approached the besieged city, and spoke in the hearing of Jerusalem's people these words:

"Beware lest Hezekiah persuade you, saying, 'The Lord will deliver us.' Has any one of the gods of the nations delivered its land from the hand of the king of Assyria? Where are the gods of Hamath and Arpad? Where are the gods of Sepharvaim? Indeed, have they delivered Samaria from my hand? Who among all the gods of these lands have delivered their countries from my hand, that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem from my hand?" (vss 18-20).

You hear what Rabshakeh does: he puts God on a level with the gods of the nations around Israel, the nations Assyria has earlier defeated. By putting God on the level of the gods, he *degrades* the Lord. That is why, when Hezekiah brought the matter before the Lord, the Lord in so many words called this sort of talk 'blasphemy' (Is 37:6).

This tells us: sin against the third commandment is not just using bad language. It includes also that God is spoken about in a manner not consistent with His greatness. In today's world: to speak of the Lord God as if He were on a level with Buddha or Allah or some other heathen god is at bottom sin against the third commandment. His uniqueness as Creator of all and sovereign Ruler of the world today, His uniqueness as Savior of sinners must be maintained over against the gods of human imagination – regardless of who they are.

I draw your attention to another example of God's name being blasphemed. Nathan the prophet confronted David with his sin of adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Uriah. After David's repentance, Nathan spoke these words:

"Because by this deed you have given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also who is born to you shall surely die" (II Sam 12:14).

Again, we understand the point. The king of God's people Israel has committed adultery and murdered. God says that by so doing he has given God's enemies –be it within Israel or outside- occasion to drag God's name down from its lofty height and deride it. For God's reputation is intimately tied up with His people. If that people do not live as God's people ought to live, then the peoples of the world will not be prompted to give to God the praise that is His due.

This tells us: sin against the third commandment is not just swearing and cursing, nor putting God on a level with the gods of this world. Sin against the third commandment includes the way we live. That is: we transgress the third commandment when we through our conduct give the peoples of our neighborhood occasion to laugh at God. We transgress the third commandment when others see from our walk of life that we don't take God all that seriously.

So I can give you more examples of what sin against the third commandment is all about. But enough has been said, I think, to show that we fall so far short of the standard God requires. For it's a fact: time and time again, through our words and deeds, we give the people around us occasion to degrade God instead of honor Him. And it remains a fact: God is zealous for the honor of His name. In the words of the third commandment: He "does not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain."

That brings us to our last point:

What God does to exalt His name

What God does to exalt His name? Instead, brothers and sisters, of dealing with us according to what we deserve (and so striking us dead as the man of Lev 24), the Lord God gave up His only Son to die in our place. On the cross of Calvary the eternal Son of God was cursed with the damnation that we deserve on account of our sins –yes, also against the third commandment!- so that we might go free. And so it is: we don't receive the damnation we deserve; we're instead adopted to be children of God, heirs of God!

That work of Christ brings glory to the name of God. For if God would deal with us according to what we deserve on account of our taking God's name in vain (be it in words or deeds), God would have to consign all of us to hell. But it was not for hell that God made His covenant of grace with us! His purpose was to save a people for Himself "to the praise of His glory" (Eph 1). If God would curse us all for our sins, Satan and his demons could gloat over God; God would be left with nothing and Satan with everything. But that gives no glory to the exalted name of God, and that is why the Lord gave up His Son in order to save a people for Himself – unworthy though they are. Jesus Christ came to

earth, and He died on the cross and rose again, "for the praise of [God's] glory."

That is why the angels of heaven continue even today to sing the praises of the Lord God. Christ's work on the cross has been finished, and so sin atoned for, a people reconciled to God. That's why John on the island of Patmos could see the vision of Rev 5. Three times he heard a song being sung. We need, beloved, to notice those songs and the choirs who sing them. Vs 8: "the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders ... sang a new song, saying [to the triumphant Lamb]: 'You are worthy....'" Then John heard more voices, "the voice of many angels around the throne" joining the voices of "the living creatures and the elders", and this time the size of the choir was "ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands." And what do the countless angels of heaven sing? This:

"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain
To receive power and riches and wisdom,
And strength and honor and glory and blessing!" (vs 12).

Then John hears more still. The heavenly choir swells in size as "every creature ... on the earth and under the earth and such as are in the sea, and all that is in them" joins those who are "in heaven" praising the Son of God:

"Blessing and honor and glory and power
Be to Him who sits on the throne,
And to the Lamb, forever and ever!" (vs 13).

Notice: the ever-growing choir sings its praise to the Lamb, that is, to the One who laid down His life to pay for the sins of those who transgress –yes- also the third commandment. Because of His redeeming work, every knee in heaven above and the earth beneath and the waters under the earth must bow before this King of kings and extol His glorious name. That, beloved, is what is happening in heaven today. And that is what we do on earth when we sing the praises of our God in church and –I trust- in our homes. That is what we do when we live the Christian life in a godless environment and speak in defense of God's honor. It is praise for the God who made heaven and earth..., praise "on earth as it is in heaven."

Yes, in heaven above the angels ceaselessly sing their songs of praise to the God of gods. In truth, shall we on earth do any different? But tell me, beloved: what are we doing when we willingly subject our ears to blasphemy? We understand: for the child of God to subject himself willingly to hearing words that degrade his God is to participate in the degrading of God's name. Yet what do we hear when we turn on the TV? Statistics assure us that the big majority of programs have instances where God's name is taken in vain –either directly or in words that sound like one of God's names. Shall I willingly listen to that? And let my children listen to that? How can I, and still obey the third commandment?

Tomorrow we go back to our daily work in the midst of this world. For so many of us, the environment in which we work is so godless, and its godlessness comes out precisely in the abuse of God's glorious name – be it in swearing or cursing, be it in jokes that make God look silly, be it beliefs that place God on a level with heathen gods or even ignore God altogether. It's an environment we possibly can't get out of; that's the place where the Lord has given us our daily task. So we hear much abuse of God's great name.... But the child of God has no pleasure in that; at work or at TAFE he does not *willingly* subject his ears to blasphemy. That makes the work environment so different from the home; we are able to rid our homes of blasphemy –be it on TV or in music or in books, etc – and therefore are responsible before God to do so. But work is different; we're not the boss there. And there, in obedience to the third commandment, the child of God grieves at the hurt this blasphemy does to the Creator of heaven and earth, his Saviour. Shall His creatures mock Him, and get away with it?! It hurts us..., and we feel so powerless to do anything about it....

What we can do? What we *should* do? Take with you into your work environment, my brothers and sisters, the echo of heaven's choirs. That is: have fixed in your minds that the Lord your God is worthy of all praise. Then speak as opportunity presents itself in defense of the glory of your God, and act in such a way that the unbelievers around you see something of Who your God –their Creator- really is.

Hard? Undoubtedly. But remember: the God the angels of heaven ceaselessly praise is not just God the Father, the Creator, nor is He just God the Son, the Redeemer; He's also God the Holy Spirit, the Renewer. That is: this God is pleased to make His home in *you*, and with that gift He also equips you –be it with much brokenness, but He equips you nevertheless- to live and to speak in a way that brings glory to His name.

You see, ultimately it is *He* who upholds His own honor and reputation; His good name does not ultimately *depend* on us. Though we have a task to obey the third commandment –both in not degrading God as well as in making it our business to exalt Him- ultimately it is God who will rise to fight His own battle. Through the working of His Spirit within us, He is defending His name in this sinful world. And on the last day He will cause every knee to bow before His wonderful Name so that each shall acknowledge that Yes, God is God Most High, worthy of eternal glory and praise.

Around us the blasphemy continues. Though we cringe when we hear it, and do what we can to curb it, we're confident: our God shall exalt His name. And we may sing His praise eternally. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 37 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday Morning 9 April 2000.

" OUR SINFUL HEARTS REQUIRE THAT THERE BE PLACE FOR THE OATH."

Text:

Lord's Day 37

101. Q. But may we swear an oath by the Name of God in a godly manner?

A. Yes, when the government demands it of its subjects, or when necessity requires it, in order to maintain and promote fidelity and truth, to God's glory and for our neighbour's good. Such oath-taking is based on God's Word[1] and was therefore rightly used by saints in the Old and the New Testament.[2]

[1] Deut. 6:13; 10:20; Jer. 4:1, 2; Heb. 6:16. [2] Gen. 21:24; 31:53; Josh. 9:15; I Sam. 24:22; I Kings 1:29, 30; Rom. 1:9; II Cor. 1:23.

102. Q. May we also swear by saints or other creatures?

A. No. A lawful oath is a calling upon God, who alone knows the heart, to bear witness to the truth, and to punish me if I swear falsely.[1] No creature is worthy of such honour.[2]

[1] Rom. 9:1; II Cor. 1:23. [2] Matt. 5:34-37; 23:16-22; James 5:12.

Scripture Reading:

Exodus 22:9-13

Matthew 5:33-37

Hebrews 4:11-13

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 92:1,2

Psalm 17:2

Psalm 26:2

Psalm 139:1,2,3

Psalm 24:2,3

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

In its discussion of the Ten Commandments, the Catechism gives each commandment treatment in one Lord's Day – with the exception of the third commandment. The third commandment only, of all the ten, is divided over two Lord's Days.

The reason for this state of affairs is simply the circumstances as they were in the time the Catechism was written. The church before the days of the Great Reformation had given itself to corrupt teaching, and that included the adoration of saints. As a result, the people were not only taught that Yes, they could pray to the saints; they were also taught that you could appeal to the saints when you made an oath.

The Reformers strongly disagreed. To teach the people why they should no longer "swear by saints", the authors of the Catechism expanded their treatment of the third commandment to include Question & Answer 102 of our Lord's Day: "May we also swear by saints or other creatures?"

But correcting the errors which the Roman Catholic Church had taught people for years and years was not the only problem prompting our Lord's Day. There was also a group of people at the time known as the Anabaptists; they maintained that the Lord would not have us swear oaths at all. Their thought was this: the Holy Spirit has been poured out, and so we're renewed, so renewed in fact that we're above sin. So whatever I, a Christian, say must be trustworthy; you may take for granted that my Yes shall certainly be Yes, and my No shall be No. Then these Anabaptists read the Lord's word in Mt 5:34: "Do not swear at all," and vs 37: "let your Yes be Yes and your No, No", and they were convinced: the Lord does not want us to swear – full stop. Hence another Question & Answer was required in the Catechism's discussion of the third commandment: "But may we swear an oath by the Name of God in a godly manner?" And this, the fathers thought, was more material than one Lord's Day could reasonably handle. Hence two Lord's Days for the one commandment.

We live today, some 435 years after the Catechism was written. The topic of the oath does not normally generate much discussion in our midst. Yet we may be thankful that the matter receives attention in the Catechism. Why? Simply, brothers and sisters, because our interaction with people around us requires us daily to *speak*, to convey our thoughts. We do so with sinful hearts, and the hearer listens with an equally sinful heart. That's a recipe for mis-communication, for deception and betrayal – distrust. It's that reality that leaves need for the oath. And it's equally that reality that requires of God's people –renewed as they are by the Holy Spirit- to develop and cultivate a reputation of being *trustworthy* – so that we need not use the oath often at all.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

OUR SINFUL HEARTS REQUIRE THAT THERE BE PLACE FOR THE OATH.

1. By whom may we swear an oath
2. Why we may swear an oath

By whom may we swear

In normal, daily conversations, we know what to do with each-other's words. Peter speaks to Johnny, and Johnny quickly enough picks up whether he can take Peter's words at face value or not. If, however, Peter deliberately misleads or deceives Johnny, Johnny not only feels betrayed; he also has learned that he can no longer trust Peter. And it will take Peter some time and effort to regain Johnny's trust.

In the bits and pieces of daily life, we have learned to work with the fact that people can deceive. We've learned to read people, learned when we can take them seriously and when not. And if we've been duped, we've learned too how to take that in stride.

But there are circumstances in this life where we just can't afford to be deceived, circumstances where our word *must* be trustworthy.

Influential public office is committed to you, and so you're asked whether you'll carry out your office for the good of the public. The public wants an *assurance* that you're dinkum about your answer, and so seeks from you an appeal to a higher power that you in fact mean what you say when you voice your Yes.

Your testimony is required in court in relation to offences alleged against another, and so you're asked whether you'll speak the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The accused, the justice system, yes, society as a whole wants an *assurance* that you'll indeed speak the truth (for we don't want anyone wrongly found guilty), and so you're asked to appeal to a higher power to witness that you will in fact speak truth.

If you lived in Israel: you loaned your donkey to your neighbor and it disappeared through no fault of yours –you could not prove to your neighbor that you didn't neglect your responsibilities- then God commanded an oath to settle the matter between you and your neighbor (Ex 22:11). An extra assurance beyond your word, an appeal to a higher power, was required to settle the matter.

You see: in normal, daily circumstances we accept each other's word. But we all know that the human heart is deceptive, at bottom not trustworthy. That's why, in certain circumstances, people –and even God- demand greater assurances than a simple answer will provide. It's a practice recognized in the Bible: "Men indeed swear by the greater, and an oath for confirmation is an end of all dispute" (Heb 6:16).

Now the question is: who is the 'higher' to whom one appeals? The Lord God is categorical on the point. To the people of Israel He gave this clear instruction:

"You shall fear the Lord your God and serve Him, and shall take oaths in His name" (Dt 6:13).

And:

"You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve him, and to Him you shall hold fast, and take oaths in His name" (Dt 10:20).

In fact,

"You shall not make mention of the name of [the Canaanite's] gods, nor cause anyone to swear by them; you shall not serve them nor bow down to them, but you shall hold fast to the Lord your God..." (Josh 23:7f).

That's clear: the people of Israel were not allowed to swear by Baal or by Molech or by Dagan; they were to swear only by the Lord their God. In fact, to swear by the Lord God was part and parcel of serving Him. In today's language: one is to take an oath not in the name of Allah, but only in the name of the Lord. To take an oath in the name of Allah (or some other heathen God) dishonors the Lord.

That begs the question: why does God insist that oaths be made only in *His* name? Why not in the name of Baal? Or of Saint Nicolaas? Or in the name of my mother?

Here we face the question of who God really is. I said it with the previous commandments too: God is unique in that He is the Creator, and everything else is creature. God alone made heaven and earth and all that's in them. That's also why He alone knows all that goes on in one's thoughts, one's heart; He *made* the mind. So no creature in heaven above or hell beneath knows the human heart as God does. In fact, I even read in Prov 21 that the thoughts arising in the mind of a king do not enter that mind willy-nilly; rather, it is God who puts those thoughts there, God who directs those thoughts in specific actions (vs 1; cf Is 10:6-12). That is equally why David can say what he says in Ps 139:

"O Lord, You have searched me and known me.
You know my sitting down and my rising up;
You understand my thought afar off.
You comprehend my path and my lying down,
And are acquainted with all my ways.
For there is not a word on my tongue,
But behold, O Lord, You know it altogether" (vss 1-4).

Between people, you can know what is on my mind only when I tell you – be it that I tell you through my words or my actions. I can tell you that something bothers me by laying it plainly before you in clear sentences, and I can tell you too by being restless, getting up and sitting down, chewing my fingernails, etc. But when all is said and done, *I need to tell you*, somehow; otherwise you will not know my thoughts.

Equally, if I'm any good at it, I can hide my thoughts, speak words and do actions that don't reveal the deepest secrets of my heart. That's part of the brokenness and the sinfulness of this life; we have it in us to deceive each other, to hide from each other our real thoughts and intentions. But we can hide not a thing from the Lord God Almighty! Does He who made the mind not understand the mind? If John could say of Jesus on earth that He "had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man" (Jn 2:25), and if Matthew could report that Jesus knew the

thoughts going on in the minds of the scribes (Mt 9:4), how much more does the exalted Christ in heaven know the thoughts going on the minds of His people today! Well does the writer to the Hebrews state:

"And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account" (Heb 4:13; cf Prov 15:11; Ps 44:21).

Note those words: "all things are naked and open to [His] eyes." In plain English: you and I, none of us, have any secrets from God. We can hide things from each other, we can hide things from our spouses, our children, our elders, etc. But try though we might to keep things hidden from God, we simply are not able; "all things –including my heart and deepest thoughts- are naked and open" to Him. Neither the clothes that I wear nor the mask on my face nor the neutrality of my voice hide from His eyes the secrets of my heart or the intentions of my mind.

Now suppose need arises for me to give deeper assurance that what I say indeed conforms to the thoughts and plans of my mind. To whom shall I appeal, so that I can convince those around me that I in fact speak uprightly, truthfully? The answer is so obvious: if God alone is able to plumb the depths of my heart, more, if God alone knows the hidden thoughts of my heart –for He's the Creator and knows the heart He made- it follows that I may appeal only to Him to bear witness that I speak the truth. To appeal to Allah or to Saint Peter or to my mother or even to my conscience is an offence against God; His very *God*-ness demands that appeal be made to Him alone.

That explains then too, congregation, what an oath really is. An oath is nothing less than appearing in God's presence –publicly!- with the request to God to lend His ear to hear what I say and compare those words with the thoughts He knows are in my heart. In the words of A 102:

"A lawful oath is a calling upon God, who alone knows the heart, to bear witness to the truth."

And what now if God –I've asked Him to be my witness- observes that the words I speak do not agree with the thoughts He knows are in my heart? That, brothers and sisters, boils down to what the Lord in Lev 19 calls "swear[ing] by My name falsely" and that's to "profane the name of your God" (Lev 19:12). In the words of the third commandment, that's to "take the name of the Lord your God in vain." God's response? "The Lord will not hold Him guiltless who takes His name in vain." Publicly to enter God's presence with the request that God double-check that what I say agrees with what He knows is in my heart, and then to speak what I know to be not truthful, is to dishonor God publicly, is to take His name in vain – in public. And God is too jealous for the good reputation of His name to ignore that deceit. Whether other people ever find out about the deceit makes here no difference; the Lord will most surely arise to defend the honor of the name you have defiled. To say it again in the words of the third commandment: "The Lord will not hold Him guiltless who takes His name in vain." Here, then, is room only for repentance – before God's wrath fall upon you.

Why we may swear

Now, so far I've worked with the premise that the oath has a place. After all, there is an Ex 22 where God commands the use of the oath to take away doubt about a person's integrity. But there are also passages of Scripture that, at first reading, lead one to conclude that the Lord does not wish us to use the oath – at all. I remind you of what the Anabaptists said four and a half centuries ago: we have been so renewed by the Spirit that our words shall surely be trustworthy. Hence –according to them- Jesus' words in Mt 5: "I say to you, do not swear at all" (vs 34; cf James 5:12).

Yet is it really true, brothers and sisters, that the Lord no longer wants His people to use the oath at all any more? The answer is negative. It's true that in Mt 5 Jesus tells His hearers not to swear. But a number of arguments come together to make clear that Jesus does not ban the oath altogether. Consider.

In the very same chapter where Jesus says not to swear at all, He says that He did not come to destroy or nullify the Law and the Prophets; He came instead to fulfil them (vs 17). Well, the Law and the Prophets in fact commanded the use of the oath. Recall the command of Ex 22:11. Further, in Is 45 we read that God Himself swore an oath (vs 23; cf Ps 110. Also Jer 42; 12:16). Are we really to imagine that Christ

commands the opposite of what God commanded in the Law and did in the Prophets?

Jesus Himself was later in life placed under the oath, and He did not protest that oath as unlawful. I remind you of what the high priest said to Jesus at His trial. "I put you under oath by the living God," said the high priest, "Tell us if you the Christ, the Son of God." And Jesus replied, "It is as you said" (Mt 26:63f). Similarly, Paul too swore oaths. To preserve his apostolic authority among the Corinthians, Paul wrote these words, "I call God as witness against my soul, that to spare you I came no more to Corinth" (II Cor 1:23; cf Rom 1:9; II Cor 11:31; Gal 1:20; Phil 1:18). And in the Revelation shown to John, John heard an angel of heaven swear "by Him who lives forever and ever" (10:5). Well, if Jesus meant that there is no room for the oath at all, He Himself transgressed, and so did Paul, and so did this angel of heaven. Yet we understand well that that cannot be.

Furthermore, what was the problem that Jesus was addressing? Listen to what He says. "I say to you, do not swear at all: neither by heaven, for it is God's throne; nor by the earth, for it is His footstool; nor by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King" (Mt 5:34f). Why He mentions heaven and earth and Jerusalem? Simply because the Jews of His day had developed the unhappy practice of using the oath wrongly. That's to say: they would swear by the temple that their words were true, but meanwhile deceive. But, they said, if you swear by the gold of the temple you've got to be dinkum and mean what you say (Mt 23:16). Similarly, they'd swear by the altar and feel they could freely lie, but if they swore by the sacrifice lying on the altar they'd have to do what they promised to do (vs 18). In that context Jesus says: if you so abuse the oath God has given, you're not to use the oath at all; you can't be trusted with this gift from heaven. That's why He says to the Jews in Mt 5, "I say to you, do not swear at all."

Does Jesus then really mean that we are not to use the oath at all? Not so, brothers and sisters. On the contrary. *For the human heart remains so very sinful, and what we say cannot be trusted with absolute certainty.* The person to whom we speak knows that, and so is rightly on guard: is what I'm hearing really true?

I know – the Holy Spirit has renewed the hearts of God's own. But the word of God insists, congregation, that the Holy Spirit has not renewed our hearts perfectly, so that we invariably speak the real thoughts and intents of our hearts – even when the pressure is on and the moment critical. God knows: we are weak. He equally knows: my hearer may be cynical about me. That sort of friction and distrust God does not want. That is why He's given the oath; it is His gift to make life more possible in this broken world. With that gift of the oath, Peter is encouraged to lay his heart on the table, and Johnny is encouraged to believe that what Peter is saying is in fact the truth. And if it's not, well, God will sort things out in His way, at His time.

Yes, beloved, we may use the oath – with thankfulness. At the same time, congregation, we do well to realize that it will not do to use this gift lightly. To make a special point of calling upon God to witness that our words agree with what we know to be the truth has something embarrassing in it. The embarrassing element is this: to use the oath is an admission of our sinfulness and our inclination to speak what is not truthful. The Anabaptist has a point: the work of the Holy Spirit certainly has to show in what we say. So it's true: we should be able to take each other's words at face value. And the world around us should know too: you can count on those Christians to speak the truth. But to our shame, the hard reality is different. So there remains need for the oath – God's gift to His sinful children. But exactly for that reason we'll use this gift sparingly – only "when the government demands it..., or when necessity requires it, in order to maintain and promote fidelity and truth."

Meanwhile, we look forward to the day when this gift of God –given to make life in a broken world more possible– will be needed no more. That's the promise: the Lord who died to pay for our sins against the third commandment will one day return on the clouds of heaven. When that happens, He will wipe sin off this earth, will free our hearts too from the inclination to speak evil, yes, will free our hearts from the desire to doubt the neighbor's integrity. When He returns, every word we speak will agree fully with what we know to be the truth; yes, then we can trust one another fully, and all can trust every word we utter. For that day we long – and that is why we make it our business now already to speak words of truth, only truth, as best we can. Amen.



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Sermon on Lord's Day 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 16 April 2000.

" GOD COMMANDED THE DAY OF REST TO SPELL OUT OUR DEPENDENCE ON HIM."

Text:

Lord's Day 38

103. Q. What does God require in the fourth commandment?

A. First, that the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained[1] and that, especially on the day of rest, I diligently attend the church of God[2] to hear God's Word,[3] to use the sacraments,[4] to call publicly upon the LORD,[5] and to give Christian offerings for the poor.[6] Second, that all the days of my life I rest from my evil works, let the LORD work in me through His Holy Spirit, and so begin in this life the eternal sabbath.[7]

[1] Deut. 6:4-9; 20-25; I Cor. 9:13, 14; II Tim. 2:2; 3:13-17; Tit. 1:5. [2] Deut. 12:5-12; Ps. 40:9, 10; 68:26; Acts 2:42-47; Heb. 10:23-25. [3] Rom. 10:14-17; I Cor. 14:26-33; I Tim. 4:13. [4] I Cor. 11:23, 24. [5] Col. 3:16; I Tim. 2:1. [6] Ps. 50:14; I Cor. 16:2; II Cor. 8 and 9. [7] Is. 66:23; Heb. 4:9-11.

Scripture Reading:

Genesis 2:1-3

Isaiah 58

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 40:4

Psalms 115:6

Psalms 68:10

Psalms 92:4,6

Psalms 52:4,5,6

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

You are maybe aware that Lord's Day 38 has been in discussion recently in our sister church in the Netherlands. In response to an appeal relating to what a minister of the Word had said on the pulpit, the recent Synod agreed that the Sunday as *day of rest* is not based on a divine command. A day of rest may today be a good idea, but it can't –said the Synod- be said that God demands it of us. The implication is obvious: such a decision opens the door wide to joining today's world to work on Sunday.

We, brothers and sisters, live in Australia, a long ways away from the Lowlands of western Europe. One wonders: why pay attention to the matter here? Two reasons come immediately to mind. The first is this: the thoughts expressed by the minister (and now by General Synod) are aired in our midst too from time to time. And the second is this: though Holland may be far away from us geographically, there continues to be a lot of contact with Holland, and hence what happens in Holland has its effect here. It is not wise to ignore developments overseas.

We are today to listen to the Word of our God as it comes to us in the fourth commandment. In Lord's Day 38, the church has set down what the Lord requires of us in this commandment. God, we say in the first part of the answer, instructs us in this commandment to make sure that "the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained," instructs us too that "especially on the day of rest, I diligently attend the church of God." We understand: God wants us to be in church on the "day of rest". But: where does the notion of a "day of rest" come from? Does God command

it? Or is it a happy heirloom received from the fathers but not commanded in the Bible?

Let's make no mistake, congregation. When the Catechism speaks in relation to the fourth commandment of a "day of rest", the Catechism simply echoes what the Lord has taught us in His Word. The Sunday is not simply an legacy handed down from our Christian tradition; it is first of all a command of the Lord God. In fact, He commanded the day of rest in order to impress on His people how dependent we are on Him for all things for body and soul. That is, the "day of rest" spells out that we exist by His grace alone in Jesus Christ – both with respect to this life as well as to the life to come.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

GOD COMMANDED THE DAY OF REST TO SPELL OUT OUR DEPENDENCE ON HIM.

1. why we are to keep the day of rest
2. how we are to keep the day of rest

Why the Day of Rest

The Lord's command to "remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" has an Old Testament ring to it. That is simply because we associate the term 'Sabbath' with the Old Testament. Add to that Old Testament flavor the report that all the Ten Commandments are repeated somewhere in the New Testament, with the exception of the fourth, and the seed germinates in our minds that the fourth commandment is actually a bit distant from us; we perceive greater distance between us today and the fourth commandment than there is between us today and the other nine. Then we recall terms like 'moral' and 'ceremonial', are told that there's something ceremonial about the fourth commandment and so its fulfilled in Jesus Christ..., and we're left with the thought that indeed the fourth commandment somehow applies and somehow is fulfilled and so doesn't apply.... And we find it all a little bit confusing. Fertile breeding ground for the thought that the Lord doesn't really demand of us to keep the fourth commandment literally....

Let it be clear to us then first of all, brothers and sisters, that the Catechism nowhere suggests that the fourth commandment is somehow not applicable today. I remind you of what we confessed some weeks ago in Lord's Day 33. The true repentance or conversion of man, we learned from Scripture, involves two aspects, ie, "the dying of the old nature" and the "coming to life of the new nature" (Question & Answer 88). That second, the "coming to life of the new nature", included "a love and delight to life according to the will of God in all good works" (Question & Answer 90). And good works are in turn described as "those which are done ... in accordance with the law of God" (Question & Answer 91). Well now, Lord's Day 34 prints the entire law as God gave it to Israel on Mt Sinai – including the fourth commandment. Make here no mistake: in the Catechism we confess that obeying the fourth commandment is part and parcel of the regenerated life. This agrees with what Jesus said. He said pointedly that He did not come "to destroy the Law or the Prophets." "I did not come," He said, "to destroy but to fulfill" (Mt 5:17). That is simply to say that the fourth commandment remains in force just as much as the other nine. Whether or not the fourth commandment is explicitly mentioned in the New Testament is then of no consequence; this commandment too, like the others, remains the will of God for all men. And as it turns out, the fourth commandment is mentioned in the New Testament; we'll come to that later on.

God's will for us, then, includes that we "remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy". The word 'Sabbath' means to cease, to put a stop to. So I read concerning Job's three friends that they "ceased (sabbath!) to answer Job" (32:1). What does the Sabbath day put an end to? God Himself answers that question in the course of the fourth commandment, for He says

"in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day. Therefore the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it."

This, of course, is a direct reference to the passage we read from Gen 2. The first Sabbath the world experienced denoted an end to God's creating activity; the first Sabbath put a stop to the week of creating. And how did it put a stop to the first week? God set the day apart as separate, as different; He "sanctified" it. And God demonstrated its separate character by "resting", not working on this day as He had on the previous six; the first Sabbath meant a

ceasing of God's creating work and therefore a resting from that work. That's Gen 2: "in it He rested from all His work which God had created and made" (vs 3). You see, the very thought of 'Sabbath' involved the notion of rest, of ceasing from the work of the week. In truth, "the day of rest".

But it wasn't to be a day of rest for God only. God in heaven "blessed the seventh day and *sanctified it*," He says in Gen 2. Now the question is: was God's decision to "sanctify" the day valid only for Himself? Was it God's wish that only *He Himself* rest from work on this day, and not people? But if that is so, brothers and sisters, why are we told? In fact, does God need a divine declaration differentiating one day from another? Does God in fact keep a routine of days and nights, or weeks and years? Is He not above time? No congregation, when the Lord "blessed the seventh day and sanctified it", He did it not with a view to Himself but with a view to *people*; *they* were to take note and act accordingly. And in the first week of the world's existence God also set the example for people to follow; six days He labored and the seventh He rested – as people, created in His image, were henceforth to do.

I know: the book of Genesis does not give us any examples of people actually working with the instruction of God in Gen 2. But the Bible's silence on a given matter does not mean that it did not happen. Note that when the Lord gave instruction to Israel in the desert about manna (Ex 16), and said specifically that they were to collect it six days but not on the seventh, we get no indication from the text that the people were perplexed with this instruction. On the contrary, that chapter of the Bible gives every indication that the people knew what the Sabbath was all about.

However that may be, the fact of the matter is that God gave a command at Mt Sinai which He tied back directly to Gen 2 and His work of creation. That is: God took Israel out of the land of Egypt, made Israel His special people, and at Mt Sinai commanded them –as we heard in previous weeks- to work with His revelation at creation and so have no other gods before Him (first commandment), to work with His revelation at creation and so worship Him only as He commanded (second commandment), to work with His revelation at creation and so never make His glorious name little (third commandment). And the matter is true for the fourth commandment too; Israel was told at Mt Sinai to work with God's revelation at creation and so rest on the seventh day. As God did no work on the seventh day, so His people were to do no work on the seventh day; for son and daughter, for male servant and female servant, for cattle, and for the stranger who is within their gates, the seventh day was to be "the day of rest" – according to the pattern set by God in the beginning.

Now the question is: are we in the New Testament to keep this command also? That is: are we in the New Testament to know a "Lord's day", a "day of rest"? Recall: the Lord Jesus Christ said that He "did not come to destroy [the Law and the Prophets] but to fulfill" (Mt 5:17). That is why Paul says in Rom 7 that he "delights in the law of God according to the inward man" (vs 22); that law of God remains in force. That includes the fourth commandment; the "day of rest" that God ordained for mankind in the beginning remains His will for mankind today. As God would have no one to serve other gods before Him, as God would have no one to take His name in vain, so God would have no one to forget or ignore the "day of rest". If it were not so, we'd most certainly expect a clear passage of New Testament Scripture making clear that the Lord no longer demands mankind to "remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." But such a passage negating the instruction of Gen 2 and the will of God in the fourth commandment is simply not to be found.

What we do find in the New Testament is two sorts of references to the Sabbath. On the one hand there's a cluster of texts in the epistles of Paul which some would read as stating that the Sabbath is no longer relevant. I think of Rom 14:5:

"One person esteems one day above another; another esteems every day alike. Let each be fully convinced in his own mind."

And Gal 4:10:

"You observe days and months and seasons and years. I am afraid for you, lest I have labored for you in vain."

And Col 2:11:

"So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ."

But none of these texts, beloved undo the Lord's instruction in the fourth commandment. What they do say is that the errors propagated by the Jewish teachers (that by honoring certain days one gains one's salvation) are wrong; God has supplied salvation through the work His Son did on the cross. In truth, Jesus did not come to destroy the Law and the Prophets, but to fulfill (Mt 5:17).

The second cluster of texts in the New Testament relating to the fourth commandment are those that speak of "the Lord's day" or "the day of the Lord." The disciples, we read, met together on "the Lord's day" (Jn 20:19,26; Acts 20:7), and Paul commanded the Corinthians to set aside money for the needy on "the Lord's day" (I Cor 16:2; cf Rev 1:10). But where, congregation, does the phrase "the Lord's day" come from? As with so much from the New Testament, so this phrase too is borrowed from the Old Testament. Specifically, this wording comes from Is 58, where the Lord calls the Sabbath "My holy day" and "the holy day of the Lord." When the apostles in the New Testament called the Sabbath "the day of the Lord", they laid –via Is 58- a direct link between the Sabbath (and so the fourth commandment) and that "day of the Lord". Those two are the same; the Old Testament Sabbath *is* the New Testament "day of the Lord", and the New Testament "day of the Lord" *is* the Old Testament Sabbath – both obedience to the fourth commandment.

Of course, that the Sabbath was called "the day of the Lord" has another aspect to it, and that is that on this day our Lord arose from the dead; it was specifically *His* day. That is also why the church remembered the Lord's day on the first day of the week –the day of Jesus' resurrection- instead of the last day of the week. And this too, we need to know, is fulfillment of Gen 2; God rested on the seventh day, but Adam and Eve rested on the *first* full day of their existence. Their pattern in Paradise became *the* pattern for God's children when Paradise was –in essence- restored.

But note it, congregation: even that shift from the last day of the week to the first does not undo the fourth commandment itself. It remains God's will for His people that we "remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." And that's to say that God wants us to maintain "the day of rest"; six days we are to labor and the seventh day we and our children, our household tools and our work implements, and our employees also, are to enjoy a "day of rest".

Are we today still to take "a day of rest"? Does God command it? To impress God's will on the matter more firmly still upon your hearts, brothers and sisters, I ask your attention for Is 58. Listen to God's Word through the prophet:

"If you turn away your foot from the Sabbath,
From doing your pleasure on My holy day,
And call the Sabbath a delight,
The holy day of the Lord honorable,
And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways,
Nor finding your own pleasure,
Nor speaking your own words,
Then you shall delight yourself in the Lord;
I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth,
And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father" (58:13f).

What do you think, congregation: do those promises apply only to Old Testament Israel? Or may we take the passage to heart as a promise that God will certainly bless us today if we "call ... the holy day of the Lord honorable" – and treat it that way? Consider.

Isaiah 53 speaks of the work of our Lord Jesus Christ, and we have no hesitation to believe that this work applies to us; with enthusiasm we apply to ourselves the prophets words of vs 4:

"Surely He has borne our griefs
And carried our sorrows."

Isaiah 55 records the promise of the Lord that He will make his everlasting covenant with those who "come, buy wine and milk without money and without price" (cf vs 3). We understand that the promises of that text are not restricted to Old Testament Israel, but are equally for us.

Isaiah 56 enjoins the eunuch to believe that he's not a "dry tree" (vs 3), in fact, he's to receive a place in God's house. That has to be New Testamentic, if only because in the law of Moses there was no place for the eunuch in the temple (cf Dt 23:1). But there certainly is room for him in the church of Jesus Christ!

And what shall we say of the promises of the first part of Is 58? Are we really to say that they are Old Testamentic, and have no relevance for us today? Listen:

"If you extend your soul to the hungry
And satisfy the afflicted soul,
Then your light shall dawn in the darkness,
And your darkness shall be as the noonday.
The Lord will guide you continually,
And satisfy your soul in drought,
And strengthen your bones" (vss 10ff).

Truly, beloved, who among us would insist that these promises are for Old Testament Israel only?

But if we have no problem seeing the surrounding chapters as relevant for us, *why do we hesitate to draw the material of ch 58 about the Sabbath into today?* Isn't that being less than honest? No, brothers and sisters, not only does God's instruction as found in Gen 2 and cast into commandment form in the fourth commandment pertain to us today, but the promises of blessing on delighting in the day of the Lord pertain to us today also.

And now we're at the heart of why God wishes us still to keep the day of rest. For when all is said and done, the day of rest God grants us each week again impresses upon us the work of our Lord Jesus Christ. You will know that in the fourth commandment as we find it in Ex 20, Israel must "remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy" –why?- "in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day;" we've spoken of that already. But when Moses repeats the Ten Commandments in Dt 5, he gives a different reason for the fourth commandment. It's this:

"Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day."

And the exodus from Egypt foreshadowed the deliverance Christ would obtain for His people from Satan's bondage! Well, through Christ's work on the cross we have been set from Satan's slavery, and to impress that upon us the Lord gives us a "day of rest". Here is the significance of Isaiah's words:

"If you ... call the Sabbath a delight,
The holy day of the Lord honorable,
And shall honor Him, not doing your own ways,
Nor finding your own pleasure...,
Then you shall delight yourself in the Lord;
And I will cause you to ride on the high hills of the earth,
And feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father."

"The heritage of Jacob your father": that's the gospel of free grace through Jesus Christ! *That* is the greatest blessing the Lord can give to any sinner, and *that's what He promises to give* to those who honor His day. For their focus is on Christ, they delight in what the "day of rest" symbolizes, they receive great pleasure in the work the Lord in mercy has done for them – and so *that's* what keeps them busy on that "holy day of the Lord".

How the Day of Rest

And because on that day those who delight in the Lord take pleasure in what the Lord has prepared for them, they also make it their business to rest "all the days of [their lives ... from [their] evil works, let the LORD work in [them] through His Holy Spirit, and so begin in this life the eternal sabbath." Given *why* the Lord continues to give "the day of the Lord", there's no room for sin in my life; there's room only for daily repentance, the dying of the old nature and the coming to life of the new. And to help that process along, we shall –like Israel of the Old Testament (Lev 23:3)- not consider the day of rest as a day to sleep, nor a day to relax on the beach. But we shall consider the day of rest to be a day to meet together with the people of God "to hear God's Word, to use the sacraments, to call publicly upon the Lord, and to give Christian offerings for the poor." As the apostle to the Hebrews put it: we are not to forsake "the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some" (10:25).

How, then, shall we remember "the Lord's day"? That question becomes increasingly urgent as our society moves rapidly away from the Christian principles that under-girded western civilization for so long – and so moves to ignore or forget the ordinance of God that all men are to work six days and rest on the seventh. Shall we take employment that requires laboring on the Lord's day? The pressure is on. But the fourth commandment still answers that question clearly. The will of the Lord remains that we labor six days, and rest on "the Lord's day". By resting from our labors on "the day of the Lord", we confess our conviction that we belong to our Lord Jesus Christ, and that our Father for Christ's sake –He made heaven and earth- makes us ride on the high hills of the earth and feeds us with the heritage of Jacob. In a word, we give expression to our faith, to the conviction that we live by grace and not by sweat; *God*, and not our *efforts*, supplies the food and drink, the home and car we need.

Is our Sunday simply an heirloom inherited from the fathers? But when all is said and done, behind the Sunday is the commandment of our God. It is His will that we keep the Sabbath day holy, that we rest on the "day of the Lord". With that day He promises –and we confess- that we live by His grace alone.

And that's a gospel we don't want to loose. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 39 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday Afternoon, 21 May 2000.

"OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITIES IS OBEDIENCE TO GOD."

Text:

Lord's Day 39

104. Q. What does God require in the fifth commandment?

A. That I show all honour, love, and faithfulness to my father and mother and to all those in authority over me, submit myself with due obedience to their good instruction and discipline,[1] and also have patience with their weaknesses and shortcomings,[2] since it is God's will to govern us by their hand.[3]

[1] Ex. 21:17; Prov. 1:8; 4:1; Rom. 13:1, 2; Eph. 5:21, 22; 6:1-9; Col. 3:18-4:1. [2] Prov. 20:20; 23:22; 1 Pet. 2:18.

[3] Matt. 22:21, Rom. 13:1-8; Eph. 6:1-9; Col. 3:18-21.

Scripture Reading:

Romans 13:1-7

Deuteronomy 21:18-21

Confessions:

Article 36 Belgic Confession

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 95:3,4

Hymn 57:4

Psalms 31:15

Psalms 106:4,7,8

Psalms 37:3,4,5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The question of authority and obedience to authorities is surely a timely subject. I say that because our day knows a general lack of respect for parents by their children, a lack of respect for teachers by their pupils, a lack of willing obedience to government by the citizens of the lands. That trend doesn't pass us by. As evidence that in the church too there is an increasing disrespect for authority, I remind you of how we speak to each other about the government of our nation. I remind you too of the tone of voice with which we parents let our children speak to us. And I remind you too of the fact that, unlike so many years ago, congregation members increasingly challenge the admonitions given by elders. In truth, in the world around us respect for authority has decreased greatly, and that trend is noticeable in the church and in our families.

In His covenant with His people, the Lord has included a commandment about authority. God has delivered a people from bondage to slavery in Egypt, yes, from bondage to the slavery of sin and Satan, and in His care for His own instructed them to "honor ... father and ... mother." With that command to honor father and mother, the Lord would have us "show all honor, love, and faithfulness ... to all those in authority over" us. And that in turn means that God would have us to "submit [ourselves] with due obedience to their good instruction and discipline."

Authority and obedience. The notions are outdated in the world around us, and are distinctly under attack in the church

also. That is why I need to impress on you today, congregation of Jesus Christ, that the matter of the fifth commandment is really a question of *what do we think of God*. You cannot separate obedience to authority from the *reason why* authority is to be respected and obeyed. And once one grasps *why* authorities are to be obeyed, then and only then can one stipulate *how* and *how far* one is to obey them. It is these questions that I wish to address this afternoon.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

OBEDIENCE TO AUTHORITIES IS OBEDIENCE TO GOD.

To explain this theme, we pause at three points:

1. The reason for obedience
2. The manner of obedience
3. The limit of obedience

Reason for Obedience

Why is it, brothers and sisters, that children are to obey parents, students to obey teachers, a nation to obey the government, etc, etc?

LD 39 expresses the answer in simple terms: "it is God's will." The reason is that simple. This straightforward yet categorical answer of the Catechism as to why people are to be obedient to those in authority over them means –and we need to note this- that all other arguments for obedience are not correct.

It's said today that one ought to obey authorities because it doesn't pay to disobey them. Children should obey parents because disobeying is to ask for punishment, and punishment is not desirable. The citizens of the land should obey the government because disobedience can lead to a fine, and that's hard on the wallet. To be obedient is the most beneficial.

It's true that precisely this thought is behind some of our actions. We reckon with what the authorities say because we just as soon not reap the penalty on disobedience. It may be with grumbling that we pay our taxes, but we do it because we don't want a fine. We obey our teachers because we don't want a detention. We stick to the rules laid down in the home because we don't want to be grounded. It's what we experience: to obey is more beneficial.

Yet you notice, beloved, that thinking in this way does not reckon with the fact that it is *God's will* that we obey authorities. *Argument from benefit is not the same as argument from God's will*. In fact, to suggest that we should obey those over us because obedience produces the greater benefit is a thoroughly humanistic line of thought. For that line of reasoning leads logically to the conclusion that one *obeys only as long as one sees obedience to be beneficial*. That is: once I see more benefit in disobedience than in obedience, the road is wide open for me to rebel against those over me. And I do what is best in my own eyes.

Don't misunderstand me. It's true that we read in the Bible about punishments on doing evil. "Rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil," Paul writes in Romans 13. And he adds: "Do want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good..." (vs 3). So, Yes, the Bible does know the argument of obeying because of the consequences. But that does not mean that that is all the Bible says on the matter. In no way would God have us obey simply because of the resulting consequence of our obedience. God would not have us think that the matter of whether we obey a given instruction of a parent or a teacher or a government is to be determined by where we consider the greatest gain to be. In the final analysis, the Scriptural ground for obedience is not the question of consequence. Rather –Romans 13- "let every soul be subject to the governing authorities" –why?- "*for* there is no authority except from God.... Therefore whoever resists the authority resists what God has appointed" (vss 1f). That's the bottom line: behind the person who has authority over us is *God*. And God says that we are to obey that person in authority over us, not because it is beneficial, but because "it is God's will".

It makes one ask: why is it God's will that we obey authorities? I draw your attention to Art 36 of the Belgic Confession. There you and I, together with the fathers over the centuries, summarize the teaching of Scripture like this: "We believe that ... our gracious God has ordained kings, princes, and civil officers." And why has God done so? "Because" –says that article- "because of the depravity of mankind." God "wants the world to be governed by laws and policies, in order that the licentiousness of men be restrained and that everything be conducted among them in good order." Do you hear, congregation, what we confess Scripture to teach? It's this: authorities are a *gift* from God. And God gave authorities *because He cares for this world*.

Recall: God created this world to be *His* world. The fall into sin caused the good order which God had placed in His world to collapse; men could not live decently and in harmony any more for this world became Satan's. But God so loved this world, He so cared for it, that He sent His only Son to ransom this world from the power of the evil one. Christ went to the cross in order to redeem, but He could not redeem this world unless He *obeyed His Father* even unto death. He hung on the cross in total darkness, all alone, beset by Satan. But the command of God applied for Him while on the cross too; He also had to "honor ... father and ... mother." Jesus heavenly Father may have rejected Him, and Jesus knew that He had –that's why He cried out His anguish: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" – but Jesus was not allowed to 'curse God and die'; Jesus had to obey those in authority over Him, and that included His Father in heaven. He had to obey, to honor, even though His Father had rejected Him.

We do well to realize, brothers and sisters, that Jesus did not honor and obey His Father while on the cross because His Father was so loving to Him now. If ever anybody was hated, it was Jesus Christ on the cross. And if ever hatred hurt, it was that hate on the cross, because it was His own Father who hated Him with a perfect hatred; Jesus on the cross was one-and-all sin, and God hates sin. We for our part would say that, given the Father's rejection of His Son, there was no reason for Jesus now to honor and obey His Father. *Yet Jesus did honor and obey!* He bowed His head before the highest authority, He did not curse His Father, He did not disobey Him and give in to Satan. He continued in submission to His Father, because He knew that authority comes from God and God is not to be trifled with. So He was obedient – though the result was death. He was obedient even unto death, and that is why God crowned Him with glory and honor, and gave to Him a name which is above every name, that at Jesus' name every knee should bow. Because He was obedient, God the Father exalted Him in the heavenly places and made Him *Lord of all* the earth; "sit at My right hand," He said to His triumphant Son, "until I make Your enemies a stool for Your feet." And God gave the world to Christ.

Where, then, congregation, do authorities come from? They come from God. Why? Because Jesus Christ has triumphed over darkness, over the devil. It's not Satan who rules this world, but God. That's why *God* stands behind the authorities that exist. He puts these

authorities there because He cares for this world; they are His servants through whom He rules. He places over us parents, teachers, consistories, governments, etc, because the King of the world is interested in the wellbeing of His people. Rom 13: a ruler "is God's servant for your good."

Why, then, should we be careful to obey those in authority over us? *Because, congregation, obedience to the authorities is obedience to God.* The world in which we live does not consist of people and authorities on one level – authorities we may choose to obey or disobey depending on whether we find obedience beneficial for us or for the general public. No, by the ordinance of God the world in which knows people with authorities *over* them – and those authorities ultimately are tools in the hand of the King of kings who would govern men *through* these authorities. Governments, teachers, parents, consistories are not just persons over us and nothing more; governments, teachers, parents, office-bearers are tools in God's hands through whom *God* rules over us – for our good. That is why rebellion against those set over us is not simply to snub those authorities; disobeying authority is nothing else than disrespecting *the Lord God*.

This is the reality that puts the passage we read from Dt 21 into perspective. In that passage the Lord God gave instruction to Israel regarding those who refused to obey authority. I grant, it strikes us as very harsh, that "a stubborn and rebellious son" should be stoned to death. And it doesn't sit well with us that it is the parents themselves who have to lay the charges against their child; we'd find it so hard to do. Yet this is God's command to Old Testament Israel – why? – because God wished Israel to know that disobedience to parents is not primarily an offence against the parents.

It's first of all an affront to the Lord God. If it is true that behind the parents stands God, then it is so obvious that dishonoring parents implies dishonoring God. And it is rebellion against *God* that the Lord does not tolerate. He does not tolerate rebellion because this world is *His* world. It cost the blood of His own Son to redeem this world! And will He now tolerate a flaunting of His authority?! See there, beloved, the reason why God commanded that one in Israel who kicked against rules and authorities was to be put to death. *Such a person did not reckon with the work Christ would do on the cross!*

We do well to keep it in mind. Why ought students to do what their teachers say? Sure, obedience may in its time be embarrassing before the eyes of buddies, but that's neither here nor there. The question is: can you afford to act as if Christ has not been victorious, as if God is not behind these authorities? Why ought children to obey their parents? Because otherwise they may get kicked out of the house? End up paying more for room and board elsewhere? Not at all. Young people are to reckon with *who God is* and *what God has done* in ransoming this world. If He is King –and that's a fact we deny to our eternal damnation- if He is King, you *need* to obey Him. And if He wishes to govern us through our parents, then we need to acknowledge that and so obey those parents too. Equally, why do we obey the governments of our land, show them honor and respect? Because they have earned our respect? Because they're worthy? Or because the authorities have a lot of money? Think on it, beloved: take the badge of office off a premier and he's a man just like you and I. Take the clothes off a millionaire, clean out his bank balance, and he's as miserable a person as anybody else. It's not because of what they are of themselves that we are to show honor and pay taxes and obey their laws. They may be kings and rulers, but they are that by the sovereign choice of the King of kings. We obey and we honor and we are submissive because Christ obeyed and honored and was submission to the Father on the cross. We reckon with who Christ is –King of kings- and we reckon with what He did – and that's why we obey.

Yes, Dt 21 strikes us as harsh. And we haven't the habit of stoning stubborn and rebellious sons or persistent law breakers. Yet beloved, we may do well to take Dt 21 into account somewhat more fully. Christ fulfilled the law, true, but the intent of the law remains. If Old Testament young people were to be put to death if they persisted in stubbornness and rebellion, and they were to receive this punishment because their behavior was offence against God – not reckoning with His redemption- then the principle of that law counts today as well. Yes, it is the duty of parents, if they cannot get anywhere with a stubborn and rebellious child, to involve the Consistory. For their child lives in sin. And sin is something that God does not tolerate in His church. So it is that the consistory may also be obliged to proceed to the New Testament equivalent of stoning: excommunication. *For God remains God.* And we need to be careful that we don't let the ties of blood silence the command of God to take His Godhead seriously. Ultimately, it's respect and love for God and His honor that dictates our behavior toward our children. And this principle, of course, we have to apply in all areas of life.

Manner of Obedience

Given that the ground for obeying authority lies in the fact that God "governs us by their hand" (and does so as a result of Christ's work on the cross), can we also say something about the manner of obeying those over us – second point. LD 39 describes this manner like this: "I show all honor, love, and faithfulness ... to all those in authority over me." The point here is that the Lord does not appreciate *grudging* obedience; God demands that obedience be *from the heart*. It's not simply that God says: make sure you obey and pay your taxes because the law says so. No, God tells us also *how* we are to pay our taxes, *what attitude we are to have* when we pay them. It is God's will that we adopt an attitude of love to the authorities. So I am to hand over my share of the taxes cheerfully. Why? Because God rules us by their hands. Christ on Calvary obtained salvation for me, and so I love Him with all my heart and soul and strength. The government that requests my taxes is the servant of *this* Savior, and that's why I gladly give taxes - for Christ's sake. True, it may well be that I do not find the actions of the government all that agreeable. But again, that is beside the point. The actions of the authorities are ultimately their responsibility. It is for me to recognize that behind Major Stubbs, behind Premier Court, behind Prime Minister Howard, stands my Lord Jesus Christ – and that point is true for *all* whom God has set in authority over us. Whether I understand their actions is not decisive, and whether I approve of their actions is not decisive either; for His sake I show honor, love, faithfulness to all whom Christ in His wisdom has set over me. And I acknowledge that my Savior is ruling me, through their hands. So we submit with proper obedience to their instruction and correction.

The Catechism mentions also that we are to have patience with their weaknesses and shortcomings. Now if anything is hard, that's got to be it. Yet that, brothers and sisters, is God's law. God would have us deal patiently, be understanding and tolerant with regards to those over us. Why? Again, because God in His wisdom considers it beneficial for me that I be governed and taught and restrained and guided by precisely these parents, these teachers, these governments, these elders, etc. And God's ways are higher than man's ways; we shall never be able successfully to second-guess why God does things this way or that. God *governs us by their hands*, and that is something we accept, and *therefore have patience* when we discover that our mentors are not exactly perfect.

We all know the adage that love makes blind. Among men that should maybe not be so; we may never blindly follow another. But with respect to God it most certainly must be true. Because of what our Savior did for us, we love Him, must love Him. That love means that we accept gratefully *all that He gives*, including a ruler, a parent, an officebearer that we don't really appreciate. Love for my all-wise God means that I *honor those whom He puts over me*, even then when I disagree totally with their strategy. I honor, I obey, and do so willingly and without grumbling, not because of who the ruler is in himself; I honor and obey, and I do so willingly and without grumbling, because I know where this ruler with all his shortcomings and idiosyncrasies comes from. And I recognize that God makes no mistake in giving to us this particular authority.

Limit of Obedience

That leaves yet our final point, the limit of our obedience to those whom God sets over us. God stands behind the authorities that be, and we know that God demands absolute and total obedience to them since we are to love Him and serve Him with our whole heart and soul and mind. Yet we understand well that this does not mean that there are no boundaries to the obedience God wants us to give to those in authority over us. Instead, the Lord God has set a limit to the obedience we are to give.

I said already that authorities are there because God placed them there. And that's the reason why we are to respect them. But that same reality, congregation, provides anyone in any position of authority with the boundaries within which he may act. A parent, an officebearer, a teacher, a government official is commanded by God to *be* His servant, and therefore to exercise the power of his office in a way that agrees with how God rules. Parents have authority over their children, not for their own benefit, but so that these children might be brought up to fear God. Governments have authority over the citizens of a land, not so that they might have a comfortable life themselves, exploit the people of the land, but so that there might be law and order within the land, yes, so that the people of God can freely worship this God of all the earth. So there are boundaries to what the authorities can demand.

But we know that authorities are able to overstep the boundaries they have received from God; they are, after all, still sinful people. And when they insist that those under them do that which is contrary to the will of God in heaven, then it is the responsibility of these subjects to *disobey*. For it is the duty of men "to obey God rather than men" (Act 5:29). That rule of Scripture constitutes the limit of the obedience God demands us to grant to those over us. Yet - and we need to have this straight in our minds- even when God demands of us to disobey the instructions of the authorities- He still insists that we are to show honor to such an authority - for Christ's sake (cf I Sam 26:19).

Today's thinking says: obey if it's beneficial (and if you can break the law without being caught, the more power to you). I trust I've said enough for you to understand that that notion is radically unbiblical. But now I need to add yet that disobeying those over us is always, *always rebellion* (unless, of course, obedience to the demand of those over us would cause us to sin against God). We are quick to condemn revolutionary activities as they are found throughout this world, be it in government overthrows in distant lands, or terrorist actions, etc, and rightly so. But, congregation, we need to *be consistent*. To disobey those over us -including parents, teachers, officebearers, government- always constitutes *revolution* - unless that one exception is a reality. Disobedience to authorities is *revolution*, revolution first of all against the God who has chosen to care for us through those particular authorities. Revolution is a big word, yes. But it can be pretty close to home too. Let's be awake.

Obedience. That is the command of God. To honor and obey those over us is to honor and obey God. To dishonor and disobey those over us, is to revolt, is to rebel against God. No wonder that the Lord attached to this command a promise about "living long in the land which God gives" to us. To tangle with God will always result in us holding the

short end of the stick. The rebellious son of Dt 21 may have had his life shortened; God will see to it that *all* who fail to reckon with God and His sovereignty will have their lives shortened.

On the other hand, those who reckon with God, who acknowledge through their obedience to authorities that Christ is King of kings and Lord of lords, shall inherit the land, the earth on which we now live. Yes, they shall live long in land God gives, for the Lord has promised that the New Jerusalem shall come from heaven to *earth*. In that New Jerusalem every creature on this earth shall acknowledge His authority, His supremacy; great and small shall bend the knee in humble recognition of His Lordship. Like the angels of heaven today, all shall sing His praises with the words of Rev 5:

"Worthy is the Lamb who was slain
To receive ... honor and glory and blessing" (vs 12).

And where there is honor there shall also be obedience.

And those who lived in rebellion against the King of kings in this life? They shall be swept off this earth for all eternity. In the New Jerusalem there is no room for the disobedient.

"Honor your father and your mother, that it may go well with you..., and that you may live long...." Yes, Lord, I love You because of the redemption Jesus obtained on the cross of Calvary. That's why I show all honor, love, and faithfulness to all those in authority over me. For I know: You, O Lord, govern me, take care of me, through these sinful people. And You are wiser than I am; You make no mistake in looking after me through these sinners. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 40 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday Afternoon, 5 July 1998.

" THE GOD OF LIFE HATES MURDER AND DEMANDS LOVE."

Text:

Lord's Day 40

105. Q. What does God require in the sixth commandment?

A. I am not to dishonour, hate, injure, or kill my neighbour by thoughts, words, or gestures, and much less by deeds, whether personally or through another;[1] rather, I am to put away all desire of revenge.[2] Moreover, I am not to harm or recklessly endanger myself.[3] Therefore, also, the government bears the sword to prevent murder.[4]

[1] Gen. 9:6; Lev. 19:17, 18; Matt. 5:21, 22; 26:52. [2] Prov. 25:21, 22; Matt. 18:35; Rom. 12:19; Eph. 4:26. [3] Matt. 4:7; 26:52; Rom. 13:11-14. [4] Gen. 9:6; Ex. 21:14; Rom. 13:4.

106. Q. But does this commandment speak only of killing?

A. By forbidding murder God teaches us that He hates the root of murder, such as envy, hatred, anger, and desire of revenge,[1] and that He regards all these as murder.[2]

[1] Prov. 14:30; Rom. 1:29; 12:19; Gal. 5:19-21; James 1:20; 1 John 2:9-11. [2] 1 John 3:15.

107. Q. Is it enough, then, that we do not kill our neighbour in any such way? A. No. When God condemns envy, hatred, and anger, He commands us to love our neighbour as ourselves,[1] to show patience, peace, gentleness, mercy, and friendliness toward him,[2] to protect him from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies.[3]

[1] Matt. 7:12; 22:39; Rom. 12:10. [2] Matt. 5:5; Luke 6:36; Rom. 12:10, 18; Gal. 6:1, 2; Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:12; 1 Pet. 3:8. [3] Ex. 23:4, 5; Matt. 5:44, 45; Rom. 12:20.

Scripture Reading:

Genesis 9:1-7

1 John 3:10-18

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalm 16:1

Psalm 118:1,7

Hymn 37:3

Psalm 133:1,2

Hymn 54:1,4,5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The Lord sets before us today His instruction not to kill. The Catechism summarises for us that with this command the Lord tells us to *love*.

Love. The complaint is repeatedly heard that there is not adequate love in our midst. That there is room for growth is no doubt true; we'll need to come back to that. But it is fitting today first of all, brothers and sisters, to observe that there is also very much of love in our midst, much for which we do well to express our thanks to the Lord God. There are various lonely people in our midst, and yet effort is made to draw them into the homes and families of the congregation – love. There are those in our midst who are beset with grief, sorrow, anxiety, and others come to share

the burden, to open the Scriptures, to pray – love. There are those who have given themselves to sin, and others come with words of admonition in an effort to prompt repentance – love. There are the repentant, and others come with words and gestures of encouragement – love. There are the sick mothers, or those who just had a baby, who aren't in a position to cook a meal for the family, and a meal is spontaneously supplied, once, twice, numerous times – love. There's a small appeal for finance to allow a sick member to travel to Texas to visit a doctor..., and within a week the needed money is there – surely that is love.

These evidences of love, congregation, makes one small, and thankful. Love, says the apostle, is a fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5). And *we are allowed to see something of that love in our midst!* Please, beloved, let no one be cynical about whether or not the communion of saints is alive in our midst, let no one be cynical about whether there is love. Instead, let songs of praise break from our lips as we see before us the evidence that the Lord in the Spirit is actively working in our hearts and lives.

No, that does not mean that we have arrived, that there is no need to listen to God's Word in the sixth commandment, that we have reached the goal God has set. Make no mistake: even the holiest in our midst demonstrates only a small beginning of the obedience God requires – also in relation to love for the other; there remain so many ways in which the communion of saints can be improved. But precisely because there is already ample evidence of the Spirit's work in our midst may we be the more eager to listen to God's Word as it comes to us in the sixth commandment – so that in turn we grow more in Him and so show love to one another better still.

I summarise the sermon, then, with this theme:

THE GOD OF LIFE HATES MURDER AND DEMANDS LOVE.

- 1. why we may not murder**
- 2. why we must love**

1. We find ourselves today in a climate that does not know what love for the neighbour really is. The pattern of behaviour dominating society is purely *self love*, as in: 'I have to get on with *my* life.' So, if the neighbour has become too much of a burden and a hindrance for me to get on with *my* life, I set that neighbour aside. If that neighbour is an unborn child, it's aborted. If the neighbour is an elderly, demented parent, he or she is institutionalised. If the neighbour is the spouse I no longer appreciate, I move out on him or her and file for separation and divorce. And the children can go to a day care center.... This is what the Scriptures call "lovers of self". Given that climate around us, it's not really surprising that our state has recently adopted legislation that gives to us by official government decision just about the most liberal abortion laws available in the whole world. The fact that we are now allowed, by the law of the land, to kill another without fear of punishment is simply a fruit of the worship-of-self that pervades society's thinking. Given this background to legalised abortion, it is inevitable –unless God grants repentance- that one day euthanasia will be legalised also.

To battle this selfishness, then, I need to set before you first why that extreme of selfishness –murder- is wrong. Why did God tell us not to kill? What's behind it?

In Scripture we first meet the command not to kill in Gen 9; we read the passage. After Noah had left the ark, the Lord gave him an instruction valid for all men. Said God:

"whoever sheds man's blood,
By man his blood shall be shed" (Gen 9:6).

That command appears in the context of God having given to men all plants and animals for food. That is to say: God told Noah that he could help himself to all plants and all animals in order to eat, to keep warm, to live. God gave this permission not to Noah alone; rather, in Noah the entire human race is told that all creation, all animals and plants, is laid at man's disposal in order that man may use creation to live for the glory of the Creator. In the face of pleas from animal rights' activists and environmentalists, this is a passage of Scripture we do well to bear in mind; all creation is given to us for food, for shelter.

But, God continued, Noah was not, under any circumstance, to lay hands on any *person*, neither to eat him, nor to obtain his property for himself, nor to get rid of him so that he can no longer be a problem. God was insistent: you may not kill another person for any reason. Said God: 'animals and plants I give to you; they are at your disposal so that you can live for Me. But fellow men I do not give to you; you shall keep your hands off of each other. And if you do take the life of another man, then I decree that your blood shall be shed in turn.' Notice, congregation: God does not make distinctions in relation to age or health. He does not say that the old and infirm and handicapped and the unborn may be killed, but the children and the women must be spared. God issues a blanket condemnation of shedding the blood of any person – irrespective of age or health.

Why, my beloved? Why did the Lord permit the human race to kill animals and plants but expressly outlawed killing people? Why are all creatures laid at our disposal, with the express exception of our fellow men? God Himself gives the reason in the second part of vs 6:

"For in the image of God
He made man."

That man has been created in the image of God sets a direct link between God and man. Of all the creatures formed in the beginning, man alone was created "in the image of God", and that means: the human race received the instruction to 'image God', to show to the rest of creation something of God's glory and greatness, His faithfulness and wisdom. More, the Lord also equipped the human race so that each person might indeed be able to reflect to the rest of creation something of what God was like. So people are different than dogs; people have a *task* dogs don't have *and* (so that they can do the task) people have *talents* dogs don't have. In the hierarchy of creation, God gave to mankind a place *between* Himself on the top of the ladder and animals & plants on the bottom of the ladder. And in this hierarchy, it is for man to image, to reflect, to show what God is like. Let it be fixed in our minds: the human race is created to show to the rest of creation something of what God is like, so that in turn the creatures of the world be moved to praise God the more. Our place as image of God is geared to greater glory for God!

That, my beloved, explains why in Israel any animal that killed a man (an ox, for example) was in turn to be killed (cf Ex 21:28). Equally, it explains why God commanded capital punishment for any person who murdered another person. For by murder that creature –whom God set between Himself and creation in order that He might be imaged to all creation- is removed from his God-given post and robbed of his God-given talent, and because the murdered man can't image God any more *God is not being glorified*. This is something God will not tolerate –after all, He made the world for His own glory- and that is why He condemns all murder so vehemently: "whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed."

We all realise, though, that after God created man in His image, the human race fell into sin. The result of the fall is that people are not what God created us to be; we're no longer perfect, we're moody and temperamental and selfish, we're subject to sickness and deterioration and death, some of us are handicapped so that we cannot function independently of others. In a word: we can't and we don't image God the way we should. It makes one wonder: might that maybe mean that the command of Gen 9 has lost its punch?

Not at all, beloved. Remember that the instruction of Gen 9 came *after* the fall into sin. That is: both God and Noah knew that the human race was sinful, knew that the human race was subject to countless ill effects of that fall – including sickness and suffering, senility and handicap, etc. Yet God issued a blanket condemnation of all murder; in no way may one take the life of another in order to make one's own life easier.

The drift of the command of God in Gen 9 was repeated years later to Israel at Mt Sinai – the sixth commandment. Here we find more detail about why God forbids murder. For the sixth commandment appears in the context of God's declaration to Israel about Who He was. That's the opening line of the commandments: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." And, God added, *that's why* "you shall not murder."

"The house of bondage": the people knew very well what that had been like. With reference to the sixth commandment: the people of Israel had been commanded to kill all their male children. That is: upon birth the new

parents had to examine the gender of the newborn, and if the infant was a boy he was to be thrown into the Nile – infanticide. More, obedience to this command meant in the long term that Israel as a people would be wiped out, for without potential husbands a people lasts but one generation – genocide. In a word: the land of Egypt, the house of bondage, was for Israel the land of death.

But see: from this land of death the Lord God gave His adopted people deliverance. That is: He saved them from death and gave them life. More, He gave them life *abundantly*; already there was an abundance of breakfast laying on the desert floor every morning, and soon God would give His redeemed people a land flowing with milk and honey, a land of *life*. In turn, the abundance of life Israel received from the Lord in their deliverance from Egypt and the bread in the desert and the promise of the land of Canaan foreshadowed the salvation God would work in Jesus Christ. For the Son of God would come to ransom God's people from spiritual death, would come to give life in the fullest sense of the word.

Then Yes, the old and the infirm came along with Israel out of Egypt. So did the handicapped and the unproductive. They were there at Mt Sinai when the Lord established His covenant with His people, told them not to murder. For all were redeemed from bondage to Egypt, redeemed from the House of Death, and if God delivered somebody from death, shall a man turn around and commit him to death?? All were redeemed in the blood of the Son of God, and therefore nobody should dare to destroy what Christ has delivered.

We too, by the grace of God, have been delivered from bondage to Death, to sin and Satan. And there is the reason, beloved, why none of us should dare to move another of us closer to the door of Death. Redeemed you are, and so are your aged parents, and so are your unborn children, and so are your handicapped family members. All are redeemed in the blood of Jesus Christ, all are given life abundantly, and so there is no room for us to consider Death for them. That task to image God is restored in Jesus Christ, and so it is for us to permit the other (no matter how frail or handicapped) to image the Creator as long as God gives the task.

And what are we to say, then, of the unbelievers? For it is true: they have not been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ, have not been recreated by the Spirit of Jesus Christ either so that they can image God once more. But the fact of Gen 9 remains: "whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed."

Besides, this is the dispensation of the Holy Spirit. As a result of the redeeming work of Christ on the cross, the dividing wall between Jews and Greeks has been broken down. The work of Christ on the cross, then, is not for the benefit of Jews only, but for the benefit of people from every tribe and tongue and nation on earth. The gospel is to go to one and all. But you can't bring the gospel to the dead. To push another, then, into the realm of the dead is to take away from him any and all opportunity to hear the gospel and repent. Through my murdering another, then, I become in part responsible for his eternal damnation. Instead of murdering another, or permitting murder, it is for us to do what we can to set the gospel before the other.

2. So we find ourselves in our second point for this afternoon. For, if we are not to murder, what are we to do instead? What is the other side of the coin?

In the passage we read from I Jn 3, the Lord God sets murder and love beside each other as opposites. I read in vs 11:

"For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, not as Cain who was of the wicked one and murdered his brother."

And vs 14:

"He who does not love his brother abides in death. Whoever hates his brother is a murderer...."

In fact, the point of the contrasts in John's letter is that there is really nothing between murder and love. To fail to love the brother is in fact to murder. And No, John would not have us think that anyone who fails to love his brother invariably sticks a knife into that brother and snuffs out his light; rather, John would have us know that any feelings of hate toward the brother are *in essence* no different from the sin of actual murder.

To our way of thinking, this just cannot be true. We imagine murder and love to be opposite extremes of a long continuum of emotion. Then we imagine ourselves to be at the extreme called 'love' when it comes to our feelings about family members. We imagine ourselves a bit removed from the extreme called 'love' when it comes to our feelings about persons in the church; we still love them, but it's not as warm as with family. And people we meet at work, or maybe people from the community as such, well, then we're sort of on neutral ground somewhere in the middle of this long continuum; we don't get warm and mushy about these people, but certainly don't hate them either and aren't about to murder them. When all is said and done, we just don't associate ourselves with the negative extreme of this continuum; very few of us can mention names of people we actually hate and would want to murder. So the fact that John places no neutral ground between love and murder strikes us as strange....

Observe, then, my beloved, what John writes. For John draws his readers attention to the example of the Saviour. Vs 16: "By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us." The reference is to the fact that the Son of God did not hesitate to leave the splendours and comforts of heaven for our benefit. And Yes, we find that stirring, we are grateful that the Lord Jesus has laid down His life for us. But to appreciate what this love on Jesus' part really is, we need to understand the force of the word 'us'; Jesus "laid down His life for *us*". And what sort of a person am I?? Says the Lord of me and of you: by nature we are lovers of self, by nature we are haters of the other. O true, we don't mind other people, but the reason we don't mind other people around us, even love them, is for the sake of *personal* benefit. I read in Rom 3 this characterisation of people, including you and me: 'his throat is an open grave, under his lips is the venom of asps, indeed, his feet make haste to shed blood.' Speak ill of another, think ill of another, do wrong to another: see there the natural man – guilty of sin against the sixth commandment. Infatuated with the self. In Bible language: murderers.

But this is love: God sent His Son for the likes of *us*. The love of God is not that we are so attractive to God that He feels moved to do something for us. The love of God is that He "sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (I Jn 4:10). The love of God is that He gave His Son for us *even though there was absolutely nothing in us that could impress to God*. This is love: that the radically and totally unworthy should receive goodness and kindness –and how?– by God giving for our benefit the very dearest He had: His only begotten Son! *That* is love.

But you see, brothers and sisters, if this is what love is, then there's no place in our minds for the thought that love is but one extreme of a long continuum of feelings, with love at one end and hate (& murder) at the other, and a big slice of neutral ground in the middle. Love is what God has poured out on *murderers*! Love is not something that God restricted to those who were dear to Him, nice to Him, good people; love is the goodness God displayed to His enemies, those who hated Him, those who had murder in their hearts. As Paul writes to the Romans: "Christ died for the *ungodly*," and "while we were still *sinner*s Christ died for us," and "when we were *enemies* we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son" (Rom 5:6ff).

Now the Lord does not want us to kill, does not want us to take the life of another for our own benefit. God gives reasons for that in passages of Scripture as Gen 9 and Ex 20. Instead, the Lord wants us to "love one another" (I Jn 3:11), yes, to "lay down our lives for the brethren" (3:16). Very concretely: do for the other person what God in Christ did for me. That is: while the other person still hates me, I give up my everything for that person's good – even as God, while I still hated Him, gave up His only Son for my salvation.

The priest and the Levite on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho saw the beaten traveller laying half dead on the path. But these pious church goers did not show love to the wreck on the side of the road; because they were too busy, or too proud of their clothes to get them dirty, or too shy to reach out to a stranger in need, they passed by on the other side – and so made themselves guilty of sin against the sixth commandment. Neither the priest nor the Levite imaged God, neither showed the love God Himself had shown, neither did good to the broken. The Samaritan, because he showed mercy and sought to help, showed a proper understanding of the sixth commandment; he was not guilty of murder because his heart went out in compassion for the man in need. Make no mistake, beloved, in God's books love and murder are not too opposite ends of a long continuum, with the large terrain of neutral ground in between. Love is that you reach out to the despised, the broken, the repulsive, the one in the gutter, and show to him through word and deed the same goodness the Lord has shown to you in Jesus Christ.

That is why, beloved, there is no room in the heart of the child of God for any love of self that in turn hinders you

from striving to benefit the other. There is room only for self-denial, emptying the self to make the other flourish. In the life of the Christian there is no room for *taking*; there is room only for *giving*. That is true in marriage, it is true in the family, it is true in the communion of saints, it is true also in the world as a whole. *Give, give, give, without end*, irrespective of whether the other deserves it, irrespective of whether the other returns it. *Give*, that the other may see through your behaviour something of what God is like in His love for you. *Give*, that the other may be prompted to praise the Maker of heaven and earth, be prompted to confess the Redeemer of the fallen. *Give* – without care to the self. Anything else is in essence murder. And God hates murder.

Then Yes, dear congregation, there is very much in our midst for which we may be thankful; there is much of love in our midst. And that's so very encouraging, particularly because John had to write that "we know that we have passed from death to life, because we love the brethren" (I Jn 3:14). So, the fact that there is love is evidence of God's favour upon us, evidence of our election and salvation. Yes, that's encouraging.

But at the same time, beloved, let us make it *more and more* our effort to obey the sixth commandment. For despite the evidence of love in our midst, it also remains a fact that there is far too much of selfishness in our midst, of self love. Yes, there are those who give freely, without concern for self, for the benefit of others – give of time and money and talent and energy. But there are also those in our midst who hog their time and their money and their talents and their energies for themselves alone. And the spouse or the child or the brother or the neighbour is left for others to care for. That is simply sin. And John says of such an attitude: "he who does not love his brother" –and love is what God did in Christ; love is that one empties oneself for the benefit of the absolutely unworthy- "he who does not love his brother abides in death" (I Jn 3:14). In fact, such a person, though he comes to church and reads his Bible and goes to club, in fact abides in death. Here is room only for repentance.

Again, there are those of us who claim to love the other, but attach conditions so that they show no love until the other makes a move. So I hear things like, "She has to repent first, and then I'll receive her." That, my brothers and sisters, is not what our Lord did to us!! He did not withhold evidence of His love for us *until* we had reached out to Him; He loved the unworthy *while we were still enemies!* That is the love that God wants you to show, and if you refuse you are, in God's vocabulary, a murderer. Here is room only for repentance.

The world in which we live is caught up in love for the self. We have it within us also to be caught up in the same love for the self. Such love for self leads very logically to getting rid of bothersome persons from one's life – be it that the unwanted child is aborted, or the aged parent is pushed into a senior's home, or the handicapped child is institutionalised, or the stubborn child is exiled, or the contrary spouse is shunned, or the person standing in the road to your own happiness is actually killed. In physical ways and in emotional ways it is easy, so easy, to shut another out of one's life. That's murder.

The Lord, though, has poured out His Holy Spirit so that the people of His love –those lost wretches for whom He sent His Son- might in turn show God's love to other wretches. Certainly, it takes much effort, day after day, to love another as God loved you. But God has promised grace to do so, and we can even see evidence in our midst that Yes, God keeps His promise. So, my beloved, continue in the strength of the Lord to love your neighbour as God in Christ has loved you. *In total denial of Self.* Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 41 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman, held on Sunday Morning, 4 June 2000.

***" IN THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT GOD PROTECTS MARRIAGE FROM DECAY
."***

Text:

Lord's Day 41

108. Q. What does the seventh commandment teach us?

A. That all unchastity is cursed by God.[1] We must therefore detest it from the heart[2] and live chaste and disciplined lives, both within and outside of holy marriage.[3]

[1] Lev. 18:30; Eph. 5:3-5. [2] Jude 22, 23. [3] I Cor. 7:1-9; I Thess. 4:3-8; Heb. 13:4.

109. Q. Does God in this commandment forbid nothing more than adultery and similar shameful sins?

A. Since we, body and soul, are temples of the Holy Spirit, it is God's will that we keep ourselves pure and holy. Therefore He forbids all unchaste acts, gestures, words, thoughts, desires,[1] and whatever may entice us to unchastity.[2]

[1] Matt. 5:27-29; I Cor. 6:18-20; Eph. 5:3, 4. [2] I Cor. 15:33; Eph. 5:18.

Scripture Reading:

Genesis 2:18-25

I Thessalonians 4:1-8

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 35:1,4

Psalm 19:3,4

Psalm 25:5,6

Psalm 128:1,2,3

Psalm 119:1,4

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

Our age is seeped in sex. Literature, movies, music, advertising: all ask our attention for sex and how delightful sex is. There's something in us that makes us respond positively to all these stimuli, for God has created us with a sex drive.

But the emphasis on sex does its damage. So very many young people in our society do not enter marriage as virgins; today it's acceptable behavior to engage in sexual activity shortly after puberty. That happens in the world, and we are naïve to think that this development passes the church by. Similarly, it's acceptable in the world to have an affair with the secretary, or to visit the bathhouses. Here too we're naïve to assume that this never happens in the church.

This sexual license of our age does not go without the judgment of the Lord. God has promised that sexual licentiousness would earn His punishment; that's clearly stated by the Lord in Romans 1, for example. Well now, observe the rise of AIDS in our society. And observe the increase in the number of divorces, with all the misery that results from that. And observe too the number of unhappy marriages, unhappy because sex has been tampered with in years past. Yes, sexual license earns its penalty – in the world and in the church.

God has given the seventh commandment, that command not to commit adultery. It's a command that the Lord today sovereignly lays before all of us –why?- because He does not wish any of us, whether we be younger or older, to get hurt. Any sin is grievous to the Lord, but the sin a person commits against the seventh commandment is sin against one's own body, a sin that leaves for life terribly twisted and mangled scars in oneself, and possibly in others. In His mercy God would spare us that.

IN THE SEVENTH COMMANDMENT GOD PROTECTS MARRIAGE FROM DECAY

1. the purpose of marriage
2. the reason for passions

The purpose of marriage

God created Adam in the beginning. His task was to image God, to show to all the world what God in heaven was like. This particular mandate made it evident that Adam did not exist for himself. He rather had been put on earth with a view to living for God.

In His wisdom the Lord discerned that it was not good for Adam to be alone. So, while Adam slept God took one of his ribs and fashioned from that a woman. Then we read this beautiful comment about the Lord: "He brought her to the man." That is: God answered the aloneness of Adam by presenting to him a bride; God Himself officiated at the first marriage on Earth. When the Lord tells us this in Genesis 2 He adds that here is a principle true for all men and women; "therefore," says God, "a man shall leave his father and his mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall be one flesh." Let no one tell you, then, brothers and sisters, that marriage is a human institution, a habit thought up by men to organize life well. Marriage is not a human institution; it is an ordinance of God. And to flaunt the ordinances of God is to invite God's wrath.

What, now, was the purpose for Eve's existence; why did God create her? The Lord tells us clearly: He formed Eve because He determined that Adam needed a *helper* beside him. Adam's specific task was to glorify God by taking care of the world, and to do that he needed help. Eve's specific task, then, was to help Adam in glorifying God; she was to assist him in taking care of God's creation. Together they were made in the image of God for God's sake.

That means that Eve was not granted existence for her own sake, not any more than Adam was granted existence for his own sake. For both *God* was the center of their existence; it was for His own glory that God was pleased to create both of them, more, for the sake of His own glory that God brought these two individuals together in marriage.

That tells us in turn that marriage is not simply a relation between two people. Our society may make that out of it, it is even what the naked eye may see, but that is not what it is. Marriage is a triangle, a triangle with the two human partners at the base poles and God at the top. Both the man and the woman have a task, and therefore a relation, with God. It is in order to carry out their specific task *toward God* that God ties a knot between the two persons. A marriage without God is not a marriage in the full sense of the word. For then the purpose of marriage –God- is ignored.

So we understand that the fall into sin dealt a devastating blow to marriage. In fact, the terrible effect of the fall on marriage is illustrated by the simple fact that Adam pointed a finger at Eve and blamed her for the misery they found themselves in; "the woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree." Adam doesn't speak of 'his wife', doesn't speak of the one whom he loves; he speaks of *her*, of that individual, "the woman whom You gave to be with me." And why were Adam and Eve at odds? Why was the knot between the two base poles of that triangle called marriage strained? It's because this husband and his wife had lost the purpose of their marriage! The fall into sin meant that the vertical relation between each of them and the Lord God was broken. The apex of the triangle of marriage had been cut away. Yet it was that top point, it was the shared faith in the Lord, the awareness that both lived for God, that formed the glue to their marriage; it was *serving God together* that gave their marriage its strength. The fall meant that each partner in marriage severed the relation with God, and that's why the bond with each other was broken; they were but two individuals who happened to be together. Marriage destroyed.

In His infinite goodness it pleased the Lord to repair the severed relation between each of these two individuals and

Himself. For God spoke of placing enmity, of destroying sin and Satan, and so working reconciliation between Himself and sinners; Jesus Christ was to come. Because of His coming sacrifice, the relation between Adam and the Lord God was restored, the relation between Eve and the Lord God also was restored. But if the separate relations between Adam and God on the one hand, and Eve and God on the other hand, were again restored, then the relation between Adam and Eve could also be restored. For it's that bond with God that forms the glue in a marriage. And so it turns out: because the Lord provided reconciliation between Himself and sinners through Jesus Christ, that first marriage could be healed. That is why even in this sinful world marriage today need not be just a living together of a man and a woman who feel attracted to each other; marriage can be much deeper. As it was in Paradise, so it may be today again; because of the reconciliation the Lord provides through Jesus Christ between Himself and sinners can God again be in the center of the existence of the individual, and to assist the one in serving Him God gives to the one a partner. The triangle that was marriage in the beginning is restored in Jesus Christ.

What that means for marriages today? It means first of all this: any marriage must be a marriage *in Christ*. In other words, each marriage must have God in the center. It is categorically sin to marry without God. It is categorically sin for a Christian to marry a person that does not believe in God. If two individuals are not both reconciled to God, if either one of them does not have a bond through faith with God, they cannot and they may not marry. For marriage is not there for the sake of marriage, and love is not there for the sake of the other. But marriage is a gift of God to enable two persons to glorify *Him* the better. And how shall a wife assist her husband in serving the Lord if the Lord is not central to her life? Or how shall a husband lead his wife in the service of the Lord if God's glory is not first and foremost in his existence? Consider what the apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "For what partnership have righteousness and iniquity? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? ...What has a believer in common with an unbeliever?" (II C 6:14f). And Paul's point is clear: "Do not be unequally yoked together with unbelievers."

Does that mean that anyone who claims to have a bond with God is a suitable marriage partner? Not so, brothers and sisters. Not only must there be *a* bond with God; there must in fact be a *strong* bond, a *healthy* bond with God. In other words, any who would entertain the thought of marriage must ensure that both they themselves and their chosen partners serve God *with all their heart*, serve God as God has commanded in His Word. Tell me: how shall a wife assist her husband in serving the Lord if she herself serves God in a self-chosen fashion? How shall a husband lead his wife in serving the Lord if he does not himself bow before every command of the Lord?

And there you have the reason, brothers and sisters, boys and girls, why you are not to look outside the church for a marriage partner. You are not to look outside because you and those outside - in general- do not have Christ in common. And if you do have Christ in common -for yes, there are believers outside the church- that other person does not serve God in the way He has commanded in His Word. After all, also where one goes to church is not a matter of personal taste or family heritage; where one goes to church is a matter of obeying God's will for you. To marry someone who does not serve God, or who serves God in a fashion different from what God has commanded, is to guarantee trouble in your marriage. For how can you help each other to serve God if you cannot agree on *how* to serve Him? The fathers were not wrong when they said of old that persons of different faiths or churches who would care to share the same pillow in fact invite the devil to sleep with them too.

Does that mean that we're not to look outside the church at all for a possible partner? Can one not bring the desired boy or girl to the Lord, to His Church - and then marry? Consider only this, my brothers and sisters. How do you know that the person with whom you strike up a relation indeed will come to faith in the Lord, indeed will come to serve God as God has commanded in His Word? (cf I Cor 7:16) Let us be honest: obedience to God is something that *you* cannot work in anyone's heart; obedience is only something that *God* can work. And He works it only in those whom He chooses. For you to strike a relation of love between a person who either does not serve God or who serves Him in a self-chosen fashion, and then *hope* that the person you love will one day come to faith or obedience, is simply presumptuous; you have no right to think that God indeed will work faith and obedience in the heart of your boy-friend or girl-friend. Even if that person comes faithfully to church with you today, attends catechism classes too, you still have no guarantees that he or she will one day become the support you need for you to carry out your task in life of glorifying God. It may be very flattering that the person of your choice finds you handsome, friendly, humorous, etc. But marriage cannot be built on beauty or humor or even love. And so you have to be mature enough to look beyond the externals, to find out instead whether that other person *loves God more than you* and not you more than God. In a word: it is simply not on for anyone to strike up a courtship outside the church. That's the long and the short

of it.

To avoid misunderstanding, I might add yet that it's an entirely different situation when one comes to church out of love for Christ, and then falls in love with someone in the church. In that situation, Christ is demonstrated to be first in his or her life, and not the boy friend or girlfriend.

At the same time, let it be very clear that the principle which prohibits courtship outside the church needs to be applied when you seek a partner inside the church too. The reality is that not all young people *in* the church grow up to love the Lord above all. Yet the partner you end up with must have that strong bond with the Lord. So it is that, before you start up a relation even with someone in the church, it is of this that you must be convinced: does this person love God above all? Can he or she be a support for me in my efforts to live for the Lord? And if that ever so charming person cannot be a support for you in that, you may not even date; you do well to call it quits before anything serious develops. Marriage by definition *must* have God in the center, and so courtship must too.

Again, that principle needs to be applied by each of us not only when we seek a partner. It's critical that in our courting days we ensure that our personal bond with God is strong and right, that the bond our chosen partner has with God is strong and correct also, for only then can the bonds between husband and wife be good. But life keeps on going. So we do well to see to it that our bond with God *remains* good; if, for whatever reason, that bond with God decays, weakens, breaks, in the course of years, our bonds with each other in marriage will strain and possibly break also.

God would have us be happy in our marriages. That means that we'll have to understand the purpose of marriage: God's glory. And we'll have to act accordingly, both when we seek a marriage partner and when we live through life as married persons. Anything else is at bottom adultery, nothing less than transgression of the seventh commandment.

The reason for passions

We move on to our second point. To appreciate how God would protect marriage we need to understand more than the purpose of marriage. For the fact of the matter is that so much misery appears in marriages because of sexual desires, *passions*.

We do well to understand, brothers and sisters, boys and girls, that the passions we have are themselves not wrong. In fact, God created man with a sexual appetite. That's clear from what we read from Gen 2. God answered Adam's aloneness with the creation of a woman, and then decreed that the two should be one flesh. That notion of being 'one flesh' –answer to Adam's aloneness- includes (amongst other things) the matter of sex. I remind you too of the desires expressed by the bride and groom in the Song of Solomon, a song that God Himself put in Holy Scripture. Let it be clear to us: sexual desire is itself good, is part of God's creation. Let no one be embarrassed to have sexual longings. The big question is: what do we do with those longings. God in the beginning told the human race to "have dominion" over all creation – and that includes dominion over the self, over one's sexual urges too. God's ordinance in the beginning was that sexual urges were not to have dominion over man; rather, man was to have dominion over his urges.

But as it is, the fall into sin reeked havoc with the desires God had created in Adam and in his wife. Instead of governing their desires (as they could before the fall), the human race was so weakened by the fall that desires could now govern them. Human nature became depraved, with as result that passion could not be controlled; passion became lust.

But note: the fact of our sinfulness does not make passion itself sinful; it's not. What is sinful is that we let our passions get away on us, govern us. And that's what the command of God now is: we are not to let our passions get away on us; we are not to commit adultery. The work of Jesus Christ resulted in God's people being ransomed from the power of the devil, being reconciled to God; there is forgiveness for every sin, sexual included. But Jesus Christ did more than reconcile us to God; He also poured out on us His Holy Spirit, so that we might be sanctified, made to be new creatures. That Spirit of Christ so works in God's people that the old nature is more and more put to death and the new more and more made alive, with as net result that the child of God demonstrates in his life the fruit of the Spirit.

And one of the fruits of the Spirit that the apostle Paul mentions is that of *self-control* (Gal 5:23). We are, in other words, granted strength by the Lord to govern our passions, instead of having our passions govern us. Granted, it's a governing done with many shortcomings, but it's a beginning nevertheless. It is as the apostle Paul writes to the Thessalonians: "this is the will of God, your sanctification." And that sanctification implies that each is to "abstain from sexual immorality." And abstaining from sexual immorality implies that each one is to "know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in the passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God" (I Thes 4:4f).

Paul speaks here of each person possessing "his own vessel". That's a reference to one's sexual organs. Paul's point is that the Thessalonians –renewed as they are by the Spirit of God- are to contain, to control their sexual urges. In fact, Paul is quite blunt on the point. Vs 6: "no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter." Paul's reference is –as one commentator put it- "that no Christian should overstep the mark or take advantage of his or her fellow Christians in sexual matters." The urges God has created have a place in marriage, and they may not be answered by carrying out your desires on a third party. To do so is to hurt that third party, to tear apart her very soul, her inner being. No matter how good it feels at the moment, it remains lust and never love – for it is transgression against God and therefore against the neighbor.

I draw your attention too to what Paul says at the end of vs 6. "No one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter," I read, "because the Lord is the avenger of all such." Sexual offences by their very nature take place in secret. But the Lord sees in secret. And He –as Ps 94 had earlier declared- "is the avenger of all such." God does not leave sexual transgression unpunished. How He does it? That's God's department. But He does; that's what Paul says here. That is why repentance is so very necessary, and with repentance the washing away of sins, including sins against the seventh commandment. And repentance involves making good with the person you've taken advantage of.

Our society today says that passions should be answered; it's even said that exercising self control is not good for you, it frustrates. But the Lord speaks most differently. Yes, the subject of sex is enticing to young ears, even the older delight in the subject. But passion, brothers and sisters, is to be *controlled*, and used well. This gift was not given so that we might pore over Playboy magazines, or glue our eyes to sexual movies (be it in the home or elsewhere). Though sex is all around us (so that temptation to give in to sexual urges is simply the greater), we may believe that the Lord gives strength to resist the temptations thrown at us, temptations that are so appealing to us.

But we shall have to pray about it. We don't mind to mention food and drink, work and health to the Lord in prayer; we shall have to mention struggles in relation to sex as well. Yes, let parents be open to their children about sex and the seventh commandment, talk to them about it and teach their youth to lay these matters in prayer before God. The youth have their feelings, their drives. Teach the youth, then, to appreciate why God gave passions, and encourage them to respond to their desires in a Christian way. Pray with your children for strength to govern their passions, to be able to control themselves even when their friends consider sexual activity part of proving your maturity. The previous generation may or may not have spoken to us about matters of sex, but *this* generation *needs* openness to their parents on the topic, *needs* guidance desperately.

The question is asked, notably by young people: how far can we go? What can we do, what can we not do as a young couple who love each other? Or as young people who like to explore? But that question is wrong. The question ought not to be: how far can we go. The question is rather to be: do we control our passions, or do our passions control us? Anything that makes your passions control you implies that you go too far. Recall that the Lord has set you free from bondage to sin and Satan. Because God set you free does God want you to *be* free. And that means too that you are not to be enslaved to the desires of your body. You are not free, not as a couple together either, when all that is on your mind is sex.

Sex is the gift of God. To take that gift and use it before God gives it to you in fact destroys the beauty and depth of that gift. Countless marriages have been damaged because the couple did not wait with sex until God gave them to each other. Sex is not the beautiful thing described in the Song of Solomon if you have to engage in sex with the fear that you might become pregnant or somebody catch you in the back seat of the car or you have to keep one ear open for somebody else to come home. Sex in that kind of a situation is as often as not the boy using the girl to relieve his

passions, and the girl letting herself be used out of fear that her boyfriend drop her..., and feeling like a dish rag afterwards. And always there remains a feeling of guilt. The beauty of the honeymoon is clouded over by the memories of past wrongs. And the oneness of marriage is destroyed.

Yet, beloved, let that reality not cause despair. For the Lord God has promised to forgive *each and every sin*. And sin against the seventh commandment is certainly no worse than any other sin. There is unfaithfulness in marriage, there is unfaithfulness before marriage. It is for us, where we have been unfaithful, to confess that unfaithfulness, to admit our sins to the Lord and to each other within marriage. And be then assured, beloved, that the Lord does wash away *all* transgressions.

But we understand well that confession is not sufficient. Where we still engage in activities that the Lord would condemn, we are to break from those activities, repent. That may be hard, and it may involve breaking up for a while. But God would see you one day happily married, and that means that you have to live in a holy fashion also before you marry.

In the seventh commandment, God would protect the marriages that be. In keeping with this command, it is for the married to remain faithful to the vows they have given each other; it is for them to keep God in the center of their marriage.

In the seventh commandment, God would protect the marriages that are coming. It is for youth today to prepare themselves for solid marriages, marriages that have God in the center. That implies using your passions rightly, finding for yourself a God-fearing partner. It implies for parents that they teach their youth what marriage is all about, what is the place and function of sex within that marriage. That's how God's seventh commandment is obeyed.

Recall, beloved, the word of the Lord through Paul: "God has not called us for uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore he who rejects this, does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit" (I Thes 4:7f). Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 43 of the Heidelberg Catechism, by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 18 June 2000.

"THE GOD OF TRUTH DESIRES A PEOPLE OF TRUTH."

Text:

Lord's Day 43

112. Q. What is required in the ninth commandment?

A. I must not give false testimony against anyone, twist no one's words, not gossip or slander, nor condemn or join in condemning anyone rashly and unheard.[1] Rather, I must avoid all lying and deceit as the devil's own works, under penalty of God's heavy wrath.[2] In court and everywhere else, I must love the truth,[3] speak and confess it honestly, and do what I can to defend and promote my neighbour's honour and reputation.[4]

[1] Ps. 15; Prov. 19:5, 9; 21:28; Matt. 7:1; Luke 6:37; Rom. 1:28-32. [2] Lev. 19:11, 12; Prov. 12:22; 13:5; John 8:44; Rev. 21:8. [3] I Cor. 13:6; Eph. 4:25. [4] I Pet. 3:8, 9; 4:8.

Scripture Reading:

James 3

Deuteronomy 19:15-21

Proverbs 12:17-22

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 34:5

Psalm 12:1,2,3,4

Psalm 141:2

Psalm 31:7,8,9

Psalm 119:16,17

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

There is one recorded incident only where Jesus labeled someone a 'liar'. In His conversation with the Jews in John 8, Jesus used the word with regards to Satan. By so doing, Jesus characterized Satan for what he was. Says Jesus:

"He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it" (vs 44).

This does not mean that Satan is the only one who speaks lies. For Jesus says to the Jews that "you are of your father the devil" (vs 44). The Jews were acting a certain way, and Jesus characterizes that as devilish; it's behavior flowing from their identity as children of the devil. Here, brothers and sisters, we have a truth valid for all people, whether "Jews or Greeks", whether Japanese or Dutch or Australian or Canadian; in our natural, fallen state, we all, as children of the devil, naturally speak lies even as our natural father the devil speaks lies. As Paul says to the Romans:

"There is none righteous, no, not one...

"Their throat is an open tomb;

With their tongues they have practiced deceit";

"The poison of asps is under their lips" (Rom 3:10,13).

The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ, though, is that God sent His only Son into the world to ransom a people from the power of the devil. Through His labor on the cross, the chosen of God are taken from Satan's side and brought back to God's side; they're set free from the devil. More, by the mighty working of the Spirit poured out at Pentecost, these redeemed are renewed, are changed, so that they speak not according to the nature of their old father the devil, but speak instead according to the nature of their new Father in heaven. As He is truth and speaks only truth, so the redeemed of Christ are renewed to speak truth. So, when Paul tells the believers of Ephesus of the renewal worked by the Holy Spirit, he describes the consequence like this:

"Therefore, putting away lying, 'Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor,' for we are members of one another" (4:25).

Lying characterizes those who belong to the devil. But those renewed by the Spirit have a new inclination: through the working of the Spirit they desire to speak and hear only the truth. That is what God sets before us in the ninth commandment. As He is God of truth, so His people –delivered as they are from Satan's bondage- are to be people of truth.

I summarize the sermon this afternoon with this theme:

THE GOD OF TRUTH DESIRES A PEOPLE OF TRUTH.

1. the setting of the ninth commandment in Israel
2. the significance of the ninth commandment today

The Setting of the Ninth Commandment

"You shall not," said God in the ninth commandment, "bear false witness against your neighbor." The reference to "witness" places this ninth commandment specifically in the context of the courtroom.

Israel's court system was somewhat different than ours is. The elders of a given town transacted their affairs at the gate of the city (cf Ruth 4:1f) – a public place. So, if Johnny had a dispute with Peter that they could not sort out together, Johnny and Peter would go to the city gate and lay the problem before the local elders – men (we should know) who knew Johnny and Peter well, for their cities were generally not all that big. After hearing the two men out to get a handle on the dispute, the elders did not have to do an investigation; they were instead to demand witnesses. These witnesses had to have seen the wrongdoer do his misdeed, and then had to give to the elders an account of precisely what they'd seen. This is the material we read from Dt 19:

"One witness shall not rise against a man concerning any iniquity or any sin that he commits; by the mouth of two or three witnesses the matter shall be established" (vs 15).

Because of the role of the witness, what the witness said was critically important. In the face of a serious accusation, the words of the witness meant life or death for the accused. That's why Solomon in Prov 12 can say that

"There is one who speaks like the piercings of a sword" (vs 18; cf 25:18).

That is: the words of the witness have the effect of a sword if that witness testifies that you've done a deed deserving of death.

That in turn makes crystal clear why it was so imperative that the witnesses in Israel's courts spoke truth and truth alone. If the witnesses were free to say in court whatever they wished to say of the accused, then not only would the life of the accused be at stake, but so would the freedom of all Israel be at stake. If Israel's court system left room for false witness, then anybody could be dragged before the elders and under a show of justice be sentenced to death. Just think of what happened with Naboth, when Jezebel organized the two scoundrels to testify falsely about Naboth; their testimony caused his death. We understand: when witnesses can get away with false testimony, there is no justice left in the land, and with the absence of justice there is no peace left either. Instead, there is fear; will somebody jealous of

me haul me before the courts for something I didn't do? And this is a new form of slavery for the people, the slavery of fear.

But God did not redeem a people from Satan's power in order to have them subjected to another bondage. The Lord Jesus Christ laid down His life so that His people might live in the freedom that comes with being children of the God of truth. That is why God included in His ten Commandments also the ninth, yes, and focused the ninth commandment specifically on the witnesses of Israel's court system. At all costs, those witnesses must speak truth alone – lest justice and righteousness and peace desert the land (Ps 72:1-3; 85:11). *For God wants His people free of any yoke.*

That is equally why the Lord God told Israel to deal very severely with false witnesses. We read it from Dt 19:

"if the witness is a false witness, who has testified falsely against his brother" –and that's to say that he's given false testimony- "then you shall do to him as he thought to have done to his brother" (vss 18f).

Did the false testimony involve that Peter stole an ox from Johnny, while the witness in fact did not see Peter steal the ox? According to the law, Ex 22, anyone who steals an ox must "restore five oxen for an ox" (vs 1). Very well, then the witness shall give to Peter five oxen to compensate for his false accusation. Did the wrong of which Peter was falsely accused earn a death penalty? Then the false witness was to receive that death penalty. "Your eye shall not pity: life shall be for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot" (Dt 19:21). It is as Solomon put it:

"Lying lips are an abomination to the Lord,
But those who deal truthfully are His delight" (Prov 12:22).

Of course, God's intent with the ninth commandment was not to limit the focus of the command only to the courtroom, as if only in court there is no room for lying, while outside there is. As with every other commandment, the specific point of the command has a much wider application. So I read in Hosea 4, for example, that the Lord condemns "lying" in general life. And that is why Jesus in John 8 describes lying as from the devil. In all of life, God wants to see nothing at all of lies and deceit. Instead –and this is the point of the ninth commandment- all my words are to be truth, fact.

How, then, must I speak, whether I'm in court or outside of court? If there is no room for lies, may I say all things to anyone who asks? May all facts be mentioned? That brings us to our second point:

The Significance of the Ninth Commandment

Lord's Day 43 summarizes well the practical implications of the ninth commandment for the people of God throughout the ages. "I must not," we confess, "give false testimony against anyone, twist no one's words, not gossip or slander, nor condemn or join in condemning anyone rashly and unheard." Here we have a list of concrete applications of the ninth commandment for us today. In this second point, then, I'd like to look at each of these applications in more detail.

False Testimony

The Catechism mentions first false testimony. One can think here, again, of the courtroom itself. There is simply no room for giving false testimony, no matter the nature of the testimony, no matter either the circumstance of the trial or the heat of the moment. False testimony always remains against the will of the Lord. After all, we have been set free from bondage to Satan so that we might image the God of truth.

This principle counts for every conversation. Never may I say Yes when I know the answer is No. That is simply lying. And lying is of the devil. Consciously to utter naked lies is to reveal that you are on Satan's side still, not redeemed by the blood of the Savior or renewed by His Spirit. So there is need for repentance. The need is the greater because the Lord spells out in Rev 21 that "liars" are amongst those not welcome in the New Jerusalem (vs 8).

Twisting Words

The Catechism mentions also that I am to "twist no one's words". The human heart is so depraved that it's for us no big thing to follow the example of the devil. His first words recorded in the Bible are the following:

"Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?" (Gen 3:1).

That's a classic example of twisting words. God's word to Adam was this:

"Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat" (Gen 2:16f).

God was generous; "of every tree of the garden you may freely eat," except that one. Satan presented God as stingy; "you [may] not eat of every tree of the garden?" Was it a blatant lie, as in false testimony, on Satan's part? No, it wasn't. But it was a lie nevertheless, because Satan fed into Eve's mind an understanding of God that was not accurate to who God really was. With a twist words –the two sentences sound very similar- with a twist of words, Satan injected a lie into Eve's mind; God isn't so generous after all.

Yes, this sort of lie comes easy to us. In fact, it's easier to twist someone's words than to utter "false testimony", simply because it's easier on our conscience; we feel the sin isn't as big. Besides, twisting someone's words is harder for the hearer to spot than outright false testimony. Whether we intend it or not, it is deceit nevertheless, and a work of the devil. That means in turn, congregation, that we need to make it our business to understand well what a person says before we pass on what we think he said. Being accurate, being truthful, takes effort. And if we're not sure that we've got the other person correctly, it's wiser, better, to say nothing. Silence can be golden.

Gossip and Slander

We confess in our Lord's Day that, according to Scripture, also "gossip or slander" falls under the ninth commandment. The term 'gossip' describes passing on true facts about a person –gossip is not lying in the sense of false testimony- but the facts are not helpful to building up the person's reputation. In fact, it's damaging. Slander is to add some untruth to the gossip, be it in the form of exaggeration or in the form of outright lies.

The Lord our God is a God of truth; He cherishes the truth, speaks the truth. Yet notice, my brothers and sisters, that God Himself does not broadcast all facts about His children. Some facts about you and me, in fact, God washes away so that He remembers these facts no more. This is the promise of Jer 31 (and it's repeated twice in the letter to the Hebrews):

"I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (vs 34; cf Heb 8:12; 10:17).

That doesn't mean that these transgressions never happened; they did, they're facts, they happened. But God chooses not to remember your sins and mine, and so will make no mention of them either anymore. Here's the example the children of this God of truth need to follow. Not every fact is allowed to be spoken about, not every fact is allowed to be passed on. Some things are simply not edifying, not helpful to the person's reputation nor helpful to the hearer's understanding of what the saints in the church are like.

In this regard, brothers and sisters, we need to bear in mind what James writes. I quote chap 3:2:

"we all stumble in many things. If anyone does not stumble in word, he is a perfect man."

The point is: none is without fault. I can find fault with you as much as you can find fault with me. What do I gain by passing on to John Public less-than-pleasant facts about you? Sure, my hearer may look at me with big eyes and I may enjoy having the privilege of the floor, but have I acted as the Lord acts? And have I done you a service? We know it well; none of us appreciates that our personal dirty laundry gets hung up for public observation. It's not edifying.

But the devil likes it. For passing on facts that knock another down a few notches in the mind of the hearer sows

distrust, dislike, enmity. It's sets children of God against children of God. It causes the one to avoid the other, to give the other long looks. If, then, we nevertheless pass on negative facts, we cooperate in the devil's work; intentions aside, we contribute to breaking down the church of God. In truth, there are times when silence is golden.

Gossip, passing on unwholesome facts about other people, is transgression of the ninth commandment, and therefore sin. This sin, like any other sin, requires forgiveness of sins in the blood of Jesus Christ. And that forgiveness is granted when there is repentance from this sin, and therefore an all-out effort to tame the tongue.

Condemning Rashly

The Catechism mentions a fourth evil as sin against the ninth commandment, namely, that one condemns or joins in condemning someone rashly and unheard. If Johnny tells you something awful about Peter, have you the right to cluck your tongue at Peter and from now on hold Peter guilty of what Johnny said? Suppose Johnny is your friend; does that make any difference about accepting what he said about Peter? Or if 20 of Johnny's friends say it, does that give you the right to condemn Peter in your mind or join the 20 in their condemnation of Peter? I remind you of the Lord's word in Prov 18:

"The first one to plead his cause seems right,
Until his neighbor comes and examines him" (vs 17).

The point is simply: when you hear one side to a story, it seems pretty solid, quite true. But the Lord insists that there's a second side, and that second side can shoot big holes in the story you heard first. That's why it's a principle of Scripture that no one may judge a person without first having all the facts *from both sides* on the table before him. Only when you're well and fully informed are you in a position to pass judgment on Peter. To condemn Peter rashly and unheard is simply sin against the ninth commandment. For you are letting a lie live in your mind about Peter, you are letting a conclusion live in your mind based on partial or maybe incorrect information. And let us be honest; the perception that you now have in your mind about Peter—he's a so-and-so; I know because Johnny said—is going to affect your esteem of Peter. And that has as practical consequence in turn that you distrust Peter, you avoid him.... In the church that's exactly what the devil wants; sow distrust, sow discord, pitch brother against brother, get them talking *about* each other but not *with* each other. This, then, is the first principle: no one may judge another without first having heard *both sides*.

But there is a second principle. For even if one is fully informed, he does not necessarily have the *right* to judge the situation. The teenager in the home who sees his younger brothers caught up in a dispute may well have the facts of the case on the table before him. Does that make the teenager a judge in the matter? We all know that God has given the role of judge to the parents. And parents know from experience how much trouble can be caused when the older child thinks he does have the right to judge the matter. Well now, this too is a principle of Scripture: I am not allowed to meddle, let alone make myself judge, in somebody else's affairs (cf I Peter 4:15; Prov 26:17). And the reason is so simple. None is allowed to condemn another unless he has all the facts. But in Johnny's dispute with Peter, Peter is not going to give you all the facts if he sees you as meddling, as making yourself a judge where God has not called you to judge. Here is what the Lord Jesus said in His Sermon on the Mount:

"Judge not, that you be not judged. For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged;
and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you" (Mt 7:1f).

Instead, those called upon by *God* to judge must be given space to do their work. That is true for parents in the home, it is true for elders in the church, it is true for the justice system in the world.

Judging rashly and unheard: yes, this too is sin against the ninth commandment. This sin, like any other sin, requires forgiveness of sins in the blood of Jesus Christ. And that forgiveness is granted when there is repentance from this sin, and therefore an all-out effort to avoid making judgments on the basis of one-sided information, to avoid making judgments too where God has not appointed you to be a judge.

The tongue. "With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men" (3:9). That tongue"—though "a little member"—"is a fire, a world of iniquity" (vs 5f), untamable by mankind (vs 8); it's "an unruly evil, full of deadly

poison." The Lord has told us this so that we might watch what we say, might also learn to be "slow to speak" (James 1:19). Solomon said it pointedly:

"In the multitude of words sin is not lacking,
But he who restrains his lips is wise" (Prov 10:19).

But it's such a challenge for sinful people to restrain those lips. That is why we need, when we open our mouths to speak, first to pray that petition of Ps 141:

"Set a guard, O Lord, over my mouth;
Keep watch over the door of my lips" (vs 3).

Here too we need so desperately the renewing work of the Holy Spirit! "We are members of one another," Paul writes (Eph 4:25), and for that very reason there may be no room for lying – not in any of the forms mentioned in Lord's Day 43. That's equally why there may not be room in the communion of saints for wanting to hear negative things of others either. Speaking the lie, speaking the gossip, speaking the rash condemnation is sin against this commandment, and so is *listening* to the gossip, listening to the rash condemnations. Here we need to be our brother's keeper; let us encourage each other, help each other to speak only truth, yes, and only that truth which is edifying, which builds up esteem for each other.

That's how we show abundant fruits of the Spirit. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 48 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday Morning 13 August 2000.

"JESUS CHRIST TEACHES HIS CHURCH TO PRAY THAT WE AND ALL CREATION ACKNOWLEDGE CHRIST AS KING."

Text:

Lord's Day 48

123. Q. What is the second petition?

A. Thy kingdom come. That is: So rule us by Thy Word and Spirit that more and more we submit to Thee.[1] Preserve and increase Thy church.[2] Destroy the works of the devil, every power that raises itself against Thee, and every conspiracy against Thy holy Word.[3] Do all this until the fulness of Thy kingdom comes, wherein Thou shalt be all in all.[4]

[1] Ps. 119:5, 105; 143:10; Matt. 6:33. [2] Ps. 51:18; 122:6-9; Matt. 16:18; Acts 2:42-47. [3] Rom. 16:20; I John 3:8. [4] Rom. 8:22, 23; I Cor. 15:28; Rev. 22: 17, 20.

Scripture Reading:

Revelation 12

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 24:1,5

Psalm 99:5,6

Psalm 122:1,3

Psalm 47:1,2,3

Psalm 96:8 & Hymn 47:3

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

What, my brothers and sisters, does one pray on a day as today? We've just heard –again- announcements of withdrawal relating to a brother and a family. It leaves us with pain, anguish in our hearts. Brothers and sisters with whom we've enjoyed communion over the years..., gone.... What are we to say to our God? How shall we lead our families in prayer today, and do justice to this situation?

Prayer. Even in the best of times we don't find praying all that easy. We find ourselves using the same words time and again in our prayers, find it hard to get specific....

We're not the first to have difficulty with prayer. Luke tells us that one day the disciples saw Jesus in prayer. When He finished, they approached Him with their question: "Lord, teach us to pray" (Luke 11:1). We understand: implicit in that request was that the disciples had trouble with prayer. Though their parents had no doubt taught them this and that in their youth, and the local priest had taught them one thing and the other too about prayer in the synagogue, the disciples in the nitty-gritty of their adult lives found prayer a bit of a problem. They saw Jesus pray, He seemed to have no problem speaking to God, and so sought from Him instruction: "Lord, teach us to pray."

We're curious about Jesus' answer. Did He tell them how to sit when praying? Did He give instructions first to meditate? No, congregation, Jesus gave no technique. He answered the question of *how* to pray but giving instruction in *what* to pray. "When you pray," He replied, "say...", and there follows the Lord's Prayer. Jesus point was not, of

course, that we pray the exact words of the Lord's Prayer each time we speak to God. Jesus' point instead was that the various petitions of the Lord's Prayer show us what we're to pray about, teach us what we're to speak to God about.

The first instruction Jesus gives about prayer is caught in the first petition: "hallowed be Your name." That's to say: Father, make Your name, Your reputation, more and more glorious. Our prayers, then, are not to be self-centered but God-centered. Here's very much instruction for how we're to pray; our prayers are not to be about ourselves (as in, Lord, give us this, give us that), but our prayers are to be about God, about glorifying Him, about Him making His name more special, more glorious still.

But the first petition is not the end of Jesus' answer to His disciples about how they are to pray. For Jesus adds to the first petition also a second, "Your kingdom come." And No, congregation, this second petition does not stand separate from the first; this second petition rather expands upon the first. For how is it that God is pleased to make His reputation more glorious still? His name is hallowed by *God making His kingdom to come*. In the second petition the Lord teaches His disciples –and so His church of all ages- what to say to God in one's specific circumstances so that His name is made to receive more glory. For God's name is hallowed the more when Christ's kingship over the world is publicly acknowledged.

I proclaim to you God's Word about prayer with this theme:

JESUS CHRIST TEACHES HIS CHURCH TO PRAY THAT WE AND ALL CREATION
ACKNOWLEDGE CHRIST AS KING.

1. The Scriptural context of this petition.
2. The Catechism's explanation of this petition

The Scriptural context of the petition

"Your kingdom come," Jesus tells us to pray. Come to think of it, we find this somewhat of an odd thing to pray. After all, Jesus once said to His disciples that "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me" (Mt 28:18). And directly after Jesus spoke these words, He ascended into heaven and received from the Father the throne at God's right hand (Mark 16:19). In other words, God crowned Jesus as Lord of the universe, Master of all, King (Acts 2:36). So, in the greeting you heard at the beginning of this service, grace was extended to you and peace also "from Him who is and who was and who is to come [that's God the Father], and from the seven spirits who are before His throne [that's the Holy Spirit], and from Jesus Christ who is the faithful witness, the first born of the dead, *the ruler over the kings of the earth*" (Rev 1:4f). This is the who opens the scroll of history (Rev 5), the one who controls absolutely the thoughts and words and deeds of the great men of the world today. Though he's the president of the world's only surviving superpower, Scripture would have us know that Mr Clinton is not on top of the ladder; over him is the Lord of lords, the King of kings, Jesus Christ the Son of God. And we understand: if Jesus Christ is King of kings, He certainly has a kingdom, for a king without a kingdom is a farce. And the Bible is very plain too what Jesus' kingdom is; if "all authority in heaven and on earth" has been given to Jesus Christ, it surely follows that the entire world is His kingdom. Every nation, every newspaper, every nook of life in this wide creation falls under the authority of King Jesus; all the world is His kingdom. That's why we sang Ps 24:

"The Lord is King of earth's domain,

The world and all that dwell therein."

There's where the question comes in. If Jesus Christ is King of kings, if all the world is His domain, why shall we pray that His kingdom *come*? Is that kingdom not here?! Haven't we a contradiction here?

The point, brothers and sisters, is that Scripture tells us more than the good news that our Savior is King supreme of all creation. The Scriptures impress on us too that hostile forces have invaded the kingdom of Jesus Christ. More, countless residents of Christ's kingdom refuse to acknowledge that Christ in fact is King.

Allow me an illustration to clarify the point. In World War 2, Hitler's army invaded the Netherlands. I understand that

with the defeat of the Dutch army, the queen of Holland fled to England. Did she by fleeing abdicate her throne, or did she remain queen of Holland? As it is, she remained queen, and continued her governing from exile; via the radio she regularly spoke to her subjects. Many people of her kingdom were loyal to her; they continued to acknowledge her as queen and obey her instructions. But invaders were in the land, and the invaders insisted that the queen was not sovereign. Various citizens of the Dutch kingdom agreed with the invaders and rebelled against the queen, refused to acknowledge her authority; these were traitors who sided with the enemy. Those who acknowledged the queen found themselves at loggerheads with those who refused to acknowledge her authority; Dutchman was pitted against Dutchman, neighbor against neighbor, obedient citizen against disobedient citizen.

So it is too in this world. "The Lord is King of earth's domain," and that reality is pictured in Rev 12 like this: the male Child born to the woman "was caught up to God and His throne" –that's the ascension of Christ into heaven- and so was made to "rule all nations with a rod of iron" (vs 5); He was made King of kings. Further, with His ascension "war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon" (vs 7). That is: God's angelic army under the leadership of the archangel Michael battled the dragon –that's Satan- and defeated the devil, cast him out of heaven. That part of Christ's kingdom known as 'heaven', then, has no rebel within it anymore; in heaven every angel and every saint fully acknowledge Christ as King.

But Satan, Rev 12 continues, "was cast to the earth" (vs 9). He's invaded this part of Christ's kingdom and does all in his power to foment rebellion against the King. Vs 12: "Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath...." And what's he do in his wrath? Vs 13: "when the dragon saw that he had been cast to the earth, he persecuted the woman," that is, the church. And vs 17: "the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." He's the invader in Christ's earthly domain and seeks to compel disobedience among those who "keep the commandments of God", who listen to the instructions of the King.

Yet we're not to think, congregation, that it's only Satan and his demons who live in rebellion against the King. The very next chapter of the Revelation shown to John tells us how effective Satan's attack on Christ's kingship is; "all the world", says Rev 13:3, join the devil in resisting the authority of the King of kings. And that's to say that the people of the world in general turn traitor against the Lord; they choose to disobey the commandments of the King and listen to the instructions of Satan instead.

This, my brothers and sisters, is the Biblical picture of life in this world. Though God in heaven has once crowned Jesus as Lord of Australia, the tragic fact of the matter is that in Australia we don't notice much public acknowledgment of Jesus' kingship; on the whole our country lives in rebellion against the King of kings. Then sure, we may live in peace, rebellion can even bring its own sense of peace, but it is and remains *rebellion*. The more we get used to a culture that doesn't acknowledge Christ's kingship, the more we're deceived by the devil to think that this is normal, this is OK. Make no mistake, beloved: you live in an environment of war where hostile invaders have penetrated the kingdom of your King, and so very many citizens of that kingdom have become traitors, have agreed to side with the invaders.

According to God's word it's simple fact that we live in an environment of war. Now the thing is: we can approach our King in prayer and determine to say nothing about the rebellion and the disobedience.... But we understand well that such speaking to God is farcical, is shallow, doesn't do justice to the situation. Truly, what minister of the crown worth his salt would dare to speak to the queen of Holland during the Second World War and decide to ignore the rebellion in her kingdom and speak only of the house he wanted to build, the comforts he wanted for himself? Would such a minister of the crown not very quickly be reprimanded..., and possibly lose his job? You wish to speak to God today in prayer, you'd ignore the rebellion in His kingdom?! In the context of war and rebellion, you wish God's ear to ask for nice weather for our holidays and that's it, for a good night's sleep and that's all? We realize there's something shallow, something narrow-minded about that! As long as invaders and traitors, the demons and the unbelievers, continue to try to remove Christ from His throne, no loyal subject of the King can be unmoved by that evil. If then we pray with ourselves and our dreams and hopes central to our petitions, no wonder we find prayer so difficult, so frustrating.... Here's where Jesus' teaching about prayer is so instructive; "when you pray, say: ...Your kingdom come." That brings us to our second point:

The Catechism's explanation of the petition

Given the context of the rebellion within Christ's kingdom, the second petition comes alive for us. We realize: what we're asking is that Christ be acknowledged throughout His kingdom as the King He is. That sends our thoughts to the rebels in Christ's kingdom, and we expect the Catechism to mention straightaway these rebels. But see, our Catechism does not explain this petition first of all with reference to the rebels. The Catechism begins its explanation of this petition by having us pray for *ourselves*. That's the first part of the answer: "so rule *us* by Your Word and Spirit that more and more *we* submit to You."

Us

The point is this. We acknowledge that Christ is King, but we also know well that in the course of the past week so many of our deeds, our words, our thoughts and even our attitudes were not in agreement with the commands of the King. We heard His law this morning, so we know what He wants of us. He says we're not to bear false witness, but we know that lies have crossed our lips. He says we're not to kill, but we know that thoughts of hatred have crossed our minds. He says we're to honor father and mother, but we need to admit that we've disobeyed those in authority over us. Certainly, for those citizens of Christ's kingdom who acknowledge His kingship there is forgiveness of sins, and we praise the Lord for that. But the fact of the matter is that acknowledging Christ as King means simply that we need to obey His every command. When the king of a nation gives a specific command to a citizen of his realm, and that citizen opts to disobey, that king will charge him with insubordination, and possibly with treason. So too ourselves. We need, we must, obey the King's commands, submit to Him. But we fall short. It's not just that unbelievers are rebels; there's so much rebellion in our own hearts. That does not do justice to Christ's kingship, and it doesn't give glory to God's holy name, and that's why we need to pray first of all: Father, rule *us* by Your Word and Spirit so that *we* submit more and more to You. Grant that we do not rebel against any command of Yours, grant instead that we obey your every instruction in our every circumstance.

This petition, then, is a request to God that He please reach into our hearts and lives in order to cut sin out of us, to cut out of us any rebellion against Christ's Kingship over every aspect of our lives, every moment of the day. It's a request that God work in our hearts in such a way that we acknowledge that Christ is King so that we don't pick and choose which command of God we'll obey and which we won't.

Church

After this emphasis on our own weaknesses, the Catechism still doesn't move on to pray about the rebels and the demons. Between praying for ourselves and the rebels the Catechism would have us pray for the church. The reason is this. How is it that we get to know that Christ is King? How do we get to know His commands for us? Faith comes through the preaching (Lord's Day 25) and knowledge of the will of God comes also through the preaching (Canons of Dort, Chap V, Art 14). The preaching takes place in church, in that gathering of the obedient citizens of Christ's kingdom. Because the preaching occurs in church –and the preaching is the tool of the Holy Spirit to work change and growth in sinful hearts- can the church be called the power station of the kingdom. What the town of Collie is electrically to Western Australia, that's what the church is to the kingdom. Take Collie off the map, and WA is in the dark. Destroy the church, silence the preaching, and people will not come to faith and Christ will not be acknowledged as King.

There, of course, is why Satan has done what he can in the course of church history to persecute the church (as the Lord foretold in Rev 12), why Satan still does what he can to destroy the church. Get the pulpit to proclaim heresy, get the pulpit to assure the people that all is Peace, Peace, give the people itching ears, close their ears to the preaching, undermine the credibility of the preacher so that the people won't accept what he says – anything, as long as the tool used by the Spirit is rendered ineffective. Then Satan has what he wants, for in the long run people won't know the King's commands anymore, ultimately won't even acknowledge Christ as King anymore....

This, beloved, is also the tragedy of today's announcements. It may well be true that withdrawing from the church is not the same as being a crass unbeliever. But withdrawing from the church plays directly into the hands of the devil, for the devil wants to starve the children of God from the Word of God. Withdrawing from the church does precisely

that (and so, to lesser degree, does unrest in the church); it drives a wedge between the person and the preaching, puts an obstruction in the path of the Holy Spirit to equip the saints for battle. And the long term result will be that these citizens of Christ's kingdom don't know anymore how to submit to their King. Then slowly but surely one is drawn into the camp of the traitors.

Then it's true that withdrawing is not excommunication, and excommunication is not withdrawing. But in view of the battle that goes on regarding the kingship of our Savior, both withdrawing from the church and letting oneself be excommunicated fly in the face of what Jesus wants us to pray. If we are to know how to acknowledge Christ as King, we need that church so very, very much. And as we pray for the church we pray for the peace of the church – lest the devil still obstruct growth in the Lord by unhappiness at sitting in church together. Let's know it well: if the devil can destroy the church, if he can scatter the sheep from the shepherd, can drive a wedge between the pulpit and the pew, then he's done to the kingdom of Christ spiritually what destroying Collie would do to WA electrically.

Devil

Finally, after this emphasis on the church, the Catechism draws our attention to the devil and his demons. That we ask God to make His kingdom come includes, says our Lord's Day, that we petition the Lord of earth's domain to "destroy the works of the devil, every power that raises itself against You, and every conspiracy against Your holy Word." Satan, we learned from Rev 12, attacks the church and the Christians "who keep the commandments of God," as well as incite others to rebel against the King of kings. Well, this second petition, says our Lord's Day, includes the request that God please frustrate, yes, destroy these works of darkness. That the devil would upset the church, would entice children to buck against their parents, would cause governments to persecute Christians, would turn our society into a seven day economy so that keeping the sabbath day holy is difficult: with this second petition we ask God to destroy every such effort of the evil one. And of course, to pray for the destruction of the devil and those with him is ultimately to pray for Jesus' return, for the day when the evil one will be swept off this earth, out of Jesus' kingdom into the bottomless pit – there to be sealed away forever.

We're modern people, living in a society that does not acknowledge the Lord as King. How shall we pray in the midst of such apostasy? An awareness of the reality of the war leaves no room for having nothing to say to God beyond things like weather and food and sleep. Every moment of the day we're under attack from the evil one, every moment we need to ask what it means concretely to acknowledge that the Lord Jesus Christ is King. So we pray "Your kingdom come", first in our own lives as we seek what commands our King has for us. We pray "Your kingdom come" in relation to the church, and so plead with God to preserve His church that the gospel may go out with power so that in turn the number of those who acknowledge Christ as King may grow. We pray "Your kingdom come" and so petition God to destroy the efforts of the devil to destroy the throne of the Lord.

And as we pray we are sure: God will hear such a prayer. It's Jesus' promise: ask and you shall receive. Ask that God glorify His name through making His kingdom come, and it shall come to pass. It's the promise of Scripture: the day will come when every knee in heaven and on earth will acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord – to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 49 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 20 August 2000.

"CHRIST TEACHES US TO ASK FOR GRACE TO OBEY THE KING'S COMMANDS IN EVERY CIRCUMSTANCE."

Text:

Lord's Day 49

124. Q. What is the third petition?

A. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. That is: Grant that we and all men may deny our own will, and without any murmuring obey Thy will, for it alone is good.[1] Grant also that everyone may carry out the duties of his office and calling[2] as willingly and faithfully as the angels in heaven.[3]

[1] Matt. 7:21; 16:24-26; Luke 22:42; Rom. 12:1, 2; Tit. 2:11, 12. [2] I Cor. 7:17-24; Eph. 6:5-9. [3] Ps. 103:20, 21.

Scripture Reading:

Luke 22:39-46

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 71:1,3

Psalm 63:1,2

Psalm 143:5,6

Psalm 27:4,5

Psalm 25:2,4 & Hymn 47:4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The disciples saw, heard Jesus praying, and were envious of His ability to speak with the Lord God. So they asked Him the question that's on our minds too: "Lord, teach us to pray!"

In His answer the Lord Jesus Christ instructed His people to pray in a God-centered fashion. "Hallowed be Your Name," we are to pray, and with instruction to pray this petition we are taught to ask God to make His wonderful reputation more glorious still. In line with the increase in glory for God, Jesus instructed His people to ask God also to make His kingdom come. Christ is King, true, but not all persons in His kingdom acknowledge that kingship; so many on this earth live in rebellion against the King of kings – and that does not give to God the glory that is His due. So we are to pray that the Lord God will rule us by His Word and Spirit that we submit to His kingship – to the greater glory of God.

Jesus' answer to the question of His disciples goes further. He adds to the first and second petitions a third, in which He instructs His own to ask God that He ensure that His "will be done." This third petition flows out of the second, yes, this third petition picks up on the theme of the second. For if Christ is King, it surely follows that His commands are to be obeyed. And that's the request of the third petition; Lord, cause Your will, Your commands to be obeyed on this earth as they are obeyed in heaven. As we seek to learn the better how to pray, this is instruction we shall need to take to heart.

I summarize the sermon with this them:

CHRIST TEACHES US TO ASK FOR GRACE TO OBEY THE KING'S COMMANDS IN EVERY CIRCUMSTANCE.

1. The example of heaven
2. The weakness of earth
3. The implication for our prayers

The example of heaven

Last week, brothers and sisters, in connection with the Lord's instruction in the second petition, we learned that "all authority in heaven and on earth" was given to Jesus Christ. At His ascension into heaven, God Most High gave Him a throne at His right hand, from where the King of kings governs all creation – including the "heavens above" and the "earth beneath".

Those two terms describe two areas of Christ's domain. He rules supreme in "heaven above", rules supreme also on "the earth beneath." We learned last week that on "the earth beneath" are many citizens of Christ's kingdom who live in rebellion against the King of kings; unbelievers do not acknowledge Christ's kingship. But in "heaven above" the story is different. Rev 12 –we read it last week- tells us that "war broke out in heaven", and the result of the battle is that the devil and his angels were cast out of heaven, cast "to the earth." This means nothing else, congregation, than that in "heaven above" there is no one who rebels against Christ's Kingship. In heaven today are the angels of God and the saints who have died. Both these angels as well as those saints-who-died are without sin, live without rebellion against the King of kings; both these angels as well as those saints-who-died submit themselves fully and eagerly to the will of the King and obey Him fully.

As it is, the Scriptures do not tell us much about how the saints-who-died do the will of God. But the Scriptures do tell us about the angels. Ps 103, for example, gives us a categorical statement about how the angels readily and willingly submit to whatever instructions they receive from the Lord God. Says the Psalm:

"Bless the Lord, you His angels,
Who excel in strength, who do His word,
Heeding the voice of His word.
Bless the Lord, all you His hosts,
You ministers of His, who do His pleasure" (vss 20f).

Notice: the Holy Spirit says here of the angels that they "do His word," that they "heed the voice of His word," that they "do His pleasure." Here is no indication of disobedience, nor any suggestion of protest or muttering or half-heartedness; here is only obedience, an eager readiness to obey every command coming from the mouth of the Lord.

The disciples want to know how to pray, how to speak to the God whom these angels obey so readily and cheerfully. Jesus tells them to ask God to cause them to do His will "on earth as it is in heaven." That is: Jesus tells the disciples to ask God to cause them to do His will "as willing and faithfully as the angels in heaven." You see, congregation, Jesus sets heaven as the example for earth to follow. In heaven Christ is fully acknowledged as King, to the point of heaven's inhabitants giving willing and faithful obedience to the King's every command. As these heavenly servants of the King do His will without protest, without muttering, so earthly servants of the King are also to do the will of the King without protest, without muttering. It's for grace to do the King's will eagerly that the Lord would have His disciples –and us!- to pray.

That brings us to the second point:

The weakness of earth

For, do people do the will of our King? I read in Gen 6 that

"...the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (vs 5).

And in Rom 3:

"There is none righteous, no, not one...;
There is none who seeks after God..." (vss 10f).

So we confess in Lord's Day 3 that people are so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil - unless we are regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

By God's grace, we are regenerated. Does that mean that we know and can do the will of our King? I remind you of what we confessed a few weeks ago with Lord's Day 44. We asked whether "those converted to God" could "keep these commandments perfectly," and answered that question like this: "in this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience." That is why the apostle Paul cried out his frustration in Rom 7, lamenting that he could will what is right but he couldn't do it. It's our experience too; we want to do the will of God, are fully determined that today we *shall* do the will of God – only to find, to our shock and dismay, that we've failed again.

Precisely there, brothers and sisters, is where the third petition comes into the picture. God has given us His commands; He's given a Bible full of instruction for us about how He wants us to live in this world of His. But because of the sinfulness remaining in us, we have difficulty carrying out the will of our God. We acknowledge that the Lord is King, we know we need to obey His commands, but we are too weak to push through and consistently do what the King requires of us. Hence Jesus' instruction to pray this third petition: "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

I need, brothers and sisters, to give the matter more color, more depth. The Lord is King, we confess. But He's no small King; such is His sovereignty that –as Abraham Kuyper said it a century ago- there is not a square inch of life of which Jesus does not say, 'Mine'. That's in turn to say that there's not a single aspect of the life you and I live that falls outside of the interest and the authority of the King of kings. Whether we are sitting in church or playing sport, whether we're engaged in a business transaction or studying at school or doing the dishes or laying in bed, Christ claims every moment of our lives as His, and Christ has His commands for us. I read in Ps 119 that God's "Word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path" (vs 105), and the path the psalmist refers to here is the pathway along which the Lord is pleased to lead the psalmist in any given day of his life – be it getting out of bed, getting dressed, having breakfast, getting off to work, doing the work, recreation after work, etc. That path –and it's our experience too- is not necessarily easy walking like today's footpaths; the path of life is more like walking a bush trail, with roots and stones on the path over which you trip. To walk such a path you need light. And the psalmist says: the light I need to walk the path of life is ... God's Word. For in that Word the Lord has given His people the instructions they need to live for Him. So: every moment of the day or night, whether I'm involved in doing the laundry or driving the car or chatting on the phone, it's God's Word that tells me what I ought to do. But see, doing that Word in the nitty-gritty of life I find so difficult. It's one thing to follow the main lines of what God wants of me. I can make sure I serve God and not an idol, make sure I go to church, make sure I don't kill, etc; doing the broad lines is one thing. But we realize well that if Christ is King we need to serve Him in the *details* as well. And that's more difficult, very difficult.

And it's in relation, congregation, to the *details* that this third petition comes to its own. That is: Jesus tells His disciples to ask God for grace to do God's will not just in a broad way, but in the details. The angels of heaven do not give obedience to the King only in the broad sweep of things; those angels obey every command of the King, down to the small details. And: they obey *all the time*, in every circumstance in which God is pleased to place His angels. That is God's will for us; since Christ is King we need to deny our own will in things big and in things small, and without any murmuring obey His will in whatever circumstance God may place us.

As it is, at this very moment God places us in church, and has us listen to a sermon. We know His will for us right now; He wants us to listen to the sermon, take it to heart, learn from it. But the reality is that our thoughts drift – that's human weakness. And Satan loves that; he'd dearly have us distracted so that we don't hear the Word God gives to us. That's the concrete situation we're in. In *this* situation the Lord reminds us that He's King, and He has commands for us to obey. Specifically, He'd have us to fight the tendency to let our thoughts drift; He wants us to listen to the Word God sets before us. *Here's* the place of the third petition; as I struggle with my concentration, it's for me to call upon

God for strength to deny my own will and do His will. "Help me, Lord, to do Your will for me in the situation You place me in right now; give me strength to concentrate, to listen, to take Your word to heart." You see, beloved, this prayer is so practical; it interacts with the concrete situations in which we find ourselves.

Tomorrow our situation is different. I come out of bed, and I know very well what my parents expect of me; I need to make up my bed, and then get myself ready to be presentable at the breakfast table at 7:00. But I'm in a foul mood, I can't be bothered to tidy up my room; my inclination is to ignore what Mom says.... But the Lord is King of all life, including those moments before breakfast, and it's His will that I submit myself to His commands. That's why I need to pray, in that particular circumstance: Lord, what do you want my to do? More, give me the strength to deny my own will and without any muttering obey Your will. And what is God's will? There's a whole Bible full of instruction, and No, there's no passage that tells me exactly what I need to do between getting out of bed and sitting down for breakfast. But there is a passage that says that I'm to honor my mother, that I'm to obey her. Well, there's God's will for me in the circumstance then; do what Mom wants, without any protest, without any muttering. But to it is hard; it flies in the face of my inclinations. So the Lord would have me to pray. "Father, make me in this situation to obey Your commands, give me strength to deny my own will and do Your will – and do so without muttering, without a long face."

Or: I'm about to make a deal, do a business transaction. The sinfulness remaining in me inclines me to make a deal that serves my own best interest. But I know that the Lord is King over all of life, and that means too that His instructions are critical for me also in the manner in which I do my business. But O to act Scripturally, to fix a deal in a manner that gives glory to God and shows love to the neighbor – *that's* so hard. That's now Jesus' instruction; pray, ask God for the wisdom to know His will for you in that particular situation in which the Lord places you, more, ask God for the strength to deny your own will and calmly, willingly do His will in that specific circumstance.

You realize: I can give you dozens of examples drawn from the bits and pieces that make up our daily lives – those paths along which God leads us day after day. And here's the point: in each such situation, the Lord would have me to *seek His will*. Prayer is not just that I speak to the Lord about things far removed from me, things that don't touch where I'm at at the moment. Pray is not just that I ask God to bless mission work, bless the government, take care of aging parents, etc, etc. Certainly, to pray about these things is important, and they belong to our daily prayers. But really, praying about those things more removed from where I'm at is not the central aspect of prayer. To pray only about those more distant things is a recipe to developing a shallow prayer life, prayers that sound the same day after day, prayers that don't breathe the air of real life. No, beloved, the Lord would have us speak to Him about the bits and pieces of daily life where we get our own hands dirty. Christ is King, so His Word is our command for every step along the way of the path of life. So always the question needs to be on our mind, "Father, what do you want me to do?" "What is Your will for me in this circumstance?"

So I read in Luke 22, for example, that Jesus approached His Father in prayer not just at the end of the day, or when He sat down to eat, or when He began a meeting. Rather, at a given moment in the course of the day the pressures of what was going to happen became too much for Jesus. So what does He do? He sought the Lord in prayer. In the real life situation where Jesus was in, He cried out His anguish to his God. "Father, if it is Your will, take this cup away from Me; nevertheless not My will, but Yours be done" (vs 42). Every fiber in is human being –He was true man like you and I- cried out to flee from the coming hell on the cross. So He tells God of His struggle, using the Old Testament language of 'cup' – a term that describes the horrible anguish that comes with receiving God's curse. But even as He tells God of the nitty-gritty of where He's at that, He includes the third petition; "nevertheless not as I will, but as You will". That is: give Me the strength to deny that urge within Me to run and flee, give Me the strength to go forward to the cross and obey Your revealed will for Me. And see: God gave strength; "then an angel appeared to Him from heaven, strengthening Him" (vs 43).

And there's the point for us: speak to God about the specific situation you're in, and in that situation seek His holy will for you, seek strength to *do* His will. For it's by people *doing* the will of the King *in their specific difficulties that they're in* that God is praised, His Name is hallowed.

That leaves yet our last point:

The implication for our prayers

Now we've come full circle. Fact is that we tend to pray with ourselves as the focus of our prayers. With the first petition the Lord taught us to get our eyes off ourselves and fix them instead on Him; we exist for His glory and so need also to pray that His name be hallowed, His reputation be made more glorious still. But now we learn that this focus on God does not exclude any attention on ourselves; we most certainly must have an eye on ourselves also, pray for ourselves. But each in his right place; *we're to give attention to ourselves in submission to the greater goal of God's glory!* We need to speak to God about our concrete situations, where *we* are at, and then speak to God about ourselves *not* with a view to our comforts and our wishes, but with a view to *His* will, *His* glory.

Here, I suspect, is the reason why we have difficulty with prayer. We pray about things far away from us –things like government, mission, school, etc- things removed from the dirt and grim of our daily lives. About these things we can be emotionally rather neutral; we simply pray that the Lord will bless all mission work, give wisdom to governing authorities to carry out their office in a manner pleasing to the Lord, etc. Then prayer gets routine, and we can (and do!) say the same words to God in prayer day after day. Or we pray about things close to us – our health, our happiness, our hopes. But then we pray not with God's glory first in mind but rather with *our* comfort, *our* wishes in mind. But when things don't happen as we'd like, we experience that praying gets to be a frustrating exercise; we feel unheard.

What the problem is? This: we do not lay before God *the concrete circumstance we're in*, and then ask Him to show us what *He wants us to do*. We don't ask Him for strength to follow not our own heads but His revealed will. I know, it's not easy to pray *against* the urges within us; that requires so much self-denial. Make no mistake: it was not easy for the Lord Jesus Christ to ask God for strength to subject His will to God's will! But when we seek God in an effort to subject our conduct to His commands, *then* praying becomes *meaningful*, for then our prayers are borne from the struggles of real life. And that's when (and how!) we show our dependence on God, our trust in Him. For we acknowledge that His will is better for us than our own will.

How shall we pray? We shall not ask God that He please do our will. We shall instead ask God that we humbly do His will. So we shall not come to God in prayer only at set times – when we sit down to eat, or when we go to bed, or when we begin or end a meeting. Instead, we'll "pray without ceasing" (I Thess 5:17), continually throughout the day seeking the will of God for us, asking for strength to obey our King in our concrete circumstances – that in turn His name is glorified through us.

Then we may be sure: God will hear, and answer. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 9 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday Morning, 11 April 1999.

"GOD MY FATHER IS WILLING AND ABLE TO CARE FOR ME PERFECTLY."

Text:

Lord's Day 9

26. Q. What do you believe when you say: I believe in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth?

A. That the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who out of nothing created heaven and earth and all that is in them,[1] and who still upholds and governs them by His eternal counsel and providence,[2] is, for the sake of Christ His Son, my God and my Father.[3] In Him I trust so completely as to have no doubt that He will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul,[4] and will also turn to my good whatever adversity He sends me in this life of sorrow.[5] He is able to do so as almighty God,[6] and willing also as a faithful Father.[7]

[1] Gen. 1 and 2; Ex. 20:11; Job 38 and 39; Ps. 33:6; Is. 44:24; Acts 4:24; 14:15. [2] Ps. 104:27-30; Matt. 6:30; 10:29; Eph. 1:11. [3] John 1:12, 13; Rom. 8:15, 16; Gal. 4:4-7; Eph. 1:5. [4] Ps. 55:22; Matt. 6:25, 26; Luke 12:22-31. [5] Rom. 8:28. [6] Gen. 18:14; Rom. 8:31-39. [7] Matt. 6:32, 33; 7:9-11.

Scripture Reading:

Hosea 11

Psalms 121

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "*Book of Praise*" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalms 33:2

Psalms 146:3,5

Psalms 121:1,2,3,4

Hymns 8:2,3

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

From the edge of the Pit where we had placed ourselves God in mercy supplied deliverance; freely we are granted escape from the horrors of that Pit. With LD 8 we considered what kind of a God this was who granted this escape; this God, we said, was Triune, so great that He was beyond our understanding.

Now what? Now that Triune God has granted escape from the Pit, what does He do with us? Someone in prison shall be most grateful if a strongman will break him out of prison – unless that strongman takes the ex-prisoner to a torture chamber; were that freed prisoner broken out of jail in order to be tortured, he shall surely wish to be back in the confines of his cell. God has set us free from the horrors of hell; what does He do with us now? Has something worse in mind for us than hell, or better? That's the material about which we make confession in LD 9.

This God –He set us free in Christ- has now established His covenant of grace with us. We all –we heard it some weeks ago- have been adopted by Him to be His children; He has made Himself 'Father' to each one of us. As Father He has promised to "provide us with all good and avert all evil or turn it to our benefit." And He is no small god, unable to deliver what He promised; this Father is in fact the Creator of heaven and earth. As we go through the trials of this broken life, here, congregation, is material of enormous comfort and encouragement.

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

GOD MY FATHER IS WILLING AND ABLE TO CARE FOR ME PERFECTLY.

1. as gracious Father He is willing to care
2. as almighty God He is able to care

1. Gracious Father is willing to care

All of us have a father; else we would not exist. As such, we also have thoughts about what a father is. Because of our experience with fathers, some of us have very positive perceptions of the notion of 'father'; Dad was always there when we needed him, he protected us, understood us. Others of us have very negative perceptions; Dad was never there for us, Dad didn't understand us, in fact Dad misused us.

As it turns out, those thoughts we have of our earthly fathers in turn affect the way we understand the word 'Father' in relation to God. For that reason I need briefly to consider with you an earthly father, before we look at what God says about Himself as Father.

II Samuel 13

II Samuel 13 tells us of two brothers and a sister, Amnon, Absalom and Tamar. The chapter tells us also of a father, one who was not there when his children needed him. The father was King David.

We're familiar with the events. Amnon developed such an appetite for his sister Tamar that he became sick, lost weight. When father David came to visit, he asked him to send Tamar to care for him. David granted the request. Once Amnon was alone with Tamar, he raped her.

What, brothers and sisters, does this say about David? This: this father did not know what lived in the mind of his son. Had David had even an inkling of Amnon's appetite, he surely would not have permitted his daughter to be alone with Amnon.

In due time David heard what happened. His response was that "he was very angry" (vs 21). But we read nothing of David reaching out to support Tamar. Nor do we read that David pursued justice against the perpetrator. Though David as king was obliged –and in a position- to punish the perpetrator, David did nothing....

Two years later Absalom thought to take justice in his own hands. He organised a feast..., and asked his father to let Amnon attend the feast too. Strange, for the chapter tells us that after Amnon raped Tamar, Absalom "spoke to his brother Amnon neither good nor bad" (vs 22). Did David not know Absalom's feelings about Amnon? Why, then, did he let Amnon go to that feast? Did he not know what Absalom thought of Amnon? In a word: *where was David as a father??* His sons did not receive his attention; his daughter did not receive his care.

God is Father

Now God tells us that He is 'Father'. Are we to see God as a father along the lines that David was a father? If yes, then surely, congregation, there is no advantage in this God having delivered us from the Pit and Satan's clutches. If God is the strongman who delivers us from prison, only to lead us into some chamber of torment –and that is where Tamar found herself; let no one think that a victim of rape does not go through some sort of hell- if God is the strongman who delivers us from prison only to lead us into some chamber of torment, we'd be better off to stay in the Pit of hell! As it is, God has said He is our Father. What we need to do, then, is ask God what He means when He uses concerning Himself the term 'Father'. Does God intend the term 'Father' as He applies it to Himself to have the same loading as the term 'father' had in Tamar's mind when she thought of David? As it turns out, it is not so. I draw your attention to some passages of God's Word.

Ex 4:22f

The people of Israel were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt. As such, this people was at the bottom of the ladder, the lowest of the peoples; slaves had to do what they were told, slaves are a heart-broken, oppressed people. God sent Moses to Pharaoh with these words: "

‘Thus says the Lord: "Israel is My son, My firstborn. So I say to you, let My son go that he may serve Me. But if you refuse to let him go, indeed I will kill your son, your firstborn." ’

What, congregation, does a statement like this say about God? Does this testify of distance between God and His people, of standoffishness? Does this portray a lack of care, a hardness toward Israel? We understand: not at all. Instead, the fact that God calls Israel His ‘son’ portrays God as caring, as compassionate for this people, as out to seek the good of this people.

Deut 1:31

Forty years later Israel is before the gates of the Promised Land. In the course of those forty years God had delivered Israel from Egypt, supplied daily for Israel’s needs in the desert so that the people had food day by day, water to drink, protection from enemies, clothes to wear. In Dt 1:31 the Lord looks back over the years of His care, and describes it like this:

"the Lord your God carried you, as a man carries his son, in all the way that you went until you came to this place."

Again, congregation, what does a statement like say about God? "As a man carries his son": the phrase conjures up to our minds the picture of the father who sets his little boy on his shoulders. The picture speaks of tenderness, of care, of love, of self-denial for the sake of the boy. That is how God consciously portrays Himself in His relation to Israel.

Deut 32:6ff

At the end of the book, Moses teaches Israel a song, and in that song expressly calls God a ‘Father’. Vs 6:

"Is He not your Father, who bought you? Has He not made you and established you?"

Just what Moses means with the term ‘Father’ He draws out in the verses that follow. Very graphic is the material of vss 10-12. There Moses says of God:

"He found him [Israel] in a desert land
And in the wasteland, a howling wilderness;
He encircled him, He instructed him,
He kept him as the apple of His eye.
As an eagle stirs up its nest,
Hovers over its young,
Spreading out its wings, taking them up,
Carrying them on its wings,
So the Lord alone led him,
And there was no foreign god with him."

The imagery speaks of tender care. God found Israel in a desert land; that depicts Israel as in need of help. What did God do? "He encircled him, He instructed him, He kept him as the apple of His eye." How much tenderness, how much understanding, how much love and care are captured in those words! We see it happening before our eyes: Israel, lost and shrivelled in the heat of the desert, is enfolded by God’s care, taken into His protection, their every need supplied.... Yes, that’s tenderness, that’s true care.

Hosea 11

And what shall we learn from the prophecy of Hosea? Many years after Israel was settled in the Promised Land, God

moved the prophet to speak to Israel like this:

"When Israel was a child, I loved him,
And out of Egypt I called My son" (vs 1).

And (vs 3):

"I taught Ephraim to walk,
Taking them by their arms."

And vs 4:

"I drew them with gentle cords,
With bands of love,
And I was to them as those who take the yoke from their neck.
I stooped and fed them."

The whole passage speaks of tenderness, of great gentleness on God's part toward Israel His son. Here's a loving Father, here's a Father who's *there* for His child, a Father truly interested in His son, a Father seeking the best for His son. Even when there is disobedience and obstinance on the part of the son, this Father does not turn His back. Listen to vs 8:

"How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, Israel?
How can I make you like Admah?
How can I set you like Zeboiim?
My heart churns within Me;
My sympathy is stirred."

Truly, congregation, here is compassion, tenderness, care.

The full glory of what God's *Father*-ness really means for us was revealed in the fact that this God set about securing our salvation. Such was His compassion, so much of a *Father* was He, that He gave up what was most precious to Him in order that we might become His children. For the salvation of persons lost in sin and misery, Triune God determined within Himself to send the Son to earth to pay for sin – so that you and I might be made children of God, God might become our Father. Here is nothing, *nothing* of selfishness, of standoffishness towards children, of distance; here is only love, tender compassion, self-emptying for the sake of the undeserving.

God is Father

And *that*, my brothers and sisters, that is what God wants to portray in that single word 'Father'. When He uses that word 'Father', He would not have us think of David, would not have us think of the fathers we grew up with either. Those fathers were sinful, limited; they were not always there when we needed them, nor did they understand all our needs. But God is not a Father like that at all; He attaches the word 'Father' to Himself, and loads the term with a content unique to Himself, a content that very much speaks of safety, security.

Now, it's all fine to have a Father willing to do whatever He can to protect, understand, help, care. No doubt, so many of our earthly fathers do strive to model their parenting after the example of the Father in heaven. But one can have all the best intentions in the world; they help nothing if one is not in a position to push through with action. God as Father is willing to love and care and protect, but is He able? That brings us to our second point:

2. Almighty God is able to care

How do I know that my Father is able to provide for my every need? The evidence of His ability, congregation, lies in the fact that He created all things. The point is this: if God created heaven and earth (and that's a catch-all phrase

describing all things that exist outside of God Himself), then it follows that God is on top of the ladder, that there's not a force in all creation stronger than He, that He is in sovereign control of all that happens in the world He made.

As to the greatness of His might, His manner of creating is stark testimony that there is none like Him. I read in Ps 33:

Ps 33

"By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,
And all the host of them by the breath of His mouth.
He gathers the waters of the sea together as a heap;
He lays up the deep in storehouses.
Let all the earth fear the Lord;
Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him.
For He spoke, and it was done;
He commanded, and it stood fast" (vss 6ff).

Fancy that: He *spoke*, and every star you can see suddenly was there! He spoke, and trees and mountains and oceans and canyons were *there*! No wonder that the psalmist tells all the inhabitants of the earth to "stand in awe of Him"! This is a God like there is none other. And this, congregation, is the God who says to *you*: I am your Father! This is the God who says to you that He encircles you with His compassion and tender care, with His love and His protection. Now tell me: is He able to supply the care and understanding and protection and love He promises to supply? The very fact that He's the Creator of heaven and earth means that there's not a muscle anywhere in all creation able to move unless God permits. In Jesus' words: even the hairs of your head are all numbered (Mt 10:30). So?

Ps 121

Ps 121 tells us of a man who was going to travel from here to there. He's standing, shall we say, at the door of his house, ready to leave. As he looks at yonder hills, a worried frown crosses his face; how is he going to get across those hills? Remember: the psalmist had to walk, and the track snaking up and down the hills will have been narrow, with loose stones and branches on them. More, in the loneliness of the hills, highwaymen waited for their prey.... Recall the victim in Jesus' parable of the priest, the Levite and the Samaritan....

But the frown doesn't stay on the face of the psalmist. "I lift up my eyes to the hills," he says, "From whence comes my help?" He gives this answer:

"My help comes from the Lord,
Who made heaven and earth" (vs 2).

Notice, brothers and sisters, the reference to creation. The psalmist knows his God to be the Creator, and *that is why* he knows no fear. Since his God is the Creator,

"He will not allow your foot to be moved" (vs 3).

In fact,

"The Lord is your keeper;
The Lord is your shade at your right hand.
The sun shall not strike you by day,
Nor the moon by night.
The Lord shall preserve you from all evil; <
He shall preserve your soul.
The Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in
From this time forth, and even forevermore" (vss 5ff).

You see: the psalmist appeals to the doctrine of creation, and works with it in his concrete circumstances, works with it

as he sets out to travel the hills. He draws comfort from the revelation of God in Gen 1; my God, says the psalmist, is the almighty, is *able* to provide for my every need.

Ps 146

So too the author of Ps 146. This author compares the support and help you get from people with the support and care you receive from God. As to people, he says:

"Do not put your trust in princes,
Nor in a son of man, in whom there is no help.
His spirit departs, he returns to his earth;
In that very day his plans perish" (vss 3f).

But God, he says, is different:

"Happy is he who has the God of Jacob for his help,
Whose hope is in the Lord his God" (vs 5).

Why is that person happy? Because of Who God is! Vs 6: this God

"...made heaven and earth,
The sea, and all that is in them."

You see: the psalmist again appeals to the doctrine of creation, and from the fact of Gen 1 draws out enormous comfort for the people of God. The God who made Himself 'Father' for sinners is almighty to save, and that's what makes "happy" the man "whose hope is in the Lord ... who made heaven and earth."

Evolution

This, brothers and sisters, is why the evolution theory is so evil. The matter of how the world got here is not simply a question of origins; it's a question of your security, your safety, your comfort today. To insist that this world got here through an evolutionary process is to deny the almighty power of God. It's to say that something has happened apart from Him. And that simply means that God is not on top of the ladder, it's to say that something exists in this world that's not totally *under* God. But if He is not on top of the ladder, if there's something in this world that's not *under* Him, then He is not almighty, then He's not in control of all things. Then it's fine to say that God is your Father, and fine to maintain that He is willing to care for you well, but ultimately your Father is then a small god, is not necessarily able to deliver the expectations He sets forth in His Word. That's the evil of the evolution dogma; it makes God small and so takes comfort away from the children of God.

That is also the reason why it is imperative that we cling to the simple words of Gen 1, as explained in Ps 33:

"... He spoke, and it was done;
He commanded, and it stood fast" (vs 8).

What you see outside is God's world, your Father's world – made in a moment at His command. It displays His majesty, His "almighty power and deity" (Rom 1:20), and so the stars and the trees, the flowers and the bees are a source of great comfort and encouragement; your Father is able to supply your every need.

The God who made this world has made Himself our Father, us His children. Sovereignly He takes us along the paths of His choosing; through good days and bad "He carries us, as a man carries his son." Shall we fear while we sit on His shoulders? Shall we fault Him for leading us poorly? Tell me: who do you think your Father is??

Conclusion

Now one thing remains. Why has God told us this rich gospel? So that we might feel good, be comforted and secure?

No, beloved of the Lord, that's not the reason. If it was, His message would be a failure to various of us, for the fact remains that not all of us have experienced only care and tenderness from the hands of this God. This is a matter that will require our attention further next week, with LD 10.

For now the question remains: why has God told you that He is your Father? The reason is this: that in our circumstances we might more and more entrust ourselves to Him, and so give praise to this God of gods. That's the theme of the Scriptures: He made all for His glory. That we may be children of the world's Creator simply prompts for greater praise for this Creator – your Father and mine. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 50 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 3 September 2000.

"JESUS TEACHES US TO PRAY FOR DAILY BREAD."

Text:

Lord's Day 50

125. Q. What is the fourth petition?

A. Give us this day our daily bread. That is: Provide us with all our bodily needs[1] so that we may acknowledge that Thou art the only fountain of all good,[2] and that our care and labour, and also Thy gifts, cannot do us any good without Thy blessing.[3] Grant therefore that we may withdraw our trust from all creatures, and place it only in Thee.[4]

[1] Ps. 104:27-30; 145:15, 16; Matt. 6:25-34. [2] Acts 14:17; 17:25; James 1:17. [3] Deut. 8:3; Ps. 37:16; 127:1, 2; I Cor. 15:58. [4] Ps. 55:22; 62; 146; Jer. 17:5-8; Heb. 13:5, 6.

Scripture Reading:

I Timothy 6:6-19

Exodus 15:22-16:21

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 145:4

Psalm 136:1,13

Psalm 105:14,15

Psalm 104:7,8

Psalm 34:2,4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The disciples had difficulty praying, and so asked Jesus for instruction about prayer. Part of the instruction Jesus gave in answer to this question was the command to ask God to "give us this day our daily bread."

We're used to that petition, and we understand too that the Lord would have us to ask Him not just for bread as such, but also for food in general, sleep, clothes, transport, shelter – as the Catechism has it, "all our bodily needs."

But why, brothers and sisters, are we to pray for these things? Why can't we take food and sleep, clothes and shelter for granted? Why, in fact, do we need food and clothing? What place should this petition have in our prayers?

As it is, congregation, we're to pray this fourth petition in connection with the first three. We're to ask for the bread we need to carry out day by day the task God has given us in His kingdom – so that in turn His glorious name is made more glorious still through our labors. Our prayers for "daily bread", prayed with this goal in mind, will certainly be heard by our God and Father.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

JESUS TEACHES US TO PRAY FOR DAILY BREAD.

1. The need for this prayer
2. The perspective of this prayer
3. The content of this prayer

The need for this prayer

The Lord our God has established His covenant of grace with us. In Christ He has spoken with us, and in Christ we may speak to Him. But there are things that can make speaking with God very difficult. One of those things that *can* make speaking to God difficult is riches, wealth. Agur, the author of Proverbs 30, utters this prayer:

"Two things I request of You
(Deprive me not before I die)...:
Give me neither poverty nor riches—
Feed me with the food allotted to me;
Lest I be full and deny You,
And say, "Who is the Lord?"
Or lest I be poor and steal,
And profane the name of my God" (vss 7ff).

Notice: Agur is aware that to have too much can lead one to deny the Lord. Then the point is not that one denies the Lord's existence; the point is rather that one no longer acknowledges *dependence* on the Lord.

Here, congregation, we need to be honest with ourselves. Agur asks God to give him neither riches nor poverty. Very, very seldom do we find people who pursue poverty. On the other hand, very, very often we find people who pursue riches. In fact, it's in all of us to want more, better, bigger. It's sinful human nature; we want comfort, we want riches, we want this, we want that. But Agur has learned the instruction Solomon has given in the book of Proverbs (instruction about human sinfulness and greed), and so beseeches God to spare him the temptations that come with riches. "Feed me," he prays, "with the food allotted to me; Lest I be full and deny You, And say, 'Who is the Lord?'"

The apostle Paul echoes the need for modesty in his words to Timothy. We read his warning against greed:

"...the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows" (I Tim 6:10).

We understand: if you've strayed from the faith through your greediness, prayer becomes so very difficult. In fact, then you cease praying.

Yet it doesn't take full-blown departure from God's ways to have difficulty with prayer. James puts it like this:

"You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures" (James 4:3).

You see, these saints didn't deny God as such, nor did they quite praying. They kept asking, asking for this and for that, things they wanted for themselves, for their children, things that they could enjoy, that supplied them comfort and pleasure. But they weren't getting what they requested. And we know from our own experiences that when you ask and ask, and consistently don't receive, prayer gets frustrating, and one is tempted to give prayer away....

I don't know whether the disciples of Jesus were well off. It's possible that some of them were; the father of James and John, for example, was a well-to-do businessman. However that may have been, the disciples had trouble with praying. Because they asked and asked, and didn't receive - because they were asking for things to spend on their own pleasures? I don't know. But the fact of the matter is that the Lord gave His disciples particular instruction in relation to asking for daily bread.

And see: Jesus' fourth petition follows the same line in which the Holy Spirit had long ago moved Agur to pray. Agur asked God to keep poverty away from him, "lest I be poor and steal, And profane the name of my God." The disciples

too, says Jesus, should ask God to keep them from poverty; "give us day by day our *daily* bread." With this prayer the disciples should acknowledge their *dependence* on God. The instruction of Scripture is so clear that all creatures are dependent on God. I think of Ps 104. The psalmist has been speaking about wild donkeys (vs 11), cattle (vs 14), young lions (vs 21), etc, and then says:

"These all wait for You,
That You may give them their food in due season" (vs 27).

That's not to say that every person in Perth today is aware of their dependence on God for food, but that doesn't change the facts any; the wild donkeys of Judah's hills did not consciously know their dependence on God either, but they –like every person and every creature on the earth today- is dependent on the Lord God for food. Paul goes farther in his words to the unbelieving pagans of Lystra: "He gives to all life, breath, and all things" (Acts 17:25). That's categorical language; "He gives to *all* life, breath and all things." It's the instruction of Scripture: all the world is *dependent* on Him. By teaching us to pray the fourth petition, Jesus teaches us to confess this reality before God. 'Lord, if You don't give us daily bread, we shall perish. So, give us day by day our daily bread.'

The perspective of this prayer

Agur asked more than that God would withhold poverty; he asked also that God would withhold riches – lest, said Agur, "I be full and deny You, And say, 'Who is the Lord?'" Notice that Agur does not set his goals too high; he's modest in his requests. This is precisely Jesus' instruction to His disciples. He tells them to ask God for "bread". Have you ever considered, congregation, why Jesus instructed His disciples to ask for "bread" instead of, say, meat – let alone one of the delicacies available at Jerusalem's best restaurant? The reason, of course, is that bread was for the people of Israel the *basic* diet; everybody ate bread. And the people of God should be content with the basics. I remind you of what Paul wrote to Timothy:

"And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content" (6:8).

In other words, we don't need things that tickle are pleasures, don't need to pursue luxury, comfort.

Here is a theme that's so very contemporary. Albany's whaling station was shut down a couple of decades ago because of a ban on whaling –why?- because human greed had chased the whales too close to the point of extinction. Examples of that nature are almost infinite; so very much damage has been done to the environment, so much pressure has been put on species God placed on this earth simply because of human greed. People want more, and more. These environmental issues shall surely keep appearing on the world's agenda in years to come, and these are issues in which the children of God shall need to be involved. Yet it shall need to begin with ourselves, with what we demand for ourselves. And what we want for ourselves needs in turn to be reflected in what we pray. And here's Jesus' instruction: ask your heavenly Father for "bread". In other words, keep your wishes simple, keep your material goals very modest.

It's a thought we don't really like, since it's in us to want more, *more*. But here, brothers and sisters, we come to the kernel of the fourth petition. Why is this petition the *fourth* one? What's its place in the light of the whole Lord's Prayer?

It's no accident, congregation, that this petition for daily bread follows the one about doing the will of God. You'll recall from previous sermons on the Lord's prayer that the first three petitions are all connected together. We're to ask the Father, Jesus says, that His wonderful Name may be made more glorious still; that's the first petition. How that's to be done? By us acknowledging that the Lord is King in all of life – the second petition. And how do we acknowledge that the Lord is King in all of life? Third petition: by us doing His will, obeying His commands for us. And, we'd said in Lord's Day 49, we're to do the will of God in the concrete circumstances where God in wisdom places us day by day, that is, in our "office and calling." Well now: what do we need in order to carry out our office and calling? What do we need to do the will of God in the place God has put us day by day? What do we need to obey His will so that we acknowledge His kingship, and so make His name more glorious? Of course: we need "daily bread". Do we need delicacies, do we need the fastest and best, do we need expensive clothing, the trendiest? Something in us says: we

need that, we want that. And Yes, as long as we keep our goal related to ourselves, to our comfort, what other people think of us, the impression we can make on others, then Yes, these things shall be important to us. But the Lord teaches us to pray with the Lord God in the center of our lives, and the reason for having us pray God-centered prayers is simply because *our lives* are meant to be God-centered, not self-centered. And if our lives are to be *God-centered*, then the purpose for asking for bread is not that *we* get comfortable, that *we* can satisfy our taste for finery. Rather, then the purpose for asking for bread is that we have what we need to do the will of God, so that in turn we acknowledge His kingship and *God* be glorified.

I ask your attention for Israel in the desert. This people had been delivered from bondage to the Egyptians –why?- so that they might live for the glory of the God who delivered them. But I read in Ex 15 that the people of Israel, three days after they crossed the Red Sea, ran out of drink. When they finally found water in Marah, they were disappointed to taste that the water was not drinkable. Tell me now: would this state-of-affairs glorify the Lord? Had God in fact brought them out of Egypt in order to have them die in the wilderness from thirst? Had God not said He'd bring them into a good land, a land flowing with milk and honey? We realize: for His own name's sake the Lord had to give His people drink. And He did.

Ex 16 tells us that this same people, now some six weeks after the exodus, ran out of food. What Israel should have done? Prayed! Prayed the fourth petition. But they didn't; instead, they complained, complained with their own stomachs, their own lives, their own selves in the center of their attention. Yet –for this is right after the exodus, and Israel has so much to learn- God answers their complaint; He promises to give bread day by day. And so it happens; day by day there is adequate bread laying on the desert floor around the tents of each Israelite. No, the manna isn't the finery supplied by the best of restaurants, but people don't need that either. What Israel needed was simply bread, the basics so that they would not curse God for leaving them with an empty stomach. They need the basics so that they can do the actual task God gave the people to do day by day (and that was to travel through the desert to the Promised Land) – and in the challenges of travelling the desert to do His will, acknowledge His kingship, make His name more glorious.

The same is true in chap 17 when the people are again without water, true too when enemies attack the people. The Lord supplied for their needs in a basic but very real fashion – so that they could live for Him.

Here, brothers and sisters, is the instruction for us. You have difficulty with prayer, you ask and don't receive? Think then: is what you ask for geared to your own comfort, your own welfare, your own reputation? Beloved, then you can ask for God to fulfil your dream a thousand times in a day, but you shall not receive. Learn from James:

"You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures" (James 4:3).

And learn from the Lord's instruction in the fourth petition; you are to ask for the basics you need *in order to carry out the will of God for you in the specific place God gives you in daily life* – to His greater glory.

The content of this prayer

Well, then, what do you need? What should you concretely ask for? Look, congregation, what is your specific task tomorrow? So many of the young people shall go to school tomorrow. God's will for you at school tomorrow is that you learn what there is to learn in your grade, and do so with obedience to God's Ten Commandments. What that requires? O yes, it requires breakfast tomorrow morning, for you can't study well on an empty stomach. So you may ask for breakfast. But you need more to do God's will at school tomorrow. You need sleep tonight, for you can't study with a sluggish head. So you ask for sleep. To do your work well at school requires also that your teachers have the insight and wisdom and courage to teach the course in a fashion pleasing to the Lord. So you pray tonight that the Lord please give your teachers the insight and wisdom and courage they need. To do God's will for you at school tomorrow requires that you stand above the pressures of your peers, that you obey God's commands about loving your neighbor as yourself. So you pray for grace to love your neighbor as the Lord has loved you. You see, boys and girls, here is Jesus' instruction for you. What should you pray for tonight, tomorrow morning? You have difficulty knowing what to say, how to say it? Here is Jesus' instruction for you: think through what your specific needs are for tomorrow

in relation to the task the Lord is pleased to give to you, and then lay those needs before God, concretely, and do so with His glory in mind. Then there is ample to pray for, day by day!

Others are off to work in a cabinet-making shop. It is God's will that in that shop His children obey His commands as they do their work, and so acknowledge that He is King and glorify His name. Yes, that requires food and sleep, it requires health and ability to concentrate on the job, it requires grace to honor the boss, etc, etc. So the prayer of the cabinetmaker is different than the prayer of the student. Though the prayer follows the same lines (according to the instruction of the Lord's prayer), the details are different because the circumstances are different.

Or the task God gives tomorrow is in the kitchen, in the laundry room. That requires specific gifts from God, according to your personal needs. For the one mother it's patience with a run-down washing machine, for the next it's patience with a child who doesn't take the tissues out of his pocket, for a third it's strength to persevere in a job you find so boring. But that's the job God gives, and so there you need the gifts from God to do His will, to develop God-pleasing attitudes as you do the work He gives, so that in turn you acknowledge His kingship in your life and give glory to His wonderful name.

So I can go on. But the point becomes clear, I hope. The disciples had difficulty praying, and Jesus' instruction is that their prayers are to have God in the center. Yet that doesn't mean prayer can't be about the self; rather, prayer *must* be about the self, about the specific bits and pieces that make up your daily life. After all, it's not just in church that we're to glorify God, but we're to hallow His name wherever we get our hands dirty with the grime of daily living. There's where things are at moment by moment, and those are the bits and pieces we need to lay before God, in all the circumstances we're in –whether nice or not- where we seek to do the will of God.

The disciples had difficulty praying, and it's a difficulty we share – maybe because we're selfish in our prayers, maybe because we ask for things we don't need in order to glorify God's name. So Jesus' instruction is so relevant for us. In the fourth petition we're taught what specifically we're to pray for, taught with what mindset we're to ask it.

And truly, congregation, when we lay the bits and pieces of our lives before God with a view to getting from God what we need to do His will, for His glory, there's plenty to pray about. For our circumstances, the details of our tasks, change by the hour. And therefore the things we need to do God's will keep changing too.

You see, there's lots to pray about....Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 52 Q&A 127 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 17 September 2000.

" IN THE FACE OF SATAN'S RAGE THE LORD TEACHES US TO SPEAK WITH GOD ABOUT OUR WEAKNESSES."

Text:

Lord's Day 52 Q&A 127

127. Q. What is the sixth petition?

A. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. That is: In ourselves we are so weak that we cannot stand even for a moment.[1] Moreover, our sworn enemies-- the devil,[2] the world,[3] and our own flesh[4]-- do not cease to attack us. Wilt Thou, therefore, uphold and strengthen us by the power of Thy Holy Spirit, so that in this spiritual war[5] we may not go down to defeat, but always firmly resist our enemies, until we finally obtain the complete victory.[6]

[1] Ps. 103:14-16; John 15:1-5. [2] II Cor. 11:14; Eph. 6:10-13; I Pet. 5:8. [3] John 15:18-21. [4] Rom. 7:23; Gal. 5:17. [5] Matt. 10:19, 20; 26:41; Mark 13:33; Rom. 5:3-5. [6] I Cor. 10:13; I Thess. 3:13; 5:23.

Scripture Reading:

Luke 22:31-34; 54-62

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 101:1,3

Psalm 90:1

Psalm 142:4,5

Psalm 54:1,2,3

Hymn 43:1,2,3

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The disciples sought from the Lord instruction in how to pray. Jesus' taught the twelve --and us- to address God as 'Father' (and so acknowledge that they were His children), to speak to God too about hallowing His name, making His kingdom come, etc. Last week we listened to the fifth topic the disciples were to speak to God about, that matter of their sins and would the Lord God please forgive those sins, ie, deal with them as if they had never had nor committed any sin. That, the disciples --and we- had to add in God's hearing, is how we, by the sovereign working of the Holy Spirit in our sinful hearts, treat those who trespass against us.

The Lord's instruction about prayer, however, did not stop with this fifth petition. He's added a sixth, "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." As we seek to learn from the Lord how to pray, we'll need to understand *why* our Savior taught us to pray this sixth petition. Further, what are the implications of this prayer for our conduct? Or, can our conduct prevent us from praying, praying also this petition?

The Lord Jesus Christ, brothers and sisters, works with a number of realities of life when He teaches us to pray this sixth petition. He works with the reality of our weakness, works with the reality of Satan's rage, and works with the reality too of the Father's sovereignty and care. As we seek to understand the sixth petition, we'll need to come to grips with these realities.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

IN THE FACE OF SATAN'S RAGE THE LORD TEACHES US TO SPEAK WITH GOD ABOUT OUR WEAKNESSES.

1. Why this petition is necessary
2. Why this petition is possible
3. Why this petition has consequences

Why this petition is necessary

Jesus, I said a moment ago, works in the sixth petition with a number of realities of life. To appreciate the need for the sixth petition, we need to understand what these realities are. The first reality with which Jesus works in this petition is the reality of our weakness.

Our weakness

Nobody likes to be weak. We all want to be strong. So young men stand before the mirror to examine how their biceps are developing. And teenagers tell their parents that they don't need to be told how to do things; their old and wise enough, physically and mentally strong enough to look after themselves. Older people have the same habits; something in us cringes at the thought of having to display that we need help; we much prefer to portray ourselves as person who can stand on our own two feet, independent – we're strong.

That's human. But it's not right. I mean: though we want to be strong, the Lord tells us that we're not strong. In fact, the Scriptures portray us as weak, and very dependant. The Catechism sums up the matter like this, "In ourselves we are so weak that we cannot stand even for a moment." To prove the point, the Catechism refers to two texts from Scripture. The first is Ps 103, where David is moved by the Holy Spirit to say:

"For He knows our frame;
He remembers that we are dust.
As for man, his days are like grass;
As a flower of the field, so he flourishes.
For the wind passes over it, and it is gone,
And its place remembers it no more" (vss 14ff).

It's a humbling description that the Holy Spirit gives of people. God remembers, He says, "that we are dust." Then the point is that we did not call ourselves into existence, but the Lord God almighty once collected dust from the earth, fashioned that dirt into the shape of a man, and blew into his nostrils the breath of life. The implication is that we are *totally dependent* on God for "life and breath and all things" (Acts 17:25).

The Holy Spirit adds on top of that that we are mortal, finite. "As for man," says the Psalm, "his days are like grass." We all know that grass, like flowers, is short-lived. Another month or two and the rains will stop, the easterlies will start, and within two days a green field turns brown. Grass is short-lived, is vulnerable. So are people. One day we're here, healthy and well. The next day we're in bed, sick..., or maybe dead. That's people, *weak, dependent*.

The second text the Catechism mentions is Jn 15. I read these words:

"I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" (vs 5).

We're familiar with grapevines. Shortly the branch will bud, and after some weeks young grapes will appear, ready for eating in January or February. But clip the branch from the vine..., and you'll get neither bud nor crop. For the branch is *dependent* on the vine. Says Jesus: so it is with you. Says He to the twelve (and so to all His people): "I am the vine, you are the branches.... Without Me you can do *nothing*." That's absolute language; without the Lord we can do *nothing*.

We like to be strong, self-sufficient, able to handle the challenges of life ourselves. But the Scriptures, congregation, are adamant that we are *not* strong, are *not* able to handle the challenges of life ourselves. The Scriptures teach that we need to have small thoughts of ourselves and our abilities. So we say in Lord's Day: "in ourselves we are so weak that we cannot stand even for a moment." No, brothers and sisters, it's not flattering, it's not the way we like things to be, but it's fact nevertheless. Paul warned us to take this reality seriously when he wrote, "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (I Cor 10:12).

Satan's rage

The second reality with which Jesus reckons in the sixth petition is the fact of Satan's rage. When we listened some weeks ago to the Lord's instruction in the second petition, we read together Rev 12. The chapter had told us that war had broken out in heaven, with as result that Satan and his demons were cast out (vss 7ff). That victory in heaven resulted in the following warning to the earth:

"Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time" (vs 12).

The nature of that wrath is further pointed up like this:

"And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (vs 17).

This "offspring", we need to know, congregation, is the believers, *you, me!* Make no mistake: we live in a context of war! Our enemy is none other than the devil, and he has with him a host of demons. More, this devil is enraged, he knows the end is in sight, knows he's already been defeated and will shortly be swept off this earth into the bottomless pit. His rage, though, does not mean that the devil acts 'out of control'. On the contrary, in his rage he uses every cunning trick hell can devise to trip up you and me, if possible to snatch us from the hands of our God and Savior.

We learn from Scripture that the devil has enlisted the services of a number of allies in his effort to snatch us from God's hands. The first one we mention in our Lord's Day is the world itself. It is as the Lord says in Jn 15:

"If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (vs 19).

By the term 'world' here we are not to think of creation as a whole, but to think instead of godless society. The culture around the disciples of Jesus' day, like the culture around us today, revolves around the concept that God is not God. That's the world in which we live, that's the air we breathe; it's Australian culture, American culture, European culture, Indonesian culture, you name it. That air, that world, that environment provides support for Satan's attack on the people of God, the church of God, his attack on you and on me. The world is his ally; we get no support from the world in our attempts to do the will of our God, to make His kingdom come and so to make His glorious name more glorious still. On the contrary!

Concrete evidence of that hard reality is everywhere. The air we breathe encourages selfishness, encourages people of all ages to think that the most important person in their lives is the self. And you've got the right to happiness, to pursue whatever makes you feel good. So if you want sex you can have it. And if your marriage keeps you unhappy, you can opt out. And if submitting to your parents gets in the way of your happiness, you can tell your parents where to get off. That's what's communicated when you walk down Hay Street, it's what's communicated when you listen to the radio, when you watch TV, when you surf the internet. The exceptions encouraging you to the contrary are so few as to be negligible. The world is an ally of the devil.

The second ally the Catechism mentions is "our own flesh". It is true that the Holy Spirit has renewed us, and we see wonderful evidence of that renewal in the fact that we forgive those who trespassed against us. But that renewal has not yet brought us to the goal of perfection, and that in turn means that there rages within us a battle; shall we in a given circumstance do the will of our God and Savior or the will of devil? It's not an easy battle, simply because our

flesh remains inclined to do the will of the evil one.... As Paul cried out to the Romans:

"For what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do" (Rom 7:15).

In truth, "we are so weak that we cannot stand even for a moment...." By nature our sinful flesh sides with the devil....

Two realities. We are weak, and the enemy so strong. In fact, the enemy is not just outside, over there somewhere. The enemy has his supporters *inside of ourselves!* No wonder heaven spoke of "woe" for the earth!

Luke 22

I think, brothers and sisters, that I need to give this material more color. We'll accept that we are weak and Satan is strong, but what does this weakness concretely look like? And what do Satan's attacks actually look like? I'd like to supply more color to this material by drawing your attention to the verses we read from Luke 22.

The Lord is now but hours away from His arrest. I read in vs 3 that Satan has already entered Judas Iscariot so that the betrayer has gone to make arrangements with the chief priests (vs 4). Jesus addresses His disciples, and as He speaks has His eye on Peter. "Simon, Simon!", He says, "Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat." With those words the Lord pulls back for a moment the curtain of heaven and reveals to the disciples what took place there. "Satan has asked for you," relates the Lord. That is, Satan has entered the courts of God with a demand, has insisted that God give him Peter, as well as Andrew and John and Thaddeus and Philip and the rest of the disciples (for the word 'you' in vs 31 is plural). That demand, congregation, shows something of Satan's rage; he demands a chance to get his devilish hands on the disciples of the Lord....

And what does Satan want to do with Peter and Andrew and John and Thaddeus and Philip and the rest? Says Jesus to the disciples: he's demanded that God give you to him so that "he may sift you as wheat." The disciples knew well what sifting was all about. The farmers of their days put the harvested grain on a mesh which a servant shook back and forth in an effort to separate the rubbish from the grain. Satan demands the disciples because he wants to place them on a sieve, wants to shake them all about –why?- in order to demonstrate how weak, how absolutely flimsy and sickeningly impotent, these disciples are.

What's so intriguing now, congregation, is Peter's reply. Vs 33: "Lord," he says, "I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death." What Peter is saying with that reply? This: Lord, let Satan go ahead. I can handle it. If he puts me in prison for Your name's sake, so be it. I'm ready for it Lord, ready even to die for You.

Tell me, brothers and sisters, does that sound familiar? That Satan prowls around seeking whom he may devour is no secret to us, and the fact that he has allies in the world and in our own flesh is not either. But *how do we react to that reality?* We might not say it in words, but in our deeds we demonstrate a posture of: we can handle it, we're strong. You wonder on what I base this conclusion? I base this conclusion, beloved, on *the way we treat* the world. The world is an ally of the devil, the world does not encourage us to do the will of our God and so acknowledge His kingship; the world rather hinders us. But we don't treat the world as an enemy, as ourselves being weak and vulnerable; instead we put our shoulders back –we're strong- and join the world in its pursuit of personal satisfaction. You see, it's the attitude of Peter; Lord, I can handle it.

But Jesus didn't agree with Peter. Vs 34: "I tell you, Peter, the rooster shall not crow this day before you will deny three times that you know Me." In other words: 'Peter, you think you're strong, but you're not.' And Jesus, not Peter, was shown to be correct. Shortly after Jesus' conversation with the disciples about Satan's demand in heaven, Judas returned with the soldiers of the chief priests and Jesus was arrested. Peter followed Jesus at a distance to the house of the high priest, then joined the soldiers around the fire. A servant girl interrupted the conversation with the statement, "This man was also with Him." To which Peter in panic replied, "Woman, I do not know Him." Twice more it happened, and twice more Peter denied association with Jesus of Nazareth.... Strong? Able to stand in the face of Satan's attacks? Peter thought so. "Lord, I'm ready to go with You, both to prison and to death." But how totally wrong he was, how shamefully he fell! Strong? No, congregation, Peter wasn't – though he thought he was, though he

wished he was. Indeed, here is warning for us:

"Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (I Cor 10:12).

The disciples sought instruction on how to pray. Was part of their problem with prayer that they considered themselves strong, self-sufficient; they could manage quite well in the storms of life? However that may have been, the Lord instructed them to speak with God about their own weaknesses, instructed them to speak with God too about the persistent and hideous attacks of the devil. "Lead us," they were to say to their Father in heaven, "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." We're so weak, they are to confess before God, and Satan is so strong. We haven't got what it takes to resist the evil one, to stand in the face of his attacks. We'll fall for sure, Father, and that means we won't do Your will, we won't acknowledge Your Kingship, and so won't give glory to Your holy name. So, Father, please grant that we don't end up in situations where Satan can really put the squeeze on us. Instead, "deliver us from the evil one."

I move on to our second point:

Why this petition is possible

It's so true, we don't like being weak. Then to pray this sixth petition, yes, there's difficulty in that, it's so humbling.... We do well to realize then, brothers and sisters, that our Lord supplies us great encouragement to pray this petition.

I refer again to Luke 22. Jesus told Simon and the rest of the disciples of Satan's demand before God in heaven. But Jesus adds more information about what took place in heaven. Vs 32: "I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail." You see, Jesus knows that Peter is weak. So, in the face of Satan's demand, Jesus interceded before God on Peter's behalf!

As it is, the Scriptures contain Jesus' intercessory prayer for the disciples; you find it in John 17. He spoke these words to His Father on behalf of the disciples:

"I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours.... Now I am no longer in the world, but these are in the world.... Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are.... I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not pray that You should take them out of the world, but that You should keep them from the evil one..." (Jn 17:9ff).

That's Jesus' prayer for the disciples; He implores God not to take them out of the world, but in the world to "keep them from the evil one." Then the point is not that the Father would please keep the disciples miles away from the evil one; the point is rather that the Father keep watch over them, guard them, preserve them in the face of Satan's attacks. In other words, the disciples are to *expect* attacks from the devil, are to *expect* that they'll feel the rage of the dragon cast out of heaven according to Rev 12. Temptations to sin are *bound* to come, are *guaranteed* to come. Yet that's no cause for the disciples to despair, for none less than *Jesus* has prayed for them. And the Father always hears whatever the Son asks. That's also why in Luke 22 Jesus can say to Peter these words, "*when* you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren." Notice that: "*when* you have returned to Me." Jesus doesn't say, "*If* you return." No, Jesus knows Peter will not only stumble but also that God *will keep him, will preserve him, will set him back on his feet*. For none can snatch a single one of God's own from God's hands. And so it happened; after Peter denied three times that he knew the Lord, he "remembered the word of the Lord..., [and] went out and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:62). Here was repentance, proof that the Father heard the prayer of His Son and so held on to His weak child.

Here is a reality, congregation, true not just for Peter and the other disciples, but true for you and me too. For Jesus, after He prayed in Jn 17 for the disciples, prayed "for [all] those who will believe in Me through [the disciples'] word" (vs 20). The enraged devil today makes war against the children of God, against you and me, and attacks us cruelly. We for our part do not have the wherewithal to stand in the face of his attacks; the world in which we live conspires with the devil to bring about our fall, and our own flesh is inclined to do the bidding of the evil one. Yet, brothers and

sisters, we may *with confidence* approach our God in prayer to ask Him that He not place us in a situation of temptation. With confidence we may ask Him to deliver us from the evil one, and we may approach Him with confidence because Jesus Himself has prayed for us and *assured us that the Father indeed will keep us in His care* – so that in turn we may do His will, acknowledge His kingship and so praise His name.

Now yet our third point:

Why this petition has consequences

Does all this mean that we can become careless, in the sense that the Lord will hold on to us anyway? The disciples want instruction about how to pray, how to speak with God. Yet we all understand, congregation, that talking and walking go together; to talk one way and then act another way constitutes a lie. The Lord our God would have us acknowledge before Him that we are weak, acknowledge before Him too that we know very well that the enraged devil seeks to prevent us from doing God's will and so acknowledging Christ's kingship. That's why we turn to Him for protection, turn to Him with the request that He not put us in situations where Satan can really squeeze us.

But such a prayer has this consequence that it just will not do to get up from such a prayer, and head off into an environment where we know we are more vulnerable to Satan's attacks! Jesus' instruction to pray the sixth petition contains within itself instruction to us to watch our step, instruction to steer clear of circumstances where Satan can take advantage of us more easily.

I remind you again of Luke 22. In the vss 31-34 Peter is surrounded by Jesus plus ten other disciples, all brothers in the Lord, all renewed by the Holy Spirit, all seeking –be it with brokenness- to do the will of the Master. Jesus tells Peter of Satan's demand, and Peter feels strong; "I'm ready to go with you even to prison and to death." The vss 54-62 has Peter surrounded again by a small crowd, but it's a different crowd. This time they're all soldiers, and a girl seeking the company of soldiers. They're wearing their swords and clubs, their language is rough. Over yonder is Jesus, the man they just arrested.... In that environment the girl amongst the soldiers has a dig at Peter, "This man was also with Him." Peter's sense of strength? It's gone, evaporated.... Why? *The situation has changed*. This is an environment of godlessness, of worldliness; here's Peter in the world, Peter in an environment hostile to God and His glory. And Satan has a good ally in Peter's own flesh; Peter doesn't want to be arrested as Jesus was, is scared of being mistreated.... So Peter falls for Satan's temptation....

What we learn? We learn, congregation, that in the one environment we're more vulnerable to Satan's temptations than in another. Here's the lesson: we can't ask God to "lead us not into temptation" and then promptly place ourselves in circumstances where we're wide open to temptation! Here we need to use our heads; we can know from Scriptures as well as experience that certain environments leave us wide open to the temptations of the devil. You can't pray this sixth petition, and then head out to investigate the magazines the News Agent has on display. That makes a farce of your prayer, and makes further prayer impossible. You can't admit to God your weakness and Satan's rage and so ask God not to lead you into temptation but instead to deliver you from the evil one – and then blithely turn on the TV to see what titillation you can find. To do so is to show that you did not mean your prayer, and makes further prayer impossible also. You can't sincerely pray this prayer, and then feel comfortable with the world. To pray this prayer means that you make it your business to stay alert to where you are more vulnerable to Satan's attacks and avoid those environments like the plague.

We don't like being weak, true. But the fact is that we are; on our own strength we cannot stand even for a moment. We pursue the glory of our God and Savior, and so want to do His will. Very well, then we seek His strength in prayer unending, and therefore His grace to deliver us from the evil one – day after day, hour by hour, moment by moment. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 52b of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 1 October 2000.

" WITH THE WORD 'AMEN' JESUS TELLS US TO CONFESS OUR CONVICTION THAT GOD HEARS AND ANSWERS ."

Text:

Lord's Day 52 Q&A 128-129

128. Q. How do you conclude your prayer?

A. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. That is: All this we ask of Thee because, as our King, having power over all things, Thou art both willing and able to give us all that is good,[1] and because not we but Thy holy Name should so receive all glory for ever.[2]

[1] Rom. 10:11-13; II Pet 2:9. [2] Ps. 115:1; Jer. 33:8, 9; John 14:13.

129. Q. What does the word Amen mean?

A. Amen means: It is true and certain. For God has much more certainly heard my prayer than I feel in my heart that I desire this of Him.[1]

[1] Is. 65:24; II Cor. 1:20; II Tim. 2:13.

Scripture Reading:

Deuteronomy 27:11-26

Luke 11:1-13

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 40:7

Psalm 66:8

Psalm 6:5,6

Psalm 116:1,2,3,4

Psalm 106:23,24 & Hymn 47:10

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We've spent a number of weeks with the Lord's instruction on how to pray. We've considered what the Lord taught when He instructed us to address God as 'Father', considered what the Lord taught too when He gave us the six petitions of the Lord's prayer. We've learned that central to pray needs to be God and not ourselves, His glory and not our reputation, His kingdom and not our kingdoms, His will and not our wishes. For us to do His will (and so acknowledge His kingship and in turn hallow His name), we need daily bread, the strength and wherewithal to act in obedience to His commands in the specific circumstances of each day, yes, each changing minute. But we misuse His gifts, we sin, and that hinders prayer, and so we need to ask God to forgive those sins. And Satan keeps attacking us, keeps seeking to trip us up so that we don't do God's will, don't acknowledge His kingship, and so don't glorify His name. Hence the instruction to ask the Father to deliver us from the evil one. That's the material we heard in the weeks gone by.

Now a question for you, beloved. After listening to all that instruction from our Lord and Savior, do you think that your praying has improved? Now that the Lord has told us what to speak about to our heavenly Father, do you approach the throne of grace with more confidence? Specifically, do you find that God hears you?

We'd like to think that the answer is Yes. In fact, we know that the answer should be Yes, because of what Jesus said in Luke 11: "Ask, and it will be given to you." But the hard reality is that we have asked, and we've not received.... Though we've besought the Lord this past week with tears, loved ones have hardened themselves on paths of sin, and other loved ones have not returned to the Lord and His service. Though we've pleaded with God this week so frequently for understanding from others, for love from the spouse, the parents, the children, for the grace to accept what God has given, have prayed for relief from aches and pains, for fulfilment in daily work, God has not granted all our petitions. And really, that gets us down. Then we find it fine to receive instruction about how to pray, but the simple fact is that we still do not receive all we ask for. So the drive to keep on praying evaporates....

We come today to the end of the Lord's instruction to His disciples about how to pray. The Lord tells us (it's recorded in Mt 6, not in Luke 11) to end our prayers with the little word "Amen". With that little word, congregation, the Lord would impress on us that Yes, we *may* keep on coming to God with great confidence; "God has much more certainly heard my prayer than I feel in my heart that I desire this of Him." The Lord, you see, would teach us to keep on praying – with confidence.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

WITH THE WORD 'AMEN' JESUS TELLS US TO CONFESS OUR CONVICTION THAT GOD HEARS AND ANSWERS.

1. The meaning of the term 'Amen'.
2. The encouragement of the term 'Amen'.

The meaning of the term 'Amen'.

We are used to ending our prayers with the word 'Amen'. But what, congregation, does that word mean? We've got children in the congregation in grade 1, grade 2, grade 3. You end your prayers too with the word 'amen'. What's it mean? Can you tell me, boys and girls? I think that you're thinking it means 'the end', or something like that. When you hear Dad say 'Amen' it means he's done; now it's your turn to pray. Or you can open your eyes....

But the word 'amen' doesn't mean 'the end' or 'I'm done', or something like that. The word "Amen", isn't even an English word. It's Hebrew; in our Bibles it's not been translated. What it means? Let's look for a moment in Genesis 15. The passage tells us of Abram; in time past he had been told that he would have a child, but as the years went by no child arrived. So Abram took his concern to God – vss 2 & 3. God responded by taking him outside and showing him the stars and said, "so [many] shall your descendants be" (vs 5). Then we read these words: Abram "believed in the Lord." The Hebrew, though, says that Abram "amened" in the Lord. There's the meaning of the word "amen"; the word means 'I believe'. God spoke, and Abram accepted God's word for true and fact, accepted that God was dinkum in what He said; things would certainly happen as God promised. You see, with the word "amen" Abram indicated his conviction that *God would surely do as He had just said He would do*. Here we've got a taste of what Amen means; with the word Amen one *gives expression to one's heartfelt conviction that what the previous speaker has said will surely come to pass*.

We read together from Dt 27. The Levites received here instruction to declare that any man who committed this or that sin was to be cursed, and the listening people were commanded –no less than 12 times– to respond with that word 'Amen (cf also Num 5:22; Neh 5:13). The fact that the people were *told* to say 'amen' tells us that the word captures, expresses *the reaction God wished the people to have* to these curses. On the basis of what we learned from Gen 15 we understand that the word "amen" was obviously not to convey simply the notion that the people *accepted* the curses upon possible sins, as if this Amen was simply an equivalent to "alright, OK, we'll accept that". No, on the basis of what we learned from Gen 15, we understand that with the word 'Amen' the people were instructed to *confess their faith*, to express their heartfelt conviction that God would certainly do as He had promised to do. God made a promise to Abram in Gen 15 about children; Abram responded to that promise by believing it, holding those words for true and certain – God would surely do as He said He would do. God made a promise to Israel in Dt 27 about curses; Israel was to respond to that promise by *believing* it, holding those words for true and certain – God would surely do as He said He would do.

As it is, congregation, the word ‘Amen’ does not appear in our Bibles only to indicate the response of a person or people to the curses of another. The word appears also as one’s response to *words of praise* one has just heard. We may consider David’s song of gratitude on the occasion of the ark being brought to Jerusalem. Said David:

"Save us, O God of our salvation...,
[that we may] give thanks to Your holy name,
to triumph in Your praise.
Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
from everlasting to everlasting!"

And what’s the response of the people? We read this: "and all the people said ‘Amen’" (I Chron 16:35f). Elsewhere we read these words: "Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God. Then all the people answered, ‘Amen, Amen’..." (Neh 8:6).

Here is praise for God, and in both these cases those who hear these words of praise voice their Amen, voice that Amen in order to express their conviction that Yes, it’s true, God is to be blessed from everlasting to everlasting, the Lord is the great God. You see, this Amen is again a *confession of faith*; the hearers profess that the words spoken are true and shall always be true – God is blessed and God is great now and always. "Amen."

The NT uses this same word "Amen" in the same way. I think of the well-known words of Rom 11:

"for of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory for ever. Amen"
(vs 36; cf Rom 9:5; Gal 1:5; Eph 3:21; etc).

And of those words from Rev 5:

"...every creature ... I heard saying,
‘Blessing and honor and glory and power
Be to Him who sits on the throne,
And to the Lamb, forever and ever!’"

and the four living creatures responded with "Amen" (vs 13f). Time and again a statement is made about the greatness and the glory of God, and repeatedly the word "Amen" follows those words of praise, follows it to give expression to one’s faith that Yes, those words of praise are *so true, so correct*; I *believe* that God is great, all glorious.

This is the word, brothers and sisters, that the Lord told us to add to our prayers. What the meaning is of that word? It certainly does not mean something like "this is The End of my prayer." The Biblical meaning of the word instead teaches us that with this word Jesus wants us to *profess our faith*, wants us to express our conviction that the words just prayed are so very true, shall come to pass.

That brings us to our second point,

The encouragement of the term ‘Amen’

Why, brothers and sisters, does Jesus teach us to use this term at the end of our prayers? Why are we to profess faith when we’ve come to the end of what we’re saying to God, profess our conviction that the words we pray are true and certain, shall come to pass?

Let’s be honest; when somebody speaks words of praise to God and then says "amen", says ‘I believe that God is truly God’, yes, we find that understandable. But our prayers are not simply thanksgiving and praise; our prayers, according to the command of Christ Himself, include also many requests. And that’s where we have a problem. What does Amen mean after a number of petitions have been brought to God? Does that word at this point also give voice to our heartfelt belief that the words spoken are true and certain; God will certainly do as we have asked? No, we find that rather far-fetched; we don’t feel comfortable being convinced that we’ll get what we ask. After all, over the years we’ve asked so much, and still haven’t received it....

It's to be clear in our minds and hearts, brothers and sisters, that the word "Amen", also in our prayers, always *is and remains a profession of faith*, of faith in God. That may be obvious to us about prayers of praise, but it's equally true also of prayers that are made up mostly of petitions, requests.

How so? With that word Amen in the context of a prayer of request, we're expressing our conviction that *God will give us what we ask*. We express that conviction because God has *promised to give us what we ask*. With that word 'Amen' at the end of our prayers, we are responding to God's promise to answer our petitions. With that word 'Amen', we are voicing our faith that God will answer our prayers, just as He has promised.

Before you protest in disbelief, before you tell me that God has definitely not given to you all you've asked, I remind you of the words of Jesus in Luke 11. Said He in vs 9:

"And I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened" (vs 9f).

Jesus' language is clear: ask and we shall receive. But *the Lord would not have us ask for anything that may fancy our sinful minds*. Those words about asking and receiving were spoken in a specific context, and that context is that of vs 1: the disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray, to which request Jesus answered by giving the Lord's Prayer. But the Lord's Prayer wasn't the limit of Jesus' answer; in the verses that follow, the Lord told the twelve to pray with the conviction that God would give what His people asked. That's the point of the parable about the Midnight Friend who will surely rise and give whatever his visitor needs. Then follows the lesson for the disciples: "So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you" (vs 9).

No, the disciples were not to ask for just anything and expect to get it; the disciples were to ask for the things that Jesus in the Lord's Prayer commanded them to ask. The promise of the Saviour in Luke 11 is that whatever is asked of God *in accordance with the Lord's Prayer* will certainly be granted; whatever falls within the framework of those petitions the Father in heaven will certainly give to His children.

See, congregation, the petitions Jesus instructs His children to pray are *more* than petitions; the petitions of the Lord's Prayer are *also promises*, promises that God will grant these specific things to those who ask Him for these. *That*, by brothers and sisters, is the notion we echo when we say "Amen" at the end of our prayers. With that word we express our hearty conviction, our faith, that God will surely grant the things He commanded us to ask. He told us to ask that His name be hallowed, and so we pray, "Hallowed be Your Name, Amen". And that's to say: Father, make Your name more glorious still, *and we are sure You will do that*. Jesus told us to ask God for strength to do His will, and so we pray, "Your will be done, Amen." With that we say that we believe, are firmly convinced, that Father *will* give us what we need to do His will. Jesus told us to ask God to keep us from the evil one, and so we pray, "Father, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one, Amen." With that word 'amen' we express our conviction that the Lord will most certainly grant what we ask; He will deliver us from Satan. We're certain because we hold God to His word; "ask," He said, "and it will be given to you."

Why might it be that we can be so convinced that God will give us what we ask, will give us what He promised to give us? That, brothers and sisters, is because of *who* God is. Said Jesus of Himself: I am "the Amen" (Rev 3:14). And the point of that title is that every word spoken by Jesus Christ is believe-able; whatever He says He'll do, He certainly will do. It was with that very truth that Jesus worked time and again in His public ministry; repeatedly He called attention to His words by saying (and I quote the old King James Version), "verily, verily, I say to you" (cf Jn 16:23). Or, as Jesus actually said in the original: "Amen, amen, I say to you." Believe-able He was. And that's why the words He spoke in Luke 11 are also believable; we can accept them for true and certain, we can expect to receive what we ask for simply because Jesus said that God would give what we request.

In this context we are to remember that the many promises God had made to Israel in the past, promises of blessings and promises of curses, were all ultimately fulfilled in the Son, Jesus Christ. As promised in the Old Testament, He came to pay for sin, to be rejected of God, to undergo God's hellish wrath, to die. Though it was not easy for the Father to give up His only dearly beloved Son for the suffering of the cross, He yet gave Him up, sent Him –why?–

because He had promised to do so. Christ Himself is ultimately *the* evidence that God is true (Is 65:16), that His word is believable, that He will do as He said He will do. God had promised the Christ so long ago, and *did what He said He'd do*. That's why the apostle Paul can say of Jesus: "For all the promises of God in Him are Yes, and in Him Amen" (II Cor 1:20).

We believe that God has fulfilled His Word, has sent His Son into the world to atone for our sins, to reconcile us to God, to make us children of God. But beloved, if God has given us so much in Christ, if –as Paul says– He "did not spare His own Son but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (Rom 8:32). That's the promise we have, a promise that comes from the mouth of God as certainly as that promise about children for Abram came from the mouth of God. Abram believed the Lord's word, 'amen' that word; it is for us to do the same, to believe His promise, to say "Amen" to those promises. He's promised daily bread? Then we *believe* the promise. We'll ask for daily bread, and as soon as we've asked for it we'll say Amen, we'll confess our conviction that we shall surely receive the daily bread we need, shall definitely receive all we need to live for God and His glory. We'll say it because we're convinced that God is going to keep His promise, is going to give to me what I ask. After all, He is *God*, my Father for Christ's sake.

Still, we experience the reality as so different.... We ask, and don't receive.... I put to you, congregation, two scenarios from Scripture in relation to unanswered prayer. The first is the Lord's instruction in James 4. James is moved by the Holy Spirit to write the following words:

"You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures" (vs 3).

The whole drift of Jesus' instruction in the Lord's prayer had been that our speaking with God needs to be God-centered, and not self-centered. That is why the Lord told us to ask that *God's* name be hallowed, *His* kingdom be made to come, *His* will be done. The other three petitions –our daily bread, forgiveness for our sins, deliverance for us from the evil one– also do not have us in the center, but God; we ask for daily bread, for forgiveness of sins, for deliverance from the evil one so that we can do God's will in our circumstances – and so in turn give Him the glory that is His due. As Jesus also taught us at the end of our prayer; "for Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory." God-centered. If, now, we come into God's presence with ourselves in the center of our thoughts (and therefore of our prayers), shall we really expect God to answer, to give us what we ask? Not at all, beloved! Not even if we coat our selfishness with a veneer of, 'Lord, then we can serve you better.' Whatever we ask has to have God in the center, not ourselves. *Then* we may be sure that the Lord will certainly hear our prayer and supply our needs. Otherwise the words of James hold true,

"You ask and do not receive, because you ask amiss, that you may spend it on your pleasures" (vs 3).

The second scenario I refer to is Paul's prayer in II Cor 12. Paul, I read, "pleaded with the Lord three times that [the thorn which bothered him so] might depart" from him. No doubt, Paul was convinced that without this thorn in the flesh he could better do the task God gave him in His kingdom as preacher of the gospel. But God's answer was this:

"My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (vs 9).

In other words, Paul's request for relief was denied. Does that fly in the face of Jesus' promise in Luke 11, the promise we echo when we use the word 'amen'? No, it doesn't. Listen again to God's answer:

"My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (vs 9).

Notice: it's an answer that has *God's own glory in the center*. Paul's weakness, says God, is going to point up more the strength of God. That's why Paul adds in response to this answer:

"Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (vs 9).

Central to Paul is not the question of whether his head hurts or whether he has no bed to sleep on or whether he's forever being spoken evil of by those who oppose the gospel. Central to Paul is not himself, but his God. And if this

God is pleased to supply different daily bread to Paul than Paul wishes (so that Paul can still do the will of God, to the greater glory of the King of kings), then who is Paul to argue with that; he knows, he believes, that God is granting him what he needs and wants *since basic to his wants is the glory of God!*

Here's for us the instruction too. Do we get what we want? If our thoughts and wishes revolve around ourselves, no, beloved, we may not count on getting what we want or think we need. *And so we haven't got the right to end our prayers with the word 'amen' either!* But when our thoughts and wishes revolve around God and His glory, we certainly can count on receiving what we ask, for the essence of what we ask is the glory of God. So we can –and must- end our prayer with 'amen' also; we're confessing our conviction that God will supply us with all we need to make His name more glorious still.

So it is, brothers and sisters, that the child of God whose heart is set on the glory of the God who showed him such mercy may come to God so boldly, so confidently. He knows, God hears, God answers. In truth, "God has much more certainly heard my prayer than I feel in my heart that I desire this of Him." And I believe that God will grant me all I need to glorify His name. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 15 October 2000.

"IN THE CATECHISM WE ECHO THE ONLY COMFORT GOD HAS TOLD US."

Text:

Lord's Day 1

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

A. That I am not my own,[1] but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death,[2] to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.[3] He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil.[5] He also preserves me in such a way[6] that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head;[7] indeed, all things must work together for my salvation.[8] Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life[9] and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him.[10]

[1] I Cor. 6:19, 20 [2] Rom. 14:7-9. [3] I Cor. 3:23; Tit. 2:14. [4] I Pet. 1:18, 19; I John 1:7; 2:2. [5] John 8:34-36; Heb. 2:14, 15; I John 3:8. [6] John 6:39, 40; 10:27-30; II Thess. 3:3; I Pet. 1:5. [7] Matt. 10:29-31; Luke 21:16-18. [8] Rom. 8:28. [9] Rom. 8:15, 16; II Cor. 1:21, 22; 5:5; Eph. 1:13, 14. [10] Rom. 8:14.

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

A. First, how great my sins and misery are;[1] second, how I am delivered from all my sins and misery;[2] third, how I am to be thankful to God for such deliverance.[3]

[1] Rom. 3:9, 10; I John 1:10. [2] John 17:3; Acts 4:12; 10:43. [3] Matt. 5:16; Rom. 6:13; Eph. 5:8-10; I Pet. 2:9, 10.

Scripture Reading:

Isaiah 40:1-14

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 62:1

Psalm 40:4

Psalm 115:5,6

Psalm 16:1,2,3

Hymn 49:1,2

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Once again, for the so-manieth time, we begin again with Lord's Day 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism. The question that arises is Why. Why have the churches decided –it's Article 63 of the Church Order- that Sunday by Sunday "the doctrine of God's Word as summarized in the Heidelberg Catechism" should be proclaimed in the preaching (cf Art 63, CO)?

That question becomes more pressing when we realize that this Catechism was written well over 400 years ago. Those 400 years have seen so very much change that we really wonder what good going through such an ancient document can do for us today. Shouldn't we replace the Catechism with a modern document, addressing modern problems? Or better: shouldn't we give away Catechism preaching altogether, and instead focus on the Word of God itself?

As it is, congregation of the Lord, the Word of our God has not changed over the years and centuries. That Word is

still the only source of comfort in the midst of the tears and trials of this modern life. And how shall the doctrine of that Word be brought to the hearts and homes of the people of God? The Catechism –and with it the Catechism preaching- still serves as a golden tool to show the people of God what comfort He extends to us in His Word. So we continue to open the Word of God in the preaching – and use the Catechism as our guide as we seek God’s promises for us modern people.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

IN THE CATECHISM WE ECHO THE ONLY COMFORT GOD HAS TOLD US.

1. What a confession is.
2. What our comfort is.

What a confession is.

I asked you a moment ago, congregation, why it is that we begin preaching our way through the Catechism again. The answer to that question lies in the nature of what a confession is.

You will be aware that the Free Reformed Churches of Australia have adopted a total of six confessions. These six fall in turn into two groups of three. There are first the three Ecumenical Creeds, ie, the Apostles Creed (which we hear most Sundays in the afternoon service), the Nicene Creed (which we confess from time to time), and the Athanasian Creed (which I use a couple of times per year). Beside these Ecumenical Creeds the churches also have adopted three creeds coming from the time of the Great Reformation, viz, the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism and the Canons of Dort. Of these six it is specifically the Heidelberg Catechism that is used in the preaching simply because it was written for the specific purpose of being a tool for teaching.

Six confessions we have. But what are these confessions actually? The word ‘confession’ is an English translation of a Greek word that means, "to say the same thing". That’s what a confession is; a confession ‘says the same thing.’ The big question is now, As who? A confession says the same thing *as God*. The point is that the Lord God has spoken to people; that’s His Word, the Bible. We read that Word, and, by the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we respond to that Word in a positive fashion, respond with faith, with accepting as true the promises of God in that Word. So what do we do? We say in human words what God has said to us in His Word. That is, we take those promises of God as explained in His Word, and we echo these same promises as true for ourselves. We say the same thing as God says, we repeat after God. True, we use fewer words; we put God’s promises in very summary form. But that doesn’t take away from the fact that we repeat after God what God has said to us. He has told us in His Word this and that about the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, we’ve read it, we believe it, and so we say in our own words how the resurrection of Christ benefits us – and there you have Lord’s Day 17 of the Catechism. The Lord has told us in His Word this and that about angels, we’ve read it, we believe it, and so we repeat God’s revelation in our own words – and there you have Article 12 of the Belgic Confession. That’s what a confession is; a confession *repeats after God what we have heard God say to us in His Word*.

If that, brothers and sisters, is what a confession is, some consequences follow in relation to the confessions of the church.

The first is that confessions are not simply human opinion. Yes, the confessions are human work; unlike the Scriptures, they are not inspired. So confessions can have mistakes. (That is why confessions are always open to revision – if it can be shown that a statement in the confessions does not accurately capture what God has told us in His Word. So you will find, for example, at the end of Art 36 of the Belgic Confession, words to the effect that Synod 1905 deleted a section of that article. Yes, the confessions are open to revision.) Meanwhile, we cannot say that these confessions are simply human opinion. After all, the confessions say the same thing as God says – as the numerous proof texts seek to show.

There’s a second consequence. If the confessions say the same thing as God says, then the content of the confessions is the same as the content of the Bible. True, the Bible is much bigger; in the confessions we give only a summary of what God has revealed to us. Still, the confession is an *accurate* summary. It

captures in brief what God has said in a big book. That is why it is fitting for us to *treasure* the confessions. By treasuring and mastering their content, we treasure and master the Word of God itself.

In the third place, if in the confessions we are repeating after God what God has told us in His Word, the confessions have authority. Theologians speak here of ‘derived authority’. The point is that the Bible has the final authority, simply because it is the actual Word of God. So in disputes appeal is ultimately to be made to the Scriptures. But since the Confessions say the same thing as the Bible, we can appeal to the confessions also and –certainly amongst Reformed believers- an appeal to the confession as good as an appeal to the Scriptures.

So many of us have professed the faith. The Form for Public Profession of Faith asks this question:

"First, do you wholeheartedly believe the doctrine of the Word of God, summarized in the confessions and taught here in this Christian Church?"

By saying ‘I do’ to that question, we agree that the confessions indeed do say the same thing as God says in His Word; they are Scripturally faithful, they capture accurately what God has revealed. So we hold ourselves and each other to these confessions, and we understand that by doing so we are holding ourselves and each other to the Word of God itself. Please, then, brothers and sisters, let us not *contrast* the Bible and the Confessions, as if the one is important and the other is not. In the Confessions we give our *personal response* –be it through words we’ve adopted from somebody else who lived long ago- to what God has said to us in His Word. In the confessions we say, ‘Yes, Lord, this and this is what you promise me in Your Word, and so this and this is what I believe; I echo in my confession what You have promised me in the Bible.’

That brings us back to the confessions themselves. Particularly the Heidelberg Catechism (though its true of the Belgic Confession too) speaks in very personal terms. Time and again in the course of this confession one finds the word ‘I’, the word ‘me’, or the words ‘we’ and ‘us’. When we professed the faith, we as much as claimed that those personal pronouns referred to *ourselves*, to *me*. In these confessions it’s not somebody else who is repeating God’s Words after Him; no, it’s *we ourselves* who say the same thing as God says. For we understand and accept that God’s promises are not meant simply for other people; we understand and accept that God’s promises are true *for ourselves*. For God has established His covenant of grace with *us* and so has told *us* that He would be our God and adopt us to be His children. He has said that *in relation to us*, and that is why we repeat after God, we put on our lips, in our own language, with our own words, what God has told us in His Word. So we say, with Lord’s Day 1, that "I am not my own, but belong ... to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ," and we dare to say that because that’s what God told us. And we say with Lord’s Day 52 that the Lord wants me to end my prayer with the word ‘Amen’ because "God has much more certainly heard *my* prayer that I feel in my heart that I desire this of Him." And that’s true of every Lord’s Day in between; in each Lord’s Day I’m responding to God’s promises, I’m echoing what God has said to me and *consciously getting personal in the process*.

We begin the Catechism preaching again with Lord’s Day 1. What we’re doing in the Catechism preaching, then, is taking the various doctrines of the Word of God, listening to what the Lord says in His Word on this matter and that, and we’re responding by expressing our conviction that it’s true for ourselves. There you have the reason too why Catechism preaching needs to continue – though the Catechism is so old and the times are a’changin’. For the promises of God to His people do not change, any more than God Himself ever changes (cf Ps 102:25ff). Those promises hold true, no matter what changes there may be on this earth. Those promises about the Holy Spirit, about the providence of God, about the birth and death of Jesus Christ, and so very much more, are extended to us so that we might be comforted and taught how to live our lives *in this world* to God’s praise. Let the preaching draw out those promises we cherish so much, and let us learn anew how to respond to those promises in our modern circumstances.

There you have too the reason why the second service on Sunday –where the Catechism is normally expounded- needs to continue, and why we need to make it our business to attend faithfully. History shows that where the catechism preaching is discontinued, the churches become superficial – for doctrine gets forgotten. Yet getting doctrine right is the first step to getting life right. The challenges of this life remain many, and in those challenges we need to hear again the promises of the God who does not change – and need to hear again from the Word of God why we can may

confess what we confess. So we, though modern people, begin again with Lord's Day 1 of an old, old catechism – and we're persuaded that this summary produced by children of God 400 years ago captures accurately what the Lord has told even *us* in His Word.

And what is it that God has told us in His Word? That's our second point:

What our comfort is.

The Word that God in heaven has spoken to sinners on earth has a theme. The golden thread running through the whole Bible is the concept of comfort. After our fall into sin, the Lord God sought us out, gave up His only Son to pay for sin – *comfort*. That theme is picked up in the introductory Lord's Day of the Heidelberg Catechism: "what is your only comfort in life and death?"

"Comfort". It's a word we use regularly, and it's a concept we all want. But what, brothers and sisters, is comfort actually? The word 'comfort' presupposes a situation of pain, of trouble, of misery. In that situation one needs strengthening, encouragement, comfort. Comfort is not that one speaks some nice words or gives someone a hug. There's place for that, sure, but comfort in the Biblical sense of the word means a lot more.

I draw your attention to Is 40. I read these words:

"Comfort, yes, comfort My people!"
Says your God.
"Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her,
That her warfare is ended,
That her iniquity is pardoned;
For she has received from the Lord's hand
Double for all her sins."

To appreciate the significance of the word 'comfort' here, we need to understand something of the pain, the trouble, the misery in which God's people existed. As it is, in chaps 40-66 Isaiah addresses the people of Israel in their exile. We know enough about exile to realize that exile was misery. The people used to have their own homes in and around Jerusalem, with their own beds, their own table, their own family. Exile meant that you were dragged away from your home, you no longer had the security of your own bed, your own mother beside you, etc. Exile meant that you were dislodged, had no home, possibly had no family. Exile meant that the soldiers could do with you whatever they wished. Exile meant that you were a *thing*, something to be used.... And that's how Israel experienced exile....

Now we also need to recall, congregation, why Israel was in exile, why this tribulation came upon them. It was, we know, because of their sins, their refusal to accept what the Lord had said in His Word. So they provoked the wrath of the Lord, and brought His curse upon themselves – to their enormous hurt.

To a people burdened by such pain, trial, tribulation, the Lord directed the words of Is 40, spoke of comfort. What is comfort? Says God: tell the inhabitants of Jerusalem who now languish in exile that "her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned." Here is the gospel of forgiveness of sins, and with that gospel the good news that the curse of God upon sin is lifted – with as result that there's an end in sight to the warfare, the unrest the people experience. More, the Lord says in vs 3 that a highway has to be prepared for God, for God is coming to His people; "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed" (vs 5). The thought is repeated in vs 10; "behold, the Lord God shall come with a strong hand." Yes, God is coming, and what shall He do? Vs 11: "He will gather the lambs with His arm, And carry them in His bosom, And gently lead those who are with young." In a word, here is care, here is protection, here is relief. Better put: here is reconciliation with a God once offended by sins, here is peace with God. No longer is there curse; there instead His blessing!

What is comfort? Comfort is that the Almighty God of heaven and earth strengthens the drooping hands, encourages the downhearted, gives hope to the hopeless. In the depth of its content, comfort according to the Bible is that God Most High reaches out to lost sinners and makes them His beloved children for Jesus' sake. At the heart, then, of the Biblical notion of 'comfort' is the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Now the Catechism asks what *your* comfort is. More, the Catechism asks what your *only* comfort is. The Catechism has learned from God's word, you see, that God supplies men with one comfort alone. There are not multiple varieties of comfort, nor are there numerous sources of comfort. What, then, is your only comfort?

To that question, now, about *our* only comfort, you and I in Lord's Day 1 repeat after God what He has told us in His Word. Gladly we answer the question of what our only comfort is, and we feed back what God has told us in His Word. "I am not my own," we say with awe in our voices, "but belong with body and soul" - that's with all our being- "both in life and death" -that's from cradle to the grave and every situation in between- "to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ."

"I belong", we say. That's a very common word, a concept so vital to the way our culture operates. "Belong": it's the notion of possession, of ownership. Everything in our houses belongs to somebody, and we don't appreciate when somebody else doesn't respect our property. "I belong," we say, and we mean with that that we are the private property of someone, are owned by someone. By whom? No, not ourselves; I don't own me, I'm not my own boss. The Lord tells me that I've got a much better owner than I could ever be for myself, since I'm sinful and so I don't know how to take care of myself. Who owns me? None less than the Savior of the world, the Lord Jesus Christ! How come He owns me? The Lord Christ *died on the cross* in order to set me free from the slavery of the devil! With His own blood He bought me, and so I'm His property.

And no, that's not true simply of the other person; according to the Scripture, the Lord God has said to me at my baptism that this good news is true *for me*. That is why *I* take up the words of Lord's Day 1, *I* borrow words used in the church for over 400 years, and *I* say with so many thousands over the generations and around the world that "I am not my own but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ."

What my situation is today? True, beloved, we are not in exile as the people of Is 40 were. But each of us has pain in our lives, each of us faces trouble of some sort, distress. Specifically in the midst of that distress, of that pain, we say what God has told us in His word, "I am the property of Jesus Christ," and Christ has paid for all my sins so that I'm reconciled to God, the curse of sin is gone from my life, I live under the blessing of the Lord – come what may.

Yet even that is not the full extent of the comfort God extends to us in His Word. The Lord Jesus Christ not only has full rights to me; He also takes full responsibility for me. How He cares for me? "He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head." You see, beloved, in His care for His property, Jesus Christ entrusts us into the care of His heavenly Father – the almighty Creator of heaven and earth! This is the God of Is 40, the God who pardons iniquity, the God who tenderly carries His own in His bosom, the God who has measured the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance (vs 12). Sovereign God is my loving Father, and He cares for me –I say in Lord's Day 1- so well that "not a hair can fall from my head" without His will; "indeed, all things must work together for my salvation." Is my situation a mess? Do I see trouble on every side? This is my comfort, my source of encouragement and reassurance, that sovereign God –my Father for Jesus' sake- is busy working precisely this mess for my salvation. That's the promise I hear from God's mouth in holy Scriptures, and so it's a promise I humbly repeat.

The Christ who owns me does more for me still. I learn from His Word that He also gives me His Holy Spirit so that I might be assured of eternal life, yes, and might be made to live for God daily now already. So speaks the Lord, and that's why I repeat this promise too after my God.

We're modern people, living in complex times. But we'll work our way through the Catechism again, old though it is. We'll do it, because we're sure that the Heidelberg Catechism catches accurately the riches God has promised to us in His Word. So we'll borrow those words first penned centuries ago, and we'll repeat after God the riches that God has given us in His Word. We know: God doesn't change, and so His promises are valid still – no matter our circumstances. We're sure: God has given comfort, the only true comfort in all the world, and that comfort is *ours*. Always. Amen.



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Sermon on Lord's Day 2 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday Morning, 12 November 2000.

"TO REJOICE THE MORE IN OUR ONLY COMFORT, THE LORD TEACHES US THROUGH THE LAW TO SEE OUR SINS AND MISERY."

Text:

Lord's Day 2

3.Q. From where do you know your sins and misery?

A. From the law of God.[1]

[1] *Rom. 3: 20;*

4. Q. What does God's law require of us? A. 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.[1] This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.[2]

[1] *Deut. 6:5.* [2] *Lev. 19:18.*

5. Q. Can you keep all this perfectly?

A. No,[1] I am inclined by nature to hate God and my neighbour.[2]

[1] *Rom. 3:10, 23; 1 John 1:8, 10.* [2] *Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Jer. 17:9; Rom. 7:23; 8:7; Eph. 2:3; Tit. 3:3.*

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 19:16-22

Matthew 22:34-4

Also;

[Canons of Dort](#), chapter III/IV, Articles 5,6

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 147:1,6

Psalm 65:2,3

Psalm 130:1,2,3,4

Hymn 24:1,2,3,4,5

Psalm 95:1,3 & Hymn 54:1

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

With Lord's Day 1 we make confession of our only comfort in life and death. We 'confess', and that's to say (we heard some weeks ago) that we 'say the same thing as God says'. In the Bible the Lord has told us the good news of His salvation in Jesus Christ, and we respond by saying after God in our own words what He has told us. To repeat this only comfort after God, yes, we find that a pleasant privilege.

Now we come to Lord's Day 2. As we did in Lord's Day 1, so also in Lord's Day 2 we are saying after God what God has told us in His Word. God's revelation is broader than the fact that we belong with body and soul to our faithful Savior; God has also told us things about ourselves – things that are not so very flattering. Since God has seen it

necessary to tell us about ourselves, we shall need not only to accept what He says, but also to confess it, to *say these things after Him*.

But even as we do so, brothers and sisters, we shall need to realize what the reason is *why* God has told us these things. We made confession of that in Lord's Day 1, when we acknowledged that, if we are to live and die in the *joy* of this comfort, we need to "know" three things. The first of the three was "how great my sins and misery are." With Lord's Day 2 we begin our confession of what God has told us about the greatness of our sins and misery, and Lord's Day 2 begins this confession *in order that we might be happy*. The purpose of the material of Lord's Day 2 is not to make us depressed; the purpose of drawing out how great our sins and misery are is to make us rejoice the more in the only comfort confessed in Lord's Day 1. For the sake of our joy in the Lord's service, then, we say after God in Lord's Day 2 what He has told us about the law and our inability to obey it.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

TO REJOICE THE MORE IN OUR ONLY COMFORT, THE LORD TEACHES US THROUGH THE LAW TO SEE OUR SINS AND MISERY.

1. the function of the law
2. the depth of the law
3. the vanity of the law

The function of the law

We live, brothers and sisters, in a time wherein we know an enormous amount about ourselves. Physicians and psychologists together know so very, very much about the human being, about how the body and the mind works.

These experts on the human being do not mind to tell us what, by their judgment, human nature is really like. Psychologists and social workers alike tell us that human beings are at bottom pretty decent creatures; there is good in every person. Where evil dominates a person, we're told, we've got evidence that his circumstances somewhere along the line were bad; it was the childhood illness, or the poverty of years ago, or the heavy hand of his father, or the bullying of the children at school, etc, that produced the evil in the man today.

The Lord God from heaven above tells people on earth that the doctors and the psychologists have not got it right. God from heaven above looks further into the insides of man than any human on earth can see, and He perceives just how depraved human nature really is. Before He destroyed the world with the flood, He offered the following observation about human nature. I read in Gen 6:

"Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (vs 5).

It's not, says God in heaven about people on earth, that the heart alone is evil, but the thoughts in the heart are evil also. More, it's not just that the thoughts of the heart are evil, but the intentions behind the thoughts of the heart are evil also. And that's to say that the *source* of the thoughts entering our minds is evil; *evil exists within us to the very core of our being*. See there God's divine evaluation of human beings.

It's an evaluation God has told us about. We can, with the learned teachers of our day, ignore that information. But God is so gracious, brothers and sisters, to work in us by His Holy Spirit that we accept as fact the evaluation God has given us about ourselves. That is why, though the evaluation goes against our sinful nature, we accept the evaluation and repeat it after God in our Catechism; this is part of the faith that God has worked in our hearts.

That we accept the reality of our depravity is implicit already in the first question of the Lord's Day. We ask, "From where do you know your sins and misery?" That question assumes the *fact* of misery and sinfulness. Notice: we do not ask for evidence *whether* there is sin in us and misery in our lives, for we have learned from God's Word that it is so. Question 3 takes God's Word on the point for granted. Here, then, is an attitude of humility, an attitude of accepting what God says, of not challenging what God says. The very formulation of the question (and it's true of the answer

too) demonstrates the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and lives; because of His work in us we acknowledge that God's Word has something to say to us, yes, that we need instruction from Him – including instruction about our sins and misery.

It is, we say in Answer 3, "from the law of God" that we know our sins and misery. Notice: the answer is not that we know our sins and misery from God. While it's true that we know our sins and misery from God, what we're confessing here is that God has told us about our sins and misery *via a particular means*. That means is *the law*. That's what the Lord has said in Rom 3: "by the law is the knowledge of sin" (vs 20). That raises this question: just how does the law generate knowledge of our sins?

The law. Already in Paradise the Lord gave His law. Adam and Eve were created in the image of God, and that means that they were to image God, to act as God acted. So, as God did not lie, Adam and Eve were not to lie. As God did not steal, so Adam and Eve were not to steal. The law was in force for them, written on their hearts. So it was too that the Lord gave a particular command in relation to the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They could eat of all the trees of the garden, but of that one they were not to eat. This was part of God's law to them.

As long as Adam and Eve obeyed the law, there was no misery in their lives. That law gave them freedom (cf James 2:12). Like a fish is free as long as it obeys the law God has ordained for it (a fish is to stay in the water, is not to try to climb the sand dune), so Adam and Eve were free as long as they remained within the borders God ordained for them, free as long as they obeyed His law. As a fish loses its freedom as soon as it runs itself onto the beach, so Adam and Eve would lose their freedom as soon as they transgressed the law. You see, that law gave them freedom, it set the borders within which God gave man ability to enjoy life.

But Adam and Eve transgressed the law. Like beached whales, they found their freedom gone, found their lives miserable. They were suddenly aware of their nakedness and so sought to cover themselves. They heard God coming to them in the garden, and fled in fear. They had stepped outside the borders imposed by the law and so were miserable. So Adam could say with Question & Answer 3 that he knew his misery "from the law of God." He could recall distinctly how that law had protected his happiness as long as he obeyed it, and he could taste in his fallen life the bitter results of disobeying that law.

God came to the fallen creature man, to those two in the Garden who –like the beached whale- had gone outside the borders God had set. What God did with the law? Did He tell Adam and Eve that He would set the law aside since Adam and Eve had disobeyed it anyway? Did God –if I may stretch the analogy of the beached whale for a moment- change Adam and Eve so that they could live happily on the beach instead of in the water where they'd been created to live? No, brothers and sisters, God maintained the law. That's to say that God kept the borders for Adam and Eve as He'd created them – despite the fact that they'd sinned, that they'd beached themselves. God maintained the law, and insisted that the borders God had created for Adam and Eve remain as they were. That's why Adam and Eve's lives remained so uncomfortable. God maintained the law, and that law drove home to Adam and Eve how great their sins and misery were. That law reminded them where their freedom really was – in the water. That law drove home the reason why there was so much misery in their lives now; they'd insisted on disobeying, on living on the beach instead.

God maintained the law. That's why Noah and Abram and Judah afterwards were also not permitted to give themselves to lying, to stealing, to serving other gods. God maintained the law, and that's why, when He adopted Israel to be His special people by covenant, He repeated for them the same law as was valid in Paradise and valid in the years after Paradise. At Mt Sinai He wrote on tablets of stone for Israel's benefit the same law that had been valid for all men ever since the creation of the world.

Christ Jesus did the same. He told His disciples that they were "not [to] think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Mt 5:17). In other words, Christ did not set aside the law, did not turf it out as something from the Old Testament. "I've not come to destroy the law," He says, and that's why the commandments of God to Israel are repeated time and again in the course of the New Testament for the sake of the New Testament church – with repeated insistence that God's people obey that law. Yes, Jesus adds that He came to "fulfill" the law, and Jesus' point is that He came to obey that law perfectly. So, in the course of His 33-year sojourn on this earth, Jesus never once disobeyed the law of God, never once sinned against His God and Father; God

maintained the law, and therefore Jesus had to obey it.

Think not, therefore, brothers and sisters, that the law has no relevance today, or has but secondary importance. The devil would dearly love us to ignore the law, to downplay the law, to cease reading the law in church, no longer to preach the law. But God insists that the law of the beginning remains in force – even though we’ve stepped out of the water and try to survive on the beach. God insists on us keeping the law, and so rubs under our noses that we belong in the water and not on the beach.

Then it’s true that we might get used to existing on the beach, might conclude that being as limited and miserable as a beached whale is simply the way life is, and so we may as well accept it. But the Lord says No, the Lord would set before us the freedom we had so that we might realize how great our sins and misery are. That is why we need to keep hearing the law, so that we impress it on ourselves that the lives we now live are not according to what God created us for, our lives are miserable now because of our own transgression.

I move on to our second point:

The depth of the law

In the second Question & Answer of our Lord’s Day, we ask what it is that God’s law requires of us. At first glance, we puzzle at the question. What God’s law requires of us? Easy, we say; God requires obedience. But what, brothers and sisters, is the obedience God requires?

The rich young ruler of Mt 19 wanted to know what he had to do in order to inherit eternal life. Jesus’ reply was, "Keep the commandments" (vs 17). Jesus proceeded to list them: "‘You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness,’" etc. The response of the young man was this, "All these things I have kept from my youth."

It’s an interesting response, congregation. "You shall not murder," Jesus says, and the young man maintains he kept this law, and he meant with that that he’d never stuck a knife in anybody. "You shall not commit adultery," Jesus says, and the young man maintains he kept that law, and he meant with that that he’d never slept with anybody except his wife. Etc. Now the question is whether this is the sort of obedience God demands. The answer is No because this man could still not inherit eternal life. To inherit eternal life this man –Jesus says- had to sell all that he had and give the proceeds to the poor and then follow Jesus (vs 21).

The point? God does not require a shallow obedience to His law, a superficial obedience, an obedience that satisfies the outward look of things. God maintains the law and requires obedience to the *very heart* of the law.

That’s Jesus point a couple of chapters later when the Pharisees ask Him "which is the great commandment in the law" (Mt 22:36). The point is that the Pharisees had listed all the laws they could find in the books of Moses, and then proceeded to tick off the ones they kept. But in so doing they thought they found some laws which, if you kept the one, meant that you disobeyed the other. If, for example, you sought to obey the command to admonish your neighbor, you could end up working on the Sabbath. Hence their question: which law is more important? And the big question: which law is *most* important?

Jesus in His reply invited the Pharisees to look at the law not just skin deep, superficially; in His reply He asked the Pharisees to look down to the very depths of the law. Jesus told them that the first and great commandment of the law is this, that "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." And a second commandment of the law is like it; "you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Love. Says Jesus: love does not *replace* the law, as if the law is now outdated and in its place comes love. No, says Jesus, love is the *heart* of the law, love is the *essence* of the law, love gets you to the *depths* of the law. Then Jesus adds that the love God demands in the law is not something shallow; the love God demands in the law is a love "with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." That’s to say that it’s a love that requires your whole being, from top to toe, all the time.

Jesus Himself had earlier said that He had not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it (Mt 5:17). That word ‘fulfill’, we’d said earlier, meant that the Lord had obeyed the law perfectly, never sinned in the slightest in the 33 years of His time on earth. What example, then, did Jesus give as to what *love* really is? He Himself once said:

"Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends" (Jn 15:13).

After all, in such self-sacrifice there is no advantage for the self, no selfishness. And precisely that is what the Lord Jesus did. He gave up the treasures of heaven to become a man, to enter our sinful world. On this earth He gave up all, even went to the cross, in order that the undeserving might have life, life eternal. So John is moved by the Holy Spirit to write:

"In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (I Jn 4:10).

That is the love God demands in His law.

Now we need to think for a moment, brothers and sisters. Give it some thought: when was the last time that you displayed that sort of love – be it to your spouse or your brother in the church or your companion at work? Sure, by the working of the Holy Spirit there is love in our lives – and we praise God for it. But when, congregation, when was the last time that you showed love *as Christ did*? When did you *lay down your life* for the benefit of the other? For *that's* what the law requires! And on that point we draw a blank because *we simply are not able to produce this sort of love*. That's to say: we draw a blank because we simply are not able to obey the law as God wants us too. You see, God wants obedience to the law, total love for God with all our heart and all the soul and all the mind, and for the neighbor the same love as God wants for Himself. Total self-emptying, even to death, for the benefit even of the ungodly: that's what God requires. *And we can't produce it!* God wants us to swim freely in the water, but we can't because we beached ourselves.

That brings us to our last point:

The vanity of the law

"What does God's law require of us?" Total, absolute love – as Christ showed love. "Can you keep all this perfectly?" "No," we say in Answer 5, "No." In fact, we continue, "I am inclined by nature to hate God and my neighbor...."

In His law God demands love. In my life I produce hate. That reality, beloved, points up the vanity of the law. There are those who think that by obeying the law they can crawl their way into God's favor; the mindset of the ruler of Mt 19 is around us and in us. The Arminians of long ago argued that fallen man could use the Ten Commandments to attain salvation; by doing your best to obey the law you could impress God. In answer to the Arminians the fathers put into the Canons the confession we read from chapter III/IV. They said:

"[the law] neither points out a remedy nor gives him power to rise out of this misery. Rather, weakened by the flesh, it leaves the transgressor under the curse. Man cannot, therefore, through the law obtain saving grace."

That confession expresses clearly, brothers and sisters, the vanity of the law. So high are God's demands in the law, so profound its essence, that any attempt to satisfy God's wrath and win His favor through obedience to the law is doomed to failure from the start. That law serves only to spell out that we are guilty before God, cursed (cf Rom 3:19f). Sunday by Sunday we hear the law, and so Sunday by Sunday we're confronted with the need to love God with all our heart and all our soul and all our mind, and to love our neighbor also. But the mirror of the law God keeps holding before us drives us to the awful conclusion that, when all is said and done, we do just the opposite of what the Lord requires, and so we're lost, lost.

Now the question, beloved, is this. Does all this mean that we are to be depressed about the material of Lord's Day 2? The answer, beloved, is No! God from heaven on high has told us in His Word how great our sins and misery are. We might prefer to be left in ignorance of such black facts, yet we know full well that ignoring the reality helps us

nothing. So we do well to *thank God for telling us how things really are*. Why? Because if we want to overcome our misery, we do well to understand what the essence of that misery really is. Now that God has told us, we can see what we can do about it. What we can do about it? *Nothing!* All we can do is cry out to God for mercy!

And see: *God has given that mercy already!* The Lord God sent His only Son to obey the law *for us*, that there might be redemption for the undeserving. Canons of Dort, chapter III/IV, Article 6:

"What, therefore, ... the law can [not] do, God performs by the power of the Holy Spirit through the word or ministry of reconciliation, which is the gospel of the Messiah, by which it has pleased God to save men who believe, both under the old and under the new dispensation."

That this redemption was for us is something we confessed in Lord's Day 1 already, and that's why we could embrace the only comfort there is in life and death. To appreciate how wonderful this comfort is I needed to know –we said in Question & Answer 2- "how great my sins and misery are." Well now, I've heard from God's word how great my sins and misery are, and the Holy Spirit has worked in my heart so that I repeat after God –with the words of Lord's Day 2- just how awfully great my sins and misery really is. The Spirit makes me repeat those words *not* so that I might end up in a depression, but rather so that I might recognize the more how wonderful it is that God sent His Son to redeem sinners as depraved as the mirror of the law shows us to be. What a God this is; it's not for the righteous and the good and the noble that He gave His Son, but for sinners, for a wretch like me. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 3 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 19 November 2000.

" THE ORIGIN OF OUR SINFULNESS UNDERLINES OUR NEED FOR GOD'S GRACE ."

Text:

Lord's Day 3

6. Q. Did God, then, create man so wicked and perverse?

A. No, on the contrary, God created man good[1] and in His image,[2] that is, in true righteousness and holiness,[3] so that he might rightly know God His Creator,[4] heartily love Him, and live with Him in eternal blessedness to praise and glorify Him.[5]

[1] Gen. 1:31. [2] Gen. 1:26, 27. [3] Eph. 4:24. [4] Col. 3:10. [5] Ps. 8.

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

A. From the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise,[1] for there our nature became so corrupt[2] that we are all conceived and born in sin.[3]

[1] Gen. 3. [2] Rom. 5:12, 18, 19. [3] Ps. 51:5.

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

A. Yes,[1] unless we are regenerated by the Spirit of God.[2]

[1] Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Job 14:4; Is. 53:6. [2] John 3:3-5.

Scripture Reading:

Gen 1:26-31

Eph 2:1-10

Also;

[Canons of Dort](#), Chapter III/IV, Articles 1-3

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 18:9,10

Psalms 40:2

Psalms 92:6

Psalms 51:3,5

Hymns 24:1,3,5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We confessed in Lord's Day 1 our only comfort in life and death – a comfort so rich and glorious because it takes our attention off ourselves and our struggles, and places it squarely on the work and grace of the Lord our Savior. We added in the second Question & Answer that there is a key to enjoying the riches God gives, and that key is *knowledge*, knowledge of three things.

Last week, with Lord's Day 2, we began our discussion of the first of these three, "how great our sins and misery are." We heard God say in His Word that while in His law He demands perfect love – "with all your heart and with all your

soul and with all your mind"- we are able only to hate. So, with humility, we repeated after God His revelation about our depravity, and confessed that "I am inclined by nature to hate God and my neighbor." Today, with Lord's Day 3, we listen farther to what the Lord tells us about our sins and misery, and so say after Him what He reveals to us on the matter.

Indeed, congregation, the material God has revealed to us about our sins and misery is not flattering to ourselves. That explains why this material is not popular. Yet we may not avoid this material, simply because it is part of God's revelation to us. And He has told it to us so that we might marvel the more at the grace He has shown us in sending His only Son for the likes of *such sinners as we are*. As we listen to the sermon, let's keep in mind what we confessed in Question & Answer 2; to live and die in the joy of this comfort we need to know first the greatness our sins and misery.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE ORIGIN OF OUR SINFULNESS UNDERLINES OUR NEED FOR GOD'S GRACE.

1. our sinfulness is not from God
2. our sinfulness is from ourselves
3. our sinfulness is overcome by God

Our sinfulness is not from God

You and I, we confess in Lord's Day 2, are "inclined by nature to hate God and [the] neighbor." The big question flowing from this statement is this: *How come?* Where does this hatred come from?

We read from Gen 1 that the Lord God created us. Okay, "did God, then, create man so wicked and perverse?" That is, did God create us in such a way that we hate God and the neighbor? The Lord nips that thought in the bud, for when He looked at His handiwork at the end of the sixth day He "saw all that He had made, and indeed it was very good" (vs 31). That includes man. No, God did not create us with hatred in our hearts.

What then? May we imagine that the man and woman God created on the sixth day were "very good", as in, on the outside you could detect no flaw - but nevertheless had a manufacturer's defect hidden somewhere inside the intricacies of their personhood? Is it so that God -like today's automobile manufacturers, for example- had done His best in making Adam, run exhaustive tests on Him, brought in specialists from here and there, and was finally content that this was the most perfect model possible and so pronounced His divine "very good" over His handiwork? Car manufacturers will, if a given flaw arises in numerous cars, issue a recall, and that's to say that they'll take responsibility for the flaw. Are we to think in similar terms in relation to God's creation of man? That is, the flaw we acknowledge in Lord's Day 2 is actually the result of a manufacturer's defect; God should take responsibility for it, should issue a recall?

We might like to pass the blame on to God. Yet, congregation, we may not do that, for two reasons. In the first place, the Lord makes clear in His Word that He makes no mistakes. Moses is moved by the Lord's Spirit to say of God that "His work is perfect" (Dt 32:4). Elihu admonishes Job's friends like this:

"Therefore listen to me, you men of understanding:
Far be it from God to do wickedness,
And from the Almighty to commit iniquity" (Job 34:10).

The psalmist adds in Ps 92 that "there is no unrighteousness in Him" (vs 6). Ps 18: "as for God, His way is perfect" (vs 30).

May we think of a mistake in what God made, a manufacturer's defect? To let our thoughts go in that direction, beloved, is to imply that to our minds there is weakness in God, imperfection in Him. And that is to have in your minds a thought of God that does not agree with what He has revealed about Himself. It's certainly tempting for us

sinner to think that God's work is flawed, and we may be inclined to agree with many around us who dare to have a big mouth against God, but the fact of the matter is that such thoughts or words are sin. Our place before the God of all the earth is to be humble. Never can we fault Him with less than perfect work.

The second reason for insisting that there was no flaw in God's handiwork is what God Himself says in Gen 1. The passage tells us that God created man in His "image". The notion of 'image' does not mean that we look like God; it means instead that we *act as God acts*. The governor-general of Australia, Sir William Dean, is meant to image Queen Elizabeth. Yet we all understand well that this does not mean that he is supposed to put on a dress. It means instead that where the queen would be expected to carry out a public function in a certain manner, Sir William Dean would do it in her place, and then would do it *as the queen would do it*. He is to reflect her authority, her compassion, her patience, etc.

The Lord God created the human race to image Him, to reflect what He is like. As He is without flaw, so God created Adam and Eve without flaw. As He is perfectly good, perfectly righteous, perfectly faithful, etc, so He created Adam and Eve to be perfectly good, perfectly righteous, perfectly faithful. The whole notion of our being created in the image of God underscores the point that we were created without a flaw. That is why we cannot and may not lay the blame for our depravity at the feet of God. Instead, we need to echo God's revelation and admit that "God created man good and in His image, that is, in true righteousness and holiness." Or in the words of the Canons of Dort,

"In the beginning man was created in the image of God. He was adorned in his mind with true and wholesome knowledge of his Creator and of all spiritual things; his will and heart were upright, all his affections pure, and therefore man was completely holy" (III/IV, Art 1).

As God is holy.

But, I hear you say, did God not give man the opportunity to sin? And since God let man come to a choice to do this or that, to obey or disobey, is God not *somewhat* responsible for man's depravity? I mean: if God hadn't given man a choice, we wouldn't have sinned – and so our depravity is to some degree God's fault? It is true, congregation: God gave us the choice, gave us room to sin. But God, sovereign Creator, says that He made us *totally responsible* for whatever choice we made. The fact of the matter is that there is no fault in Him; "His work is perfect." As creatures we can't understand how He, holy God, would permit sin to enter His world, permit the creature created in His image to fall into sin. He tells us that He is God and we but creatures, tells us too that He carries no responsibility for our depravity. Yes, we are inclined by nature to hate God and the neighbor. But in no way can God be held responsible for that hatred within us.

That brings us to our second point:

Our sinfulness is from ourselves

"From where, then, did man's depraved nature come?" God in His Word draws our attention to the events of Genesis 3. Though God had categorically said that Adam and Eve were not to eat of the fruit of that one tree over there, they ate of it anyway. The result of this disobedience was that Adam and Eve lost their innocence; when God came to them they hid themselves in shame from the presence of the Lord. And when God found them among the trees of the garden, Adam and Eve both gave themselves to selfishness, to finding fault with another. Here is the root of our depravity. While before the fall Adam and Eve were "very good" (Gen 1:31), the Holy Spirit's assessment of all men was true of Adam and Eve directly after the fall; they were "desperately wicked" (Jer 17:9). No longer were people "very good"; the Lord God, before He sent the flood upon the earth, looked and "saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen 6:5; cf Gen 8:21). The Word of the Lord is clear; our wickedness is rooted in the fall and disobedience of our first parents in Paradise. So all we can do is repeat after God this horrible truth; "man's depraved nature" comes "from the fall and disobedience of our first parents ... in Paradise." Or in the words of the Canons of Dort:

"rebellious against God ... [man] brought upon himself blindness, horrible darkness, futility, and perverseness of judgment in his mind; wickedness, rebelliousness, and stubbornness in his will and heart; and impurity in all his affections" (C of D, III/IV, Art 1).

The origin of our wickedness lies in the rebellion of Paradise.

For our part, brothers and sisters, we can understand that this fall into sin affected Adam and Eve, made them blind, dark, perverse, "desperately wicked". After all, they were there, they committed the deed. The harder question is: *what about you and me?* What did we do wrong that we should become perverse, wicked, rebellious?

The apostle Paul, congregation, writes to the Romans about the fall into sin. He speaks about the fall of Adam in Paradise and then adds that "all sinned" (Rom 5:12). His point is that Adam and Eve were not the only two people in Paradise who transgressed the command of God; all men were somehow there and sinned. We can attempt to explain how we were there (and there are a few theories around to help us understand), but when all is said and done, the Lord has not told us how we were present in Paradise. He's told us only *that we all sinned* in the beginning, and since He the Creator says this of us creatures, we shall have to be content with that information, and embrace it as true. So we say after God in the Heidelberg Catechism that "there" –that's Paradise- "there our nature became so corrupt that we are all conceived and born in sin." And we say in the Canons of Dort that "*man*" brought upon himself blindness, horrible darkness, etc.

Where, then, does our sinfulness come from? Our sinfulness comes from the events which took place in Paradise as described in Gen 3. Yet the responsibility for our sinfulness lies not with those of generations gone by; the responsibility for my sinfulness rests with me. In Paradise *I* sinned, *I* rebelled. Never, beloved, can we point a finger at somebody else –be it of this generation or of generations long gone- and claim that our depravity is his fault. The Scripture is very clear that God holds each person fully responsible for his own sinfulness.

This is a point that can hardly be over-emphasized today. The unbelieving world does not want to know of depravity at the core of our being; common secular belief has it that we're all good by nature and sinful conduct arises from the environment in which one grew up or the things that happened to you years ago. Over against that error we shall need to cling to the revelation of God about our corruption; sinful conduct arises at bottom from the fact that we ourselves fell into sin in the beginning.

But it's not just unbelievers that embrace such a thought. In this world are so many who claim to embrace the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and yet they deny the doctrine of total depravity. I refer to general evangelical christendom, and think of such writers as Janet Oke, Gilbert Morris, Bodie Thoene, and the like. Today's evangelical christendom has embraced wholesale the error of Pelagius of centuries ago. Pelagius was the British monk who insisted some 16 centuries ago that children are born pure, with no inclination to sin. Each child becomes a sinner, he said, because of the example the children see from the adults around them. Put a newborn child on a desert island by himself, and if he were to survive to manhood, he would be perfect – for he's never seen the example of sin from others. So, said Pelagius, the cause of someone's evil conduct is not himself or his sinful heart, but his environment. At bottom it's the same belief as embraced by humanists, be it with a Christian coating.

Some 400 years ago Arminius picked up the same heresy and propagated it from the pulpits of the newly reformed churches of the Netherlands. The Synod of Dort rejected this notion as unbiblical, and set the matter right in the Canons of Dort. Hence Article 2 of the Chapter we read earlier:

"Since after the fall man became corrupt, he as a corrupt father brought forth corrupt children. Thus the corruption has spread from Adam to all his descendants, with the exception of Christ alone, not by imitation, as the Pelagians of old maintained, but by the propagation of a perverted nature, according to the righteous judgment of God."

And yes, that is Biblical. When David after his sin with Bethsheba reflected on how he could fall into his adultery, he was moved by God's Spirit to say this:

"Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity,
And in sin my mother conceived me" (Ps 51:5).

David's point was not that his mother was sinning was she delivered her child, nor that she was sinning when she

conceived him. David's point here is that his depravity goes back all the way to his birth, yes, to his conception. That is, from the very start of his existence he was inclined to sin. You see, David doesn't agree with Pelagius or with Arminius about children at birth being perfect. Rather, one's depravity has its roots in the very beginning, in the events of Genesis 3. That is why today, when parents bring their children to church for baptism, the parents need first to acknowledge before God and the congregation that their little bundle of joy is "conceived and born in sin and therefore subject to all sorts of misery, even to condemnation" – as the first question of the Form for Baptism has it. Evil, brothers and sisters, lies deep within every child we conceive and bear.

Precisely for this reason is the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ so very wonderful! Corrupt fathers bring forth corrupt children, and corrupt mothers do too – exactly because we are all involved in the fall in Paradise. That is why God from heaven on high had to intervene in the normal cycle of things on this earth if a perfect child was to be born. And that's the marvel of Luke 1; Almighty God sent His Spirit to come upon a woman of Israel – with as miraculous result that the Child she conceived was holy, without sin. This one, of course, could obey the law of God, for He wasn't sinful. More, since He was Son of God He could obey the law of God *for us* – so that we might receive redemption. Take away Gen 3 and all its horrors from your bibles, beloved, and the need for Christ's holy conception and birth also disappears. Insist that our little ones are not conceived and born in sin, are not "desperately corrupt" from the word Go, and the need for the miracle of Christmas disappears. But, on the other hand, insist on the horrid reality of Gen 3, and the wealth of God's grace in Luke 2 comes into sharp focus.

We come to our third point:

3. Our sinfulness is overcome by God

We ask in the last Question & Answer of our Lord's Day whether we are "so corrupt that we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil." We answer the question with a loud "Yes". Indeed, congregation, this too is something we are repeating after God. I think, for example, of Jesus' word in Jn 6. He said to the Jews, "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (vs 44). The word 'draw' in this text describes what you do to a log or to a stone; to move it you need to drag it, it's dead weight, it's not going to cooperate. Here's the same thought as Paul writes to the Ephesians; he tells them that they are "dead", "dead in sin." And the dead, we realize, do nothing; the dead certainly do not work along with you when you try to move them. That is why that senior brother of the congregation told young Rev deCock before the Secession of 1834 that if he had to add even one sigh to his salvation, he'd be eternally lost. The "dead in sin" can't save themselves, nor contribute to their salvation; they need to be drawn, dragged into God's kingdom.

This inability to save the self is something the fathers at the Synod of Dort understood well, and that's why the fathers –in the face of the teachings of the Arminians- made confession of what God said about how radical our depravity is. They put it like this:

"Therefore all men are conceived in sin and are born as children of wrath, incapable of any saving good, inclined to evil, dead in sins, and slaves of sin" (III/IV, 3).

Whereas the Arminians of today –the Janet Okes and the Gilbert Morrisses and the Bodie Thoenes, etc- would have us think that people can decide to open their hearts to God –and all the while God is the perfect gentleman who wouldn't dare impose Himself on someone who doesn't want to serve Him- the Lord in His Word describes us as *dead*. And pity the 'gentleman' who waits for the dead to make a move; he'll have to wait an awfully long time!

Dead. By way of analogy: the Arminian –and your average evangelical Christian with him- will compare our fall into sin as falling off a three-story building. To fall of the peak of this church would no doubt get you a couple of serious injuries, but there's a good chance you could call out for help – and maybe even decide for yourself whether you want any help or not. But if you fell off the top of a 70 story building, you haven't a hope of calling out for help, let alone deciding whether you'd like to receive any help – for you're dead. The effects of falling off that 70 story building: that's the picture Scripture gives of our fall into sin; we're dead, dead in sin, and so in no condition to cooperate with any who would attempt to rescue us. That is why in our Lord's Day we state emphatically that "we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil ... *unless we are regenerated by the Holy Spirit.*" We say the same thing in the

Canons of Dort:

"without the grace of the regenerating Holy Spirit they neither will nor can return to God, reform their depraved nature, or prepare themselves for its reformation" (Art 3).

So radical is our fall that we haven't a hope of a chance of helping ourselves simply because the dead *cannot help themselves*.

This, brothers and sisters, is what the Lord has told us in His Word, and so this is what we repeat after Him. But why, congregation, has God told us this? Surely, there's no comfort in this for us!

But there, beloved, we're wrong! We read that passage from Eph 2, where the Lord describes how radically lost we are, how dead. Against that black background the words of vs 4 jump out in all their riches and glory. Listen:

"But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)..." (vss4f).

Notice how pointedly the apostle sets the glory of God against the background of our depravity. While we were dead, "God who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive." That the dead come alive can never be credited to the dead; that the dead come alive is fully and totally the work of God alone. And that's the point of confessing the material of Lord's Day 3; our contribution to rising from our spiritual graves is zero! Yet we're alive, able to confess the delightful material of Lord's Day 1 – *and that's fully God's doing!* If He has made alive persons dead in sin, tell me, will this God let you perish again? *Is that the kind of God He is?! Amen.*

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 4 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 3 December 2000.

" GOD'S JUSTICE IS THE CAUSE OF OUR SALVATION."

Text:

Lord's Day 4

9. Q. But does not God do man an injustice by requiring in His law what man cannot do?
- A. No, for God so created man that he was able to do it.¹ But man, at the instigation of the devil,² in deliberate disobedience³ robbed himself and all his descendants of these gifts.⁴
- ¹ Gen 1:31. ² Gen 3:13; Jn 8:44; 1 Tim 2:13, 14. ³ Gen 3:6. ⁴ Rom 5:12, 18, 19.
10. Q. Will God allow such disobedience and apostasy to go unpunished?
- A. 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,¹ as He has declared:² Cursed be every one who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them (Galatians 3:10).
- ¹ Gen 2:17; Ex 34:7; Ps 5:4-6; 7:11; Nahum 1:2; Rom 1:18; 5:12; ² Deut 27:26.
- 11 Q. But is God not also merciful?
- A. God is indeed merciful,¹ but He is also just.² 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.³
- ¹ Ex 20:6; 34:6, 7; Ps 103:8, 9. ² Ex 20:5; 34:7; Deut 7:9-11; Ps 5:4-6; Heb 10:30, 31. ³ Mt 25:45, 46.

Scripture Reading:

Jonah 4

Nahum 1:1-11

Also:

[Canons of Dort, Chapter II, Articles 1 & 2](#)

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 7:4

Psalms 40:1

Psalms 103:5

Psalms 78:13,16

Psalms 34:6,7

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Lord's Day 4 revolves around the topic of the justice of God. It's a topic we don't find that stimulating; something in us would prefer that we speak about the *mercy* of God instead of His *justice*. That is why I want to make very clear straightaway, congregation, that the material of this Lord's Day is not human consideration, but is our echo of what God says in His Word. God Himself speaks in the Bible about His justice, we read what He says, and in Lord's Day 4

we *repeat after God* what He told us in His Word. If we find the material of Lord's Day 4 hard, it's in fact God's Word we find hard.

Furthermore, we need to bear in mind today what we confessed in Lord's Day 1. We said in the second Question & Answer of that Lord's Day that we needed to know three things if we are to enjoy fully the comfort of the gospel. The first of the three things we needed to know was "how great my sins and misery are." Lord's Day 4 will outline for us in greater detail than the previous two Lord's Days just how great our misery is. Though it's a dark message, let's realize well that the white never looks so white than when you set it against a background of blackest black. That's what we do here with the gospel.

On the basis of what God told us in His Word, we'd confessed some pretty bad things about ourselves in Lord's Days 2 and 3. We'd acknowledged that while God demanded full obedience to His law, all we could do was disobey, hate. We'd acknowledged too that the cause of the problem was not some manufacturer's defect, but our own fall into sin. In other words, the problem is completely *us*.

Yet you know how things go when you're in a corner. In an effort to defend yourself, you go on the offensive, you attack. You're caught with your hand in the cookie jar, and the automatic thing you do is say that Johnny did it first so you better talk to him. Self-defense by pointing the finger at someone else.... That's what we do with the Questions of Lord's Day 4. We go on the offensive and attack ... who? *God*, God's *justice*. First we suggest that maybe God is *unjust* in demanding obedience from sinners as we are, then we attempt to belittle God's justice because, after all, isn't God merciful.... By the grace of God, though, we are moved to give Scriptural answers to these sinister questions.

I preach to you the gospel of the justice of God. I use this theme:

GOD'S JUSTICE IS THE CAUSE OF OUR SALVATION.

1. God maintains the demands of His law.
2. God's mercy does not annul His justice.

God maintains the demands of His law

Question 9 picks up the thought we confessed in Lord's Day 2. We'd learned from God's Word that the Lord wants obedience to His law, perfect obedience. That means, we said in Lord's Day 2, that God insists on total love; He wants us to love Him with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind. Nothing half-hearted, nothing of "she'll be 'right;" God wants total, radical, absolute obedience. But, we added too, we can't do this, for we're "inclined by nature to hate God and [the] neighbor."

Now the question is: is God not unjust by requiring of us what we can't do? Isn't it wrong, isn't it unfair, to demand of a blind man that he describe what's on yonder hill?

You see, brothers and sisters, what we're doing here? We're conceding that Yes, we're sinful, we're conceding that indeed "we are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil." But instead of being small and humble in the face of the consequences of our fall, we're developing the nerve to suggest that maybe God is being unfair in His treatment of us. Should God not be more reasonable, should God not take into account our circumstances, our handicaps?

That question becomes more pressing when we realize that amongst people this is a basic assumption for the way we operate together. Some of us, for example, are expected to front up at work tomorrow morning, and if don't we shall face some less-than-pleasant consequences from the boss; after all, he insists that we be punctual. But we end up in the hospital tonight with appendicitis. We're not worried about the reaction of the boss though; we're sure he'll change his demands for us, his expectations for he'll take into account our changed circumstances. Mom tells the children to set the table with the best dishes. In the course of doing so, you drop the stack of plates. We realize: Mom may be upset that the dishes are broken, but she'll change her demands on us, she won't insist we set the table with the best dishes – after all, we can't, they're broken. See, that's life; we change demands according to changing circumstances. The question is: *should God not do that too?* That's question 9: "does God not do man an injustice by requiring in His law

what man cannot do?"

In answer to that question, the Scriptures draw our attention to the beginning, to Paradise. Specifically, God made man good and in His image, and so we were able to obey God's law perfectly. That we fell into sin is our own fault; "man, at the instigation of the devil, in deliberate disobedience, robbed himself and all his descendants of these gifts" – as we already confessed in Lord's Day 3.

And let's be honest, congregation, we can see much validity in this answer. Suppose you have an exam next week but in your foolishness you throw your notes out the window. Whose fault is it that the exam is too hard? We realize well that the teacher is very much allowed to demand that we know the material of the course; we certainly don't expect him to downgrade the exam to accommodate our folly. It's I who, in deliberate disobedience, tossed my notes out, and now I have to wear the consequences.

Yet, brothers and sisters, there is more to the matter than simply the fact that God made us able to obey, and we handicapped ourselves. Suppose for a moment that the Lord our God in Paradise would have changed His demands upon us as a result of our changed circumstances, would have changed His demands to suit what we were able to perform after the fall. What would such a change on God's part have told us about God?

It would have told us, congregation, that God *changes*, that God is *flexible*. I grant, with our human way of looking at things, that's attractive. We don't like people who are inflexible, rigid. We feel we need to move with the times, need to be willing and able to bend with the circumstances. So we say of God too that we'd like Him to be flexible, to bend His expectations according to the circumstances.

As it is, this notion that God should be flexible is deeply imbedded in many minds of contemporary Christianity, even in our churches. We hear it in our midst too that "God understands," and the point is that we think that the Lord takes into account the difficulties of our circumstances and so lowers His demands upon us. We say: God realizes how stubborn my child is, and so understands that I don't put my foot down to insist on obedience. We say: God realizes how much pressure I have at work, and so doesn't hold it against me that I smoke a bit of dope from time to time. You see, we think in terms of God altering His demands upon us to suit the circumstances in which we find ourselves.

But now the question is, congregation, whether God reveals Himself to be like that. Does He change His demands for us according to the circumstances in which we find ourselves? Specifically, is God more tolerant of sin when our circumstances become harder? Or is it so that God demands more obedience of us when the pressure is lower? At bottom, it's a matter of *whether God is flexible*, a matter of whether God looks through His fingers at sin, ignores certain sins in certain circumstances. In answering that question, we need to look at the very first time that God was confronted with a change of circumstances in the lives of man. That first time was, of course, the fall into sin – Genesis 3.

And see: in Gen 3 the Lord God did not change His demands! The demand of Gen 2 had been *obedience*; God had written His law on Adam's heart so that he knew what God wanted of him, and he obeyed – till he ate of the forbidden tree. But after the fall there's no change in God's demands; after the fall into sin it remained God's command to Adam and his offspring that they serve no gods but God, His command that Adam and his offspring serve God only as God demanded. As before so after the fall there was no place for theft, for lying, for adultery, for killing, for coveting, etc. God established His covenant with Israel at Mt Sinai and gave to His people *the same commandments* to which Adam and Eve were bound in Paradise. Indeed, Israel –and it's true for all men everywhere- were expected to love God with all one's heart and soul and mind – just as God demanded of Adam and Eve before the fall into sin. Jesus Christ repeated the same thought to the disciples in His sermon on the Mount. "Therefore," He said, "you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Mt 5:48). Conclusion: after the fall into sin *the Lord God did not change His demands*; they remained as they were.

Is that a good thing? Most definitely, brothers and sisters, it is! If God would have changed His demands on account of our falling into sin, He would be *reactionary*, would *change because we change*. That's to say that somehow we set the standard, we take the lead, and God follows on the cue that we give; we change, so He changes. Human nature might like that idea, but it's not Scriptural.

No, beloved, God is *God*, and that's to say that His standards remain the same, unchanging. Let people be unfaithful, but God is faithful. Let people change, but God does not change. That in turn means that we can always know what we have in God. In our day and age so very much changes; so little is today the same as it was, say, 50 years ago. But God doesn't change with the weather, His demands don't vary from day to day. His demands today are exactly the same as they were 50 years ago, as they were 500 years ago, as they were 5000 years ago. Computer technology doesn't change that, scientific know-how doesn't change that, resurgent heathendom doesn't change that – *no more than the fall into sin changed it!* God is the one constant amidst all the changes of life; always is He God – and therefore His demands the same.

And Yes, this is reason to praise Him! The psalmist instructs us to do precisely that in Ps 111. "Praise the Lord!" he insists at the beginning of the psalm..., and then proceeds to explain why. "All His precepts are sure," he says, "They stand fast for ever and ever" (vs 7f). Here is stability, security, He the only Rock in the midst of the changes around us.

It's true, beloved, the Lord God has not changed His demands, despite our fall into sin. Yet that does not mean that God is callous, unfeeling toward sinners. For the Scriptures also declare that while God continues to insist on perfect obedience to His law, God as a father pities His children; "He knows our frame, He remembers that we are dust" (Ps 103:14). That is the reason why He sent into this world His only-begotten Son, a man not touched by the fall into sin, a man able to obey perfectly the holy demands of eternal God. Christ set about His earthly task, and what did He say to His disciples? This:

"Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill" (Mt 5:17).

Jesus' point? He came to *obey* every command of God! God's law counted for Him too; Jesus also had to obey perfectly every jot and tittle of the law of God. He had to, just as we do, because the Lord did not relax His expectations one dot. It's because God maintained the demands of the law that Jesus ended up on the cross of Calvary; that was the result of His careful obedience to every command of God.

Does God do man an injustice by requiring of him in His law what man cannot do? The Lord, my brothers and sisters, would have us reject the thought of injustice with God. It's because God maintained the demands of the law that Christ ended up on the cross – and so acquired our salvation. Shall we dare, *shall we dare*, then, still to think there might be injustice on God's part?? It is for us instead to praise Him for maintaining His demands; His justice produces our salvation!

The careful listener will at this point, I suspect, raise a second concern we have in relation to God. A couple of the Catechism students picked it out too, and it's this: if God shows mercy in giving Jesus Christ, doesn't that empty God's justice of its clout? It's the point of Q 11: "But is God not also merciful?" That brings us to our second point:

God's mercy does not annul His justice

It's a fact: the Bible speaks much of the mercy of God. I think, for example, of the verses we read from Jonah. The Lord had told Jonah to proclaim doom to the city of Nineveh; "yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown" (3:4). After some protest the prophet had done so. And see, the king decreed repentance so that God "relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them" (3:10). Jonah worded it like this:

"...I know that You are a gracious and merciful God, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness, One who relents from doing harm" (4:2).

God Himself expressed the matter like this:

"... should I not pity Nineveh, that great city, in which are more than one hundred and twenty thousand persons who cannot discern between their right hand and their left - and much livestock?" (4:11).

It's a thought we like. So we're terribly sinful, and it's our own fault, and God is just is keeping His high demands

upon us. Then we like the idea that there's a gentle side to God, that there's abundant mercy in Him. We feel: that means that God won't look too seriously at our sins. So we conclude: our misery isn't that big after all, for God will abundantly pardon.

Now, it's true, congregation, that the Lord our God is merciful. There are various passages of Scripture beside the Jonah passage that point that up. But it definitely will not do to play God's justice off against His mercy in the sense that God's justice gets swallowed up by His mercy – so that in turn there's scarcely a penalty for our sins. The Bible is insistent that God's justice is very much a reality, and woe be to us if we should ignore it!

I think here of the passage we read from Nahum's prophecy. Nahum addresses the very same city Jonah addressed, and says this:

"God is jealous, and the Lord avenges;
The Lord avenges and is furious.
The Lord will take vengeance on His adversaries,
And He reserves wrath for His enemies" (1:2)

We understand: that's a very different picture than we glean from Jonah! But the prophet makes it more pointed still. Vs 6:

"Who can stand before His indignation?
And who can endure the fierceness of His anger?
His fury is poured out like fire,
And the rocks are thrown down by Him."

"Rocks are thrown down by Him...." No wonder, as vs 5 says, that "the mountains quake before Him, and the hills melt!" God in His wrath is not to be trifled with!

This is the thought, beloved, to which we give expression in our Lord's Day. We say in A 10 that God "is terribly displeased with our original sin as well as our actual sins." The term "terribly displeased" attempts to capture the color of God's anger as described in passages as Nahum 1. "Terribly displeased": Nahum speaks of an anger that moves mountains, an anger that makes the earth heave. It's an anger that results in destruction so that rivers dry up and flowers wilt and hills melt (vs 4f). It's the same picture as Jesus painted when He described hell as a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt 24:50). Here's an agony beyond words, a horror so awful that no eye has seen it nor ear heard nor the heart of man conceived – a horror that gives eternal expression to God's terrible displeasure with our sins.

And make no mistake, beloved. The infinite anger of God as described by Nahum is not restricted for heathens alone, like the people of Nineveh – or to people who once heard the gospel (as Nineveh did from Jonah) and rejected it. I read in Numbers 11 that God's people Israel "complained", and when the Lord heard it, "His anger was aroused" with as result that "the fire of the Lord burnt among them, and consumed some in the outskirts of the camp" (vs 1). I read in the same chapter that the Lord sent quails, and "while the meat was still between their teeth, before it was chewed, the wrath of the Lord was aroused against the people, and the Lord struck the people with a very great plague" (vs 33). Note it well, brothers and sisters: God's anger was aroused against His own people by covenant, people like you and me!

Nor is a passage as Num 11 unique. Time and again in the book of Judges the Lord confronted His people with His anger upon their sins. It all ended with the exile, when the Lord in anger cast His people away from Him. No, beloved, the Scriptures nowhere downplay the justice of God as if the human race need not fear God much. Such is His justice, and therefore His terrible displeasure, that the penalty of God crushes a man, crushes *us*. We put it like this in the Canons of Dort:

"And as He Himself has revealed in His Word, His justice requires that our sins, committed against His infinite majesty, should be punished not only in this age but also in the age to come, both in body and soul" (II.1).

And in our Lord's Day:

"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."

If this, brothers and sisters, is what we confess, we shall need to be careful to take God seriously!! And inasmuch as I speak now to you and not to another, I need to urge *you* to take God seriously. It just will not do to assume that God has but little emotion on account of your sins, that God looks the other way when you sin. On the contrary! That is why the question needs always to be on our minds: how will God respond if I do this or that? To provoke His wrath is to invite such punishment that even mountains falling on us will not save us from His anger. Let it be fixed in our minds: the Lord is a severe judge. *And that is why our misery is so great!*

How great? So great that even the Son of God on the cross of Calvary cringed under the weight of God's wrath. If anybody was ever miserable, surely it was He as He hung there suspended between heaven and earth, rejected by God and man alike, tormented by the excruciating pain of divine rejection. *That* is what we deserve on account of our sins.

Yet here, beloved, is the gospel. The justice of God requires that the wrath of God against my sins be poured out on me. But see, in boundless mercy God puts Christ *between* His wrath and me, so that the wrath I deserve falls onto Christ! In the words of the Canons of Dort:

"For us or in our place He was made sin and a curse on the cross so that He might make satisfaction on our behalf" (II.2).

Notice those glorious words, beloved of the Lord! "For us", "in our place", "on our behalf": those words describe that the Lord Jesus Christ took the wrath of God that we deserve!

That is the gospel. God's wrath is not minimized, God's wrath is not buried under a flood of mercy either. Rather, God's wrath is fully satisfied by Jesus Christ – who acts "*on our behalf*."

Next week, the Lord calls us to sit at the Supper of the Lord, the good news of Christ dying *for us* and *in our place*. It's a wonderfully glorious gospel for unworthy sinners. But nothing makes the glory of the gospel of that table stand out so sharply as the black background of our sins and misery.

I acknowledge my sins and accursedness, acknowledge that I deserve His wrath in this life and the life to come, acknowledge that I am black. Now Christ would tell me that He bore *for me* the wrath of God against my sin. Given how black I am, I dare not stay away when Christ would impress upon *me* the shining glory of His work *on my behalf*. *Amen.*

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Sermon on Lord's Day 5 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 10 December 2000.

" GOD REVEALS TO SINNERS THE WAY OF SALVATION ."

Text:

Lord's Day 5

12. Q. Since, according to God's righteous judgment we deserve temporal and eternal punishment, how can we escape this punishment and be again received into favour?
- A. God demands that His justice be satisfied.¹ Therefore we must make full payment, either by ourselves or through another.²
- ¹ Ex 20:5; 23:7; Rom 2:1-11. ² Is 53:11; Rom 8:3, 4.
13. Q. Can we by ourselves make this payment?
- A. Certainly not. On the contrary, we daily increase our debt.¹
- ¹ Ps 130:3; Mt 6:12; Rom 2:4, 5.
14. Q. Can any mere creature pay for us?
- A. No. In the first place, God will not punish another creature for the sin which man has committed.¹ Furthermore, no mere creature can sustain the burden of God's eternal wrath against sin and deliver others from it.²
- ¹ Ezek 18:4, 20; Heb 2:14-18. ² Ps 130:3; Nahum 1:6.
15. Q. What kind of mediator and deliverer must we seek?
- One who is a true¹ and righteous² man, and yet more powerful than all creatures; that is, one who is at the same time true God.³
- ¹ 1 Cor 15:21; Heb 2:17. ² Is 53:9; 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 7:26. ³ Is 7:14; 9:6; Jer 23:6; Jn 1:1; Rom 8:3, 4.

Scripture Reading:

Isaiah 1:21-31

Romans 2:1-16

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 119:13

Psalm 119:4

Psalm 25:6,7

Psalm 84:3,4

Psalm 77:5; & Hymn 30:5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We could live and die in the joy of belonging to Jesus Christ only –we said in Lord's Day 1- if we knew how great our

sins and misery are. With Lord's Day's 2 to 4 we repeated after God that in fact our sins and misery were impossibly great. God, we confessed in Lord's Day 2, demands perfect obedience to His holy law, demands love for God and neighbor alike, but all we can do by nature is hate.... The cause of our inability to love, though, lies not with God and the way He made us; the fault lies rather with ourselves because we turned our backs on God in Paradise – we said in Lord's Day 3. And God's response to our fall and brokenness, we added in Lord's Day 4, is severe judgment; God is simply not going to leave our transgressions unpunished.

It's not a nice picture. Judgment, "everlasting punishment of body and soul": no, that's not a nice picture. But this is what God has revealed in His Word, and so we've repeated this awful reality after God. We're sure that the Lord has not told us this so that we'd develop a complex....

As it is, brothers and sisters, the Lord has told us about our sins and misery *in order that we might appreciate the deliverance He's prepared*. For this is the good news of Scripture: God has told us more in the Bible than that our sins and misery are so great. He's told us also that there is a *way to escape* the just judgment of God. That, now, is what we set out to confess in the second section of the Catechism, Lord's Day's 5-31. With Lord's Day 5 we begin repeating after God what He has told us in His Word about the way of salvation.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

GOD REVEALS TO SINNERS THE WAY OF SALVATION.

1. The destination of salvation road
2. The name of salvation road
3. The way to travel salvation road

The destination of salvation road

Every road leads to somewhere. Albany Hwy will bring you to Albany, the Great Eastern to Sydney. Roads have destinations. The way of salvation has a destination too. To explain to you what that destination is, though, we need to look at the *beginning* of this road. What's the beginning?

We'd said in Lord's Day 4 that we are deserving of the just judgment of God both now and eternally. When all is said and done, this just judgment of God is hell. We want, of course, to escape this judgment, this hell. There, now, is the topic of this first point. Is it enough that we escape this hell, find a way out from under the judgment of God? Is the destination of salvation road simply that we get out of hell?

In answer to that question we need to consider what hell is. I learn from Scripture that hell is a place of indescribable anguish, of eternal weeping and gnashing of teeth. Elsewhere this place of God's judgment is described as a bottomless pit. Language like this places in our minds the thought that hell is simply a place. Then automatically we think in terms of escape as getting out of this awful place. We imagine a prison, a sort of concentration camp, and escape means to get out, somehow to get over those walls to the freedom outside.

Now, it's true that hell is a place. But it is a place characterized by more than pain and suffering; it is a place characterized by the *absence of God's favor*. That is why Jesus' three hours of darkness on the cross can be described as a descent into hell (Lord's Day 16); in those three hours of darkness Jesus was rejected by God, fell totally outside of the favor of God – and that is hell. Escape from hell, then, is not simply that we somehow get out of a place of torment into an area where we don't experience God's judgment anymore. Escape from hell means that we get out of this sphere of being rejected by God. And when it comes to notions of rejection or acceptance, there's no neutral territory, no halfway position somewhere between rejection or acceptance; one is either rejected by God or accepted by God.

Consider Paradise for a moment. Adam and Eve lived within the walls of the Garden, and there did their daily work. In the cool of the day the Lord God came to visit them, to talk with them (Gen 3:8). That's to say that Adam and Eve were in God's favor, and so God came to them and they could speak with God. When they fell into sin, the Lord God sent them out of the garden. Yet we understand well that the Lord's point was not simply that Adam and Eve should no

longer enjoy the abundance of fruit available in the garden; no, by exiling them from the garden the Lord was *sending them out of His presence*. The wilderness outside the garden with its thorns and thistles was symbolic of hell, of being sent out of God's presence, cast into the realm where they taste His judgment. Outside the garden was not a neutral area somewhere between the favor of God they used to have in the garden and the full judgment of God they'd one day experience in hell. No, in the garden they'd tasted the favor of God, tasted God's acceptance; outside the garden they tasted the disfavor of God, tasted God's rejection of them.

Now we ask about the destination of the road of salvation. Is the destination simply that we escape the judgment of God? It cannot be, congregation, for there is no neutral territory between being accepted by God or rejected by Him, no neutral territory between God's favor and God's disfavor. Getting out of the place called hell with its divine judgments doesn't help you a dot if you do not at the same time reconcile yourself to God – for without reconciliation with God you stay outside of His favor, and that's to say that you stay under His judgment, His disfavor – hell!

What, then, is the destination of salvation road? What we need is not just to escape God's punishment (hell), but also to be received into God's favor. Let's have here no narrow or shallow understanding of the salvation we need! Unless we are restored to God's favor, unless we are reconciled to God, we remain under His curse and judgments.

That is why, in Q 12 of our Lord's Day, we do not ask simply for how we can escape God's punishment. Instead, we deepen the matter straightaway by asking how we can be received into God's favor again. Those two –escaping God's punishment and being received into God's favor- are two sides of one coin, are inseparable. Let no tell you, beloved, that all you need is escape from hell; what you need is more, much more than that. What you need is to *reconciliation with God* – the same God against whom we rebelled in Paradise and continue to rebel day by day. That –reconciliation with the God who drove us out of Paradise- *that* is the destination of the salvation road we seek.

That brings us to our second point:

The name of this salvation road

The names of some roads are determined by the destination of the road. Albany Hwy received its name from the fact that the road ends up in Albany. That's also why in the points of this sermon I refer to 'salvation road'; the road of which we're speaking today leads to salvation, reconciliation with God. But roads can receive names also according to the things you see on that road, things that characterize that road. A name as "Coastal Hwy" tells you nothing about where the road leads, but tells you much about what you see along the road.

What, now, characterizes salvation road? What would be a fitting name for the road so that we get a taste of what this road is like?

We read together a section of Is 1. The chapter describes the sins of Jerusalem, and God's response to those sins. That is, He will punish by a just judgment. Vs 24:

"... I will rid Myself of My adversaries,
And take vengeance on My enemies.
I will turn My hand against you" (vss 24f).

The details come out later on; God will send the people of Jerusalem into exile. At the same time, though, the Lord speaks about the goal of the exile. Says the Lord:

"I will restore your judges as at the first,
And your counselors as at the beginning.
Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city" (vs 26).

Here too the details come out later on in Isaiah's prophecy; God will restore His people, will even dwell among His own again – reconciliation, redemption. We understand: here is a foreshadowing of the same material with which we're dealing in our Catechism.

Well, now, in this context the Lord's words in vs 27 are intriguing. For the Lord says there that "Zion will be redeemed by justice." How amazing! God speaks of redemption, and we equate redemption with mercy. We say: if there is a road to salvation, if there is a road that leads to reconciliation with God, that road should certainly be characterized by mercy; it should be called "Mercy Road". But see: Isaiah does not say that redemption shall come for Zion through mercy; he is moved by God's Spirit to say instead that redemption shall come *with justice*. That is: justice is the means, the instrument by which redemption shall come to Zion.

This text from Isaiah is not unique. I read in the book of Exodus that God "will not justify the wicked" (23:7). In fact, that is the second commandment:

"For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me" (Ex 20:5).

It's what we read from Rom 2: every sinner shall face the wrath of God. Vs 3:

"...do you think this, O man, ... that you will escape the judgment of God?"

And vs 5:

"But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God...."

You want to be reconciled to God? Yes, there is a road that leads from the judgment of God we deserve to reconciliation with God. *And the name of the road is Justice!* Justice: that, congregation of the Lord, is what characterizes that road back to God – *justice*. That's what the Lord says in the Bible He's given us, and that's why we say it after God in Lord's Day 5, A 12: "God demands that His justice be satisfied." If you want to escape the just judgment of God and be again received into God's favor, the only possible way is to satisfy that justice. That's how Zion can be redeemed, and that's how you can be redeemed; "with justice".

And how can we satisfy that justice? We repeated it after God in Lord's Day 2; God demands obedience, and that's to say that God demands total and absolute love for Him. But we can't love Him as He demands; instead, we are "inclined by nature to hate God and [the] neighbor." In His instructions to Israel about the sacrifices required in the tabernacle, the Lord made clear to His people that their sins required satisfaction; when they sinned they had to make good, had to present an offering to the Lord. The same holds true for us, and that's why we confess in A 12 that we must make full payment, in some way.

But can we? Could Israel? O yes, Israel had to bring countless sacrifices to the temple. But those sacrifices did not themselves pay for Israel's sins. They served simply to defer the judgment of God on their sins, served to draw God's attention to Another who would die instead of the sinner. For the sinner in Israel could not satisfy God's justice any more than you and I can. And Scripture is clear on that point. The very fact that the Lord instructs us to ask God time and again to forgive our sins makes plain that we keep on sinning – and therefore earn more condemnation. The apostle repeats it in Rom 2; with every sin we commit we treasure up for ourselves wrath from God (vs 5). Pay our debt with God? Satisfy His justice? "Certainly not. On the contrary, we daily increase our debt." Such is our depravity

Shall I then seek a kookaburra to pay my debt with God? Or ask Michael the archangel to satisfy God's justice for me? The word of the Lord is clear: "the soul that sins shall die" (Ezek 18:4). It was human nature that sinned, and therefore it's human nature that must pay for sin; God is too just to accept the labors of a kangaroo to pay for my sin.

What then?

"With what shall I come before the Lord,
And bow myself before the High God?
Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings,
With calves a year old?
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,

Ten thousand rivers of oil?
 Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression,
 The fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? (Micah 6:6f.).

None of it, beloved, none of it will help. If, as Nahum says, the mountains quake and rocks are thrown asunder in the face of God's wrath, then a calf a year old, or a thousand rams, or 10,000 rivers of oil, or even my firstborn will perish under the weight of God's wrath. It's these data of Scripture that prompt us to echo God's Word in Question & Answer 14 like this: "God will not punish another creature for the sin which man has committed. Further, no mere creature can sustain the burden of God's eternal wrath against sin and deliver others from it." Not a kookaburra or a kangaroo, not a million gold bars or Michael the archangel will satisfy for us the just judgment of God.

Where that leaves us? We seek a road that leads out away from the judgment of God, leads us to full reconciliation with God. The Lord tells us that there is a salvation road, and its name is Justice. We're delighted to learn of that road, for it means there is a possibility that we actually can escape God's judgment and be received again into His favor. But lo, now that we've had a good look at this road we find that *we can't travel it!* The volcanoes on that road are too daunting for us; it's not passable!

How disappointing. We're excited to find there is a road, for we want escape, reconciliation. But what a letdown! It would be better if there wasn't a road at all.... At least we wouldn't get our hopes up.... This, beloved, signifies the end of all efforts to obtain salvation ourselves. What we confess in Lord's Day 5 is that no creature of God is able to travel salvation road; the justice of God makes it impassable for any creature. So there is no room in our minds for the thought that we via our works can travel that road, can work our way into God's favor. There is no room either for the thought that we can ride into God's favor on the coattails of our parents, or an office-bearer, or the church – for these parents or office-bearers or even the church cannot travel that road themselves. Here is room only for humility, for brokenness, for a contrite spirit. As the prophet Micah has said:

"He has shown you, O man, what is good;
 And what does the Lord require of you
 But to do justly,
 To love mercy,
 And to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:8).

We come to our last point:

How we can travel salvation road

The Lord, brothers and sisters, did not tell us about salvation road just so that we might get our hopes up – only to have them dashed. That's not what your God is like.

True, we can't travel Justice Road; for us it's impassable. But that doesn't mean that God can't travel it! The gospel is that *there is a road*; that's the element of Deliverance we confess in Lord's Day 5. *There is a road*, and God has not told us that fact for nothing. He's told us that "Zion will be redeemed by justice" because it's through justice that *He* intends to redeem Zion.

And see: the Lord Jesus Christ says to His disciples that He is "the way"! (Jn 14:6). The apostle to the Hebrews adds that Jesus by His blood has consecrated for us "a new and living way" to enter the presence of God (Heb 10:19f). We can't travel Justice Road, we can't on our own strength escape the just judgment of God and find His favor again. But the God who is at the other end of the road has traveled that road, has come to us with the gospel of His only Son, and through the work of that Son of God has opened up the way of salvation for us. By His death on the cross He satisfied the justice of God, and so reconciled sinners to God so that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

Jesus Christ: He remains the only way to travel the road of salvation. Jesus Christ: He satisfied the justice of God – it's what the Lord impressed upon us today at His table- and so we are redeemed with justice.

This is the gospel God has prepared for you, beloved. You want to escape God's justice, and we understand that to

mean that we need to be received again into His favor. For us that task is "hopeless and in vain; our guilt was e'er increasing." But holy God, in boundless mercy, has come to us in His only begotten Son, and has shown us that He is the Way to the Father. That we could eat the bread and drink the cup at the Lord's table today have pointed up that Yes, we're reconciled to God; the Lord Himself has made us travel the length of Justice Road in Christ. So we have life with God, life forevermore!

Take that gospel with you, my brothers and sisters, into the cares of this coming week! Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 6 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday Morning, 17 December 2000.

" IN CHRIST GOD HAS WORKED SALVATION FOR PEOPLE DEAD IN SIN."

Text:

Lord's Day 6

16. Q. Why must He be a true and righteous man?
- A. He must be a true man because the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should pay for sin.¹ He must be a righteous man because one who himself is a sinner cannot pay for others.²
- ¹ Rom 5:12, 15; 1 Cor 15:21; Heb 2:14-16. ² Heb 7:26, 27; 1 Pet 3:18.
17. Q. Why must He at the same time be true God?
- A. He must be true God so that by the power of His divine nature¹ He might bear in His human nature the burden of God's wrath,² and might obtain for us and restore to us righteousness and life.³
- ¹ Is 9:6. ² Deut 4:24; Nahum 1:6; Ps 130:3. ³ Is 53:5, 11; Jn 3:16; 2 Cor 5:21.
18. Q. But who is that Mediator who at the same time is true God and a true and righteous man?
- A. Our Lord Jesus Christ,¹ whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption (1 Corinthians 1:30).
- ¹ Mt 1:21-23; Lk 2:11; 1 Tim 2:5; 3:16.
19. Q. From where do you know this?
- A. From the holy gospel, which God Himself first revealed in Paradise.¹ Later, He had it proclaimed by the patriarchs² and prophets,³ and foreshadowed by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law.⁴ Finally, He had it fulfilled through His only Son.⁵
- ¹ Gen 3:15. ² Gen 12:3; 22:18; 49:10. ³ Is 53; Jer 23:5, 6; Mic 7:18-20; Acts 10:43; Heb 1:1. ⁴ Lev 1-7; Jn 5:46; Heb 10:1-10. ⁵ Rom 10:4; Gal 4:4, 5; Col 2:17.

Scripture Reading:

I Corinthians 1:18-2:10a

Luke 1:26-38

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 98:1,2

Psalms 25:5,6

Psalms 22:10,11

Hymn 20

Hymn 16

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Especially at this time of year our world is busy, so very busy, with things of this world. Christmas shopping demands one's attention fully; one must, *must*, get a present for Tom, and for Dick, and for Harry – and for Sue and Janice too.

But what shall I buy?! And I've got only 7 shopping days left....

And Christmas day itself? First there's the excitement of opening the gifts. Then the pleasure of enjoying this gift and that one. Or maybe there's the whisper of dissatisfaction; why did Molly buy me that – what does she think I am.... Or: why didn't Geoff buy me anything; doesn't he like me?

What it all is, congregation? The evil one wishes nothing more than to *distract* the attention of God's people, yes, of all the world, to get people's attention away from the glorious work of God that's highlighted so wonderfully in the Bible's message of Christmas. As long as people's attention is distracted, that message won't be heard. And where it's not heard, or where it's drowned out by other excitement, faith will not grow. That is precisely what the evil one wants.

Satan does not pass the church by, seeks also to distract you and me. In the midst of his effort, the Lord God pulls us this morning out of the busyness of this world (with its rush to finish Christmas preparations) and brings us to church. Here the Lord would speak to us of *His* work, of what He has done to work salvation for sinners as we are. He wants *us* to know the gospel, and grow in the faith.

Following Lord's Day 6, I preach to you this morning the gospel of Christmas, under this theme:

IN CHRIST GOD HAS WORKED SALVATION FOR PEOPLE DEAD IN SIN.

1. God's plan of salvation
2. God's work of salvation

God's plan of salvation

Lord's Days 2-5, brothers and sisters, had focused our attention on this earth. The Lord God required of us that we love Him with heart and soul, but –try though we might- we are not able to produce the service to God that He requires; that's what we confessed in Lord's Day 2. The cause of the problem is not in heaven, though, for the God who created us fashioned us without a flaw, perfectly able to obey every command of His. The cause of our inability to obey God's law lies instead with ourselves, for we transgressed the command of God in the beginning and so became depraved. That was Lord's Day 3. And Lord's Day 4 echoed the response of God to our self-imposed depravity; "God is terribly displeased with our original as well as our actual sins, and will punish them by a just judgment both now and eternally." See there how great our sin and misery is!

Last week, with Lord's Day 5, we confessed that there is a way for people on earth to be reconciled to God. That way is called Justice Road; for people to escape God's punishment and be reconciled to God, God's justice must in some way be satisfied. But we can't satisfy that justice; we daily increase our debt with God. Nor can we line up a kookaburra to pay for us.... Result: we on this earth are hopelessly lost. The God who created us is terribly displeased with us, and there is no way in all the world that we are able to get out from under His eternal wrath. Lost we are, hopelessly lost....

In the face of this total lostness on our part, we read in the Word of God that *God was busy*. I read in I Cor 1:30, for example, that Christ "became for us wisdom from God." The point of the phrase "became for us" is that God prepared Christ for us and sent Him to us – that through Him we might receive righteousness and sanctification and redemption. In Lord's Day 6 we quote precisely this text in order to draw out to people on earth –lost and hopeless as we made our condition- that *elsewhere in the universe help was being prepared for us*. What, now, is this help?

The apostle Paul speaks a number of times about a 'mystery'. I read, for example, in I Cor 2 these words:

"...we speak the wisdom of God in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God ordained before the ages for our glory" (vs 7).

And in Rom 16 he writes about "the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest" (Rom 16:25f). This 'mystery' does not refer to a thriller, complete with thefts, suspense and detectives. The

‘mystery’ of which Paul speaks is God’s plan of salvation – kept secret ever since Paradise but now revealed.

What this plan of salvation is? In the face of man’s hopelessness and lostness on earth, triune God in heaven above took counsel within Himself to determine a way to save His lost covenant partner on earth. The result of that counsel-within-Himself is known as this ‘mystery’. To the Ephesians Paul writes that the content of this mystery is "Christ" (2:4). To Timothy he fleshes it out in more detail, like this: "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness." Then he sets out to explain what this "mystery of godliness" is. Says Paul:

"God was manifested in the flesh,
Justified in the Spirit,
Seen by angels,
Preached among the Gentiles,
Believed on in the world,
Received up in glory" (I Tim 3:16).

We understand: Paul is speaking about the work of Jesus Christ. "God," he says, "was manifested in the flesh," and that’s obviously a reference to Christmas, to the coming of the Son of God as a man on this earth. *That*, brothers and sisters, is the mystery of God, the plan determined by triune God already before the fall into sin occurred. You see: our fall into sin did not catch God by surprise –are not all things in this world in His hands?- and already before it had happened God determined within Himself a plan to save the people who plunged themselves into misery and hopelessness. See there what kind of God this is!

True, the Lord did not straightaway tell the fallen human race the details of His saving plan. After the fall into sin He spoke to the serpent in the hearing of Adam and Eve, and declared:

"And I will put enmity
Between you and the woman,
And between your seed and her Seed;
He shall bruise your head,
And you shall bruise His heel" (Gen 3:15).

Here was a declaration of intent; God would somehow crush Satan through the Seed given to the woman. How? The details are not yet revealed. That is why Paul in the New Testament calls this plan of salvation a ‘mystery’ and then explains what he means with that term; he speaks in I Cor 2 about the "*hidden* wisdom from God" and in Rom 16 about "the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest." Think of a rose bud. That hard green bud has a surprise tucked away inside of it; the bud itself is a promise that next week a lovely flower will bloom. Already that bud is complete, has all the parts of the flower tucked away inside it. But for now it remains hidden, a mystery. Slowly, gradually the bud opens, and in the process more and more of the flower appears until its full glory is displayed for all the world to see.

So it is with God’s plan of salvation. Those words spoken in Paradise about crushing the serpent were the bud of the flower that came to full bloom with the coming of Jesus Christ. In Paradise that bud was still small, it’s wonderful color and aroma still tucked away inside its shell, kept secret from the eyes of men. In the course of years the Lord revealed its glorious secrets slowly but surely. What was first revealed in Paradise was afterward "proclaimed by the patriarchs and prophets and foreshadowed by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law." That the people of Israel in the face of sin had to sacrifice an animal (instead of themselves perishing under God’s wrath against their sin) foreshadowed the gospel of Jesus Christ in a fuller way than the words God spoke in Paradise to the serpent. Slowly, gradually, resolutely, the mystery of God was revealed; slowly, gradually, resolutely His plan of salvation made known to lost sinners. Finally, when the Son of God entered this world as a man, the full glory of the plan of salvation was made manifest; its wonderful color and aroma was now evident for all the world to enjoy – or reject. Then was made obvious what Paul quoted from the Old Testament:

"Eye has not seen, nor ear heard,
Nor have entered into the heart of man

The things which God has prepared for those who love Him" (I Cor 2:9, quoting is 64:4).

How marvelous the mystery of God, the secret of salvation for creatures lost in sin! His answer: that one Person of the holy Trinity should leave the company of the other two and enter the world of man, yes, become a man. O the wisdom and the glory of God!

No wonder Paul sets before the Corinthians the work of God in terms of *wisdom*. Who in all the earth would have thought of *this* answer? That God would come to earth after earth rejected God? That God would travel to us when we couldn't travel to Him? That He would send His only Son to become our righteousness and sanctification and redemption? Truly, the wisdom of God is beyond our comprehension, beyond our wildest imagination! But this is the gospel, the way of salvation, so that "he who glories, let him glory in the Lord" (I Cor 1:31).

We move on to our second point:

God's work of salvation.

Such was the plan of God for our salvation. And see, when the time had fully come, God sent forth His Son (cf Gal 4:4). I read in the gospel of Luke that the angel came to Mary in Nazareth and announced to her that she would

"conceive in [her] womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David" (Lu 1:31f).

Mary questioned how in the world this might be, since she wasn't married. To which the angel gave this answer:

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (vs 35).

True man

The angel Gabriel impressed it on Mary; this Child would be *her* Son, "born of woman" (Gal 4:4). That is to say: this infant would be as human as any other child. That's how it turned out. Luke 2 records that Mary "brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger" (vs 7). The point is that this Child needed the same care as any other child ever born; this Child too was helpless, needed warmth supplied by another, needed a place to sleep – like every newborn does. So it is too that Mary and her husband had their hands as full with their newborn as any parents do; the Child cried, needed a feed and a wash, needed to be taught this and that and so much more. Please, beloved, do not see the infant born on that Christmas day so long ago as different from the children born today; He had the same needs simply because He was as human as the rest of us.

And human He had to be, by God's divine decree. For "the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should pay for sin." God will not punish another creature for the sin which man has committed, and so the Savior He sent into the world could not be an Extra-Terrestrial being who happened to live in the shell of a human body. God is just; man sinned, and so many must pay for sin. So the plan Triune God ordained within Himself included that the One sent to earth had to become man. And –to our comfort and salvation- Luke insists that the Child in Bethlehem's manger *was* true man.

Righteous Man

Yet He was more than true man. For the angel of Luke 1 insisted to Mary that her Child would be "holy" (vs 35). That's to say that He'd be separated from sin, would remain untouched by sin in His righteous soul. Though "corrupt fathers bring forth corrupt children," this Child would not be corrupted by sin, and that would be because of the intervention of the Holy Spirit. Such was God's plan, and so it had to be "because one who is himself a sinner cannot pay for others." So God ensured that the Savior He sent was able never to sin.

What consequences that reality had for His parents in raising Him I do not know. But this I do know: the Child of

Bethlehem, though as human as any of us, never sinned. Never in the course of His earthly life –be it as a child or a teenager or an adult- did He transgress any command of God. Always there was obedience, full obedience. He said it Himself; "My food is to do the will of the One who sent Me" (Jn 4:34). Holy He remained, righteous, without sin. He never attracted a debt with God, and so when the time came to suffer the wrath of God on the cross of Calvary He had sins of His own to atone for – and therefore could take upon Himself the sins of *others*, yours and mine. And God would accept His labor *in our place*.

True God

He was more than a true and righteous man. Twice in Luke 1 the angel said to Mary that her Child would "be called the Son of God." He'd be "called the Son of God" because, said Gabriel, the father of the child will not be a man, will not be your fiancé Joseph; rather, "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you." The Holy Spirit Himself –Who hovered over the face of the waters in Gen 1- would come upon Mary so that she would become pregnant with none less than the Son of God Himself.

It's specifically John who belabors this point. John speaks in the first chapter of his gospel of "the Word," says of Him that "the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (1:1). That Word is none other the second Person of the holy Trinity – true God. Of this Word –true God- John exalts that

"the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1:14).

That Word –God!- "became flesh," became man, joined in the weaknesses that characterize the human race since the fall into sin. Yet He remained God, for John insists that "we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father." Though true man man, the glory of God remained evident in Him – for He remained true God. That's why Matthew could say of this Child that He is "*Immanuel*," which is translated, "God with us" (1:21).

"God with us." How marvelous, beloved, the thought! God from heaven on high present on this earth! The Child that needed the tender care of His mother Mary was none less than – *God!* How astounding the mystery of God, how delightful the work of salvation God has prepared for us! "God with us": that is why Jesus, in the course of His years upon earth, could raise the dead, could heal the sick, could forgive sins. The Child born in Bethlehem remained true God, and so on the cross of Calvary could "bear in His human nature the burden of God's wrath" – and so "obtain for us and restore to us righteousness and life." In truth, how delightful God's work of salvation at Christmas!

We on earth were lost in our sins, hopeless in the face of the challenge of travelling that road of Justice back to God. While we were helpless, *God acted!* By God's work, Christ "became for us wisdom from God – and righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (I Cor 1:30). By His work –Christmas is Step 1 of God putting His plan into action- by His work we have *life!*

The time of year when the church remembers specifically this redeeming work of God in Jesus Christ is upon us. The world around us is busy, so very busy doing good to each other, buying that necessary present, preparing for the feasting. How great the temptation is that we get swept along! That's how Satan wants it; *distract* people, keep them busy with the pleasures and demands of this life – that way they haven't time to appreciate the glorious mystery of God revealed at Christmas.

You, then, what are you going to do for Christmas? Collect your family together to open gifts? Intentions aside, you will by so doing draw attention away from God's gift of His only Son.

What to do for Christmas? Tell, *tell* the children, *tell* the family of the mystery of God. *Tell* those around you how Triune God in heaven above determined so long ago that One of the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity should leave the glory of heaven for the crib of Bethlehem. *Tell* it, and *retell* that One of the Three Persons of the Trinity has become true man even while He remained true God. And why? "For us and our salvation!" *Tell* it, and let nothing you do in this season distract you from delighting in that gospel. More, let all you do in this season focus your attention – and the attention of those around you- onto this "holy gospel."

May the Lord God grant that none of us is swept along by the distractions characterizing the world around us. Instead, may we all be so filled with gratitude for the self-emptying God displayed at Christmas for our salvation that our entire conduct in the coming weeks is characterized by praise for such a God. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 15 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 4 March 2001.

**" CALVARY'S CROSS IS ABOUT CHRIST SATISFYING GOD'S WRATH AGAINST OUR SINS
."**

Text:

Lord's Day 15

37. Q. What do you confess when you say that He suffered?

A. 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.[1] Thus, by His suffering, as the only atoning sacrifice,[2] He has redeemed our body and soul from everlasting damnation,[3] and obtained for us the grace of God, righteousness, and eternal life.[4]

[1] *Is. 53; I Tim. 2:6; I Pet. 2:24; 3:18.* [2] *Rom. 3:25; I Cor. 5:7; Eph. 5:2; Heb. 10:14; I John 2:2; 4:10.* [3] *Rom. 8:1-4; Gal. 3:13; Col. 1:13; Heb. 9:12; I Pet 1:18, 19.* [4] *John 3:16; Rom. 3:24-26; II Cor. 5:21; Heb. 9:15.*

38. Q. Why did He suffer under Pontius Pilate as judge?

A. Though innocent, Christ was condemned by an earthly judge,[1] and so He freed us from the severe judgment of God that was to fall on us.[2] [1] *Luke 23:13-24; John 19:4, 12-16.* [2] *Is. 53:4, 5; II Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13.*

39. Q. Does it have a special meaning that Christ was crucified and did not die in a different way?

A. Yes. Thereby I am assured that He took upon Himself the curse which lay on me, for a crucified one was cursed by God.[1]

[1] *Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13.*

Scripture Reading:

Romans 2:5-11

Romans 3:21-26

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 116:9,10

Psalm 18:1

Hymn 22:1

Psalm 16:3,5

Hymn 52:1,3

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

With Lord's Day 15 we give our attention to the cross of Calvary. Concerning this cross I want today to ask you a question. We're well aware that the work of Jesus Christ on the cross stands central to the Christian faith. But can you tell me why the cross is so significant? What is this cross really all about?

Evangelical Christians of the world today give two different answers to that question. The one answer says that at the heart of the cross of Christ is the notion that the wrath of God had to be satisfied. The other answer disagrees; it says that at the heart of the cross is the notion that God wished to display His love. There's my question for you: which of these two do you think best captures what the cross of Jesus Christ was really all about? Is it *satisfaction of God's*

wrath against sinners or demonstration of God's love for sinners?

Before we proceed to answering this question, I should draw a picture of why this question is asked – and answered as it is. You see, for generations and centuries the church has answered this question as Lord's Day 15 does. That is, Christ's sufferings on the cross were the result of God's heavy wrath being poured out on His Son-become-man.

But that answer doesn't satisfy today's thinking. Western culture has become very me-centered. This me-centeredness brings with it a refusal to see the self as evil; it brings instead a love for self – and so seeing the self in positive terms. So we learn to tell ourselves that we're OK, parents tell their children that they're OK, counselors tell their clients to think of themselves in positive terms, etc. That focus on self, and so evaluating the self in positive terms, simply makes the traditional understanding of the cross of Christ offensive. To see the cross of Christ in terms of payment for sin, in terms of satisfying the wrath of God against sin, implies that people are sinners, are evil, are abhorrent, not OK. So there's numerous in our day who are honest enough to state in so many words that they find the cross of Christ offensive and they've turned away from the Christian faith altogether. But Satan is subtle. There are also those who continue to speak in glowing terms about the cross of Christ, but who have in the meantime altered the meaning of Christ's work on the cross. Instead of seeing the cross as satisfaction for God's wrath against sin, the cross is seen as a display of God's love. That is, God loves me, thinks that I'm such a decent chap that I should be His child, and so sent His only Son to earth to take my sin away so that I could be His....

We live and grow up in this culture that teaches us to think in positive terms about the self. The consequence of thinking in such terms of the self is that we lose sight of the depths of Christ's work on the cross. Today, then, I want to set forth for you what the cross of Christ was really all about. I want to show you from Scripture that Lord's Day 15 is so correct when it describes the sufferings of Christ on the cross in terms of His satisfying the severe wrath of God. That will give us a very unfavorable picture of ourselves, but so be it; it's exactly when we see our sins and misery for what it is that the riches of the gospel of the cross come in to clear focus.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

CALVARY'S CROSS IS ABOUT CHRIST SATISFYING GOD'S WRATH AGAINST OUR SINS.

1. The cross displays what I deserve
2. The cross proclaims what I receive

1. The cross displays what I deserve

God's wrath against sins is very real. In Rom 1 Paul lists certain patterns of behavior among men that result from God pouring out His wrath on unrepentant sinners. I read concerning these unrepentant people that

"God gave them over to a debased mind, to do those things which are not fitting; being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; they are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful..." (Rom 1:28ff).

These evils generate so very much suffering – and it's not only in society around us. How many in the church *suffer* as a result of whispering or backbiting, *suffer* because children are disobedient to parents, *suffer* because they sense around them untrustworthy spirits, unloving attitudes, unmerciful conduct. Suffering characterizes life outside the Garden of Eden, and we get so tired of this suffering. Rightly do we recognize that this suffering is the result of our fall into sin....

That is why, my brothers and sisters, we need to keep in mind that before God sent the human race out of the garden, out of His presence, out into a world of thorns and thistles *and suffering*, He spoke to them a word of gospel. The Seed of the woman, He said, would crush the seed of the serpent. Then He gave to Adam and Eve a gift, gave them "tunics of skin" (Gen 3:21). Why He did that? Why He replaced the coverings of fig leaves Adam and Eve had earlier made for themselves? Before the fall God had told Adam and Eve that if they would eat they would die (Gen 2:17). But God

is pleased to spare them, and *here is the first indication of **how** God would spare them, would satisfy His wrath* against their sins. From our position today we look back through the sacrificial laws of the Old Testament and see here already the outlines of the doctrine of substitution; an animal was put to death *in their place*.

The gospel comes into clearer focus when Abraham sacrifices his son Isaac on Mt Moriah. After God stopped Abraham from carrying out the final act, "Abraham lifted his eyes and looked, and there behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of his son" (Gen 22:13). It's especially the last four words of that text that are important for us today. Abraham offered up the ram "instead of his son." That's to say that Isaac should have died (and he deserved it; he was sinful as we all are, and God had said that "the soul that sins shall die"), but the ram died *in place of* Isaac, died *in his stead*.

The matter becomes clearer still in the laws given to Israel at Mt Sinai. It pleased the Lord to come and dwell in the midst of His people. A tabernacle had to be built in which God would dwell, but every morning and every evening an animal had to be sacrificed on the altar just outside that tabernacle. That is, between the people and their God there had to be blood. Why? The Lord gives the answer in Lev 17. Says God to His people:

"...I have given [blood] to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul" (vs 11).

The point? Such is God's wrath against the sins of man that every man should perish. Particularly now, given that God comes to live among His people-by-covenant, each of these persons should fall dead in the face of God's anger. But the people don't fall dead, they don't perish, because God is pleased to ordain that the blood of an animal should flow *instead* of the blood of the sinner. You see, the animal stands *in place of* the sinner, and so the sinner is not consumed by the wrath of offended God.

Certainly, we see gospel in that, and rightly so, for the sinner is spared. But focus for a moment, beloved, on the *price* this sparing cost. For the tabernacle in Israel was *awash* with blood. The place was slippery with blood, the place stank of decay and of burning flesh, the place was alive with flies, and what did the blood and the stink and the flies spell out? God's mercy? No, beloved, this is the smell of sin! All that blood and that odor and those flies spelled out how much God hated sin! He couldn't stomach sin, and would put up with *this* in order to get rid of sin! The apostle to the Hebrews sums up what happened day by day in the Old Testament temple: "without shedding of blood there is no remission" of sin (9:22), he writes.

But did it help? Did all those sacrifices of the Old Testament, all that blood, actually get rid of sin? The author of Hebrews continues:

"But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year. For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins" (10:3f).

Did it help? Did the blood and the smell take the sins away? No, brothers and sisters, it didn't! "It is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins." Instead, all those sacrifices simply pointed up how real sin was, how evil sin was, how revolting sin was to God.

That is why in turn these sacrifices had to come to an end; they could not go on indefinitely. For the wrath of God remained unsatisfied. Animal sacrifices in the Old Testament were no more than a foreshadowing that one day that infinite wrath of God would explode out of its boundaries and destroy all upon whom this wrath fell. And woe then to him upon whom this wrath would descend!

There came the day when John the Baptist was doing his work by the Jordan River. A man walked toward him. "Behold," John cried out, "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn 1:29). What John was saying here? Moved by the Holy Spirit, brothers and sisters, he identified Jesus as "the lamb of God." That is, John understood that Jesus had the function of the thousands of sheep slaughtered in the Old Testament tabernacle over the centuries. Such is God's wrath upon sin that sinners must perish. God had ordained that the blood of animals should make atonement for the soul, yet that blood of countless sheep could not finally take sins away. In the face of that futility God Himself supplied the Lamb who *could* take away sin. "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of

the world!"

Three years later this Lamb was slaughtered. Yet the means of slaughter was not the familiar pattern of the Old Testament sacrificial system. By God's ordinance, this Lamb had to be *crucified*. That is, He had to undergo the *most extreme suffering* that people knew about – crucifixion. More, this Lamb of God had to be hung on a cross because God had decreed in the book of Deuteronomy already that His curse lay upon all who were hanged (21:23). In a word, on the cursed cross of Calvary the Lamb of God tasted the wrath of God in its most potent form.

And why? Why the curse of God on this Lamb? Why this Lamb had to suffer the worst suffering possible on this earth? That, congregation, is because sin was transferred onto this Lamb. God from heaven on high saw the Lamb of God hanging on the cursed cross and *He saw sin*. Noah's drunkenness and Abram's lies, Jacob's deceit and his sons' hatred of their brother Joseph, Israel's idolatry in Egypt and complaints in the desert, David's adultery and Elijah's despair, and whatever other sin there was among the people of God in the Old Testament were placed squarely on the shoulders of the Lamb of God on the cross. More, the sins involved in Augustine's loose living and Calvin's bad temper, the sins involved in Kuyper's errors and Schilder's sharp pen, the sins of today's saints – be they sins of thought or word or deed, your sins or mine – were piled onto this Lamb. Now finally the cup of God's wrath was allowed to overflow, to explode onto Jesus Christ. The Son of God who had enjoyed glory with the Father in heaven from all eternity was now rejected by the very God whose glory had been His delight. It baffles the imagination, and the human tongue scarcely dares to say it, but on the cross of Calvary the Son of God was rejected by His Father! Such was the intensity of the wrath of God against sin that the Son who had enjoyed glory with the Father from eternity now had to cry out His despair, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?!"

It's all so well known to us. But please, my beloved, when you consider the cross see what was really going on there. The place stank literally to high heaven with the reek of sin, and that is why the place attracted the wrath of God so severely. But think: *whose* sin attracted such suffering for the Christ? Shall I say it was Israel's sins that attracted such suffering for Christ, or the sins of the folk of Africa or of the people of Amsterdam? God forbid that I should do that! My sin, *my sin* drew upon the Son of God on Calvary's cross the eternal wrath of God! Here's no room for looking at how evil the sins of others are; here's room only for the awful realization that *my* sins drove the Christ to such indescribable suffering.

What then is the cross of Calvary? *Here is displayed what God thinks of me!* I ought to *die* because I have sinned. More, I ought to die a prolonged, painful death, I ought to *suffer*, suffer so intensely on account of my sins. I, *I* should hang on that cursed cross! *That's* what I deserve – according to the righteous ordinance of God.

What is the cross of Calvary and the suffering of Christ on that cross? It is, congregation, a *demonstration of the wrath of God on our sins*. That cross leaves no room for me to think that I'm pretty good, leaves no room for me to think that God is happy enough with me to go out of His way to make me His child. The cross, and the suffering of Christ on it, spells out how God sees me, spells out what I really deserve, spells out what I'm really like. *It's all so humbling....*

But in the midst of wrath, the prophet says, God remembers mercy. And that is true in connection with the sufferings of Christ on the cross also. That's our second point:

2. The cross proclaims what I receive

What, brothers and sisters, was the purpose of Christ suffering so severely on the cross? In Lord's Day 15 we say that Christ's suffering is an "atoning sacrifice," yes, "the only atoning sacrifice." This notion of "atoning sacrifice" puts into English a difficult word found in Rom 3:25, the word "propitiation". "Propitiation" describes the idea of turning away the wrath of God by means of a sacrifice. That single word, then, captures the Old Testament teaching of an animal dying in place of the sinner so that the sinner might go free. When Paul says in Romans 3 that God sent His Son as "a propitiation by His blood", Paul is saying that Christ died *in place of* the sinner so that the sinner might go free. That is, through Christ's suffering God's wrath against sin is turned away from sinners – with as glorious result that there is no wrath from God left for the people of God!

It's a point, congregation, that we overlook to our peril. Those of you who still have the RSV with you in the pew will

notice that in your translation Rom 3:25 does not use the word ‘propitiation’ but the word ‘expiation’. Why? That’s because the RSV translation was prepared under the influence of the thought that God’s not that angry with sinners. Behind those two words, propitiation and expiation, there’s a drawn out theological debate about whether God indeed is wrathful on account of the sins of man (and that His wrath has to be satisfied) or whether it’s sufficient that sin is simply wiped out. With the word ‘expiation’ the RSV sought to leave in the reader’s mind the conclusion that God’s anger is not a factor; it’s sufficient that sin be wiped out. The NKJV, on the other hand, realizes that much more is at stake, and so translates with the word ‘propitiation’.

And rightly so. For, as the quote I mentioned earlier from Rom 1 shows, God’s wrath is in fact today proceeding from heaven and active upon earth. So real is that wrath of God today that Paul in Rom 2 reminds his readers of "the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to each one according to his deeds..., to those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth... – indignation and wrath, tribulation and anguish" (vs 5f, 8f). In chap 3 Paul continues his argument to show that every person, Jew or Greek, are all "under sin", and so are exposed to the wrath of God in this life and the life to come. Make no mistake, congregation, the controlling reality of every man’s life, as long as he stays in his sins, is the wrath of God – whether the person is aware of it or not.

Precisely there is the good news of the word propitiation. This term wants to say that this wrath is gone! People who were enemies of God are now made children of God. People upon whom rested the wrath of God may now know themselves loved by God. How come? *Propitiation*: through His work on the cross of Calvary Christ has satisfied the wrath of God against sin on our behalf.

Here, finally, beloved, is where the love of God enters the picture. For, yes, the cross of Christ certainly displays God’s love. But how? Listen to the apostle John:

"In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (I Jn 4:10).

Notice that John uses the word ‘propitiation’, and with that John brings in all the material of the first point of this sermon. The cross: it’s a display of God’s wrath; through the cross that wrath must be satisfied. Yet what, says John, prompted God to display that wrath and have it satisfied through the suffering of His Son? That, says John, is because of the love of God. Such was the Father’s love that He sent His Son to satisfy God’s wrath.

May we then ignore that wrath and focus simply on the Father’s love? Not so, brothers and sisters, not so. His love and His wrath need to stand side by side, and that is possible only if you see God’s love not as a love for sinners for sinners’ sake but a love for sinners for His own sake. And that message is so offensive to people wrapped up with themselves. We want God to love us for our own sakes, because we’re respectable creatures, likeable. But the Lord says categorically that it is not so; so great is our depravity that our sins stink to high heaven and provoke His fearsome wrath. Yet He loves sinners, for reasons found within Himself. And to ransom the sinners mercifully chose to love, He put His only Son on the cross *to satisfy His wrath* against those sinners.

O God, how marvelous are Your works! That I, who deserve to hang on Calvary’s cross on account of my sins, that I should be spared – how awesome, how wonderful, how delightful the news!

Now we go home. What’s at home? The joys of this life, *and the griefs!* Home, daily work: there’s so much suffering in it, and I get so tired of it. But the gospel of Christ’s suffering *in my place* puts the suffering of this life into perspective. For Christ’s work means that my Father in Jesus Christ *is not angry with me on account of my sins anymore!* Christ "obtained for us the grace of God, righteousness, and eternal life." So my faithful Father will carry me through the sufferings of this life until I receive the crown of glory. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 16 Q&A 44 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 18 March 2000.

"CHRIST'S HELLISH AGONY ASSURES US THAT GOD NEVER FORSAKES US."

Text:

Lord's Day 16 Q&A 44

44. Q. Why is there added: He descended into hell?

A. 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[1] but especially on the cross, has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell.[2]

[1] Ps. 18:5, 6; 116:3; Matt. 26:36-46; 27:45, 46; Heb. 5:7-10. [2] Is. 53.

Scripture Reading:

I Peter 3:18-22

Psalm 88

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 22:1,2

Psalm 88:1,2,6

Psalm 42:4,5

Psalm 22:7,8

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Sunday by Sunday we confess with the Apostles' Creed that Jesus Christ "descended into hell." What, congregation, do you understand by the phrase "descended into hell"? It needs to be granted that at first reading the phrase means that Christ went down to the literal place known as hell, the bottomless pit. And given where this phrase occurs in the Apostles' Creed –it occurs after the references to His crucifixion, death and burial, and before the reference to His resurrection- we walk away with the conclusion in our minds that here we're confessing that the Lord Jesus Christ spent the three days between His death and resurrection in the company of the devil and his demons.

Is this so? Did our Lord Jesus Christ literally spend a period of time in the company of the devil and his demons in the bottomless pit, in that place known as hell? If yes, of what comfort is that to us? If no, what is the significance of the Apostles' Creed as it's worded?

As it is, congregation, Scripture nowhere teaches that the Lord in fact went to that bottomless pit known as hell. When we in the Apostles' Creed confess Jesus' descent into hell, we're confessing something rather different. As we confess in our Lord's Day, Christ's descent into hell means that Christ endured the agony, the horrors of hell. And that's enormously comforting for us, for He endured this hellish agony *in our place*. So, no matter how deep the pit into which we sink might be, we never experience the terrors of hell.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

CHRIST'S HELLISH AGONY ASSURES US THAT GOD NEVER FORSAKES US.

1. The Scriptural meaning of this confession
2. The personal comfort of this confession

1. The Scriptural meaning of this confession

The Apostles' Creed, brothers and sisters, came into being via a process of growth. In other words, it was not written at one time, nor by one writer, but developed over a period of many years.

The last addition to this creed is the phrase under consideration this afternoon, "He descended into hell." Nobody really knows why these words were added. But "added" they were, and that comes back in our Catechism in Q 44: "Why is there *added*: He descended into hell?"

There are those who insist that with this phrase the Church would confess that Jesus literally went to that home of the devil and his demons, that place of eternal torment where the unbelieving go. To prove their point they refer specifically to the passage we read from I Peter 3. In vs 18 the Holy Spirit says this:

"For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison" (vss 18f).

Those last words, "preached to the spirits in prison," are then understood to be proof that the Lord Jesus Christ went to hell in order to preach the gospel of His victory to the damned. If that's true, that raises of course the next question: would these unbelievers then receive another chance still to repent....

As it is, brothers and sisters, Peter is not saying that Christ went to the home of the damned. Look carefully at what Peter says. He writes that "Christ ... suffered once for sins." We understand that to be a reference to what Christ experienced on the cross of Calvary. Peter adds that Christ was "put to death in the flesh." That's a reference to His death on Good Friday. Peter continues, "but was made alive by the Spirit." That describes Jesus' resurrection on Easter Sunday. After His resurrection, by this Spirit, Christ "went", Peter adds. Where to? Peter doesn't tell us right away. But he does tell us what Jesus did by His going. He "preached to the spirits in prison." Now, that phrase "spirits in prison" certainly does suggest to our minds that Peter is thinking of the damned in hell. The problem is, though, that the Bible nowhere else uses the word 'spirits' to describe people, let alone the people who have gone to hell. But the Bible certainly uses the word 'spirits' to describe angels, be it good angels or fallen angels (cf Eph 2:2). And Peter himself says later on what happened to the "angels who sinned" in the beginning (II Peter 2:4). These angels, says Peter, —we know them as demons— were cast into hell, and there God chained them so that these demons cannot do all that they would like to do (cf Rev 20:1f). These fallen angels are "the spirits in prison" of I Pet 3. To them, Peter says, Jesus "preached". When? Peter is emphatic: this preaching occurred *after* Jesus' resurrection. Whatever it is that Peter is describing here, it took place not while Jesus was dead but rather after He arose from the dead. Note that vs 19 occurs after the resurrection mentioned in vs 18. Further, His *going* was the proclamation. That's vs 19: by the Spirit He "went", and it's the fact that "He went" that forms a proclamation to the demons of hell. You see, those spirits are in prison, they're bound, and so they can't stop Jesus from going where He wills. That Jesus could freely "go" was a proclamation to the demons that He was more than they. That's underlined in vs 22, where Peter says that Jesus went to heaven and there received a place at God's right hand, with "angels and authorities and powers" (that describes the fallen angels, cf Eph 6:12) "having been made subject to Him." Notice, then, congregation: I Peter 3 does not teach that Christ went literally to the bottomless pit.

Yet it's not, brothers and sisters, simply a matter of the Bible nowhere saying that Jesus went to that place called hell after He died. The Bible is emphatic in telling us where Jesus *did* go after His death. Remember the words we read last week from Luke 23. To the criminal on the cross Jesus said, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). Notice: Jesus speaks of "today", and not at some undisclosed time in the future after He could possibly have gone to hell. Notice too that Jesus tells the criminal that he would be "with Me" in Paradise. That's to say: Jesus would Himself be in Paradise. And Paradise, of course, is not hell, but heaven. Further, just before He died, Jesus said to His Father, "Father, into Your hands I commit my spirit" (23:46). We well understand that with these words Jesus is not committing His spirit to the devil in hell but to the Father in heaven. No beloved, the Bible makes

very clear that when Jesus died on the cross His body stayed on this earth, but Jesus Himself went to His Father in heaven. It happened to Him as it happens to all God's own; when Jesus died His soul was "immediately" taken up to heaven (cf Lord's Day 22).

So we're back to our question from the beginning: what are we to understand by the phrase of the Apostles' Creed that Jesus "descended into hell"?

The answer, congregation, requires us to consider what is meant by the word 'hell'. 'Hell' is that bottomless pit with its everlasting fire, its gnashing of teeth, its pain and terror (cf Mt 24:51; 25:30, 41, 46). The human mind doesn't like the notion of such a place, and around us we hear denials that hell in fact exists. But the Word of God is emphatic that, Yes, hell is most certainly very real. Yet the essence of hell is not its fire and terror and pain; these are but the fruits of what hell at bottom really is. What characterises hell, and gives it its terror, is the fact that hell is void of any grace from God. Hell is to be rejected by God, deserted and disowned by the Creator and Sustainer of life, to be denied any grace from the Maker of heaven and earth. *That* is hell.

Forsaken, forgotten. Maybe it's happened to you in years gone by that you were with your mother in a crowded mall. You looked around..., and couldn't find your mother. She was gone..., you were alone.... That feeling of rejection, of lost ness, that panic: multiply that endlessly, and maybe you being to taste the terror, the pain of hell, of being rejected by God.

The Scriptures give us examples of persons who felt forsaken by God. I think of Heman the Ezrahite – Ps 88. We don't know who he was, we don't know his situation; we know only how he felt. Listen to him:

"O Lord, God of my salvation,
I have cried out day and night before You.
Let my prayer come before You;
Incline Your ear to my cry" (vss 1f).

But God doesn't hear. Though Heman's "soul is full of troubles," God in heaven has no time for Heman. Heman prays, but God ignores him, forsakes him.... Vs 13:

"...to You I have cried out, O Lord,
And in the morning my prayer comes before You.
Lord, why do You cast off my soul?
Why do You hide Your face from me?"

All his praying helps not a thing...; God is gone.... And if it's not bad enough that God is gone, Heman complains that his friends and loved ones too want nothing to do with him, more: "Loved one and friend *You* have put far from me" vs 18). Talk, beloved, about a sense of total despair....

Was Heman in fact forgotten by God, forsaken? Make here no mistake, congregation. The Lord God had established with Heman the Ezrahite the same covenant of grace that He established with every other child of His in the course of history. At his circumcision the Lord signified and sealed to Heman that he was God's child-by-covenant, and so God promised to be Heman's Father, to supply all his needs, to avert all evil or turn it to Heman's benefit. What do you think: would the God who promised such riches to this covenant child of His some years later turn around and forsake this child? Is that the God of the Bible, the kind of God Heman had, *you have*?? We know it well: the Bible is emphatic that God isn't like *that*.

And *why* is He not like that? Do our sins not dictate that God should leave us and forsake us? Yes, beloved, it is true; our sins do dictate that. But we confessed the other week - and ate and drank the sign and seal of that reality today - that Christ by His death on the cross has paid for our sins so that God is not angry with us on account of our sins anymore. So our sins are never a reason why God might forsake us. Are there other reasons, then, why He would forsake us? Will it ever happen that we find ourselves in a hell, a place where God is not with us?

See here, my brothers and sisters, the point of the confession that Christ "descended into hell." What is hell? That

God's grace is gone. What happened to Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary? *God withdrew from Him every trace of His grace!* From the sixth hour till the ninth, from twelve noon till three PM –when the sun is hottest and light the most intense- blackest night settled around the cross of Calvary. That black symbolized that God –God is light- was *gone*. God, Jesus' Father, the Sustainer of life, the God who was Jesus' very bread, the God whose will was Jesus' delight, forsook His child, went away, withdrew His grace. All that was left was wrath, eternal wrath: that was anguish for the Christ, was pain, terror, agony. From our own experiences we know what anguish is, we know what pain is, and terror, and agony. But words fail us, congregation, as we seek to describe the intensity of the anguish that settled upon the Son of God as His Father turned His back on Him, forsook Him. We can empathize with Heman in his anguish, but who, beloved, who can plumb the depths of Jesus' anxiety when He cried out those agonizing words, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" Well do we in our Catechism describe Christ's "anguish, pain, terror and agony" with the word "unspeakable". With our limited and broken minds we can't even begin to understand the agony, the terror, this was for our Lord. All we can say is that this was hell for the Son of God. No, Christ did not literally descend so many meters into a pit called hell. But on the cross itself the circumstance characterizing hell settled on the Son of God. That is what is captured by that phrase of our confession, "He descended into hell."

2. The personal comfort of this confession

What, now, is the benefit of this hellish agony on Christ's part? This, beloved: Christ's forsakenness on the cross is *the reason why Heman was not forsaken*. Heman, like all of us, had those moments that he felt God was gone, God didn't care, God showed no grace. On his knees beside his bed at night he poured out his complaint to God, and to the way he experienced it his plea fell on deaf ears. In the morning he poured out his complaint to God again, and again to the way he felt about God did not hear. He experienced no grace from God, experienced God as absent. But the way Heman *experienced* things was never the true measure of reality, for his feelings were warped by the fall into sin. The God who established His covenant with Heman would never forsake His child –why not?- because one day Christ would be forsaken!! Never would Heman taste the unspeakable agony of hell because one day *Christ would taste that unspeakable agony*.

Here, congregation, is unspeakable comfort! Our Lord's Day speaks of "our greatest sorrows and temptations." With that phrase, our Lord's Day would have us think back to the worst thing that has ever happened to us. So, think, beloved: what is the worst thing that ever happened to you? What makes for your worst nightmares, your feelings of terror, of panic?? More often than not, those events –our greatest sorrows and temptations- lead us to conclude that God wasn't with us, and the pain that keeps coming back leads us to conclude that there is no grace from God for us. *Hell*.

But this is the gospel, dear brothers and sisters. The Lord God would have us know that even in such "greatest sorrows and temptations" He has not deserted us, He has not withdrawn His grace from us. How we *experience* things is not the measure of reality! On the cursed cross Christ was deserted, forsaken, God's grace withheld from Him, so that we might never be deserted, forsaken by God. That is the gospel, beloved! And that is why you may be assured and comforted –despite the horrors of your situation- that you are not alone, you are not in a hell, forsaken by God and His grace. By His unspeakable anguish He has "delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell" – we say in our Lord's Day, and that's to confess that we never taste hell in this life nor the life to come, regardless of what happens.

This morning we read together the *Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper*, and we'll read the Abbreviated Form shortly. That Form puts this gospel into such beautiful words. Listen: "On the cross He humbled Himself, in body and soul, to the very deepest shame and anguish of hell. Then He called out with a loud voice, My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? –purpose?- *that we might be accepted by God and nevermore be forsaken by Him* (*Book of Praise*, pg 597). The Abbreviated Form puts it more pointedly: "He was forsaken by God that we might nevermore be forsaken by Him." You heard that, beloved? You sat at His table, you ate the bread and drank from the cup because Christ would impress on you that you have part in His sacrifice. *That means that this blessing is also yours!* This is a gospel promised in the covenant, and that is why Heman, despite his feelings of rejection, continued to pray. He *knew* –for God is faithful- that his feelings didn't tell him all the true facts of life.

We go back to our regular lives, and for some of us that includes the memories that gives us nightmares. Such is the

care of your covenant God, beloved, that He impresses on you today the good news that He never leaves you nor forsakes you (Heb 13:5). Christ tasted hellish agony long ago so that you might today never taste that sort of agony. God withdrew all grace from Him so that He might never withdraw His grace from you today.

What, now, is faith? To keep dwelling on those feelings of being alone, forsaken by God? No, beloved, no. Faith is that one subjects those feelings of aloneness to the greater reality driven home today through Word and sacraments: *God never leaves us or forsakes us*. That is why prayer is always, always possible. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 16 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday Morning 11 March, 2001.

" CHRIST'S DEATH MAKES THE CHRISTIAN'S DEATH A GAIN."

Text:

Lord's Day 16

40. Q. Why was it necessary for Christ to humble Himself even unto death?

A. Because of the justice and truth of God[1] satisfaction for our sins could be made in no other way than by the death of the Son of God.[2]

[1] Gen. 2:17. [2] Rom. 8:3; Phil. 2:8; Heb. 2:9, 14, 15.

41. Q. Why was he buried?

A. His burial testified that He had really died.[1]

[1] Is. 53:9; John 19:38-42; Acts 13:29; I Cor. 15:3,4.

42. Q. Since Christ has died for us, why do we still have to die?

A. Our death is not a payment for our sins, but it puts an end to sin and is an entrance into eternal life.[1]

[1] John 5:24; Phil. 1:21-23; I Thess. 5:9, 10.

43. Q. What further benefit do we receive from Christ's sacrifice and death on the cross?

A. Through Christ's death our old nature is crucified, put to death, and buried with Him,[1] so that the evil desires of the flesh may no longer reign in us,[2] but that we may offer ourselves to Him as a sacrifice of thankfulness.[3]

[1] Rom. 6:5-11; Col. 2:11, 12. [2] Rom. 6:12-14. [3] Rom. 12:1; Eph. 5:1, 2.

44. Q. Why is there added: He descended into hell?

A. 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[1] but especially on the cross, has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell.[2]

[1] Ps. 18:5, 6; 116:3; Matt. 26:36-46; 27:45, 46; Heb. 5:7-10. [2] Is. 53.

Scripture Reading:

Genesis 5

Luke 23:38-56

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 116:1,2,3

Psalm 6:2,3

Psalm 90:3,4,5

Hymn 51:6,7,8

Hymn 56:1,3 & Psalm 16:5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

I doubt that too many of us spend a lot of time thinking about death. Most of us, after all, are young, and so, in the nature of things, have other things on our minds. And that's healthy.

Yet, brothers and sisters, the Lord God has been pleased to reveal this and that about death. Since every part of God's revelation is important for us and necessary, we need to make it our business to know what God has said on this topic. In fact, the matter of what God has said about death becomes the more important when we realize what our culture is thinking and doing about death. For on the one hand our culture wants to minimize death and downplay its sting; one sees evidence of that in the promotion of euthanasia in our land as well as in the skeletons and other death images on the t-shirts of the nation's youth. On the other hand, our culture is scared of death, and that comes out in the desire to extend life at all costs, to fight off death as long as possible. Those two, the minimization of death on the one hand and the fight against death on the other, are, of course, two sides of one coin; such is the fear of death that people make a joke of it in their efforts to avoid facing death's bitter reality.

In the midst of this culture the Lord tells us what death really is, tells us too what our Lord Jesus Christ has done about death. His Word teaches us that death is the payment God requires for sin, and since the payment isn't enough death remains for the unbeliever a horrible reality; death signifies entry to hell. But not so for the child of God. Since Jesus Christ has paid for sin, death is no longer our payment for sin, but signifies entrance into God's presence in heaven.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

CHRIST'S DEATH MAKES THE CHRISTIAN'S DEATH A GAIN.

1. The cause of death
2. The defeat of death
3. The purpose of death

1. Cause of death

The paradise God made in the beginning did not know death. That death nevertheless entered God's beautiful world makes death a foreign thing, an enemy.

Where death came from? God had said to Adam and Eve on the day He made them that they could eat of every tree of the Garden, with the exception of the one. God added that "in the day that you eat of it, you shall surely die" (Gen 2:17). Death would follow their eating of the tree simply because their eating would be sin. This connection between sin and death is repeated elsewhere in Scripture. I read in Ezekiel 18 that "the soul who sins shall die" (vs 4). And Paul says in Rom 6 that "the wages of sin is death" (vs 23). God has placed a direct link between those two concepts. You cannot speak of sin without bringing up death as its penalty, its consequence. And you cannot speak of death without bringing up its cause, the fall into sin.

Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit. As God had ordained, they died the moment they sinned. No, they didn't die physically; their heart didn't stop beating. Rather, they died spiritually. By disobeying God, Adam and Eve broke the covenant bond God had established with them, and joined Satan's side, established a bond with Satan. Being on Satan's side, having a bond with Satan, is what Paul calls "dead in sin" (Eph 2:1,5). You see, 'life' according to Scripture is not simply that one breathes, or that the heart beats. 'Life' is a much deeper concept, is in fact that one has *communion with God*. 'Life' is that the covenant bond with God is active, is vibrant. But by disobeying God's command, Adam and Eve broke that covenant – and thereby broke the bond with God, became "dead in sin". So it was that when they heard the sound of God coming in the cool of the day, they hid themselves. They were scared of God, dead with respect to God, spiritually dead.

Physical death followed many years later. Gen 5 tells us that Adam lived 930 years, "and he died" (vs 5). In fact, that's a refrain throughout Gen 5; for each generation we read those disturbing words, "and he died" (cf vss 8, 11, 14, 17, etc). Physical death invariably comes so that the body must return to the dust from which it was taken. The penalty God placed on the fall into sin cannot be escaped; all *must* die. Resist though one will, stay physically fit, inject medicines, etc, ultimately does not help; "it is appointed for all men once to die," and so it happens. Though men lived some 900 years before the flood, the end for all was the same; "and he died." Moses was years later inspired by the Lord to write that "the days of our lives are seventy years; and if by reason of strength they are eighty years" (Ps

90:10) – and we die. There are no exceptions. What today is so strong, so muscular, so fit, becomes weak tomorrow. And the weak peter out, we die.... It is the bitter fruit of our disobedience in Paradise. Sin, death: those two can't be separated.

Or can they? Gen 5 mentions one exception to that sad refrain about death. Though of every generation it is said that "he died", it is said of Enoch that "he was not, for God took him" (vs 24). This man was a sinner like anybody else, responsible for his transgression in Paradise and his transgressions day by day. Yet he did not die! How is that possible? Surely it means that you *can* separate sin from death, death from sin! And so it is, brothers and sisters. That brings us to our second point:

2. The defeat of death

The day came when Jesus of Nazareth hung on the cross of Calvary. After experiencing hellish agony –rejection by men and God alike- He "cried out with a loud voice" and said, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit." What, my brothers and sisters, happened next? Can you recall? You will tell me, I think, that then Jesus died – and so we can add Jesus' name to the list of Gen 5; "Jesus lived 33 years, and He died."

Did He? Some of you have been at a deathbed, have seen a man die. What happens? A man of strength is overcome by illness or old age, and the result is that gradually he becomes weaker and weaker..., until finally he just peters out.... That is, death comes along to take him, and he can't fight it anymore; he dies.

Did Jesus do that? It's not, congregation, what the Bible says. I read in Luke 23 that after He committed His spirit to His God, Jesus "breathed His last" (23:46). John says that Jesus "gave up His spirit" (19:30). Both Luke and John avoid the phrase so common from Gen 5 that "He died". They avoid the phrase because Jesus didn't peter out, didn't slide into a coma so that death came along and took Jesus. No, for Jesus death was a *decision*, was an *action*. At His time, He sovereignly gave Himself to death. Consider the following factors:

- We read from Luke 23 that Pilate placed an inscription over Jesus on the cross proclaiming, "This is the King of the Jews." Pilate meant this as a farce, meant it to poke fun at the Jews. Yet there was definite truth in the proclamation of the sign. Since Jesus remained true God, He was sovereign King even on the cross. In fact, He remained sovereign Master of death as well.
- We read that one of the criminals crucified with Jesus challenged Him to "save Yourself and us." Could Jesus do it? Most certainly He could. He had the power to hop off the cross any time. That's exactly why the criminal's words form a temptation for Jesus; He was powerful to do what the criminal wanted – and so escape the agony of the cross.
- I read in vs 46 that Jesus "cried out with a loud voice." The dying don't cry out with a loud voice (unless one is being killed, and that's not the case here). The most the dying can do is whisper.... But Jesus has strength.
- Jesus says in vs 46, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit." Here, too, is action. Jesus does something, consciously, deliberately hands over His spirit, His soul to God in heaven. I know, David in Ps 31 spoke the identical words (vs 5), and we may voice these words too on our death beds, but for us these words are a resignation; we see death approaching, we can't fight it anymore, and so we give in, resign ourselves to the inevitable, and so commit our spirit to our God. But in Jesus' situation there is nothing of resignation; on the lips of the Son of God on the cross of Calvary these words contain decision, contain authority, action.

Jesus "breathed His last," says Luke, and that does not mean that Jesus just petered out, that He slipped into a coma and death took Him away. Rather, Jesus made a conscious decision now to die. He was master over death, now decided to breathe His last, and so gave Himself to death at a point of His choosing. As Jesus Himself said in Jn 10:

"My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again" (vss 17f).

This, my brothers and sisters, is a remarkable thing. God had laid a connection between sin and death so that all who sinned invariably had to die; death was the penalty on sin, death was payment for sin. Jesus was *the* Sinner, for all our sins were piled onto Him. So He had to die. But see, Jesus dies in a way different from any other person! Others die as *victims* to death. Not so Jesus; He died as *master* over death. Why the difference? That, of course, is because through His suffering He had atoned for sin. Recall: after the three hours of darkness He cried out on the cross that "it is finished" (Jn 19:30). So death for Jesus was no longer payment for sin, no longer curse from God over sin. So God did not send Death either to take Jesus anymore.

Given, then, that sin was paid for, why did Jesus still die?! Hebrews 2 puts it like this: "through death [Jesus] might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil" (vs 14). That is, instead of Death coming along to take a weakened Jesus along with him to the realm of the dead, the sovereign Christ on the cross took hold of Death and determined to go with Death for as long as He wished. Because He took hold of Death and so breathed His last, He could also rise from the dead and begin breathing again. He is master over death; the power of death is broken, destroyed.

It is a point, brothers and sisters, that must be clear in our minds. For all of us it's true that we are victims of death, that Death is stronger than we are, that we have to go along with Death. That is the penalty of our fall into sin; ultimately we have to give in to Death, submit to Death. *But not so Jesus!* He gives Himself to Death at His time. More, Death is His servant, Death must serve His purposes.

From His position of strength over Death, the Lord Jesus Christ could change the *reason* of death for the child of God. The connection God placed between sin and death meant that death was the consequence of sin, more, that death was man's payment for sin. But because of our sinfulness and brokenness, our payment was never adequate; neither Adam or Noah or Abraham or Moses or any of the Old Testament fathers could present their own blood as adequate payment to God for sin. That is why all those who died without faith in the coming Savior woke up after death in the agony of hell; Death was the certain entrance to hell.

But because Christ paid for sin, no sinner needs to offer his own blood to God anymore. In that equation where sin leads to death, sin is gone because sin has been paid for. That's why death is no longer the payment for sin. That is also why Paul can say to the Corinthians that "Death is swallowed up in victory." For, he adds, "the sting of death is sin," but sin is taken away! (15:54ff).

Here, congregation, is also the delightful gospel of Jesus' burial. Joseph of Arimathea took the body of the dead Jesus down from the cross. That involved removing the hands and feet from the nails, touching the body, carrying the body to the tomb. All of that gave ample time to observe that the look in Jesus' eyes was vacant, dead, that the temperature of the body was the temperature of death, that rigor mortis had set in. Had Joseph observed that the body was warm, that rigor mortis had not set in, he most certainly would not have buried it. Here is a witness that Jesus was really dead.

And that's gospel! Christ had paid for sin. Yet He sovereignly gave Himself to death that –as Hebrews 2 says– "through death He might destroy him who had the power over death, that is, the devil." And that chapter adds that thereby Jesus "release[d] those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage" (vs 15). No longer is death for the child of God his payment for sin! That link God placed between sin and death is severed! Christ changed the *reason* for death. That change of reason for death was foreshadowed already in Gen 5 with the reference to Enoch not dying. He did not die, but instead "God took him" (vs 24) because this would be the new purpose of death; instead of being payment for sin, death would be for Jesus' sake the means by which God would bring His own into eternal glory. In a world where the cold reality proclaimed that all men die, God spared Enoch the humiliation of death in order to proclaim to all the world that God in Christ would break the link between sin and death – and so all the world of Enoch's day was confronted with the gospel.

That brings us to our third point:

3. The Purpose of Death

Why, congregation of the Lord, do we still have to die? If Christ has paid for sin so that death is no longer the payment for sin, why does God not simply let us live on and on? It strikes us as desirable – especially if we have lost loved ones....

Note, beloved, the way we answer that question in the Catechism. Answer 42: death "puts an end to sin and is an entrance into eternal life." Here are two factors. The first is that death "puts an end to sin." The point here is that life on this earth remains a vale of tears. We all experience it; life knows pain, be it suffering because of illness, be it suffering because of disappointments with people. Children are received with joy in one's youth, but those same children can be cause for deep concern and disappointment later on. And what shall we say of the pain caused by apostasy in the world around us, and weaknesses in the church.... More, the older one gets, the more one's own weaknesses become evident, and bother you.... Shall we then live on and on? No, beloved, there is profound *mercy* in God's decision to relieve His people from the trials of this life. "The days of our lives are seventy years," long enough to complete the task of raising the next generation of covenant children, and God relieves us of the sufferings that characterize this vale of tears. Through Death as His tool, God "puts an end to sin" in the lives of His beloved.

Yet God does not use death only to put an end to sin. Death does not put one into a non-existence, into a world of nothingness free only from pain and suffering. Death "puts an end to sin," yes, and at the same time "is an entrance into eternal life." 'Life', I said before, is 'communion with God'. In this earthly life the child of God already lives with God; in fact the Holy Spirit has made His home in our hearts. That life-with-God never ends for the child of God. That is why Paul can say to the Romans that even death cannot separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom 8:38f). But it remains fact that in this life we do not see God face to face. More, because of sin we repeatedly experience a measure of distance between ourselves and God. How, now, do we get out of this vale of tears into that world of glory in the presence of our covenant God? The way to get from this life to that life is by means of death. Death is the entrance, death is the door through which the child of God must travel to get out of a life of sorrow and brokenness into a life in God's presence. Whereas the Lord simply "took" Enoch so long ago (and Elijah too), God is pleased not to use that means for the rest of us; He in His wisdom is pleased to take us to glory by means of death.

We might wish it were different, for we realize well that the process of dying brings its pain, its own humiliation. Here we need to bear in mind, brothers and sisters, that God maintains His word in the beginning. He said that if we would eat we would die. He keeps His word, and so we shall have to undergo the humiliation of death. So we taste just how broken we've become as a result of our fall into sin, and therefore how much we need the redeeming work of the Savior. Yet even tasting that brokenness is not a bad thing, for Paul says to the Corinthians that for the child of God that process of dying brings with it an inner renewal (I Cor 4:16). That inner renewal is the beginning of a "weight of glory" that God gives to His own in the life to come. So Paul can say to the Philippians that death is "gain". Sure, he'd prefer to keep living in this life, he says, because he can see work that needs to be done. But, he adds, it's "far better" to be with Christ; "to die is gain" (Phil 1:21ff). No more tears, no more pain, no more remnants of sin; only glory with God – how rich the future for the sinner bought with Jesus' blood! And the way to enter that realm of glory is through the door of death. No wonder Paul can jubilate that "Death is swallowed up in victory," that the sting of death is broken, is gone (I Cor 15:54f).

Shall we then prolong life at all cost? The world around us will spend big money and effort to keep death at bay, and yes, that's so understandable; those not washed in Jesus' blood need to pay for their own sins – and they can't! How awful is death for those who must face God empty-handed! But not so for those whose sins have been washed away in Jesus' blood. Keep death at bay at all costs? In this matter too, beloved, we may be different from those around us. Sure, let us treasure the life God gives. But fight of death at all costs? There is no need to do that. Let us lift our eye beyond the fact of death, and beyond the empty place that will result from the passing on of a loved one. The Lord is pleased to give the crown of glory to a dear child of His. We realize: it will not do to begrudge another such a privilege.

Then it's true: for those left behind an empty place remains. Death does leave such a painful scar. And those who have lost loved ones know so well how intense the longing can be to have the loved one back, how much of a struggle it is to let the loved one go. We're confronted so painfully with the harsh reality that we still live in a vale of tears, that we

have not yet been relieved of the suffering that characterizes this fallen world. But for us who remain, beloved, the good news of Christ's triumph over death has encouragement for us too. It's not just the sick or the aged who benefit from the confession of Christ's death, but also the young and the healthy. For Christ's triumph means that the living are spiritually alive again. And that's to say that those who live in Christ have "communion with God" again. Then yes, death leaves a very empty place, and that emptiness hurts. But communion with God –being *alive* in the true sense of Scripture- means that there is no distance between God and us, that we're secure in His hands, deeply loved by a God who gave His only Son to the death of the cross so that we might live with Him forever. Granted, in the face of an empty place left by death we might not feel that God is near, might not feel that God loves us dearly. But what we feel is not the measure of reality; our feelings are warped by the fall into sin. The fact of the matter is that even in our aloneness and grief, the God who has let loved us go through the door of death before we travel that route continues to carry us in His hands.

How did Paul say it again? "I am persuaded," he said, "that neither death nor" –and there follows a long list- "that neither death nor ... anything else can separate us from the love of God which is in Jesus Christ our Lord" (Rom 8:38f). That includes our own death as well as the death of loved ones. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 17 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 26 March 2000.

"CHRIST'S RESURRECTION FROM THE DEAD IMPLIES THAT WE MAY LIVE BEFORE GOD FOREVER."

Text:

Lord's Day 17

45. Q. How does Christ's resurrection benefit us?

A. 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.[1] Second, by His power we too are raised up to a new life.[2] Third, Christ's resurrection is to us a sure pledge of our glorious resurrection.[3]

[1] Rom. 4:25; I Cor. 15:16-20; I Pet. 1:3-5. [2] Rom. 6:5-11; Eph. 2:4-6; Col. 3:1-4. [3] Rom. 8:11; I Cor. 15:12-23; Phil. 3:20, 21.

Scripture Reading:

I Corinthians 15:1-23

Ephesians 2:1-10

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 116:1,2,3

Psalms 115:8

Hymn 28:2,3

Psalms 30:1,2,7

Psalms 16:5 & Hymn 51:2,4,8

Beloved Congregation of the Lord!

Sunday by Sunday we confess with the church of all ages that the Christ who was crucified, dead and buried arose on the third day.

Resurrection. From our own experience we know well that death is permanent; never has anyone buried in Fremantle Cemetery again walked the streets of Fremantle, and we don't expect to meet the deceased on the street either. Our experiences dictate it: the dead remain dead. So we are not surprised that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is widely denied....

Yet there is, brothers & sisters, that word from the apostle Paul to the Corinthians. Says Paul in I Cor 15: "for I delivered to you first of all that which I also received." And what was it that Paul considered to be so important? This: "that Christ died for sins..., that He was buried, that He rose again on the third day" (vs 3f). So, not just Christ's death and burial are of utmost importance; of equal importance with the death and the burial is Christ's resurrection from the dead. As the apostle explains somewhat later: "If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!" (vs 17).

We wonder: why can Paul be so categorical about the need for that resurrection? In Lord's Day 17 we confess the

answer to be that Christ's resurrection guarantees our own eternal life with God.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

CHRIST'S RESURRECTION FROM THE DEAD IMPLIES THAT WE MAY LIVE BEFORE GOD FOREVER.

1. We are made righteous before God
2. We are raised to a new life
3. We are pledged a glorious resurrection

1. We are made righteous before God

We remember on Easter Sunday that a grave was opened, and the dead person in that grave resurrected. To understand the meaning of that resurrection of so long ago, we must identify first *who* arose.

The one who arose, we know, was Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He had lived a number of years on earth, had preached the gospel of redemption, and though He had initially been welcomed by the people He was later rejected and crucified.

Crucified He was. Scripture tells us that a hanged man is accursed of God (Dt 21:23). Jesus Christ, in other words, Son of God though He was, was *cursed* by God. With Lord's Day 15 we confessed why; He was cursed because He took on Himself the sins of His people. And sin is something God hates, is something God will not tolerate. Sin He became, and that is why God poured out His *wrath* on Jesus. For three hours there was total darkness, and that darkness meant that God had deserted Jesus, it meant that Jesus was alone without God, was rejected by God. At the end of those three hours He cried out that His work was finished, and then He gave up His spirit, died. He died because "the justice and truth of God required that satisfaction for our sins could be made in no other way than by the death of the Son of God." He died, and was subsequently buried.

This, my brothers and sisters, is the man whose grave was empty Easter Sunday! That man, whom God had crucified on Good Friday, arose on Easter Sunday. That same man, whom God had rejected on Good Friday, was raised on Easter Sunday. He who cried that all was finished and then breathed His last, is the man who vacated His tomb on the third day.

How come He vacated His grave? Scripture gives two answers, and both need our attention this afternoon. Scripture says of Jesus on the one hand that "God raised Him up" (Acts 2:24), and on the other hand that "Jesus arose" (I Cor 15:4). You catch the difference; in the first instance Jesus is passive, is acted upon, is raised. In the second Jesus is active, does something, arises. Both emphases need our attention.

First, then, Scripture says that "God raised Him up." The significance? This: on Easter Sunday the very same God who had earlier cursed Jesus of Nazareth now raised Jesus of Nazareth from the dead. On Easter Sunday the same God who had deserted His Son because that Son had become all sin now raised this same Son from the dead. Why did God do that? Why this public change in God's approach to Jesus? That, brothers and sisters, was because the entire world should know that *God had lifted the curse* He publicly laid on Jesus three days earlier! It was so that all the world might know beyond a doubt that *God was satisfied with the work Christ had performed on Calvary*, was satisfied with the sacrifice Christ had made for sin.

We know well that an offer to pay \$20,000 for a car doesn't make the car yours until the salesman has accepted the offer. "It is finished," cried the Son after undergoing the three hours of darkness, but on Good Friday heaven there was from heaven no reply as to whether God considered the payment sufficient. *That public reply of acceptance did not come until the third day.* Then God sent angels to earth to roll back the stone from the sepulchre, caused the earth to quake, tombs to open and many of the recently dead to walk about the streets of Jerusalem. And all of that was to direct attention to the empty tomb; it was to say: God in heaven has raised Jesus Christ from the dead. "God raised Him up" as sure evidence that God accepted the sacrifice Christ offered to Him on the cross. By His act of raising Jesus God says in the hearing of all the world: "well done, good and faithful servant."

But, my brothers and sisters, if God was pleased with Christ's work so that He raised Jesus from the dead, then it follows that God no longer saw Jesus as covered with the sins of the human race. The very Jesus whom God condemned on Good Friday is now acceptable to God, innocent of sin; God now sees Christ as righteous in His eyes. That's why Christ can stand before God again, and God receive Him. It's a point I'll come back to shortly.

First, though, I need to draw out that Scripture tells us more than that God raised Christ. We're also told in so many words that Christ "arose" (I Cor 15:4), that is, that He Himself acted, left the grave, picked up His life again. So it's not only so that God the Father acted on Jesus Christ and *raised* Him; it's also that God the Son acted upon Himself and so arose. What that means? That means, brothers and sisters, that Jesus Christ –though dead!- had power over death, power to escape death, power to make Himself alive again. So His rising is proof of His majesty, His strength.

But of what importance was it that Jesus demonstrate His power? This: He showed that *He actually had the power to forgive sins*. For what is easier, for Christ to say that one's sins are forgiven, or for Christ to pick Himself up from the dead and walk? Jesus sovereignly arose from the dead, and that's to say that He escaped the clutches of Death, better, He defeated the prince of Death, Satan. That's what His rising was a demonstration of. And because He defeated Satan was His rising from the dead also a judgment over Satan; here was evidence that Satan was bound, trussed up, broken. And if Satan is broken, then Christ can freely take from the slaves of Satan and make them again children of God. And He can present them to the Father, and say to the Father that these are the ones God has given to Him, the ones for whom He died, the ones for whom there is forgiveness of sins. They are presented to the Father, not as persons dead in sin, but as those who have no sin; Christ died for them. And because they have no sin anymore for Christ's sake are they justified with Christ before the throne of God. They are not blackened by sin; they are instead washed clean by the blood of the resurrected Christ so that they can stand freely, without fear of condemnation, before God. Christ has overcome death, and the glorious result is that those whom God has given to Christ are made to share in the righteousness which Christ has earned for Himself by His death.

We realize, beloved: it's rich, to be placed by Christ before the throne of God and have God declare you righteous with Christ. Rich indeed. But who receives this wealth? Who is made righteous before God?

In our Catechism we confess that it's "us", that is, the believer. Who benefit from Christ's resurrection? You and I, brothers and sisters, in so far as we believe what God has told us in His Word. Through faith the believer may say: "whatever Christ is before God, I also am." Through faith the believer says: Christ is acceptable before God (that's proven by the fact that God raised Him from the dead) and so for Christ's sake I too am acceptable to God. Christ obtained righteousness, and that righteousness is *also given to me*, for *what is Christ's is mine*; I share in Christ, I am made one with Christ. So I, personally, can stand before that throne of God's Judgment, and I need not be afraid!

Then it's true: the resurrection of any person from the grave may make no sense to us. Yet, congregation, we are compelled to believe it, lest we fail to share in Christ's righteousness - and so find ourselves condemned before God. God raised Christ, and that's our salvation. Christ rose, and that's our salvation too. To deny that resurrection is to deny salvation. As Paul says: "if Christ has not been raised" - and we may add; if you maintain that Christ has not been raised- "your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (I Cor 15:17), still unrighteous before God, dead in sin. For God is God of the living, not of the dead!

How marvellous, beloved, is the wealth the Lord gives to us in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But the riches go farther than the fact that we are made righteous before God through His resurrection. There's also the fact that we are raised to a new life: second point.

2. We are raised to a new life

The Bible tells us, congregation, that the believer is raised to a new life in two senses. For the believer *has already been raised* to a new life, and he also *will be raised* to a new life.

That the believer will be raised to a new life is something we understand. That's a reference to the last day, to the time when the dead shall rise from their graves and - in the words of LD 22- the flesh shall be reunited with the soul and

made like Christ's glorious body. More on that latter.

What, however, is meant by that other concept, that the believer *has already* been raised to a new life?

We are to recall, brothers and sisters, that every person, as a result of the fall into sin, has become dead in sin. Though we all had life with God in the beginning (for there was communion with God in Paradise), that life with God ended at the fall when we deserted God in favour of serving Satan. That life with God ended, and as such we *died*, became dead in sin. As we read from Eph 2: we "were dead through the trespasses and sins in which [we] once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air" (vss 1f). Dead we were, and that implied a conduct, a manner of living. "Among [these] we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind" (vs 3).

But, Paul continues, "God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ..., and raised us up [with Christ]" (vss 4f). And with that Paul means that God has taken His child from Satan's power, given him forgiveness of sins, made him righteous, and adopted him to be His own child. So, the communion with God is restored; that person has *life* again.

The apostle says the same thing in Romans 6. Paul says that when Christ died, the Christian died also. That is, when Christ died on the cross, the Christian died with Him, died *to sin*, became dead-with-respect-to-sin. Then Paul continues: "if we have been united together [with Christ] in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection" (Rom 6:5). Says Paul: those two go together. When God through Christ causes someone to "die to sin", to become dead-with-respect-to-sin, then God does not leave that person dead. But God sees to it that the person who has died with Christ to sin is also raised with Christ to a new life. So, if having died to sin is a fixed reality for every Christian (and it is!), so is the fact that every Christian has been resurrected to a new life. Anyone who shares in the benefits Christ obtained on the cross is no longer the person he once was - dead in sin; rather, he has become what he was not - alive to God. God, after all, is God not of the dead but of the living. So, if God is indeed your God, then you are no longer dead; you have been made alive again. That's Paul's argument in Rom 6, and that's what we confess in the second part of Lord's Day 17 with these words, "by [Christ's] power we too are raised up to a new life."

But if being dead in sin implied a lifestyle, brothers and sisters, so does being raised with Christ imply a lifestyle. Rom 6: "our old man was crucified with Him" (ie, was put to death with Christ), "that the body of sin might be done away with, and that we should no longer be slave of sin" (vs 6). Those are the realities that lead Paul to tell the Ephesians that they are to lead a life worthy of the calling to which they were called. And that means in practice that the Ephesians are to act in a fashion consistent with their identity; because they have died to sin and been raised with Christ to a new life, they are also to *be* what they have now become in Christ. How is it that they shall *be* what they have become? Paul gives the answer: by imitating God, as beloved children (Eph 5:1).

That means for us, congregation, the same thing as it meant for the Ephesians. If we have indeed been raised to a new life with Christ, then we cannot act as children of Satan; we must instead act as children of God. And that does not mean that the Christian simply refrains from doing what Satan likes; it means instead that the Christian makes a point of imitating God. For he has been raised to a new life. And being raised to a new life implies having been made a child of God, not just on paper but also in heart. And just as much as a natural child cannot help but resemble his parents in actions and looks, so also the sinner who has been raised to a new life and made a child of God cannot help but resemble his Parent in heaven. For as the father is, so is the son.

How does the Father in heaven act? The Scripture is full of that. God is holy, righteous, gracious, merciful, etc, etc. The Christian must be the same. And he can be that only by obeying the law which God has given to us. For that law is the guide that tells us what God is like. So Scripture tells us that by what a person does, one can tell whether he is indeed a child of God or not; by his manner of life one can discern whether that person has been raised to a new life.

We need it fixed in our minds, beloved. Being dead to sin is a basic fact for the child of God; it's not wishful thinking. That counts also for the concept of being raised to a new life. That too is not wishful thinking; it's reality. You have been raised to a new life – if indeed you are in Jesus Christ. But if that's reality, beloved, if you are a new creature, if

in faith you share in the righteousness which Christ earned on the cross, then - says the Lord- then you *cannot help but demonstrate that reality*. Just as much as Jesus Christ, once raised, could not stay in the grave, so also the child of God, once raised to a new life, cannot remain in the grave of sin. If being dead in sin implies that we'll act dead in sin, then being raised to a new life implies that we will act raised to a new life.

So, brothers and sisters, if we do not act as the Father in heaven does, then it is to be questioned whether we *really* are raised to a new life, adopted to be children of God, righteous through Jesus' blood. The proof of one's identity as a new creation, as being made alive in Jesus Christ, lies in *the actions*.

Shortly Easter shall be upon us. With reason the police shall be out, watching for transgression of the speed limit, watching for transgression of the alcohol limit too. Will you act different than the world around us? Or shall you, like those still dead in sin, obey the urges of the flesh? The young people will be invited to a Congress. Those of you who go: will your conduct show that you are raised to a new life, or that you are still dead in your sins? Will you give yourselves to the outings on the beaches, with their alcohol and drugs, or will you keep yourself clear of works of darkness? Imprint it on your minds, brothers and sisters, older and younger alike: to celebrate Easter according to the fashion of the world means that you are not touched by what Easter is; you are still dead in sin, not raised with Christ. Here we all need to do self-examination: do my actions give proof that I've been raised with Christ to a new life, or not? Where those actions do not give that proof, there is need for repentance. And the repentance that is required involves not just a breaking with sin, but an embracing in faith of the fact that Christ arose from the dead – so that God declared righteous both Christ Himself *and* all who belong to Christ.

The riches God has prepared for us in the resurrection of Christ from the dead are enormous. We're made righteous before God. We're also raised to a new life ourselves, today already. Rich indeed! Yet it's richer still: we're also pledge a glorious resurrection ourselves – third point.

3. We are pledged a glorious resurrection

The believer, the child of God united by faith to Jesus Christ, has been raised to a new life, and invariably gives evidence in this life of his resurrection in Christ. Yet, to his shame and pain, the Christian's renewed life remains far short of God's holy standard. So the Christian cries daily with Paul, "wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?"

Here, dear congregation of Jesus Christ, is another rich promise of your resurrected Saviour! For the Lord has promised that those today raised from deadness in sin to a new life before God, will tomorrow be perfected. Today children of God imitate God so poorly; tomorrow there shall be no sin, the imitation shall be just as God desires it.

Lord's Day 17 speaks of "our glorious resurrection". That phrase does not mean that simply our bodies will come out of the grave as Christ left His tomb. No, "our glorious resurrection" implies that the total person shall be completely renewed. Here too, the resurrected Christ is the example. When Christ left the tomb, He did not continue His life as He used to lead it before He died. He was a changed person, recognizable, yes, but not restricted by walls and space; glorified He was, then already. And so it will be with the child of God; we shall be glorified, altered. How exactly it shall be we do not know.

And, beloved, we don't have to know either. What we do know is this: with this body, the one that now has desires against God, I shall praise God perfectly. On that day the struggle to *be* what God has made us to be shall be over; perfectly we'll carry out God's will for us. See there the marvellous depth of the promised "glorious resurrection." We'll be completely renewed, raised to a new life in the fullest sense of the word. Talk about rich!

No, congregation, to speak of a resurrection from the dead makes no sense to our limited and sinful minds. But I believe that Christ rose, in triumph, *and that's my life – today and forever!*

My God is God of the living, not of the dead. Amen.



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Sermon on Lord's Day 18 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 8 April 2000.

"CHRIST'S ABSENCE FROM US TODAY IS BETTER FOR US."

Text:

Lord's Day 18

46. Q. What do you confess when you say, He ascended into heaven?

A. That Christ, before the eyes of His disciples, was taken up from the earth into heaven,[1] and that He is there for our benefit[2] until He comes again to judge the living and the dead.[3] [1] Mark 16:19; Luke 24:50, 51; Acts 1:9-11. [2] Rom. 8:34; Heb. 4:14; 7:23-25; 9:24. [3] Matt. 24:30; Acts 1:11. 47. Q. Is Christ, then, not with us until the end of the world, as He has promised us?[1] A. Christ is true man and true God. With respect to His human nature He is no longer on earth,[2] but with respect to His divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit He is never absent from us.[3] [1] Matt. 28:20. [2] Matt. 26:11; John 16:28; 17:11; Acts 3:19-21; Heb. 8:4. [3] Matt. 28:18-20; John 14:16-19; 16:13.

48. Q. But are the two natures in Christ not separated from each other if His human nature is not present wherever His divinity is?

A. Not at all, for His divinity has no limits and is present everywhere.[1] 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.[2]

[1] Jer. 23:23, 24; Acts 7:48, 49. [2] John 1:14; 3:13; Col. 2:9.

49. Q. How does Christ's ascension into heaven benefit us?

A. First, He is our Advocate in heaven before His Father.[1] Second, we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that He, our Head, will also take us, His members, up to Himself.[2] Third, He sends us His Spirit as a counter-pledge,[3] 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.[4]

[1] Rom. 8:34; 1 John 2:1. [2] John 14:2; 17:24; Eph. 2:4-6. [3] John 14:16; Acts 2:33; II Cor. 1:21, 22; 5:5. [4] Col. 3:1-4.

Scripture Reading:

Luke 24:36-53

John 16:4-15

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 68:7,8

Psalm 71:3 - [Athanasian Creed](#)

Hymn 33:4,6

Psalm 47:1,2,3

Hymn 31:1,3,5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We know where Jesus is today; with the church of all ages we confess that Jesus "ascended into heaven." Heaven: that's a long way away from us. We're here on earth, caught up in the grind of this life. Our dear Savior is in another

world, one without tears and pain and pressures, enjoying the glory of heaven with the Father, the angels, and the saints who have been relieved of the toils of this earth.

Truth be told, we find something unpleasant in that thought. Jesus enjoying the bliss of heaven, while we need to endure the trials of this earth.... We wish Jesus were with us, talking with us, walking with us, touching our children, healing our sick, raising our dead, answering our questions, sharing our troubles.... To have Him near strikes us as far richer than His being so distant from us in heaven....

Yet we read from Jn 16, brothers and sisters, that it is better for us that Jesus be gone from us, better that He is in heaven today (vs 7). It's this thought that I want to work out for us this afternoon. Yet, before I can do that in earnest, I should draw out for you the difficulty the church has had over the centuries with the confession of Christ's ascension. I use this theme:

CHRIST'S ABSENCE FROM US TODAY IS BETTER FOR US.

1. The controversy surrounding where Jesus is
2. The comfort flowing from where Jesus is

1. The controversy surrounding where Jesus is

That the Savior is today in heaven is the uniform message of the whole Bible. Months before He ascended, Jesus already told His disciples where He was going to go. Jn 14:

"In My Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" (14:2).

And Jn 16:

"...now I am going to Him who sent Me... (vs 5).

So it was that Luke could pinpoint Jesus' destination at His ascension. Says Luke:

"while [Jesus] blessed them, He parted from them, and was carried up into heaven" (Lu 24:51).

Stephen saw the result. When he was being stoned, Stephen "gazed into heaven and saw...Jesus standing at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55). Paul on the road to Damascus heard Jesus' voice coming from heaven (Acts 9:4). So he could later write to the Romans that the Christ who died is now "at the right hand of God" (8:34). It's all repeated in the Revelation which John saw on Patmos; in God's presence in heaven He saw the Lamb, Jesus Christ (5:6; cf 12:5). In a word, Scriptures inform us that the Savior is today in heaven, yes, He's been there ever since He ascended from earth before the eyes of His disciples. It's texts like these that has prompted the church to confess in Question & Answer 46 of our Lord's Day that "Christ, before the eyes of His disciples, was taken up from the earth into heaven, and that He is there ... until He comes again to judge the living and the dead."

Yet, brothers and sisters, there are other texts in the Bible that say something different. I think, for example, of Mt 28. In that passage Jesus instructed His disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, and then He encouraged His disciples with this promise:

"...lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (vs 20).

On another occasion, Jesus appeared to Paul by night in a vision and said to Paul this:

"Do not be afraid, but speak and do not be silent; for I am with you..." (Acts 18:10).

Similarly, in his vision on Patmos, John could be told that none else than Jesus Christ walks amongst the churches (2:1). Christ in heaven?? This cluster of texts leaves us with the conclusion that Christ is always on earth, is never

absent from His people, is always with us.

These two clusters of texts leave us with a problem. How's it possible that Jesus could leave earth, go to heaven, be in heaven, and yet be here too? How are we to understand His being absent and present at the same time?? And what sort of comfort is there for us today from the mixed messages we're receiving on the point? This is the point of Q 47 of our Lord's Day: "Is Christ, then, not with us until the end of the world, as He has promised us?"

At the time of the Great Reformation in the sixteenth century, this question of where Christ is has been a point of discussion. In fact, it was on this point that Luther and Calvin –those two principle leaders in that Great Reformation– parted ways. More, it was because this item was such a hot point of discussion 450 years ago that LD 18 devotes no less than four Questions & Answers to the matter of Christ's ascension – and in the process takes us to heights of theology we can scarcely understand.

What was it, then, that Luther said on the matter? This man of God drew attention to an iron rod. That iron rod, said Luther, has particular characteristics; it's stiff, dark gray in color, at room temperature. If you now lay that iron rod in a fire, that iron rod remains iron but meanwhile picks up some characteristics of the fire. For the rod becomes hot, red. The rod remains what it was, and yet it's changed.

When Luther spoke about the ascension of Jesus Christ, it's this comparison he called to mind. Jesus, Luther said, was true man, like you and I, with all the characteristics of a true, real person. But, Luther knew, Jesus was also divine, with as result –Luther said– that Jesus' human nature had taken on characteristics of the divine nature – just like the iron rod in the fire took on characteristics of the fire. So it was that Luther could conclude that Jesus' human nature was actually everywhere at the same time. Since God is everywhere, and this aspect of the divine nature had infiltrated Jesus' human nature, Luther felt justified with this conclusion; Jesus' human nature was everywhere present. This was particularly so after Christ's triumph on Calvary, with His ascension into heaven. That is why Luther could insist that anyone who ate the bread of the Lord's Supper ate more than actual bread; in the bread –said he– was Christ's real, true human body. No, not visible, that's true. But because Jesus' human nature had taken on divine characteristics was that body everywhere, and therefore Jesus' real body was truly present in the bread of the Lord's Supper.

Here, then, Luther had an answer as to how Jesus could be in heaven while at the same time present with us on earth. Said Luther: Christ ascended into heaven, true, and that's where He is even today. But the Christ who is in heaven as God and man is also with us on earth as God and man, present with us wherever we be, present with us as a man because His human nature has taken on that divine characteristic of being everywhere present. So Jesus is bodily with us today, even though we don't see Him anymore.

Others of the reformers, John Calvin in particular, took strong position against this stand from Martin Luther. Various discussions were held between those who defended Luther's position and those who defended the Reformed point of view. But try as the two sides might, they could not overcome their differences concerning the Lord's Supper celebration and the questions about Christ's ascension that lay behind this discussion. Luther and his team remained insistent that Jesus' body and blood were literally present in the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper. The Calvinists, on the other hand, were convinced that Luther was unScriptural in his teaching surrounding the Lord's Supper. The two sides could not find each other on this point, and so they went their separate ways, with Calvin becoming the father of today's Reformed churches, and Luther the father of today's Lutheran churches.

For our part, brothers and sisters, we may well wonder whether this different understanding surrounding Christ's ascension was really sufficient reason for these two groups to stay apart, to develop into two separate churches. These two leaders of the Reformation agreed on all points of doctrine, except this one. And to our mind, this one point seems so minor, and certainly irrelevant to the central doctrine of Scripture: Christ crucified for sinners. Certainly not worth hindering the unity of the churches.... But both Luther and Calvin were convinced that their particular understanding of God's Word on the matter of Christ's ascension (and so how He was present at the Lord's Supper) was according to the will of the Lord. And because they were convinced that their respective views were Scriptural, neither felt free to compromise, to back down. Both understood the holiness of God, a holiness that requires people to accept as true *all* that God has revealed in His Word, accept it *in the way* that God has revealed it. So the two groups stayed apart. And yes, here's a lesson for us to learn in maintaining *all* God has revealed.

What, then, was wrong with Luther's understanding about the two natures of Christ? I mention this afternoon two reasons why Luther's perception was wrong. The first reason has to do with what Scripture teaches about the fact that the Savior had to be a true man. That teaching is summarized in LD 6, and so I don't have to go into the Scriptural proofs here; we did that some months ago with that LD. LD 6 confesses Scripture to say that the Savior must be true man –why?– because "the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should pay for sin." In other words: according to God's decree, the second Adam, the one who would pay for sin, should have the identical nature as the first Adam, the one who fell into sin.

Luther, though, when all is said and done, presented Christ as having a human nature that was *not* the same as Adam's human nature. For Christ's human nature had an *extra* dimension to it; it had taken on divine properties so that it was everywhere present. By so saying, then, Luther –unintentionally, to be sure– rattled the doctrine of salvation itself. For, as we confess in Article 19 of the Belgic Confession,

"our salvation...*depend[s]* also on the reality of His body" (emphasis added).

And:

"For this reason we profess Him to be...true man: ...that He might die for us according to the infirmity of His flesh" (Art 19).

I mention a second reason why Luther's understanding was wrong. Not only did Luther rattle the doctrine of salvation itself as summarized in LD 6; Luther also did not reckon adequately with what the Scriptures themselves say about Christ's ascension. Consider the passage we read from Luke 24. Luke tells us in so many words that Jesus "parted from them" (vs 51). Yet before Luke related this parting, he took pains to impress on his readers *who* Jesus was. Vss 36ff: Jesus demonstrated to the disciples that He was really and truly a true man. For He showed them His hands and His feet, and He said:

"See...that it is I Myself; ...for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have" (vs 39).

And when they gave Him "a piece of broiled fish", "He took it and ate before them" (vs 42f). True man. *That* was the Jesus who "parted" from them. This true man was with them, and then He left, went up into heaven. This true man was really there, and then He was really gone. He didn't just *appear* to be gone, but meanwhile was still somehow bodily present; no, He was *really* gone. That's what the text says: "He parted." That true man was with the disciples no longer. In the words of LD 18:

"...Christ, before the eyes of His disciples, was taken up from earth into heaven" (A 46).

The Calvinists of the time of the Reformation understood Scripture to teach something different from what Luther was teaching, and so they didn't feel free to join with the Lutherans. In fact, when it came to writing a Confession, a special point was made of elaborating on precisely this point – with as result that we have LD 18 in our Catechism, with its detailed discussion on the question of how Christ is both absent and present. So our fathers high-lighted the differences –why?– because they wanted the Church to confess the truth of God's word and the children to be taught that whole truth. In a word: here is a concrete application of commands of Scripture as recorded, eg, in Deut 5, where the Lord tells His people not to "turn aside to the right hand or to the left" from anything the Lord God had commanded (vs 32). *Every* word God has spoken, every command, every doctrine, every detail, is important – regardless of whether or not we understand how it is important. In our day, when doctrinal precision is given second place to the theme of unity, this action of the fathers is an example we do well to keep in mind. Theirs was action consistent with God's revelation.

As to the matter of the two natures of Christ, just what *do* the Scriptures teach about the two natures of Jesus Christ? In the course of the centuries, the church has struggled to put into words what it was that the Lord revealed on this point about the Savior. In the *Athanasian Creed* the church put it this way: Jesus Christ "is God and man" (Art 30). More, He is "perfect God and perfect man" (Art 32), "equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching His manhood" (Art 33). He is "one Christ", not as a result of the Godhead being converted into flesh, but rather "by taking the manhood into God" (Art 35). He is "one altogether, not by confusion of substance, but

by unity of person" (36). The *Belgic Confession* puts it a bit more simply:

"...the person of the Son of God is inseparably united and joined with the human nature.... Each nature retains its own distinct properties...."

You hear it: that last sentence is a plug against the Lutherans. Further:

"His human nature has not lost its properties [when it was united with the divine].... It [remains] finite and retains all the properties of a true body" (Art 19).

I admit: after reading the *Athanasian Creed* and Art 19 of the *Belgic Confession*, it still isn't very clear just how Jesus Christ was God and man at the same time. And it's not at all that straight forward to me how the ascended Savior is both present and absent. But it doesn't have to be all that clear to our limited and sinful minds. If the Lord God says that His eternal Son became true man even while He remained true God, if God says that Christ is present everywhere with His divinity even while He is absent with His humanity, then that's the way it is, though I don't understand its details. This is God, the Almighty, while we're but people, finite. So we worship and believe.

What, then, went into heaven at the ascension of the Lord Jesus? That was Jesus Himself, true God *and* true man. But, while His human nature –truly human as it is– is today in heaven only, *His divine nature is not*. Christ's human nature –truly human as it is– can be in one place only at any given time, but not so His divine nature. That divine nature – truly divine as it is– is everywhere, and *so with His divine nature Christ is still with us*. In the words of our LD:

"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" (A 47).

2. The comfort flowing from where Jesus is

That brings us to the other point we need to consider today: what comfort is there for us in the fact that Christ is absent from us as far as His human nature is concerned? Wouldn't it be better for us if we could visit with Him, ask Him our questions, bring our sick to Him?

Our Chief Prophet and Teacher, brothers and sisters, told His disciples (and so told us too) that "it is to your advantage that I go away" (Jn 16:7). Jesus explained how it is better for us that He's gone, is absent from us with His human nature. Said Jesus:

"if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I depart, I will send Him to you" (vs 7).

Yet Jesus' point was not that the Holy Spirit is more important for us than Christ Himself. The point is rather that Jesus can *do more for us from out of heaven, through the Spirit*, than if He stayed with us on earth. What can He do for us from out of heaven? The Catechism mentions three benefits in A 49.

The first is that in heaven our ascended Savior functions as our Advocate, our lawyer before God. That is: in heaven He intercedes for us before His Father. Our sins form a barrier preventing us from speaking to God. But Jesus as our Advocate in heaven pleads with the Father on our behalf, reminds God that He gave His blood for our sins so that for Jesus' sake we're righteous (cf I Jn 2:1). We realize: here's great encouragement for us! For who of us never finds prayer difficult because of our sins? But Christ's presence with the Father means that we have access to God, freely and all the time (cf Art 26, *Belgic Confession*). So Christ's ascension into heaven gives confidence to pray, to pray boldly. What encouragement this is, when we find prayer so difficult, that in heaven is one pleading with God on our behalf. And the one who pleads with God for us is as human as we are, of like nature with us, and so one who understands the temptations of this life and the way we grapple with the challenges of life.

The second benefit mentioned in our Lord's Day relates to the fact that Christ is preparing a place for us in heaven so that we might one day be where He is. Already a true man is in heaven, bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh. That He is there, preparing a place for us, encourages us to in the trials of this life to look forward to the glory that will be ours one day.

But it's the third, congregation, that needs particular attention this afternoon, the notion that the ascended Christ has sent us His Holy Spirit.

The thing is this. While Jesus was on earth, He was restricted –true man that He was– to being in one place at a time only. When He was in Bethany, He could not be in Capernaum. More, through out all the time He lived on earth, He never visited the children of God who lived in, say, Ephesus or Rome. If anyone wanted to hear Jesus of Nazareth, if anyone wanted encouragement from Him, he first had to find out where Jesus was, and then go to Him.

But now Christ has ascended into heaven; He's left us. Yet we are not the poorer because of it; we're rather richer as a result of His ascension. For exactly because He is in heaven with His human nature can His divine nature be everywhere. Specifically, through His Holy Spirit the Son of God is present everywhere with His divinity, majesty and grace. It is not so that we today need to go to, say, Sydney in order to find Jesus, talk to Him, receive encouragement from Him. Rather, He is "with us always", wherever we are on the face of this earth – no matter the situation, no matter how distant we are from other people, no matter whether we see or notice Him around us.

And what does the-Christ-who-is-with-us-through-His-Spirit do? Since the Holy Spirit is the Spirit *of Christ*, this Spirit *keeps prompting us to look to the Christ* who labors for us in heaven. You see, it's so very human to fix our attention to this earth – be it to its pleasures and riches *or* its troubles and worries. To fix our attention on the pleasures and riches of this life has us stay busy in our minds and activities and conversations with such earthly things as our car, our house, our job, our children, our holiday. So too, to fix our attention on the troubles of this life has us stay busy in our thoughts and talks and actions with the evil that happened to me long ago, or the sin so-and-so person committed, etc, etc. Either way, *our focus remains earthbound*. But Christ our Savior is in heaven, and so it is necessary that our focus be heavenward. The Spirit Christ sent to earth works precisely that focus in the people of God; by His power, we confess in our Lord's Day, "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 church confesses that the Lord Jesus Christ has ascended into heaven. Bodily He is there, laboring diligently in heaven for our benefit. That is why our focus needs to be in heaven too, with Christ our Savior, and may not be distracted by any diversions of earth. And our focus *can* be on heaven because the ascended Christ is with us through His Holy Spirit, equipping us, encouraging us to focus our sights on heaven alone. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 19 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 15 April 2001.

" THE CHRIST WHO DIED FOR US RULES EARTH FROM HEAVEN UNTIL HE RETURNS ."

Text:

Lord's Day 19

50. Q. Why is it added, And sits at the right hand of God?

A. Christ ascended into heaven to manifest Himself there as Head of His Church,[1] through whom the Father governs all things.[2]

[1] Eph. 1:20-23; Col. 1:18. [2] Matt. 28:18; John 5:22, 23.

51. Q. How does the glory of Christ, our Head, benefit us? A. First, by His Holy Spirit He pours out heavenly gifts upon us, His members.[1] Second, by His power He defends and preserves us against all enemies.[2]

[1] Acts 2:33; Eph. 4:7-12. [2] Ps. 2:9; 110:1, 2; John 10:27-30; Rev. 19:11-16.

52. Q. What comfort is it to you that Christ will come to judge the living and the dead?

A. 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.[1] 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.[2]

[1] Luke 21:28; Rom. 8:22-25; Phil. 3:20,21; Tit. 2:13, 14. [2] Matt. 25:31-46; I Thess. 4:16, 17; II Thess. 1:6-10. *God the Holy Spirit and our Sanctification*

Scripture Reading:

Colossians 3:1-17

Mathew 25:31-46

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 93:1,2

Psalm 47:3

Hymn 50:1,2,3,7

Psalm 110:1,2,3

Psalm 96:8; & Hymn 57:4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Our thoughts this weekend focus on Jesus' death on Good Friday and His resurrection on Easter Sunday. This afternoon, though, we come to Lord's Day 19 of the Catechism, about the sovereignty of the ascended Christ in heaven and His return on the clouds. To our minds, it's a different topic, one scarcely related to Golgotha and the Garden of Gethsemane. But notice, congregation, that our Lord's Day very deliberately reaches back to Good Friday and puts Christ's return in the context of His work on the cross long ago. Question & Answer 52: "... I ... eagerly await 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.*" We realize: it was at the cross of Calvary that Christ submitted Himself to the judgment of God, with as wonderful result that on the last day there is no curse left for us.

The thoughts of many focus this weekend on Christ's death and resurrection. But to see Christ's death and resurrection in the light of God's judgment against sin – no, our nation and our culture doesn't want to do that. At best, the cross provides us with opportunity to "look for the signs of the dawning reign of the love of God" – as Archbishop Carnley put it in his Easter message to the nation. The message of the Easter season, then, is that our families, our society, our government needs to show the self-emptying love of Jesus, and that's it. Certainly there's no place to speak about judgment....

How offensive, then, congregation, will our confession in Lord's Day 19 be to our nation! Here we speak not of a soft love whereby each is nice to his neighbor; in Lord's Day 19 we speak about enemies, we speak about "sorrow and persecution", we speak about the "judge from heaven", about "casting all His and my enemies into everlasting condemnation." Our nation embraces multiculturalism and therefore officially embraces any religion as acceptable; in our land there is no room for condemning statements of judgment about people's faith, people's lifestyles, people's eternity. Language of judgment, speaking about curse, indicating others as enemies does not fit in a society that wants to promote mutual respect and acceptance, that wants to see only love. No, that the crucified Jesus would return on the clouds in order to *judge*, and then send all unbelievers, all non-Christians to hell, is offensive talk in our nation.

But here we are, Free Reformed Churches of *Australia*, speaking about judgment, even "eagerly awaiting" the Judge from heaven. To stick to our Lord's Day makes us offensive in our land. But that be so, beloved, for in our Lord's Day we simply repeat after God the gospel He revealed to us in His Word.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE CHRIST WHO DIED FOR US RULES EARTH FROM HEAVEN UNTIL HE RETURNS.

1. Christ rules the earth as King today
2. Christ returns to the earth as Judge tomorrow

1. *Christ rules the earth as King today*

Each one of us in this past week has experienced something of the brokenness of this earthly life. Be it wounds we received from accidents, or heartaches we've experienced from frictions with other people, or sleeplessness we battled due to stress: we've all experienced in some way that this life knows its pain and sorrow. It's so human, in the midst of this pain and sorrow, to keep our eyes fixed on the hurt and those who cause it, to keep our eyes fixed on this earth as we cast about for solutions to our problems. We could even cast our minds back in history and look at Jesus' example on the cross of Calvary for insight and perspective in how we ought to tackle our problems today....

The Lord our God, though, tells us to lift our eyes off this earth. The answer to our problems is not within ourselves, is not found either in following the example of Christ on the cross – for His example is one we cannot follow. The Lord God tells us in Col 3 to "seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God" (vs 1). In the midst of life's struggles, this is where the Lord would direct our attention.

Why? Because, brothers and sisters, Christ in heaven is not idle. Last week, with Lord's Day 18, we confessed Christ's high priestly labors in heaven; in the presence of His Father He intercedes for us so that in turn the Father receives our prayers and deals with us in mercy. With Lord's Day 19 we confess that Christ is occupied in heaven with His function as *King*. In the midst of life's struggles, it's to Christ's kingship that the Lord in Col 3 directs our attention.

Christ is "sitting at the right hand of God," says Paul in our chapter. The phrase "sitting at the right hand of God" appears frequently in Scripture as a designation of *authority*. I think of Ps 110. David says:

"The Lord said to my Lord,
'Sit at My right hand,
Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.'
The Lord shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion.
Rule in the midst of Your enemies!" (vss 1f).

Notice how the notion of ‘sitting at the right hand’ is placed in the context of authority, of being sovereign ruler over the entire world. To have enemies as your footstool pictures you as sitting on a chair with your feet stretched out upon the necks or backs of your enemies – you are sovereign, victor.

This psalm, with this notion of triumph for the one at God’s right hand, is applied to Jesus Christ on the day of Pentecost. Peter quotes Ps 110 in relation to the ascended Christ, and then adds this conclusion:

"Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both *Lord* and Christ" (Acts 2:36).

"Lord," says Peter under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The term "Lord" means ‘Master’, ‘Sovereign’. That’s the ascended Christ: *Lord* of lords, *King* of kings. In his letter to the Ephesians Paul puts it like this:

"...[God] seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come. And He has put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all" (1:20ff).

That is: His sitting at the right hand of God means that He is sovereign over the principalities and powers and mights and dominions – terms Scripture uses to describe the demons of hell. The ascended Christ is King of such magnitude that the powers of darkness are subject to him! In the words of Question & Answer 50: Christ’s sitting at God’s right hand means that "Christ ascended into heaven to manifest Himself there as Head of His Church, through whom the Father governs *all* things."

What, now, brothers and sisters, is the implication for us today? This: *Christ rules this world totally, sovereignly*. The horrors that Slobodan Milosovich poured out over Serbia and Croatia did not happen by chance, but had the hand of your sovereign Savior behind it. In fact, Jesus Christ uses Milosovich’s evil to gather His church in Serbia. The liberalism that has swept through South Africa in the last decade did not happen willy-nilly, but the hand of the King of kings was behind it – so that His church gathering work in that country might continue. The mid-air collision between the American spy plane and the Chinese fighter jet, with its resulting tensions, did not happen by chance, but had your Savior’s mighty hand behind it – so that in turn His church gathering work in China and America, and around the world, might continue. How the virus that carries foot-and-mouth disease travels is determined by your Lord and Savior, and He allows the virus to settle here and not there with a view to His church gathering work. I can’t understand it all, but I know that here is an encouragement for us in the midst of the godlessness we see in our society. Does the fact that church leaders in Australia pervert the gospel mean that the church of Christ will perish? Not unless the Lord wishes the gospel to be silent in Australai. For the ascended Christ, King of kings as He is, will bring to glory every one whom the Father has given Him; none shall be snatched out of His mighty hand (Jn 10:27ff). So we need not fear, though being a faithful Christian in our multicultural society becomes increasingly difficult. For, as we confess in Question & Answer 51, Christ’s glory as our Head has this wonderful benefit for us: "by His power He defends and preserves us against all enemies." That’s true on a national or international scale, and true too on a very local and personal scale. For the Christ who rules sovereignly in heaven loves each one of His sheep so dearly that He laid down His life for each. Today, from heaven on high, He so governs the world that each of His sheep –you and I included- are safely protected in His almighty and loving hands. So no powers of hell or hatred of workmates can touch us apart from the will of the One who laid down His life for us. See there the wonderful comfort that flows from God’s revelation of Jesus’ enthronement at God’s right hand.

But this wonderful comfort, beloved of the Lord, is not the only implication flowing from Christ’s place in the world as King of kings. Paul draws out another consequence in Col 3, one relating to lifestyle. For he says in vs 2: "set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth." He works that out in the instruction of vss 5-17. "Therefore," he says, "put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." Earth-centered drives as sexual urges, being in with the crowd, getting that car at all costs: put it to death, says Paul, for Christ your Savior rules from heaven, and so there are bigger and more important realities than your earthly urges. Paul continues that theme in vs 8: "But now you yourselves are to put off all these: anger, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another...." Paul speaks of "putting

off", and the picture is of what one does to a coat. As a result of the fall into sin we've received a coat of attitudes coming from hell, attitudes as anger, hatred, filthy language. That coat of attitudes results in particular behavior, conduct driven by anger, hatred, foul talk, etc. But that coat, says Paul, we need to "put off." In its place we're to "put on" –vs 12- a new coat of attitudes: "tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another...." Why we're to put on this new coat of attitudes? Because these are attitudes that come from heaven where Christ is. So Paul asks us to imitate Christ. Vs 13: "even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do." Vs 16: "let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom...." Vs 17: "whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus...." In heaven, at God's right hand, He is 'Lord', and so on earth we need to acknowledge Him, submit to Him. Putting on attitudes from heaven results in lifestyles on earth agreeing with Christ's sovereignty over all. See there the second consequence that flows from God's revelation of Jesus' enthronement at God's right hand.

We say: we can't act in a manner consistent with Christ's lordship. True, in ourselves we can't; we remain too weak and broken, too oriented to this earth. But I draw your attention, congregation, to the material we confess in the first part of Question & Answer 51. The glory of Christ our Head benefits us –how?- in this that the ascended Lord "by His Holy Spirit ... pours out heavenly gifts upon us, His members." And in the strength of the Holy Spirit we can lift our eyes off the behavior patterns of this world, and adopt patterns consistent with the reality of Christ's ascension and lordship in heaven. It's a topic we can speak about more, the Lord willing, with Lord's Day 20, about the Holy Spirit. Meanwhile, let it be enough to say today that we certainly can begin to live in a manner consistent with Christ's ascension and sovereignty.

Our land, my brothers and sisters, does not acknowledge that the very same Christ who died on Good Friday and arose on Easter Sunday is today Lord of our land. That's why so much ungodliness is permitted in our land today, so much lawless behavior. In the midst of this unbelief we repeat after God the fact of Christ's enthronement in heaven. We draw much comfort for ourselves from that confession; more, because Christ is King today our lives are different –*must* be different- from those of fellow Australians around us.

I come to our second point this afternoon:

2. Christ returns to the earth as Judge tomorrow

Yes, we live in a society that ignores or denies Christ's enthronement at God's right hand. That ignoring or denial, however, will not continue. The angels who came to earth after Jesus' ascension told the disciples that "this same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). When He returns to earth every knee will bow before Him, be they knees of forces from heaven above or from the earth beneath or from waters under the earth – including every knee in Australia.

Meanwhile, as long as the ungodly ignore Christ's sovereignty over the world, these ungodly will make life awkward and difficult for the child of God. It's a fact: to put on attitudes that come from heaven –"tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another"- produces word choice and conduct that attract derision, scorn. To be 'in' with your mates you need to laugh along at crude jokes, need to use some foul language. Because the child of God is different - *must* be different- from people around us, we find ourselves in uncomfortable positions. The temptation is great, as with Asaph in Ps 73, to join the ungodly....

But the Lord who rules all the world today, congregation, would encourage us to 'hang in there'! For Jesus Christ is returning from heaven to this earth. When He comes, He will call all men to appear before Him, and all must give account of everything they've ever done or said. The passage we read from Mt 25 makes the point so clearly:

"When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats" (vss 31f).

The sheep, the righteous, will be told that they "inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (vs 34). But the goats, the unrighteous, will be told to "depart ... into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his

angels" (vs 41). So speak the Scriptures, and so we confess in Question & Answer 52 that "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."

In the midst of the "sorrow and persecution" God's children suffer in this earthly life, here is a word of enormous encouragement! Today the Godly may find themselves at the bottom of the pile, the object of derision and scorn. How tempting, then, to look for ways to take vengeance, to get back at those who keep putting Christians down, to try to clamor to the top of the pile, to get one better over the other. But the Lord has said that vengeance was His; no man has the right to take justice in his own hands. And the Lord at His time will execute His vengeance. When? It will all come together on the last day, for then the Lord will wreak His vengeance on all who did not acknowledge His lordship. For when Christ comes back

"the books will be opened and the dead will be judged (Rev 20:12) according to what they have done in this world, whether good or evil (2 Cor 5:10). Indeed, all people will render account for every careless word they utter (Mt 12:36), which the world regards as mere jest and amusement. The secrets and hypocrisies of men will then be publicly uncovered in the sight of all"

- as we confess in the *Belgic Confession* (Article 37).

What a thought that is, beloved! Everything will come out of everybody's closet; no secret will remain secret, whether the offender was you or me, or anybody else.

"And so for good reason the thought of this judgment is horrible and dreadful to the wicked and evildoers, but it is a great joy and comfort to the righteous and elect. For then their full redemption will be completed and they will receive the fruits of their labour and of the trouble they have suffered. Their innocence will be known to all and they will see the terrible vengeance that God will bring upon the wicked who persecuted, oppressed, and tormented them in this world."

And our sins that will come out of the closet on that day? To the degree that there is faith in Christ's atoning work on Good Friday, these sins are all covered in His blood - so that we need give no explanation, no matter how horrid those sins. Notice how we echo God's revelation in our Lord's Day: "I ... await as judge from heaven *the very same person who before has submitted Himself to the judgment of God for my sake.*" Yes, this is a reference to Good Friday: the Judge has Himself laid down His life for me, taken upon Himself the curse that I deserve! When Christ comes back as Judge, it's the cross of Calvary that will stand in the center of attention, for that cross means that my sins have been washed away. How, then, can I give account for my sins? I can't, true, but I can and may and must draw the Lord's attention to His work on Calvary, the work that atoned for my sins so that I don't have to suffer for them anymore.

And where there is no faith in the Christ of Calvary? Make no mistake, beloved: account must be given of every sinful word and every evil deed - and that account can't be given in such a way that one can get out from under the wrath of God....

Yes, brothers and sisters, older and younger, here is encouragement for the child of God. Let's not get downhearted because of the opposition we encounter in this life. Instead, let it be fixed in our minds that the Christ who reigns supreme today -so He's the One who permits suffering in my life!- will come again as Judge. So we'll not stare at the injustices of this life, nor the hurt we experience, but we'll fix our eyes on high, where Christ is at the right hand of His heavenly Father - from where also He'll come again to judge the living and the dead. Meanwhile, we'll make it our business to be ready and waiting for the coming of our Lord and Savior.

How can we be ready? By embracing today the promises of forgiveness that God has extended to us in the covenant He established with us long ago. Faith, responding to my baptism: *that's* what I need so desperately today - lest Christ return before I'm ready. And if I'm not ready, I shall suffer the eternal horrors of everlasting hell. For Christ's work on the cross covers only the sins of the believer. And having the full load of God's wrath come upon me is something I don't want.

Then again, I don't want it for others either. Well did the apostle Paul lay his heart on the table in his plea to king Agrippa when he said to him: "I would to God that not only you, but also all who hear me today, might become both almost and altogether such as I am, except for these chains" (Acts 26:29). *A heart for other people*, a longing to see others spared the eternal torment of hell: that belongs to the attitude the Christian must put on according to Col 3. No anger towards another, no matter what suffering he caused you, but instead kindness, mercy, even forgiving one another as Christ forgave you – yes, that attitude drives one to seek out the other so that you can sit *together* in the kingdom of heaven. As Christ rescued me from hell through His self-emptying on Calvary *even while I was His enemy* (Rom 5:8), so I seek to persuade others of the truth of the gospel –regardless of who they are or what they've done to me– so that in the day of Christ they may not perish under the curse of the Judge but live forever under His blessing.

It's not politically correct in our society to speak of judgment, of sin, of hell. All roads lead to heaven, we're told, and the gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection is simply that we should let ourselves be weak in order to gain others. But the gospel of Good Friday and of Easter Sunday goes far beyond that. Christ defeated sin and Satan, and so has received a throne today over all the world, with Satan and his demons under His feet, and world rulers and politicians and union bosses under His feet also, and likewise all employers and employees, all teachers and students, all parents and children, yes, every thing in all creation. The triumphant, risen, ascended Christ leads world history with a view to gathering His church, so that He can come again on heaven's clouds – to be worshipped by all men. He comes as Judge, and that day will represent the end of all tears, all crying, all suffering. Then Paradise will be restored!

"Come, Lord Jesus!" Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 20 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 29 April 2001.

"GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT STRENGTHENS GOD'S PEOPLE IN THE FACE OF THE SATAN'S HATRED."

Text:

Lord's Day 20

53. Q. What do you believe concerning the Holy Spirit?

A. First, He is, together with the Father and the Son, true and eternal God.[1] Second, He is also given to me,[2] to make me by true faith share in Christ and all His benefits,[3] to comfort me,[4] and to remain with me forever.[5]
[1] Gen. 1:1, 2; Matt. 28:19; Acts 5:3, 4; I Cor. 3:16. [2] I Cor. 6:19; II Cor. 1:21, 22; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 1:13. [3] Gal. 3:14; I Pet. 1:2. [4] John 15:26; Acts 9:31. [5] John 14:16, 17; I Pet. 4:14.

Scripture Reading:

John 15:18-16:4

I Corinthians 6:9-11

I Thessalonians 4:1-8

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 18:1,6

Hymn 38:1,4

Hymn 36:3

Hymn 41:1-4

Psalm 118:3 & Hymn 62:4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

With Lord's Day's 18 & 19, we'd confessed that the Lord Jesus Christ had ascended into heaven. And heaven is a long ways away from Kelmscott. Yet we'd hastened to add in both Lord's Days that the ascended Savior is not absent; instead –Lord's Day 18- "with respect to His divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit He is never absent from us." More, Lord's Day 19, "by His Holy Spirit He pours out heavenly gifts upon us, His members."

With Lord's Day 20, now, we open our Bibles to learn what the Lord God says about the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. Then we repeat after God what the Lord has told us about the Holy Spirit. We confess first of all that the Holy Spirit "is, together with the Father and the Son, true and eternal God." And we add that the Spirit, "true and eternal God," is also "given to me" –why?- "to make me by true faith share in Christ and all His benefits", to "comfort me," and third, "to remain with me forever."

The reference here to comfort arises in the context of Satan's rage against the church of God. Jesus' promise to send the Holy Spirit - Jn 15:26- came in the context of His talk about the world's hatred against God's people. Christ keeps His word, and so, after the Spirit was poured out and the church was persecuted by Saul, the brethren received "the comfort of the Holy Spirit" – I read in Acts 9:31.

This afternoon I want to draw out the work of the Holy Spirit in the context of the world's hatred. I summarize the sermon with this theme:

GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT STRENGTHENS GOD'S PEOPLE IN THE FACE OF THE SATAN'S HATRED.

1. The devil's rage
2. The Lord's gift
3. My own responsibility

1. The devil's rage

Jesus' promise to send the Holy Spirit was given in a particular context. We read it from Jn 15; Jesus spoke of being hated by the world, hated to the point that the children of God would even be killed for their faith.

Behind that hatred of the world is another reality, and that's the hatred of the devil and his demons for the people of God. Concerning this devilish hatred our Lord says this to us through John:

"Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time" (Rev 12:12).

The apostle Paul fleshes out this hatred of the devil when he speaks of "deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons" (I Tim 4:1), and –in II Tim 3– of "evil men and imposters" (vs 13). The point is that the devil is very angry, and therefore pulls out all stops in order to trip up the people to God, to tear God's own from the hands of God. We don't hear much of persecution in our society, for we're freely permitted to serve the Lord, to go to church, to send our children to reformed schools and catechism classes; the term 'persecution' makes us think of places as China. But we're certainly hated by the devil, despised, and therefore tempted and cajoled to transgress the commandments of the Lord our God. So in the face of unemployment the devil would have us trust in ourselves. And in the face of a broken washing machine (just when the pressure is on to get things done!), the devil would us blow a fuse, swear. In the face of family friction, the devil would have us think that the problem is the other person; certainly not me!

I can go on mentioning evidence of Satan's hatred. Australian society hasn't much tolerance for people who are straight; these 'straights' are considered backward, out-dated, narrow-minded, intolerant. So it's not easy on the work place, with the workers around, to speak in defense of Jesus' name. Similarly, in the boardrooms of the business world it's not at all easy to keep your transactions above board and pleasing to the Lord. To be expecting child number 7, or to be pregnant at age 40, is to invite comments of disapproval – both from outsiders and from those in the church. And who can stand above the certain derision of the boys when you're offered a joint and want to turn it down? And who of our youth is left cold when you see the pornography in the News Agent? No, we're not dragged off to prison on account of the faith, but suffer because we do the Lord's will: Yes. From every side sin stares us in the face, and from every side temptation is laid before us to relax the norms of Scripture and go along with the trend of society. And that's persecution, spiritual persecution. It is as Paul wrote to Timothy: "all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution" (II Tim 3:12). That's the reality of this life.

That we are all tempted to sin is something we all know. But let it be impressed on our minds, brothers and sisters, older and younger, that *we all are hated*, that we all are the focus of diabolic attack. Our "adversary the devils walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour" (I Pet 5:8), and he'd love to consume each and every one of us. No form of attack on ourselves and our families is for the devil too cruel, too hard; he'll try anything. Via the *Woman's Weekly* he'll sow his devilish thoughts in our homes, via TV he'll destroy family interaction, via computer games he'll make our children callous about killing, through the busy-ness of life he'll prevent parents from speaking with their children, and so on, and so on. *Hated you are*, my beloved, and pummeled from every side.

These are the things spoken of in LD 19. this is the era of "sorrow and persecution" described in Question & Answer 52. Because this is the context of our daily living we "eagerly await" the Lord from heaven, for at His return "He will cast all His and my enemies into everlasting condemnation." That is: all who today put pressure on the children of God –and that includes the devil and his demons, it includes also the ungodly who would tempt us to sin– all who today put pressure on the children of God to make us sin will be swept off the earth, sealed in the eternal bottomless pit. *Then* the struggles of this life will be over, *then* the temptations gone, and *then* we'll be freed of the hassles that we now face as a result of Satan's fury.

But all of that, brothers and sisters, still lies in the future. Yes, it's a glorious future, and we look forward to it, but it remains *future*. Meanwhile, we live *today*. And today we remain very much under attack, are persecuted spiritually, emotionally, psychologically because we belong to Jesus Christ. We look forward eagerly to relief on the day of Jesus' return, but *now* we need to cope with the pressures of life, the pressures of Satan's attacks. And *how, how do we cope with that??* How can our young people be encouraged to say No at a party where a joint is passed around? How can they keep their thoughts holy when they walk into a newsagent or, for that matter, go to the beach? How can our businessmen say No to under-the-table money? How can our mothers still dare to fall pregnant when they already have a sizable family? How, how can we survive in the battle against the demons of hell?!

There, brothers and sisters, is the place of LD 20. This world is filled with evil spirits, but in this sort of world God has given us His Holy Spirit! That, *that* is how we're enabled to cope today. That's our second point: in the face of the devil's rage, the Lord gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit.

2. *The Lord's gift*

Concerning this gift of the Holy Spirit, LD 20 tells us immediately what we are to think about the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is not a thing, vague, indescribable. The Spirit is *God*, says LD 20, "true and eternal God, together with the Father and the Son."

This Holy Spirit –God Himself!– (says our LD further) "is also given to me." Yes, we –you and I– are sinful people, living under attack on this earth. But *in this situation*, congregation, God the Spirit is "given" to us. Specifically, God the Holy Spirit dwells in our hearts. Paul says to the Corinthian believers this: "Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? (I Cor 3:16). "You are the temple of God," he says, and with that phrase picks up on Old Testament vocabulary. Solomon built a temple in Jerusalem, and at its dedication the glory of the Lord settled upon the temple, ie, God Himself came to live in that temple built of wood and stone. So that temple Solomon built is called in Scripture the "temple of God". Yet with Jesus' triumph on Calvary, the curtain of that temple was torn; the point is that the temple had fulfilled its function, was no longer the place where God dwelt. Instead the Holy Spirit was poured out on the believers on the day of Pentecost; God in the Spirit came to live in the hearts of His people. That's the point of the apostle's phrase in I Cor 3: he tells the saints of Corinth that each one of them is "the temple of God". That each is temple of God is pointed up in the second part of the verse where Paul says that "the Spirit of God dwells in you". As temple of God, each saint in Corinth is home to the Holy Spirit; He dwells in the hearts of each believer.

But if that's true, brothers and sisters, of the believers of Corinth, it's equally true of each believer of Kelmscott. Every child of God is a temple of God, and that means nothing else than that God the Holy Spirit dwells in your hearts. Recall what we heard so often from the Form for Holy Baptism (and that form, remember, summarizes what God says in His Word to each of His covenant children – that's all of us!). Page 584, last paragraph:

"When we are baptized into the Name of the Holy Spirit, God the Holy Spirit assures us by this sacrament that He will dwell in us and make us living members of Christ, imparting to us what we have in Christ, namely, the cleansing from our sins and the daily renewal of our lives...."

Says that Form: the promise of the covenant God made with each one of us includes this that God in the Holy Spirit dwells in us. That's God's promise. That's in turn why the believer confesses in LD 20 concerning God the Holy Spirit that "He is given to me." In our LD we simply echo what God has promised to us in the covenant.

That means in turn, brothers and sisters, older and younger, that God has passed none of you by with His gift of the Holy Spirit; to all His covenant children the Lord has given the promise that He "will dwell in us". In the midst of a world with devils filled, here is for each of us pointed comfort. None of us need ever to stand alone against the attacks and temptations of the devil; God has given His Spirit to all of us.

What, though, does the Holy Spirit do in our hearts? Does He just sit (as it were) in a corner of the heart, and leave us go as we're inclined to go? The answer is No. Wherever the Holy Spirit is, there comes *change*. Think of what happened to the craftsmen instructed to build the tabernacle in Moses' day (Ex 31:2ff). Think of the effect of the

Spirit's coming on men as Gideon, Samson and David. On the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit was poured out on the believers, these new believers were changed so that they "had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need" (Acts 2:44f). The apostle Paul captures the changes resulting from the Spirit's presence in Eph 5. He says:

"For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), finding out what is acceptable to the Lord" (5:8-10).

You hear it: the Ephesian saints were once "darkness", but they've been changed so that now "you are light in the Lord". That's a change worked by the Spirit; now there is with the Ephesian saints "goodness, righteousness, and truth" and that's in turn why these believers are to stay clear of the evils mentioned earlier in that same chapter. In similar terms the apostle speaks to the Corinthians. I quote from I Cor 6:

"Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God" (vss 9-11).

There it is again: "such were some of you." That's past tense: such *were* some of you. But not anymore; "you were washed," adds the apostle, "but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God" (vss 9-11). It's not just a matter of sins being washed away in the blood of the Lord Jesus; it's also, says Paul, a matter of the Holy Spirit at work in the heart so that one is sanctified. And with that work of Holy Spirit, things *change*; "such *were* some of you."

I need to make this element more personal. We said before: the Holy Spirit has been given to each one of us; part and parcel of the covenant God made with each of us (and signified in holy baptism) is the fact that the Holy Spirit dwells in our various hearts. But if the presence of the Holy Spirit invariably produces change, then that means nothing else, brothers and sisters, than that *we all should be changed creatures*. That is: each one of us is to be different today from what we by nature are. By nature we're dead in sin, given to all sin. The renewing work of the Holy Spirit implies that we're changed so that we are no longer what we used to be. That is: the effect of the Spirit's presence is that *we are now alive to God*. That, beloved, is the promise that accompanies the Spirit's presence.

That is in turn, then, something we are to *see* in ourselves and in each other. The Holy Spirit came upon Gideon and Samson and David, and His presence was *obvious*. The Holy Spirit was poured out on Pentecost, and His presence amongst the believers was *obvious*. The Holy Spirit is promised to each one of us in the covenant, and His presence cannot remain secret, hidden; the change resulting from His presence must be *evident* for both yourself and others to see. For *where there is no change, there is no Spirit!* Where there is no change, the Spirit is not present, not because He wasn't promised (He was promised, to all of us, for God made His covenant with all of us); the Spirit is not present *because He is not welcome*. "Every covenant," you remember, "contains two parts, a promise and an obligation." So it is for us to see to it that we "do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God" (as Paul writes in Eph 4:30), to see to it that we "do not quench the Spirit" (I Thes 5:19). After David's sin with Bethsheba, he made a point of beseeching God in prayer not to take His Holy Spirit from him (Ps 51). You see: you don't necessarily *have* what's promised to you. That just depends on whether you *want* what's promised.

Where the Holy Spirit is, there is change. This change produces *results*. That is: where the Spirit has worked change, that person no longer is dead in sin, no longer has delight in sin, no longer *wants* to sin. Instead, he's changed to a new live, regenerated, hates sin, flees from sin, resists and fights sin. Recall that passage from I Cor 6: Paul tells his readers that fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, homosexuals, drunkards, etc, will not inherit the kingdom of God, and then adds: "such were some of you". So: this is no longer what the Corinthian saints are. They are changed, that is, they no longer give themselves to fornication, to idolatry, to adultery, to homosexual practices, to drunkenness, etc.

No, that's not to say that they're never tempted to acts of fornication, never tempted to get drunk. But the thing is that *they can now resist these temptations*. The Holy Spirit of God dwells within them, this Holy Spirit has worked a

change in them so that their appetites are geared to righteousness and not to evil, yes, this Holy Spirit strengthens them in the struggle against the temptations that be. And this Holy Spirit *can* strengthen in the face of Satan's temptations because this Spirit is God, is the Spirit *of Christ* (cf Rom 8:9). And Christ, we know, is the one who defeated Satan on the cross of Calvary. If He, then, has defeated the devil and his demons on Calvary, how much more than can that Spirit of Christ strengthen the children of God in the face of the temptations that be! See there the reason why the apostle Paul can say to the Romans that "sin shall not have dominion over you" (6:14). That's a *promise*, more, it's a *statement of fact*: sin shall not rule over the child of God. For not only has the devil been defeated on Calvary; the Holy Spirit has also been poured into our hearts so that today He strengthens God's own in the battles we face.

So it is that *giving in to each temptation that comes your way is not at all inevitable* for the child of God. The Holy Spirit has been poured out, and so, yes, we *can* fight against sin, *can* resist sin, can no longer say that 'we can't help but sin'. LD 20: the Spirit is "given to me –why?– to make me...share in Christ and all His benefits." Those benefits include Christ's triumph over Satan! In the Spirit that benefit is given to me. Let none amongst us, then, beloved, consider giving in to sin inevitable. That confession you make every week concerning the Holy Spirit does not allow for that sort of a conclusion! Because of Who the Holy Spirit is, fighting sin, resisting sin is definitely possible. That brings us to our final point today:

3. Our own responsibility.

The point is this: given that the Holy Spirit has been given to us, what do we do in the face of the evil spirits attacking us in the world of today? Is it for us simply to assume that the Holy Spirit will fight our battles for us, will apply to us the benefits Christ obtained, and so it's for us just to coast along? We all know the answer. Even though the Holy Spirit has been given to us, we still need to keep fighting. And that is because it is *through* our resisting temptation, our saying No to the lure of alcohol and the offer of a joint and the temptation to accept under-the-table money, etc, that the Holy Spirit fights our battles for us. It is not so that we can sit on our hands, and leave the struggle against temptation to the Holy Spirit; it is not so either that the Holy Spirit sits in the corner of our hearts and lets us struggle on our own. The Spirit's work and our work come together, need to be mentioned together, is a co-operation. It's a co-operation not in the sense that the Spirit does His part and we do our part; it's a co-operation in the sense that the believer does what the Spirit works in him. The Holy Spirit works in and through the believer to curb sin and frustrate Satan, and at the same time it's the believer who is busy doing the work of the Spirit.

That means on the one hand, brothers and sisters, that we may be full of confidence in our resistance to sin and temptation. We're not left on our own, not dependent on ourselves, on our own inner strength. By the grace of the Lord God, *God Himself in the Spirit is with us* as we face whatever temptation there might be. So it may be fixed in our minds: succumbing to the attacks of the devil is not at all inevitable.

It means on the other hand that we need to make it our business day by day to fight. Exactly because we've received the Spirit, exactly because we're enabled by that Spirit to fight, need we *consciously to make it our business to resist sin* and to do the will of God in our every circumstance. The Spirit has been poured out, and therefore we may not be lazy in that fight. God the Holy Spirit dwells in our hearts, and that's why it is for us to get off our backsides and very much battle against any and every temptation that comes our way. The Bible is full of that instruction; throughout the Scriptures the child of God is *commanded* to do this, *commanded* to stay away from that. He's *told* to, it's his duty to. And the promise is that God the Holy Spirit does His work against sin through our struggles.

I Thes 4 gives us an example. Paul tells his readers to "abstain from sexual immorality", that is, tells them to make sure that each person "possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust." So no one is to take advantage sexually of a weaker person, none to hurt another by forcing his will on the other. That's the command. But notice what Paul says in vs 8: "he who rejects this does not reject man, but [rejects] God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit." Then the point is not only that a person who gives in to sexual temptation has rejected God in the sense that I Thes 4 is *God's* command (and not just Paul's); the point is that the person who gives in to sexual temptation rejects the fact that *the Holy Spirit has been poured out in his heart*. That Spirit is there, and *so* (says Paul in this chapter) you are enabled to control your sexual drive, not succumb to temptation. It requires a fight, certainly, but the fight is possible and can be successful because of the Holy Spirit. That's the promise, the gospel of Jesus Christ's victory over sin and Satan, a promise touching you in your specific circumstances today, tomorrow, Tuesday.

So, beloved of the Lord, fight on. Your responsibility is real, very real, and the battle not easy. But in this world with devils filled, your God and Savior has given to you the Spirit of the triumphant Christ. Work confidently with that reality. Soon, soon the Christ who gave the Spirit will return to earth, then to "cast all His and my enemies into everlasting condemnation." On that day the temptations and the frustrations will be gone, gone.... And we shall be fully changed, perfectly enabled to do always the will of God our Savior. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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**Sermon on Lord's Day 21 Q&A 54 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on
Sunday afternoon, 5 May 2001.**

***"THROUGH HIS SPIRIT THE ASCENDED CHRIST GATHERS TOGETHER THE PEOPLE
GOD GAVE HIM."***

Text:

Lord's Day 21 Q&A 54

54. Q. What do you believe concerning the holy catholic Christian church?

A. I believe that the Son of God,[1] out of the whole human race,[2] from the beginning of the world to its end,[3] gathers, defends, and preserves for Himself, [4] by His Spirit and Word,[5] in the unity of the true faith,[6] a church chosen to everlasting life.[7] And I believe that I am[8] and forever shall remain a living member of it.[9]

[1] John 10:11; Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11-13; Col. 1:18. [2] Gen. 26:4; Rev. 5:9. [3] Is. 59:21; I Cor. 11:26. [4] Ps. 129:1-5; Matt. 16:18; John 10:28-30. [5] Rom. 1:16; 10:14-17; Eph. 5:26. [6] Acts 2:42-47; Eph. 4:1-6. [7] Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:3-14. [8] I John 3:14, 19-21. [9] Ps. 23:6; John 10:27, 28; I Cor. 1:4-9; I Pet. 1:3-5.

Scripture Reading:

John 6:35-40

I Thessalonians 1:1-6

Also:

[Article 27 & 28 Belgic Confession](#)

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 27:2

Psalm 84:1 (Baptism: Hymn 45:1,2)

Psalm 122:1,2

Psalm 87:2,3,4

Hymn 40:1,2

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Our Savior has ascended into heaven, and left us on earth. That doesn't mean, though, that there is distance between Him and us; "with respect to His divinity, majesty, grace and Spirit He is never absent from us" – we said in Lord's Day 18. In fact, through His out-poured Spirit our ascended Lord applies to us the gifts He has obtained for us on the cross of Calvary – Lord's Day 19. In our Apostles' Creed we mention five of these gifts, viz, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Last week we listened to what work the Holy Spirit does in the people of God; this week, with the first Question & Answer of Lord's Day 21, we begin considering the gifts the Lord gives us through His Spirit. The first gift we consider is the church.

I summarize the sermon this afternoon with this theme:

**THROUGH HIS SPIRIT THE ASCENDED CHRIST GATHERS TOGETHER THE PEOPLE GOD
GAVE HIM.**

1. The work of Christ.

2. The responsibility of the Christian.

1. The work of Christ.

The term 'church' conjures up particular images in our minds. We think of 'church', and our minds go to this building, goes to the congregation that meets here, the preaching, the consistory, the people. That understanding of 'church' can in turn lead to positive thoughts, to the degree that we are comfortable with the people in church, comfortable with the work of the office-bearers, etc. Alternatively, that understanding of 'church' can lead to negative thoughts, to the degree that we don't feel comfortable with the people, are not happy with the work of the office-bearers, etc. Positive thoughts about the people and the church can then lead to complacency, while negative thoughts can lead to being discouraged altogether. Notice: both of these perspectives have us busy with people, and that keeps our eyes focused on the wrong place.

As it is, the term 'church' has a different loading in the Bible. When the Bible speaks of the church, the Bible thinks immediately of Christ. Christ is pictured as the Head, and the church as His body. We realize well that you cannot separate head from body; to speak of the one is to involve the other. The Bible speaks of the church as the bride, and of Christ as the bridegroom. You can certainly distinguish between bride and bridegroom - the two are not the same! - but to speak of the one is to involve the other. There's the point: when the Bible speaks of the church, always Christ is involved. That means for us that when we think of 'church' we need to think first of all not of people (be it in positive or negative terms), but we're to think first of all of *Jesus Christ*. For the church is *His work*.

Jesus Christ. He ascended into heaven. Yet from heaven Christ does not keep Himself distant from the earth. In His discussions with the Jews He once said – Jn 6- that the Father had given certain persons to the Son (vss 37, 39). In His highpriestly prayer Jesus described these persons as "the men whom You have given Me out of the world" (Jn 17:6). Jesus pictures all mankind as divided into two; on the one hand there's "the world", and on the other those "whom You have given Me out of the world." Christ's sacrifice on the cross of Calvary was for the benefit and eternal salvation not of all men, but for the benefit and salvation of those whom God has given to Christ; these are the elect, none of whom would be lost (Jn 6:39; 17:12).

What, now, does the ascended Christ do from heaven for these elect-for-whom-He-died? Paul says it in I Thes 1: in the power of the Holy Spirit the gospel of salvation came to the elect of Thessalonica (I Thes 1:5). More, as a result of the working of the Spirit the ascended Christ caused these elect to become followers of the Lord (I Thes 1:6). And so it is around the world, throughout the ages, wherever there are persons whom the Father has given to the Son. So there was the eunuch from Ethiopia; by the urging of the Holy Spirit Philip entered his chariot, found him reading the prophecy of Isaiah, and explained it to him – with as result that the eunuch came to faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 8:26ff). There was Lydia of Thyatira, living in Philippi; by the leading of the Holy Spirit Paul spoke the gospel in Philippi in the hearing of Lydia, and "the Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul" (Acts 16:14). There was a Frank Dong in studying in China; by the leading of the Holy Spirit the Word of the Lord came to Frank's ears, and he came to faith.

But does the Lord in heaven now leave these elect-come-to-faith to drift as they would? Does He leave them to exist as isolated individuals in this hostile world, islands to themselves? The answer is No. Rather, in His time and in His manner the ascended Lord gathers together into one body all those in a given community in whom He has worked faith. That gathered-together group is known as Christ's *church*.

Here we need to pause for a moment to consider what the church is. In today's popular understanding, the church is all the people of God anywhere in the world, all those with faith in Jesus Christ. You can't see this church, for you can't see who really has faith, and you can't see all the believers of Perth (let alone of Australia or around the world) in one go, and so the concept 'church' has become a vague, indefinable thing; in our minds we attach the word 'invisible' to this 'church'. But that, congregation, is not how the Bible speaks about the church.

We find the word 'church' various times in the New Testament, and each time the word translates the Greek word 'ecclesia'. That Greek word 'ecclesia', however, appears more often in the Bible; it's not always translated with the word 'church'. That's because the word 'ecclesia' was a common word amongst the pagan Greeks, used simply to

describe a gathering, an assembly of people. So I read in Acts 19, for example, about the riot instigated by Demetrius the silversmith. The people had "rushed into the theater with one accord" (vs 29), and that angry crowd packed in the theater is called in vs 32 an 'ecclesia' – and this time our translation gives it to us as 'assembly'. This, now, is the word the Holy Spirit was pleased to use for the result of Christ's work; the persons in whom He has worked faith are brought together into an 'ecclesia', into an 'assembly'. But when our Bibles translate the word 'ecclesia' where the word describe the gathering of the true Christian believers, it does so not with the word 'assembly' but with the word 'church'. That's OK, as long as we understand that the Greek word remains 'ecclesia', and that teaches us what the church is; it is the *assembly*-gathered-by-Christ, it is the gathering of those Christ brings together – true Christian believers. So Paul wrote a letter not to the individual products of the Spirit's renewing work in Thessalonica, Christians-who-existed-as-so-many-islands-to-themselves. Rather, he wrote his letter

"To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (vs 1),

to the body of believers that comes together at such and such an address.

What, then, is the church? The church is the assembly, is the gathering of the people of God. The church is not the people of God scattered hither and thither across the world, but it's these persons *gathered together* in the name of the Lord. As a result of Scriptural data as these, we confess in Article 27 of the *Belgic Confession* this:

"We believe and profess one ... Church, which is a holy *congregation* and *assembly* of the true Christian believers...."

Congregation, assembly: both words give back to us in English what is captured in the Greek word 'ecclesia'.

This church, this gathering-of-the-people-of-God is the work of the ascended Christ. Let it be fixed in our minds: in heaven on high our ascended Savior does more than intercede for God's own at the Father's right hand (Lord's Day 18), does more than govern the world for the sake of His church (Lord's Day 19), does more than give us His Spirit to comfort us (Lord's Day 20); this Savior in heaven labors on earth through His Holy Spirit to *gather* into one all those whom the Father has given Him. This gathering is *His* work.

And it's a work, congregation, that you can see with your own eyes. You need but look around you, need but look at yourself. Where are you? Think: you are sitting in the congregation of the redeemed, in the congregation of those righteous before God through Jesus' blood. And in this gathering of the righteous the Word of the Lord is now being proclaimed to you. Tell me: is what you are seeing around you simply human work? Is your coming here this afternoon perchance your own doing? Is the proclamation of the works of salvation strictly human activity? No, brothers and sisters, we are ourselves dead in sin and will certainly not proclaim the Word of life or listen to it. Nor, for that matter, will we on our own initiative come to the gathering of God's people to hear that Word, to use the sacraments, to call upon the Lord in prayer or to give Christian offerings for the poor - for the dead do nothing. What you see happening right now is *the work of the ascended Christ Himself!* He, through means of *His* choosing, has brought you this afternoon to church –why?- because He loves you enough to work and to strengthen faith in your heart.

It's a thought, brothers and sisters, that needs to fill us with awe. All around us people are busy on the Lord's Day doing their own thing. Each one, as long as there is no faith in their hearts, is dashing blindly into hell. But the Lord Jesus Christ takes you from among the thousands who desecrate the Lord's Day and brings you to church, to the assembly of the redeemed, because here the Lord would strengthen you in faith, and here the Lord would give you a small foretaste of the eternal life He's prepared for the elect. Marvel, beloved, at the Lord's church-gathering work laid before you for you to see, and marvel that *you* are allowed the privilege to be included in His work! Here's what we confess in Lord's Day 21: "I believe that I *am* ... a living member" of the church. And if the ascended Christ has worked faith in my heart (for the Lord God has given me to Christ as one of the elect out of the whole human race), then He will not desert me tomorrow – and that gives me confidence to confess that I "forever shall remain a living member of it" too.

The ascended Lord works. Yet He doesn't work only with me or only with the 300 members of this church of His. Already to Abraham God had said that His seed would be a blessing to "all the nations of the earth" (Gen 22:18; cf Is

49:6). That is: Christ's work on the cross would benefit not just Jews, but people of every tribe and tongue and nation. That's why Ps 87 could exalt that persons of Babylon and Philistia and Tyre and Ethiopia would join the Israelites to say that their salvation was in Zion – in the temple with its proclamation through the sacrifices of Jesus' atoning work. In accordance with such Old Testament prophecy, then, the persons whom the Father gave to Jesus out of the world could not be only Jews; the elect given to Jesus had to include persons from every tribe and tongue and nation (Rev 5:9; 7:9). For God keeps His word.

So it's no surprise to find that Jesus' church gathering work is not restricted to God's Old Testament covenant people alone. I mentioned the eunuch of Ethiopia in whose heart the ascended Christ worked faith. I mentioned too Lydia of Thyatira, in whose heart Christ worked faith and joined her to His church in Philippi. I can mention Christ's work in Kelmscott, where the ascended Savior has joined you and me to His assembly in this place – and we're not descendants of God's Old Testament covenant people. We heard last month about South Africa, and the work the Lord is doing there. The handout in the pigeonholes last Sunday about the China Mission Project in Vancouver informed us about the work the ascended Christ is doing through Rev Dong among Chinese people. Before our eyes, brothers and sisters, the ascended Christ is working in agreement with the promises God voiced to Abraham centuries ago; Christ is working here, Christ is working there, Christ is working anywhere on the earth, wherever there are persons whom the Father has given to Him – and we can see places where He is busy. Through His Spirit He's working faith, and some of those in whom He's worked faith He is sovereignly, graciously gathering together with other believers of town into His sheepfold.

This, brothers and sisters, is what the catholicity of the church is all about. Sunday by Sunday we confess with the Apostles' Creed that the church is 'catholic,' and with that we certainly do not mean that the church of Christ is somehow connected to the Roman Catholic Church; the church of Rome has no biblical claim to the word 'catholic'. Rather, with that term we confess that the ascended Christ works here, there, anywhere on the face of the earth to gather His own together; 'catholic' means universal. Lord's Day 21: "I believe that the Son of God, *out of the whole human race*, ... gathers, defends and preserves for Himself ... a church...." Or, in the words of Article 27 of the *Belgic Confession*: "this holy Church is not confined or limited to one particular place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed throughout the *entire* world."

We find the notion of catholicity somewhat hard to grasp. That the church is 'catholic' prompts us to picture the church as invisible, to think of that supposed indefinable and borderless body of all the elect of all tribes and tongues and nations. But the catholic church, congregation, is not invisible or hard to define. Rather, by its very definition the church is visible, and this very visible church is spread all over the world. I was in Fremantle a couple of weeks ago, and I saw the ocean. Last January I was in Albany, and I saw the ocean too. A year ago I was in South Africa, and there I also saw the ocean. No, I didn't see the whole ocean; we all realize very well that the ocean is too big, too spread-over-the-whole-world for us to see in one look. But that doesn't make the ocean invisible or indefinable and vague; that instead makes the ocean 'unoverseeable' – for want of a better term. So too the church. Right now I see the church of Jesus Christ in Kelmscott. After this service I can travel to Byford and see Christ's assembly-of-the-redeemed there too. I can also travel to Vancouver, to Pusan, to Rotterdam, and so many other places in the world and see the results of the labors of my ascended Savior in those communities. That's the catholicity of the church.

And here, now, is another remarkable thing, beloved. Despite the fact that the ascended Savior is working anywhere on earth to gather His church, the church He gathers is *united*, is one, is the same. The Savior does not work a different faith in the hearts of Zulus than He works in the hearts of Europeans. For there is one way to be saved, and that is through faith in Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). The apostle wrote to the Ephesians that:

"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all" (Eph 4:4ff).

The Spirit of the ascended Savior works the same faith in one God in the hearts of all those whom the Father has given to Him. So, when we confess the faith Sunday by Sunday with the words of the Apostles' Creed, we confess faith "with the church of all ages and places" – for all God's own, by the working of one Spirit sent by one Christ, believe the same thing. But this unity does not mean that the Lord's church in each culture is identical. If I may come back for

a moment to the analogy of the ocean: the ocean off the shores of Fremantle is the same as the ocean around Albany or Cape Town. In each place the water is wet, is salty, can thrash the shoreline violently; we've got no trouble identifying that water as ocean, we see its oneness, its sameness. Yet we recognize that there are local variations; the water temperature isn't the same, and the waves that batter the shoreline differ in intensity and frequency, etc. So too the church. Though spread and dispersed throughout the entire world, the church is one – though there are different 'temperatures' and 'storm patterns', if you will, from place to place and culture to culture. But the church is 'one' nevertheless by the power of faith, for the Lord who works faith and gathers His church is not divided.

How marvelous, beloved, is this work of the Lord around the globe. Yet the Lord tells us that this work is not complete, that it remains an ongoing labor on the Savior's part. We saw something of that this afternoon. Through baptism Melissa was engrafted into the Christian church (Lord's Day 27), and that was Christ at work. Similarly, there are more people in town whom the Father has given to the Son than are today members of the church of Christ in this place. In His time the Lord works faith in these elect ones, and at His time the Lord also gathers these people together with the rest of His elect. So, in the course of years, we have seen persons joining the church – Christ at work! And His church gathering work on earth will continue until the day of Christ's return; not until that day will all the elect be gathered together, will the assembly-of-the-Lord be complete (Rev 7:9; 14:14). Meanwhile, it continues before our eyes, continues around the globe. And that's exciting!

But that work of the Lord, brothers and sisters, does not pass our responsibilities by. The Lord has created us to bear responsibility, and that responsibility pertains to the Lord's church gathering work too. That's our second point this afternoon:

2. The responsibility of the Christian

When we spoke last week about the Holy Spirit and His work with Lord's Day 20, I said that "the Spirit's work and our work come together, need to be mentioned together, is a co-operation." That is: the believer does what the Spirit of Christ works in him. Well, a concrete application of that point is found in relation to the church. It is Christ who gathers His people together, gathers His church. But God's people can't just sit on their hands and wait for Christ through His Spirit to assemble us; it's for God's own to gather *with Christ*. That means specifically that it is for those persons whom the Father has given to the Son, those persons in whom the Son through His Spirit has worked faith, to *make it their business* to assemble with other believers. Yet the assembly where Christ calls His people is not a place where people need to look at each other, as in: do I like that person, do I agree with all yonder man has done, has that lady always been nice to me, etc. The church can never have people as its focus; the church must have Christ as its focus. The bond that keeps redeemed sinners together is not the bond of blood or the bond of friendship; the bond that keeps redeemed sinners together is their common love for their one Savior. So the place where God's people congregate must be there *where Christ Himself is present*. Where that is? There where the voice of the Shepherd is heard. Christ calls His people *to Himself*, to where He is. And one knows where Christ is in the same way as sheep know where their shepherd is; they hear His voice.

That is why the first mark of the church is the preaching of the gospel. It is the Spirit of the ascended Christ who takes men and causes them to proclaim the gospel. Where this gospel is proclaimed from the pulpits, *there* Christ is present, there Christ is gathering His redeemed together, and so there the redeemed of God need to gather together.

Does that mean that we must expect perfection in the preaching – be it the audible preaching or the visible, the word or the sacraments? While the norm is that preachers around the world bring the Word of God without error in any way (for it is *God's* word), the fact remains that God uses sinful men to proclaim the gospel. Their sinfulness will invariably come out in the preaching. Christ calls His people together not where the preaching is perfect (for that happens nowhere in this life), but where the preaching is faithful, where the good news of God's saving work in Jesus Christ is proclaimed with integrity. Where that occurs - no matter in which language or among which race of people, or in which culture- where that occurs Jesus Christ the Shepherd is present, and that is where His sheep must congregate.

Similarly, must we expect perfection in church discipline? While the norm is that elders around the world discipline God's people without error in any way, the fact remains that God uses sinful men to teach and admonish His people. Their sinfulness will invariably come out in the way they exercise church discipline. The point is though whether,

despite the shortcomings of the elders, the sheep of the Lord are told in their circumstances what the will of the Lord for them is. Christ calls His people together not where the discipline is perfect (for that happens nowhere in this life), but where discipline is applied faithfully. Where that occurs, be it with so many shortcomings, Jesus Christ the Shepherd is present, and that is where His sheep must congregate. More, where that occurs His sheep are *not permitted* to depart from that gathering-of-the-redeemed, for that is to work contrary to where and how the Lord is working. That is why we confess together in the *Belgic Confession*, Article 28,

"that no one ought to withdraw from [the assembly of the redeemed], content to be by himself, no matter what his status or standing may be. But all and everyone are obliged to join it and unite with it, maintaining the unity of the church. They must submit themselves to its instruction and discipline, bend their necks under the yoke of Jesus Christ...."

Yet what do we see in our midst? So often in the last number of years we have seen persons withdraw from the church; we heard it this morning again. Yet that is so wrong, so very wrong. To withdraw from the assembly of the redeemed is *to work against Christ*. While He is *gathering* His people together, the person who withdraws is *scattering* himself from that gathering. Then sure, the person who withdraws will have his reasons. Invariably he'll see sin, weakness, failures with people in the church or with the office-bearers. And that's no surprise, simply because the people Christ gathers to the church and the office-bearers He calls to office remain sinners. But what is the Lord's will in the matter? This, that we have to get our eyes off the people, and onto Christ, and then *work along with Christ in His church gathering work*. If this assembly-of-believers is His work, no child of God is allowed to withdraw from it – "no matter what his status or standing may be." To work against Christ is always sin, and it requires repentance. As long as one acts contrary to the ordinance of God there can never be a blessing.

You will say: those who have gone out from us join other assemblies of believers in town where Christ is also present and His voice is faithfully heard. Good and well. But again, beloved, what is the will of the Lord in the matter? This: where Christ is gathering His people together in multiple places in one town, these churches need to work together, need to recognize from each other that the Lord has worked one faith in one Savior in these various assemblies. Christ's church in Kelmscott sees that work of the Lord in Armadale, in Byford, in Mt Nasura. But we do not see that work occurring in Gosnells or in Bull Creek or in Bicton. Hear me well: I do not say that there are no sheep of the Lord in those suburbs, or that churches in these suburbs have no true believers among their members. But when you speak of 'church' you speak of Christ –remember?- and that's the question: is *Christ* present there, ie, is *His* voice heard? And the answer to that question may not be made by any single one of us individually. After all, Solomon said that "in the multitude of counselors there is safety" (Prov 11:14). It's the congregation together, or even the bond of churches, and not you as an individual member, who may decide whether the assembly in the next suburb rightly calls itself a church of Christ, is the church where Christ calls you to be. Here we need to be very wary that we do not adopt for ourselves the individualism that is so rampant in our times.

Through His Holy Spirit the ascended Christ gathers together the persons whom the Father has given to the Son. In His incomprehensible mercy He has taken you and me and brought us together in the assembly of the redeemed in Kelmscott. Very much sin remains in each of us; the Christ who brought us together has not yet perfected us. But the sin that remains may never be cause for anyone to withdraw from Christ's church in this place; to withdraw is to work against the ascended Christ – and there's no blessing on that. Instead, it is for each of us to keep directing each other's attention to Christ, what He is doing in our community and how He wants us to respond in turn.

And the other believers in town? By a mercy as incomprehensible as the mercy with which the Lord has joined us to His church, these believers will one day be drawn also to the assembly of the redeemed – if not in this life, then in the life to come. Meanwhile the duty remains: we and they need to work along with Christ, and so be where He is gathering His church. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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**Sermon on Lord's Day 21 Q&A 55 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on
Sunday afternoon, 13 May 2001.**

"CHRIST MAKES HIS CHURCH INTO A COMMUNION OF SAINTS."

Text:

Lord's Day 21 Q&A 55

55. Q. What do you understand by the communion of saints?

A. First, that believers, all and everyone, as members of Christ have communion with Him and share in all His treasures and gifts.[1] Second, that everyone is duty-bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members.[2]

[1] Rom. 8:32; I Cor. 6:17; 12:4-7, 12, 13; I John 1:3. [2] Rom. 12:4-8; I Cor. 12:20-27; 13:1-7; Phil. 2:4-8.

Scripture Reading:

I Corinthians 6:9-11

I Corinthians 12

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 16:1

Psalm 65:2,3

Hymn 38:1,2

Psalm 133:1,2

Psalm 122:1,2,3

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We learned to our delight last week that our Lord Jesus Christ, though ascended into heaven, remains busy on this earth. Through His Holy Spirit He bestows His heavenly gifts on us His members. His gifts include the church, the gathering together, all around the world, of those whom the Father has given to the Son. And we, we confessed last week, may be among those gathered together through the working of Christ's Spirit. Exciting!

As it is, the Lord God tells us that the ascended Savior does more on earth than gather His church. For by His sovereign working, the church He gathers on earth in this town and that is characterized by the same love that the Son of God displayed in His self-emptying work on the cross. That love, that self-emptying attitude for the sake of the other, is the communion of saints – another work of the ascended Savior on this earth. It's about this work of the Lord in our midst that I may speak to you today.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

CHRIST MAKES HIS CHURCH INTO A COMMUNION OF SAINTS.

- 1. The labor of Christ,**
- 2. The responsibility of the Christian.**

1. The labor of Christ

What work, brothers and sisters, does the ascended Christ do in forming His church into a communion of saints? To get a clear picture of that work, we need first to appreciate what people really are.

After Adam and Eve fell into sin, the Lord God put to Adam this question: "Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you that you should not eat?" (Gen 3:11). Adam's reply was this: "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate" (vs 12). Here, congregation, is your classic blame shifting; 'don't look at me, look at her.' But what, now, prompts the one to point the finger at the other? Is it not *selfishness*? That exposes fallen human nature for what it is: selfish to the core.

That selfishness produces other evils. So Cain could be jealous with his brother, and that jealousy could grow into hatred, and that hatred into murder. Lamech could take two wives instead of one, and then boast of killing a lad because that lad had wounded him. It's all selfishness, self-centeredness, and it's bitter fruits. See there human nature (cf Rom 3:10ff).

It pleased the Lord God to send His only Son into the world. To this Son the Father gave certain persons from out of the whole human race (we learned last week), and for these persons Jesus Christ laid down His life. After His triumph on the cross Christ ascended into heaven, and now, in the course of church history, He *gathers together* these persons of every tribe and tongue and nation whom the Father has given to Him. In that church-gathering work of His, He causes the Word of life to go out to those whom the Father has given to Him, yes, He causes that Word to meet with faith in the hearer. Then at His time He gathers together the believers of a given community. So there is a church in Kelmscott, and there is a gathering of believers in Cape Town, and there is one in Unai too – all sinners redeemed in the blood of Jesus Christ, now gathered by Christ through His Spirit into one body in that community.

But what kind of persons are these people who Christ has gathered together? By nature they are selfish, by nature they are given to sin, any sort of sin. And when sinners are brought together, and each may live out his selfishness as he wishes, you have a recipe for disaster! For each by nature feeds off the other, each by nature is out to preserve his own skin – of course, at the cost of the other. Here, now, is the work of Christ known as the communion of saints: Jesus Christ changes people so that selfish sinners in fact live together in peace and harmony, even need each other in a positive way.

I draw your attention to the church gathering work of Christ in Corinth. The city of Corinth was notorious for its sexual corruption, was the San Francisco of the times. God the Father, though, had given certain persons of this town to the Son, and so the ascended Christ caused the gospel of Calvary to come to Corinth. That gospel came to what sort of people? Or to put the question in terms of Lord's Day 21: what sort of people did the Lord Jesus Christ gather together into His church in Corinth? The passage we read from I Cor 6 gives us some indication. For those verses give us a list of what sort of persons cannot inherit the kingdom of God, and then closes with this pronouncement: "And such were some of you" (vs 11). In other words, within the congregation of those gathered by Christ in Corinth were fornicators and idolaters and homosexuals and sodomites and thieves and drunkards and extortioners, etc. As long as one is a fornicator or a homosexual or a thief, what is one doing? This: one is giving in to the passions of the flesh, one is letting oneself be governed by your own selfish drives. As in: I want this and this, and I'm going to taking advantage of you in order to get it. Depraved human nature at its worst.... A group like that together is a definite recipe for disaster, especially for the weaker in their midst.

In Corinth Jesus Christ gathered His church together – including these idolaters and sodomites and thieves and drunkards and extortioners. But see: this gathering of sinners did not blow apart, for the people Christ gathered did not *remain* idolaters and sodomites and thieves and drunkards and extortioners. Vs 11: "such *were* some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God." That is: through His Spirit the ascended Christ worked a change in these sinners so that they became what they were not. These sinners were made *saints*. And 'saints', we have to understand, are not sinless people, or very good people; saints are sinners who have been washed by Jesus' blood and renewed by Jesus' Spirit. The church Christ gathered in Corinth was "a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers, who expect[ed] their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, [were] washed by His blood, and [were] sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit." *Saints* they were, because of Christ's work.

Yet that's not all that Christ did. For these sinners-become-saints, gathered by Christ in Corinth, were not so many individuals in one place – like balls in a net; when you remove the net the balls go every which way because they're not individually connected to each other. No, the saints Christ gathered into His church in Corinth He also made into a *body*. I Cor 12: the people Paul addressed in that chapter were the very same people addressed in chap 6, the group that included ex-fornicators, ex-homosexuals, ex-thieves, etc. Of these people Paul said in vs 27, "You are the body of Christ, and members individually." We've all got bodies, and we all know so very well that bodies are not just collections of separate parts. A body is a unity, with each member of the body needing to work together with the rest of the body for the well being of the whole body. So too the body of Christ in Corinth. The ex-homosexual and the ex-drunkard and the ex-thief were gathered by Christ into one body not so that they could each might be lame appendages living off the rest of the body as so many parasites – and meanwhile doing nothing for the rest of the body. No, the ex-homosexual and the ex-drunkard and the ex-thief were gathered by Christ into a *body*, and the point is that each contributed to the well being of the others – for each has an allegiance to the other, each has a commitment to the other, each needs the other. A church is not just a *gathering* of saints, of so many individuals that have no bond with each other, no commitment to each other, no allegiance to each other. A church is a *communion* of saints, and that term 'communion' says that there's a bond between each of the members, a bond that compels members to do things for each other.

A classic illustration of the point is given in Acts 2. After the Holy Spirit had been poured out and Peter had delivered His sermon, the crowds responded with repentance. The result is recorded like this: "and that day about three thousand souls were added to them" (vs 41). We may be sure that these three thousand were not all good friends with each other; many were strangers to each other. And we may also be sure that there were various persons here with rather notorious reputations. Yet what do we read? Vs 42: "and they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship...." Fellowship: that's being together, more, that's depending on each other, supporting each other; the Greek word is 'communion'. How amazing! Strangers, persons from any class in society, of decent and not-so-decent reputation - *together!* That they're not together in a superficial sense is pointed up by vss 44f; they "had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need." How different, how vastly different from the selfishness of Adam in Paradise, how different from the selfishness characterizing all humans! Where this difference comes from? This, brothers and sisters, is the work of Jesus Christ! For by the powerful working of His Spirit, He makes His people share in Himself, and so reflect too the mindset He Himself has.

What that mindset is? Paul draws it out for the Corinthians in his second letter. For he says in II Cor 8:

"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich" (vs 9).

That Christ was rich describes the glory which He had with the Father in heaven from all eternity. But, says Paul, Christ "became poor." That's Christmas, when the Son of God laid aside His heavenly wealth and was born in a manger, had nothing – and ultimately ended up on the cross. And why? "He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." In other words, Christ did not think of Himself, His own skin, His own comfort; He instead emptied Himself for the benefit of the other. And who is the 'other' who becomes rich through Christ's self-emptying? That's sinners – including the ex-drunkards and the ex-extortioners and the ex-sodomites of the congregation of Jesus Christ in Corinth!

But these selfish persons are now brought together, assembled by Christ into one body. What happens? This: these persons –by nature selfish- empty themselves for the sake of others! I Cor 12: they are a body! That is: these selfish persons of Corinth have been changed so that instead of leeching off others, using others to satisfy their own urges, they now give of themselves to make the body function together. See there, my brothers and sisters, the marvelous work of the ascended Christ! The communion of saints: it's His work amongst sinful people!

We can trace Christ's renewing work further still. Christ made the church of Corinth into a body. In a body the various members need each other so much. See now: Christ also gave gifts so that the persons He grafted into this body could all benefit each other in some way or another! I Cor 12: the one person has the gift to be a foot, another the hand, the third an eye. Vs 4: "there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit;" it's the one Spirit-of-Christ who gives different gifts to different people. But these different gifts –vs 7- are "given to each one for the profit of all." So the one person

in the congregation –vs 8- "is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit," and so, if you in your difficult situation need a word of wise guidance it's brother so-and-so you need to visit – that's why God gave the brother to the body. To another –vs 8- the same Spirit-of-Christ has given the gift of knowledge; sister so-and-so is a walking encyclopedia and you with your question should feel free to pursue an answer from her – that's why God gave the sister to the body. To another the Lord has given the gift of faith, to another gifts of healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discerning of spirits, etc, etc; a variety of gifts according to the needs of the congregation. Christ through His Spirit gives diversities of gifts to the body, so that in the body there's eyes and ears, legs and a liver, nose and knees and toes also. And what if there was no liver? Or the Lord hadn't given any eyes? What if there was no gift of wisdom or of faith or of prophecy or of healing in Corinth? Then the body would not be able to function optimally; the whole body would suffer. But here is Christ's care, Christ's mercy to His redeemed people: He gives gifts according to the need of the body so that the body of Christ does not lack. That is true, beloved, of Corinth, and it's true of Kelmscott also. Whatever the body of Christ in a given place needs in order to be a *body* is granted; Christ gives these gifts here and those gifts there, whatever He in wisdom determines that body needs in order to function as His body. Which, by the way, means that we need not expect to find the same gifts in Kelmscott as the Lord was pleased to give in Corinth. God gives us the gifts we *do* need, not the gifts we don't need.

How marvelous, beloved, is the work of the Savior! We tend to look at each other, and ourselves, and see faults, weaknesses. And it's a fact, the faults and weaknesses are certainly there. But the Lord would have us know, brothers and sisters, that He has supplied sufficient gifts in the midst of His congregation in Kelmscott so that we can be the body Christ wants us to be.

Again, God has not made us all eyes, and it's just as well; "if the whole body were an eye, where would be the hearing?" – as Paul says in vs 17. But what happens now? We look at another, and we feel that he's got more gifts than I've got, and so we wish we were like him..., and we become dissatisfied with what we received.... But let it be fixed in your mind, beloved: if Christ has performed a work, He's performed it well. If Christ has made you a knee in the body of Christ, you have every gift you need to function as the knee in that body. You are not less than another, simply because Christ has not made you an eye! Jesus Christ has given us all separate gifts, and it's in our uniqueness-as-individuals that we function together as a body.

Once more, since the body is Christ's work, and He has joined you to His body in this place, then it follows that no member of this congregation should feel that he doesn't belong. Just because the collarbone has a more behind-the-scenes function than the rest of the body doesn't mean at all that the collarbone hasn't a role to play in the body. *Which* gift you have is not the critical question; important is that Christ has joined you to His body, and *therefore* you have a gift. And the gift you have is important for the well being of the body; else the Lord would not have given you that gift. Out, then, beloved, with the thought that you're not good enough, or the thought that you have nothing to contribute, or the thought that you don't really belong. Don't compare your gifts to those of others, and then think yourself less; delight instead in the fact that Lord has given you a place and task in the body – and therefore gifts to fulfill that task.

I realize: we look at the communion of saints in Kelmscott and we see so very many imperfections. We see some groups in the congregation, and we see brothers and sisters at enmity with each other. Yet, congregation, to stare at these imperfections is to make ourselves blind to Christ's work. Human nature is to hate the other, is to be fully selfish and self-seeking; recall Adam's answer to God, recall Cain's killing of Abel. What, now, do we see in our midst? Many remaining imperfections, O yes. But we also see so very many fruits of the Christ's work in our midst! Mutual encouragement does occur, and so does mutual admonitions in the face of sin. Carrying each other's burdens does occur, and so does warning each other of dangers. Are we so many lonely individuals, like separate balls in a net? Not at all; there is real care, true sharing, genuine love. *And that is the Lord's work in the midst of His congregation in Kelmscott!*

Does this mean that Christ's work is complete in our midst? No, not at all. We very much experience that imperfection remains. And here, beloved, we are not unique; this is instead the way the Lord is pleased to work in this broken world. Concerning the very Corinthians of whom Paul could say in chap 12 that they were one body, he says in chap 1 that they are divided. I quote 1:10:

"Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you."

Paul adds in vs 12 that in Corinth the one said, "I am of Paul," the other, "I am of Apollos," a third, "I am of Cephas," and still another, "I am of Christ". Yet of that group Paul says that they are one body! You see, it doesn't take a certain standard of perfection to be a communion of saints; it takes *Christ-being-at-work* to be a communion of saints. And where there is love in Christ for one another, a self-emptying as Christ emptied Himself for sinners, there Christ is at work, there He has formed the individual believers of town into one body, a communion of saints.

Remember: the communion of saints is not *first of all* something we see or experience; the communion of saints is first of all something we *believe*. For the Christ who from heaven gathers into one those whom the Father has given Him does not leave these persons-by-nature-dead-in-sin in their depravity; He raises them to a new life so that they love as Christ loved. No, not perfectly; that will not happen until the day that Christ comes back. But changed they already are, and formed into a functioning body too. Our eye is not to be on the imperfections in our selves and in our midst (that would only make one despondent, cynical); our eye is to be on the work that Christ is doing. And His work in the midst of sinners in Kelmscott moves one to thankfulness, to praise.

So we come to our second point:

2. The responsibility of the Christian

Here I can be brief. For what, brothers and sisters, is the responsibility of the Christian? Given the work that our Lord Jesus Christ has done, given that He has formed us into a communion of saints, a body, what obligation follows? It's quite simple, beloved. In deep gratitude for the work our Savior has done and continues to do in us, it is for us to *be* what the Savior has *made us to be*. You are a hand, and your neighbor is a nose that itches? Reach out, in compassion scratch the itch, comfort your neighbor in her grief. You are an eye, and your brother is the foot about to trip over the curb? In love tell your brother of the danger that threatens. You have the gift of wisdom, and your sister doesn't know where to turn in her problems? Go to her, draw her out, and point her in the right direction. In a word: simply recognize the work the Lord is doing in our midst, and *work along with Him. Amen.*

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 21 Q&A 56 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 20 May 2001.

"FOR CHRIST'S SAKE GOD DOES NOT DEAL WITH US ACCORDING TO OUR SINS."

Text:

Lord's Day 21 Q&A 56

56. Q. What do you believe concerning the forgiveness of sins?

A. I believe that God, because of Christ's satisfaction, will no more remember my sins,[1] nor my sinful nature, against which I have to struggle all my life,[2] but He will graciously grant me the righteousness of Christ, that I may never come into condemnation.[3]

[1] Ps. 103:3, 4, 10, 12; Mic. 7:18, 19; II Cor. 5:18-21; I John 1:7; 2:2. [2] Rom. 7:21-25. [3] John 3:17, 18; 5:24; Rom. 8:1, 2.

Scripture Reading:

II Corinthians 5:9-6:2

Isaiah 43:22-28

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 143:1,4

Psalm 51:4,5

Psalm 103:1,3,4

Psalm 32:1,2,3

Psalm 103:1-12

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The ascended Christ through His Holy Spirit pours out heavenly gifts upon His people. We considered two weeks ago His gift of the church, and last week His gift of the communion of saints. Today we come to His gift of the forgiveness of sins.

This third gift of which we make confession in our Catechism brings us to the heart of Christ's redeeming work on the cross. It's a gift that determines the way the Lord God treats us in this life, a gift that's critical too as we consider what will happen when the Lord returns on the last day. For this gracious gift means that the Lord does not bring us into condemnation – neither in this life nor in the life to come. At the same time this gift too does not come without responsibility on our part; as with His gift of the church and of the communion of saints, so too the labor of Christ in relation to the forgiveness of sins implies a responsibility for the Christian.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

FOR CHRIST'S SAKE GOD DOES NOT DEAL WITH US ACCORDING TO OUR SINS.

1. The work of Christ

2. The responsibility of the Christian

1. The work of Christ

As we seek to learn today, brothers and sisters, what the Lord tells us about the forgiveness of sins, we shall do well to consider briefly first what sin is, and what God's response to sin might be. An awareness of sin and God's response will make us marvel the more at the gospel of forgiveness.

Simply put, sin is rebellion against God, is disobeying God's holy command for whatever reason. God's response to sin is anger, and that's deadly for the sinner. In Lord's Day 4 we echo Scripture on the point; God, we say, "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." And that's an awful judgment; the thought of God's wrath prompts people to call on mountains to fall on them and hills to cover them.

It's in the face of God's terrible response to sin that we make confession today of the forgiveness of sins. That already tells us that with this topic of forgiveness of sins we're touching a most precious teaching of the church. After all, none of us wants that eternal wrath of God to settle on us; instead, all of us want to escape that wrath.

That being said, we need to consider what forgiveness of sins is. What does the term 'forgiveness' mean? The word translated in the New Testament with the English word 'forgiveness' describes the notion of release, of discharge, of exemption. A release is given to slaves, and the point is that the slaves are set free. A discharge is given by the bank, and the point is that you don't have to pay what you owe. An exemption is granted from military service, and the point is that you don't have to spend time in the army. In relation to sin: when I sin I end up in a slavery, for my sins become a burden over my head that attracts the eternal wrath of God. Forgiveness of sins is that God releases me from the burden caused by my sins. Forgiveness of sins is that God discharges me from what I owe to Him. Forgiveness of sins is that God grants me an exemption from the wrath that I deserve. In simple language, forgiveness of sins is that *God does not deal with me according to my sins*.

Given that the Lord is so emphatic on the rightness of His holy anger against sin, this notion of release, of discharge, of exemption is so profoundly rich. That's why I want to run you, brothers and sisters, through a string of Scripture texts to prove the point. David says in Ps 103 that the Lord "forgives all your iniquity" (vs 3). David describes this forgiveness with the following words:

"He has not dealt with us according to our sins,
Nor punished us according to our transgressions" (vs 10).

That's a definition of forgiveness of sins to which we'll need to return. Meanwhile, David also explains how come God doesn't deal with us according to our sins. He says:

"As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgressions from us" (vs 12).

In today's modern world, east is not all that far removed from the west; a few hour's flying and we're in eastern Australia, and a few hour's more travel and we're on the far side of the globe. But in Israel's culture what was removed from you and brought as far west as you could go was functionally irretrievable; it just took too long to get it back. That's the point; God does not deal with David according to David's sins, but takes those sins away so that they play no role at all in God's dealings with David. Which is in turn to say that it's not David's sin that determines how the Lord deals with David, but it's instead God's mercy and compassion that determines what the Lord gives David. Vs 11:

"For as the heavens are high above the earth,
So great is His mercy to those who fear Him."

A second text that needs our attention is Micah 7. Here we meet the same thought, but with different imagery. The prophet is moved by the Lord to say this:

"Who is a God like You,
Pardoning iniquity
And passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage?

He does not retain His anger forever,
Because He delights in mercy.
He will again have compassion on us,
And will subdue our iniquities.
You will cast all our sins
Into the depths of the sea" (vss 18f).

What sinks into the depths of the sea in our day is not necessarily gone; think of the Russian nuclear submarine that sank last year in the Barents Sea, or think of the Titanic lying in some 3500 meters of water in the Atlantic. But Israel didn't have the technology we have. What was cast into the Dead Sea or the Mediterranean Sea was gone and could play no role anymore in your life. So it is, says Micah, with sin. Such is God's incomparable compassion that He disposes of our sins into the depths of the sea, and the point is that these sins *no longer play any role* in the way in which God deals with the forgiven sinner.

I draw your attention to a third text. The Holy Spirit says this through the prophet Isaiah:

"I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake;
And I will not remember your sins" (vs 25).

The imagery is that of ink. You're writing down a record of this or that with your feather pen, and you end up with a spill of ink on your page. You can soak up the puddle with a blotter, but the effect is that a mark remains on your page, a mark that makes it impossible to read what you'd written. That's the image of Is 43; the Lord spills ink on the page listing our sins so that the list can't be read. The net result is again that the Lord does not hold those sins against His people; He promises to deal with Israel without regard to their sins and the penalty His people deserve.

I can give you more images from the Bible to illustrate what forgiveness of sins really is. But enough has been said to demonstrate that the practical consequence of forgiveness is –as David said in Ps 103- that *God does not deal with us according to our sins*. That is forgiveness: in the relation between God and His people, God does not deal with His own according to what we deserve. Though He is terribly displeased with our sins, and promises to punish them in this life and in the life to come, forgiveness means that the punishment does not happen, that God's conduct towards us is determined not by our sins but instead by His mercy in Jesus Christ.

Here, of course, is the blessed fruit of the Savior's work on the cross. You recall from the Old Testament that when the people of Israel confessed their sins before the Lord and made a sacrifice for those sins, the sinner had to lay his hand on the head of the animal – and the point was that sin was transferred from the sinner to the animal, with as result that the sinner was released from his sins, was discharged from the burden of those sins, was granted an exemption from serving the penalty these sins deserve. In the final analysis those sins were transferred to Jesus Christ; "the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" so that "He was wounded for our transgressions" and we get to go free (Is 53:5f). Because of His work on the cross, the wrath of God on our sins is taken away, and we are reconciled to God again to that there is peace between God and sinners. As Paul says to the Corinthians: God "has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ.... That is, God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them" (II Cor 5:18f). Reconciliation: there is now peace with God! No longer does His curse rest on us on account of our sins! It's the glorious words of Rom 8: "there is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus!" That's why we confess in Article 23 of the *Belgic Confession*:

"We believe that our blessedness lies in the forgiveness of our sins for Jesus Christ's sake and that therein our righteousness before God consists...."

What a glorious concept this is, beloved! It's the eternal wrath of God we deserve, a wrath so terrible that we'd call on mountains to fall on us to hide us away from that wrath. But instead of that wrath we receive *blessedness*, receive God's favor, His pleasure! Listen again to the rich words of Article 23:

"This is sufficient to cover all our iniquities and to give us confidence in drawing near to God, freeing our conscience of fear, terror, and dread, so that we do not follow the example of our first father, Adam, who

trembling tried to hide and covered himself with fig leaves. For indeed, if we had to appear before God, relying - be it ever so little - on ourselves or some other creature, (woe be to us!) we would be consumed. Therefore everyone must say with David, 'O LORD, enter not into judgment with Thy servant, for no man living is righteous before Thee' (Ps 143:2)."

See there, beloved, the glorious work of Christ! Shall we be afraid of God? Shall we cringe at the thought of His displeasure at our sins? Thank God: no, no! With deep gratitude I may confess with Lord's Day 21 that "God, because of Christ's satisfaction, will no more remember my sins..., but will graciously grant me the righteousness of Christ, that I may never come into condemnation." I need not be afraid of God, not in this life nor in the life to come.

And, beloved, let the wording be fixed in your minds: we receive this wealth "because of Christ's satisfaction." His work on the cross is the sole cause of us receiving this immeasurable wealth. Which is to say that we do *not* receive this blessedness because of anything *we* do! Not a single work of yours, beloved, earns you this wonderful gift – and that includes your work of repentance. It is grace, fully grace alone, to people who themselves do not seek God. I will come back to this point, the Lord willing, in our second point on the responsibility of the Christian. But first there's another element of forgiveness that needs our attention.

One hears from time to time that forgiveness means that God *forgets* our sins. Our Lord's Day even seems to foster that thought, for it says that "God ... will no more remember my sins." "No more remember": we understand that to mean that God forgets. But that conclusion is wrong. I mention two reasons for saying this.

In the first place, that phrase from the Catechism that "God ... will no more remember my sins" is language borrowed from the Bible. I quoted already from Is 43:

"I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake;
And I will not remember your sins" (vs 25).

In our Lord's Day we simply echo Isaiah's prophecy. But does Isaiah mean that God *forgets* Israel's sins? That can't be because just two verses later the Lord reminds Israel of the sins of the fathers (vs 27); He's not forgotten them. The point here is: what is meant by the word 'remember'?

I mentioned it this morning already. Gen 7 ends with the statement that the waters of the flood were on the earth for 150 days. Gen 8 begins with these words, "Then the Lord remembered Noah." Is the point that God clean forgot about Noah for 150 days, and something jogged His memory 150 days later? Of course not; imagine if our God developed a temporary amnesia while He promised to look after us always! No, when the text says that "the Lord remembered Noah," the point is that now God set to work to do something to deliver Noah. As the same verse also says, "And God made a wind to pass over the earth, and the waters subsided." It's as we heard this morning from Dt 8: to remember involves that you do something.

That's the point in Isaiah when the prophet says that God will no remember sins, and that's equally the point in our Lord's Day. That God no more remembers our sins means that His actions towards His people are not determined by His people's sins; His actions towards those sinners are instead determined by His compassion in Jesus Christ.

There's a second reason for saying God does not forget sins. Consider the following string of texts.

- Jesus says to the Pharisees in Mt 12 that "for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned" (vs 36; cf Luke 12:2f)).
- In his first letter to the Corinthians Paul writes, "Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God" (I Cor 4:5).
- In the passage we read from II Cor 5, Paul says, "We must all appear before the judgment

seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad" (vs 10).

All three texts, brothers and sisters, tell us about the Day of Judgment, how it is that every thought of our mind, every word our mouths have spoken, every deed we've ever done, will be laid out before us. In the words of Rev 20:

"And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and books were opened. And another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books" (Rev 20:12).

You cannot get around it, beloved: data as these imply that there is in heaven a record of our every thought, every word, every deed. How we have to imagine this record I do not know. But it is obvious that the Lord God does not forget our sins as if there exists with Him no memory of our evil thoughts, words or deeds. That memory there most certainly is! Let no one tell you that forgiveness of sins means that God forgets those sins. He doesn't!

But the thing is that the Lord's *actions toward us are not determined by His knowledge of our transgressions*. For all practical intents and purposes those sins are blotted out, removed as far as east from west extends, cast into the depths of the sea. So it will be at the trial on the last day that even while there is present a record of my sins - and Satan will no doubt seek to draw God's attention to that record in order to compel God to condemn me! (Zech 3:1ff)- yet *God will not act toward me on the basis of that record*. Instead, for Christ's sake He will declare me not guilty, innocent. So, in the words of our Lord's Day, I will not come into condemnation. That is, I will not find myself in the hell I deserve on account of my sins! You see, God will not deal with us according to our sins, nor punish us according to our transgressions – as David described forgiveness in Ps 103.

And here is now the wonderful thing about it all: the recollection of all sins on the last day will point up the more the glory of our God! All sinners will be there, with all their sins. The ungodly need to give account of their evil thoughts and words and deeds, and they can't – and therefore shall taste the severe judgment of God as they go to their eternal home in hell. And the world shall see that God is *just* in His sentence. The godly shall need to give account of their evil thoughts and words and deeds also, but Christ shall intervene (Zech 3:4) and remind the Father how He on the cross of Calvary paid for their sins so that sinners were reconciled to God. It will be clear to all that the children of God are no better than the unbelievers, and yet God is pleased to show *mercy* on them for Christ's sake; how the mercy of God will be shown up so wonderfully!! And all of it together shall give cause for one and all to praise the Lord for both His justice and His mercy!

I move on now to our second point:

2. The responsibility of the Christian

I said before that not a single work of ours in any way earns us this wonderful gift of forgiveness of sins – and that includes our work of repentance. Instead, God gives it to men freely, of grace, for Christ's sake. That does not mean, though, that the Christian has no responsibility in the matter. Rather, it is here just as with any other of God's gifts; it is for us to work along with Christ, to embrace in faith the gift God gives in Jesus Christ. I draw your attention here to II Cor 5.

The chapter is written to the "saints" of Corinth, sinners with whom God does not deal according to their sins. In fact, chap 5 begins with the assurance that "if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens" (vs 1). The point is that God, because of Christ's satisfaction, no more remembers the sins of these Corinthians, but will graciously grant them the righteousness of Christ so that they will never come into condemnation. That reality, though, doesn't take away from the fact these Corinthians must also – like all men- appear before the judgment seat of Christ (vs 10). It's the thought of this judgment seat, says Paul, that prompt him –vs 11- to "persuade men"; he would do what he can to encourage people to repent and believe.

But see: Paul doesn't just try to convince the heathen of Corinth to repent and believe! Vs 20: "Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to

God." He's urgent in repeating the point in 6:1: "We then, as workers together with Him also plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain." *Now* there's still opportunity to repent and believe, so take the opportunity!

We puzzle. Didn't Paul say at the beginning of the chapter that these Corinthians had "a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens"? Why does Paul at the end of the same chapter call upon them to be reconciled to God?!

The point here is, beloved, that every gift of God must be embraced time and time again. That is true of God's gift of forgiveness as well. The sinner sins every day; daily we "struggle" with our "sinful nature", daily we experience that we cannot do the will of God as we'd love (Rom 7). Shall we skip lightly over these sins in the conviction that the Lord will forgive? No, beloved, no! Day by day we need to be reconciled to God, day by day we need to embrace in faith the gospel of free grace, and that means that day by day we need to be repentant of our sins. If, as Paul says in II Cor 5, we have died with Christ, then we can't just live in sin; on the contrary! To die with Christ and be raised with Him means not just that one fights against sin but also that one is sorry for sin. To be reconciled to God day by day involves that one fights against sin day by day, and is sorry for sin day by day.

So: there is no forgiveness for the sin of big-mouthing those in authority over you unless you acknowledge that sin as sin, are sorry before God for the sin you committed, and fight that sin earnestly. There is no forgiveness for the sin of gossip unless you acknowledge that gossip as sin, are sorry before God for the sin you committed, and fight that sin wholeheartedly. Concretely: it is imperative that each and every one of us –sinners as we all are- be sorry for our sins and come to God with a broken and contrite heart.

Does that mean that we earn forgiveness through our repenting? No, it doesn't; forgiveness of sins is God's gracious gift to unworthy sinners. But we have our responsibility here. Unless we repent of our sins in humility before God, we cannot claim to possess the gift God has prepared for us.

The gospel of forgiveness of our sins is so very, very rich. It's a treasure from Christ which the Holy Spirit applies to the people of God. We delight greatly in the fact that God for Christ's sake does not deal with us according to our sins, nor punish us according to our iniquities. We show our gratitude by carrying on resolutely in the struggle against our sinful nature, repenting of every sin, seeking again reconciliation with the God who gave us so much in Christ. Amen.

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**Sermon on Lord's Day 22 Q&A 58 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on
Sunday afternoon, 10 June 2001.**

"THE LIFE OF THE CHRISTIAN IS A LIFE OF JOY"

Text:

Lord's Day 22 Q&A 58

58. Q. What comfort do you receive from the article about the life everlasting?

A. Since I now already feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy, [1] 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.[2]

[1] John 17:3; Rom. 14:17; II Cor. 5:2, 3. [2] John 17:24; I Cor. 2:9.

Scripture Reading:

Genesis 3:8-19

Romans 1:18-31

Revelations 21:1-4

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 84:3,4

Psalms 30:3

Psalms 16:5

Psalms 16:2,3,4

Hymns 53:1,2

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ

Are you happy? Does your life know an abundance of joy, or do you find yourself burdened, life a bore?

I ask the question because of what we just confessed. We said in our Lord's Day that we "now already feel in [our] heart[s] the beginning of eternal joy." Yes, we speak only of a beginning, but it's a beginning of *eternal* joy, and so, surely, must be real. Hence my question: do you feel that joy in your heart, or do you find yourself burdened, life a bore?

Of course, we need to be careful of building towers on what we feel in our hearts. Those hearts remain sinful, and therefore are certainly not true indicators of reality. It may well be that our sinfulness hinders us from experiencing the joy the Lord wishes us to enjoy. Nevertheless, congregation, the Lord does teach us in His Word that the life of the Christian is to be characterized by joy. That's what I wish to draw out with you this afternoon.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE LIFE OF THE CHRISTIAN IS A LIFE OF JOY.

1. The cause of joy
2. The receivers of joy
3. The perfection of joy

1. The cause of joy

To appreciate the joy of Christian existence, we shall do well to consider what things were like in Paradise. Were Adam and Eve happy? Was their life a life of joy or not?

The answer to that question, brothers and sisters, is surely positive. Adam and Eve knew of no anxieties, no pains that took the fun out of their lives. That is abundantly pointed up by God's declaration when He finished His creating work; "God saw all that He had made, and behold, it was very good" (Gen 1:31). "Very good," said God, including Adam's existence and Eve's. Even the fun and the pleasure the two of them had in their life was "good" fun, was, in fact, "very good" fun.

Their pleasure in life evaporated with the fall into sin. According to custom, Adam and Eve heard the sound of God walking in the garden. And what did Adam and Eve do – they "hid themselves"! And why did they hide themselves? Said Adam: "I was afraid." Instead of the joy and contentment that characterized his existence before the fall into sin, it is now fear and terror that characterized Adam's life. And whence the fear? Fear, and so the absence of joy and contentment, resulted from eating from the forbidden tree. The cause of misery, of joylessness, is *sin*.

Why did the fall into sin result in the loss of joy? Sin, brothers and sisters –that setting aside of God's command in favour of following their own desires- implied that their bond with God was broken. What had made their existence in Paradise so joyful and content was the fact that Adam and Eve knew that their Creator was their Father, their Provider; there was that close communion with God. The fall into sin meant that this bond with God was broken, that Adam and Eve were alienated and alone. That their bond with God was broken is pointed up so starkly in the fact that God sent them out of the Garden, sent them out of His presence. And the world God sent them into was a world of anguish, of pain, of joylessness. Said God to the woman, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing." And implied with that pain is the anguish involved in raising the children received. Pain: that characterizes the existence of the woman. And the man fared no better; "cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life.... In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground...." Pleasure is what Adam and Eve were used to in Paradise; pain and toil is what would characterize their existence from now on. It is as the apostle Paul says: "here indeed we groan" (II Cor 5:2). Groan: yes, that's life. And it's all the result of the fall into sin, of breaking that bond of love with God.

But we must go a step further, beloved. *Why* is life after the fall into sin characterized by groaning and toil? To ask the question differently: what did expulsion out of the Garden of Eden symbolize? Expulsion from the garden symbolized nothing else than *expulsion from the presence of God*. And who is God? He is the Creator of life, the Provider and Sustainer of life. To be exiled from God's presence is to *be separated from the source of life*. And we understand very well that to be separated from the source of life will invariably take away from the joy of life, will instead fill life with a measure of anguish.

Similarly, what was symbolized by being sent into a world of thorns and thistles, a world of pain and toil? What these thorns and thistles, this pain and toil, symbolized is nothing else than *life with Satan*. For life with Satan: that is the alternative to life with God. Breaking the bond with God means invariably that one establishes a bond with Satan. There is no neutrality; one lives either for God or for Satan. To leave God's presence in disobedience implies that one joins Satan's side, enters Satan's presence.

But Satan, we all know, does not and cannot give life; he is but a creature himself. Nor can Satan give any joy; depraved creature that he is, he cannot deliver us from the wrath of God that rests upon us as a result of the fall into sin.

And there, brothers and sisters, we've touched on the core of the problem. *On every sinner lies the wrath of God*. Irrespective of who the sinner is, irrespective of how much Satan may care for his children, that sinner has fundamentally no joy in life –why not?- because over him hangs the thunderclouds of God's wrath. And neither the sinner's own ingenuity, nor the power of Satan, can deliver a sinner from the wrath of the offended Creator; that wrath shall surely be poured out on every sinner. And it is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Again, it matters not whether sinners care to admit the reality of this wrath or not. One can ignore or deny it a hundred times over, but that does not change the reality any. The sinner has broken the bond of friendship with God and that means wrath, simple. And therefore can the sinner have no fundamental joy in life.

But here is also the gospel, beloved! Even before God sent Adam and Eve out of the Garden, He established enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. God promised that a Saviour would be born of woman who would crush Satan's head. That Saviour would pay for sin, would satisfy the wrath of God, would deliver God's people from the power of Satan and reconcile them to God. Such was the promise, and so it has happened. In due time God sent His only Son to earth, and in Christ God reconciled the world to Himself, delivered His own from Satan, defeated the evil one. From eternity Christ had shared glory with the Father, had shared also the perfection of joy. But the glory Christ laid aside, and the joy of heaven Christ laid aside too. He came to earth, and subjected Himself to the toil and the pain of earthly life. Headaches and heartaches, anxiety and frustration became also the lot of Jesus Christ. All His life He suffered, bore in body and soul the wrath of God against sin. It all came to a head on Calvary; the wrath that takes fun out of life was poured out on Jesus Christ, so that for Christ on the cross there was no pleasure, no joy at all. Not only was there the pain of the nails in His hands and feet, not only was there the anguish of being rejected by family and friends, by His own people; worst for Christ Jesus was the terror of being rejected by His God, His own Father. Sin He was made, and so there was poured onto Him that intense wrath of God. Rejected He was by the Father who had loved Him from all eternity, and He was handed over to Satan and his demons. And that was the worst: His heavenly Father was gone, *gone* because Christ was made all sin. And so there could be for Christ only hellish anguish, terror, fear....

But what was the result of His forsakenness, the result of the anguish, of the absolute lack of pleasure? The result, beloved, was this: we are accepted by God! The wrath that hung over us was satisfied by Jesus Christ, and *so there is no wrath left for us*. Forgiven we are, reconciled to God, and so adopted to be children of God again. Yes, that, that is the gospel, a gospel so rich that it's calculated to make the child of God *sing for joy*! Here, in truth, is Paradise restored, is cause for happiness, for contentment.

The Lord Jesus Christ drew it out pointedly in His instruction to His disciples. In so many words He told His followers that not to be anxious about life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink or what you should wear. The fall into sin may mean wrath from God, true, and therefore toil and sweat and tears, anguish to survive, no pleasure in life. But, says Jesus, I obtained for you redemption, and so there is for you no more wrath from God; instead of wrath there is grace alone. So don't be anxious about your life, what you shall eat, or what you shall drink, or what you shall wear. Take lesson instead from the birds of the air and the flowers of the field, for God in heaven takes care of them. And who is this God? This God, yes, He was so angry with you because of sin. But I paid for sin, and so *He is your heavenly Father for My sake*. Let anxiety override your joy? Let the troubles of life take your pleasure away? No, My people, no! Your Father knows exactly what you need, and gives it too. So: be content, worry not. Rather, enjoy the life your Father gives you, enjoy His faithful and wise care; He fails you never.

Does this instruction from the Lord Jesus match the sort of arrangements God made elsewhere in Scripture for His people? Could God's Old Testament people, for example, have joy? Why, brothers and sisters, that's a theme running through the instruction given to Israel in the desert! Recall for a moment how many holidays, how many feast days God gave to His Old Testament people. More than a third of the days of the year (including the sabbaths) were to be for Israel feast days, days of rejoicing! These feasts days were opportunities to congregate, gather together, and rejoice together before the Lord because of His abundant blessings. That, beloved, that's what God wants His people to have - pleasure in life, delight, enjoy the redemption God has graciously granted to His undeserving people.

And that's not all. Read the covenant blessings God promised to pour on His people when they lived according to the demands of the covenant. Recall the prosperity and peace God gave to Israel early in the reign of King Solomon. Read the Song of Solomon at your leisure sometime, and see how much God wants you to enjoy your body, marriage.

That theme of rejoicing, of enjoying the life God gives, is repeated in the New Testament. Jesus went out of His way to see to it that God's people enjoyed life. He multiplied wine at the wedding feast in Cana, healed countless sick, raised the dead, made lame people walk. And why? Because life is to be enjoyed! Christ came to bring healing in the relation of sinners to God, and that healing had to have consequences in daily life; God wishes His own to be happy,

content. That's why the good news of Jesus Christ was coupled with healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, helping the oppressed (Lu 4). And so it is too that the apostle Paul can write time again that the child of God is to "rejoice," and "again I say rejoice."

"...I now feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy." How Scriptural the Catechism speaks in stating this truth! Happiness, contentment, the beginnings of perfect joy: that characterizes the life of the Christian. So, congregation,

there is no place,
for a long, sad face,
among those who know Christ Jesus.

Joy, then, is very much a gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ. Who, then, receive this joy? That's our second point:

2. *The receivers of joy*

If joy is a gift of God's grace in Jesus Christ, it follows that those who receive joy are those who believe in Christ as Saviour, who have forgiveness of their sins.

Yet that is a fact that is disputed, disputed not only by so many in our society today, but also by persons within the church. There are those who think that a life of simple obedience to God's commands is at bottom a dull life. So what does one do? One looks for pleasure - how? - by following the desire of the flesh, possibly even getting into a bit of mischief, being a bit naughty. For that's exciting, gets the adrenaline going, is fun.

But is it so fun? Is satisfying one's desire rewarding, does it bring on happiness? There was a time when the people of Israel came into contact with the daughters of Moab (Num 25). These girls of Moab invited the boys of Israel to "the sacrifices of their gods" (vs 2). Now, we are to know that sexual promiscuity played a large part in Moabite sacrifices; their god was a god of sex. Over against the strict life these Israelite young people had been taught to live, this invitation was surely attractive, it appealed to the heart, the desires of the flesh. And what, we can hear them say, is wrong with a bit of fun?

But what, brothers and sisters, was God's response? This: "the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel" and God commanded that every one who had participated in this adulterous idolatry was to be slain.

Why this command? Did God not grant Israel some fun? Indeed, beloved, the Lord certainly would have His people have fun. But *the fun Israel was to enjoy was to be God-centered fun*, and therefore good fun in the real sense of the word. But the fun that Israel's youth proposed to have with the Moabites was not fun in the real sense of the word; it was sin, and therefore but shallow fun, momentary pleasure, for it brought on themselves the wrath of God. Sure, the youth of Israel may have got a buzz out of their orgy with the Moabites. But that sense of pleasure arose out of sin-filled hearts, and therefore the peoples' evaluation of what was pleasurable was warped. And in short order the Israelites would taste the wrath, the displeasure of God on sin, and that is not enjoyable.

And why must God's wrath come on sin as this? Though God's holiness is surely the basic reason why God responds to sin with wrath, one can mention also a further reason, viz, God does not want His children to get hurt. Sin produces pain - various among us will know ample examples of sins in youth that has produced pain for years to come. God wishes to protect His children, wants His children to enjoy life. So for the protection of His children, to ensure that they really enjoy life, God forbids sin.

We read together from Rom 1. Men's ungodliness and wickedness brings upon themselves the wrath of God. And how is that wrath demonstrated? How does God punish? By inflicting on sinners blindness, blindness so that they engage in more sin, sexual sins. And those sins of homosexuality, of lesbianism, of sex before and outside of holy wedlock are - says Paul- punished with venereal disease. And if there is still no repentance, such sinners are given over to impossible attitudes, attitudes that destroy homes, marriages, friendships, leaving the sinner a dejected and lonely individual with no one caring for him anymore. Why are these things the result of sin? Again, one reason is surely this: God wants people to enjoy life. But there can be no enjoyment when the relation with God is broken, is strained by sin. So God wants the sinner to taste, to experience the bitter fruit of his sins, wants the sinner to realize that there is no lasting, no

deep enjoyment in sinful activity. God makes the life of the sinner empty so that that sinner might break down, confess his sins, and turn to God for healing (cf Ezek 18:32).

Who receive joy? It is not, brothers and sisters, it is not those who give in to the desires of the flesh. O yes, mischief gets the adrenaline going, and *to our depraved flesh* that is fun. But let older and younger recall: on sin comes wrath from God. More, on sin comes punishment. And those realities mean that the fun of the world, satisfying the pleasures of the flesh, is but shallow fun; that fun does not last. You wish fun in life, wish to enjoy the life God gives? One way there is to have fun, and that is being reconciled to God through Jesus Christ, and that in turn means living your life in harmony with the commands of God. Not for nothing does the Lord tell Israel that His blessing lies on obedience to God's law. And not for nothing does the psalmist say that "fullness of joy" is found in God's presence; yea, "in Your right hand are pleasures for evermore" (Ps 16:11).

Who receive joy? It is those, congregation, who know that the God they've offended in Paradise has become their Father for Jesus' sake, and now supplies their every need in perfect measure and in perfect wisdom. These are they who delight in the will of God, who know that God's will and way for them is steeped in love....

I come to our last point,

3. *The perfection of joy*

Pleasure, enjoying life, comes from God alone, is possible only because Christ has reconciled sinners to God. So it is that only those who are reconciled to God can actually have real pleasure in life; they alone have received forgiveness, no longer languish under the burden of God's wrath.

But we all know so well: even as we delight in the forgiveness of sins, we do not have full joy in this life. Life has so many concerns, so many problems. And we ourselves remain so full of sin. No, the joy of life is quickly overshadowed by the troubles that be.

And so it is indeed, beloved. Not for nothing does the Catechism speak about the *beginning* of eternal joy. In this vale of tears the child of God receives no more than that. But tomorrow it will be different! On the Last Day there will be fullness of joy, for then God will wipe away every tear, and death shall be no more, nor shall there be crying or pain anymore (Rev 21). Today sin remains in the world and in our lives, and we daily taste the bitter fruits of sin – a fruit that takes away the joy belonging to faith. But on that final day sin shall be gone, done away with. Then there shall be life with God in the fullest sense of the word; we shall live with Him and He with us. Yes, life everlasting.

We look forward to it. But, beloved, we may do more than look forward to that last day. Life everlasting is not something for the future only. Life everlasting is something *we have now already*. Already we enjoy forgiveness of sins, already we enjoy reconciliation with God. For Christ's sake we already have a heavenly Father, and that Father today supplies for our every need. So we haven't a worry in the world; we're reconciled to Him, safe in His hands.

That, beloved, is life. And that reality gives joy unending, today and forever. Go then, in peace. And sing for joy. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 23 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday Afternoon, 17 June 2001.

" I AM RIGHTEOUS BEFORE GOD THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST. "

Text:

Lord's Day 23

59. Q. But what does it help you now that you believe all this?

A. In Christ I am righteous before God and heir to life everlasting.[1]

[1] *Hab. 2:4; John 3:36; Rom. 1:17; 5:1, 2.*

60. Q. How are you righteous before God?

A. Only by true faith in Jesus Christ.[1] Although my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all God's commandments, have never kept any of them,[2] and am still inclined to all evil,[3] yet God, without any merit of my own,[4] out of mere grace,[5] imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ.[6] He grants these to me as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and as if I myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me,[7] if only I accept this gift with a believing heart.[8]

[1] *Rom. 3:21-28; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8, 9; Phil. 3:8-11.* [2] *Rom. 3:9, 10.* [3] *Rom. 7:23.* [4] *Deut. 9:6; Ezek. 36:22; Tit. 3:4, 5.* [5] *Rom. 3:24; Eph. 2:8.* [6] *Rom. 4:3-5; II Cor. 5:17-19; I John 2:1, 2.* [7] *Rom. 4:24, 25; II Cor. 5:21.* [8] *John 3:18; Acts 16:30, 31; Rom. 3:22.*

61. Q. Why do you say that you are righteous only by faith?

A. Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith, for only the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ is my righteousness before God.[1] I can receive this righteousness and make it mine my own by faith only.[2]

[1] *I Cor. 1:30, 31; 2:2.* [2] *Rom. 10:10; I John 5:10-12.*

Scripture Reading:

Zechariah 3

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 23:1,2

Psalm 115:6

Psalm 130:2

Psalm 34:8,9

Hymn 24:1,5,6,7

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Over the years, the Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper has become rather well known to us. Yet it's contents, brothers and sisters, remain so incredibly, delightfully rich. After that Form has explained the work of Christ in Gethsemane and on the cross, it summarizes the wealth of the celebration like this:

"From this institution of the holy supper of our Lord Jesus Christ we learn that He directs our faith and trust to His perfect sacrifice, once offered on the cross. It is the only ground of our salvation."

As it is, Lord's Day 23 does the same thing. We've spent 15 Lord's Days discussing the faith confessed in the Apostles' Creed, including the fact that Jesus is Saviour, that He suffered for our sins, that He died on the cross, that He arose, etc. Hence the question of our Lord's Day: "What does it help you now that you believe all this?" The wonderful answer we've learned from Scripture is this: "in Christ I am righteous before God, and heir to life everlasting." That is: Christ "is the only ground of our salvation."

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

I AM RIGHTEOUS BEFORE GOD THROUGH FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST.

1. I have no righteousness of my own.
2. I am granted the righteousness of Christ.
3. I am responsible to embrace this free gift.

1. I have no righteousness of my own

What, my brothers and sisters, is meant by the word 'righteous'? I suspect that to many of us the term has us thinking about people, and then specifically that people live in a certain way. To our minds, the term describes the person who doesn't give himself to sin, who lives uprightly. So the word 'righteous' comes to mean the same thing as the word 'holy'.

As it is, congregation, the term first of all says something not about people but about *God*. The term describes the notion that God deals uprightly with people. Yet the point is not that God deals with people according to what people deserve (for people never deserve anything; we are but creatures); the point is rather that God deals with people *as He said He would*; the term is first of all covenantal. And how has God promised to deal with people?

Out of the fallen human race the Lord God established with some His covenant of grace, and that's to say that the Lord claimed these persons for Himself as His special people, and so promised to forgive their sins and give them life everlasting. God's righteousness is that He deals uprightly with these people, deals with them as He said He would, and that means that He in fact does forgive their sins and grant them life eternal with Him. As to the rest of mankind, God has not established with them His covenant of grace, and so the promise of Paradise remains: if you sin, you die. God's righteousness is that He gives these people the penalty they deserve – hell.

God is righteous; He deals with people according to the promises He made with people. That – O delightful gospel! – is what makes us righteous before God in turn. To draw that all out this afternoon, I ask your attention for Zech 3.

The prophet Zechariah was shown a remarkable vision. Though he himself lived in Jerusalem (shortly after the people of Israel returned from their exile in the land of Babylon), he was taken into heaven to see what was happening there. He saw, we read, "Joshua the high priest." Zechariah knew Joshua, for Joshua was the actual high priest labouring in Jerusalem in the days of Zechariah. According to God's law in the books of Exodus and Leviticus, Joshua's task as high priest was to represent God's covenant people to God, was also to lay God's blessing on God's covenant people. Zechariah sees the high priest in his vision, and yet it's not simply the high priest as a person that Zechariah sees; in the figure of Joshua *all the people of Israel* were present in heaven. But these people are characterized by sin. That's pointed out in the vision by the fact that Joshua –vs 3– "was clothed in filthy garments"; those filthy garments symbolize the sins of the people.

Joshua –and in him the people– is "standing before the Angel of the Lord." This is not just any angel; in the Old Testament the phrase "the Angel of the Lord" describes the second Person of the holy Trinity – the One who would one day come in the flesh from the virgin Mary and die on Calvary's cross. Joshua, then, representing God's covenant people, *sinners all*, is standing in the presence of *God*.

The third figure Zechariah sees is Satan, "standing at [Joshua's] right hand to oppose him." That's language from a court setting. Satan is the prosecution, Joshua (and that's to say: God's covenant people Israel) is the accused, and the Lord God is the Judge. That's the vision.

Now Joshua hears words. Vs 2: the Lord says to Satan, "the Lord rebuke you, Satan." That is: the Lord is telling Satan off. Why is He telling Satan off? Because Satan is *opposing* Joshua. How is Satan opposing Joshua? As the prosecution in this trial, Satan *was outlining to God all the evils of which Joshua was guilty*.

What might the details be of what Satan was saying? In our chapter Zechariah doesn't tell us the details in so many words. But we now details from other parts of the bible. I will summarize the charges under three headings, headings that we find back in our Lord's Day.

The first charge is this: Lord God, Joshua, the people of Israel, "have grievously sinned against all [Your] commands."

- You told them to have no other gods before you, but look at all the idolatry Israel has committed over the years. The Baals and the Molechs and the Asherahs have been served over the years. And even now they're serving other gods, for they're not finishing the temple because they want to build houses for themselves first; their own comforts come before You.
- In the second commandment You told them to serve You only as You commanded in Your word, but they don't. They have their own self-chosen ways of going about Your service; see, Lord God, how sinful this man is who wants to come into your presence.
- You told them never to dishonour Your name, always to uphold Your reputation. But their lack of trust in You makes the other peoples laugh you to scorn.
- In the fourth commandment You told them to keep the Sabbath day holy, but the returned exiles don't mind at all to do some business on the Sabbath.
- Etc, etc, congregation, through all the commandments.

They "have grievously sinned against all [Your] commands," and so are deserving of Your wrath. And the horrible thing, beloved, is that *Satan is correct!* Listen to God's holy Word in Rom 3: "There is none righteous, no, not one...; there is none who seeks after God" (vss 10f). In fact, "all the world [is] guilty before God" (vs 19). Must a righteous God not condemn this people, send them to the hell they deserve?!

Satan's second charge is no better. Joshua, says Satan, and the people he represents, "have never kept any of Your commands." As children, as teenagers, as parents, as elders, as priests, as old people: it all makes no difference; from cradle to grave, by day and by night, they sin against You, Lord! There's not a shred of good in Joshua, in Your covenant people; You must condemn them, send them into my hell. And again, beloved, the horrible thing is that *Satan is correct!* Said God in Gen 6: "the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and ... every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (vs 5).

So too the third charge. Lord, they're "still inclined to all evil." Joshua has seen Your holiness in heaven, Lord, but You let him return to His task in Jerusalem, and what He's seen here will make no difference, he'll keep on sinning; Your people are depraved to the core. And here too, *Satan is so correct*. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit Paul groaned out his frustration, "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it! ... Wretched man that I am; who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom 7).

Three charges. By God's leading, our consciences accuse us of exactly the same things. So in our Lord's Day we join Satan in self-accusation before God: "I have grievously sinned against all God's commandments, and have never kept any of them, and am still inclined to all evil."

What, now, does the heavenly Judge say in the face of Satan's accusations? O yes, with very many the Lord God certainly agrees, and these people who have no regard for God and His word in any way, shape or form will receive the punishment God promised in Paradise; "if you sin you shall die." For God deals with man according to His promise. But God does not respond in that way to Satan's accusations concerning Joshua and so concerning His covenant people Israel! That brings us to our second point:

2. *I am granted the righteousness of Christ*

For see what happens! In the face of Satan's accusations, the Lord *rebukes* Satan, tells him off. And instead of condemning Joshua –sinner though he certainly is!- the righteous Judge commands that Joshua's dirty clothes –those sins!- be taken from him and he be clothed with "rich robes" (vs 4). That's to say: Joshua's sins, Israel's sins, are forgiven; God will not deal with Joshua according to those sins! Why not? *Because*, congregation, *God is righteous!* That is, God deals uprightly with Joshua, with Israel. No, not according to what Joshua and the people deserve, but according to *His promise in the covenant!* And what's the promise of the covenant? This: I will be your God, and you My people. That's to say: I look at You through the blood of Jesus Christ, and so take all your sins away.

This is something that the prosecution in heaven's courts should have known, for Satan knows the Old Testament Scriptures so very well. That God would forgive the sins of His people was the good news proclaimed in the temple of the Old Testament through the centuries. You sinned, then had to take a ram from the flock and bring it to the tabernacle. There you had to lay your hand on the head of the animal and confess your sin over it. Point: your sin was transferred from yourself onto the animal. Then the animal was killed, and that's to say that it died on account of your sin, and you got to go free; there was no condemnation from God for you! And if you stayed behind at the temple long enough you'd see the high priest come out of the temple, and extend his hands over the people in order to lay God's blessing on the people; "The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious to you...." In a word: though you came to God's presence in the temple as one guilty of this and this sin –dirty clothes- you left with God's blessing upon you – the clean clothes of Christ! Why could you go home assured that your sins were washed away? Because God had established His covenant of grace with you, promised for the sake of His coming Son to "wash us with Him in His blood from all our sins and unite us with Him in His death and resurrection" so that "we are freed from our sins and accounted righteous before God" – as the Form for Baptism has it. That was the gospel of the temple through the centuries, and God –righteous that He is- deals with His people *according to His promise*.

That's why God, in the vision He showed to Zechariah, does not agree with Satan's charges! God does not issue a verdict upon Joshua to the effect that he is Guilty-as-charged. Instead, the Lord God rebukes Satan, tells Satan to work with God's covenant promises to Israel, and gives Joshua a change of clothes, forgiveness of sins – and all of it means that God declares Joshua *Not Guilty!* Here's what the apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, and what we confess in the Doxology of the Lord's supper form:

"God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life" (Rom 5:8ff).

That's why we confess so enthusiastically in our Lord's Day that though "I have grievously sinned against all God's commandments, and have never kept any of them, and am still inclined to all evil, *yet God*, without any merit of my own, out of mere grace, imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ." I deserve damnation, but I receive salvation! And why? Because Satan does such a poor job in prosecuting us? Or because we're pretty decent people after all? No, no! We receive forgiveness, salvation, because of *God's promise in the covenant*; He deals with us according to that promise – pours out His wrath onto Christ so that we might go free. And so strongly does God want to impress that gospel upon us that He set us at His table today so that we might eat and drink these symbols of His mercy to us. See there, beloved, how exceedingly gracious this God is to the unworthy!

Then yes, our consciences may continue to accuse us that we don't deserve to sit at this table and we don't deserve forgiveness and life eternal, and our consciences are so correct. But there's a reality greater than our depravity, beloved, and that's the reality of God's covenant promises, and His pledge to deal with us according to those promises. That is why I may not doubt that my sins are truly forgiven in Jesus' blood as certainly as I ate and drank those tokens of Christ's atoning sacrifice at the table today. For God is righteous, and *that's why He declares me Not Guilty, righteous*.

3. *I am responsible to embrace this free gift*

But if that's the gospel, beloved, why would God ever be angry with us? We're God's people by covenant; shouldn't we then skip over all further talk about God's wrath and punishment on our sins – be it in this life or the life to come?

Let it first be fixed in our minds, beloved: there is no cost on our side for God's forgiving grace. The Lord God does not put a price tag on forgiveness or on redemption, be it a price of \$20,000 or a price of seven prayers a day or a price of going faithfully to church, or a price of shunning the pub, or any such thing. That is what the Bible means when it says that "you have been saved *by grace*...; it is a *gift* of God, not of works" (Eph 4:8f). The price is Zero; it doesn't cost you a penny. God came to us with His covenant of grace while we were infants, not able to offer God a thing to earn that covenant with its promises. He came to us with His gift of forgiveness, of salvation, and He asks no price for it; it's *free*! That's also the point of our Lord's Day, where we say in A 60: "He grants ... me [Christ's perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness] as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and as if I myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me." He knows well I don't deserve redemption, but He gives it to me freely nevertheless! That's the marvel of the gospel, it's the wonderful *grace* of God!

Yet there is, congregation, another side to this coin. For the Lord had created us in the beginning to *have responsibility*. Though we've fallen into sin and become inclined to all evil, the Lord does not annul that responsibility. That is why the Bible is full of commands to God's people to *respond* to God's covenant promises; time and again there's instruction to repent and believe. And the structure of the covenant makes it plain: you will not receive the promises God gave in the covenant unless you repent from sin and believe the promises God has given. For the covenant has two sides, a promise and an obligation. And it's for us to answer to the obligation; else we'll not get what's promised – including the forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Jesus Christ.

But what is this responding then? How does one do that? I said already: God's gift of redemption carries no price tag, and so I don't have to do anything to earn it. Neither \$20,000 nor diligent praying nor faithful church attendance or being a decent citizen of the community will earn me God's Not Guilty verdict. Instead, that verdict is *promised already in the covenant*, and that covenant is mine; at baptism *my name* was mentioned in relation to that covenant! But now I need to reach out to receive what God has prepared for me. I've mentioned before the example of the box of chocolates. I offer you this box, it's got your name written on it, and I say it's for you. You don't have to do anything to earn it; I'm holding it out to you. But we all understand you have to do something before you can sink your teeth into the chocolates, and that is that you need to *receive* my gift. If you keep your hands in your pockets, you'll not be able to enjoy that box. So it is with God's gift of forgiveness and righteousness in Christ. It's promised to you in the covenant, your name was mentioned at baptism; it's really for you. But you'll not be able to enjoy it unless you *receive* it. Then yes, it's so true that it's the Holy Spirit who makes you able to receive it, makes you want to receive it. But He does so through your taking seriously the responsibility God has given you; never may you say that you'll just sit there until the Holy Spirit makes you receive the gift of God. You have to work, you have to make a point of receiving His gift. That act of receiving it, accepting it, embracing it: *that is faith*. That is what we mean in our Lord's Day when we say that we are righteous before God "only by true faith in Jesus Christ." No, "not that I'm acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith" – as if that reaching out to receive were my contribution to earning God's favour, were somehow the way in which I become righteous before God. Rather, "I can receive this righteousness and make it my own by faith only;" faith is the hand of the soul by which I receive the treasure God is giving to me. *That's* how I respond to God's gift.

And that's what I did at the table today. As I reached out with the hand of the body to receive the bread and drink, so with the hand of the soul I reach out day by day to accept, to embrace, to receive the gift of redemption God gives me in Christ. *Faith!*

But faith never comes by itself. "Faith without works is dead," declares James. That is: you can't separate faith from obedience. Where the soul reaches out to receive what God in mercy gives in Christ, there will be also works of obedience, conduct pleasing to the Lord God. That's why a life of disobedience is so telling as to whether or not you are forgiven of your sins; where you *give* yourself to sin you simply don't have forgiveness. And no, that doesn't mean that God suddenly is not acting toward you as He said He'd act toward you, for in His covenant He promised not only blessings; *in His covenant He promised also His curse* – where the receiver of the promises refused to accept the treasures God gives! You see: God is always faithful! But you need to make it your business to take your own responsibility seriously!

We've sat today at the table of the Lord. What we were told at the table? This: "in Christ I am righteous before God." Satan wants to throw me off balance, to doubt God's promises, to fall for his accusations. But, by the grace of God, I may believe the promise of the gospel: God deals with me uprightly, according to the promise of the covenant. So I'm righteous, accounted by God as Not Guilty of my sins. God said so, and that's why I believe it. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 24 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 1 July 2001.

" IN DECLARING US RIGHTEOUS, GOD EXPECTS NO CONTRIBUTION FROM US. "

Text:

Lord's Day 24

62. Q. But why can our good works not be our righteousness before God, or at least a part of it?

A. Because the righteousness which can stand before God's judgment must be absolutely perfect and in complete agreement with the law of God,[1] whereas even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin.[2]
[1] Deut. 27:26; Gal. 3:10. [2] Is. 64:6.

63. Q. But do our good works earn nothing, even though God promises to reward them in this life and the next?[1]

A. This reward is not earned; it is a gift of grace.[2]

[1] Matt. 5:12; Heb. 11:6. [2] Luke 17:10; II Tim. 4:7, 8. 64.

Q. Does this teaching not make people careless and wicked?

A. No. It is impossible that those grafted into Christ by true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness.[1]

[1] Matt. 7:18; Luke 6:43-45; John 15:5.

Scripture Reading:

Ephesians 2:1-10

Matthew 20:1-16

Also [Article 24](#) *Belgic Confession of Faith*

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 135:1,2

Psalm 62:1,7

Psalm 130:2,4

Hymn 24:1,2,3,4

Psalm 118:7,8

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

With Lord's Day 23 two weeks ago, we confessed that God freely declares sinners righteous before Him. Satan may accuse, our consciences may join Satan in finding fault with ourselves, but God for Christ's sake declares us Not Guilty of sin nevertheless; the judgment those sins earn has been poured out on Jesus Christ so that we get to go free!

It's been two weeks since we heard that glorious gospel of free grace. That's given us two weeks to think about it. Now my question is: what do you think of this gospel?

You will say to me that you quite agree with this gospel; after all, it's what the Scripture says. I grant it; you are correct. But just because it's in the Bible does not mean that we find it easy to accept.

Allow me an anecdote. You recall the day that you and your class were standing on the sport's oval. Two classmates

took turns selecting players for their team from the crowd. Your thought as you were standing there? Like me, you hoped against hope that you'd be picked *soon*, for the last thing you wanted was to be a left over. Why? Because you wanted recognition for what you're able to do, you wanted to be acknowledged that you're able to contribute something positive to the team. What you didn't want, absolutely not, was to be singled out as being a dud, a tag-along, having nothing to contribute.

When all is said and done, brothers and sisters, the same thought arises in the human heart in relation to God. What we want, so desperately, is acknowledgement from God that we have something to contribute. That we're duds, that there is nothing in us to attract God's attention – we know the thought is Scriptural, but it still grates. That reality in turn makes us vulnerable to suggestions that we can, and even do, contribute something to our salvation.

With Lord's Day 24 we echo God's Word when He tells us why there is no place for our contributions. I summarize the sermon with this theme:

IN DECLARING US RIGHTEOUS, GOD EXPECTS NO CONTRIBUTION FROM US.

1. Our works are not good enough
2. Our works are rewarded nevertheless
3. This teaching is not dangerous

1. Our works are not good enough

To get a handle on the material of our Lord's Day, brothers and sisters, I'd like today first to tell you something about the history behind our Lord's Day.

In your lessons in church history over the years, you will have heard of a gentleman by the name of Pelagius. Pelagius –he was born in the year 354- was convinced that each child was born good. Adam's fall into sin, he said, affected only Adam himself; those who came after him learned to do evil only because of the bad example of the previous generation. As to obtaining God's favor, Pelagius was convinced that man could obtain this favor quite easily, simply because people –with the exception of Adam and Eve- had not fallen into sin. So, by doing things pleasing to God, one was sure of a place in His good books.

The church of Pelagius' time did not agree with this teacher. It was particularly Augustine –he was born in the same year as Pelagius, in 354- who showed from the Bible what the truth of the matter was. The fall into sin, Augustine insisted, was not a slip from one man so that only Adam suffered the consequences of the fall. Rather, with Adam's transgression all men sinned, so that the wrath of God rests upon all men. In fact, Adam's fall into sin was a total fall, a radical fall – with all the consequences thereof. By way of comparison: Augustine would compare the human race to the person who fell off the top of Perth's Bank West tower. We're sure: that person has done more than scrape his knee; rather, he's very dead, every bone and organ broken. The ambulance attendants will receive no advice from the fallen man as to how to put him onto a stretcher, will get no assistance from him either. For the dead do nothing. That's the imagery Augustine would use, an imagery drawn directly from Eph 2 where Paul says mankind has become "dead in trespasses and sins" (vs 1). If anyone, then, is to be saved, he is dependent fully and totally on God's redeeming work in Jesus Christ. Augustine's teaching won out over Pelagius' heresy, so that the church adopted the position of Scripture – even as we confess it today.

But Satan does not give up so easily. Though Pelagius was out of favor, his basic heresy found it's way back into favor in the course of time. For persons in the Augustinian camp found the notion of people being dead, having nothing to contribute, too hard to swallow; human pride gets in the way of being seen as duds. These persons picked up elements of Pelagius, polished and refined them, and taught that indeed God saves through Jesus Christ. But, they added, you do have a contribution to make yourself. And you can make a contribution because you've not fallen off a 55-story building; you've fallen off a three-story building. The fall into sin did not make you dead; it only injured you. You need help alright, because you've got a broken leg and a couple of broken ribs and a punctured lung, but you can call out for help, and you can even assist the ambulance attendants to get you on the stretcher. This notion is known as semi-pelagianism, and has become the official position of the Roman Catholic Church.

To put the whole matter a somewhat different terms: Pelagius says that people can get themselves on own steam into God's favor since we are good in ourselves. Augustine says that people are dead, and therefore can contribute nothing to being received into God's favor; people are 100% dependant on God's grace in Jesus Christ. Semi-pelagianism, or Roman Catholicism, says that God has given Christ and so taken us, say, 95% of the way back to God. But the last 5% is for us to do; through our good works we need to finish the work that Christ has begun. We realize: there's a big difference between the position of the pelagians and the semi-pelagians; the pelagians say we can do it all ourselves, the semi-pelagians say we can do only a little ourselves, we need Christ. But they have in common that both want to make *a contribution* to our being accepted by God. Neither position sees people as *dead*, as having nothing attractive in us to God, as not being able to contribute in any way.

Why I tell you this? The Catechism, congregation, was written in a context. Caspar Olevianus and Zacharius Ursinus prepared this Catechism for the instruction of people who had been instructed by their Roman Catholic priest, had been taught that they were in a position to make some contribution towards their being accepted by God. Olevianus and Ursinus put Lord's Day 23 in this Catechism, taught the people that they were righteous before God only through faith in Jesus Christ, taught that Christ's sacrifice on the cross was the only and complete ground of our salvation before God. But the question that invariably came up in the minds of the people was then the first one of our Lord's Day: "but why can our good works not be our righteousness before God, or at least a part of it?" If Pelagius wasn't right in insisting that our works will do the whole 100% in obtaining God's favor, why is the Roman Catholic position wrong when they say that Christ's work takes us 95% of the way, and we can do the remaining 5% ourselves? Why can't our good works be at least a small part of our righteousness before God?! You see, beloved: the question arises directly out of the instruction the people had received over the years in the Roman Catholic Church.

But that historical background to this Question & Answer doesn't mean that we can remove it from the Catechism. It's true that the Catechism speaks in the same line as Augustine; I'll come back to that in a moment. But the thing is that after the Catechism was written and embraced by the churches of the Reformation, the semi-pelagianism of the Roman Catholic Church was smuggled into the very churches that adopted this Catechism. And in the process the Catechism was put on the shelf.

Who brought it back into the churches? None else than Arminius. What Arminius taught was at bottom simply a modified version of the same semi-pelagianism embraced by Roman Catholicism. For Arminius said too that, sure, we've fallen into sin, but the fall can't be compared to falling of the Bank West tower; it's to be compared instead to falling of the roof of this church building. You're hurt, you need help, true, but you're not dead in sin, and so you can and must contribute; God sees something desirable in you, in your abilities and performance, and that's why He picks you for His team. Then yes, the Synod of Dort condemned that thought in the Canons of Dort, and we today embrace these Canons as an accurate echo of what the Lord has taught us in His Word on the point. But Arminianism is all around us; evangelicalism as a movement is Arminian in its core. That's the air we breath, it's the novels we read, it's the Christians we meet on the campus or at work. And while we breathe that air and read those novels and meet Evangelical Christians at work, there's something in our own heart that bucks against the idea that there's nothing attractive about us, that we have nothing to contribute; we desperately want to be seen as *somebodies*, as desirables, as attractive to God. To be duds, dead..., is so humiliating....

That is why the material of our Lord's Day remains so important for us today. Specifically this question: what does God think about us? Does He see anything attractive in us? As we come to Him with our contribution to our salvation, how does He respond? What does He say of that contribution?

What He says, beloved? The answer, brothers and sisters, is simple, but it's O so humiliating.... The Holy Spirit moves the prophet Isaiah to recognize that God is "indeed angry, for we have sinned..., and we need to be saved" (Is 64:5). But how shall we be saved? Shall we impress God through out own contribution? Says Isaiah: "we are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags" (vs 6). And no, the filthy rags of which Isaiah speaks is not the sort of dirty clothe we back-yard mechanics wipe our hands on after doing some work on an engine. He's talking rather about rags covered in blood, specifically clothes stained by menstruation. It's vile, repulsive. So, says the prophet under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, so are our best works in the eyes of God – vile, repulsive. Shall we now come to God with such works, and expect Him to be pleased with our contribution?? Shall we with Pelagius assume that God will accept such offerings as all that's needed to find a place in His favor? Or shall we with the semi-

pelagians of long ago and of today conclude that God will receive such rags as our contribution to complete the work Christ has done? Surely, beloved, it's so obvious: you wouldn't accept a bloodied clothe as somebody's good work. How much less will God do so – holy and righteous as He is!

Shall I then think that there is room for a contribution on my part? Let me instead be humble, very humble, and recognize that I have nothing, nothing at all within myself, that I could present to God to appease Him. Let me recognize that there is no room for me to think in terms of me making a contribution to my salvation. As Paul says to the Ephesians: "for by grace you have been saved through faith, and not of works, lest anyone should boast..." (2:8f).

I move on to our second point:

2. Our works are rewarded nevertheless

This answer from Is 64 did not go down well with all who heard the argument of Question & Answer 62. Over against the notion that people can somehow contribute to our righteousness before God, the fathers placed the words of Scripture as found in Is 64. In turn the Roman Catholics also quoted Scripture. Does the Scripture not say, they argued, that God rewards our good works in this life and the life to come? That's the subject that receives attention in Question & Answer 63. Notice: the argument has turned now to Scripture; what does Scripture say.

It's a fact, brothers and sisters, that the Lord does promise to reward good works. In His Sermon on the Mount Christ says:

"Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven..." (vs 12).

The apostle to the Hebrews says of God that "He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him" (11:6). John on the island of Patmos hears Jesus pray like this:

"And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work" (Rev 22:12).

The Bible is clear: the Lord God "promises to reward [good works] in this life and the next." Doesn't that mean that your good works earn something, are in some way a contribution to God being happy with you?

To show the thinking of Scripture in answering that question, beloved, I refer to the parable we read from Mt 20. You recall how the landowner went to the market place a number of times in the course of the day, and hired those holding out for a job. At the end of the day, the laborers lined up to receive their payment, with those hired last standing first in the line. When those at the end saw that the latecomers received a full denarius for the labors, they in optimism exalted that they'd surely receive much more; after all, they'd endured the heat of the sun.... But they received only one measly denarius.... Hence their complaint to the landowner that something wasn't square. To which he replied: "Take what is yours and go your way. I wish to give to this last man the same as to you. Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?" (Mt 20:14f).

The point? This: God is generous to whom He wills. Of themselves, our contributions are of no value to God; they're instead repulsive. Yet He is pleased to reward our good efforts – not because they deserve a reward, but rather because *God is gracious*.

Here, congregation, is shown up again something of who this God is. Our best works are defiled with sin, true. Yet instead of holding His nose at us, and sending us out of His holy presence, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ places on our good works –offensive though they are of themselves- His gracious crown! Where I should expect from God hostility, I receive favor! Where I should expect disapproval, I receive blessing! And no, it's not because of anything in me; it's only and alone because of His good pleasure, His grace in Jesus Christ. How marvelous, how wonderful is His mercy!

Now yet our third point:

3. *This teaching is not dangerous*

The argument from Scripture that the semi-pelagians raised in Question 63 has, then, no weight, is not a legitimate argument. So those semi-pelagians raised a practical argument, as mentioned in Question 64: "Does this teaching not make people careless and wicked?" It's the thought that there should be a stick behind the door to compel people to behave. If you tell people that forgiveness is a free gift, and you can't earn it, the logical conclusion might well be that you'll just go ahead and sin, for it makes no difference anyway.... Better, then, to tell people of God's wrath, and what they have to do to escape it; you'll get a better society out of it, better people, and better-behaved teenagers....

Now, it may be true from a human point of view, congregation, that a stick behind the door will produce better behavior. But the point of religion is not to make people more morally upright. And the purpose of preaching and teaching the norms of Scripture is not to make a pleasant society, let alone a well-behaved society driven by fear of God's punishments. The fine point of preaching, and the fine point of the Bible, is to proclaim the wonderful works of *God*. And what are His works? This, that He has claimed a people for Himself –not *because* those people are so attractive, but rather *in spite of* their repulsiveness- and so established with them His covenant of grace. God's work is this that He has given His Son to atone for the sins of these people, so that because of Jesus' sacrifice these sinners might be declared righteous before Him. But His saving work does not stop once a sinner has been rescued from Satan's power and been restored to God. For the persons whom Christ has reconciled to God are *also changed by the Holy Spirit*, so changed that they no longer image Satan but instead image God again. Since they image God again, they *simply will not give themselves* to lives of lawlessness and godlessness; they'll instead do the things that please the Lord. In the words of our Lord's Day: "It is impossible that those grafted into Christ by true faith should fail to bring forth fruits of thankfulness." Why it's impossible? Because God's work is so complete! It's *all* His work, from A to Z, including the desire to live in grateful holiness before Him.

Is an upright life, then, the result of fear, of being afraid of the horrible consequences of provoking God's wrath? For the unbeliever that might in practice be so. But let it be fixed in our minds, beloved: *that is not the gospel!* For the person who has accepted God's revelation about us being dead in sin as a result of the fall, for the person who has embraced God's gospel of redeeming *the unworthy, the vile*, there is no room left for fear of God. There is instead gratitude, deep thankfulness for God's saving work, and therefore a cheerful working along with the Holy Spirit who has renewed him; that person will invariably seek to do the will of God. No, he won't do God's will perfectly; he'll stumble often since he "is still inclined to all evil" – as we confessed in Lord's Day 23. But see the work of the Holy Spirit in his life, and delight in that work too, he certainly will.

Repeatedly you hear from this pulpit the gospel of free grace, the gospel of God freely declaring sinners righteous, not on grounds of own contribution but on grounds of Christ's work. On the sports oval we couldn't bear being the last to be picked, for we wanted to be recognized for our achievements. You understand: there is no room for that desire in the courts of God. Salvation is of grace alone, 100% grace.

And that's what makes our salvation so certain. *If it's 100% God's work, it's got to be perfect! Amen.*

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 25 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 8 July 2001.

" THE WORSHIP SERVICE IS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT EVENT OCCURRING ON EARTH TODAY."

Text:

Lord's Day 25

65. Q. Since then faith alone makes us share in Christ and all His benefits, where does this faith come from?

A. From the Holy Spirit,[1] who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel,[2] and strengthens it by the use of the sacraments.[3]

[1] John 3:5; I Cor. 2:10-14; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29. [2] Rom. 10:17; I Pet. 1:23-25. [3] Matt. 28:19, 20; I Cor. 10:16.

66. Q. What are the sacraments?

A. The sacraments are holy, visible signs and seals. They were instituted by God so that by their use He might the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel.[1] And this is the promise: that God graciously grants us forgiveness of sins and everlasting life because of the one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross.[2]

[1] Gen. 17:11; Deut. 30:6; Rom. 4:11 [2] Matt. 26:27, 28; Acts 2:38; Heb. 10:10.

67. Q. Are both the Word and the sacraments then intended to focus our faith on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation?

A. Yes, indeed. The Holy Spirit teaches us in the gospel and assures us by the sacraments that our entire salvation rests on Christ's one sacrifice for us on the cross.[1]

[1] Rom. 6:3; I Cor. 11:26; Gal. 3:27.

68. Q. How many sacraments has Christ instituted in the new covenant?

A. Two: holy baptism and the holy supper.[1]

[1] Matt. 28:19, 20; I Cor. 11:23-26.

Scripture Reading:

I Corinthians 2

Genesis 1:1-5

Also Canons of Dort, [chapter III/IV, 17.](#)

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 33:1,2

Hymn 29:1

Psalm 19:3,4

Psalm 119:39,41,42

Psalm 85:3 & Hymn 37:1,2

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Church services are not the most popular attractions of our culture. And certainly not those services where the service appears to be a one-man show. The danger is that we get swept along in this belittling of church services and

preaching.

As it is, the Lord God teaches us that there is no event more powerful, or more significant in the history of mankind, than the church service and the preaching of the gospel that occurs there. With Lord's Day 25 we repeat after God why the church service is so vitally important. We confess that it's in church that the Holy Spirit is pleased to do His work of regenerating sinners, applying to them the redemption Christ has obtained on the cross. This work of God on earth today confronts us with the responsibility God has given to us.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE WORSHIP SERVICE IS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT EVENT OCCURRING ON EARTH TODAY.

1. Why the worship service is so significant.
2. What responsibility follows for us.

1. Why the worship service is so significant

Question 65 reminds us that "faith alone makes us share in Christ and all His benefits." That's an echo of material we'd confessed in more detail in Lord's Day 23, where we acknowledged that we are righteous "by faith only." In order to appreciate the material of our Lord's Day this afternoon, brothers and sisters, I need to remind you briefly of what we'd said about faith a couple of week's ago.

The faith mentioned in Lord's Day 23, I said then, was not a thing, a substance that you have and so can set on a shelf. Faith, I said, is, like walking, an action, and you can't set an action –like walking- on a shelf. I reminded you of the box of chocolates, of how I can present a box to you with your name on it, you don't have to earn it at all, but you certainly have to do something before you can enjoy its flavour. You need to get your hands out of your pockets, you need to reach out to receive, to accept, to embrace the box I'm giving to you. God, we confessed in Lord's Day 23, has prepared a most marvellous gift for us in Jesus Christ; by His work on the cross He's obtained for us righteousness and life – riches God promised to *us* in the covenant He made with us in our infancy. At baptism He's assured us these riches were really ours; our name was even mentioned in connection with those riches. What we need now to do is *respond to our baptism*, and that's to say that we receive, accept, embrace the wealth God has prepared for us. But, we said with Lord's Day 23, we can't use the hand of the body to reach out and receive God's saving work in Christ; we need instead to reach out with the hand of the soul. That, we said, is what faith is; faith is that action of stretching out the soul to receive, to accept, to embrace the wealth God gives in Jesus Christ. That was Lord's Day 23.

The problem is, though (as we confessed last week with Lord's Day 24), that we don't have it in ourselves to reach out the hand of the soul. I referred last week to Eph 2, where the apostle says emphatically that we are "dead in sin." Our fall into sin cannot be compared to falling off the top of the church so that we are injured, in need of help, but able to call for help and even help the ambulance attendants; rather, our fall into sin is to be compared to jumping off the Bank West tower, so that we're well and truly dead on the sidewalk below. God in Christ has obtained forgiveness of sins for us, and righteousness and life, and –Lord's Day 23- "I can receive this righteousness and make it my own by faith only" – that is, by stretching out the hand of the soul to receive it. *But the dead can't stretch out the hand*; the dead can't do anything! So the work of Christ on the cross doesn't help me a dot as long as I'm left to myself to reach out for it, to accept it. If I need to come up on my own strength with that activity called faith –what Lord's Day 23 calls "accepting this gift"- Christ's death will help me nothing. For I am dead, and therefore I can't accept God's gift of righteousness in Christ. Here I'm confronted again with my bankruptcy before God. It's not just that Christ has to *obtain* salvation for me 100% (for even my best works are so vile before God as to be offensive to Him); Christ also has to *apply* this salvation to me 100%. That second, that Christ has to apply this salvation to me 100%, is the material of Lord's Day 25.

How, now, does Christ apply to me the work He accomplished on the cross? He does that, brothers and sisters, through His Holy Spirit. Christ has ascended into heaven. But that does not mean that He is absent from us. Rather, on Pentecost He has poured out His Holy Spirit. Through this Spirit He is not only *present* with His own, but also *active amongst* His own. Specifically, through His Holy Spirit Jesus Christ in heaven is *applying* to His own the wonderful gifts He obtained for us on the cross.

Consider the passage we read from I Cor 2. The apostle is speaking in the passage about the wonderful redemption that Christ has obtained on the cross, a redemption so marvellous that no eye has seen it nor ear heard it nor has it even entered the heart of man. Yet, says the apostle in vs 10, "God has revealed" this redemption "to us" so that we know about it. How has God revealed it? Vs 10: "through His Spirit." But how can the Spirit reveal anything to *dead* people? How can dead people come to *know* God's redeeming work in Christ? That's possible, congregation, because the Holy Spirit *raises dead people to new life*; these people by nature dead in sin are raised from their spiritual graves and made alive again.

How, now, does the Holy Spirit make alive persons dead in sin? To accomplish His work, brothers and sisters, the Holy Spirit uses the *Word* of God. The word is His tool by which He accomplishes the work He sets out to do. To appreciate this work of the Holy Spirit, I draw your attention to the very first time the Holy Spirit is mentioned in the Bible: Genesis 1.

God, Gen 1 records, created the heavens and the earth (vs 1). The earth, though, was without form and was void; God had not yet organized His world, placed everything in good order. Meanwhile, vs 2, "the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." Why the Spirit was hovering over the chaos is told to us in the following verses. For –vs 3- "then" –that is, when "the Spirit was hovering over the face of the waters"- "then God said, 'Let there be light.'" And see: "there was light." How come? God *spoke*, and the Holy Spirit of God translated the Word into action. The Word of God, God's speech, is powerful, gets things done, is effective –how come?- because the Holy Spirit –true God!- turns the Word into action (cf Ps 33:6).

This connection between the Word and the Spirit comes back time and again in the Bible. The prophets of the Old Testament spoke the Word of God to God's people, be it words of admonition and judgment, or words of comfort and encouragement. But, says Peter, the words the prophets spoke "never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke *as they were moved by the Holy Spirit*" (II Peter 1:21). And see: every elect person amongst the prophets' audiences repented of sin and came to faith – for the Holy Spirit turned that Word of God into action; that Word was a hammer that broke the hardest hearts (Jer 23:29).

So too on the day of Pentecost. Peter, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, began to preach. What Peter spoke was not the word of men, but the Word of God. And see: the Holy Spirit took the Word of God as it came through the mouth of Peter and translated that Word into action; through the power of the Word persons dead in sin were raised to new life. Acts 2:37: "when they heard [Peter's sermon], they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?'" And a few verses later we read that "that day about 3000 souls were added to" the crowd of disciples (vs 41). It is as Peter later said in his first letter:

"... you have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit ..., having been born again ... through the word of God which lives and abides forever."

And Peter adds:

"Now this is the word which by the gospel was preached to you" (I Peter 1:22ff).

Notice what he says: by the work of the Holy Spirit you have "been born again." And the Spirit did not willy-nilly cause this "born again"; He did it instead "through the word of God", and that life-giving word is "the gospel" which "was preached to you." There is a particular means the Spirit uses to make dead people alive, and the means God has ordained is *the Word*. The Word of God, the gospel of Jesus' payment for sin on the cross of Calvary, came to the ears of the people Peter addresses, and the result was that these people dead in sin were raised to new life in Christ. As persons now alive they were now able to "accept" the gospel (to use a word borrowed from Lord's Day 23), they can "accept" the gospel God has prepared in Jesus Christ, they can stretch out the hand of the soul; the Holy Spirit has made these sinners alive again. That is why Paul can say to the Romans that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom 10:17). It is equally why the apostle Paul could remind the Thessalonians that "when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe" (I Thes 2:13). Heathen persons of Thessalonica heard Paul preach the gospel, and they recognized that the word they heard was not a message dreamed up in the human

mind, but was instead a message from God Himself – a Word that worked "effectively", powerfully, in these dead hearts so that they came to faith.

This, now, is the material of our Lord's Day. Faith, that accepting of God's gifts of salvation in Jesus Christ, does not come from ourselves, for we are dead. Such is God's grace that He not only *obtained* righteousness for us through the *blood* of Jesus Christ; He also *applies* that righteousness to us through the *Spirit* of Jesus Christ. The Spirit does that *through the Word*; through the preaching of the Word of God the Spirit makes alive again people by nature dead in sin. Lord's Day 25: the faith we need so desperately in order to share in Christ and all His benefits comes to us "from the Holy Spirit who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel."

Let it be firmly fixed in our minds, brothers and sisters. The Christ who labored on the cross of Calvary has indeed ascended into heaven, and there He labors for our benefit in the presence of the Father. *But that does not mean that He is today not laboring for our benefit on this earth!* He most certainly is, through His Holy Spirit. Through His Holy Spirit the ascended Christ is raising from their spiritual graves all those for whom He died, all those whom the Father has given Him. And the means the Holy Spirit uses to do His life-giving work is none else than the preaching of the gospel, the Word of God as it comes through men called to preach that life-giving Word – as Paul declares in Romans 10.

That brings us in turn to the question of *where* the Holy Spirit does His work. If the means He uses to work faith is *the preaching of the gospel*, where does that administration of the Word occur? That, beloved, is *in the worship service*. Under the leadership and oversight of office-bearers appointed by God to shepherd the flock (Eph 4), the Word of God is spoken, is proclaimed. That is the Word the Spirit uses to raise to new life hearts dead in sin. That is why I said, congregation, that there is no place in the world today, no event anywhere in the world today, of greater significance than what happens in church. There is no band in church, there is no orator in church, there is but little audience participation in church, and our culture writes off that sort of activity as dull, boring. And no doubt, to our human sensitivities (dead in sin as we by nature are), this activity surely comes across as uninspiring, boring. But that does not take a thing away from the fact that this is how God Most High is pleased to work. Through the preaching He raises sinners to new life so that they can embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ. *The worship service*, irrespective of venue, *is the workshop of the Holy Spirit*; there He is busy raising dead people to new life. And please don't minimize that work; well do we say in the Canons of Dort that "regeneration is not inferior in power to creation or the resurrection of the dead" (C of D, III/IV, 12). As awesome as the work of God through the Spirit was in Gen 1, so awesome is the work of God through the Spirit today in church! There is no event in the entire world today as profound, as majestic, as awesome as the Spirit's activity *in the worship service* of raising the spiritually dead from their unbelief!

I know well, beloved, that this sounds silly to human ears. What *we see* in church is much weakness, brokenness, sinfulness – just as the Corinthians saw when Paul came to Corinth with the gospel. I Cor 2: Paul says that "I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom" (vss 3f). It's all so foolish to the human mind; anything is more exciting than church. But Paul adds, "my speech and my preaching were ... *in demonstration of the Spirit and of power*, that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (vs 3f). No, the natural man does not see the wisdom and power of the things of the Spirit, "for they are foolishness to him" (vs 14) – for they're dead in sin. But those whom God has chosen to life will come to the point – thanks to the life-giving labor of the Holy Spirit through the Word in church- to recognize that Yes, indeed, the worship service is the workshop of the Holy Spirit – that one place on earth of greatest significance and most momentous change.

That brings us to our second point:

2. *What responsibility follows for us*

It's a principle of Scripture, beloved, that wherever the Holy Spirit works amongst men, we have a responsibility. For the Holy Spirit takes seriously the responsibility God created us within us in the beginning.

Well now, the worship service is the workshop of the Holy Spirit; through the Word proclaimed under the supervision of the office-bearers, the Spirit works faith. What, now, is our responsibility? It's first of all this: I need to make it my business to *be there!* The Lord God, congregation, has established with you and me His covenant of grace, and that's

to say that the Lord has promised to us all the riches of Christ's work on the cross. But we have a responsibility, and that is to respond to these promises, and we cannot respond on our own strength for the simple reason that we are dead in sin. Since God the Holy Spirit would awaken us to new life, *and He would do that in the worship service*, it is for me to *be there!* That is the force of the apostle's instruction in Hebr 10, when he commands that we're not to forsake "the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some" (vs 25). *Be there*, as often as God gives the possibility, present yourself in the workshop of the Holy Spirit so that He can work on you.

You will say to me: but I get nothing out of it, church leaves me cold, the preaching does nothing to me. I will not dispute, my brother, my sister, that that is how you feel. But let me ask you a question. Did you *pray* before you came here that God will touch your heart, break your heart in church today? I ask the question because I have a deeper question, and that's this: do you really *want* the preaching to break your sinful heart, to convict you of sin, raise you to new life? You see, you don't have only a responsibility to front up in church; you also have a responsibility to come to church *with a humble attitude*. If you come to church because it's the expected thing to do, if you come to church simply to sooth your conscience, do not, please, do not expect that the Holy Spirit will automatically raise you to new life, work faith in your heart. For you have your responsibility, and the Holy Spirit takes that God-given responsibility of yours seriously. You need to enter the workshop of the Holy Spirit with an attitude of humility, an attitude of *wanting* Him to work upon you and change you, you need to enter with a prayer to God that He will work a living faith in your heart. That may well require repentance, an acknowledgment that you've come to church with the wrong attitude, an attitude of 'I'm OK', or an attitude critical of the way the Holy Spirit is pleased to work, critical of the means the Holy Spirit is pleased to use. Remember it: repentance is our responsibility, and the Holy Spirit takes that God-given responsibility of ours seriously. If church leaves you cold, *you first of all* need to do something about it.

Perchance you have another objection. You say: but I already have faith, so I don't need to go to church to get faith anymore; the most I need is some strengthening – and I don't really need that every week. I'm grateful to hear, my brother, my sister, that you have faith. But let me set straight a misconception here. Faith is not a thing that you have or don't have, something you can touch or put on a shelf or stick in your pocket. Faith is an action, just as much as walking is an action. Day by day the Lord confronts us with altered circumstances. There's a tiff with your mother, or there's the need to buy new trousers, or there's a meeting with the boss, or there's a death to digest. In each and any circumstances, as they change by the day, I need to work again with the promises of God extended to me at my baptism. He tells me in all my circumstances that He is my Father who controls every hair of my head and works all things for my good. As my circumstances change I need, again and again, to stretch out that hand of the soul to accept the promises God has given to me – whether they be promises from the Father or the Son or the Holy Spirit. Never can I say that I've 'arrived', that I've accepted the promises of God in Christ once and for all. Faith is daily activity, is time and again receiving, accepting, embracing the gospel of Jesus Christ in my varying circumstances. To encourage me to keep stretching out that hand of the soul to receive God's promises in my changing situations – similar as today may be to yesterday – the Lord God gives me a Sunday every week again, and tells me, every week again, to present myself in the workshop of the Holy Spirit so that He might equip me again to receive by faith what God has promised in Christ. Here, again, is need for humility on our part. As we said with Lord's Day 23: though righteous in Jesus Christ, we remain "inclined to all evil," and that means too that we remain inclined in our changing circumstances to follow our own heads, to think that we know ourselves how best we can go forward – instead of asking the Lord for His will for us and giving us the strength of faith to accept His perfect will for us.

Sunday by Sunday the Lord God calls us to the workshop of the Holy Spirit. Shall I absent myself from church then? Shall I tell God that I'd rather watch the footy game? Or that the child's cold is a sufficient excuse for me to stay home because I don't really feel like going anyway? Or that I need a holiday, and so I'm going bush for a while? God, congregation, has given the specific command of Eph 4:30: "do not grieve the Holy Spirit." And Yes, we grieve the Holy Spirit when we think we don't need to present ourselves in His workshop. We grieve the Holy Spirit when we tell the Lord that we're going on holidays for a while, and won't bother to come together where the Lord calls us. We grieve the Holy Spirit when we consider a footy game more important than the worship service.

Is that, then, the limit of our responsibility, as long as we front up in the worship service Sunday by Sunday? We understand: it's for us also to be of such a frame of mind that we are able to take in what the Lord says to us through the preaching (cf Mt 13). That is why there is no place for coming to church tired. That means in turn: it will not do to be out late Saturday night. Let parents and children impose a curfew on themselves that you are in bed on time

Saturday night – simply because you take seriously that tomorrow you want to present yourself in that one address on all the earth that is more important than any other place, and you want to benefit from the work the Holy Spirit is doing there through the preaching. Equally, being in a frame of mind to take in what the Lord says through the preaching – and so being open to the work of the Holy Spirit in church- requires that one cannot come to church critical of the man God has put on the pulpit. That may require some hard self-denial on everybody's part, may require much prayer and hard work, but it must be done; a critical attitude hinders the working of the Holy Spirit. Here too we need to take our responsibilities seriously.

By the grace of God you've come to church today. What have you seen, what have you heard? The main feature of the entire service was the sermon. It was a sermon prepared in weakness, delivered in weakness; I well know that my work needs the redeeming blood of the Savior so very much. Human wisdom dictates that the worship service is hardly an inspiring place to be, and definitely so in our culture of entertainment. Both arguments –the brokenness of the preaching and the lack of entertainment value- strongly tempt us to belittle the worship service, to stay away from time to time, to dream in church.

But over against these human arguments, the Holy Spirit has placed His gospel: He tells us in Scripture that Christ has not only obtained salvation for us through His blood on Calvary long ago, but He also applies this salvation to us through His Spirit in church today. Since that is how God the Holy Spirit is pleased to work, I make it my business to keep in step with the Spirit – and be in church faithfully, prayerfully, humbly. Lest I fail, in the changing circumstances of life, to accept, to receive, to embrace day by day the rich promises God gave me in the covenant. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 21 October 2001.

"GOD GAVE ONE DAY IN SEVEN FREE FROM WORK TO DEMONSTRATE THAT HE ALWAYS CARES FOR HIS PEOPLE."

Text:

Lord's Day 38

103. Q. What does God require in the fourth commandment?

A. First, that the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained[1] and that, especially on the day of rest, I diligently attend the church of God[2] to hear God's Word,[3] to use the sacraments,[4] to call publicly upon the LORD,[5] and to give Christian offerings for the poor.[6] Second, that all the days of my life I rest from my evil works, let the LORD work in me through His Holy Spirit, and so begin in this life the eternal sabbath.[7]

[1] Deut. 6:4-9; 20-25; I Cor. 9:13, 14; II Tim. 2:2; 3:13-17; Tit. 1:5. [2] Deut. 12:5-12; Ps. 40:9, 10; 68:26; Acts 2:42-47; Heb. 10:23-25. [3] Rom. 10:14-17; I Cor. 14:26-33; I Tim. 4:13. [4] I Cor. 11:23, 24. [5] Col. 3:16; I Tim. 2:1. [6] Ps. 50:14; I Cor. 16:2; II Cor. 8 and 9. [7] Is. 66:23; Heb. 4:9-11.

Scripture Reading:

Gen 2:15-17

Ex 16:13-30

Jn 6:48-51

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 136:1,13

Psalms 34:4

Psalms 23:3

Psalms 42:1,3,5

Psalms 145:4,5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The Sunday is under violent attack in today's western world; few are the people in our land who today refuse out of principle to work on the Sunday.

In the face of this attack, brothers and sisters, it is critical that we realize that the Sunday does not stand by itself. In the fourth commandment God gave a day free from work to spell out how much He cares for His own. To confess that fact is to acknowledge our *dependence* on God, our *trust* in Him. We demonstrate that trust, that dependence, by keeping the Sunday holy....

I preach to you the gospel of the fourth commandment using this theme:

GOD GAVE ONE DAY IN SEVEN FREE FROM WORK TO DEMONSTRATE THAT HE ALWAYS CARES FOR HIS PEOPLE.

We pay attention to three aspects of this command:

1. the purpose of work
2. the extent of God's care
2. the behaviour for the Sunday

1. *The purpose of work*

The fourth commandment makes us think of the Sabbath day, that Old Testament seventh day of the week that has become the first day in the New Testament dispensation. And mention of the Sunday awakens in us thoughts of church, of the need to go to church, what we should and should not do on Sunday, etc. That the fourth commandment would encourage our thoughts to revolve around the Sunday and church attendance is promoted by LD 38; here we confess that God requires in the fourth commandment "first, that...I diligently attend the church of God...."

Yet, beloved, the fourth commandment deals with far more than the Sabbath and Sunday behaviour. It's true that God begins this commandment with telling us to "remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." But in this command God also goes on to speak about the other six days of the week: "Six days shall you labour and do all your work," He says. The seventh day stands in contrast to the other six in that on the seventh "you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter...." Central to the fourth commandment, then, is the concept of work; six days you do work, one day you don't.

Work. What is the purpose of work? We *experience* that one must work in order to eat, work in order to live. Sure, there's those in our society to manage to live without working (be it because they're on the dole, or have their pot of gold), but we realize that's the exception. General experience is that one needs to work in order to obtain an income, to pay off the house, buy the groceries, save for the holiday and for retirement. Work: we have to, in order to enjoy the weekend. Or, as the notice would have it on Albany Hwy: "First retire, then live."

But is this thought so Scriptural, beloved? Would the Lord really have us think that we need to work in order to eat? Work in order to enjoy the weekend? Work in order to retire?

We read together a portion from Gen 2. The Lord God had placed the man and his wife in the Garden of Eden, with specific instructions "to till it and keep it." It was for Adam and Eve to take care of the Garden, to develop it, beautify it, and by that means to subdue, have dominion over all things in that garden. We realize: God's instruction "to till it and keep it" meant that Adam and Eve had concrete work to do. Even in Paradise Adam and Eve did not live a life of constant vacation; the first two people had to work hard and much. True, though: their work was pleasant; they met none of the frustrations we meet as a result of the fall into sin.

But why did Adam and Eve have to work? Did they have to take care of this garden in order that they might have something to eat? No, congregation, they did not have to work in order that they might earn a crust. I say that because of what I read in vs 16. God told Adam and Eve that they could "freely eat of every tree of the garden," except that one in the middle of the garden. The implication is that there was in the garden *sufficient available* for Adam and Eve to eat, even before they began their work. They did not have to work in order to eat; rather, God saw to it that there was food even before they began their work. That is, in Paradise the order was not: work, and therefore food, but rather: food, and therefore work.

Things changed when the human race fell into sin. For I read in Gen 3 that God said this: "cursed is the ground because of you.... In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread..." (Gen 3:17ff). That is: the ground would no longer freely supply food; people would now have to sweat, labour, in order to wrestle food out of the ground.

Yet, congregation, Gen 3 is not the end of the story, and is not the reality under which you and I live today either. For the Lord God has followed this fall with His work of redemption in Jesus Christ. Through His sacrifice on the cross, the Saviour has undone the curse of the fall, so that believers are reconciled to God again; God has become our Father for Jesus' sake. This God –Father for Jesus' sake- *cares* for His children perfectly. That care includes that He freely gives His own the daily bread they need.

Here I draw your attention to Ex 16. You know the context. The people of Israel had been slaves in Egypt, subject to very hard labour. They experienced it most bitterly: if they didn't work, they didn't eat; in fact, if they didn't work,

they were beaten, hard. But God redeemed this people out of Egypt, claimed this people as His, promised to care for them, love them. How, now, does God show His love and His care? Indeed: He freely supplied them with food.

Granted, it's not that Israel in the desert could loaf around. Their necessary daily work involved packing up the tents, tending the flocks and herds, marching to the next campsite the cloud would indicate. The people were busy, and certainly did not have the time to search the desert for food. Yet God was pleased to reward Israel's labour; every morning He put manna on the ground.

Of this manna we say: this was something special. And it's true. Yet what is special about the manna, brothers and sisters, is not that the Lord was pleased to feed Israel each day anew. God has done that since the beginning of the world! What is special is that God provides Israel with food *in this unusual way*. Normally, God gives food through, say, causing a harvest to grow on the land as a result of human labour. But note: such food still comes from *God's* hand; man can plant, man can even water, but it is God who gives the growth, the harvest. This time it's different; this time God rains food down from the skies. So God underlines that food, all food, *comes from God*. It was *He* who in Paradise told Adam and Eve to help themselves to every tree in the garden – and so provided an abundance to eat. It was *He* who uttered a curse on the earth after our fall into sin – and so withdrew the easy gift of food He'd given in Paradise. And it was *He* who opened the skies to rain down food for His people Israel in the desert – so that His people-by-covenant might never lack.

So we are confronted, beloved, with God's order of things. He does not want His people to think in terms of: I must work *in order* to eat – as in: the purpose of work is to eat, to live, to retire. Rather, it is *God's promise* that He will freely supply His people with food. So: it is for God's redeemed people to do their work – not in order to earn a crust, but in order to care for God's world. And as we care for God's world, we may *believe* that God will supply the food we need day by day.

To impress this point the more upon His people, congregation, the Lord gave Israel the particular instruction in Ex 16 about not gathering manna on the Sabbath. They were not to gather it on the sabbath, for they were not to work on the Sabbath. "Six days you shall labour, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not do any work." Yet that does not mean that Israel was to go hungry on the sabbath. They would not go hungry on that day of rest *because one does not work in order to eat in the first place*. Israel's covenant God would supply their food. That's why God promised to supply them on the sixth day with sufficient food for two days – and the extra of the sixth day would not spoil on the seventh either. So: six days one labours, takes care of God's world. Meanwhile, God provides daily food 7 days, cares for His people.

It's to be fixed in our minds too, congregation, that this arrangement –that God provides daily food- was not meant to be valid only for the time that Israel travelled in the desert. The command to work six days and rest on the seventh was valid for Israel also once they entered the Promised Land. That it was God who would supply the needs for daily living was made more clear by God's specific instruction to Israel that, once they were in the Promised Land, they were to work the land six years and leave it fallow the seventh. Every seventh year God's special people were to forego sowing their fields and pruning their vineyards (Lev 25:4); Israel had to observe a sabbath year. Did this command mean that God would have His people starve that year? Not at all! Says God in Lev 25: "if you say, what shall we eat in the seventh year, if we may not sow or gather in our crop?" then God's answer is this: "I will command My blessing upon you in the sixth year, so that it will bring forth fruit for three years" (Lev 25:20f). Never was Israel to think that work earned food, that one worked in order to live. No, Israel had to know that the God who made that covenant with them at Mt Sinai kept them alive, supplied for all their needs. That's the instruction implied also in that promise of God that if Israel should fail to obey His commands they could work as hard as they wished, but they would still not have enough, for God would curse and not bless. "Cursed shall be...the fruit of your ground, the increase of your cattle.... The Lord will smite you with...fiery heat, and with drought, and with blasting, and with mildew..." (Dt 28:17ff). And that's equally the instruction implied in that promise of God that if Israel would obey His commands, He would bless. "Blessed shall be...the fruit of your ground...." For "the Lord will open to you His good treasury of heaven, to give the rain of your land in its season and to bless all the work of your hands" (Dt 28:3ff). It is a refrain in Scripture, beloved: God's ordinance is that *our work does not earn us a living*. Instead, that living is *given*, graciously given by a faithful covenant God for Jesus' sake. That is why Jesus, when He taught us to pray, told us to say, "Our Father in heaven..., Give us this day our daily bread."

"Six days you shall labour," said God to Israel. "And the seventh day is a sabbath." We understand it now: implicit in this commandment is God's *promise* that *He supplies the needs of His people*. With this commandment God would have His people know that they don't have to sweat around the clock, seven days a week, to look after themselves, for *God looks after His own*. Here is instruction that God's people may not think in terms of being dependent on the self, on own resources – with the worries and ulcers that come with that. To underline how much we depend on God, the Lord told Israel that they didn't have to work on the seventh day, simply because their survival and prosperity did not depend on their own sweat but instead on His care and faithfulness. In a word: the fourth commandment proclaims gospel, the gospel of God's care for His people by covenant.

We live today in the New Testament dispensation. But the fact that we are dependent on God, the reality that the God of the covenant cares for His children, has not changed over the centuries. The truth of the fourth commandment is very much valid for today as well. That is what makes the push of today's society for Sunday work so tragic. People want shops open –why?- because the thought prevails that working is necessary for financial security. We are, society believes, to take care of ourselves. And there is no *trust* that *God supplies*, there is no desire to pray in childlike faith that fourth petition: "Give us this day our daily bread." On that lack of trust there can lay no blessing from God; society shall taste that a lack of trust invariably earns God's displeasure.

But that lack of trust, brothers and sisters, must not be present among those who say they believe in the Lord God. The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ cares for His people, so that we don't have to look after ourselves. We know it –is it not, congregation?- and that is why we pray the fourth petition: "Father, *You* give us this day our daily bread." But if we're going to pray that, then we also have to *show* that we trust *God* to supply our daily needs, and that means in turn that we don't work on the Sunday – as if we had to look after ourselves.

That's true, boys and girls, in relation to homework for school. You think you need some extra hours on Sunday to get your homework together? Not so, says the Lord; do your work six days, and trust Me, I will supply, says the Lord. It's equally true for earning the dollar you need for further education, or for getting a deposit on the house you want to buy, or supplying the food and clothes for your children. You think you need the job that's available on Sunday, or a part-time Sunday job to bolster the income of the week? Not so, says the Lord; do your work six days, and trust Me, I will supply, says the Lord. This is the question that must come to the foreground as a seven-day workweek becomes more common around us: do I work in order to eat, *or* do I trust that my God supplies for my needs? It's a question that each one of us, older and younger, must answer.

I move on to our second point:

2. The extent of God's care

The fourth commandment, then, reveals God to be a God who cares. How wonderfully rich the gospel of this commandment is! Yet it's not just food that He supplies. God would have us know that His care extends to all areas of life.

We learned from Ex 16 that God's gift of daily manna was for Israel instruction to trust in the Lord. It's noteworthy, now, that chap 17 tells us of God supplying more than manna; He gave Israel water (17:1-7), also gave them protection from the Amalekites (17:8-16). The point is this: food, water, protection from enemies *all* comes from God. It comes from Him because the fourth commandment teaches at bottom that God cares for His people, and God's care is never inadequate, or restricted to one part of life alone. So it was also very much in keeping with the lesson of the fourth commandment that the OT saints, when they felt dejected, down, longed to be in the temple, *for that is where God was, the God who supplied their every need*. Ps 42: my soul is cast down, the floods overwhelm me, troubles threaten to drown. So what does the psalmist do? "My soul thirst for God, for the living God." Because the psalmist knew the Lord to be that caring Father did he throw himself into the protecting, comforting arms of the God of the fourth commandment.

And shall we, beloved, do any different? We live after the events of the wilderness, after the psalmist, after Calvary. The psalmist found security in God; said the psalmist to himself: "Hope in God; for I shall again praise Him, my help and my God." But we, we have seen Jesus Christ rejected by God so that we might be accepted by Him. In Paradise

we had offended God, with as result that we could not count on God's protection, God's care; the ground was cursed. But, in keeping with the gospel of the fourth commandment, God so cared that He sent His only Son. And this Son is *the* bread of life (Jn 6:48). In Christ, we receive *the* food we need in the midst of life's deepest cares. For He secured atonement for us, forgiveness of sins and so reconciliation with the God we once offended! It is with this gift as with anything else our heavenly Father gives: it's all grace, apart from works; what counts for food counts for salvation, what counts for salvation counts for food - it's all given to us by grace alone, undeserved, not earned.

That means, brothers and sisters, that the gospel of the fourth commandment comes down to what the Lord said to His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount; "do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat or what you shall drink, nor about your body, what you shall put on.... Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all" (Mt 6:25ff). And this Father cares; to Him we are of more value than the birds of the air.... Only, "seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well" (vs 33). Seek first His kingdom. That, in NT terms, says the same thing as what God commanded Adam about the Garden: "till it and keep it." Seek first His kingdom, and that's to say: take care of God's world for God's glory. And the promise in the covenant remains: all you need will be added to you.

Such is the message, the gospel of the fourth commandment. How easy, beloved, does God make life for the humble, dependent child of His! How easy, when we place ourselves with our ups and downs into the hands of our heavenly Father.

Now yet our last point, briefly:

3. The behaviour for the Sunday

Given that the Sabbath command teaches God's care, teaches that all things needed for body and soul come from God, what shall we do on that day when we need not work – and therefore may not work? Shall we consider that to be a day for ourselves?

But how, brothers and sisters, could that be?! Given that all we need is graciously given to us by God, is it possible to have a day without God – particularly this one day that symbolizes God's care so fully?! God has given the Sunday free from work to underline that it is He who supplies our daily bread –and every other need as well- and so it follows that this day is not *our* day; here is rather a day to focus particularly on the God who supplies our every need, to pay special attention to the fact that we live out of His hand. Here is a day for special thanksgiving! Small wonder that in the Old Testament God wanted a special burnt offering on the sabbath (Num 28:9f). And how understandable that God commanded His people to spend the Sabbath in the house of the Lord (Lev 23:3; Num 28:25). The saints of old understood this; they longed eagerly to go the dwelling of God, and lamented when they couldn't. In that temple they gave thanks for that which they graciously received in the week past. And in that temple, sabbath after sabbath, God fed them the word of Life, encouraged them with the gospel of forgiveness of sins for Jesus' sake, and so with the assurance that all they needed in the coming week would also be provided by the Lord - be it forgiveness or food, grace or clothes, health or wealth, life or death.

So it cannot be otherwise, beloved, than that we too, aware of our dependence on God, desire to spend the day in Church, with God. It is as the Catechism says: we want to hear God's word, that word about forgiveness and grace for Christ's sake, that word about God's daily care for us. We want to use the sacraments to be reconfirmed in our conviction that yes, God does care. We want to call publicly on the name of the Lord, for we want to thank Him for everything He graciously gave, and we want to testify of our conviction that we are fully dependant on Him alone for the week ahead; we ask Him to provide everyday anew our daily bread. And we joyfully give Christian offerings for the poor, for we realize not only that what we have received was undeserved; we also realize that God may be pleased to use our contributions to feed others of His children.

Sunday: God cares. In truth, how rich is that gift of Sunday! Our world throws the four commandment away, but I wouldn't want to do without it for anything in the world! I understand: the Sunday is the symbol that He cares, that I'm dependent on Him. In the ups and downs of life, what comfort I receive in that gospel!

Sunday: my God cares. That is why I cherish the Sunday, and will keep that special day holy. For I want to

demonstrate publicly my *trust* in Him; I'm sure that *He* supplies all my needs, always.

Sunday: my God cares. In fact, He cares so much that every week anew He gives me a special reminder of how much He cares – Sunday! Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 39 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 4 November 2001.

" AUTHORITY IS GOD'S GIFT IN CARING FOR HIS PEOPLE."

Text:

Lord's Day 39

104. Q. What does God require in the fifth commandment?

A. That I show all honour, love, and faithfulness to my father and mother and to all those in authority over me, submit myself with due obedience to their good instruction and discipline,[1] and also have patience with their weaknesses and shortcomings,[2] since it is God's will to govern us by their hand.[3]

[1] Ex. 21:17; Prov. 1:8; 4:1; Rom. 13:1, 2; Eph. 5:21, 22; 6:1-9; Col. 3:18-4:1. [2] Prov. 20:20; 23:22; 1 Pet. 2:18.

[3] Matt. 22:21, Rom. 13:1-8; Eph. 6:1-9; Col. 3:18-21.

Scripture Reading:

Romans 13:1-7

Ephesians 5:22-6:9

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 99:1,2

Psalms 115:6

Psalms 77:5,7

Psalms 34:5,6,7

Psalms 78:3,4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

God's fifth commandment to His covenant people revolves around the notion of authority. We understand the term 'authority' to mean that someone else can tell us what to do, and we're meant to listen. That's why we don't like the notion of 'authority'; it's deeply ingrained in our fallen human natures that we don't want to be *under* another. We prefer to be free, make up our own minds – and if there has to be authority we want to be on top of the pile giving the instructions to another, and not on the bottom of the pile receiving them.

The society in which we live shares this aversion to authority. The older among us will remember the songs the Beatles sang in the 1960's, how they railed against authority and encouraged the youth of the western world to do their own thing. The seeds of rebellion the Beatles sowed ripened some years later; in the late '60's and early '70's America witnessed a number of rebellions by university students. The American government conscripted young men into the army to fight in Vietnam, but various young people dodged the draft, refused to obey. Among them was none other than Bill Clinton. Yet he became President of the United States – though he never expressed regret for disobeying the law and being a draft dodger. My point is: what the Beatles sang in the '60's has been embraced by the American people as a whole; many people today do not respect authority. And Australia is no different on the point; we import American thinking and follow suit. In that culture we live today, and in that culture we confess in our Lord's Day that God wants us to "show all honor, love and faithfulness to ... all those in authority over me, submit myself with due obedience to their good instruction and discipline...." By insisting on authority, congregation, we row against the common stream. That's hard, for older and younger amongst us alike, because our fallen human nature prefers no authority.

God, though, has spoken to us about authority, and that is why we repeat after God in our Lord's Day what He has said on the matter in His Word. With humility we bow before His Word, and seek to be taught, instructed, in His way.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

AUTHORITY IS GOD'S GIFT IN CARING FOR HIS PEOPLE.

1. The origin of authority
2. The style of authority
3. The response to authority

1. The Origin of Authority.

We speak first, then, about the origin of authority. It needs to be said upfront, brothers and sisters, that we are busy here with an element of *faith*. Where does authority come from? The Lord God tells us that authority comes from *Him*. That is, He is the Creator of heaven and earth, and therefore He is the One who gives the rules. He fashioned Adam and Eve, then put them in the Garden, and told them that they could eat of every tree in the garden – except that one over there. He could give that instruction by virtue of His being *God*, Creator. Similarly, God is the One who upholds the world He made, and therefore is the One who may continue to give the rules. We remain dependent on Him for life itself, and therefore He may tell us what to do and what not to do.

I said: this is an element of faith. Suppose we were to reject the fact that God is there. We insist there is no God, insist that the world came into being through a process of evolution – just as our world does. If you insist there is no God, how would you answer the question of where authority comes from? The world around us answers the question in two ways. The first is: Johnny is bigger than Peter, and that's why Johnny can impose his will upon Peter; Peter better listen lest Johnny beat him up. It's said: that's how authority works in the family; parents are bigger than their children and therefore can impose their will on the little ones. But that doesn't explain how there's government in a country, and so our society has a second answer to the question of where authority comes from. It's this: people *agree together* to appoint a leader, and promise to obey this leader as long as he gives instructions the majority like. So: next Saturday we go to the polls, and Australians together will decide who should be our Prime Minister. The elected man will have his authority from the people, and is obliged to do what the people want. It's called democracy, the rule of the people.

Notice: in both these explanations, authority comes not from outside this world, from its Creator; authority comes instead from within this universe, from man himself. The result of this line of thought is that if I'm not happy with what the authorities require of me, I may resist, may rebel – as the Beattles encouraged us to do so many years ago (and today's singers still repeat that message). This man-centered notion of authority doesn't have room for honoring, loving those in authority over us, doesn't have room for cheerful submission. That the average member of society has embraced this message is pointed up by the way young people are today allowed to speak to their parents. Mom has a question about how come your trousers are dirty. A God-pleasing answer sounds like this: "I'm sorry, Mom, but I got my trousers caught in the bicycle chain." But what's the standard answer today: "I couldn't help it; trousers got stuck in the chain." That is: the answer comes with a tone of insolence; that's disrespect for authority, cheekiness.

As it is, though, congregation, older and younger, God is *there*, the Creator and Sustainer of the world. As Creator He's the One who may tell us what He wants us to do; as creatures we are by definition *under* His authority. That is why the apostle Paul says in Rom 13 that "there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God" (vs 1). Solomon says the same: "By me" –and "me" refers here to God– "by me kings reign, And rulers decree justice. By me princes rule, and nobles, All the judges of the earth" (Prov 8:15f). Granted: in the texts quoted the reference is to government, to kings and prime ministers and presidents; God appoints these authorities, so that we need to see God behind Premier Geoff Gallop. But the point is true of every sphere of authority, be it in the country or in the church or in the home. "There is no authority" on the face of the earth "except from God." That is why in our Lord's Day we ask, "What does *God require* in the fifth commandment?"

All authority, then, comes from God. That raises the next question: *why* has God ordained authority? To put the

question into proper focus, I need to take you back for a moment to Paradise. How did Adam and Eve know what God's will for them was? They knew: God created them, God gave them instructions, they were *under* God's authority. But how did they know what God wanted of them? We learn from Gen 3 that the Lord God came to Adam and Eve in the cool of the day (vs 8). There's the answer, congregation: God Himself came down from heaven to earth to speak with Adam and Eve and tell them what He wanted of them. That is, His instructions to them came directly from the mouth of God. Today there are some five billion people on the face of the earth. Is God able to come to each person, say, on a daily basis, and explain to each what God's will for each person is? Certainly, He is able, for He is God almighty. But see: God is pleased to tell people His will for them *not* via His direct coming to each person; He is pleased to tell people His will *by means of authorities*. That is, God sovereignly appoints certain persons to a place over other persons so that through these authorities God may lead those whom He is pleased to place under authority. We need to understand that the existence of authority is a matter of God's *care* for people. Setting persons in positions of authority over other persons is the means God has chosen to make clear to the persons under authority what His will for them is. We echo this reality in our Catechism by confessing: "it is God's will to govern us by their hand."

If authority is there, then, because "it is God's will to govern us by their hand", two consequences follow. The first is that anyone in a position of authority needs always to bear in mind that he himself is also *under* authority – all authorities are themselves under *God's* authority. As a person under God's authority, he may never, ever impose his own will on those under him. Always he has to speak on God's behalf, has to speak according to the revealed Word of God. In fact, anyone in a position of authority has to give account to God for how he has used the position God has given to him. Where he abuses that authority, that is, when he uses his position to impose his own will on those under him (instead of God's will), he has a severe penalty to pay; *God* will require him to give account. It may be human nature, beloved, to desire to be *in* authority instead of *under* authority, but the responsibility that God has laid upon those whom he places *in* authority is enormous. What James writes about teachers receiving "stricter judgment" (3:1) is true not just for teachers in the professional sense of the word, but true for all those in authority. That is also why it is so important that all those to whom God has entrusted authority know God's word well!

There is a second consequence that follows from the fact that authorities are given by God as means through whom He would care for and rule over certain persons. The second consequence is that persons *under* authority need to *be deliberate in honoring authorities*. To disregard the authorities, to flatly disobey, to speak to authorities in insolent tones, is displeasing to the Lord God simply because –Rom 13- the authority "is God's servant to you for good" (vs 4). When you snub the authority, you don't snub simply the *person* in authority, but you snub the *God who appointed that person* to the position of authority. God says in the fifth commandment that people must "honor your father and your mother," and refusing to give that honor is to sin against the God who gave you parents, is to sin against the God who is pleased to govern you through particular authorities.

I move on now to our second point:

2. The Style of Authority.

We've heard so far that authority comes from God, and is the means God is pleased to use to make clear His will for the persons He has placed under authority. So far I've kept it general, without mentioning various spheres of authority, simply because what I've said about authority so far is true for all authority. As it is, though, commentators tend to speak about three spheres of authority, viz, authority in the home, authority in the church, and authority in the state. In our second point I need to expand upon these three, and in doing so I want to show you what the Bible says about the style of authority.

The point here is: how is one in authority to exercise his authority? How do you encourage those *under* authority to show honor, love and faithfulness to those *in* authority, to submit obediently to their good instruction and discipline? In answer to the question, I ask your attention for our Lord Jesus Christ. There came the day when the twelve disciples argued over who would have the position of greatest authority in the kingdom of heaven. Jesus' reply was this:

"You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the

Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mk 10:42ff).

That is: Jesus drew attention to His own example. He didn't come to be on top of the pile, with everybody obedient to Him; He came instead "to serve", to go to the cross so that His death might ransom many from eternal damnation. That, says the Lord, is the example you need to follow. "Whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all." So Jesus on another occasion washed the feet of the disciples –and that's the work of a slave!- and then said: "I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (Jn 13:15). There you have, congregation, what I mean with the phrase "style of authority". Those to whom God entrusts a position of authority are not to be dictatorial, and impose their own will on those under them. Instead, those in authority are *to serve* those under them.

The apostle Paul works this out in the passage we read from Ephesians 5. I said earlier that folk commonly speak of three spheres of authority, viz, the family, the church and the state. For our part, when we think about authority in the family, we think of the relation between parents and children. Yet when the apostle speaks of authority and submission, he doesn't speak first of the authority parents have to their children and the obedience children must give to their parents. He speaks first of marriage. He says in 5:22:

"Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything."

The wife, he says, is to "submit". The husband, he adds, is the "head of the wife." In the Bible the notion of 'headship' captures the concept of having authority. That is the point: the husband has authority over the wife (cf I Peter 3). I know that this thought is anathema in today's society; feminism would have the woman to be free. But this, beloved, is the will of God in marriage; you wives in the congregation are to submit to the husband God in wisdom has given you. That's to say: it is God's good pleasure to govern you, to make known His will to you, through the husband He's given. And: you cannot expect your children in the home to obey you if you will not obey your husband.

But now notice: this isn't all that Paul says on the point. For scarcely has Paul told the wives in Ephesus to submit to their husbands, when he straightaway addresses the husbands on the matter of "style of authority". Listen:

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself."

You hear it: Paul picks up on what Jesus said in Mk 10 and Jn 13. Jesus' style of authority was to *empty Himself* for the sake of His bride, the church. Undeserving though God's people were, unclean and repulsive on account of their own sins, yet the Lord Jesus Christ did not come with a heavy hand and a dictatorial arm to lay down the law upon those under Him. That is why husbands may not rule their wives in that fashion; the husband leads his wife by *emptying* himself for her benefit. And we realize: when the husband exercises his authority over his wife in this self-emptying manner, seeking to serve her so that she flourishes, it is much easier for the wife to submit. Sure, it still requires self-denial on her part since nobody by nature likes to be under authority. And she will have to act from out of the faith that God is pleased to govern her through her husband. But when the husband shows this kind of service to his wife, he makes it pleasant for her to show him "all honor, love, and faithfulness", makes it pleasant for her to "submit [herself] with due obedience to [his] good instruction."

This same matter of style of authority comes up in the next section of Paul's letter. He instructs children in 6:1 to "obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right." Here is the immediate material of the fifth commandment itself: children must honor father and mother, and you show honor by obeying them. It is a message found time and again in Scripture. Moses tells Israel that "Everyone of you shall revere his mother and his father" (Lev 19:3). Solomon calls his children to him and tells them repeatedly, "Hear, my children, the instruction of a father" (Prov 4:1; cf 1:8, 10, 15; 2:1; 3:1, 21; 4:10, 20; etc). The Lord's standard is that children are to obey their parents.

But look, boys and girls, fathers and mothers, at what Paul adds in Eph 6:4. "Fathers," he writes, "do not provoke your children to wrath, but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord." Paul says two things here. On the one hand fathers are not to provoke the child to wrath. That is: they're not to frustrate their children, exasperate them, make them angry. How that's done? For example, by being heavy fisted, laying down the law unfeelingly. Here's where the second thing Paul says dovetails with the first. For Paul adds: "but bring them up in the training and admonition of the Lord." That is: bring them up in the way in which the Lord brings up His people. There's again the example of the Lord Jesus Christ. He wasn't heavy-fisted in the way He treated His people. He instead sacrificed Himself for their sake! So too the fathers, in denial of self, are to teach the children the way of the Lord. You see, when fathers (and mothers) in their style of authority follow the example of the Lord, they make it much easier for the children to "show all honor, love and faithfulness to ... father and mother." Sure, the children still need to act out of faith, still need to fight the inner urge to be one's own boss. But with such a style of authority parents are making it pleasant for the children to obey, instead of placing obstacles on the path of the children.

Again, congregation, the same matter comes up in the vss 5-9. In the sphere of the state there is an authority relationship between government and citizens, and there's an authority relationship also between employers and employees. Paul addresses here the servants, the employees. They are, says Paul, to "be obedient to those who are your masters" – or, as we'd say today, your employers. Paul expands upon that: employees are to do service with goodwill, "as to the Lord, and not to men." But Paul straightaway adds: "you Masters, do the same things to them, giving up threatening." There's the style of authority again, a style wherein masters serve their servants, seeking what is good for them. That's how employers need to treat their employees, and where that occurs the employees will be pleased to do their best for the boss.

Family (be it husband/wife relations, be it parent/child relations) and the workplace are the institutions Paul mentions in Eph 5 and 6. Yet we understand that the topic of authority extends beyond these institutions. Also in church there is authority. That's why Paul tells Timothy, for example, to "preach the Word" (II Tim 4:2). And Jesus tells the first office-bearers, the apostles, that "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Mt 18:18). That's why the Holy Spirit tells the Hebrews to "obey those who rule over you, and be submissive" (Heb 13:17).

But at the same time as the Scriptures emphasize the need to submit to authorities in the church, the Bible also emphasizes that office-bearers need to exercise their authority with a style pleasing to the Lord. If the Head of the church served His people so totally that He laid down His life for His own, it follows without discussion that those in the church who have received a position of authority must do the same. It is as Jesus said to the first office-bearers of the New Testament church:

"You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant" (Mk 10:42f).

Here is the responsibility for office-bearers: serve the sheep that Christ bought with His blood. Serve, in denial of self. Heal the broken-hearted, set the broken legs, bind up the wounds. In denial of self, *serve* – and so show how Christ has emptied Himself for the salvation of those under Him.

Then, brs office-bearers, you make it easier for congregation members to submit. True, the sheep of the flock still need to exercise so much self-denial. After all, sinful human nature wants to be free, doesn't want to submit to another. But exercising authority according to the style of Christ takes away obstacles that can hinder the sheep from submitting to those whom God has placed in authority in His church.

Now yet our final point:

3. The Response to Authority

Suppose, now, that in your marriage your husband does not display the style of authority commanded by the apostle. Does the fact that your husband fails to comply with God's standard for him permit you to dishonor him, disobey him? Suppose, children, that your father or mother do not display the style of authority the Lord requires. Does that failure

on Dad's or Mom's part permit you to dishonor your parents, to big-mouth them, to disobey them? Does the boss' failure to display the style of Christ mean that you employees don't have to submit to the boss, work hard for him? Does an office-bearers' failure to measure up to the standards that Christ has set free you from the command of the Lord to submit with due obedience to their good instruction and discipline?

Here, my brothers and sisters, we need to keep in mind what we said about the origin of authority. It is *God* who has chosen the notion of authority as the means by which He would govern His people. God is almighty; He could rule over us without using persons in authority over us. Similarly, God is almighty and so could have given us a different spouse, different parents, a different boss, different office-bearers. He is almighty, and therefore could certainly have given us Buddhist parents living in Mongolia. You'd still be you, with your character and eye-color and mental gifts, etc, but having different parents, be raised in a different faith, etc. But God didn't do that –why not?– God instead gave you the parents you have –why?– because *He is pleased to look after you by means of those particular parents*. Certainly He knew, long before you were born, that the parents to whom He would give authority over you would be sinful people, persons who battle with the sin that remains in us all. Yet God mandated *your particular parents* to look after you. More, God instructed *you* to obey *them*. My point is: the sinfulness of the parents does not let the children off the hook so that they need not obey Dad and Mom anymore.

The same is true in relation to marriage. God is almighty, and very able to give to the wives of the congregation a different husband. He knew before He gave wife to husband that both husband and wife would continue to struggle with the weaknesses of sin. Yet God commands the wife to submit to her husband. Certainly, the husband is instructed to display a certain style of authority. But the abiding sinfulness of the husband does not excuse the wife from God's command to submit to the authority that God in wisdom has placed over her.

Again, the same is true in relation to the state. Paul is emphatic in Rom 13 that "every soul" is to "be subject to the governing authorities." How amazing, for the governing authorities in Paul's days were anything but Christian! The emperors were godless men, the governors were folk like Herod and Pontius Pilate. But their godlessness in no way let the people off the hook; God's command remained that "every soul" must "be subject to the governing authorities." In fact, "whoever resists the authorities resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment upon themselves" (vs 2).

That, my brothers and sisters, is the ordinance of God: I am to "show all honor, love, and faithfulness to my father and mother and to all those in authority over me, submit myself with due obedience to their good instruction and discipline, and also have patience with their weaknesses and shortcomings." The reason is simple: "it is God's will to govern us by their hand." The fact that their style of authority does not conform satisfactorily to God's model in Jesus Christ does not free anyone from the obligation to submit to the authority God has placed over us.

There is one exception. When the authorities in the Sanhedrin forbade Peter and John from speaking in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, Peter replied: "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29). The Lord wants obedience to all authority, except where those *in* authority require those *under* authority to do what is *contrary* to God's revealed will. Authorities are God's servants, and therefore may require only what God requires. Where commands from authorities go contrary to God's commands, the authorities *abuse* the authority God has given – and those under authority are to disobey. That is not easy for citizens to do in a country, for it can bring persecution upon oneself. It is not easy for employees to do in relation to a boss (if, for example, he demands that you work on Sunday), for it can cost you your job. It's not easy for children in a family either, for persons in authority can threaten the children so cruelly if they speak out about the sins they're required to perform. But we must obey God rather than man, and therefore must disobey when those over us demand actions from us that God forbids. Especially children do well to seek help from others, others in authority, so that abuse of authority can be snuffed out and those abusing authority be brought to justice.

Our society spurns authority, and our sinful nature finds that attractive. The Lord has told us that authority comes from Him, that authority is His gift for the protection and care of His people. Let us humbly acknowledge that care –how?– through those in our midst *in* authority making it their business, in the strength of the Holy Spirit, to exercise that authority in the style Christ has displayed. And those *under* authority may acknowledge that same care –how?– by submitting, also in the strength of the Holy Spirit, to the authority God placed over us.

Blessed are they who acknowledge God as Lord – and He governs us through authorities of His choosing. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 40 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 11 November 2001.

"THE CREATOR OF LIFE GIVES AND TAKES LIFE IN HIS TIME AND MANNER."

Text:

Lord's Day 40

105. Q. What does God require in the sixth commandment?

A. I am not to dishonour, hate, injure, or kill my neighbour by thoughts, words, or gestures, and much less by deeds, whether personally or through another;[1] rather, I am to put away all desire of revenge.[2] Moreover, I am not to harm or recklessly endanger myself.[3] Therefore, also, the government bears the sword to prevent murder.[4]

[1] Gen. 9:6; Lev. 19:17, 18; Matt. 5:21, 22; 26:52. [2] Prov. 25:21, 22; Matt. 18:35; Rom. 12:19; Eph. 4:26. [3] Matt. 4:7; 26:52; Rom. 13:11-14. [4] Gen. 9:6; Ex. 21:14; Rom. 13:4.

106. Q. But does this commandment speak only of killing?

A. By forbidding murder God teaches us that He hates the root of murder, such as envy, hatred, anger, and desire of revenge,[1] and that He regards all these as murder.[2]

[1] Prov. 14:30; Rom. 1:29; 12:19; Gal. 5:19-21; James 1:20; 1 John 2:9-11. [2] 1 John 3:15.

107. Q. Is it enough, then, that we do not kill our neighbour in any such way? A. No. When God condemns envy, hatred, and anger, He commands us to love our neighbour as ourselves,[1] to show patience, peace, gentleness, mercy, and friendliness toward him,[2] to protect him from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies.[3]

[1] Matt. 7:12; 22:39; Rom. 12:10. [2] Matt. 5:5; Luke 6:36; Rom. 12:10, 18; Gal. 6:1, 2; Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:12; 1 Pet. 3:8. [3] Ex. 23:4, 5; Matt. 5:44, 45; Rom. 12:20.

Scripture Reading:

Genesis 9:1-7

Romans 12:9-13:10

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 119:28

Psalm 103:4

Psalm 18:8

Psalm 145:2,3

Psalm 37:1,9,11

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The Lord instructs us in the sixth commandment not to murder. With this command we're placed in the midst of some very contemporary issues facing our society. That terrorists hijacked airplanes and turned them into missiles –in the process killing all passengers on board- was an act of murder. Abortion clinics in our country and around the world annually terminate hundreds of thousands of pregnancies – and that is murder. A couple of years ago the Northern Territory government permitted euthanasia (be it under certain conditions), but euthanasia is murder. Thankfully, the federal government stepped in to force a change in law. Meanwhile we today have a Dr Nitzke lobbying strongly to open a euthanasia clinic in WA – contrary to the sixth commandment. Suicide rates have risen in the last number of years, but suicide too is murder. In distant lands are millions of refugees, some of whom go to great lengths to get to

Australia. The major political parties of our land uphold a policy of not welcoming these refugees. The question is: does God in our commandment give us a responsibility toward these refugees? If yes, what? You see, the sixth commandment places us in the midst of some very contemporary issues.

It is simple enough to say that God forbids the murder of innocent passengers on an airplane, forbids the murder of babies in their mother's womb, forbids the murder of a senile grandparent, etc. But why, brothers and sisters, why does God forbid it? What are the principles behind the sixth commandment? And if God forbids murder of babies, what does God command in relation to caring for mothers unhappy with their pregnancy? If God forbids the murder of the aged and infirm, what does God command in relation to caring for these members of our society?

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE CREATOR OF LIFE GIVES AND TAKES LIFE IN HIS TIME AND MANNER.

1. Why people may not terminate life
2. What people need to do with life

1. Why people may not terminate life

God's command is categorical: "You shall not murder." Why did the Lord give this command? The answer lies first of all in the material of Genesis 1 and 2. For I learn from those chapters that the human race did not arise from a process of evolution so that there is at bottom no difference between a man and a mosquito – as if there's morally no difference between getting ride of a pesky mosquito and getting rid of a troublesome man. Rather, the Lord God almighty took dust from the earth, fashioned it into the shape of a man, breathed into it the breathe of life, and man became a living being. Not only that, the man God fashioned in the beginning was created in the image of God. That is, the Lord gave a unique task to the man; the man was created in such a way that he imaged what God was like. As image of God he received a place in God's world *above* the animals; man himself is not an animal. After the Flood, God told Noah that "every moving thing that lives shall be food for you" (Gen 9:3); Noah and his descendents were free to kill any animal for food. But God added, "Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man" (vs 6). God permits the killing of animals (under certain conditions), but He forbids the killing of people, and He Himself appeals to His creating work to explain His command; He created the human race, and did so in the image of God.

It is true that the fall into sin occurred between the time God created man in Gen 2 and the time God forbade murder in Gen 9. That fall into sin changed much, and changed things radically, but it did not change the fact that man was created to image God. True, after the fall the human race was no longer *able* to image God unless the Lord renewed a particular person through His Holy Spirit. But even that doesn't change the fact that man had a *task* to image God, and on account of that task no one was permitted to kill another.

As we consider why we may not murder, there is another aspect we need to keep in mind. To murder someone is to inflict death upon that person. But where, congregation, does death come from? God did not create it; death did not exist in Paradise. Instead, death entered the world when we ate from the forbidden tree. Said God in the beginning: "in the day that you eat of [that tree], you shall die" (Gen 2:17). That's what happened. In Adam the whole human race sinned, and so brought death to oneself. Paul says it this way to the Romans, "The wages of sin is death" (cf Rom 6:23).

Since that is the case, brothers and sisters, who is entitled to distribute that penalty? Are you? Am I? Let's have it straight in our minds, beloved: death is not simply the termination of life. Nor did that termination exist in the world God created in the beginning. Death is a foreign element, an evil thing that we brought into the world through our fall. Death is God's penalty, God's judgment on our disobedience; death is the expression of God's holy wrath on our sin. That reality spells out that it is not for people to distribute death to anyone; it is for God to hand out that penalty upon sinners at the time of His choosing.

Remember too that death is not the end of things. This penalty on sin, death, leads to God's judgment hall. As the apostle Paul writes: "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one many receive the things

done in the body" (II Cor 5:10). That presses the question upon us again: is it for any of us to hurl a person in front of God's judgment seat?! You see, as long as a person lives, there is still time for him to repent from sin and embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ in faith. But if I murder a person, if I impose upon him the penalty God ordained for sin, I drive him straight to God's judgment seat – and he no longer has opportunity to repent of his sins, with all the eternal consequences of that.

Again, there is another aspect of the matter to keep in mind. The Lord God sent His only Son into a world where God promised the penalty of death upon every sinner. He sent His Son so that He might bear the burden of God's wrath against sin. What happened? The Lord Jesus Christ was *murdered* on the cross of Calvary. As Peter says in His Pentecost sermon to the people of Jerusalem concerning Jesus of Nazareth: "Him ... you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death" (Acts 2:23). That's to say: *people* thought to take matters in their own hand, and impose on Jesus of Nazareth the penalty that God had decreed upon every sinner. That was blatantly *evil* on the part of the people, since God had prohibited murder; God Himself would impose the penalty of sin upon the sinner at *His* time. But more, God had decreed that the penalty of death was to fall only upon *sinner*s. And see: Jesus was Himself *not a sinner*! Yet the people murdered Him; how evil their deed!

But here is the marvel of God's eternal counsel: God in infinite mercy was pleased to turn this murder into salvation for many! For Peter continues his sermon like this: "God raised [Him] up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it" (vs 24). Christ's innocent death is the fulfillment of the sacrifices of the Old Testament; as the animal died in the temple *in place of the sinner* who deserved to die for his sins, so Christ Jesus died *in place of the sinner* who believes in Him. So sin was atoned for, and the sinner delivered from the wrath of God. That's the mystery of the gospel; the murder performed upon Jesus Christ opens up for God's people the way to heaven!

That glorious gospel, though, does not mean that we no longer have to die. We certainly do. But, as Paul can say, "to die is gain." For death brings the child of God before the judgment seat of God, *where Christ intercedes on his behalf*, and the saint –justified as he is in Jesus' blood- receives life eternal in the presence of God – with no tears or pain or suffering anymore. Indeed, for Christ's sake is death gain!

Does that glorious gospel mean that we are now free to murder each other or ourselves? Most certainly not! The command of the beginning remains; God created us in His own image, and therefore we may not kill each other or ourselves. In fact, through His Holy Spirit the Lord has *recreated* us in His image; how much less then are we permitted to murder each other or ourselves!

How, now, my brothers and sisters, are we to apply this material in midst of today's questions? What should the unmarried girl do when the doctor tells her what she feared to hear – yes, you're pregnant? What should you do when you're told that the baby you're expecting is handicapped? The option is available: terminate the pregnancy. To our sinful nature the option is attractive; in the church there's still shame associated with pregnancy outside of marriage, for it speaks of sin. How tempting the option to be rid of the evidence.... And a handicapped child, one that will never walk, will never be independent? Human emotion says: put this child to one side, and let's try again....

Listen, beloved of the Lord, to what the Holy Spirit makes David say. Ps 139: "You formed my inward parts; You covered me in my mother's womb" (vs 13). The point: God Himself was at work in the womb of David's mother. He caused David's conception, at the time of His choosing, and He fashioned David in his mother's womb in a manner pleasing to Him. And that is true of every child throughout history, including the child you'd rather not carry. What shall we do now; criticize God for the way He makes a child, conclude that His handiwork is no good and so we'd better terminate the pregnancy? Is it the place of creatures to criticize the Creator? Says Isaiah:

"Woe to him who strives with his Maker!
...Shall the clay say to him who forms it, 'What are you making?'
Or shall your handiwork say, 'He has no hands'?" (vs 9).

That is: it is not for people to criticize the master Potter for the work He does. If He wants to make one child to be good at everything –we'd say: the ideal child- and He wants to make the next so handicapped that the child needs constant care, it is not for us to criticize God's decisions. God created that child, whether handicapped or not, in His

image. If we shed the blood of the child we'd rather not have, by God's ordinance our blood must be shed – capital punishment. No, beloved, the God of life does not give us permission to destroy life – no matter how inconvenient that new life may be. Instead, where He in wisdom gives new life, His children may expect that He will also give the strength to care for that new life.

Again, what shall I do when suffering and pain becomes too much to bear, when I'm a burden to others? Shall I seek assistance from a Dr Nitzke to be relieved of the suffering of this life? Shall I pursue euthanasia to free an aged family member of her suffering? You know, if you claim there is no God, if you are convinced that the human race is nothing more than a more evolved animal than any other species, then, really, what argument can you bring up that we should not do to an old person what we do to an old farm animal? That our society moves in the direction of euthanasia is a perfectly logical follow-on from the evolution theory.

But what does the Lord say on the matter? It's a fact that people become old and lose their ability to be productive members of society. It's a fact too that people can become so riddled with pain that they long for relief. And we all know that everybody is going to die one day anyway. Does the Lord give opening to us to hurry death along? Here too, beloved, we need to work with the material of Gen 9: God created man in the image of God, and so He forbids the shedding of anyone's blood. It may well be that a person overcome with illness no longer shows anything of the glory of being created in the image of God –and yes, that's so very humbling, for the person himself and for his family- but God's ordinance stands: "Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man" (Gen 9:6). More: death is God's wages on our sin. It is not for us to impose that wage on a sinner; that's for God to do, at His time. Even the fact that Jesus Christ has taken the sting out of death for the child of God does not alter the fact that death is for God to give, not us – no matter how unproductive a person may become, no matter how much a suffering person longs for the end. Instead of looking at euthanasia as an escape from misery, the Lord would have us cling to His promises in Jesus Christ, including this promise that He carries His own in every circumstance; Christ was forsaken, and therefore the child of God is never forsaken, no matter how great the pain.

The same applies to suicide. Shall I criticize the fact that God has given me life, continues to give me life, and so seek to put an end to my life? Shall I say that God's timing in giving me death is bad, and so hurry things along? Certainly, for the believer "to die is gain." But if God has said that murder is sin, how shall I give account to God for my sin of murdering myself? Please hear me well; I do not say there is no forgiveness possible for the sin of suicide. The question now is: what is God's command on the matter? He hates murder, and that includes not just murder of another (be the person strong or weak, healthy or sick, and unborn infant or an aged or suffering family member); it includes also the murder of self. God created life and He upholds it, and so we may not take it. Death is *His* penalty on our fall into sin, and so it's not for us to take that penalty on ourselves when we want it.

Yet suicide speaks of despair, and God has a word of encouragement for those who despair. Christ Jesus was rejected by God and man alike *so that we might never be rejected by God*. Then it's true that we may feel so alone, so rejected. But the Lord would have us believe that our feelings are not the measure of how things really are. His promise is firm, and to that we may cling.

God hates all murder. So much so that He emphatically commanded that "whoever sheds the blood of man, by man his blood shall be shed." That is: God does not want a murderer to live on His earth, whether that be the person who shoots his neighbor in cold blood, or who tears an infant from the womb, or gives a lethal injection to a so-called unproductive member of society. The means God has ordained for the result of sin to come upon the murderer is capital punishment; the governing authorities –Rom 13:4- must take the life of the evildoer. I know: there are those who argue that the sixth commandment forbids murder, and so we may not kill even the murderer. But in the case of the murderer *God Himself* commands that the murderer's life be taken. We have to acquiesce to that, and insist on capital punishment for all murderers. That our government does not insist on capital punishment, that it even permits abortion, must bring God's displeasure upon our land.

I move on now to our second point:

2. What people need to do with life

Behind the murders on September 11 lay an enormous amount of hatred and anger and desire for revenge. Behind a suicide can be very much hatred too, particularly hatred of the self. Behind abortion and euthanasia lie attitudes of selfishness; this pregnancy doesn't suit me, I haven't got the energy or time or money to look after my aging parent. Behind murder lie unholy attitudes. "By forbidding murder God teaches us that He hates the root of murder, such as envy, hatred, anger, and desire of revenge, and that He regards all these as murder" – we confess in our Lord's Day.

Instead of attitudes that lead to murder, the Lord God requires His people to embrace different attitudes. Question & Answer 107: "When God condemns envy, hatred, and anger, He commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves, to show patience, peace, gentleness, mercy, and friendliness toward him...."

"Patience, peace, gentleness, mercy, and friendliness," we say in our Lord's Day. These attitudes, brothers and sisters, are fruits of the Holy Spirit. I read in Gal 5 that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (vss 22f). These are fruits of the Spirit because they are the attitudes that the Lord displayed when He sent His only Son into the world. "God so loved the world," I read in Jn 3, "that He sent His only-begotten Son into the world that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have life everlasting" (vs 16). "The Lord is merciful and gracious, Slow to anger, and abounding in mercy," I read in Ps 103:8. Jesus says in Luke 6 that the Most High is "kind to the unthankful and evil," and then adds, "Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful" (vss 35f). This is the attitude that God displayed in Jesus Christ to the unworthy, and that's why the Lord commands His people to display the same attitudes.

In fact, that's why the Lord through His Holy Spirit causes His people to display these attitudes. And see: what do we see in the congregation? What do we see in our homes? Certainly, we can pick up on the shortcomings that remain, and recognize that we have need for further growth. But at the same time, beloved, we can note with deep gratitude to the Lord that He through His Spirit has worked in our hearts so that the patience, peace, gentleness, mercy, and friendliness mentioned in our Lord's Day are evident in the congregation, and evident in the families. Here is reason for deep gratitude, and constant thankfulness to the Lord.

Charity begins in the home, the old adage has it. And that's true. The attitude in the home and the care within the congregation needs also to be tasted in the society around us. A couple of examples. Consider the nursing homes of our nation. It is first and foremost for residents' children and grandchildren to extend mercy and love to their aged parents or their handicapped sibling. But the fact is that in our society too many are finding the care of needy family members an unwanted burden, and so accept euthanasia as a way out. The weak and the aged become victims to their children's selfishness. Is here not an opportunity for Christians to show to others something of the love that God showed to the world in sending His only Son?

In the greater Armadale area are surely as many abortions per capita as anywhere else in the nation – mothers with an unwanted pregnancy, mothers not able to bear the thought of receiving a handicapped child. Who knows what anguish there is in the heart of the mother as she faces the thought of an unwanted or handicapped child? Is there not here an opportunity to extend to her the gentleness, the kindness, the mercy the Lord has extended to us? Who knows what relief that mercy can bring to that mother, and what consequence for the child! O yes, it can require long-term work on our part. But decrying the abortion laws of our nation is not enough; we confess in our Lord's Day that the Lord our God "commands us to love our neighbor as ourselves, to show patience, peace, gentleness, mercy, and friendliness toward him...."

What shall we say in relation to the refugees that keep struggling to come to Australia's shores? Given the millions of refugees around the world, and given that our enormous land is so sparsely populated, is the Lord pleased that we set a ceiling of 12,000 on our annual intake? Does that image the love and the mercy and the gentleness and the friendliness that our Lord commands in the sixth commandment?

Charity begins in the home. By God's grace, one can see a beginning of obedience to the sixth commandment in our homes and congregation. But the world around us still lives in their sin, and so tolerates murder in cold blood. It is an environment where there is so much need for the love, the mercy, the friendliness, the patience that God displayed in Jesus Christ. And God would let the world taste something of this mercy and kindness through the way His children treat their fellow men. Amen.



Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 42 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 2 December 2001.

"GOD'S REDEEMED PEOPLE ARE GENEROUS IN GIVING."

Text:

Lord's Day 42

110. Q. What does God forbid in the eighth commandment?

A. God forbids not only outright theft and robbery[1] but also such wicked schemes and devices as false weights and measures, deceptive merchandising, counterfeit money, and usury[2] we must not defraud our neighbour in any way, whether by force or by show of right.[3] In addition God forbids all greed[4] and all abuse or squandering of His gifts.[5]

[1] Ex. 22:1; I Cor. 5:9, 10; 6:9, 10. [2] Deut. 25:13-16; Ps. 15:5; Prov. 11:1; 12:22; Ezek. 45:9-12; Luke 6:35. [3] Mic. 6:9-11; Luke 3:14; James 5:1-6. [4] Luke 12:15; Eph. 5:5. [5] Prov. 21:20; 23:20, 21; Luke 16:10-13.

111. Q. What does God require of you in this commandment?

A. I must promote my neighbour's good wherever I can and may, deal with him as I would like others to deal with me, and work faithfully so that I may be able to give to those in need.[1]

[1] Is. 58:5-10; Matt. 7:12; Gal. 6:9, 10; Eph. 4:28.

Scripture Reading:

Job 29:1-17

I Timothy 6:1-10

II Corinthians 8:1-15

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 8:1,2

Psalm 8:3,4,5

Psalm 37:9

Psalm 112:1,2,3,4

Psalm 41:1 & Hymn 52:1,3

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

With Lord's Day 42 the church summarizes what the Lord forbids and requires in the eighth commandment. We just confessed it together. But what do you think, beloved, of the sentence on the top of pg 522 of the *Book of Praise*. We confess there that "God forbids all greed and all abuse or squandering of His gifts." Can you, brothers and sisters, give me some examples of what "abuse or squandering" might be? What do you think:

- Would spending your money on a Lotto ticket be a reasonable example of abuse or squandering? After all, your chance of getting a return on your money is so small as to be non-existent.
- Or would impulse buying be a good example of "abuse or squandering" of God's gifts? To buy because you like it, instead of because you need it?
- Or taking your pay packet, or even half of it, into town with you Friday evening, and coming back home with your pocket empty?
- Or pumping \$40 of petrol into your car, and then cruising aimlessly for the sake of cruising?

- Or making it a habit to eat at a restaurant?

Just what is "abuse or squandering of His gifts"?

The question is difficult because we're invariably tainted by the society in which we live. Our society is very materialistic. That is, our society puts considerable emphasis on having material possessions, insisting those possessions are your own, and encouraging you to enjoy them to the full. We're expected to keep up with the neighbor, like him to have the latest and the best. That's our society, that's materialism. We for our part get caught up in this way of thinking too, so that we consider our possessions our own, and it's fixed in our minds that we're to enjoy them too.

In light of this materialism of our society, what should we make of the last part of A 111? I quote: "I must ... work faithfully so that..." – and no, it does not say "so that I can buy the car I've got my eye on," and it doesn't say either "so that I can retire in comfort," or "so that I can afford my next weekend out." Rather, the Catechism summarizes the Word of God like this, "I must ... work faithfully so that I may be able to give to those in need." The critical word here is "give". And our Lord's Day mentions this in connection with the 8th commandment – the implication being that when I keep things to myself I'm guilty of sin against God's commandment not to steal.

It raises questions for us. Our society insists that's what's yours is yours, what you labored for you may enjoy. But in our Lord's Day we confess that God would us to "give". If we don't "give", do we then "abuse or squander" God's gifts?

We understand: this Lord's Day cuts close to the bone, for we quite enjoy the luxuries our society offers us. So we need to open the Scripture to see what our Lord has taught us on the matter.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

GOD'S REDEEMED PEOPLE ARE GENEROUS IN GIVING.

1. Who owns all things.
2. How God wants us to use His property.

1. Who owns all

Whose are the shoes, brothers and sisters, that you have on your feet this afternoon? Who owns the car, the bike, the stereo system, the house you have? By the law of the land, you own it. And so it is. But the Lord teaches us in His Word that that is not the full truth.

The Lord God once created the world. That reality in turn means that He is the Owner of all. So David in Ps 24 says, "The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness, The world and those who dwell therein" (vs 1). Asaph repeats the point in Ps 50; the Mighty One, God the Lord, says that "the world is Mine, and all its fullness" (vs 12). The point is clear: the world, with every last bit and piece within it, belongs to God. That is why I say that your car, your bike, your stereo system, your house is ultimately not yours but the Lord's.

What, though, did God do with His possessions? David says in Ps 8 that

"You have made [man] to have dominion over the works of Your hands;
You have put all things under his feet,
All sheep and oxen—
Even the beasts of the field,
The birds of the air,
And the fish of the sea..." (vss 6ff).

Here's the confession, congregation, that the Lord has made the human race master over God's handiwork. All things

are put under man's feet, including the animals, the birds, the fish, indeed, all things in all creation. God has given it all to man.

Yet it's not so that God has given all things to everybody, as if God encourages some sort of communist system where there is no private property. Rather, God has given *some* things to *each* person. Take, for example, Israel in the Promised Land. God did not just give to all the people the whole land, and that's it; no, He gave to *each* Israelite his *own* acreage. Yet the acreage God gave did not become the property of the individual, so that he could do with it what he wanted. God gave the land to the people, but made it plain to Israel that the land ultimately *remained His*. He said, for example, in Lev 25:23: "The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine" (cf II Chron 7:20).

When we speak of ownership, then, congregation, we have to speak of two aspects. The first is that all the world belongs to God, including the shoes on our feet, the vehicles in the car park, the beds in our homes, and the contents of our bank accounts. The second aspect is that the supreme Owner of all has given these shoes, these vehicles, beds, money to certain persons. Those two aspects together means that before God we are not owners of our property, but are rather *stewards* of property that belongs to God, property that He has *entrusted* to us. I realize that the word 'steward' is not used commonly in our society anymore. But I use it this afternoon on purpose, because the word is found in the Bible to give expression to a notion fundamental to the Biblical teaching on property, and that is that *we are responsible* for property *belonging to another*. More, since we are responsible for property belonging to another, we have to *give account to the Owner* of what we have done with His possessions. Those soccer boots, that petrol, that cheque: we need to answer the question of whether we used it in a manner pleasing to its Owner, pleasing to the God of gods and King of kings.

That brings us to our second point:

2. *How God wants us to use His property*

God, I said earlier, has given certain things to each person. Normally He gives parts of His possessions to us through our diligent work, our wheeling and dealing. So He grants that the one becomes wealthy, while the other is not.

We need to understand first that it is not wrong to be wealthy. Job, for example, was a wealthy man, and so was Abraham. In fact, even after Job lost everything, God so blessed him that he became a very wealthy man again. That persons today are wealthy is quite in keeping with God's revealed will.

A different matter, though, is whether one *wants* to be wealthy, pursues wealth as a goal. Is it good to sweat and scheme in order to achieve the goal of having a luxurious house, the latest car? On that point, congregation, the picture the Bible gives is: No, the Lord is not pleased with the *pursuit* of wealth. I think of the words of Agur in Prov 30. He says to God,

"Give me neither poverty nor riches—
Feed me with the food allotted to me;
Lest I be full and deny You,
And say, "Who is the Lord?"
Or lest I be poor and steal,
And profane the name of my God" (vss 8f).

Notice Agur's argument: poverty would prompt him to steal and therefore profane God's name, and we can understand that. But riches, he adds, give equal temptation. To be full, rich, can lead to denying God, thinking I don't need God. Let us be honest with ourselves, beloved. We confess in Lord's Day 23 that though we are for Christ's sake righteous before God, we are "still inclined to all evil." Then I read in I Tim 6: "those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare" (vs 9). That is, there is something about money and riches that forms a huge temptation, a snare for us, and it's a temptation we haven't got the wherewithal to resist – simply because we are "still inclined to all evil." It's in us to love that money, and that's why the apostle adds, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" (vs 10). Here the Lord gives us a warning; much as we find wealth attractive, our inclination to sin must make us wary of pursuing wealth.

In fact, the Biblical picture goes just the other way. Instead of looking to accumulate possessions, the Bible applauds sharing, being generous, even giving possessions away. In the course of his conversations with his friends, Job reflected on how things were before his afflictions. He says,

" I delivered the poor who cried out,
The fatherless and the one who had no helper....
And I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy....
I was eyes to the blind,
And I was feet to the lame.
I was a father to the poor" (29:12ff; cf 31:16ff).

That's to say: wealthy Job did not keep his riches to himself, but readily and generously *gave* to those around him who needed some assistance. What Job did as an individual, David expands into a truism for all people. Ps 37:

"The wicked borrows and does not repay,
But the righteous shows mercy and gives" (vs 21).

Notice his formulation: "the righteous ... gives," and that means nothing else than that righteous people in general, all who are righteous before God, make it their business to give. Ps 112 also casts the matter into very general terms; the wealthy person who fears the Lord "is gracious, and full of compassion, and ... deals graciously and lends" (vs 4f). In fact, this was the command that the Lord gave His people at Mt Sinai. This nation of redeemed slaves had to *share* readily, cheerfully, with the poorer in their midst. They were not to live as islands to themselves, hogging for themselves whatever their crops may produce, but –like Boaz- had to give cheerfully to those who had little.

In the days of our Lord Jesus Christ this instruction from the Old Testament was worked out in very concrete applications. Two examples. Zacchaeus the "chief tax collector" had managed to collect wealth; Luke says he was "rich" (19:2). But the day came when that little man received salvation in Jesus Christ (19:9). Zacchaeus' response? "Look, Lord," he said, "I give half of my goods to the poor." Why, beloved? Why would Zacchaeus *now* intend to give half his wealth away?

A second example. The book of Acts tells us what mindset characterized those who were filled with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. I read, "Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need" (Acts 2:44f). Some time later we read, "all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold, and laid them at the apostles' feet" (4:34f). Why, congregation? These people had been working for years, and slowly but surely had accumulated adequate to buy a block of land, then to build house, then a second. And now, quite suddenly, they're willing to slap a For Sale sign on their extra property, and then don't bring the proceeds of the sale to some investment agency; no, they *give it away*, bring it to the apostles for distribution. *Why?! And why now?*

The answer lies in the words of the apostle to the Corinthians. It's not that the Corinthian Christians were rich. But there was a need in far-off Jerusalem. So Paul seeks to encourage the Corinthians to give for the benefit of their brethren far away. How does he encourage them to give? No, he doesn't give a command. He says in vs 8: "I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your *love* by the diligence of others." Love: it's for the Christian to reflect the love that God has shown to him. And what love has God shown to the Corinthians? Vs 9:

"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich."

That's love! Christ "was rich," says the apostle, and the reference is to glory which Christ had in heaven with the Father from all eternity; in God's presence He was "rich". But "He became poor", that is, He gave all that wealth and glory of heaven away, He emptied Himself to take a place on this sin-filled earth. And no, the place He took for Himself on this earth was not a royal palace, or a crib fit for a king; He was content to be wrapped in swaddling clothes and have a feeding trough for a bed. From riches to rags, literally! Yet even that wasn't all, for 33 years later He gave Himself to the agony and shame of the cross; He took the sins of the cursed upon Himself so that the curse we deserve might be poured out on Him. Rich He was in the presence of the Father, but poor He became in as much as

His Father cursed Him, rejected Him!

And why that self-emptying? Says Paul to the Corinthians, "that you through His poverty might become rich." Those Corinthians were by nature dead in sin, subject to the eternal wrath of God – talk about poor! But because of Christ's sacrifice these Corinthians became rich, infinitely rich; God made them children of God, heirs of God! So they'd be kings with the triumphant Christ, permitted to rule with Him over all creatures! Talk about moving from rags to riches! And it's all undeserved; it's a display of the *love* of God!

That *love*, congregation, is the argument Paul uses to encourage the Corinthian saints to *give*, give for the unknown poor in far-off Jerusalem. Their gratitude for what Christ has done for them should prompt them to follow Christ's example of love as much as they can. No, they can't give up their lives for the people of Jerusalem. But they can give up some of wealth, some of their comforts in order to help the other. It is simply the obvious, normal thing for the Christian to do.

There, beloved, you have the reason why Zacchaeus, when salvation came to his house, determined to give generously to the poor – even half of his property. There you also have the reason why the believers directly after Pentecost were willing to sell their extra property for the benefit of the poor. Though they may have been rich in earthly terms beforehand, now Zacchaeus and these Christians of Pentecost understood what true wealth was. To be forgiven of sins, to be children of God, to be heirs of life with the Creator of heaven and earth and His Son Jesus Christ: no material wealth in all the world comes anywhere near that, nor does any pleasure money can buy! Solomon could have his palaces, but Zacchaeus now realized that he was richer, much richer than Solomon's earthly possessions ever made him. Rose Porteus may have her mansion in Mosman Park, but the saints of God –whether those of Pentecost or those of today- are far, far richer than her earthly wealth can ever amount to! For all must stand one day before the judgment seat of God Most High, and everyone's hands shall be equally empty – no matter how loaded one was on earth. And when Christ comes back on the Last Day, everything on this earth will be burned up – including the biggest mansions and most fireproof safes of the world's richest people. Ultimately wealth is found only in the blood of Jesus Christ, and that's a wealth that never perishes.

Shall the saints of God, then, hoard money for themselves? Shall we insist on a second house, or a third? Sweat and plot to establish a big acreage? The saints of Pentecost understood: this will not do! The example of Job in giving freely to the poor, the description of David where he says that the righteous generously give it away, the injunction of Proverbs to "show mercy and give" – these became instructions for the saints of the New Testament church. No, Paul does not give a command to the Corinthians to give this much or that. But the example of the Lord Jesus, how He gave up everything so that the dead-in-sin may have life, provided the model to follow. The Corinthians would show their love for God by their willingness to give, to give liberally.

Paul gave no command. But James is moved by the Holy Spirit to write this: "Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble" (1:27). We realize readily enough that James' point is not that the godly are to visit the widow and orphan for a cup of coffee and social chat, and nothing more. He speaks about visiting "in their trouble," and his point is surely that believers show their love for God by *helping* the widow and orphan, supplying them whatever they need according to the means available. *Giving* to the widow and orphan, to the poor and hungry is the command of the Lord. It was His command in the Old Testament, and so it's the example of our Lord and Savior in the New Testament.

Give all this material, brothers and sisters, we can understand why our Catechism is formulated as it is. We summarize Scripture to teach in the eighth commandment that "I must promote my neighbor's good wherever I can and may, deal with him as I would have others deal with me, and work faithfully so that I may be able to give to those in need." Sharing, generous giving: that's the example of Christ on Calvary; He gave up the riches of heaven for the poverty of Calvary so that we might be rich. Keeping things for myself, hoarding up treasures for my own comfort: that is transgression against the eighth commandment, sin before God the Savior.

Can you, brothers and sisters, older and younger, think of truly poor people in the congregation, persons for whom you should give liberally? Frankly, the Lord blesses us all abundantly so that none of us is without bread, none of us without shelter. What about in Perth; can you think of persons around us who are so destitute that we need to give

abundantly for them? We know: there may be the odd address, but in the big scheme of things, no one in our city is really poor, starving.

But the picture is different when we cast our eye overseas. The world has become a village, the poor pictured in the media have become our neighbors. And they're there by the millions upon millions, adults and children who haven't had a decent meal in days, possibly weeks, even months. Meanwhile, our western society is heavily materialistic. In connection with the September 11 attack I read somewhere that one of the causes for hatred against the western world is its greediness; the western world strips forests and denudes countries of mineral wealth simply to maintain our standard of living – and meanwhile we return little to these third world countries. I cannot judge the matter conclusively, but I can accept that there may be more than a spot of truth in the charge.

What shall we do, then, with the extra \$50 in our pocket? Pour it into the car and burn a tank of petrol for the sake of cruising? Buy another shirt because it looks nice? Or might that actually be "abuse and squandering" of God's gifts? Might it be the Lord's will that we –who by international standards are rich, very rich- might it be the Lord's will that we give not to the neighbor in Australia (who's virtually as well off as we are), but give instead to the neighbor in Africa or Afghanistan? As we confess in our Lord's Day that the Lord "forbids all greed and all abuse or squandering of His gifts", need we conclude that God would have us drop our standard of living, instead of seeking to raise it?

Our Lord was rich in heaven with the glory of the Father. He gave it away, in order that we might be rich. So there is forgiveness of our sins, sins also against the eighth commandment. The Christ who has returned to heaven has given us His Holy Spirit to guide us into all the truth, to guide us also in the application of the eighth commandment in our modern world. The Spirit has given us His Word as a lamp for our feet. And the Word sets before us the command to give, to share, and to do so generously.

"Blessed are the merciful," our Lord said, "for they shall obtain mercy" (Mt 5:7). Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 43 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 9 December 2001.

" THE GOD OF TRUTH INSTRUCTS HIS PEOPLE TO SPEAK THE TRUTH."

Text:

Lord's Day 43

112. Q. What is required in the ninth commandment?

A. I must not give false testimony against anyone, twist no one's words, not gossip or slander, nor condemn or join in condemning anyone rashly and unheard.[1] Rather, I must avoid all lying and deceit as the devil's own works, under penalty of God's heavy wrath.[2] In court and everywhere else, I must love the truth,[3] speak and confess it honestly, and do what I can to defend and promote my neighbour's honour and reputation.[4]

[1] Ps. 15; Prov. 19:5, 9; 21:28; Matt. 7:1; Luke 6:37; Rom. 1:28-32. [2] Lev. 19:11, 12; Prov. 12:22; 13:5; John 8:44; Rev. 21:8. [3] I Cor. 13:6; Eph. 4:25. [4] I Pet. 3:8, 9; 4:8.

Scripture Reading:

Ephesians 4:17-5:2

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 12:1,2,3

Psalm 63:4 (Nicene Creed)

Psalm 120:1

Psalm 52:1,2,3

Psalm 119:17,19

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The element I want to focus on this afternoon is specifically the second sentence of our Lord's Day: "I must avoid all lying and deceit as the devil's own works." I choose to lift out this particular aspect of the ninth commandment because of where things are at in our society. For our society –you know it well- thinks in terms of there being no God, thinks in terms of evolution, of people being glorified tadpoles, the intelligent human race just the product of chance. But now consider, beloved: if we're but far-developed tadpoles, on what grounds could lying really be wrong? Sure, you can say that lying is destructive, and you can say that society has decided to punish those who get caught lying, but that's something different than saying that lying is morally wrong. So lying has become increasingly common. Society today says: as long as you don't hurt others through your lying, nobody can really condemn you for telling a fib, or a whopper. That development puts pressure on the Christian to adopt the thought that lying isn't so bad after all – as long as the lie isn't too big, and we don't get caught.

The matter becomes worse when we realize that lying has consequences. When we think of lying, our thoughts go first of all to lying to the neighbor. But you know, congregation, once you get used to lying to the neighbor, you end up lying to yourself also, deceiving yourself, living in denial. And that in turn can lead to all manner of addictions – as our society experiences. In the end you lie to God also.

As it is, God the almighty has created us; we are not the product of evolution. In His care for His creatures He has also told us what is good for us, and what is not. Lying, He says, is bad for us. So He condemned all lying.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE GOD OF TRUTH INSTRUCTS HIS PEOPLE TO SPEAK THE TRUTH.

1. We are to be truthful to the neighbor.
2. We are to be truthful to the self.
3. We are to be truthful to God.

1. We are to be truthful to the neighbor.

Lying and deceit were not part of the world of Paradise. When God finished creating the world, He declared that His handiwork was "very good," and that included the human race. In fact, the Lord had fashioned people to be His "image". That's to say that Adam and Eve imaged what God was like, reflected His characteristics. And the Lord is clear as to who He is. To Moses He said that He was "the Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and *abounding in ... truth*" (Ex 34:6).

Precisely this identity of God as God of truth, brothers and sisters, is the source of so much comfort for God's people. We sat today at the Lord's table, where God extended to us through the hand of the minister the tokens that His body was broken for us and blood shed for us. But how can we be sure that God means what He says here? Think, beloved: suppose that in the Bible there was evidence that God had lied, even just once. Could we then count on it that His word to us in the sacrament today was really true? We understand: if God is not a God of truth, if His every word is not trustworthy, we'd have no assurance that our sins of this past week are really washed away. What makes the Lord's Supper celebration today so comforting is God's revelation of Himself as the God of *truth*. He does not lie, and so we can take Him *at His word*.

God, then, is characterized by truth, and He made the human race in His image, able to image His truthfulness perfectly. Where, then, does lying come from?

The Scriptures would have us know that lying comes from the devil. Genesis 3 relates that the serpent told the woman that God had it all wrong when God said that eating from that one tree would result in death. That's wrong, said the serpent, "for God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (vs 5). That was blatantly a lie, worse, it was making *the God of truth* out to be a liar. How it was possible for sinless Eve to fall for Satan's lie is more than I can comprehend, but that's what God says happened, and so we accept it for fact. The result is that lying and deceit have received a place in the nature of every human being. The psalmist even says that people "go astray as soon as they are born, speaking lies" (Ps 58:3; cf Rom 3:10ff).

Lying, I said, comes from the devil. It's important that we have this clear in our minds. Jesus was once in a conversation with the Jews, and He told them that "You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do." What sort of desires does this 'father' have? Jesus continued, "He was murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it" (Jn 8:44). Jesus' point is clear: lying comes from the devil. So Peter, when Ananias came to him with proceeds from the sale of his house, said to him, "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself?" (Acts 5:3). Notice: Peter connects lying to Satan. Yet was Ananias' lie such a whopper? Not at all. He's sold his land for, say, \$100,000, then brought \$95,000 to the apostles with the statement that this was the money he got for his land. Was he wrong in keeping \$5,000 for himself? No, that wasn't wrong at all, Peter says in the following verse. The wrong lay simply in the fact that Ananias said that he donated the whole proceeds, while in fact he donated 95%. *We* say: who would argue on the 5%; you can't make an issue out of everything! But Peter says, "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie?"

The point is this, brothers and sisters. We call ourselves children of God, and so we are – children of God by covenant, children of God through faith. But what, now, if we give ourselves to lying? What if we, in the words of our Lord's Day, "give false testimony against" someone? What if we twist someone's words so that we make someone out to have said something different from what he actually said? What if we gossip or slander, pass on material about a person that we know to be not quite factual, or is damaging to his honor or reputation? Then, beloved, *we have let Satan have a place in our heart!* I know: to say it this way sounds enormously overdone. But Scriptures do not permit

any other way of looking at the matter. I drew your attention already to Gen 3, where the Lord tells us how lying came into the world. I drew your attention to Jn 8, where Jesus tells the Jews that lying is of the devil. I reminded you of Acts 5, where Peter tells Ananias that Satan filled his heart to make him lie. We also read together Eph 4, where the apostle contrasts the conduct of the Gentiles and the conduct of the regenerated. The Ephesian saints, he says, have put off the old nature that gave itself to deceitful lusts, and have put on a new nature "which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness" (vs 24). And what's the *very first consequence* flowing from this change that the apostle lists? Indeed, beloved, it's the subject of lying! Vs 25: "Therefore, putting away lying, 'Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor.'" The apostle is emphatic: the people redeemed from Satan's power may no longer lie. They may no longer lie since lying comes from the devil. It's because of all this material that the church in Lord's Day 43 says that "I must avoid all lying and deceit *as the devil's own works*." Do I say it too strong, then, when I say that when we lie we have let Satan have a place in our heart? That, beloved, is not too strong! That is how the Bible speaks.

That reality, congregation, gives so much reason for self-examination. Have you, brothers, lied this past week to your wife, lied about why you were late home from work, or lied about the size of your pay packet this week? Have you, sisters, lied to your husband about how you spent your money this week, or what you did with your time? Have you, young people, lied to your parents about where you were Friday night? I ask the question because by lying we gave room in our hearts to the devil. Yet that is precisely what Paul tells us in Eph 4 *not* to do. Vs 27: "nor give place to the devil." The world around us minimizes the evils of lying, sees the evil of it only in its consequences; if you can get away with it, good for you. But the Lord tells us something different in His word. What makes the lie so evil is not first of all its consequences (whether you can get away with it), but its *source*. Lying has its source with the devil, and God would not have His children associated with His archenemy. Christ came to defeat Satan, and He has defeated him too. Why, then, should we give place to the devil in our hearts?!

Now we also understand why the Lord reacts so vehemently to lying. Through Solomon God declared that "lying lips are an abomination to the Lord" (Prov 12:22). In fact, says Solomon, "he who speaks lies shall perish" (19:9). Recall what happened to Ananias and Sapphira. Liars will have no place on the New Earth. Rev 21: "the cowardly, unbelieving, abominable..., idolaters, and all liars shall have their part in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (vs 8).

So it's so imperative, brothers and sisters, that we repent of all lying. For the sake of our own salvation it is essential that we avoid lying, that we avoid giving false testimony about anyone, that we avoid twisting anyone's words, avoid gossip and slander like the plague. And where we're guilty, where we've permitted Satan a place in our heart so that we speak what is not true, it is essential that we acknowledge the wrong of it, *repent*. We sat at the table of the Lord today, ate the tokens of His forgiving grace, and the point is that there is forgiveness for *every* sin – including this sin that Scripture associates so directly with Satan. Let that be encouragement, brothers and sisters, that we fight the inclination to lie to our neighbor.

And let no one say that the fight against lying is too much for us. The Lord has given us His Holy Spirit so that we are *made able* to resist this sin, are *made able* to make progress in the struggle to speak the truth. We're not on our own! The struggle; the God of truth is present with us in His Holy Spirit – Immanuel!

We've drawn out in this first point where lying comes from, why God hates all lying. That can be applied directly to the neighbor, as our Lord's Day words it: "I must not give false testimony against anyone..., I must ... do what I can to defend and promote my neighbor's honor and reputation." But this material can be applied to the self also. That's our second point:

2. We are to be truthful to the self.

We don't readily think in terms of lying to oneself. Yet we do it. Allow me a very simple illustration to point up what I mean. The sign on the side of the road posts the speed limit as 90 kph. The road is smooth, the shoulders wide, visibility good, and there's not a car in sight. What do we do? We move the car along at 100, 110 kph. We're grateful there's no police around, for we know we'll have a fine to pay. But we quiet our conscience by telling ourselves that the speed limit includes a measure of personal responsibility, that is, this is a straight piece of road, and there's not a

soul in sight, and so it's perfectly OK to let 'er go. The thing is now: we let ourselves *believe* a piece of deception, and so we sin against the fifth commandment. Does the example ring a bell, brothers and sisters? We tell ourselves that speeding on this piece of road, in these conditions, is OK, and we silence the conscience by *believing the lie*.

Now, that may be a relatively innocent example. Here's another one. Statistics tell us that the big majority of young people in our society 'experiment with drugs' – as it's politely called. Drugs are easily available for those in the know, and there are Free Reformed youth too who use drugs. What happens now? You're at a party of a fellow youth-club member, and someone offers you a toke. Your conscience tells you: don't do it. But there's all those eyes looking at you, friends you'll see at club next week again.... So how do you silence your conscience so that you can justify that toke? You tell yourself: 'it's only once, and once won't hurt me, I won't do it again.' And all those eyes looking at you convince you to believe yourself. So you accept the offer.... But who are you kidding, beloved? You're kidding *yourself*. You can tell yourself whatever you want, but none of it does away with the fact that drug use is against the law of the land; taking a toke is sin against the fifth commandment – even if the police refuse to lay charges. But the matter is more sinister than that. For your conscience serves as a wall, a barrier, between yourself and sin. By rationalizing to yourself that this is only for once, and once won't hurt me, you've lowered that barrier. Then, by jumping the wall and doing the sin, you've shown yourself that it's all quite manageable; you can do it and even get away with it. And you can muffle the conscience that keeps trying to tell you that you sinned by repeating to yourself that, look, this was just once, and once can't hurt.... *You believe that lie*, and so you let that sin against the fifth commandment stay there without repenting of it. So it's no surprise that once you've given yourself to drugs once you're likely to accept a toke again, and again. And doing drugs becomes a habit, and the habit becomes an addiction.

No, today is not the place to elaborate on evils of addiction – whether it be to drugs or to alcohol or to smoking, etc. Suffice is simply to say that the Lord told us to have dominion over creation, and that means that no created thing is to have dominion over us. And addiction is that we permit created things to rule over us. But that's the topic for today; the point for today is rather that we *come to understand the dynamics* of how we give ourselves to sin – be it speeding or addiction to drugs, or whatever. So often it begins with *a lie to the self*, begins with the self believing the lie. But lying – whether it be to the neighbor or to the self – is not of God; lying is of the devil. When we permit ourselves to believe a lie we are doing precisely what the evil one wants – and the result will invariably be that we end up enslaved to some form of evil. More, when we permit ourselves to believe a lie we are *in fact* liars – and upon that must come God's judgment.

That is why it is necessary that we pause to reflect on whether we are in fact truthful with ourselves, or whether we, on the contrary, let ourselves believe a lie. The heavy drinker, for example, may soothe his conscience by telling himself that he can stop at any time. Can he really? Or has he let himself believe a lie? The person tardy in paying his church contributions can tell himself (for the so-manieth time) that I'll make my contribution next week. Really? Or is he letting himself believe a lie so that his conscience won't compel him to act straightaway? The person who passes on gossip tells herself that she's speaking in love and has the well-being of the church at stake, and so it's OK to pass on the latest. Really? Or is that just a pious way to get around the command of our Lord's Day to "do what I can to defend and promote my neighbor's honor and reputation"?

Lying is of the devil, brothers and sisters. We are not to lie to the neighbor, and if we do he may well catch us out. But we're not to lie to ourselves either, and if we do – who will catch us out? Even more than with the neighbor, it is our *individual responsibility* to examine ourselves that we do not permit ourselves to believe a lie – whether the lie be big or small, whether the consequence strikes us as big or small. Lying is of the devil, and children of God have been freed from the devil. Lying characterizes the old nature that's dominated by sin, and not the new nature dominated by the Holy Spirit. "Therefore, putting away lying, 'Let each one of you speak truth'" – also to the self.

Here is a task for parents with regards to their children. How can parents teach their children not to lie to themselves? To ask the question differently: how can parents short-circuit the process that can lead to addiction? True, no recipe is foolproof, if only because there are more factors involved than self-deception. But to the degree, beloved, that the ninth commandment plays a role in protecting the next generation from addictions, it is imperative that parents teach their children to speak the truth in all circumstances. Where children can get away with lying to the neighbor, they will inevitably see nothing wrong with lying to themselves. Here the instruction and discipline of the parents is essential. And equally essential is the *example* of the parents on the point. Children are perceptive, and will certainly realize

when parents give themselves to lies, be it in relation to the neighbor or in relation to the self.

We come finally to the third point:

3. We are to be truthful to God.

What do you think, beloved: as long as we believe a lie ourselves, will we come to God in repentance of the sin of speeding or the sin of drug use or of drinking or of not paying our contributions readily and cheerfully? The answer speaks for itself.

So it is, congregation, with all self-deception. As long as we live in denial, we can't see why we need to repent from the sins that follow from that self-deception. The result is that we chalk up a greater debt with God; we keep on speeding, keep on drinking, keep on abusing the other, etc, etc. That is why I say that we need to be truthful to God. Truthful not first of all in relation to the speeding or the drug use, etc, but truthful first of all in relation to our *believing our own lies*. And that's to say that we acknowledge our transgressions on the point in repentance, seek His forgiveness, and then implore His grace to get away from the slaveries resulting from the lies we've embraced in the first place.

And I say it again: God has poured out His Holy Spirit, and so we *can* fight against the urge to believe our own lies – Immanuel!

In the world around us lying is acceptable behavior – at least if you don't get caught. The Lord places lying within the realm of the devil. The gospel is that our Lord Jesus Christ has defeated the evil one, and paid for all the sins of God's own; it's the gospel the Lord impressed upon us at His table today. More, the Spirit renews God's own so that we can speak the truth.

In a world of deceit, it's for us –older and younger- to be different, to love no lie, to embrace only truth – be it with respect to the neighbor or to the self or to God. Today it's a struggle, but the Lord comes soon to judge the living and the dead. Then we'll be perfectly renewed, enabled fully to image our Creator and Redeemer again. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 44 Q&A 113 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 23 December 2001.

" GOD OUR FATHER WOULD HAVE US BE CONTENT . "

Text:

Lord's Day 44 Q&A 113

113. Q. What does the tenth commandment require of us?

A. That not even the slightest thought or desire contrary to any of God's commandments should ever arise in our heart. Rather, we should always hate all sin with all our heart, and delight in all righteousness.[1]

[1] Ps. 19:7-14; 139:23, 24; Rom. 7:7, 8.

Scripture Reading:

James 4:1-12

Colossians 3:1-17

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 149:1

Psalm 147:4

Hymn 48:2,3

Psalm 62:1,6,7

Psalm 131:1,2,3

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The central notion of the tenth word of God's covenant with us is the word 'covet'. The Greek Bible uses a certain word here that is translated in more ways into the English. Amongst the various English translations given to this Greek word are terms as 'covet' or 'desire' or even 'lust'. I mention this because I want to define from the outset, which sin the Lord addresses in the tenth commandment. Though the English word 'lust' has a different flavor to it than the word 'covet', and the word 'desire' has a somewhat different flavor again, in the Greek it's all the same word, and this is what God condemns in the tenth commandment. Covet, desire, lust –or, in the plain English of today- 'I want': that's what God condemns in the tenth word of His covenant with us.

'I want.' The phrase characterizes today's western society. Ever since the 1960's western society has become very self-centered, egotistical; it has a very bad case of the 'I-wantsies'. The most important person is the self, and it's almost seen to be your right to have your desires fulfilled. To speak of coveting or lust as sin makes another giggle; how can you consider something to be sin when it comes as involuntarily to us as saliva at a BBQ?!

But the Lord has something to say on the matter, yes, and we hear His condemnation of the 'I-wantsies' every Sunday. Instead of His people thinking in terms of 'I want', God would have His people be content with what He in wisdom supplies. After all, He is our Father in Jesus Christ, and so supplies our needs perfectly.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

GOD OUR FATHER WOULD HAVE US BE CONTENT.

1. Coveting is not always wrong.
2. Coveting has bitter consequences.
3. Coveting needs to be overcome.

1. Coveting is not always wrong.

It needs to be said first of all, brothers and sisters, that not all wanting is wrong. Our Lord Jesus Christ once said to His disciples, "With fervent desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (Luke 22:15). The Greek uses here the same word as in the tenth commandment. Similarly, the apostle Paul writes to Timothy that "If a man desires the position of a bishop, he desires a good work" (I Tim 3:1). Again, the Greek uses the same word as in the tenth commandment.

That should not surprise us. Commandments 6,7,8 and 9 also are all short, and put a full stop after the verb. "You shall not murder," says the Lord, and that's an all-inclusive command prohibiting *all* murder. "You shall not commit adultery," says the Lord, and that's an all-inclusive command prohibiting *all* adultery; the Lord allows for no exceptions. "You shall not steal," the Lord continues, and again makes that an across-the-board, all-inclusive command; there is no place for stealing.

But with the tenth commandment the Lord does not place a full stop after the prohibition against coveting. Instead, the Lord adds details as to what we may not covet. The objects we may not covet revolve around the neighbor. That is, we may not covet the neighbor's wife, the neighbor's house, the neighbor's man-servant (we'd say today his cement mixer or his lawn mower), may not covet the neighbor's maid-servant (we'd say today her washing machine or bread maker), may not covet the neighbor's ox (that'd be his tractor) or his donkey (that'd be his car), or anything that is your neighbor's. The focus is the *neighbor*, that is, the things the Lord God has given to the neighbor. Here, then, is the material I touched upon with the eighth commandment: God owns everything, and He's given parts of His creation to certain persons. If He in His wisdom has given a certain house to my neighbor, it's not for me to protest that and lust after that house. If God in wisdom has given a certain woman to my neighbor, it's not for me to protest that and want her for myself. That's the tenth commandment: "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife. You shall not covet your neighbor's house...."

But, as I said before, that doesn't condemn every want. Jesus wanted, fervently, to eat that Passover. Young men may aspire to the office of elder. Young people (and not so young) may want a spouse.

What, then, is the difference between a healthy want and a sinful want? The difference, congregation, revolves around the whole *purpose* of our existence on this earth. God created us so that we might glorify Him. *A want that has the self in the center* is condemned in the tenth commandment. On the other hand, *a want that has God in the center* is pleasing to the Lord. He, after all, is God, and so all our being needs to revolve around Him. When a young man desires to be an office-bearer one day, that's a good thing – provided his motive is to serve the Lord, and not himself. When young people (and not so young) desire a spouse, that's a good thing – provided the motive is God-centered and not self-centered. To say it all in the words of our Lord's Day: in the tenth commandment the Lord tells us "that not even the slightest thought or desire contrary to any of *God's* commandments should ever arise in our heart." The focus needs always to be God. Anything else falls short of God's holy standard.

So: anything I want needs also to be what God wants. Where my wants are me-centered, I'm in the wrong and transgress the tenth commandment.

As it is, though, we live in a society filled with the 'I-wantsies'. Despite the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, we remain inclined to all evil. It's in us, then, to have big demands, to want this and to want that, to covet. So we do well to consider what the consequences of coveting might be; second point.

2. Coveting has bitter consequences.

The Bible is full of examples that spell out the devastating consequences of coveting. I read in Micah 2 the following:

"Woe to those who devise iniquity...."

They covet fields and take them by violence,
 Also houses, and seize them.
 So they oppress a man and his house,
 A man and his inheritance" (vss 1f).

That little passage details two consequences on coveting. The first is the hurt the covetous person inflicts on his brother. The covetous person lusts after the neighbor's house with as result that the neighbor is oppressed. But that's not the only result, for the Lord also pronounces His 'woe' on the man obsessed by the 'wants'. "Woe," says God, and we understand well that when God pronounces His woe, trouble will certainly follow for you!

As a concrete example, we may think here of Ahab. The king wanted Naboth's vineyard for a vegetable garden. But Naboth told Ahab that God did not give him liberty to sell his possession to another. Ahab's reaction? "He lay down on his bed, and turned away his face, and would eat no food" (I Kings 21:4). That is, he pouted, he sulked. He wanted that land so much that he couldn't handle the frustration of not getting it. See there the result of coveting; not getting what you want makes you a miserable person. I'll come back to that in a moment.

But sullenness was not the only result of Ahab's covetousness. Jezebel offered to organize the requisition of Naboth's property. And see: Ahab the king did not have the backbone to say No! For he wanted the property! The result is that Naboth ended up being stoned to death – the victim of Ahab's lust for the block of land.

David saw that woman bathing in the courtyard beside the palace. Result: he committed adultery. And then, to cover up his sin, he had the woman's husband killed. There's the result of coveting: somebody else suffers, suffers badly. But the penalty for David was equally severe. For the Lord's response through Nathan the prophet was this: "Now therefore, the sword shall never depart from your house..." (II Sam 12:10). So it happened. His son Amnon raped his sister Tamar – and David didn't have the wherewithal to deal with Amnon according to God's revealed law; son Absalom killed his brother Amnon – and David didn't have the wherewithal to deal with Amnon according to God's revealed law either; Absalom rebelled against David and sought the throne of Israel – and again David didn't have the backbone to demand his death. There's the result of David's lusting: trouble settled upon his family for years.

Jacob's sons were green with jealousy on account of the favored position their father gave to brother Joseph; they coveted his place in the family, wanted to be favorite themselves. Result: they sold Joseph to the Midianite traders, so that Joseph was doomed to a life of slavery. But the brothers did not get away Scot free; their deed ate at their conscience so badly for years that, when they had to go to Egypt to buy grain, they went with lead in their shoes.... And when father Jacob died, they begged Joseph not to deal with them according to what they deserved....

And no, brothers and sisters, that such consequences follow on the sin of the 'I-wantsies' is nothing new to us. We experience that the same thing happens today, happens in our own homes. What happens, girls, when you tell your Mom, "I want the same kind of shoes Susie has." I hope for you that your mother is wise enough to say No, but does your case of the wantsies not lead to you being sullen on account of Mom's wise refusal; you *wanted* the shoes so much that you couldn't handle the disappointment of a No? And what about you boys. You want things in your bedroom to be like this, you've got your mind set on it. But your brother says No. Result? There's a fight in the house. That's the result of the wantsies; coveting leads to friction.

Or consider the person who badly wants that particular promotion at work. He doesn't get it, and that disappointment eats at his sense of self-worth, takes away his pleasure in his work, with as result that he's miserable at home. Who suffers? Sure, he does himself. So does his employer, because he's not producing up to standard. And so does the family, because Dad has become bitter.

Or consider the girl who longs for marriage, but no one asks for her hand. Or the young man who married so eagerly, but within a year has a sick wife, bedridden for life.... Or the parents who tried so hard to cause their children to walk in the way of the Lord, but their Johnny tosses home and faith overboard.... The battles inside can be so fierce; the disappointment can turn into bitterness.... In truth, *coveting has bitter consequences*.

Is it not good, then, you ask, to long for marriage? Is it not good to want your children to walk in the way of the Lord? Most certainly, it is. But there are things that we people cannot control. Whether one receives a spouse is one of them.

Whether one retains a healthy spouse is another. Whether one's children will serve the Lord is a third. That these wants become so strong in our minds that they drive us can lead to bitterness when we find our wants denied. Here I come back to what I said earlier: our wants are not to be self-centered, but God-centered. To want a spouse for own comfort is not pleasing to the Lord. To want our children to serve the Lord so that we have a good reputation in the church community is not a good motive either. Though we live in a self-centered society, and are ourselves inclined to be self-centered, we need to be on our guard that our wants –though themselves honorable- are *God-centered*. On anything else His blessing does not lie, and we shall suffer the consequences of our coveting.

The passage we read from James 4 gives us a clear example of the consequences of coveting. The passage is addressed to Christians, sinners renewed by the Holy Spirit and formed into the church of God. Yet the apostle asks them in vs 1: "Where do wars and fights come from among you?" Point is: this congregation of Christian believers was obviously racked by internal feuding. How come? Vs 1: "do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members?" It's expanded in vs 2: "You lust and do not have." There, brothers and sisters, is the same word as is found in the tenth commandment, the word that can be translated as covet or desire or lust. The Lord has said that His people are not to covet, to lust anything that is your neighbor's, but that's exactly what the Christians James addresses were doing. They *wanted*. There were urges within them demanding satisfaction. Vs 1: there are "desires for pleasure that war in your members." Those inner desires insisted that things must go *my* way, and I can't handle it if things don't go my way. Yet because things don't go *my* way –what happens?- "you murder and covet and cannot obtain." No, not that we have to think of these Christians actually taking each other's lives. We confessed in Lord's Day 40, in relation to the 6th commandment, that when God forbids murder he forbids also the root of murder (such as envy, hatred and anger), and accounts these things as murder. That's what we need to think of here; these Christians ended up hating each other, and so becoming more jealous of each other, and in turn fighting each other. There's the consequence of coveting, of *wanting*. My way, or no way. And the peace that was supposed to characterize the church of Jesus Christ was far removed from the believers James addresses.

That's why James gets stuck into the congregation the way he does. Vs 4: "Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God?" To covet, to give in to a case of the I-wantsies is purely worldly behavior. The people of the world let their lives revolve around themselves, want things their way and can't handle it if things go differently. But not so the people of God. Hence the plea of vs 5: "Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, 'The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously?'" That is: don't you know that God wants His people completely, totally *for Himself*? He wants you *God-centered*, not self-centered? Then why the infighting? Is fighting-driven-by-lust not by definition self-centered? As in: it has to go *your* way? Give it up in repentance, says James, and humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord (vs 10). And instead of speaking evil of the brother, instead of fighting against him, recall that the one Judge of all will one day come, and *He* will judge all men.

Coveting, wanting what the Lord has given to another, insisting on satisfying our own wants: it arises so naturally, automatically in our sinful minds. It's like saliva; we find we have no control over it. That brings us to our third point:

3. Coveting needs to be overcome.

But how, we wonder, do you do that? To mind comes such practical possibilities as shunning advertisements, making a point of steering clear of the 'wantsies' of our society. And yes, that can help. But let us be honest, beloved, it doesn't solve the problem altogether. For our wants are not just material things. Wants can also reflect that one desires to be on top of the ladder; recall the boys fighting about how to organize their bedroom. What hinders the one from giving in to the other is his pride; neither can stomach being less than the other. How, then, can we fight coveting, lusting the other's position in the family pecking order, desiring the other's popularity, coveting the other's brains?

Yes, beloved, the Lord shows us the way here. Consider the passage we read from Col 3. Paul tells the believers of Colosse that they were "raised with Christ." The reference is to Easter; when Christ arose from the dead people by nature dead in sin arose with Him to new life (vs 3f). We understand that this reality is true for God's children around the globe, all the time.

On the strength of that Easter reality, now, Paul gives the Colossians an instruction. He tells them in vs 1 to "seek". But he doesn't say that they have to "seek" wealth, or seek prestige, or seek to be on top of the pecking order. The

reality of Easter, says Paul, means that the Colossian saints are to "seek those things which are above." Why the things which are above? Because that's where Christ is, "sitting at the right hand of God." He repeats the point in vs 2: "Set your mind on" – what? The neighbor's house? His dish dryer? His standing in the congregation? None of it; "set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth."

That God-ward focus has a two-fold consequence. The first is listed in vs 5, the second in vs 12. The first consequence is that those raised with Christ are to "put to death your on-the-earth members." That is, the saints are to put to death their earth-centered drives. Some examples are listed at the end of the verse: "fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil-desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry." A second list appears in vs 8: "anger, malice, blasphemy, filthy language...." All these things speak of earth-centered attitudes, and that's not fitting for those who were raised with Christ to new life.

The second consequence, vs 12, is the other side of the coin. The saints of Colosse are to "put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another...." These are attitudes that come from heaven, and so are attitudes that ought to characterize those whose focus is in heaven. And we realize: where these attitudes are present, you don't have the jealousy that leads to covetousness, and you don't have the mindset either to focus on earthly possessions.

Paul mentions the same sort of thing to the Philippians. "Finally, brethren," he writes, "whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy – meditate on these things" (Phil 4:8). It's obvious to us: where we meditate on heavenly things, we haven't got time to get stuck on that shirt I always wanted, or gripe that my neighbor has a faster car, or that br so-and-so is a notch further up the ladder than I am. That heaven-centered focus leads to contentment in relation to the things of this life, and a keen desire to further the kingdom of God and His glory.

Precisely *that* is what God commands in this commandment. The opposite of coveting is *contentment*, like the opposite of being *self*-centered is being *God*-centered. And yes, when we are God-centered we can be content with what the Lord has given. For He's become our Father for Jesus' sake, and so made us His children. In His love for us, He gives us each day our daily bread. True, what He gives may not measure up to what *we* would prefer. But remember: we're but people, and sinful too, and so our perception of what we need is warped. Our heavenly Father has the bigger picture in mind –how His kingdom shall be promoted, and what is good for us in making that kingdom come- and He gives us all that He in wisdom knows we need. So it's for us to trust Him, and be content with what He supplies.

I realize well that this line of thought does not sit well with the mindset of our society, nor does it sit well with human nature. We want to be independent, have control of our own lives, see things go our ways. Here we need to dare to be different, deliberately different from the world in which we live. Instead of having the wants, we need to make a conscious effort to be content with what God gives.

"The Christian life is a great paradox," I read the other day. "Those who die to self find self. Those who die to their cravings will receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life (Lu 18:29f). If I crave happiness, I will receive misery. If I crave to be loved, I will receive rejection. If I crave significance, I will receive futility. If I crave control, I will receive chaos. If I crave reputation, I will receive humiliation. But if I long for God and His wisdom, I will receive God and His wisdom. Along the way, sooner or later, I will also receive happiness, love, meaning, order, and glory."

In truth: to avoid coveting, to resist the wantsies, is the way to happiness in the Lord. Amen.

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**Sermon on Lord's Day 44 Q&A 114-115 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman
held on Sunday afternoon, 30 December 2001.**

***" GOD USES STRICT PREACHING OF THE LAW TO URGE GROWTH IN HIS
PEOPLE ."***

Text:

Lord's Day 44 Q&A 114-115

114. Q. But can those converted to God keep these commandments perfectly?

A. No. In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience.[1] Nevertheless, with earnest purpose they do begin to live not only according to some but to all the commandments of God.[2]

[1] Eccles. 7:20; Rom. 7:14, 15; I Cor. 13:9; I John 1:8. [2] Ps. 1:1, 2; Rom. 7:22-25; Phil. 3:12-16.

115. Q. If in this life no one can keep the ten commandments perfectly, why does God have them preached so strictly?

A. First, that throughout our life we may more and more become aware of our sinful nature, and therefore seek more eagerly the forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ.[1] Second, that we may be zealous for good deeds and constantly pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, that He may more and more renew us after God's image, until after this life we reach the goal of perfection.[2]

[1] Ps. 32:5; Rom. 3:19-26; 7:7, 24, 25; I John 1:9. [2] I Cor. 9:24; Phil. 3:12-14; I John 3:1-3.

Scripture Reading:

Romans 7:7-25

Philippians 1:1-10

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 17:3,6

Hymn 29:1,2

Psalm 19:3,5

Psalm 119:35,36

Psalm 40:3 & Hymn 57:4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

In Q 115 our Catechism queries why God wants the Ten Commandments "preached so strictly." It's a question, I think, that lives in the hearts of each of us. In the course of this past year, we've heard the Ten Commandments read out to us some 52 times; week after week we were reminded not to do this and not to do that. More, in various sermons the holy will of our God was laid before us on this matter and that and that. In the last three months we've heard sermons on each of the Ten Commandments. As we listened to the law Sunday by Sunday, as we listened to these sermons throughout the year, there were times that we felt uncomfortable, felt guilty, felt spoken to; we squirmed on our seat. Then we wonder: is that really the way it should be? Why draw attention to our sins? Didn't Christ come to take sins away, so that the emphasis should be on His forgiving work? Shouldn't we *tone down* the preaching on the demands, on the law, so that we hear more *Gospel*?

Yes, we'd prefer to downplay the law, to emphasize the gospel; that's more agreeable to our human nature. Yet in Q 115, congregation, we implicitly confess that the Lord *wants* the Ten Commandments preached "strictly". So we want

to know *why*. That's the material I need to draw out with you this afternoon. Has the preaching this past year been too strict? Should the preaching next year be lighter?

In our Lord's Day, brothers and sisters, we answer these questions in the negative. No, the preaching has not been too strict. On the contrary. For God would make us grow in Him through the use of *admonitions*....

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

GOD USES STRICT PREACHING OF THE LAW TO URGE GROWTH IN HIS PEOPLE.

1. The context of the preaching of the law
2. The purpose of the preaching of the law
3. The goal of the preaching of the law

1. The context of the preaching of the law

In order to make clear the purpose for strict preaching of the law, I need first, brothers and sisters, to set before you the context in which this preaching occurs. We don't live in Paradise anymore, we don't live before Sinai either, nor before the first coming of Jesus Christ. Instead, in the broad picture of salvation history, we live between the moment of Christ's victory over Satan on Calvary and His return on the last day. That fact is critically important in understanding the need for the strict preaching of the law. To explain what I mean, I ask your attention for Afghanistan.

The Taliban regime controlled the biggest part of the country for the last five or so years. Countless of the Afghani people experienced the Taliban as oppressive. By order of the government, the men folk were not to shave their beards. The women were not to be seen in public; they had to hide themselves under their burkas. Children were not allowed to fly a kite; that was too frivolous. TVs and radios were banned as too worldly. Etc.

Under the assault of the American army, the Taliban regime collapsed; America has won the war, the Taliban signed for peace. You will recall the reaction of the Afghani people when their part of the country was delivered from their slavery to the Taliban. The media told us extensively how the people of Kabul responded when the Taliban was driven out of their town. Men got their beards shaved, women tossed aside their burkas, children flew their kites, TVs and radios were hauled out of the cupboards. The people were *free*, and they gave enthusiastic expression to that freedom.

We've followed the news since the deliverance of Kabul. America may have won the war, but that did not mean that peace is restored to Afghanistan. The news has told us how not every man in Kabul dared to shave his beard, and not every woman dared to lift her veil. That was because the people didn't trust each other; they knew some Taliban fighters weren't dinkum in their surrender; they'd simply gone underground to await a better day to impose their demands on the people again. The news told us too how various tribal chieftains have sought to claim their traditional part of the country, and how this has resulted in renewed fighting –or at least threats of renewed fighting- among various warlords. America has won the war, but there's a bigger challenge before the allies, and that is to *win the peace*. That is, America needs to ensure that a peace-loving central government is firmly established in Afghanistan; otherwise the Afghani people will quickly find themselves under the control of another regime as evil as the Taliban was. To win the war was relatively easy for America, but the harder task lies ahead, ie, to win the peace.

With this comparison in mind, brothers and sisters, I take you back to the history of salvation. When the Lord created the human race in Paradise, people lived in perfect obedience to the law of God. Then there came the fall into sin, with its rebellion and its evil. Instead of acknowledging God as our master, we acknowledged Satan as master, served him. But his rule was evil, oppressive. Not that that particularly bothered us, for we were dead in sin and therefore in no position to criticize his heavy hand.

True, God established His covenant of grace with Abraham and his seed. Within that covenant, He gave His law to His people so that they might know how to live before Him. It's the same law as characterized Paradise, be it that it's now given in a form that takes into account human sinfulness. God summarized into ten brief points how it was He wanted His people to live, and the ten came largely in pithy negatives: "You shall not...", "You shall not...."

But: obey these Ten Commandments God's Old Testament people could not. Their depravity remained a shackle, and Satan undefeated. So you find in Old Testament Bible history so much evidence of backsliding and apostasy. God's people-by-covenant were so inclined to serve their natural father the devil.

Then came Jesus Christ. Not only did He obey the law of God perfectly and atone for sin; on the cross He also defeated Satan. So John could see in the vision shown to him that the dragon and his angels were cast out of heaven; "that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world ... was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him" (Rev 12:8f). You see, beloved, here is victory for Jesus Christ! So the Lord God received Jesus into His heavenly presence, crowned Him with glory and honor, and gave Him a seat at His right hand as Lord of lords, and King of kings.

This glorious development could not remain a secret. So on Pentecost the ascended Lord of lords poured out His Holy Spirit. As soon as the Holy Spirit was poured out, the apostles began to speak to the people of the victory of Jesus Christ. Peter delivered a sermon, confronting the people of Jerusalem with their sin of murder (Acts 2:22f). Not only that; he tells them that Christ Jesus has arisen from the dead and is now King of kings. The people's reaction? "They were cut to the heart," says Acts 2. That is: they felt guilty, very guilty. "What shall we do?" they cried in their anguish. To which Peter responded with the instruction to repent and be baptized for the remission of sins. That's what happened; "about 3000 souls were added" to the number of the disciples.

We understand: by their faith in Jesus Christ these 3000 received a part in Christ's victory over sin and Satan. They experienced what Paul wrote elsewhere: they died with Christ to sin and arose with Him to a new life (cf Rom 6). So the old regime no longer had any control over them (Rom 6:14). Like the people of Kabul: once they heard that the Taliban was defeated, they got themselves a shave, tossed off their burkas, flew their kites – so also the new believers of Acts 2, when they were freed from the oppression of Satan's slavery, began to live with the attitudes that dominated Paradise. Listen to the conclusion of Acts 2:

"They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.... Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need" (Acts 2:42ff).

You see, here's the communion of saints as per the attitudes and conducts that God had ordained in Paradise! Here's no selfishness; here's rather an eager emptying of self –wallet included- to help the other. Christ has won the war, and so the people are freed from the slavery of Satan. And it shows up in Acts 2, as obviously as it appeared in Kabul after the defeat of the Taliban.

But the fruits of Christ's triumph in Acts 2, brothers and sisters, did not mean that every evidence of Satan's oppression was now gone. The people of Kabul did not all dare to shave or lift their veils; they knew there were Taliban-minded people around, ready to pounce on the bold as soon as the opportunity presented itself. And as long as the warlords kept fighting for their turf, peace would not be restored to the city. So it is too, congregation, in the victory of Christ on the cross. It is one thing for Christ to win the war. *Now He must also win the peace.* Christ won the war so that Satan was cast out of heaven. But when heaven rejoices on account of that triumph, heaven also utters this cry:

"Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time" (Rev 12:12).

On this earth the devil and his demons –though defeated- continue guerilla warfare, attacking the freed people of God in whatever hideous way hell can dream up. To make matters worse, those redeemed by Christ are vulnerable to Satan's attacks, for we remain inclined to all evil. It's a point that frustrates the apostle Paul so terribly that he cries out in Rom 7: "O wretched man that I am!" Though he died with Christ to sin and was raised with Christ to new life (Rom 6), though the Holy Spirit has made His home in him, yet Paul has not reached the goal of perfection; he can will what is right, he says in Rom 7, but he can't do it. It's a weakness Satan exploits to the full as he sets before the people of God this temptation and that in an effort to sabotage God's renewing work in His redeemed.

Here, brothers and sisters, is the context in which the preaching of the law occurs. The point in salvation history in which we live today is *after* the victory of Christ on the cross; Christ Jesus has *won the war* over sin and Satan. But Christ Jesus has not yet 'won the peace'. Today Satan roams this earth seeking who he may devour, today he continues his guerilla warfare, shooting here, laying a booby trap there, engaging in spiritual terrorism elsewhere. In that context the Lord God has been pleased to give the preaching of the law a fundamental role. For He would use that preaching of the law to encourage His people to live in a manner consistent with the victory Christ has obtained over the devil. That's our second point:

2. *The purpose of the preaching of the law.*

I mentioned Pentecost earlier, and how the believers of Acts 2 demonstrated fruits of repentance agreeing with God's law. That happy fruit was not something that Satan appreciated. In Acts 4 we read that Peter and John were arrested, forbidden to preach. There's Satan attack to silence the ambassadors of Christ. Make no mistake: how tempting it was for the apostles to cave in to this demand, for no one wants to be whipped. But the Lord granted no victory to Satan here; in the strength of the Lord the apostles continued preaching.

But that doesn't mean Satan quits. Acts 5 tells us of a new attack from the devil, this time using successfully the depravity remaining in the children of God. Ananias and Sapphira, people renewed by the Holy Spirit, lie to the Holy Spirit when they give their offering for the poor. Point is: though Christ has won the war, and though He has poured out His Holy Spirit to renew His people, yet the Lord has not swept Satan off this earth totally, nor has He renewed His people perfectly. That won't happen till Christ comes back. Today we live in the period when the peace of the last day is still on the horizon. As long as that last day has not come, "even the holiest have only a small begin of [the] obedience" God requires" – says the church in A 114. It matters not whether you think of Moses or Jeremiah or Paul or Ananias or Calvin or Schilder or your grandmother; each had only a small beginning of the obedience God desires. For the obedience God requires of His people in the New Testament dispensation is the *same perfection* He demanded of Adam and Eve in Paradise – a perfection they were able to produce.

Let this be clear to our minds, beloved. Given Christ's triumph over sin and Satan, God demands today perfect obedience to His law. Nothing less will do. But the combination of our abiding inclination to sin, plus Satan's continued guerilla warfare, renders us unable to produce the obedience God requires.

Here, now, is the purpose of the preaching of the law. God wants *growth* among His people, *growth* in obedience, in service to Him. To promote that growth, the Lord sends His servants to preach *more* than news of Christ's victory in the war; to promote that growth, the Lord sends His servants to preach also *how to live as a result of that victory*.

We read a passage from Phil 1. The apostle tells the saints of Philippi in vs 3 how thankful he is for the work of the Lord in their hearts. He recognizes –vs 6- that God has "begun a good work in you." That is, the "beginning of obedience" was found among the Philippians so that these people no longer lived as persons enslaved to Satan - if you will: not shaving their beards, not flying their kites, not showing their faces in public. But Paul immediately adds –vs 9- that he wants their love to "abound still more and more." That is, he wants growth amongst these saints of Philippi. God demands perfect obedience, the Philippians have a small beginning, now Paul wants growth; that small beginning has to become larger. Then certainly, Paul prays for that growth (vs 9). But he does more than pray; he also preaches. That is, he writes a letter to the church in Philippi exposing certain sins in the congregation and insisting on obedience to the norms of God in Christ. In chapter 2, for example, the apostle addresses selfishness in the congregation. He gives this command in vs 3: "let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself." Similarly in vs 14: "Do all things without complaining and disputing." Paul wants growth among the Philippians, and therefore exposes their sins and sets before the congregation the norm of God – they should learn to shave their beards, toss off their burkas, fly their kites.

This is precisely the point the church today confesses in Lord's Day 44. "Why does God have [the Ten Commandments] preached so strictly?" The first reason given in Lord's Day 44 is "that throughout our life we may more and more become aware of our sinful nature." We are not to think that we have somehow reached the level of obedience God requires of us. No, we need to *grow* in the service of the Lord who delivered us. The task of the preaching includes that our remaining shortcomings be pointed out so that we "*more and more* become aware of our

sinful nature."

Consider the Canons of Dort. Chapter III/IV, Art 16 had said that obedience to the Lord "begins to prevail." Then in Art 17 the church confesses the place and purpose of the preaching, and says that the preaching has a role not only in *working* faith, but also in maintaining that faith and *prompting growth* in the Lord's service. The second last sentence of the article reads like this:

"... grace is conferred through admonitions, and the more readily we do our duty, the more this favor of God, who works in us, usually manifests itself in its luster and the more directly His works proceed."

There you have the reason, beloved, why the preaching needs to be pointed, why the law must not only be read in church but also expounded in detail. As long as we think that the beginning of obedience that we produce is sufficient to keep God happy with us, we shall not grow in holiness and obedience. Why should we grow, if we've achieved God's standard already! Then you end up with complacent Christians, where the preaching serves simply to *confirm* a lifestyle to which the congregation has become accustomed.

But then you miss out also on the second reason the Catechism mentions for strict preaching of the law. The catechism insists that we need "more and more [to] become aware of our sinful nature" –why?– so that we "*seek more eagerly* the forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ." You see, nobody will repeat Paul's cry of desperation in Ron 7 unless he shares Paul's conviction that he falls far short of God's holy standard. And no one will share Paul's thankfulness for God's grace in Jesus Christ unless he knows himself a lost sinner. The complacent Christian may thank God for the forgiveness of those sins he committed in his wild days, but truly, he doesn't need Christ much for his daily life because that life measures up pretty respectfully to God's standard. It's the people who know that *today* they failed to meet God's standard, who know that *today* they displayed only a small part of the obedience that God requires – these are the people who *today* are excited for the forgiving work of the Savior.

Should the preaching of the law make a person feel guilty? Yes, beloved, yes!! We may be O so thankful for the fact that the Holy Spirit has worked the beginning of obedience in our lives; Christ has won the war, and so we're free! But, congregation, His work at this stage is *no more than a beginning!* Guerilla warfare is still a reality, and there is within us the inclination still to live under the oppression of the Taliban; we remain inclined to evil. So we do *not* measure up to God's standard yet, and that failure is *sin*. That's a reality we need to recognize so that we learn to treasure the more what God has done for us in Christ. Preaching that makes a congregation feel comfortable with the status quo fails to meet God's standard for preaching. Preaching must in its time move people to tears so that the members of the congregation echo Paul's cry of despair: "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom 7:24). That sort of despair drives people to Christ, because He alone can give forgiveness of those sins.

Then there's still the third purpose for the preaching of the law. Exactly because the law holds before us the standard God has set –He wants perfection, and not just the beginning of obedience– the child of God is continually instructed to *change* his behavior, to live more and more according to the perfect will of God. That is, the child of God is taught to "be renewed more and more after God's image, until after this life we reach the goal of perfection." There's our third point:

3. The goal of the preaching of the law

The strict preaching of the law is necessary because of the context in which we live. Christ has won the war, so Satan is defeated. But Christ is pleased to permit Satan to continue his attacks on Christ's people, and the means Christ is pleased to use to encourage growth among His own in the midst of Satan's attacks is the strict preaching of the law.

But see, beloved: the day comes when Satan will be swept off this earth, be cast into the bottomless pit, and with him every demon and every evildoer. Christ has won the war long ago, but permitted the enemy to continue his guerilla war against the redeemed. But that will end, end in a radical and total way; every person who remains sympathetic to the Taliban (to continue with our metaphor) will be cast out of the land, off the earth – to a degree America will never attain.

And not only that. For today our hearts remain imperfect, inclined to sin, and therefore open to the temptations of the abiding guerilla fighters. On the day of Christ's return those hearts will be renewed to perfection, so that not a single inclination to sin remains with us. Then every reservation we may have against shaving the beard and removing the burka and flying the kite will be gone forever, and we can enjoy to the full the freedom that God has obtained for us in Jesus Christ.

Therefore the law will on that day also no longer be preached as it is today, for we shall all live before God in perfect holiness – Paradise restored. As Adam and Eve did not need the admonitions of the law in Paradise, so we will not need the strict preaching of the law anymore on the new earth. Then the Christ who won the war on Calvary will also have won the peace in perfection.

We enter a new year. The strict preaching of the law will need to continue in this New Year, simply because the devil and his demons continue to attack, and we remain vulnerable to those attacks. We'll submit to the strict preaching of the law, because we want to grow in the service of the Lord, want to learn how to live in the freedom Christ has obtained for us. And we pray that Christ will come back in the course of this new year – and the era come when the law need no longer be preached at all.

Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 47 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 27 January 2002.

" IN THE FIRST PETITION, WE ASK FATHER TO USE EVEN CLOUDS AND KINGS TO MOVE MEN TO GLORIFY HIM. "

Text:

Lord's Day 47

122. Q. What is the first petition?

A. Hallowed be Thy Name. That is: Grant us first of all that we may rightly know Thee,[1] and sanctify, glorify, and praise Thee in all Thy works, in which shine forth Thy almighty power, wisdom, goodness, righteousness, mercy, and truth.[2] Grant us also that we may so direct our whole life-- our thoughts, words, and actions-- that Thy Name is not blasphemed because of us but always honoured and praised.[3]

[1] Jer. 9:23, 24; 31: 33, 34; Matt. 16:17; John 17:3. [2] Ex. 34:5-8; Ps. 145; Jer. 32:16-20; Luke 1:46-55, 68-75; Rom. 11: 33-36. [3] Ps. 115:1; Matt. 5:16.

Scripture Reading:

Leviticus 26:13-21

James 5:13-18

John 12:20-28

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 66:1,2

Hymn 4:1,2

Psalms 115:1,5

Hymn 10:1,3,8,9

Hymn 23:1,2,3

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

In your personal prayers, what is it that you normally pray about? I would not be far wrong, I think, if I were to say that in our speaking with God our thoughts tend to circle around people, be it ourselves or others. We ask the Lord to take care of family members, to be with the sick and the persecuted and the lonely and the straying and those confronted with special needs. We pray for strength to do our daily work, for wisdom to care for our children, pray also for the forgiveness of sins.

In itself, brothers and sisters, this is all good. We indeed do well to lay these concerns before our God. Jesus Himself commanded us to when He told us to pray for our daily bread and to pray for the forgiveness of our sins.

But the thing is, congregation, that *before* Jesus taught us to pray for our daily bread, He taught us *first* to pray about *God*. The first petition is this: "Hallowed be *Your* Name." So we echo Scripture in our Lord's Day like this: "Grant us *first of all* that we may rightly know You, and sanctify, glorify, and praise *You*...." That is: when Jesus taught us to pray, He told us that not we ourselves were to be central in our prayers; central was instead to be the Lord our God. As to the place that we ourselves are to have in our prayers, well, we'll come to that, the Lord willing with Lord's Day 50, on the fourth petition. Today we need to learn the first thing the Lord taught us to pray about, and that is the glory of our heavenly Father. So I summarize the sermon with this theme:

IN THE FIRST PETITION, WE ASK FATHER TO USE EVEN CLOUDS AND KINGS TO MOVE MEN TO GLORIFY HIM.

1. Why God does what He does.
2. How God's actions affect our prayers.

1. Why God does what He does

In our walk through Scriptures this afternoon, brothers and sisters, we shall discover that the first petition is exceedingly far-reaching in its impact, so far reaching in fact that God's children, when they pray this petition, actually ask God to change weather patterns and mobilize terrorists for the glory of His own Name. Precisely because this first petition is that far-reaching, shall we do well –before we begin our walk through Scriptures- to remind ourselves of whom it is that we pray to. We heard it last week: the God to whom we pray is none else than our heavenly Father. Yes, He has all power and might so as to control leave and blade, rain and drought, nuclear powers and terrorists, airplanes and bombs. But He's not a ruthless, a cold being unmoved by the plight of men. He has given up His only Son so that sinners might be His children. He now loves these children with a most tender and heartfelt compassion. In a word: we direct the first petition to our *Father*.

"Hallowed be Your Name," Jesus told us to pray. The words themselves mean simply this: we are instructed to ask God to make His glorious reputation more glorious, more unique than it already is. That is: in this petition we ask the Lord to work in such a way that all creation recognize the incomparable uniqueness of the Creator and so give Him the praise that is His due.

I said: give Him the praise that is His due. What is the praise that He wishes His creatures to give to Him?

God, three in One, had existed from all eternity. He alone was there, never lonely, never lacking anything, always sufficient in Himself, great beyond measure. It pleased this God to create a world. Why? For the sake of His own good pleasure. This God was infinitely great, and in the greatness of His wisdom fashioned a world that reflected something of His greatness and His glory. So it was that when the Lord laid the foundations of the earth, the angels broke out into songs of praise – I read in Job 38:6f. These angels, themselves just recently created, saw the power and wisdom of almighty God in the works of His hand, and so burst out in songs of praise for this God of glory.

Adam and Eve also, themselves created by God, marveled day by day at the glory of God as reflected in His handiwork. If sinful David could one day look at the stars and state that "the heavens are telling the glory of God" (Ps 19), if David could behold God's creation and the place God had given to man in creation, and then exclaim His admiration of this God –"O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth!" (Ps 8)- how much more could Adam and Eve do so before the fall into sin when God came to them in the cool of the day! Angels and man, yes, creation altogether, joined in jubilant praise of the God who had created such a marvelous universe as display of His great glory. And because of this praise from angels, animals and Adam was that first petition being answered right from the beginning already; the name, the exalted reputation of this wonderful God, was being made more glorious throughout creation by means of the songs His creatures sang to His glory.

Then came the fall into sin. With that fall death entered the world, creation itself became subject to decay (Rom 5,8). God's handiwork, which had reflected so wonderfully the glory of its Maker, was now marred, defaced, vandalized. As such, creation no longer reflected the greatness and perfect glory of the God who had initially made it. That's to say: *creation could not give to God any more the honor that was His due*. Nor could any creature upon the earth give that glory; all –especially man- were touched by sin, corrupted. So, with that fall into sin, *the first petition was frustrated!* And Satan with his demons could gloat over the success of their vandalism....

But if that is so, beloved, we understand too that the Lord God –worthy of all glory as He is- could not leave His creation so defaced by sin. For the sake of His own Name, the glory of His holy reputation, the Lord sought out our fallen parents from behind the shrubs of Paradise and proclaimed to them the redemption He promised to give in Jesus Christ. If Jesus could later state that the angels in heaven rejoice when one sinner repents (Lu 15:7,10), how must the angels of heaven have broken forth into songs of praise for God when He announced His gospel of redemption and

worked faith in the dead hearts of Adam and his wife! For this work of God showed forth His goodness and His mercy, it pointed up the righteousness and the truth of this God of glory!

In order to unfold His work of redemption, the Lord God chose a people for Himself. With that one people Israel, the Lord established His covenant, bound Himself by oath to that single nation. Because of the close relationship God established between Himself and Israel –recall what God said through Moses to Pharaoh: "Israel is My first-born son"- because of that close relationship was God's own reputation tied to Israel's conduct. Should Israel, after God gave them that deliverance from Egypt's house of bondage, now choose to serve other gods, *Israel would in effect make a mockery of God's redeeming work*, would in fact be saying that God is not someone special, is really in a category with the gods of Canaan, Egypt, the Philistine, and one can choose whom one will. So it was that God gave Israel laws, instructions that *obliged* Israel to be holy as God was holy, to be different from the nations around them because their God by covenant was so very different (cf Lev 19:2). More, exactly because God's reputation was so connected to Israel's conduct, did the Lord tell Israel not to offer their children to other gods, nor to swear falsely, swear by other gods, *lest the Lord's name be profaned* – He says in Lev 18:21; 19:12. To say it in the words of LD 47: all the commandments which God gave to direct Israel's whole life –including thoughts, words, and actions- were directed to that one purpose of having *His name honored and praised by His people*, and not blasphemed.

But what now, brothers and sisters, if God's covenant people Israel should refuse to direct their whole life, including thoughts, words, and actions, in obedience to God's laws, should decline to live in such a way that God's name be always honored and praised, and never blasphemed? What would happen, beloved, is this: Israel would *provoke God's jealousy*. Already at Mt Sinai, where God made His covenant with this people, He told Israel that He would punish His children severely if they hardened themselves in disobedience. He promised sickness and famine, terror and war, pestilence and death, until this people would awaken from their stupor, would repent of their sins, would again direct their whole lives –including thoughts, words, and actions- in such a way that their Lord's glorious Name was not blasphemed but rather honored and praised. That's the material of Lev 26. And we understand why it was that God gave this promise; He –God of glory that He is- is insistent that *He receive the glory that is His due*.

As it turned out, Israel's conduct in years to come did not give to God the honor and praise His greatness deserved. Though Israel was God's people (and known to be such), Israel yet lived like the nations, lived like people who worshiped Baal, Ashteroth, Molech, etc. So it was that God, in the days of the Judges, carried out the curses mentioned in Lev 26; He sent upon His people plagues of famine, of war, of terror. Why? So that His reputation might not be defiled among the nations of the earth, might instead be honored. God insisted that His people live according to His good commandments so that the peoples around Israel might marvel at the good laws God had given and join in songs of praise for this God (Dt 4:6ff).

To summarize so far: God made Israel His special people –why?- so that through them His wonderful name might be hallowed. The Lord gave Israel particular laws and insisted on obedience –why?- so that through their obedience His glorious name might be hallowed. The Lord chastised Israel when that people sinned, gave punishments to prompt repentance –why?- so that the glorious reputation of the God of glory might be exalted the more. In a word: *the whole manner of God's dealing with His people throughout the entire OT revolves around the theme of this first petition*. The angels of heaven and Israel on earth were expected to join together in praying that first petition, and God answered that prayer for the hallowing of His holy Name by moving if necessary even clouds and kings to urge Israel to live their whole life to the glory and praise of God Most High. Famine, war: such chastisements upon His covenant people were ultimately motivated by God's divine desire to have His children give Him the honor that was His holy due.

That brings us to our second point:

2. How God's actions affect our prayers

For we understand, brothers and sisters: if all God does revolves around God and His glory, it is for us too to ensure that our whole life –including thoughts, words, and actions- is to revolve around God and His glory. Here is shattered any thought we might have of living for ourselves, of looking after our own comfort, pursuing our own reputation. It is the instruction of our heavenly Father that we pray for *His name* to be hallowed, but surely we cannot pray this petition while at the same time the goal of our lives, the motivation of our actions, revolves around ourselves. To pray

this first petition one must deny the self, set oneself on the back burner in favor of God and His glory. This petition compels us to come to grips with *why we exist*, it directs us to take our place *under* the Creator who made all things for His own pleasure. One cannot pray as Jesus instructed unless and until one confesses with heart and soul that God is **God**, that life revolves around Him, that I exist for reasons outside myself. So this petition sounds the death-knell for the selfishness and egoism of our day; this petition allows no room for me to focus on me and my comforts. Here is the principle of I Cor 10: "Therefore, whether you eat or drink, of whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (vs 31).

It will be good to place this instruction from God into practical perspective. I draw your attention first to Elijah, then to Jesus.

The prophet Elijah, writes James, was "a man with a nature like ours" (5:17). He wasn't different than you or I, wasn't a better person, more pious, etc. I read: "he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months." Why, brothers and sisters, could Elijah 'achieve' this 'success' with his prayers? Could you perhaps do the same? The answer to that is Yes, you can do the same. In fact, in principle we *do* the same.

To elaborate. Back at Mt Sinai already, God had told His people-by-covenant that they were to direct their whole lives in such a way that His Name was not blasphemed because of them but rather honored and praised always. God added that if His children would refuse to hallow God's name by their conduct, He would send plagues of famine, war, terror, sickness – Lev 26. In fact, God literally says this to Israel:

"...I will make your heavens like iron and your earth like bronze; And your strength shall be spent in vain, for your land shall not yield its produce, nor shall the trees of the land yield their fruit" (Lev 26:19).

We're to note that this promise is voiced not on first time disobedience, but rather on recurring offences, stubborn hardness.

What now was the situation like in the days of Elijah? King Ahab officially removed the Lord from being Israel's God, and officially replaced the Lord with Baal. This people of Israel, God's people, this people who was expected to be different from the nations because their God was so unique in His power and glory, now acted officially like the other nations. Here, then, was not glory for God; here was rather blasphemy!

Elijah knows that first petition, knows that all life must revolve around God and His glory. What, then, does the prophet do? He does nothing else, beloved, then remind God in prayer of His own promises of long ago: 'Lord, you said in Lev 26 that if Your children would not direct their whole lives to Your glory, You would shut the heavens, seal the clouds, grant no rain. Lord, Ahab –and Israel with him- have crassly ignored You, replaced You with another god; Lord, "hallowed be Your Name!" Act, O God, for Your own name's sake! Do what you have said You would do, shut the heavens, so that Israel might be brought to repentance, might realize that Baal is nothing and You alone are God on high.' He prays the first petition, and lo, he is answered; God moves even clouds so that Israel might be forced to give Him the glory that is His due. And No, receiving an answer on this prayer is not a surprise; God had promised an answer as this, yea, had commanded that prayers of this nature be made of Him (for His name was to be hallowed). Elijah, a man no different than you or I, prayed that first petition according to the will of God, and so could count on it that God would certainly hear His prayer. As Jesus also said: Ask and you shall receive; ask that God's Name be hallowed, and God will do it.

But notice, too, beloved, how much Elijah had to deny himself in his prayer. To ask that there be no rain: that would touch not just Israel, but Elijah himself; he too would be able to find no bread, no drink! And certainly the prophet would have had to consider that consequence before He prayed! But this is the will of God: "whoever loves father or mother or lands or houses or *self and one's health* more than Me is not worthy of Me" (cf Mt 10:37f). Elijah understood the purpose of his existence, and therefore looked away from himself, looked only to God and His glory – and prayed accordingly. Then notice, beloved, that Elijah never came up short as a result of his prayer; that God of all glory –Elijah's Father in Jesus Christ- supplied so very abundantly for His servant by the brook Kidron.

The second example comes from Jesus' prayer in Jn 12. Jesus is within a week of going to the cross (cf 12:1). He says this: "Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? [Shall I say]: 'Father, save Me from this hour, spare Me from the cross'?" (vs 27). Note, brothers and sisters, what Jesus asks. He considers whether He should look after His own

interests, His own safety first, or not. He's a true man, and He looked up against the horrors of the cross in the same way we would. "Shall I say: 'Lord, it's all too much, I can't stomach the coming horrors of Calvary; save Me from this hour'?" But Jesus knows: this is something He cannot say, may not say. He had just said in the preceding verses that "he who loves his [own] life loses it" (vs 25). If Jesus should now think of Himself first of all, and for the sake of His own skin refuse to proceed to the cross, He would well and truly lose His life, eternally. But He knows: life doesn't revolve around the self; life revolves around the God who created life for the sake of His own glory. So it is that Jesus determines what to do. Says He: 'No, I'll not pray for Myself; I shall instead pray that first petition: Father, glorify Your Name, hallowed be Thy Name' (vs 28). To that prayer heaven responded straightaway, responded with delight: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again" (vs 28). How God would glorify it again? By directing things in such a way that God's Son would indeed be triumphant on Calvary. Yes, here is encouragement for the Son of God as He struggled with the thought of having to deny Himself for the sake of God's glory; here Jesus was assured that "he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (vs 25), Jesus included.

Was it easy for the Lord to pray this prayer, to forget about Himself and focus His attention on the God of glory? Let's make no mistake, beloved; that was far from easy. But Jesus realized why He existed, realized that His chief end in life was not Himself, but God, and therefore went ahead on the road upon which His God had set Him.

And it's true: on the cross of Calvary He received no support, no strength from His heavenly Father in His battle against the hosts of hell. Elijah received support in His circumstances so that he lacked nothing – witness the food the ravens brought him, and the bread supplied by the widow of Zaphet. But not so Jesus. Jesus was made sin, rejected by God –why?– so that God's name might be hallowed! On the cross He paid for sin, defeated Satan, conquered sin and death, and so delivered God's creation from the blemish which *we* in Adam had placed over God's handiwork. Jesus fought on Calvary for the glory of God's great name, and the blessed result was that God's Name was not blasphemed because of Jesus, but rather honored and praised.

That, congregation, is why the Lord God exalted Jesus to the heavens, crowned His eternal Son with the glory due to God, gave Him a name above every name, a name so wonderful and renowned that at the mention of that name every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth would bow in recognition of God's glory (Phil 2:9ff). Yes, because of that triumph on Calvary, because Jesus so perfectly looked away from Himself and sought only the glory of God Most High, could the apostle John on Patmos see and hear the choirs of heaven sing their songs of praise to God:

"Holy, holy, holy,
Lord God Almighty,
Who was and is and is to come!" (Rev 4:8).

And other choirs join in the jubilation: .

"You are worthy, O Lord,
To receive glory and honor and power;
For You created all things,
And by Your will they exist and were created" (Rev 4:11).

You see: *in heaven that first petition is answered so perfectly!* For every creature in heaven above gives to God the glory that is His due!

But on the earth beneath it is not yet so. Within the church and outside the church –so John is told in the Revelation he saw– there is so very much that does not honor and praise God because of His works, but rather blasphemes His holy Name. Within the church, where God has so wonderfully displayed in Christ His almighty power, His wisdom, His goodness, His righteousness, His mercy, His truth, in that church there remains so very, very much evil. One need but look at our own lives to see it. And is there repentance for it all, and hence a genuine fight against sin? We need but look in our own hearts. And the world in which we live too embraces so very much evil; the selfishness of our society, the abortions and divorces and materialism, etc, does not hallow God's name, but instead dishonors the Creator and Sustainer of life.

And what is it now, brothers and sisters, that the Lord has pledged to do with those children of His who break His

covenant, who refuse to be different from the world around, who decline to give to God the glory that is His wonderful due? What has God pledged to do to the unbelieving world? John on Patmos was told the answer so plainly in the Revelation he saw. Israel of old would receive plagues of famine, of war, of sickness, of terror; in the Book of Revelation the Lord of glory makes clear that His New Testament Israel shall receive –if God's glory is not first and foremost in our lives- shall receive plagues of a similar nature. Think of the plagues promised in the seven seals in Rev 6, the plagues of the seven trumpets in Rev 8 and 9, the plagues of the seven bowls in Rev 16. These plagues shall come –when?- as answer to that first petition! God *shall* be glorified, and if His children refuse to direct their whole life –including thoughts, words, and actions- to His glory, if those children instead give to Satan and his offspring the opportunity to mock God through us, the plagues shall come.

You see: *it is for these plagues –upon ourselves and all who blaspheme God- that we pray when we take that first petition on our lips!* When we ask God to hallow His Name, we urge Him to pour out His plagues on those –and that can include ourselves!- who refuse to live in a manner worthy of God's greatness. Who can explain in detail why the Lord permitted the terrorists to destroy those towers last September? But one aspect of the answer is certainly this, that God was answering the prayers of His people to hallow His own name – and so demonstrating the judgment that must come on sin and spelling out to a postmodern world that there is such a thing as evil. Who can explain in detail why the Lord permits things to happen in our personal lives as He does? One aspect of the answer is certainly this, that God is answering our prayers to hallow His name – in our personal lives, in our families, in the congregation, in our community, in our country. We may not be able to give exact links between our prayers and the things that happen, but we may know for certain that the Lord is busy bringing praise to Himself in all that happens – and that's precisely what we pray for in the first petition. Then it's not for us to busy our heads on *how* God answers our prayers in the first petition; it is for us instead to *believe* that He is answering our prayers, and so to keep praying earnestly, and then accepting in faith whatever God in wisdom puts on our path. We *believe*: He gathers praise for Himself. And that's what we want.

But we know ourselves to be sinful, and God's judgments severe.... Who then dares to pray this first petition?! Which sinner on the face of the earth dares to ask the Lord to hallow His name – a prayer that includes a request to God to pour forth His plagues upon the earth so that sinners repent of evil and acknowledge God to be the God He is? Ought we not rather to ask the hills to fall on us...?

Remember, beloved, the instruction the Lord gave His disciples before He taught them to pray the first petition. Said He: when you pray, say: "Our *Father* in heaven, Hallowed be Your Name." Father: we remember what the Lord had said about His being a Father. We remember how Elijah was wonderfully cared for, though a drought choked the land. We remember that Jesus was rejected by God, so that we might nevermore be forsaken by Him. We know: the God to whom we direct the first petition is *our Father*. And *that is why we dare to pray this first petition* – though praying it may cost us our houses and jobs, our peace and earthly security. We dare to pray it, because we believe that Father will glorify Himself by caring for us wonderfully, even when we're touched by cloudless skies, or afflicted by extremists who would drop their terror upon us. We dare to pray it, even if it means that we pray for plagues upon loved ones. We're sure: the God who made us His children through Jesus Christ will save us. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 48 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 17 February 2002.

" JESUS TEACHES US TO ASK THE LORD TO DESTROY EVERY WORK OF SATAN."

Text:

Lord's Day 48

123. Q. What is the second petition?

A. Thy kingdom come. That is: So rule us by Thy Word and Spirit that more and more we submit to Thee.[1] Preserve and increase Thy church.[2] Destroy the works of the devil, every power that raises itself against Thee, and every conspiracy against Thy holy Word.[3] Do all this until the fulness of Thy kingdom comes, wherein Thou shalt be all in all.[4]

[1] Ps. 119:5, 105; 143:10; Matt. 6:33. [2] Ps. 51:18; 122:6-9; Matt. 16:18; Acts 2:42-47. [3] Rom. 16:20; I John 3:8. [4] Rom. 8:22, 23; I Cor. 15:28; Rev. 22: 17, 20.

Scripture Reading:

Ezekiel 20:32-38

Psalms 137

Revelation 18:1-8

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 99:1,2

Psalms 31:12,13

Psalms 137:4

Psalms 139:11,12,13

Hymn 32:1,2,3

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The conclusion of Ps 137 –the last verse about the children- is gory to the extreme. We have difficulty imaging it: somebody throwing infants upon the rocks of Albany's Gap, and delighting in it, yea, being pronounced happy for doing it! There's something in it so very, very revolting to us.

There are people, brothers and sisters, who argue that the NT Church cannot sing and pray such words as this from the Psalms anymore. Ours –they say- is the dispensation of love, and surely there's no love in the last verse of Ps 137. Let's then write it off as the insensitive expression of a somewhat deranged OT figure, we're told; we of the NT are far more genteel, far more loving. For our part, congregation, we can feel for the argument of these people; these words from Ps 137 are surely not the kinds of things we like to pray.

Yet, brothers and sisters, it is the command of our Lord Jesus Christ that each of us pray the kind of thing mentioned in Ps 137. Jesus told us to pray the second petition, and what does the second petition mean? - "destroy the works of the devil," we say in our Catechism. Destroy: this petition asks for blood, for death! Ours the era of more gentleness, more love for others? No, says the Lord God, ours is an era of blood, of dashing little ones against the rocks! And the blood that's desired is not necessarily that of others!!

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

JESUS TEACHES US TO ASK THE LORD TO DESTROY EVERY WORK OF SATAN.

1. We are to ask it with respect to ourselves.
2. We are to ask it with respect to others.

1. We are to ask it with respect to ourselves.

Jesus taught us to pray "Your kingdom come." This petition has a background.

When God first created the world, all creation was His kingdom, His domain; all creation *acknowledged* God as King. That is true of heaven above (including its angels), true of the earth beneath, true also of the waters under the earth.

Sin entered the world; one angel with a crowd of followers rebelled against God. In heaven above, then, there were those in God's creation who did not acknowledge God's kingship. And it did not take long for that rebellion to spread even to the earth; on the earth beneath the human race joined Satan in rebellion against God, acknowledged not God as King but Satan.

This was a state-of-affairs which the Sovereign Creator of heaven and earth could not tolerate. He announced to the rebels of Paradise that He would work redemption, would deliver a people from bondage to Satan. That glorious announcement, however, came complete with a promise of bloodshed; the Lord speaks of enmity, a hatred between the seed of the woman (Eve) and the seed of the serpent (the devil) that will cause bruising –literally- crushing, and hence death.

It is this struggle-to-the-death between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent that has dominated history since the days of Paradise. God through the woman would send a Savior to earth in the person of His only Son. Satan knows that, and so has tried over the centuries to destroy the woman – and so make it impossible for her to bring forth the promised Savior. John on Patmos sees a vision wherein Satan tries to devour the Child as soon as the woman had brought him forth (Rev 12:4). You see: Satan wants blood.

But Satan is not alone in seeking blood. God Almighty fights also, seeking to crush the head of the devil. Terrible as the battle between God and Satan is, however, it's not evenly matched; from the start the victory was assured for God, for He was and remained –despite the rebellion from Satan and his followers- He was and remained sovereign Ruler of all His creation. So it was that God sent His Son into the world, with the instruction to go to the cross and there conquer the evil one. He went, but the Battle of Calvary would not at all be gentle; this would be a fight to death – *Satan's* death. Christ triumphed over the evil one, bound him, broke him; the head of the seed of the serpent was forever crushed. Make no mistake here, beloved: the battle on Calvary was a fight to the death, a fight that had to draw *blood*.

Before this Battle of Calvary, however, the Lord Jesus Christ gave to His disciples an instruction in prayer. They were, He said, to pray the second petition, pray "Your kingdom come." What this petition means? Jesus, brothers and sisters, instructed His disciples to *become involved* in the battle between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. Involved how? By using that greatest of weapons God has given to His people: *the weapon of prayer*.

How do we use that prayer? What's involved in the prayer we're to pray? Yes, in broad outlines we're to request the Lord to destroy Satan totally and finally, a prayer to make all creation acknowledge Christ's kingship and so give Him the glory that is His due – "Your kingdom come". And really, beloved, with that broad outline none of us have any problems. But what are the details involved here?

In LD 48 we confess the details. We confess in our Lord's Day that so ask God to make His kingdom come is in effect to ask God to "so rule us by Your Word and Spirit that more and more we submit to You." With that detail, beloved, the Catechism causes us to look at ourselves, causes us to pray that the Lord will destroy every work of Satan *within us*. Here the Catechism lays upon the lips of *each one of us* the prayer that God will make each of us *submit more and more to Him*. Implicit in this request is the acknowledgement that today I do not submit to God to the extent that I

should. As Paul says it: I can will what is right, but I cannot do it, and: "sin dwells in me" - Rom 7.

Given that situation –I do not acknowledge the Lord as King to the degree I should- what is it that I now pray? It's this: I ask God please to rule me by His Word and Spirit. Here is a request that God *dominate*, control me by means of His Scriptures and His Holy Spirit.

Again, this request sounds simple enough, not particularly harmful to us. Yet consider, beloved: what kind of a Word has God given us? That Bible is a two-edged sword! That Bible *cuts*, either by cutting sin out of our lives *or* by cutting life out of us through our hardening in sin. Either way it *cuts*. And cutting, we know, is always painful. Nor can any of us escape this cutting, for not one of us is without sin. Jesus told us to pray the second petition, to ask God to "rule us by Your Word and Spirit so that more and more we submit to You." With that prayer we all ask God to take the sword of His Word to us and cut into us so that we are compelled to submit to His rule. Here is no pussyfooting, beloved. Here we ask the Lord for sermons that expose our sins, that make us uncomfortable because of our sins, that drive us to repentance, to submission. Here we ask for elders to open God's Word with us in our homes and tell us straight to our face about the sins we've hidden into our lives. We ask for the brothers and sisters of the congregation to visit us, to discuss with us the wrong habits they see in us, to tell us in very clear and pointed terms where it is that we go wrong. We ask that our parents receive the insight to see through our attitudes, our habits so that we, young as we might be, might be corrected, might be made to bow to the authority of God the King. And in it all we pray that the Lord will work in us by His Holy Spirit so that we gladly accept whatever admonitions come our way, wholeheartedly submit to whatever it is that the Lord says through office bearers, congregation members, parents, whoever.

Consider the passage we read from Ezek 20. The people of Israel, that one nation of all the earth who knew that God was King on high, thought to be like the nations, like the peoples around them; in a word, they opted to ignore the reality of God's kingship. God's response was that He would, whether they want it or not, He *would* be King over them. What God would do to make Himself recognized as their King? He would, said He, enter into *judgment* with this people, judgment so that sins would be purged out from this people. Pleasant for Israel? Make no mistake, beloved; it would be anguish for the people when God would fulfill the promise of Ezek 20. Yet in the second petition it's exactly this that we ask God to do with us; in that second petition we ask God to *rule* us in such a way that we *submit*, by hook or by crook, submit to *Him* and to no one else.

That being the case, beloved, do you now *dare* to pray the Lord's prayer tonight? Do you really want the Lord God to *rule over* you? Do you really wish for Him to cause sermons to come from this pulpit that make you uncomfortable with the habits of your life? Do you really want the Lord to send office bearers to your home this year so that they might tell you frankly where things are at with you? Do you really wish for the Lord to work in you by His Holy Spirit so that your conscience bothers you? Yes, would you have God take His knife to you, as it were, to cut out from you whatever sins there remain? Yet that, beloved, is the second petition! And I tell you, if you don't really wish for God to rule you so totally, if you don't want the pain that comes with submission to God, *you have no place in the kingdom of God!* You want *His* kingdom to come, is it not? But then you certainly cannot continue to treasure sin in your own life; Christ is to be King in every corner of your life too! In the struggle between God and Satan, I am asked to choose whether it is God I serve or Satan. There is here no neutrality, no such thing as being undecided; "he who is not for Me is against Me," Jesus once said to His disciples (Mt 12:30). Well then, will you pray this petition, this prayer that God be acknowledged as King, acknowledged by you in all your life??

I move on to our second point: we ask God to destroy every work of Satan

2. *With respect to others.*

Here I draw your attention to Ps 137. The psalm is set in Babylon; the people of Israel have been exiled out of their homeland because of their sins, and are now seated with tears around the canals of their captors' land. They cried because the Babylonians teased the Israelites, demanded of them songs about Zion. The Babylonians knew full well that Zion was destroyed, and knew too that this awful fact bothered the Israelites. In other words: here was purposeful mocking of God's work of redemption. 'Come on, sing, you say your God is King on high, that He lives in Zion, that He will work salvation; sing us a song about it, your city is destroyed, your hopes shattered, but never mind, sing, sing of your stupid religion!'

It's in that context of derision against God that the statements at the end of the psalm have a place:

"O daughter of Babylon, who are to be destroyed,
Happy the one who repays you as you have served us!
Happy the one who takes and dashes
Your little ones against the rock!"

Here, congregation, is not a plea for the destruction of tormentors as such; here is rather a plea from God's children to destroy *Satan's children*, more, here is a plea to destroy every work of Satan that takes glory from God. The derision of the Babylonians: it was nothing else than ridicule of God, of the King of all the world. Yet that King must receive the recognition that is His due, all creation must bow before Him, and if the world doesn't want to do that, then that world must perish, be cast with Satan into the bottomless pit. When the Israelites in Babylon here pray that the offspring of Babylon be dashed against the rocks, they pray nothing else than that the children of Satan be destroyed. And what else, beloved, is this than the prayer of LD 48, the second petition?! "Your kingdom come": that is: "destroy the works of the devil, destroy every power that raises itself against You." It's this: destroy the taunting, the mocking of the Babylonians, destroy the Babylonians themselves, their children included, as long as they remain insistent upon blaspheming Your Name, as long as they refuse to recognize You as King, submit to Your rule.

Here, congregation, is the *antithesis* in all its strength, the reality of the fight between Satan and God. Here is no room for compromise, no room for gentle emotion, no room for love from God's children for any work of the devil. Here is room for hatred only, perfect hatred of those who conspire with hell against God and His sovereignty. Yes, it's God's command to love, to love even our enemies. But anything that smacks of Satan, any plan of action that breathes the air of hell, anybody who has sided with Satan against God is to be hated with a perfect hatred, a hatred as intense as the love we're to have for God. Yes, such is that hatred to be that we'll take the words of LD 48 upon our lips: O Lord, destroy, *destroy*.

Destroy what? What in our society is aligned against God? Certainly we can think of Godless attitudes, crass unbelief and mockery of God's word. But the Lord would have us pray not just for the destruction of attitudes and beliefs and power systems – things like the 'al-Qaeda network or the selfishness that produces abortions. We're asking God to destroy *hearts*, asking God to break the *people* who harden themselves in their disobedience to God. Ps 137 is about people, not about philosophies or actions.

And remember this promise, beloved: God *will* destroy. Recall the cry of the angel in Rev 18: "Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and has become a dwelling place of demons, a prison for every foul spirit..." (vs 2). It's of Babylon that the angel sings, to be sure. But in the Book of Revelation 'Babylon' is representative of the dominion of Satan. And that, *that*, says the angel is what has fallen; Satan's works, Satan's conspiracies, Satan's kingdom has collapsed, it's all been destroyed.

So what is it, brothers and sisters, that we are going to pray for? God has *promised* that Satan shall be destroyed; indeed, on Calvary Satan has already been destroyed essentially. More, the Savior has *commanded* us to pray that God's kingdom come. So we're left with this charge: *pray!* Pray that second petition of the Lord's Prayer, pray that every conspiracy against God, every effort of the devil to undermine God's kingship be undone, destroyed, pray that Satan and all his hosts –children included- be swept off God's earth into hell. For it pleases the Lord God to bring about the triumph He has promised over Satan *through the prayers of His children*.

But now a consequence follows, beloved, which brings us back to ourselves. The antithesis between God and Satan is radical, so radical that in our pursuit of glory for God we're to pray that Satan and his works be destroyed. That being so, it follows that we *cannot let ourselves be found to have any connection at all with anything of the devil*. Any work of the devil, any child of the devil, any conspiracy of the devil: we are to have nothing, nothing, to do with it. In the words of Jesus Christ in Rev 18: "Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues" (vs 4).

You see, beloved, if I am to pray for God's kingdom to come, if I am to pray that God be recognized as King and all His opponents be destroyed, and if in that circumstance I have befriended God's opponents, join somehow in the

works of the devil, then I pray for nothing less than *my own eternal destruction*. I cannot pray the second petition while I cooperate in any work of the devil; to do so is to pray myself into hell. So we are back at the first aspect of LD 48: "so rule us by Your Word and Spirit that more and more we submit to You." *That's* the punch of this petition: we implore God to cut all sin out of our personal lives, to do so forcibly if necessary, so that we may fight tooth and nail with God against the devil in the mother of all battles.

So I ask it again: do you dare to pray this second petition? In truth, if God were to answer our prayer according to the intent of this petition, things could get pretty uncomfortable for us, uncomfortable in the sense that sins would be cut out of ourselves, uncomfortable too in the sense that we pray others –even friends and relatives- into hell.

Do we dare to pray this second petition? We're put to the test. The test is this: *where is your allegiance?* Do you love God more than yourself, more than relatives and friends, more than this world? Dare you pray for God's divine knife in your own life, in the life of others? Recall Jesus' words: whoever loves lands or houses, father or sister, computer games or movies more than Me is not worthy of Me.

The battle between God and Satan rages on, in our lives, in our homes. But the victory, beloved, is sure. Already Christ has conquered on Calvary. Such is the power of the King-on-high that this God answers our prayers also; He can –more, He does- cause His sinful children to submit more and more to His Word and Spirit, does cut sin more and more out of the lives of His own. For He is preparing the bride for the return of her Lover....

So, once more: do we dare to pray this second petition? *Better:* do we dare *not* to pray this petition?! For the Lord our Savior has defeated sin and evil, and He comes again in glory. We don't to welcome the Savior with sin on our hands, and so we pray ardently: Father, destroy every work of the devil within us, yes, rule us day by day, moment by moment by Your Word and Spirit so that more and more we submit to You – and so be without spot and wrinkle for the day of the Bridegroom's return. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 49 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 24 February 2002.

" JESUS INSTRUCTS HIS DISCIPLES TO ASK GOD FOR STRENGTH TO OBEY HIS LAWS IN THEIR EVERY CIRCUMSTANCE."

Text:

Lord's Day 49

124. Q. What is the third petition?

A. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. That is: Grant that we and all men may deny our own will, and without any murmuring obey Thy will, for it alone is good.[1] Grant also that everyone may carry out the duties of his office and calling[2] as willingly and faithfully as the angels in heaven.[3]

[1] Matt. 7:21; 16:24-26; Luke 22:42; Rom. 12:1, 2; Tit. 2:11, 12. [2] I Cor. 7:17-24; Eph. 6:5-9. [3] Ps. 103:20, 21.

Scripture Reading:

Leviticus 13:1-23

Matthew 26:36-46

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 25:1,2

Psalms 86:4

Psalms 143:5,6

Psalms 27:4,5

Psalms 119:37,40 & Hymn 47:4

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

The disciples had observed Jesus praying. What they saw and heard prompted them to seek instruction from Jesus as to how they could speak with God in heaven. Jesus answered their request; He taught them how to pray. Jesus' instruction to His disciples benefits us; from Jesus answer we also learn how to speak with our covenant God.

Jesus' first instruction concerning prayer revolved around the matter of *Who* one spoke too; one speaks to *Father*. With God's identity as Father we are encouraged to pray boldly; God is interested in us, cares for us well.

Jesus next moved on to the *mind-set* that is to characterise prayer. In speaking with God one is not to be self-centred; one is instead to be God-centred – "hallowed be *Your* name." Further, one's concrete circumstances may not be forgotten as one speaks to God. Since life is war, the reality of that warfare is to feature in prayer – "Your kingdom come."

In the third petition Jesus comes to another mind-set, another central concept that is to characterise our speaking with God. This third mind-set, this third concept is this: the disciples, in their specific circumstances, are to ask God to show them what *He wants them to do* in those specific circumstances – "Your will be done."

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

JESUS INSTRUCTS HIS DISCIPLES TO ASK GOD FOR STRENGTH TO OBEY HIS LAWS IN THEIR

EVERY CIRCUMSTANCE.

1. God claims every area of life for Himself
2. My prayer must cover every area of life

1. God claims every area of life for Himself

"Your will be done," Jesus told His disciples to pray in the third petition. The only word that could give us some problem in this petition is the word 'will'. The question then is this: does the word 'will' refer to God's secret plan for our lives, contrived before the world began? Or does the word 'will' describe God's law, His commands for us?

It's to be straight in our minds, brothers and sisters, that with this petition we are not asking the Lord God that *God* please do what He thinks *He* should do; we're asking God rather that *we* do what He thinks *we* should do. The point of this petition is not that we ask God please to act according to His secret and sovereign plan; the point of this petition is rather that we ask God that *we* might be made to act according to His revealed commandments in the Bible. I make a point of saying this because one hears time and again a prayer in which we ask God for something, but then a disclaimer is added: "but, Lord, Your will be done". Then the sense is: this and this is what we would like, but God knows best and He's sovereign, and so we'll leave God to do with our thoughts what He wishes, and we'll submit to His wisdom: "Your will be done."

But this, congregation, is *not* the meaning of the prayer we're told to pray in the third petition. We're not asking that God please do what He thinks is right; we're rather asking about how *we* should react to things God does in our lives. I say this because of what I read in Dt 29:

"The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (vs 29).

God's secret plan for our lives is not our business; it's God's business. It is for us to involve ourselves with what God has *revealed*, and that's His law, His commands. With the third petition, Jesus told the twelve disciples around Him to focus on *God's law for them*; specifically, to ask God that their every action may be determined by God's will revealed in Holy Scripture. That's the third petition.

How did this petition touch the disciples in their circumstances? Were the disciples to understand Jesus' instruction to them in the third petition in this way that they were to ask God for strength that they might not steal, might not commit adultery, might not lie, etc? That is: were the disciples to understand Jesus' instruction here as a general prayer for general strength in the broad outlines of daily living?

To appreciate what Jesus teaches in the third petition, brothers and sisters, we need to understand that God's laws touched the disciples' lives in *every detail* of their existence. To draw out this point, I refer you to some passages from the book of Leviticus. Chapter 11 contains God's instruction to His people about animals they could eat and animals they could not eat. By God's ordinance, the cow was clean and therefore edible, but a horse was unclean and therefore could not be eaten. Mutton was OK, but pork was not (cf vss 1-8). The same was true when it came to fish: any fish that had fins or scales could be eaten; if it missed either fins or scales it could not be eaten (vss 9-12). And the Lord gave similar rules regarding birds (vss 13-19), insects (vss 20-23) and reptiles (vss 41-45). Through all these stipulations, the Lord sought to impress on His people that they were different, holy, set apart from the nations (Lev 20:22ff).

Now, we can discuss at length why God considered the one animal clean and the other unclean. It's more edifying for us, though, to consider the concrete implication of this list for Israel. There's food needed for tea, and so Mother sends the boys out fishing. The boys, however, could not bring home for tea whatever they caught; they first had to consider the will of the Lord, whether the Lord God wanted them to eat the fish they hooked. That is: the boys had to take Lev 11 with them to the creek, and ask themselves this question: what does the Lord want me to do with the fish on the line? So too when a guest arrived: Dad could not instruct his servant to kill yonder pig; it had to be that calf or that sheep. In other words: one first had to consider the will of the Lord; did God want me to roast this pig or that sheep? That was the faith God gave to His people by covenant; God's people had to ask *what God's will was for something*

so everyday as what to put on the table.

God's law reached into other areas of life. Look at Lev 11:33: any clay vessel in which they found a dead mouse or lizard or gecko they had to break; it was unclean. And remember: in those days they did not have the closed-in houses that we've got, and didn't have rat poison to put in the attic either. In other words: rodents and lizards were not uncommon in the houses of Israel, and so a dead one in the pantry was quite possible too; this kind of thing happened so many times per year in each house. The Israelite had to consider the will of the Lord: what does God want us to do in this situation?

Lev 13 mentions leprosy, spots on the skin. We know from experience that spots on the skin do occur from time to time, be it in the form of a scab or ringworm or eczema, etc. The people of Israel immediately had to consider what the will of the Lord might be here: did the Lord want them to show this scab, or this swelling, or this bright spot on the skin to the priest (Lev 13:1ff)? So too when it came to pulling the winter clothes from the cupboard. Before the people could wear their winter coat, they had to check for spots, be it mould or something else (Lev 13:47ff). That is: God's law had a bearing on whether or not you could put on that favourite coat: what does God wish me to do?

Lev 14 speaks about "the leprous plague in a house" (vs 34). That is: if a mother in Israel, while doing her regular house cleaning, found a reddish or greenish spot on the wall (and let's face it, mould is a reality in showers and laundries even today – let alone then), this woman in Israel couldn't just apply a mould killer, but she first had to consider the will of the Lord and possibly fetch the priest (14:33ff).

Chapter 15 speaks about bodily discharges, and how anything is unclean if one who has a discharge sits on it or lays on it. We all know that there's scarcely a household where there's no discharge some time during the month (cf vs 19). So: a particular bed, a particular chair in the house was unclean for a set period every month. That meant in turn that when the youth came home from school or from work, they could not just sit down on whatever chair they wished; Mom's chair could be unclean today. The point again is this: *even when it came to something so basic as choosing which chair to sit on, the people of Israel had first to consider the will of the Lord.* In all of life, down to the details of what goes on the table and what shall the children wear and where shall I sit, God's covenant children had to be busy in their minds with the question: what does God want me to do. No inch of life in Israel was free from the oversight and authority of their covenant God.

Small wonder, then, that we read in Dt 6 the instruction of God to parents: "You shall teach [My commands] to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up" (vss 6f). That command to talk of God's laws when you sit in your house had colour and depth for the parents of Israel when Mom had her period. It had colour and depth when Dad walked by the way with the boys to go fishing. The people should know it: God's service involved every moment of the day! The parents had to impress it on the children: always must the question live in your minds: 'Lord, what do You want me to do?'

David understood that God was to be involved in every step of one's life. So he could pray in Ps 25 like this: "Show me Your way, O Lord, Teach me Your paths." Here was a prayer for guidance from the Lord about what he should do in the daily decisions of his life – be they big or small. For God's ways and paths determine where God's people are to walk every day and every moment of the day, and this is the insight for which David prays. Says he in the psalm: "on You I wait *all the day*" (vs 5). Every moment he needs the Lord's instruction, in every question of life, including what to eat and where to sit.

Now the Lord Jesus tells His disciples what to pray. They're not sure about prayer, not sure what to say and how to 'get through' to God. Says Jesus in the third petition: ask God to enable you to do His will, to obey His law. Ask what your heavenly Father wants you to do in your specific circumstances, as they keep changing day by day. Specifically:

Peter was a fisherman by trade, and so were James and John. As they hauled the nets out of the water tomorrow morning, they had to ask what God's will for them was at that moment – could they keep this fish, that fish, that one...? For God had said: some fish are unclean, and you may not eat them. So there was no dollar to be made by the disciples when they caught, say, a cobbler or a squid.

For all we know, the disciples had their own homes, with their own collection of clay pots and pans. It can

very well happen that they come home tonight to find a dead mouse in the pantry. In a circumstance as down-to-earth as that, the disciple had to ask the question: Lord, what do you want me to do?

As a result of work, Nathanael got a splinter in his finger, and it ended up in an infection. Could he just go to the doctor without any more? No, first he had to consider his God: Lord, what do you want me to do? Is this something for the priest to see?

The conclusion is this: around the clock, in all their circumstances –be it big or small– the people of Israel (and so Jesus' disciples too) had to be busy with God's revealed will: what does the Lord want me to do now?

This is the thought that Jesus incorporates into His teaching about prayer. His disciples want to know how to pray. Says Jesus to them: "when you pray, say...: Your will be done." That is: "Grant, Father, that we...may deny our own will, and without any murmuring obey Your will, in whatever circumstances we may find ourselves." Seeking God's will, says Jesus, should be part of prayer; it gives so much to pray about, makes prayer part and parcel of all of life: Lord, what do you want me to do?

And we are to know: in the New Testament dispensation God's claim to every area of life is no less comprehensive than His claim was in the Old Testament. Not only does His God-head dictate the point, not only does Christ's lordship over all the world dictate the point, not only does the presence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts dictate that God claims us all the time; it's also the specific revelation of Scripture. Says Paul to the Corinthians (and his words are built on the material of Leviticus!) – says Paul: "therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (I Cor 10:31). There is it, very New Testamentic: things so mundane, so down-to-earth as eating and drinking, are to be done to God's glory. And we understand: God is glorified through our activities only if we do God's will. What we eat, when we sit down to drink, when we choose our clothes for the day, the question is to be on our minds as much as it was in Israel: Lord, what do you want me to do? Should I eat this? Are You happy if I drink this? Do You wish me to wear this? In fact, Jesus specifically says that on the Day of Judgment we shall need to give account of every idle word we have spoken (Mt 12:36). You see: even the words I speak are subject to the notion of: Lord, what do You wish me to say?

So we find ourselves, congregation, well into the second point:

2. My prayer must cover every area of life

God's law touches all of life, with no exceptions, from foods to clothes to words to sport. So the third petition is to be on my lips always too: "Your will be done"; what, Lord, do You want me to do in this situation, in that situation? Jesus did not wish His disciples to pray in general terms, to speak to God detached from their concrete circumstances; the same is true for us. In fact, Jesus Himself set the example we're to follow.

On the night before His crucifixion –Mt 26- Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane with eleven of His disciples; Judas Iscariot had already gone to the chief priests. Jesus "began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed" (Mt 26:37). In His distress Jesus prayed, as we read in vs 39: "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me." That is: Jesus was very well aware that the cross was around the corner, very aware that even now Judas was on his way with the chief priests and the temple police to arrest Him. In His prayer, Jesus spoke of a cup; "let this cup pass from Me." The word 'cup' is used in the Old Testament to describe the wrath of God (cf Ps 76). It's that wrath that Jesus was about to face, and He looked up against it terribly. So He told God exactly what His circumstances were and how He felt about His circumstances: "let this cup pass from Me." With words from the Old Testament, Jesus told the Father about His actual situation and feelings. This is specific, this is concrete.

But notice too, beloved, what Jesus does after He's told the Father of His situation and His feelings. He prays the third petition: "Your will be done." But tell me: what would you do if you were standing in Jesus' shoes that night? You well know that the temple police are on their way, and you know too that a cross is waiting for you tomorrow. What would you do?? Every last one of us, I'm sure, would Run! We'd run, we'd hide, we'd escape, anything to get away from the horrors of the cross. And make no mistake, beloved: for Jesus it certainly was a temptation also to run! But see, that's not what Jesus does! Instead of following His emotions, He prays! He tells His God of His situation, tells Him of His anguish, and then seeks God's will for Him in the situation. Third petition: "nevertheless, not as I will, but

as You will." And Jesus prays it not once but twice, yes, three times: "O My Father, if this cup cannot pass away from Me unless I drink it, Your will be done" (vs 42).

Here, my brothers and sisters, is the instruction of Jesus to His disciples in the third petition, worked out concretely for the benefit of the disciples. I know: the three who were with Jesus were sound asleep when Jesus in His anguish sought to subject His will to God's holy will. But this material came to the disciples' attention –it got in the Bible somehow– and so became for them (and for us) penetrating instruction of what the third petition is all about. Jesus in His anguish understood that He lived not for Himself, understood in His anguish that He was here for God, understood too that Satan would love to make Him follow His own desires. So Jesus made it His business to pray the third petition, made it His business to seek from God strength –in His particular and pressing circumstances– to deny the self and do what God wanted Him to do. He prayed, and so laid before us how He would have us to work with His instruction about prayer.

As we pray in this manner, as we seek God's will for us in our specific circumstances, shall our prayers be answered? Know it, my brothers and sisters, know it: Yes, your prayers shall be answered! Recall Jesus' words immediately after He taught His disciples to pray. He said: "ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Lu 11:9). That's comprehensive: whatever you ask will be given. But: it's a promise given in the context of the instruction of the Lord's Prayer. In other words: ask according to the instruction of the Lord's Prayer, and it will be given. So: ask for what God's will might be for you in your specific circumstances, and God will show you. Ask with the motif of the first petition in mind, that God's name be hallowed. Ask with the motif of second petition in mind, that God's kingship must be acknowledged. Ask with the motif of the third petition in mind, that you do His will in your situation. *And God will answer!* That's the promise! Is He not your Father for Jesus' sake?! Does He not love you, care for you; is He not deeply interested in you?? Seek then His face in your specific circumstances, ask Him what it is that He wishes you to do, and you may be sure: He will show you His way. That's the promise.

That leaves, dear congregation, just one thing left to say, and that is this: you cannot pray the third petition and at the same time keep your Bibles closed. God's will for you is revealed to you not by means of a voice in your ear or in your heart, it's not revealed to you by means of intuition or gut-feelings. God's will for you is revealed through your reading and knowing the Word of God. I trust that that's so self-evident that I need not belabour the point.

But the implication is: *we need to read our Bibles!* More, we need to read our Bibles *with our daily circumstances in mind*. With an open Bible beside us we're to seek the Lord in prayer: show me, Father, what You want me to do in this situation.

Do your prayers bounce off the ceiling? Do you run out of things to say to your Father in Jesus Christ? Tell your God, beloved, exactly where things are at in your home, at work, in the community, tell Him how you feel, tell Him what temptations you face in your circumstances. And ask: Lord, what do you want of me now? Show me *Your* will for me, Lord! Then there is so much to pray about, so very much because all of life is lived in His presence, is governed by Him, claimed by Him.

And know it, brothers and sisters: Father hears, and answers. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 50 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 3 March 2002.

" THE CHILD OF GOD CONFESSES HIS DEPENDENCE ON HIS HEAVENLY FATHER."

Text:

Lord's Day 50

125. Q. What is the fourth petition?

A. Give us this day our daily bread. That is: Provide us with all our bodily needs[1] so that we may acknowledge that Thou art the only fountain of all good,[2] and that our care and labour, and also Thy gifts, cannot do us any good without Thy blessing.[3] Grant therefore that we may withdraw our trust from all creatures, and place it only in Thee.[4]

[1] Ps. 104:27-30; 145:15, 16; Matt. 6:25-34. [2] Acts 14:17; 17:25; James 1:17. [3] Deut. 8:3; Ps. 37:16; 127:1, 2; I Cor. 15:58. [4] Ps. 55:22; 62; 146; Jer. 17:5-8; Heb. 13:5, 6.

Scripture Reading:

Exodus 16:1-5;14-21

Deuteronomy 11:8-21

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 100:1,2

Psalm 104:7

Psalm 34:4

Psalm 107:13,14,15

Psalm 145:4,5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Prayer is *commanded* of us. Jesus told us also *what* to pray; amongst other things the Lord instructed us to ask God for our daily bread. So we do it; "Father," we say, "give us this day our daily bread."

But really, brothers and sisters, is there not something rather ridiculous about this petition? For: where is tomorrow morning's breakfast? It needn't be given to you anymore; it's already in your pantry. And if it should be that food supplies for the coming week run low, a well-stocked supermarket is just down the road. Pray for daily bread? Given the abundance we have in our time, it doesn't seem quite reasonable for us to pray this fourth petition. It's more a prayer for times of hunger and famine....

Of course, we could argue that the prayer for daily bread in the fourth petition is actually a request for more than bread itself; here (as the Catechism also says) is a request to God to "provide us with all our bodily needs". So we're thinking of clothing and housing too, as well as of strength to do our daily work, etc. But when all is said and done, we haven't a shortage of clothing and shelter either; there are young people in our midst who have a house as good as paid off by the time they get married. Let's face it: as a society we're very well off. And the government has organized a nice back-stop for us; were we to get in a real pinch we can approach CentreLink for a hand-out and as likely as not we'd get it too. Pray for our daily needs? No, given our affluence in Australia of 2002, the petition scarcely makes sense.

Yet the Lord, brothers and sisters, has commanded us to pray this fourth petition. He commands it because it's *He* who controls Australia's economy – and what's in our pantry. He tells us to pray this petition because He would have us acknowledge that we are *dependent* on the God of the covenant for all things always.

I summarize the sermon as follows:

THE CHILD OF GOD CONFESSES HIS DEPENDENCE ON HIS HEAVENLY FATHER.

1. Where all food comes from
2. When God gives food

1. Where all food comes from

As I said a moment ago, we live in a very affluent society. The temptation is that we forget how dependent we are on God for food, drink, clothes, shelter, petrol, sunscreen, etc. In the face of that temptation, I want to devote my first point this afternoon to drawing out what the Bible says about our dependence on God.

We can start at the beginning of the Bible. The Lord put the first two people in the Garden of Eden, and gave this instruction to them about food; said God: "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat" (Gen 2:16). That's to say: God placed an abundance to eat in Paradise, and He in grace may this abundance available to Adam and Eve. After the fall into sin God sent Adam and Eve out of this Garden of plenty, into a land of thorns and thistles where mankind would have to labor with sweat and blisters to eek a living out of the earth (Gen 3:17ff). That is: it was God who withheld abundant food from them. Yet let people go hungry the Lord did not either; it was God who specifically said to Noah: "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as [I have given you] the green herbs" (Gen 9:3).

On the basis of such data from Scripture as these, the psalmist confessed that all food for man and animals alike comes from none other than God. Ps 104: "These all" (and here the reference is to all creatures), "these all wait for You, That You may give them their food in due season. ... You open Your hand, they are filled with good..." (vss 27f). So too Ps 145: "The eyes of all look expectantly to You, And You give them their food in due season. You open Your hand And satisfy the desire of every living thing" (vss 15f). Paul says to the heathens of Lystra: "...[God] did good, gave us (and here the word "us" refers to both Paul and the heathens he's speaking to) rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17).

You see, brothers and sisters, older and younger, the Scriptures are very clear on it: all food comes from God Himself. In our times of abundance today, this is something we do well to keep in mind. The abundance we have, the ease with which we can stock our pantries and set our tables, the ease with which we can buy petrol and sunscreen, the ease with which so many of us can pay off a house and even buy a second, is due to the good hand of God; it is He who gives this abundance in our part of the world today. I point out that this reality makes a Prayer for Labor and Harvest very appropriate, makes a Thanksgiving Day very fitting as well. To *ask* for food, to pray for clothes and cars, boats and boots is proper, and so is giving thanks for it all.

That brings us to our second point for this afternoon:

2. When does God give food?

This second point is so relevant because we experience that food and clothes, school fees and mortgage payments come rather easily for most of us. Dependent on God? We don't experience it that way. So we do well to consider what the Lord our God has told us about when He gives food.

Does God give only when one asks? Does God give food to all who ask? A quick look around us makes clear that No, the Lord God does not give food only when one asks. After all, there are countless thousands in our society who never yet asked the Lord for their daily bread, and yet receive abundance. The same was true in the days Scripture were written. The godless people of Egypt had a great abundance; the land of Egypt is even in one place of Scripture compared with the Garden of Eden in terms of lush growth and productivity (Gen 13:10).

That God freely gives food and clothes, prosperity and plenty to a given society (be it Egypt of long ago or Australia today) has a particular purpose. Paul says to the people of Athens that God "gives life, breath, and all things ... so that they should seek the Lord" (Acts 17:27; cf Acts 14:17). In line with the apostle's word on the point, we confess in the *Belgic Confession* that God makes Himself known to all men by the way He governs the world – including the rain He gives, the growth of crops, the flow of money, etc (Art 2). That Australia enjoys a prosperous economy simply increases the responsibility of Australians to acknowledge the God who mercifully gives this abundance.

Let us, though, speak now not of what God is pleased to give to the unbelieving around us. The Lord has established His covenant of grace with us, and told us how He is pleased to deal with us. Of significance in relation to the fourth petition is the fact that in the covenant God has placed a *link* between His gifts and our obedience. You know that the covenant God made with each of us has two sides: a promise and an obligation. When God established His covenant with us at our baptism, the Lord promises us that He as Father would "provide us with all good." That is, He would *care* for us, supply all our needs - including, therefore, daily bread. Because of the obligation God has built into the covenant, we receive the content of this promise –the daily bread- when we meet the obligations of the covenant – obey the commands of the covenant.

The point is important. Christ taught us to pray for our daily bread, but if there is no obedience to God's covenant stipulations, we can pray this fourth petition for all we're worth but God will not hear. Since God has placed a link between obedience and blessing, we have the responsibility to take that link seriously. In the rest of the sermon, it is this reality I need to work out.

The Lord God established His eternal covenant of grace with the people of Israel. He appeared to Moses while Israel was still enslaved to the Egyptians, and said to Moses this: "...I have come down to deliver [My people Israel] out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land, to a land flowing with milk and honey..." (Ex 3:8). Here was the promise in the covenant: God would give His adopted children a "good" land, a land "flowing with milk and honey." We understand that with that promise God also pledged to give His children their daily bread.

After God delivered His people from Egypt, however, He did not bring them straightaway into the promised land of milk and honey. He chose instead first to lead His people for some time through the desert. Why God did so? He Himself gives the answer in Dt 8; God did so to teach His people in pointed terms that they were *dependent* on the Lord for their daily needs (cf Dt 8:3). And dependence, we understand, prompts one to pray.

I said: God taught Israel *dependence* on Him. In the desert there was nothing to eat; in the desert Israel had to receive food directly from God's hand. Israel experienced that pointedly: each morning the Lord rained manna upon the sand and stones of the desert so that the people simply had to step outside their tents to pick up their breakfast from the ground. That daily ritual drove the point home: they were visibly and obviously dependent on their covenant God for their daily bread.

We need to know that this pattern of things in the desert was so profoundly different from what Israel had been used to in the land of Egypt. Yes, in Egypt the Israelites had been slaves, and that wasn't pleasant. But the Israelites apparently never ran out of food. That's what they say in Ex 16 when they hungered in the desert: "Oh," they said, "that we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and when we ate bread to the full!" (vss 2f). The contrast between Egypt and the desert was radical; *that* land provided an abundance of food, but *this* land did not. *That* land did not make clear that one was dependent on the Lord God for food, while the desert certainly did make that point very clearly.

That the Lord was also a faithful provider of food was demonstrated by the fact that He gave to Israel the needed manna for forty long years, every morning anew. The people could ask their God-by-covenant in the evening for tomorrow's bread, and in the morning it was there, on the ground around their tents, as answer to prayer. After Israel had spent 40 years in the desert collecting manna from around their tents each morning, Moses summed it all up this way: "...the Lord your God has blessed you.... These forty years the Lord your God has been with you; you have lacked nothing" (Dt 2:7). Notice those words: "you have lacked nothing." That's what characterized the Lord's giving of daily bread to His covenant children day by day: "you have lacked nothing." To be *dependent* was a good thing

because their covenant God was so faithful.

At the end of 40 years the Lord brought His people into the land of promise, that land "flowing with milk and honey". So the people would no longer be dependent on manna for food; they could now eat the produce of this good land. But –let this be clear- that did not mean that Israel would now no longer be dependent on the Lord God for daily bread. In the covenant Israel remained dependent; man always does. That's spelled out clearly in the passage we read from Dt 11.

Moses mentions in vs 9 "the land which the Lord swore to give your fathers..., 'a land flowing with milk and honey.'" Then in vs 10 Moses compares the new land with Egypt and explains how different it is. Listen: "For the land which you go to possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come, where you sowed your seed and watered it by foot, as a vegetable garden; but the land which you cross over to possess is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water from the rain of heaven" (vss 10f). The two lands, then, are different. Egypt was "watered...by foot" while the promised land of Canaan was watered by "the rain of heaven". The land of Egypt received no rain to speak of (today about 3 mm falls per year in the southern part of the land), and yet was fertile because the Nile River flowed through the land from central Africa to the Mediterranean Sea. That Nile River always flowed (be it with highs and lows depending on the season), and always there was enough water in the river to irrigate the plains around the river. Moses' reference to watering the land by foot may imply that water was moved from the river to the paddocks by some sort of foot-driven pump. In any case, the combination of sun and water meant good crops. As the Israelites said in Ex 16: "in the land of Egypt ... we sat by the pots of meat and ... we ate bread to the full" (Ex 16:2f).

From a human point of view, then, in Egypt one was dependent on no one; food came easily because water flowed regularly. In that regard Egypt of old was somewhat like Australia today: food is easy to obtain, and so it's not readily apparent that one is dependent on the Lord God. And that in turn makes praying for food appear silly.

But the land of Canaan, says Moses in Dt 11, "is not like the land of Egypt". This new land "is a land of hills and valleys", and (particularly in those days before electric pumps arrived) hills could not be irrigated with water from the river. Where Canaan got its water from then? Says Moses: the land "drinks water from the rain of heaven."

Rain. I suppose we've all seen pictures of Israel today, and from the pictures we've seen we know that land today to be a desert. Rain in Israel?? There isn't much. Yet Moses speaks here of this land drinking water "from the rain of heaven." In fact, that he describes the land as "flowing with milk and honey" must mean that Israel received abundant rains. We wonder: why no rain today and much rain then? Are we to think here of what scientists call a change in the climate of the Middle East?

No, beloved, we're not. There is no scientific evidence of a noteworthy climate change. Instead, we are to note that rain comes from God's hand *just as much a manna came from God's hand*. Look at what the Lord says in vs 14f: "...I will give you the rain for your land in its season, the early rain and the latter rain, that you may gather in your grain, your new wine, and your oil. And I will send grass in your fields for your livestock, that you may eat and be filled." Rain, and therefore daily bread is *promised*. But: *when* would God give His people that rain and so the daily bread? Vs 13: "And it shall be that if you diligently obey My commandments which I command you today, to love the Lord your God and serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, *then* I will give you the rain ... that you may eat and be filled." You see, beloved, rain in the Promised Land was *conditional*, was conditional on Israel keeping God's commands, obeying the demands of the covenant. On obedience would come rain, and with rain abundant daily bread. This connection between obedience and rain is driven home again in vss 16f: "Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them, lest the Lord's anger be aroused against you, and He shut up the heavens so that there be no rain, and the land yield no produce, and you perish quickly from the good land which the Lord is giving you." That the Promised Land, then, could be called a land "flowing with milk and honey" was not because that land was of itself so good; it was rather so that God Almighty was pleased to make the land productive so that He might graciously give His children their daily bread. Rain, productivity, food: it comes from Father's hand as a blessing upon His people's covenant obedience (cf Ps 107:33ff).

All food comes from God's hand –recall our first point- and so in Egypt food came from God's hand too. But in Egypt the sinful eye did not *see* that food always came from God's hand because the river always flowed on, there was

plenty of water. The desert was different; in the desert Israel was taught how dependent they were on the Lord for daily bread for in the desert daily bread very obviously came from His hand – recall the manna. Well now, the lesson of the desert remained valid in the land of Canaan; food in Canaan also came obviously from God's hand, for it was He who gave the rain and so made the land productive. That's the point Israel had to learn: they were always *dependent* on the Lord for their daily bread. In fact, it's a point Israel had to learn again and again; in the promised land Israel repeatedly turned from following the Lord to serve other gods, and so the Lord –faithful as He is to His promise in the covenant- withheld the rain, and so too the food. The classic example here is the days of Elijah; Ahab officially established Baal worship in Israel, and the result was a drought of three and a half years: no daily bread.

In principle the New Testament dispensation is not different. Certainly, the Lord has not given His New Testament covenant people a "Promised Land" as He gave Israel in the Old Testament; we live after Jesus' poured out His Holy Spirit. But the link between obedience and blessing remains. Jesus told not to worry, "saying: 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" For," Jesus added, "your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things" (Mt 6:31f). And straightaway He added: "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (vs 33). There's that link between obedience and blessing. Think also of the plagues mentioned in the book of Revelation, when God pours out His curses on covenant breakers; there's the link again between obedience and blessing, disobedience and curse.

Then, true, we may have many questions about why God would grant prosperity to unbelievers. But ultimately that's His business; on the Day of Judgment they will not stand (cf Ps 73). God has told us of the link He placed between obedience to the covenant and His blessings. So that's the reality I need to believe, and therefore to work with. That simply means we may not ask God to supply our needs if at the same time we don't keep His commands. We can expect an answer to our fourth petition only when we live according to what we've asked in the third.

Does the link between obedience and blessing mean that our daily bread is less certain? It's a fact, beloved, that our sins are countless. Very rightly could the Lord turn our rivers into a wilderness and our fruitful land into barrenness on account of our wickedness (cf Ps 107:33f). But here is now the marvel of the gospel: He laid all our sins on Jesus Christ, and places Christ's righteousness onto our account. So, for Jesus' sake, *despite our unworthiness, God yet grants daily bread*, all our needs for body and soul.

Exactly there, my brothers and sisters, is the reason why we need never fear that we shall lack. No matter how hard I try, my sins will always get between me and God so that God will not give me His blessing – and therefore not my daily needs. But exactly because the Savior has taken those sins upon Himself can my sins no longer form a hindrance preventing God's blessing! That's why I can pray so confidently for my daily needs, and be certain that I'll receive all God in wisdom knows I need.

The only thing is: *do you believe it?* Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 51 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 10 March 2002.

" THE LORD TEACHES US TO ASK FOR WHAT HE HAS PROMISED: THE FORGIVENESS OF OUR SINS ."

Text:

Lord's Day 51

126. Q. What is the fifth petition?

A. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.

That is: For the sake of Christ's blood, do not impute to us, wretched sinners; any of our transgressions, nor the evil which still clings to us,[1] as we also find this evidence of Thy grace in us that we are fully determined wholeheartedly to forgive our neighbor.[2]

[1] Ps. 51:1-7; 143:2; Rom. 8:1; 1 John 2:1, 2. [2] Matt. 6:14, 15; 18:21-35.

Scripture Reading:

Exodus 20:18-26

Matthew 5:43-48

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 70:1,2

Hymn 29:1,2

Psalms 25:9,10

Psalms 130:2,4

Psalms 40:4,5 & Hymn 47:6

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Jesus told us to pray for the forgiveness of our sins. So we do it, have done it countless times over the years. But: we do not always feel forgiven. We rise from prayer, but the weight of our sins seems still to lay on our shoulders....

Next Sunday we hope again to celebrate the Supper of our Lord. At the table we're confronted with the gospel of forgiveness, told that the broken bread we eat and the poured wine we drink symbolize and seal that Christ's body was broken and His blood shed "for a complete forgiveness of all our sins." But we know it from the past: those sins of long ago can still hound our conscience.... Then we wonder: are my sins really forgiven? Or does God hold our sins in memory, hold them against us...; does the fact that my sins keep coming to mind not mean that God is angry with me still on account of what I did?

Jesus told us to pray for forgiveness of our sins. He told us too: "ask, and you shall receive." This is the *promise*: there is forgiveness for those children of God who ask for forgiveness. It is for me to believe it.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE LORD TEACHES US TO ASK FOR WHAT HE HAS PROMISED: THE FORGIVENESS OF OUR SINS.

1. The Old Testament background to this petition
2. The New Testament fulfillment of this petition

1. The Old Testament background.

How did Adam and Eve know that their relation with God in Paradise was healthy, friendly, that there was nothing between them and God? The answer, surely, lies in the fact that the Lord God *spoke* to Adam and Eve, and permitted Adam and Eve to speak with God. There was *communion* between God and man, open channels of contact.

That changed radically with the fall into sin. Adam and Eve felt so vulnerable to the eyes of others that they covered their nakedness with fig leaves. And remember: there were no other people; Adam and Eve felt vulnerable before *God's* all-seeing eyes. So vulnerable did they feel that when God came to them in the cool of the day, they hid themselves from His presence among the trees of the garden. An open relation still between God and man? A relation free of accusing eyes and guilty conscience? No, not any more. The brokenness of the relation between God and man was pointed up so graphically when God drove the man out of the Garden, and placed cherubim at the gate.... We understand: it was *sin* that drove God and man apart. For, as the prophet Habakkuk said it: God is "of purer eyes than to behold evil, And cannot look on wickedness" (1:13). Anything touched by sin cannot exist in His presence.

That God tolerates in His presence nothing touched by sin was driven home for Israel at Mt Sinai. The Lord wished to establish His gracious covenant with a nation of sinners, and that's to say that God wished to live with man, and have man live with Him. But the iron barrier (cf Ezek 4:3) between man and God prevented this communion. When God came to Israel at Mt Sinai He displayed straightaway how high the iron barrier was. How He displayed that? By making His coming to His people-by-covenant so awesome, so terrible, so frightful. We read it: God's coming meant thunders and lightnings, a thick cloud on the mountain, a loud trumpet blast. Yes, "Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; ...and the whole mountain quaked greatly." We note that God's coming is described here so very differently from His coming in Paradise; *there* His coming was peaceful, friendly, welcome, *here* His coming is terrible, awesome, frightening. We know why the difference. It's because of the presence of sin in the people. Such is the effect of the presence of sin in the people that God's coming threatens to *destroy* the people; in 19:21 the people must be told to keep their distance lest "many of them perish", perish because "the Lord break out against them" (vs 22). The people realized: there was something between them and God. That's why "they stood far off" (20:18). What the problem was? That, of course, was *sin*" (cf vs 20).

But now see, congregation: what does the Lord do about the sin between Israel and God? This: *God takes steps to do away with sin!* Vs 24: "An altar of earth you shall make for Me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings...." By God's righteous decree, the wages of sin had to be death (Gen 2:17; Rom 6:23), the death of the sinner. But such is His mercy that the Lord commands the sacrifice of an animal *in place of the sinner* so that the shed blood might be an atoning sacrifice. In the words of Lev 17:11:

"...I have given [the blood] for you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement, by reason of the life."

Or, in the words of the apostle to the Hebrews:

"Under the law almost everything is purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins" (Heb 9:22).

There it is, beloved: sin stood between God and man as an iron wall and so prevented warm and open communion, prompted instead a critical gaze and a guilty conscience. But *the shedding of blood* took that sin away, the shedding of blood removed the barrier between God and man.

That came out so pointedly in the instructions God gave Moses after the awesome events on Mt Sinai. For the God who established His covenant with sinful Israel told Moses on the mountain the specifics of how to build a tabernacle, a tent in which holy God might *dwell in the midst of His covenant people*; those instructions are written in Ex 25-31. Central to that tabernacle was to be the *altar*; indeed, the altar was to be located strategically between where God would dwell and where the people could stand. That altar, with the sacrifices and hence the blood that was to be spilt

on it, removed the barrier between God and man, made it possible for God and man to live together. So, once the tabernacle with its altar was completed - what happened? Ex 40: "Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (vs 34). The meaning? *God actually came to dwell with His people!* Holy God, sinful Israel: *together*. Here the expulsion from Paradise was undone! How that was possible? That could be possible only because *sin* –that iron wall between God and man- *sin* was *gone*, forgiven, taken away through the sacrifices on that altar. So God could be with man, Immanuel: here is the gospel of reconciliation, the gospel of the forgiveness of sins.

Over the years, the people of Israel prayed for reconciliation with their covenant God, prayed for the forgiveness of sins. How could Israel of old know whether their sins were in fact gone? The evidence, brothers and sisters, lay in the fact that *God dwelt in their midst – the tabernacle*. As long as their sins remained, God could not dwell in their midst, for God cannot stand sin in His presence; He is too holy for that. That God dwelt in that tabernacle, dwelt among His own people, was intended to assure the people that their sins were gone, forgiven.

That's also why Israel could be happy, could celebrate, have feasts *at the tabernacle*. Why be happy, be happy *at the tabernacle*? That's because the sins that so troubled their conscience before were gone, gone. So they could rejoice before the Lord, rejoice in the happy assurance that God and man were reconciled, that the God whom they had offended by their sins was no longer angry with them, rejoice in His holy, gracious presence.

So: David says in Ps 103 that God "has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities." In fact, "as far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us" (vss 10ff). *Why David could be so sure that his sins were so totally gone?* Wasn't he too cocky on the point? No, he wasn't. David worked with the fact of that tabernacle, David worked with the fact of its ongoing sacrifices; he knew: here God dwelt with His people, and that means that He is not offended anymore by the sins of His people – He's forgiven them.

Years later the prophet Micah could speak in equally lofty terms of the forgiveness of sins. Said he:

"Who is a God like You, Pardoning iniquity And passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights in mercy. He will again have compassion on us, And will subdue our iniquities. You will cast all our sins Into the depths of the sea" (7:18f).

And again we wonder: how could Micah be so sure?! Just as with David, congregation: Micah worked with the fact of that God had made His home in the Holy of Holies in the temple, worked with the fact of the sacrifices in the temple; he knew: here God dwelt with His people, and that means that He is not offended anymore by the sins of His people – He's forgiven them, no longer sees those sins as a barrier between Himself and us.

Now there's Jesus, and His instruction to His disciples is this: ask your Father in heaven to forgive your sins. Was this hollow advice Jesus gives His disciples, something to pray that they may or may not receive? Not at all; for Jesus told them that they who ask *receive*. Why Jesus could be so sure that God would indeed answer that prayer? It's because of God's Old Testament track record. God's *promise* was to forgive the sins of His children, and God has demonstrated in the past that that's what He *did*. Very well, then the disciples may know that their petitions for forgiveness of their sins will certainly be answered too.

That brings us to our second point:

2. The New Testament fulfillment of this petition.

For, as it turns out, brothers and sisters, Jesus can assure His disciples that their prayer will be heard on more grounds than only God's Old Testament track record. Jesus –the name means 'Savior'- received His name from God because He would "save His people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). More, Jesus was Immanuel, Himself true God who had come to live with man on earth. Certainly *He*, then, was in a position to assure His disciples that their prayers for forgiveness would definitely be answered.

He told them to pray, and then set about demonstrating the *grounds* upon which this prayer would be answered. For this Jesus went to the cross, and on that cross took on Himself the sins of all God's people – of Old and New

Testament alike. He was made to be *sin personified*, and therefore was rejected by God; after all, God cannot stand sin in His holy presence. So it was that on the cross He had to cry out His anguish: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

But though rejected by God, beloved, Jesus-become-sin obtained reconciliation with God! Sin could be atoned only through the shedding of blood, and so Jesus shed His blood to pay for all the sins piled onto Him. In the words of Hebr 9: Jesus "appeared once for all at the end of the age to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (vs 26b). Through His death He put away sin, and so the Reject was *accepted* by God again. "Father," said He when He was about to die, "into Your hands I commit My spirit." And having said that He died, and went to heaven, into the presence of His God, *accepted*. Three days later He rose from the dead, walked the face of this earth another forty days, and then ascended, true man that He was, into the presence of His holy Father. He ascended, and that means that *man came to live in the presence of God in heaven*. He ascended, that man who had once been one and all sin, and now was welcome in the presence of holy God –welcome why?- because that iron wall of sin which stood between Himself and God was now gone.

Yet this man Jesus, ascended into the presence of holy God and welcome there too, was not to be the only human in God's courts. In the Old Testament God and man dwelt together in the tabernacle of Israel –reconciliation!- and this is concept God wished to fulfill in the New Testament dispensation also. So the Christ who ascended into heaven poured out His Holy Spirit upon man. And, wonder of wonders: this Holy Spirit now dwells among men, more, dwells *in* people. Delight in it, congregation: true God in the Spirit *lives in men* - Immanuel!

How come?? Doesn't God know that we commit sin day by day? Most certainly He does, congregation, He does! But Jesus tells the disciples to pray for the forgiveness of sins, and He tells them to pray it on the basis of His own redeeming work, tells them to pray it because *those sins are gone, forgiven*. Just as much as God's dwelling in the tabernacle in the Old Testament was evidence that God forgave Israel's sins, so the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and His dwelling in the hearts of God's own today is evidence that God has forgiven the sins of His New Testament Israel. *For God is too holy to dwell where He still sees sin.*

So I come back to the question of the beginning: can you really be sure that you really are forgiven of all your sins? Yes, life has so many difficulties and disappointments, challenges that make us think that somehow God is still angry with us. Can you, then, be sure that God has really answered your prayer?

No, brothers and sisters, you cannot crawl into heaven to check God's books and see what sins remain listed behind your name. Yet that does not mean that you can't find out whether God answers your prayers for forgiveness. What's in heaven is God's business, not ours. We have to work with what happens on this earth, and interpret what happens in the light of Scripture. What has God revealed? This: sin is ever and always a barrier between God and us, for God remains too holy to look upon evil. And this: where sins have been taken away in Jesus' blood, there *God is pleased to dwell with man*. So the critical question becomes: does God dwell in you? Has God in the Spirit made His home in your heart? Where the answer is Yes, may you be assured that indeed your prayer for forgiveness is answered, your sins are gone.

So: how do you know whether the Lord in the Spirit has come to live with you? One knows that by one's works, by whether one produces what Scripture calls the "fruit of the Spirit." What the fruits of the Spirit are? Paul gives the list: "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (cf Gal 5:22). "Love," says Paul under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Thankfully, love in the Bible is not simply an emotion, a feeling of warmth to another, for my emotions are warped by the fall into sin. No, beloved, in the Bible love is *action*, love is the attitude you take to the other so that you do not treat the neighbor according to what he deserves. Listen to Jesus as He speaks about love:

"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven; for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than

others? Do not even the tax collectors do so? Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect" (Mt 5:43ff).

That is: though my neighbor may have made himself my enemy through his evil deeds, the fruit of the Spirit called love means that I do not wish to clobber my neighbor on account of what he did; the fruit of the Spirit called love means instead that I willingly forgive, forgive even as God has forgiven me of my wrongdoings. Of grace I've received so much from Him while I was still His enemy (Rom 5); of grace I give as much to my enemy. And I'll show it to him, not just in words but also in deeds.

That becomes, then, the question for our self-examination: do I readily, freely forgive those who offend me? Do I show to my enemies –and therefore to everybody that would fit in a scale between enemies and friends- do I show to my enemies the love and compassion that God in Christ has shown me? In the words of our Lord's Day: am I "fully determined wholeheartedly to forgive our neighbor"?

Where you can answer the question, congregation, with Yes, you have the evidence that God in the Holy Spirit dwells in your heart. And that, you recall, is the evidence in turn that sin –that barrier between God and you- is gone. So you also have a place at the Table of the Lord next Sunday.

Then it's true: even our determination to forgive the other wholeheartedly is so weak, so marred by sin. Yet we may look back into our past, our lives this week. Do we see ourselves holding grudges, being unwilling to forgive others, refuse to forget the wrongs they've done to us, an unwillingness to look the other in the eye? The Lord's word is clear, congregation: where the answer is that we're not wanting to look the other in the eye, not wanting to bless those who curse us, not wanting to do good to those who hate us, we have evidence that our sins are not washed away before God's throne either; His wrath remains. As Jesus said: "if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Mt 6:15). So there's no place for us at the Table of the Lord....

Jesus taught us to pray. He told us to address God as "Father", then told us to ask Him to forgive our sins. Will Father answer, forgive our sins? Certainly, brothers and sisters, He does. The evidence that He hears your prayer for forgiveness lies in the fruit of the Spirit you produce. Those fruits reflect what your heavenly Father is like. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 52 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman Sunday Afternoon 17 March 2002

***" JESUS INSTRUCTS US TO ASK FATHER NOT TO TEST US BECAUSE WE CAN'T
HANDLE TEMPTATION."***

Text:

Lord's Day 52

127. Q. What is the sixth petition?

A. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. That is: In ourselves we are so weak that we cannot stand even for a moment.[1] Moreover, our sworn enemies-- the devil,[2] the world,[3] and our own flesh[4]-- do not cease to attack us. Wilt Thou, therefore, uphold and strengthen us by the power of Thy Holy Spirit, so that in this spiritual war[5] we may not go down to defeat, but always firmly resist our enemies, until we finally obtain the complete victory.[6]

[1] Ps. 103:14-16; John 15:1-5. [2] II Cor. 11:14; Eph. 6:10-13; I Pet. 5:8. [3] John 15:18-21. [4] Rom. 7:23; Gal. 5:17. [5] Matt. 10:19, 20; 26:41; Mark 13:33; Rom. 5:3-5. [6] I Cor. 10:13; I Thess. 3:13; 5:23.

128. Q. How do you conclude your prayer?

A. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. That is: All this we ask of Thee because, as our King, having power over all things, Thou art both willing and able to give us all that is good,[1] and because not we but Thy holy Name should so receive all glory for ever.[2]

[1] Rom. 10:11-13; II Pet 2:9. [2] Ps. 115:1; Jer. 33:8, 9; John 14:13.

129. Q. What does the word Amen mean?

A. Amen means: It is true and certain. For God has much more certainly heard my prayer than I feel in my heart that I desire this of Him.[1]

[1] Is. 65:24; II Cor. 1:20; II Tim. 2:13.

Scripture Reading:

James 1:12-15

Deuteronomy 13

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 54:1

Psalm 40:4

Psalm 141:3,4

Psalm 10:5,6

Hymn 2:4,5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The Lord has nourished our souls at His table. Shortly we leave this ‘meeting with the Lord’, and go back to the normality of life. In the normality of life we’ll experience that all the temptations and the attacks of the devil will flood over us again; ‘haughty men’ will rise against us, and ‘ruthless foes’ will be out to ‘slay’ us – as we sang from Ps 54. That’s the hard reality of this broken life.

The God who set us at His table today has instructed us how to respond in the face of the temptations and satanic attacks of daily living. The disciples didn't know what to say to God, and so Jesus told them, in the midst of their very daily lives, to pray the Lord's Prayer. That includes the sixth petition: "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one."

We're used to the petition, and pray it regularly. But tell me, brothers and sisters, how do you put this petition in your own words? In the dirt and dust of your personal life, what does this petition really sound like? When all is said and done, congregation, this petition is a request to God to prevent our friends from putting potential stumbling blocks on our path. We ask God to prevent our mates from putting enticements on our path because we recognize that we are too weak to say No. More, we ask God that *He* not put tests on our path....

I use this afternoon this theme:

JESUS INSTRUCTS US TO ASK FATHER NOT TO TEST US BECAUSE WE CAN'T HANDLE TEMPTATION.

1. Where temptations come from.
2. Why we ask for no temptations.
3. What the consequences of the prayer are.

1. Where temptations come from

"Lead us not into temptation," we pray here. The first word 'lead' means to 'guide', to 'bring'. "Do not guide us," we ask the Lord, "do not bring us into temptation." The implication is that our God can and does bring us into situations of temptation.

It's a thought we don't like. Our heavenly Father could lead us into temptation? Isn't that what the devil does?! We find it confusing, and somewhat alarming. Then we read what James says: "Let no one say when he is tempted, 'I am tempted by God'; for God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does He Himself tempt anyone" (1:13). That seems to us contradictory. If God doesn't tempt anyone, why would Jesus tell us to ask God not to lead us into temptation!?

To answer the question, brothers and sisters, I need to tell you that the word used in the sixth petition for "temptation" is indeed the same word James uses in 1:13, and it's translated for us as "tempted". More, that same word is used elsewhere in the Bible to show that Yes, the Lord Himself does place His covenant people in circumstances that for them are temptations.

We read from Dt 13. The Lord tells Israel how they are to respond when a prophet or a dreamer of dreams arises in Israel with the advice to the people to serve other gods. This prophet would possibly speak in the name of the Lord, do signs and wonders to legitimize himself, and then say to the people that the Lord Himself wants them to acknowledge other gods and serve them. Then we read this instruction from God in vs 3:

"You shall not listen to the words of that prophet or that dreamers of dreams, for the Lord your God is *testing* you to know whether you love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (vs 3).

"Testing" you, the passage says, and the word that is used here is the same word as appears in the sixth petition and in James 1. The point is that the Lord *does* test, He sovereignly sends that false prophet to see whether His people will remain steadfast in keeping God's command to have no other gods beside Him.

More examples of God testing His people can be given. Think of Abraham. God told him to take his "only son Isaac..., and offer him...as a burnt offering..." (Gen 22:1f). That chapter begins with these words: "Now it came to pass ... that God *tested* Abraham, and said to him..., 'Take now your son....' Similarly, God led Israel after the Exodus from Egypt into the dry and barren wilderness –why?- so that God might "test" them (says Ex 15:25) to see whether they would trust God daily to give them food and drink. Again, once Israel was settled in the Promised Land, the Lord left some of the Canaanites in the land to be a "test" to see whether Israel "will keep the ways of the Lord" (Judg 2f). Does God

test His people? Yes, brothers and sisters, He does. And that's nothing new for us.

But if the Bible has one word for the two English words 'test' and 'temptation', how are we now to understand the sixth petition? "Lead us not into temptation," says our translation of this petition. But we could just as well translate the sixth petition to say "lead us not into a test." Yet God –we've listed some evidence- God repeatedly *does* lead His people into a test. How do we square it all up??

To answer the question, beloved, let's look a bit closer at the passage from Dt 13. The passage tells us of the false prophet coming to God's covenant people Israel with the advice to serve other gods. Try to imagine for a moment what this false prophet looks like in real life. In our mind's eye we see a man, maybe dressed like Elijah, preaching loudly in the towns of Israel that the people should turn from God to serve Baal. We think: such a false teacher is easy to pick out and resist. True. But a false prophet, beloved, can also be far more subtle – and Satan is too crafty to come on wooden shoes. In real life the false prophet could be your mate, who says to you, 'Hey, I hear there's a do in Jericho this weekend; the locals have a Baal celebration. Coming?' And suddenly we realize: that's appealing. A Baal celebration: that comes complete with all sorts of tantalizing sexual overtones.... Something in our human nature finds that alluring.... And your own mate suggests you accompany him, just for the one evening.... Can't be much wrong with that....

The Lord adds that the invitation comes not just from your friend; behind his invitation is the Lord Himself. Vs 3: "you shall not listen to the words of that prophet..., for the Lord your God is testing you." Would Israel experience it as a test, though? Would you? I doubt it. The invitation only awakens in us the notion of *fun*. And that's to say: the invitation God gives as a test boils down *from human perspective* to be a temptation. Here's the material we read from James 1: "God...does [not] tempt anyone," he writes, and then adds in the next verse: "But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed" (vs 14). That's the point: what God sends as a test becomes for us a temptation *because of the desires and enticements of our sinful hearts*. It's not that *God* tempts us; He made us good in the beginning, and perfect and able to do His will in all things, and so He rightly sets us before tests to see whether we do His will. But sin dwells in our hearts, and so to respond to the test as God wills is for us next to impossible. For us these tests are genuine temptations, real bait leading us on to transgress from God's commands.

So we come to our second point:

2. *Why we ask for no temptations.*

I mentioned already that God after the Exodus did not bring His people directly into the Promised Land, but first led them into the wilderness. One of God's reasons for doing so was His decision to test Israel (Ex 15:25). But how did Israel handle the test? In relation to a lack of water I read this, "The people murmured against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?'" (vs 24). That is, they failed the test. That lack of water in the wilderness was for them a temptation they could not handle; instead of trusting that their mighty and gracious God would provide for their needs, they grumbled and complained.

So too in the matter of the manna. Ex 16: "...the Lord said to Moses, 'Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you. And the people shall go out and gather a certain quota every day, that I may test them, whether they will walk in My law or not'" (vs 4). And God stipulated that the people should collect enough each day for that one day only, because tomorrow God would give manna anew. The exception was the day before the Sabbath; then they were to collect enough for two days, because on that Sabbath God would not give manna. But what did the people do? They straightaway collected more than one day required, more because they did not trust God to give manna anew tomorrow. Result? The manna bred worms and stank (vs 20). What would they do now with God's command to collect on Friday enough for that day and for the Sabbath? "Once bitten, twice shy"; the people refused to collect twice as much because it would only breed worms anyway. Result this time? They had nothing to eat on the Sabbath, while those who did collect extra had adequate; it hadn't gone foul this time. In other words: the people as a whole failed the test again. The urge to disregard God's command was too strong for the people; here was a temptation they could not handle.

In fact, this weakness in His people was something that the Lord well knew. That is why He gave to Israel the particular instructions He gave in Dt 13. Israel wasn't to listen to the prophet who would invite the people to serve

other gods; rather, they were –vs 5- to put that false prophet to death. Why they were to kill him? "Because," says the Lord, "He has spoken in order to turn you away from the Lord your God..., to entice you from the way in which the Lord your God commanded you to walk." God knew that His sinful people could not handle such talk, and so the Lord in His care for His weak people told them to put all such false prophets to death – lest the people keep falling for the temptation these prophets set before them.

The chapter goes on to speak also about what's to be done with the son or daughter, the wife or friend, who secretly encourages worship of another god too. Vs 8f: "you shall not consent to him or listen to him, nor shall your eye pity him, nor shall you spare him or conceal him; but you shall surely kill him; your hand shall be the first against him to put him to death...." Imagine that, beloved! Your own wife, your own child who would suggest that it'd be fun to go to Jericho on Saturday night and join the locals in their Baal worship: you were yourself to be the first to condemn, to kill your loved one! Harsh? Yes! But why is God so harsh on the point? Because God knew how inclined to evil His people were, knew they could not resist temptation. So the tempter was to be put to death – so that the people might not be faced with further temptation and cave in altogether. Harsh? Sure. But here is the love and care of God for His people; He knows their weaknesses better than they.

The same thing is true in relation to the communion of saints in Israel. Vs 12: if you hear of someone suggesting that other gods be worshipped, then –vs 15- "you shall surely strike the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword". The fact that these inhabitants were covenant children of God with you, the fact that they attended the same Passover feast as you did, the fact that you bumped into them when you brought your sacrifices at the tabernacle: all of that made no difference; here was enticement in Israel to turn the brethren away from serving the Lord alone, a test to see whether Israel would be faithful to God. "Your eye [shall not] pity him, nor shall you spare him or conceal him; but you shall surely kill him..." (vs 8f), God commanded, for He knew that His people could not handle such tests, that they'd be much inclined to let the brother live, to let him keep suggesting the worship of other gods, and so, slowly but surely, the brother's thoughts would gain acceptance among the people....

It's in line with this instruction in Dt 13 that the psalmists prayed as they did. We sang Ps 54:

"O God, save Thou me by Thy Name,
And by Thy power vindicate me.
I am beset by those who hate me;
Hear Thou my prayer: Thy help I claim.
Against me haughty men did rise
And ruthless foes are out to slay me" (*Book of Praise*, Ps 54:1).

We get a sense of David's difficulties; he's in a real pinch. How so? The title of the psalm tells us that the Ziphites had told King Saul where David was hiding, and so David could expect Saul's army to be on his tail again. A test from God? O yes, for God would see how David would respond to such harassment. A temptation for David? Certainly! Isn't it human nature to want to clobber the Ziphites for their betrayal?! But what does David pray? Listen:

"Behold, God is my helper;
The Lord is with those who uphold my life.
He will repay my enemies for their evil.
Cut them off in Your truth" (Ps 54:4f).

That last sentence: that's a prayer according to the instruction of Dt 13. The Ziphites' act of betrayal was a source of temptation for David to trust not God but his own ingenuity –a false God- and those who supplied such temptation, said Dt 13, were to be killed. Hence David's prayer: "Cut them off in Your truth." Or, as Jesus put it in the sixth petition: "Deliver us from the evil one."

You see, congregation, what Jesus instructed His disciples to pray is what the godly of the Old Testament prayed so often already. It's a prayer built on the realization that God's covenant people haven't the strength to stand in the face of the tests God sends, haven't the strength of themselves to stand when the Lord God sends false prophets among His people, lets Satan lay enticements before His own. Hence the petition: "Father, lead us not into temptation" because we

haven't the strength to withstand the tests You send us; for us, these tests are temptations that are too heavy for handle. "Lead us not into temptation," instead "deliver us from the evil One", deliver us from the devil and all evil forces, for "in ourselves we are so weak that we cannot stand even for a moment."

And No, beloved, let us not think that we are somehow stronger than were the people of the Old Testament or the disciples in Jesus' day. Sure, the Holy Spirit has been poured out, and so there is with the child of God a beginning of the obedience God requires of us (LD 44). And yes, we could even sit today with the Lord at His table – what a privilege. But none of that is to make us think that now we're above the allurements of temptations. There's a reason why Jesus told His New Testament church to pray that sixth petition. And there's a reason why Paul cried out his frustration with himself: "I can will what is right, but I cannot do it.... Wretched man that I am!" (Rom 7:18, 24). And there's a reason why James told *regenerated Christians* that one is "drawn away by his own desires" (1:14). We today –like our brothers of old- are *too weak* to stand in the face of the tests God puts on our path. That's why Jesus tells us to pray that sixth petition day after day.

I come to our last point:

3. The consequences of this prayer.

I trust, brothers and sisters, that the material of Dt 13 makes clear enough to us what the consequences of this petition are to be for us. If the people of Israel were "so weak that [they] could not stand even for a moment", and therefore had to kill whoever from their midst suggested worship of another god (be it spouse or child or brother in Israel), and if we today are no stronger than they, then it follows that we also are to "kill" whoever in our midst would encourage any form of sin. No, not that we today are to stone such a brother or spouse or friend, physically to take his life. The New Testament knows instead the gift of excommunication, that power given to the church whereby the church cuts out of her midst those who do not wish to serve the Lord. One of the reasons given in Scripture for this gift of excommunication is that the sin may not spread to the rest of the congregation (cf I Cor 5:6). That's also why the *Form for Excommunication* instructs us to treat the excommunicated sinner "as a Gentile and an outcast". For we can't handle the suggestions of the excommunicated –be they implicit or explicit- to condone his sins or even adopt them for ourselves. We ask God not to test us –we're too weak- and so it's hypocrisy to continue consciously associating with the sinner.

But if this is true, beloved, of the sinner who comes from *within* our own midst, *how much more will this be true of sinners from outside*. God's instruction in Dt 13 was to kill the brother in Israel who enticed to worship other gods; how obvious it was then that Israel was not to befriend the Canaanites or the Amorites or the Moabites. So too ourselves: if we're not to associate with the excommunicated since we are too weak to resist the direction of life they've chosen for themselves, how much more are we not to associate with the godless –and the godlessness- of the world around us! To ask God to please not test us because His tests are for us incredible temptations, and then at the same time to surround ourselves with the attractions of the world around us, is sheer hypocrisy; it makes a mockery of our prayer, makes it impossible for God to hear this petition.

Now you, beloved, can think for yourselves of the concrete implications of this petition for your own lives. God has given you a stereo, and that is a test; God would know whether you will serve Him with it, or use it to pipe into your car sounds that leads you away from the Lord. Think, then: how do you fare in that test-God-gave? Is God pleased with what comes out of your speakers? Or is the fact that you have a stereo too much of a temptation for you? But how then can you pray that sixth petition before you go away?

God has given you a computer, and that is a test: God would know whether you will you serve Him with it, or will you use it to play games that waste your time or that cause you to block your wife out of your life for the duration of the game. The computer is a test from God: God would know whether you will visit sites on the internet that you wish nobody to know about. Think, then: how do you fare in the test-God-gave? Is God pleased with the games you have on your machine? Is God pleased with the amount of time you spend with those games? Is God pleased with the sites you visit on the net? Or has the computer in fact become an idol, a source of escape and comfort from the pressures of life?

God tests to find out whether He and His commands is central to you or not. He tests, but we are inclined to evil, and

so pick it up as a temptation. That's why Jesus tells us to bring the matter repeatedly before God in prayer; "Father, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." But as we pray, we also need to work. And that's to say that we make it our business –as per Dt 13- to cut out of our lives whatever is for us a source of temptation. Your right hand causes you to sin? Cut it off! Your internet access is too much of temptation? Disconnect it. Your computer games too appealing? Take them off your hard drive, throw them out. Your mate keeps inviting you where you shouldn't go? End your friendship with him. Prayer requires action; prayer without action is hypocrisy.

Will God answer your sixth petition? Yes, beloved, yes. At the Lord's table today we were reminded how much the Lord has given for our salvation – even His own Son. If God gave that much, do you really think He will close His ears to your cries to help in the face of the temptations you experience? Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 31 March 2002.

" OUR ONLY COMFORT COMES FROM GOD'S MERCY IN CHRIST ."

Text:

Lord's Day 1

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

A. That I am not my own,[1] but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death,[2] to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ.[3] He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil.[5] He also preserves me in such a way[6] that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head;[7] indeed, all things must work together for my salvation.[8] Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life[9] and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him.[10]

[1] I Cor. 6:19, 20 [2] Rom. 14:7-9. [3] I Cor. 3:23; Tit. 2:14. [4] I Pet. 1:18, 19; I John 1:7; 2:2. [5] John 8:34-36; Heb. 2:14, 15; I John 3:8. [6] John 6:39, 40; 10:27-30; II Thess. 3:3; I Pet. 1:5. [7] Matt. 10:29-31; Luke 21:16-18. [8] Rom. 8:28. [9] Rom. 8:15, 16; II Cor. 1:21, 22; 5:5; Eph. 1:13, 14. [10] Rom. 8:14.

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

A. First, how great my sins and misery are;[1] second, how I am delivered from all my sins and misery;[2] third, how I am to be thankful to God for such deliverance.[3]

[1] Rom. 3:9, 10; I John 1:10. [2] John 17:3; Acts 4:12; 10:43. [3] Matt. 5:16; Rom. 6:13; Eph. 5:8-10; I Pet. 2:9, 10.

(Also [Article 17](#) Belgic Confession of Faith)

Scripture Reading:

Genesis 3:1-19

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 131:1,2,3

Hymn 11:1,2,3

Psalm 62:1,4

Psalm 30:2,3,7

Hymn 49:1,2

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

As humans together we all share certain experiences. For example, we all experience that life is broken; we all experience frustration, disappointment, sadness. In the face of these frustrations, disappointments and grief we want comfort, consolation, relief. That is human nature.

In the first Lord's Day of the Catechism you and I confess that we have only one comfort, and the comfort is that we belong to Jesus Christ. We confess this comfort with words first written down more than 400 years ago, but we repeat them as true for ourselves (despite the changes the world has seen in those 400 years) because these words speak of an Unchanging God. It is this God who alone supplies comfort in the midst of the frustrations and disappointments of a rapidly changing society.

I preach to you the Word of God about your only comfort in life and death. I summarize the sermon with this theme:

OUR ONLY COMFORT COMES FROM GOD'S MERCY IN CHRIST.

1. The need for this comfort.
2. The content of this comfort.
3. The condition to this comfort.

1. The need for this comfort.

We need, brothers and sisters, to consider first what comfort is. It will help us most, I think, if we can describe the word in terms of our daily lives. We all realize that we all want comfort, but the comfort we want changes with our circumstances and our age. A restless infant becomes quiet at mother's breast, we sang from Ps 131, and we appreciate the picture; at mother's breast the infant feels comfort. As the infant grows, the child receives comfort in different ways. Some moments curled up on mother's lap soothes an unrest in the child, comforts the child. She takes to bed a flannel clothe and clutches it tightly as she sucks her thumb; the feel of the cloth is a source of comfort to the child. The teenager seeks comfort as the toddler did, but wants it in a different way; instead of a moment on Mom's lap or that flannel cloth to bed, the teenager wants that secret hug from Mom, wants Dad to bring that good-night kiss and linger for a little talk. Comfort: an inner disquiet needs to be calmed, we want soothing in the face of turmoil.

That desire characterizes all people, of any age and every place. The people of our town are no different than we who sit in church this afternoon; like we, our neighbors too want comfort. So the people of our community go searching, experimenting with this and that and something else in an effort to find comfort. In our modern society, the one person seeks relief for a disquieted soul in love. Another seeks to drown his inner unrest in alcohol. Another seeks to escape his troubles by fleeing – be it through a trip courtesy of a drug or a trip courtesy of an airline. Again another seeks to find peace for his soul in what is commonly called religion, trying the beliefs and practices of Hindu meditation or Muslim strictness or Roman Catholic ritual. Still another goes to counseling, thinks to find answers from psychology. The list goes on; so many different techniques are pushed as effective means to receiving comfort in the face of turmoil.

One needs to understand, though, that all human efforts to quiet one's soul are bound to fail. They're all bound to fail because none of these human efforts reach down to the root cause of the disquiet and unrest we sense in our soul. For the cause of the misery inside is nothing else than *sin*. And the minute you speak of sin you speak of God, for sin at heart is not a misdeed against a neighbor; sin at heart is transgression against God. And God is not a figment of human imagination, a crutch for sanity in the midst of affliction; God is the Eternal One, the Almighty by whose will we exist. Step One to receiving comfort is to take God seriously. This is the God who created us in the beginning, and established with the whole human race His covenant of love. This is the God whom we spurned in Paradise, the God we offended by our decision to disobey His command and follow our own head instead. With that decision on our part in Paradise we not only snubbed God but also formed an unholy alliance with God's enemy the devil. So we provoked our Creator to holy anger. And that holy anger expresses itself in the troubles characterizing this fallen world.

You want comfort, then, in the face of life's troubles? Here, congregation, is *the* reality you must contend with. Pretend that the Almighty is not there, decide in your mind that God is small and has to satisfy our wishes, believe that the transgression of Paradise was limited to Adam and Eve alone so that there is no wrath from God against you, and you simply will not find comfort. Fundamental to receiving comfort, fundamental to appreciating the comfort God supplies, is the reality of *God's existence* and the reality that *we have rebelled against Him*; we have offended none less than *God Almighty*! That is why you cannot find comfort in drink or in drugs or in traveling or in lottery or in love or in psychology or in wealth; none of these take seriously the hard reality that "the cause of our ... hunger and misery is sin." And that's why in turn none of these take seriously the *God* against whom we have sinned, nor what *He* says about comfort.

You want, says the Catechism, to live and die in the joy of this comfort? Then you must, says Question & Answer 2, you must know first of all *how great your sins and misery are*. To find the right cure you first have to make the right diagnosis of the problem. And the problem is *sin*, the problem is that *we have offended God*.

Sin. We've offended God. As soon as our parents in Paradise disobeyed God's command and ate of the forbidden fruit, the peace and quiet-of-soul they'd enjoyed since the day of their creation was gone. They felt vulnerable, knew they were naked, and when God came they sought to hide themselves from the offended Almighty. See there, in pointed form, congregation, the connection between sin and inner unrest! And notice the consequences God imposed on their sin; God drove them out of the Garden-of-Plenty into a world of thorns and sweat. Instead of the peace that comes with abundance, they'd have anxiety to make ends meet. Instead of the joy that comes with the promise of new life, they'd fret about the pain of childbirth and the struggles of raising the child. In a word: restlessness, nervousness, anxiety, tension would characterize their lives.

We feel the results today. How we cry inside when a personal relationship is broken – be it marriage or friendship; it hurts and we want comfort. We cry inside on account of the anxieties and cares that come with raising children, and we feel inadequate to the task, failures; we want comfort, soothing. Deep in our heart of hearts we're frustrated that things at work don't go the way they should go, and again we want comfort. So the list of pains and concerns characterizing our personal lives goes on, the bits and pieces that give us disquiet-of-soul, unrest.... Life, death, and everything in between: real life is hard....

What, now, has God done? The almighty, eternal Creator we snubbed in Paradise, beloved, *saw our misery, saw our restlessness-of-soul, and reached out with the balm of comfort!* It's our second point:

2. The content of this comfort.

We think in terms of: *we* need to reach out to God to receive comfort. In so doing, we put the onus on ourselves, as in: *we* need to find comfort. But the Scriptures, brothers and sisters, put the matter the other way around! The God of the Bible does not send us on a search to look for comfort; no, the almighty, eternal Creator of heaven and earth portrays Himself in Scripture as *reaching out to people trapped in misery and disquiet, and giving comfort*. Gen 3:8 does not show us people looking for God; it shows us instead people fleeing from God – for "Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden." Over against that is vs 9: "Then the Lord God called to Adam and said to him, 'Where are you?'" In the words of the *Belgic Confession*: "Our gracious God in His marvelous wisdom and goodness set out to seek man when he trembling fled from Him." And what message did God have for people? It's summarized in the protevangel of Gen 3:15: while we deserved damnation, when we deserved the full load of God's eternal wrath against our sin, God promised to send His only Son to bear that wrath in our place. The Seed of the woman would battle the seed of the serpent, and yes, that battle would involve injury to the Seed of the woman but death to the seed of the serpent. It all boils down to this: Christ Jesus on Good Friday would take the place of sinners so that God's wrath against us would fall on Him. More, on Good Friday Christ Jesus would still the wrath of God, with as blessed result that there is no wrath left from God against His people. That is the *comfort* God gave to Adam and Eve directly after the fall, a comfort true for all whom the Father has given to the Son. It's of this comfort that we speak in Article 17: God came to man after the fall, we confess, and "He comforted him with the promise that He would give him His Son, born of woman, to bruise the head of the serpent and to make man blessed."

What, then, is the comfort that God gives to sinners in the midst of life's turmoil? His comfort, congregation, is this: *His wrath against us is poured out on Another so that we get no wrath!*

It's material with which most of us are very familiar. And exactly because we're familiar with it is the danger great that we put this gospel on the shelf and fail to work with it in the dirt and dust of our daily lives. Things don't go the way we wish, and we say in ourselves: God must be angry with me, otherwise these calamities wouldn't happen. *And we forget to apply God's comfort to our souls in the midst of life's troubles*. Think: if on the cross God poured out on Jesus Christ the wrath that ought to fall on us on account of our sins, and if Christ was successful in bearing that wrath so that He quieted God's anger against us, *what is the result for you?* Surely, beloved, it is this: *there is no wrath from God left for you*. But why, then, do we conclude when we lose our job, or a friendship falls apart, or a loved one dies, or the business fails, or the children won't listen, why do we conclude that 'God must be angry with me'? If Christ died to pay for our sins, why do we let ourselves think that others are better than I, for they experience God's grace while I cop God's anger.... And with that thought the restlessness-of-soul inside grows bigger, and we become more and more anxious.... And as the restlessness grows, the temptation increases too to find calm for ourselves in the solutions of this world – be it the bottle or medicine or a trip away or a new relation God doesn't want, etc. And the

comfort confessed in Lord's Day 1 stays at a distance..., remote, unreal, a dream....

No, beloved, in the midst of our trials and tears we need to take God seriously. I mean: we need to work with His promise to send Christ into this world to take away His wrath on your sin. You say Christ was successful on Good Friday? Then *draw the consequence!* If Christ was successful, then there is no anger from God on you anymore! But if there is no anger from God upon you, then the trials characterizing your life are *not* expressions of God's wrath upon you! What they are instead? Remember: the God who sent His Son to pay for your sin has made you His child-by-covenant, and so made Himself your Father. As a Father, His care for His children is perfect, 100% perfect. If He in wisdom determines that you need a period of difficulty –be it longer or shorter- then who are you to criticize that?! No, congregation, the adversity He gives you is trouble-given-in-love! Then certainly, we may have so many questions about the ins and outs of God's decision to deal with us in the way things went this past week, but when all is said and done no human mind –not ours either- can fathom the heights and depths of God's wisdom. He gave His Son to take away God's wrath against my sin, and so there is no wrath from God left for me – *let that be enough!* More, the Almighty has made Himself my Father, and now supplies for my needs perfectly – *let that be more than enough!* In the words of our Lord's Day: "He ... 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." Glorious is the promise, how comforting!

And even that's not all. For this same God I offended with the fall in Paradise gives me His Holy Spirit to dwell in my heart, and through this Spirit He "assures me of eternal life." My life today may include all kinds of trials and disappointments, but tomorrow, when Christ comes back, the tears will be replaced with laughter, sorrow with joy! Today already I may be sure: Christ paid for my sins, and therefore my future shall be an eternity of God's gracious blessing. There need be no disquiet in my soul on the point; today my Father in Jesus Christ assures me of life everlasting.

Comfort? Life has so much unrest, so many things happen day by day that make us uneasy inside. But God, brothers and sisters, has *come to you* with words of consolation so that you may have peace in your heart. Such is His love for you that He would hug you with His Word, enfold you in His everlasting arms so that your soul may be at peace, quieted as a child at its mother's breast – today and always.

Now a question remains: is this comfort for everybody? Can I freely say to you that the glorious comfort God provided in Jesus Christ is really true for *you* in *your* circumstances? That's our third point:

3. The condition to this comfort.

The correct solution to a problem, we said, requires that one first make the correct diagnosis. The Lord God tells us in His Word that the correct diagnosis to the problem of our inner restlessness is the reality of our sin and so our having offended Him. He tells us further that the correct solution to this problem is His gift of His Son; Christ died to pay for our sins and so still the wrath of God against us. But now the question is: *do you agree with God?* That is, do you agree with His diagnosis of the problem, and do you agree with His solution?

The point, brothers and sisters, is this. You can find the material we confess in Lord's Day 1 very interesting, and so put it on yonder shelf to admire. But that way it all stays distant from your life. You need to *respond* to this material. God says that the cause of the miseries you experience in this life is sin. Well now, what do you think of that? God says that your sin –be it of the beginning with Adam and Eve in Paradise *or* your sins of today- provoke the anger of your eternal Creator. OK, what do you think of that? Will you take God for real, as the almighty who in fact is able – and does!- reach into your life to express His anger on your sin? Or will you choose to ignore God, or belittle His hatred of sin – and so conclude that the troubles of this life are simply the cold reality we can drown with alcohol or escape with trips or polish out of existence with psychology?

You wonder why I ask you these questions? I ask you, congregation, because the glorious comfort of Lord's Day 1 does not belong to each and every person willy-nilly. When the Catechism in Question & Answer 2 asks what "you need to *know* in order to live and die in the joy of this comfort," the Catechism uses the word 'know' to mean much more than head knowledge. Knowledge properly used leads to *action*. That's the point here too. To know your sin and misery leads to action, action of humility and acknowledging your sins. To enjoy the comfort God gives, there is a

condition you need to fulfill, and that condition is that you *acknowledge* your sins and your sinfulness, *acknowledge* that you have offended none less than the almighty Creator. This is material that you need to make very personal, material you need to embrace as true-for-yourself.

That's true not only of God's *diagnosis* of the problem; we need to make personal and embrace as true also God's *solution* to the problem. That He sent His Son to bear our sins in our place cannot be simply an interesting conversation piece, but has to be our own personal conviction - as in: though *I* provoked God's wrath through my sin, He sent His Son so pay the penalty I deserve *so that there is no wrath from God for me anymore*. You need to acknowledge not just that God came with a word of salvation, but you need to acknowledge that God came with this word *for you*. That is why, my brother and sister, I put the matter to each of you personally: what is your personal response to God's diagnosis of the problem and God's solution to the problem? Do you find it interesting, intriguing, but ultimately something that belongs on the shelf, at a safe distance from your daily struggles? *Or* do you find God's diagnosis and God's solution thoroughly exciting so that you delight in what God has done for you? The question is so important because receiving God's embrace in Christ is the only way to find comfort in the midst of life's trials and tears.

You will say that you want some assurance that God really meant His comfort for you? You will say that Yes, you agree with the diagnosis, but No, you don't dare to claim the solution as true for yourself?

But has God, beloved, not promised this comfort *to you*? Make here no mistake, beloved, He has! I refer now to the fact that He established His covenant of grace with you in your baptism long ago. There He promised to be your Father and so supply you with all good and avert all evil. There He promised to wash yours sins away in the blood of His Son so that there would be no wrath for you; you'd instead be righteous before Him. There He promised to give you His Holy Spirit so that on the last day you'd appear with spot or wrinkle before the Judge of all the world. You would say that the diagnosis is true for you, but the solution is for others? I tell you, beloved, you are wrong! God claimed you for Himself in His covenant with you, and so laid His solution to your misery on the table for you to enjoy. Because He did that, do not, *do not* set this gospel at a distance from yourself as interesting and maybe true for someone else but not for you. *That is unbelief!* Such is God's love for you that He would give *you* comfort in the trials of life, such is His love that He would quiet *your* soul in the midst of all the disquiet that comes from the brokenness of this life. But it's a reality you have to *believe*; that's the condition to enjoying this comfort.

We all want comfort, want it so much. The eternal God against whom we sinned in the beginning and sin every day, *has come to us in Jesus Christ* with His glorious comfort. He's claimed us for Himself so that we belong to Jesus Christ our faithful Savior. He's claimed us for Himself so that the Almighty has become our caring Father who supplies our every need perfectly. He's claimed us for Himself so that through His Holy Spirit we're assured, in the midst of today's sorrows, of life eternal in the presence of God Most High. Comfort? There it is, beloved, in all its glory. Believe it, work with it, enjoy it! Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 2 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 7 April 2002.

" THE DEPTHS OF OUR SIN AND MISERY PROMPTS US TO DELIGHT THE MORE IN GOD'S REDEMPTION IN JESUS CHRIST ."

Text:

Lord's Day 2

3.Q. From where do you know your sins and misery?

A. From the law of God.[1]

[1] Rom. 3: 20;

4. Q. What does God's law require of us? A. 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.[1] This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.[2]

[1] Deut. 6:5. [2] Lev. 19:18.

5. Q. Can you keep all this perfectly?

A. No,[1] I am inclined by nature to hate God and my neighbour.[2]

[1] Rom. 3:10, 23; 1 John 1:8, 10. [2] Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Jer. 17:9; Rom. 7:23; 8:7; Eph. 2:3; Tit. 3:3.

Scripture Reading:

Romans 3:9-20

Matthew 22:34-40

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 36:1,2

Psalm 42:7

Psalm 53:2,5

Psalm 10:2,3,7

Hymn 24:2,3,4,5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Printed in bold letters above our Lord's Day for today are the words: "the First Part", and then the words: "Our Sin and Misery." That's because the Catechism breaks down into three distinct parts, according to the threefold division mentioned in Question & Answer 2 of Lord's Day 1. This First Part on Our Sin and Misery is brief –only three Lord's Days- but its topic serious and (we find) depressing; we'd rather not talk about 'Our Sin and Misery', would rather talk about redemption. But here we are, with Lord's Day 2 we have to plunge into this section on Our Sins and Misery, and so we brace ourselves for depressing, discouraging material....

Yet we are in error, my brothers and sisters, if we choose to see the material of the First Part as depressing and discouraging. Question & Answer 2 of Lord's Day 1 had asked about how you can enjoy the comfort of Question & Answer 1, and told us that to enjoy this comfort we must "know" "first, how great my sins and misery are." You see, the Catechism puts a link between keen awareness of our sin and misery and delighting in the redemption God has

given us in Christ. That, then, is the purpose of this First Part of the Catechism about "Our Sin and Misery": we take a good look at 'Our Sin and Misery' so that we may rejoice the more in the deliverance God has given us in Jesus Christ.

And Yes, that Sin and Misery is miserable indeed. And therefore our gratitude to God for the deliverance He gave is the greater. I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE DEPTHS OF OUR SIN AND MISERY PROMPTS US TO DELIGHT THE MORE IN GOD'S REDEMPTION IN JESUS CHRIST.

1. The depths of our misery.
2. The redemption from this misery.

1. The depths of our misery.

The Lord God in the beginning created the human race and established with us His covenant of grace; in Paradise He was our caring and faithful Father so that life was only joy and satisfaction. We, however, threw that happiness and satisfaction away with our fall into sin, broke the covenant with God and established a bond with Satan. Well now, what's it like on Satan's side? How are we to characterize life-after-the-fall?

Over the years, people have supplied numerous answers to that question. Philosophers and artists over the generations have put into words and onto canvas what we all experience: life after the fall is broken, is painful. Sure, everyone experiences moments of happiness, but when all is said and done life is *characterized* by suffering, by sadness, by trouble – misery. Pain and death, war and sickness, bullying and abuse are part and parcel of this earthly life, whether we like it or not. The world's big thinkers agree with the little man of the street.... And what to do about this brokenness? There's those who have said that we should just laugh the brokenness and misery off, and make the most of the opportunities that be (Alexander Dumas), and there's others have tried to be much more profound about it, but the long and short is that we just have to put up with life's brokenness.

Now, there's so very much truth in what the philosophers and authors and artists and musicians say about life. Yet when all is said and down, brothers and sisters, their analysis is inadequate because they operate from a closed worldview. They look at life without taking God into account, look at life as if there is no God. Then you end up with people talking about people, end up with people's analysis about people. And we all know that nobody wants to be critical of self.... To get an objective analysis about life after the fall into sin, we need the opinion of someone outside our own circle, need input from the Creator Himself – perfect and holy as He is. So in our Lord's Day we ask "from where do you know your sins and misery," and we answer: "from the law of God."

We understand: this starting point of our Lord's Day is a statement of faith, implies that we take as our starting point the existence of God and the fact that He spoken to men in His Word. More, with this statement of faith comes an attitude of submission and humility; we accept from the start the authority of the Word of God, accept that God's analysis of our circumstance is far more penetrating and accurate than any human analysis could ever be.

What, now, does God say about our sins and misery? To answer that question for us the Lord God does not place us in an Afghani refugee camp for some months so that we might learn to empathize with the misery of orphans and the homeless. He does not put us in the West Bank either for some weeks so that we might experience the terror that comes with suicide bombers walking the streets. Nor does He put us in an AIDS clinic or make us live with Perth's street kids for some time either in order to spell out for us our Sins and Misery. Why not? That's because a refugee camp or an AIDS clinic or being a street kid are all *incidental* circumstances that do not characterize the lives of *all* people – and certainly not ours in our quiet and prosperous corner of the globe. The Lord God does not confront us with the sins and misery of the Afghanis or the Israelis or the AIDS patient; He wants to confront us with *our* sins and misery. He would have us know that *within our own homes*, in the personal lives of each of us, there is such rot and such corruption that our circumstance is more miserable than we ourselves care to admit. To drive that point home to us the Lord asks our attention for His law – a law God has given to *each* of us.

The law. We hear the term, and our thoughts go to the Ten Commandments. But when the Catechism, brothers and

sisters, uses the term 'law of God' in our Lord's Day, the Catechism is not thinking of the Ten Commandments; it's thinking instead of the whole Bible. That's clear from the passage we read from Rom 3. In the vss 10-18 Paul quoted numerous texts from the Old Testament, notably from the Psalms and from Isaiah, and then says that "whatever the law says it says to those who are under the law" (vs 19). Paul's sudden reference to 'law' here is not a change of topic (as if he's moving from the books of Psalms and Isaiah to the Ten Commandments), but with the word 'law' Paul captures the whole Old Testament from which he drew his quotations in the vss 10-18.

Well now, the Catechism wants to know what God's law requires of us. The reference is, then, to the whole Bible – a book we all have. In *the whole of His revelation*, then, what, at heart, does God say about us-after-our-fall? He created us; what is His analysis of His creatures – of you and me?

In answer to that question, the Catechism draws our attention to Jesus' words in Mt 22. More, the Catechism says of Jesus' words that herewith Jesus gives a "summary" of the law. To understand the word 'summary' here, I need to take you for a moment to that passage from Mt 22.

We read together the vss 34-40. But the 'color' of the passage is set back in vs 15. In envy of Jesus' popularity the Pharisees "plotted how they might entangle [Jesus] in His talk" – says that verse. That is: they wanted to make a public fool of Jesus so that the crowds might desert Him. Their first question, about taxes to Caesar, did not entangle Jesus. Neither did the second question, about the woman who married seven husbands and who would her husband be in the resurrection. The passage we read is the Jews' third attempt to make Jesus say something wrong. Their question (through the mouth of a lawyer): "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" Bear in mind: the purpose of the question is to make Jesus trip.

And yes, it's a devious question. The thing is that the Pharisees had added up all the commandments God had given to Israel, and came to a total of 613 laws. They also thought they discovered conflicts between these laws. For example, God had prohibited any work on the Sabbath; that's the fourth commandment. But God had also commanded that when you see your neighbor's ox walking down the road, you are to bring that ox back to your neighbor. Suppose now that on a Sabbath your neighbor's ox had escaped its paddock and was walking down the road in front of your place. What were you to do? Bring it back? But that would put you in violation of the Sabbath command.... You see the problem: obeying the one command meant you had to disobey the other.... So: which one do you obey? To answer that question, the Pharisees put the 613 commands into an order of more important and less important, and the point was that in the event of a conflict between two commands you had to keep the more important command and let the less important one go. We understand that putting these commands into some sort of order-of-importance would generate enormous discussion and disagreement. Which command should be No. 1? And which one No. 10? And which one number 98? They come to Jesus with that first question: which is the great commandment in the law? That is: which of God's 613 commands do you think should be on the top of the list?

In the light of that question, congregation, Jesus' answer is so very intriguing. For with His answer Jesus does not speak only about command No. 1, as in which command has the greatest priority. Rather, with His answer the Lord Jesus reaches underneath the surface of every command found in Scripture, reaches to the *attitude* God wants from people, the attitude that compels the fact of obedience as well as the manner of obedience to all God's commands. That *attitude*, says Jesus, is *love*. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." We understand: that attitude overcomes the dilemma the Pharisees had seen between the Sabbath command and the command about bringing the neighbor's ox back. And therefore Jesus' answer also overcame the question of which command should be No. 1. It's not a question of which command is most important; it's a question of what lives in your heart.

But with His answer, brothers and sisters, Jesus also pointed up how hopelessly warped the heart of every fallen person is, and so spelled out how great our sins and misery are. For: *what is love*? Our natural inclination is to define this word in terms of our experience. So we say that love is affection for another, or is the warm feeling you have for another. Love is the emotion that makes your heart go thump-thump-thump in that exciting way. Maybe more: ever since the rise of the hippie culture in the 60's love is associated with sex, with passion. Just think of the phrase 'make love'. So the word has come to include a strong element of selfishness. 'I love you' is one way of saying 'I need you,'

of saying: 'you've got something I want.'

We need to remember, though, that *Jesus* used the term 'love'. We do wrong to load the word He used with the meaning the term has in our society. We need to ask instead what *Jesus* understood with the word love. That's to say: what does *God* say love is? The answer to that question is given most plainly in John's first letter. Let's take our Bibles and read 1 John 4:7-11. **[Read]**.

Notice first John's inspired word in vs 8, that "God is love." Then John continues in vs 9 to describe what the love of God is. The love that characterizes God, says John, was demonstrated when "God sent His only son into the world that we might live through Him." He adds depth to that sentence in vs 10 when he says that "love" is not "that we loved God," but love is instead that God "loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins." The term 'propitiation' is one of these gems that catch a glorious doctrine in one word. Propitiation: the word means literally 'atoning sacrifice', and the point is that we deserved God's wrath on account of our sins but God put Christ between Himself and us so that God's wrath landed on Christ instead of on us – with as result that He copped what we deserve, satisfied God's justice, and we get to go free. That one word, then, catches the gospel in a nutshell.

What now is love? The Father and the Son had been together in the glory of heaven from all eternity, and delighted in each other's company. But God's love for sinners is that God *sent* His only Son out of the glories of heaven, sent Him to this sin-filled earth with the mandate to die on the cross of Calvary in order to pay for sin. *That*, says John, is love. Love is not simply an emotion, a tender feeling of affection to a special someone. Love is *self-emptying for the benefit of the unworthy*. "God is love," says John, and the point is that God has demonstrated for us what love is, demonstrated it by emptying Himself, giving up His dearest possession to be an atoning sacrifice for the salvation of the unworthy. Please have that fixed in your mind, beloved: love has no room for self! Love is not self-centered; love is rather *self-emptying*. That is the example of love that the Lord God Himself has given to us, an example of love from which we benefit so enormously – it's the cause of our salvation!

Now the Son of God whom God *in His love* sent to earth is asked to tell which is the greatest commandment of the law, which command should be on top of the list. Jesus' reaches behind God's commandments to the *attitude* God demands of people, and says that this attitude must be *love*. *Jesus* can speak of this attitude, for *He was Himself the living expression* of God's love. God loved, sent His Son, and that is to say that God *emptied Himself*, denied Himself the pleasure of the Son's company, and did so for the benefit of the unworthy, the salvation of sinners. *This* Son says that the attitude God demands is love. What does Jesus mean with the term? Surely He means that *people are to empty themselves for God and for each other even as God emptied Himself for the benefit of the unworthy*.

Now we say in our Catechism that Jesus catches in Mt 22 the attitude, the heart, the essence of what God requires of us in His law, in His Word. We hear this summary from time to time in church after the reading of the Ten Commandments. Now what do you think, beloved? *How well do you fare in showing love to God and neighbor?* We understand that love is not kindness, and love is not being decent to each other, and love is not being polite to each other either; love is that you *empty yourself for the benefit of the unworthy*. Tell me: do you think that you show that love to your spouse? Do you think that you show that love to your children or to your parents? Do you think you show that radical self-emptying to your neighbor – be he the boss at work or the fellow student at school or the chap across the road or the brother sitting in the next pew?

Let me take the question further. God's love involved self-emptying so that we might be filled. There's *action* there, doing something concrete –at expense of self- to advantage the other. Concretely then: is your life characterized by actions of self-emptying resulting in benefits to those around you? Does you spouse see in you every day that you put yourself last to advantage your other half? Do your children or your parents see in you every day that you put yourself last in order to give benefit to your children, those parents – whether they are worthy or not? Does your boss, do your workmates, see you as a person who thinks last of self, who gives the self to do good to the other – whether believer or unbeliever? *That* is the essence of God's whole revelation, it's the fine point upon which Jesus lays His finger in Mt 22.

Again, *we* could answer that question on the basis of what *we* feel about our performance - and come away reasonably satisfied. But the question is not how *people* evaluate each other. For again, we are too involved to be objective; it's

just not in our fallen selves to give ourselves a failing mark. The question is how *God* evaluates us. *And His evaluation is scathing!* Recall that passage we read from Romans 3. Paul says in vs 9 that "both Jews and Greeks ... are all under sin," and that's to say that all are equally depraved and inclined to all evil. Obey the drift of God's revelation, show the love that God has shown to men by seeking us out and giving us salvation? Not at all; all are under sin. How Paul knows that all are depraved and desperately evil? Paul has read through the Scripture God has given, and now in chap 3:10-18 gives a whole string of quotes from Old Testament Scripture to prove how *loveless* people are. Lord for God? Vs 11: "there is none who seeks after God," says Ps 53. Paul quotes from Ps 36 too: "there is no fear of God before their eyes " (vs 18). And love for the neighbor? Vs 13: "their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit," reads Paul in Ps 5. More, "the poison of asps is under their lips," says Ps 140. Is 59 agrees: "Their feet are swift to shed blood" (vs 15). People characterized by love, emptying of self for the benefit of the neighbor? Whole-hearted self-denial to pursue the neighbor's well-being and the glory of God the Creator? None of it, says Paul, none of it! God has evaluated human life after the fall, and He declares that life is characterized by lies, by slander, by killing each other....

And No, brothers and sisters, do not now travel in your thoughts to the Middle East, as if the lies and slander and killing each other characterizes only that part of the world. God would have us know that this selfishness characterizes each one of *us*; our own midst, our own families, our own persons overflow with the selfishness that prompts lies, slander, killing of the neighbor. Love is what God wants, total self-emptying for the benefit of the unworthy, but *what He wants we don't give*. So life is miserable and we experience it to be so. How many tears, how many sleepless nights, how many headaches have you experienced because you were on the receiving end of someone's slander, someone's hate?! How much misery there is! And then to recall that we see imperfectly! God sees the *depth* of our loveless-ness with infinitely far greater clarity than we could ever imagine.

God wants love, perfect love as He loved, wants us to love God and neighbor *as He loved us in the face of our fall into sin*, to love with all our heart and soul and strength. Now we realize something of the depths of our misery. For this is a love we simply cannot produce! With various rules in society we can make life more tolerable and even reasonably comfortable, but when we look in the eyes of God as to what He demands of us ... our courage fails us, for we see something of the infinite depths of our sins and misery.... We can't love God as He wants, we are so infinitely far removed from the perfection with which God made us. Our actions are characterized by self-love – and that's called hate for God and neighbor.... Woe, woe is me.... How desperately I need a Savior!

And see: God supplies *redemption from this misery!*

2. *The redemption from this misery.*

Truly, that's the glorious gospel of Lord's Day 2! For who, tell me, who is the speaker in this Lord's Day? Who is the 'I' of Question & Answer 5? No, it's not just every Tom, Dick and Harry of town. Certainly, every Tom, Dick and Harry of town is inclined by nature to hate God and neighbor alike, and each ought to admit it. But not every Tom, Dick and Harry of town in fact *admit* this depravity, dare to take the words of this Lord's Day on his lips. But here's the marvelous work of God: *you do take this confession on your lips!* You do acknowledge your depravity, do acknowledge that by nature you cannot love in the Scriptural sense of the word. How come you acknowledge it? That, beloved, is because the Holy Spirit has worked that conviction in you. And He hasn't worked in you only the conviction of sin and misery; He has worked in you also the faith by which you embrace that the Lord Jesus Christ has died to pay for your sins. That's why you and I could take on our lips last week those wonderful words of Lord's Day 1: I "belong with body and soul, both in life and 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." As Christians, persons redeemed in Jesus' blood, we look back at the miserable bondage-to-Satan from which God in Christ saved us, and we marvel not only at the fact of redemption but also at the wonders that God would give His Son to save people *as lost as we were*. Freedom is never so sweet as after you've spent some time locked away. Deliverance through Jesus' blood doesn't move to hearty gratitude unless you appreciate what you've been delivered from. God demands love, we could not love - how lost we were!- *and yet God gave His Son for our redemption* – what glorious love that is!

We live after the fall into sin, live after we've tasted God's love in Jesus Christ. Is life better as a result of receiving this redemption? Or is the misery as real as it ever was, the loveless-ness as acute as Paul describes in Rom 3? Notice,

brothers and sisters, what we say in Question & Answer 5: "I am inclined *by nature* to hate God and my neighbor." But by the grace of God the children of God do not live "by nature" anymore! Those redeemed through the blood of Christ on Calvary have also been renewed by the Holy Spirit so that we are "heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him" – as we confessed last week in Lord's Day 1. And that is simply to say, beloved, that the selfishness that characterizes the person in Satan's camp does not characterize us anymore; by God's grace the redeemed are renewed so that we reflect the love that God has shown in Jesus Christ. Reflect it perfectly? Find total self-emptying in the lives of God's people? No, beloved, not yet. Recall Lord's Day 44: even the holiest have only a small beginning of the obedience God requires. *But the beginning is real!* So you can see in the Christian *something* of the love God has shown in Christ, can see a beginning of the self-emptying for the benefit of the other.

So the command is there, brothers and sisters, to go and show that love, to God and neighbor alike – be that neighbor in the home or outside, in the church or outside. The command is there to empty yourself in the strength of the Holy Spirit for the good of the other. And true, time and again you will be bitterly disappointed in yourself, frustrated because you do not obey the law of God as God demands. Then you see something again of the Sin and Misery that remains, and so you cry out your despair with Paul: "wretched man that I am; who will deliver me from this body of death?!" But tasting something of the depths of our abiding misery does not lead to total despair, for we confess with Paul too that God Most High has *loved* us, has given His Son to take away *these ongoing sins* and so give us salvation.

Shall we despair in the face of the sinfulness and selfishness that remains? No, beloved, we shall not! Instead, every time we see something of the depths of our misery –and that's every day– we'll delight the more at the glorious heights of the redemption God has freely given in Christ *to such unworthy sinners as we are!* And that's incentive to keep showing the *same love* to others – worthy or not. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 3 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 14 April 2002.

" CHRIST CAME TO SAVE NOT THE RIGHTEOUS BUT SINNERS ."

Text:

Lord's Day 3

6. Q. Did God, then, create man so wicked and perverse?

A. No, on the contrary, God created man good[1] and in His image,[2] that is, in true righteousness and holiness,[3] so that he might rightly know God His Creator,[4] heartily love Him, and live with Him in eternal blessedness to praise and glorify Him.[5]

[1] Gen. 1:31. [2] Gen. 1:26, 27. [3] Eph. 4:24. [4] Col. 3:10. [5] Ps. 8.

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

A. From the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise,[1] for there our nature became so corrupt[2] that we are all conceived and born in sin.[3]

[1] Gen. 3. [2] Rom. 5:12, 18, 19. [3] Ps. 51:5.

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

A. Yes,[1] unless we are regenerated by the Spirit of God.[2]

[1] Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Job 14:4; Is. 53:6. [2] John 3:3-5.

Scripture Reading:

Genesis 1:20-31

Hebrews 2:5-9

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 33:1,2

Hymn 54:1,4,5

Hymn 52:3

Psalm 8:1,2,3,4,5

Psalm 144:1,2

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

What is a person? Better: what are *you*? How you answer that question determines what you will do with your children, your parents, your neighbor, yourself. Think it through: if there is no principle difference between a human and a rat, there's essentially no reason why we don't treat baby people the way we treat baby rats..., and old people the way we'd treat an old dog.... Mr Howard's recent decision in relation to human stem cell research has its roots in a certain view on people, and so does Dr Antinori's work in cloning humans.

In our Lord's Day today we repeat after God what He has told us about people. We learn from Scripture that the Lord has given an astonishingly high status to people, made people rulers over all His creation. This honored identity implies that people, by God's decree, are much too special to be treated as a rat is treated, or a dog. But to see that point requires that one embrace the reality of God's existence, and therefore the accuracy of His Word about creation. That, though, is something the sinful human heart refuses to do – unless the Holy Spirit regenerates us.

That sinful human heart. We'd confessed in Lord's Day 1 that to enjoy the comfort of God's saving work in Jesus Christ we first need to know how great our sins and misery are. As we busy ourselves today with Lord's Day 3, we'll see more of our wretchedness. But please remember, congregation, the purpose of the Lord's Day: we confess this material –critical of human nature though it is- so that we might delight the more in what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

CHRIST CAME TO SAVE NOT THE RIGHTEOUS BUT SINNERS.

1. How God created us.
2. What we became.
3. How God restores us.

1. How God created us.

Last week with Lord's Day 2, we acknowledged that we know our sins and misery only from the word of God. God's demand of us is that we *love* Him with all our heart and soul and mind, and love our neighbor as ourselves. Love: the Lord Himself showed us what that was when He gave His only Son for our salvation (I John 4:9f). Love: that is that one empties oneself for the benefit of the unworthy. This self-emptying is the obedience God demands of us, but *we can't produce it*. Such is our depravity that instead of loving as God loved us, we are inclined by nature to hate both God and the neighbor.

That brings us to Lord's Day 3. For the natural question now is this: *how come* we can't love? *How come* we hate? "Did God, then, create man so wicked and perverse?"

We need to notice first of all the Catechism's reference to creation. I draw your attention to it because today's world has embraced the theory of evolution. With the theory of evolution, people have also found an explanation for human frailties. It's said that weaknesses and self-willed natures are simply part of man's evolution; as we develop further we'll get better, outgrow our inclinations for evil. But see, the Catechism doesn't so much as entertain the possibility of evolution. And no, that's not because evolution was not known in the days the Catechism was written; Greek philosophers accepted the doctrine of evolution long before Jesus Christ was born. But the Catechism doesn't mention it simply because the Catechism takes God's word at face value. Anyone who reads Genesis 1 at face value must conclude that the Lord God created this world in six days, created also the human race. That is the plain and obvious meaning of what the Lord has told us in His word. We did not evolve over the span of millions of years; we are not well-developed monkeys.

Admittedly, this is a question of faith. The believer says with Lord's Day 3 that God created the human race. The believer will say that because he accepts what God says in His Word. He accepts what God says in His Word because he believes first of all that God is real. You see, that's the root of the discussion. Deny the existence of God, remove God from your worldview, and you have to find another explanation for the existence of the world. Though the evolution theory is impossible to hold by scientific standards, millions today hold to evolution as the correct explanation of our origin – and hold to it simply because they refuse to accept the reality of God. But accept that God is real, include God in your view of the world, and you have no problem accepting what He says in Genesis 1. That's the bottom issue: do you take God for real, or not?

The church of God takes God for real, and so accepts what He says about the origin of the human race too. Well now, did God create man wicked and perverse? The fact that we can't love as God commands us to love: is that because God made a poor job in creating us?

The believer answers that question with a categorical No. Answer 6: "No, on the contrary, God created man good and in His image." It's what we read in Gen 1:31: "God saw all that He had made, and indeed, it was very good." That's to say: there were no flaws in God's handiwork; the human race was perfect and therefore able to love according to the

demands God set.

In fact, Genesis 1 draws out that God made the human race to be unique amongst all His creatures. Genesis 1 had told us that on each day of creation the Lord God spoke a word, and as soon as He spoke light appeared, the stars came to be, trees and flowers decorated the field, etc. In the words of Ps 33: "He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast" – instantly (vs 9). But did you notice when we read Gen 1: after God finished creating the animals on the sixth day, there's a change in the pattern. With the creation of man God did not speak so that "it was done." Instead, after God finished creating the earth with its oceans and fish and forests and animals –says vs 26- God had a discussion within Himself. Vs 26: "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image.'" The word 'us' draws out the fact that after the creation of the animals the three Persons of the holy Trinity discussed among themselves what else God's creation required. Every God had made so far was "good", but, Triune God decided, His world still needed a special creature made "in Our image, according to Our likeness." This special creature would receive a special task; he would "have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle...." The fact that God relates a discussion within Himself about this last creature points up that there is something very special, something unique about this creature. This uniqueness is drawn out further when we observe how God made man. Instead of using a word of command to call man into existence, the Lord God –says Gen 2:7- collected soil and fashioned this soil into the shape of a man, "and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life." Special man is, different from the other creatures God made earlier in the week of creation.

For us modern people, this is a point we need to bear in mind. The matter speaks directly to the Prime Minister's decision in relation to stem cell research. You will know what the decision involved. Though he insisted on particular restrictions to the research, Mr Howard has given the green light to scientists to take a fertilized human egg and do research on the stem cells – all with a view to finding cures for such debilitating ailments as Alzheimer's and Parkinson's Disease. The goal is surely laudable. But what is the philosophy behind this research? It's this: mankind is one animal among thousands of species evolved over the eons. Since we come from the same living matter as frogs and rats and dogs, we can do with people the same as we can do with frogs and dogs. We all know that a fertilized egg will grow and eventually enter this world as a complete baby – be it a baby rat or a baby pig or a baby dog. That one does research on the stem cells of baby rats is one thing; a Christian cannot object to learning what there is to learn, and eventually throwing out the wasted cells. That is part of having dominion over the birds of the air, the fish of the sea and the beasts of the earth. But here's the question: may you do the same with human stem cells? To discard an animal –young though it is; just a newly fertilized egg- is one thing; may you discard a human also – young though the human is?

Society around us says: Yes. Why? Because, says society, there is no principle difference between a human and a rat. For we're both animals on the evolutionary chain, be it that the human is more developed than the rat.... See, that's the underlying principle implicit in the stem cell debate: humans are animals, in principle no different than animals. So, what you can do to a rat or a dog you can do to a man also. If it's OK to take the fertilized egg of your pet poodle for research (and destroy it when you're finished), then it's OK to take the fertilized egg of your wife for research – and destroy it when you're done....

But the Christian says: God tells us in His Word that people are not animals, tells us instead that people are special, unique. So you can't necessarily do with a human what you can do with a rat. That is true in relation to stem cell research, and it's equally true in relation to cloning. Just as with abortion and euthanasia, stem cell research and cloning of people crosses a line forbidden by God's word. *People are not animals.*

Directly connected to the fact that God made the human race special is the *task* God gave to mankind. That task is caught in the phrase 'image of God'. The phrase does not mean that the last creature God made actually looks like God. The point is instead that this final creature was created to reflect what God was like, to represent God. Notice how Genesis 1 weaves the notion of 'image of God' together with the concept of 'dominion'. That is: man was to rule over God's creation, and his manner of ruling was to image how God would rule over creation. As God would rule over His handiwork with love and care, with justice and holiness, so man was to rule over that creation with love and care, with justice and holiness – and so image to all the world what God was like. Here you see again something of the wonderfully high status God gave to man. God did not create the human race to be equal to the dogs and the cats; instead –Ps 8- "You have made him a little lower than the angels, and You have crowned him with glory and honor"

(vs 5). For "You have made him to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet, All sheep and oxen – Even the beasts of the field, The birds of the air, And the fish of the sea..." (vs 6ff). Master he is *over* creation, master *under* God. *Exalted!*

This high-ranking position God gave to mankind is demonstrated in the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. I read in Heb 1 that Jesus was "the express image of [God]" (Heb 1:3). Paul repeats the point when he tells the Colossians that Christ "is the image of the invisible God" (Col 1:15; cf II Cor 4:4). Philip asked Jesus to "show us the Father," and Jesus replied, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:8ff). Here is the glorious status God gave us in the beginning, exemplified in Jesus Christ.

How Jesus imaged the Father?

Jesus had dominion over creation; when the storm at sea threatened to swamp the disciples' boat, Jesus uttered one word of command to the wind to "Be still" and behold, "there was a great calm" (Mk 4:35ff). Here was pointed up the power of the Almighty, and His kindness and care for His despairing children also; Jesus revealed the Father.

Christ met a demoniac in the land of the Gadarenes and commanded "Come out of him, unclean spirit," and see, the demon came out (Mk 5:1ff). Jesus imaged for His disciples the power of God over the forces of Satan, imaged also God's care for this besieged man.

A woman with a flow of blood for twelve years came across His path, whom the physicians had not been able to heal. But Jesus healed the woman, and so displayed something of what God was like (Mk 5:25ff).

A girl died, and Jesus took the child by the hand, and said to her, 'Arise', and "immediately the girl arose and walked" – and so Jesus demonstrated for His disciples the power of God over life and death, and the care of God for the downcast among His people (Mk 5:40ff).

Each of these deeds of the Lord Jesus Christ, brothers and sisters, show us something of the exalted position God gave to man in the beginning. By special decision of the Trinity, God made man in His image so that we might have dominion over all His creation, made us just a little lower than the angels, gave the privilege to be lords over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and animals of the field.

But what, O what, has become of this exalted position? It's our second point:

2. *What we became.*

For the reality today is that people do not image God at all. I refer you again to the passage we read last week from Rom 3. Paul seeks to show that all people, both Jews and Greeks, are "all under sin," and to prove his point he quoted a string of passages from the Old Testament. What characterizes people, he asks? This: "there is none righteous, no, not one." "Their throat is an open tomb; with their tongues they have practiced deceit." More, "the poison of asps is under their lips," yes, "their feet are swift to shed blood." God had demanded that people *love*, love as He loved us and so image His love. But the conduct characterizing human beings, says Paul, shows nothing of that love; it instead shows hate, selfishness. See there what God says people are. And this is now the tragedy of it: *this sort of behavior reflects what Satan is like!* (cf Jn 8:44). That's people: corrupt, depraved, imaging the evil one instead of imaging the holy One!

How we became so depraved? Says the Catechism: "from the fall and disobedience of our first parents, Adam and Eve, in Paradise." Notice again: here's no appeal to evolution and the theory that we'll outgrow our wicked inclinations with time and improved breeding. Here's no appeal either to the thought that a bad environment produces a bad character. No, here's simply the humility that comes with accepting the existence of God and therefore accepting the truth of God's Word. *He* reports that something radical happened in Paradise long ago, and the Christian accepts that – painful though it may be.

Adam and Eve fell, and we fell with them, as did every person on the face of the earth today. Instead, now, of imaging

God we all by nature image Satan; instead of loving as God loved we hate as Satan hates – in pure selfishness. But that reality raises another problem, and it's this: if the fallen human race can't image God anymore, in what way are fallen people today different than animals? Or is it so that the fall from our lofty position means that we're in principle no different from the animals after all – and so stem cell research is OK amongst the unbelievers?

It's true, beloved, that with the fall into sin people lost the ability to reflect God, and instead image what Satan is like. But the fact that this is what we *became* does not mean that God has taken away the *mandate* to image God. The mandate is still there. And don't forget either: though we've fallen far, traces of our initial high status are evident from the talents that still characterize the human race. I asked your attention before for how Gen 1 interweaves the notion of 'image of God' with the concept of having 'dominion'. Well now, despite the fact that in today's world the human race has to fight against thorns and thistles, storms and earthquakes, plenty of traces remain of the dominion God gave us in the beginning. We still rule over the water so that we can raise its temperature to make a cup of coffee. We still rule over animals so that we can saddle a horse and make it do what we want. We still rule over the coal of the earth so that its energy is released and turns our computers on. True, this dominion is very marred and twisted by sin; how limited is our authority over creation compared to the authority Christ displayed! But the traces are there, and they remind us of the high calling God gave every human being in the beginning. Fallen we have, but that does not mean that we have in principle become like the animals – and so may be treated like animals. On the contrary, *each person* on the face of the earth, whether Jew or Greek, Australian or Arab, white or black, old or young – all need to be treated with the respect that belongs to being once created in the image of God.

Image of God. The term points up how great our sins and misery are. Look at the fighting in the Middle East; where's the image of God in the actions of a suicide bomber?! Look too at the strife in so many Australian homes; where is the image of God in spouse divorcing spouse?! And what shall we say of victims of traffic accidents, or those so damaged by drug abuse that they can scarcely look after themselves; what is left of the traces of God's image in these people? God created us to exercise dominion over creation –including the magpies and the honey-eaters of our backyards, including the ants under our houses and the snakes under the leaves, including the sharks of the sea- but what is left of that dominion when people can't even control themselves! The alcoholic doesn't have dominion over the bottle, but the fruit of the vine has dominion over him. The drug addict doesn't have dominion over his syringe or his tablet, but the tablet has dominion over him. The same is to be said of the person who needs his panadol at the drop of a hat.

But why speak only of substance abuse? God created us to have dominion over our tempers. But how many of us can scarcely control that temper, fly off the handle at a small provocation? God created us to have dominion over our sexual urges, but how many of us find ourselves controlled by those urges? How far, how terribly far we've *fallen* from the exalted position God has given to us! And what horrible misery appears in our lives because of it!

And the bitter effects of that fall are found not only in the realm of sin. Live with a person suffering from dementia, or come close to an Alzheimer's patient. When thought becomes irrational, or one can't remember that he's asked the question a minute ago, what is left of the exalted dignity God gave to man? How warped, how terribly *warped* the image of God has become in these people! It all underlines how terribly far we've fallen from our high state! And that spells out how great our sins and misery are....

I come to our third point:

3. *How God restores us.*

The picture of Scripture that we confess in Lord's Day 3 points out so tragically how great our sins and misery are. But precisely here lies reason to praise God the more, congregation! For see: *for what sort of people* did God send His Son into the world? Was He sent into the world for decent people? For the healthy? For the loving and the kind and those who exercised proper dominion over God's handiwork? Those with great gifts of self-control? No, beloved, no! God knew how terribly we had fallen, knows how we don't have dominion over our emotions and our urges and our tempers and our panadol and our wine closet, knows how we mess up His creation instead of caring for it as He does. *Yet He sent His Son into this world*, sent His Son to *obtain salvation for such fallen wretches!* And yes, on the cross of Calvary Christ obtained that salvation; even in the midst of hellish suffering and death He retained dominion over His human feelings and urges, retained dominion over Satan and the hosts of hell, retained dominion over death so that He

gave Himself to Death at His own time – and rose again the third day. Despite the heat and agony of the cross, the lordship of our Lord Jesus Christ –true man!- is so powerfully displayed! (cf Heb 2:5ff). And His lordship is our salvation!

In fact, we get to *share* in the riches Christ obtained on the cross. Though by nature we image Satan, though by nature we are so broken as to show next to nothing of the glory of our exalted position, the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ includes that His Holy Spirit *renews* sinners so that they image God again. No, not perfectly, it's true. But by the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit the children of God begin to show again those fruits of the Spirit. They include not just love and joy and peace and patience and kindness, but also –says Paul in Gal 5- *also self-control!* That is to say that the child of God, in the strength of the Holy Spirit, again begins to *exercise dominion* over himself. And –say the Scriptures- "he who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, And he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city" (Prov 16:32). Here, in principle, is the restoration of the exalted position of the beginning!

And as to the future: we shall reign with Christ over all creatures (cf Lord's Day 12). That's to say: we'll be kings with Christ, exercising dominion over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and the beasts of the field – yes, even angels and principalities subject to our judgment (I Cor 6).

We confess with Lord's Day 3 something of the greatness of our sins and misery. When we compare the splendors of how God made us with the broken reality we see today, we can only marvel that God still bothered to save the likes of us. And that's the point of the Lord's Day: what a wonderful God we have! To send His Son to save wretches as we are: what infinite love this is for sinners! Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 4 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 21 April 2002.

"THE SEVERITY OF GOD'S WRATH MAKES US APPRECIATE OUR SALVATION THE MORE."

Text:

Lord's Day 4

9. Q. But does not God do man an injustice by requiring in His law what man cannot do?
- A. No, for God so created man that he was able to do it.¹ But man, at the instigation of the devil,² in deliberate disobedience³ robbed himself and all his descendants of these gifts.⁴
- ¹ Gen 1:31. ² Gen 3:13; Jn 8:44; 1 Tim 2:13, 14. ³ Gen 3:6. ⁴ Rom 5:12, 18, 19.
10. Q. Will God allow such disobedience and apostasy to go unpunished?
- A. 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,¹ as He has declared:² Cursed be every one who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them (Galatians 3:10).
- ¹ Gen 2:17; Ex 34:7; Ps 5:4-6; 7:11; Nahum 1:2; Rom 1:18; 5:12; ² Deut 27:26.
11. Q. But is God not also merciful?
- A. God is indeed merciful,¹ but He is also just.² 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.³
- ¹ Ex 20:6; 34:6, 7; Ps 103:8, 9. ² Ex 20:5; 34:7; Deut 7:9-11; Ps 5:4-6; Heb 10:30, 31. ³ Mt 25:45, 46.

Scripture Reading:

Ephesians 2:1-10

Romans 1:18-32

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 5:3,4

Psalm 77:5

Hymn 24:4

Psalm 75:1,2,3,4,5,6

Psalm 103:3,4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The world in which we breathe today is infected with New Age thinking. Part of New Age thinking is that God is not the sovereign and holy Creator who inhabits heaven. Instead, New Agism says that earth and god are put together so that there is no difference between the two. One hears of Mother Nature, and in New Age thinking this is the deity, this is god in this world, this is the goddess caring for and developing her world from within. God is not 'out there'; no, god is in the animals of the field, in the trees of the forest, in rocks of the hills, and in your own heart. There's something divine in all things....

I tell you this because this very modern (and very heathen!) religion has a direct bearing on the material of our Lord's Day. In Lord's Day 4 the Christian repeats after God what he has heard God say in Scripture about His wrath and His justice. But today's world doesn't have room for considering seriously the wrath and justice of God, simply because our world insists that this earth *is* god –god is in the flowers and the birds and the stones and the people- and would god be angry with himself?!

We live in this society, and so it's no surprise that weeds from society's thinking grow in our mental gardens. No, not that we deny the reality of God's wrath; we know only too well that the Bible does speak of God's wrath. But it is very tempting to put God's wrath at a far distance from the goings on of communal and national and international life as we experience it daily. As we in our thinking put the wrath of God at a distance from daily life, the doctrine of God's wrath against sin becomes vague, something that doesn't have a place in our day to day thinking.... The result is that we don't rightly know what to do with our Lord's Day.

Yet the Christian wants to live and die *in the joy* of the comfort of belonging to Jesus Christ. To *rejoice* in this comfort the Christian has to know "first how great [his] sins and misery are." To be delivered from *little* misery does not move to joy and thankfulness as much as deliverance from *great* misery does. And the wrath of God is so severe, says Scripture, that deliverance from that wrath makes one exceedingly joyful.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE SEVERITY OF GOD'S WRATH MAKES US APPRECIATE OUR SALVATION THE MORE.

1. God's wrath is real today.
2. God's wrath is not for everybody.

1. God's wrath is real today.

Lord's Day 4 continues the train of thought laid out in Lord's Day 3. In Lord's Day 3 the Christian confessed that God had created him good and in his image. In Adam and Eve, though, we fell into sin, broke our bond with God, joined the devil. The result is, says Question & Answer 7, that "our nature became so corrupt that we are all conceived and born in sin." To say it in the words of Eph 2: we became "dead in trespasses and sins" (vs 1).

Given that depravity, the demand of Lord's Day 2 becomes more oppressive. For there we'd confessed that God wants us to obey His law. Specifically, He wants us to love God with all our heart and soul and mind, and our neighbor as ourselves. But we're corrupt, we're dead in sin. And the dead, we know, can't obey, let alone love.... Hence the first question of Lord's Day 4: "does God not do man an injustice by requiring of him in His law what man cannot do?" Isn't God unfair when He demands the impossible?

We're inclined to answer with Yes, that's unfair, certainly unreasonable. You find a dead cat on the road, and you can tell it as often as you want to move, you can shout at it and insult it, but it's not going to obey – simply because it's dead. To demand the dead to obey is simply unfair, certainly unreasonable. So we're persuaded that the Lord God too is unjust in demanding of us in His law what He knows we cannot do.

But as it is, brothers and sisters, the comparison with the dead cat is invalid. For the fact of the matter is that in the beginning the Lord God made us *in His image*, and that includes that we were *responsible*. You can never hold a cat responsible – neither when it's dead nor when it's alive. A better example to use would be the news that on Wednesday you get a science exam, and since you can't be bothered to study you throw your books out the window, and on Wednesday you tell your teacher that you can't write the exam because, well, so and so.... We all understand: the teacher would be most just in demanding that you write the exam regardless. There's the point in relation to Lord's Day 4: back in Paradise, at the instigation of the devil, we threw out the notes God gave us at creation, we robbed ourselves of the God-given ability to obey His law. So God is most just in demanding perfect obedience to His law.

But that perfect obedience we cannot supply. Since God is the just and holy God He is, He responds to our failure with His divine wrath. Question & Answer 10: "Will God allow such disobedience and apostasy to go unpunished?" In a

society that doesn't know that to do with the notion of God's wrath, we echo Scripture emphatically: "Certainly not," we say; God "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...."

With this statement, brothers and sisters, we reject as untrue the doctrine our society has adopted. God and creation are not one; God is not *in* creation so that any outpouring of wrath against people or animals or forests or oceans is in fact an outpouring of God's wrath against Himself. No, the Creator and the creature are very different, must be carefully distinguished and separated, and so room is left for expressions of the Creator's wrath in His creation.

What, now, does the Bible say about God's wrath? It is true that the Bible nowhere says that *God is angry*. I say that because I want to point out that while the Bible says that "God is love" (I Jn 4), there is no parallel text that says that "God is angry". It's a point to which I'll return later. The absence, though, of a statement in Scripture that "God is angry" takes nothing away from the fact that God is *angry*. That's a statement we do find in Scripture. David says it in so many words in Ps 7: "God is angry every day" (vs 11). The point is that the creature made so uniquely on the sixth day and given that high status in God's creation has given himself to sin, and that reality provokes God's anger every day anew.

The question is now: is this wrath of God something to get worried about? You know how people are. When the one person is angry, you do well to stay out of his path. But the next person's anger is no big problem; a kind word will calm him down. How about God's anger?

Scripture makes clear that Yes, God's anger is something to get worried about. Consider Israel's experience in the desert. When they muttered and complained, "the wrath of the Lord was aroused against the people" so that the Lord struck the people with a very great plague (Num 11:33). That happened not once but more often (Num 12:9f; 16:22ff; 25:4ff). The people felt it in their lives: God's anger is real, God's anger is deadly; they perished by the thousands.

The prophet Nahum gives us a picture of the intensity of the anger Israel tasted. Listen: "Who can stand before His indignation? And who can endure the fierceness of His anger? His fury is poured out like fire, And the rocks are thrown down by Him" (1:6). We cringe at the thought: imagine a pot of fire being poured out on top of you; how shall one escape?! Behold God's anger! Or imagine walking through the field and God rains His rocks upon you. This is not small stuff! There is no helmet that will protect you from that!

The Lord Jesus Christ knew the Old Testament so well, knew also how terrible it was to fall into the hands of the living God. He knew also that on the cross of Calvary God would pour out His fury on Him like fire. But note, then, congregation, how Jesus –true God though He was!- how Jesus *agonized* at the prospect of that wrath! Mt 26: Jesus went into the Garden of Gethsemane with three disciples "and He began to be sorrowful and deeply distressed" (vs 37) – so much so, Luke adds, that His sweat became as great drops of blood (Lu 23:43). Why the anxiety? Listen to His prayer: "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me" (vs 39). Cup: the term appears in the Old Testament as a symbol of God's wrath. I think of Ps 75: "God is the Judge.... In the hand of the Lord there is a cup...; It is fully mixed, and He pours it out; Surely its dregs shall all the wicked of the earth Drain and drink down" (vs 8). With Jesus' use of the word 'cup' in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus captures the bitterness of God's wrath, captures the horrors of having this cup of divine fury poured onto Him, and that's why He looks up against it so much – to the point of being "deeply distressed". And when Jesus some hours later tasted the heat of God's anger in deeper depths still, the weight of the wrath of God tore open His parched lips so that on the cross He cried out His hurt as God's fury was poured out upon Him like fire; "My God, My God," He shrieked, "why have You forsaken Me?" He felt in His person how horrible a thing it is to fall into the hands of the living God! See in His experience on the cross, beloved, an indication of how *terrible* the wrath of God really is. If Jesus - true God!- cringed so much under the weight of that wrath, *how shall you or I ever survive when we come face to face with that wrath!*

Does that wrath as described by Nahum and experienced by our Lord Jesus Christ have a face today? Do we see that wrath in daily life, or must we consider it to be far removed from the daily lives to today's people – a bit of a paper tiger?

No, beloved, in no way are to consider the wrath of God as far removed from daily life. Listen to Paul in Romans 1: "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men," he says (vs 18). Note

it well: Paul words this statement in such a way as to make clear that this wrath of God is an *ongoing reality*. That wrath is *continually being revealed*. In the verses that follow Paul interweaves answers to two questions about this wrath. The first is the question of *why* God's wrath is revealed and the second is *how* God's wrath is revealed.

Why does God reveal His wrath? Because, says the apostle, people turn a blind eye to what God has revealed of Himself in creation. "The heavens declare the glory of God," and so do the flowers and the trees and the storms and the sunshine; all by virtue of their existence declare the greatness of the Creator. But people refuse to acknowledge the Creator, decide instead to worship the creature. In Paul's day people did that by worshiping idols made by human hands from created things as wood and stone as if these idols had created the world and supply the needs of their worshipers. Today people commit the same sin by worshiping Mother Nature. Look, we're told today, at how marvelous Mother Nature has made her world over the millions of years of evolution. Though God displays His greatness and power in the things He made, people refuse to acknowledge Him as Creator, and God responds by pouring out His wrath. How He displays His wrath? Vs 24: "God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves." Notice: dishonoring the body is a curse from God, expression of His wrath. How do people dishonor the body? Idolizing the body, muscle-building, trimming the fat: we see it around us, we get used to it, but congregation, it is expression of God's holy wrath! People worship the creature, the body, instead of the Creator, and so God blinds their eyes –wrath!- so that all they can see is the creature, the body. The emphasis that displayed in the sports pages of your newspaper on the body –we're so used to us- is itself an expression of the wrath of God! Fix it in your minds, beloved: God's wrath is not far removed from daily life, but – says Paul- it's there under our nose. But our depravity hinders us from tuning in to it as expressions of divine wrath....

Paul continues. Because people don't bend under the weight of that wrath in repentance, the Lord reveals His wrath in stronger measures still. Vs 26: God gives people up to vile passions, so that people give themselves to homosexual behavior. Our land no longer sees homosexual activity as a crime, our state government has just lowered the age of consent for homosexual behavior. We say: this development must bring the wrath of God on our land, and that's true. But Paul would have us know, congregation, that this development *is itself an expression of the wrath of God!* That's why I say: we can't think of God's wrath as something far away, something vague that doesn't touch daily living. No, the wrath of God *is revealed* from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, and the expressions of God's wrath include things like God giving people over to idolizing the body, God giving people over to homosexual activity. And because people still do not repent under the weight of these expressions of God's wrath, such activity earns more wrath from God. Vs 27: homosexuals receive in themselves the penalty for their error – and one can think of plagues like AIDS, and one can think too of the loneliness that must creep upon the homosexual in his older age when he has no children to love him.... Yet even that is not the full extent of the wrath of God. Look at the attitudes described in vss 29f: no society can survive when its members are "filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness." Society must collapse upon itself when people "are whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful...." This is more of the wrath of God being revealed from heaven against all wickedness and unrighteousness of men. And make no mistake, beloved: these attitudes abound in our society – evidence all of the wrath of God! So you get events like the horrors of September 11; driven by hatred people kill in the name of their idol... - more expression of the wrath of God. And you get a rise in the divorce rate of the land, and proponents for euthanasia; driven by love of self people are cold to others – and it's all expression of the wrath of God on the disobedience of the human race.

Is the wrath of God far removed from the events of our daily lives? Are we to see the wrath of God only in earthquakes and wars? Let your eyes be open, brothers and sisters, to the reality of God's wrath as it presses down day by day on today's society! God is terribly displeased with [man's] original sin as well as our actual sins. Therefore He will punish them by a just judgment both now and eternally. The future will not get better; the expressions of God's wrath we encounter in society today foreshadow the eternal weeping and gnashing of teeth that characterizes hell – there's where it will all end up.

It sounds so ominous, beloved, and it is. Let no one living on the earth since the fall into sin think little of the wrath of God! But now the thing is: is this wrath of God for everybody? That's our final point:

2. God's wrath is not for everybody.

Certainly, everybody is *worthy* of this wrath. I draw your attention to the passage we read from Eph 2. At the end of vs 3 the apostle says of himself and the saints of Ephesus that we "were by nature children of wrath, just like the others." Notice how Paul tags all people with the same horrible label; we and they, everybody, are by nature "children of wrath" – God's wrath.

But see now: in relation to himself and the saints of Ephesus Paul uses the *past tense*! We "were", he says, we "were by nature children of wrath. But not anymore! Why not? Because –vs 4- "God is rich in mercy." What characterizes God is not His wrath (terrible though it is), but His mercy. Think back to Paradise. When Adam and Eve admitted to God that they had sinned, God's response was not to drop on them the eternal weight of God's holy wrath. No, God first had a word with the serpent, told the serpent that its seed would be crushed through the seed of the woman. God spoke those words to the serpent, yes, *but in the hearing of Adam and Eve!* That is: before He uttered a word of wrath to them, He let them overhear first some words of mercy! *For what characterizes God is not His wrath but His mercy.* So Paul, in full agreement with the words God spoke to the devil in the hearing of Adam and Eve, could declare that God has "made us alive together with Christ" (Eph 2:5). And he can tell the Galatians that "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law" because Christ "became a curse for us" (3:13). That is: the wrath we deserve has been poured out on Jesus Christ so that we might go free, might have no curse, no judgment, no wrath left on us!

I draw your attention to a remarkable and well known text in the Gospel of John that has direct bearing on this material. The Holy Spirit says this at the end of John 3:

"He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (vs 36).

I refer now especially to the last few words, "the wrath of God abides on him." The word 'abides' means to stay, to remain; "the wrath of God stays on him." The implication of that expression is that the wrath of God *was on him in the past* and it will *remain on everyone who does not believe*. For the unbeliever, then, there is continuity; he's by nature a child of wrath, God's wrath was one him from birth, remains on him and will continue to press on him. But for the believer *there is discontinuity!* To say it in Jesus' words in John 5:

"Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life" (vs 24).

Note again those last words: he "has passed from death into life." He who believes is a child of wrath *no longer*, and so shall not come into judgment; he has passed to a new stage in life, passed from death into life itself. And why? Because the wrath we deserved was poured out on Jesus Christ on the cross! That hellish agony He endured, the weight of God's wrath on Him that pressed out of Him the bloody sweat in the Garden of Gethsemane, is what I deserved *but did not and will not receive! Ever!*

Then, yes, things in my life may go differently than I wish, there can be so much adversity. But God says that the believer is *no longer* a child of wrath but a child of God's love, and therefore I must accept that the difficulties of my life are not expressions of God's wrath against me anymore; my Father in Jesus Christ has other reasons to put affliction on my path – even if they are afflictions that the human eye sees as identical to the expressions of wrath my God pours out on unbelievers. The words of Lord's Day 16 are true for the confessor of Lord's Day 4: "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" – specifically in my daily life.

The wrath of God is not a pleasant subject. But a presentation of Scripture, brothers and sisters, that has cut out reference to the heat of God's anger is a hollow gospel; if there was no anger from God on sin, why did the Savior ever have to suffer as He did on the cross?! As it is, His sufferings on the cross point up how great my sins and misery are; He suffered what I deserved. *And that's why I can delight so richly in the fact that I belong with body and soul to my faithful Savior!* He suffered the curse of God that I deserved, suffered it *in my place*, so that I don't have to taste that wrath – ever. Hallelujah! Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 5 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 5 May 2002.

" THE CHRISTIAN REPEATS AFTER GOD THAT HE IS DEAD IN SIN ."

Text:

Lord's Day 5

12. Q. Since, according to God's righteous judgment we deserve temporal and eternal punishment, how can we escape this punishment and be again received into favour?
- A. God demands that His justice be satisfied.¹ Therefore we must make full payment, either by ourselves or through another.²
- ¹ Ex 20:5; 23:7; Rom 2:1-11. ² Is 53:11; Rom 8:3, 4.
13. Q. Can we by ourselves make this payment?
- A. Certainly not. On the contrary, we daily increase our debt.¹
- ¹ Ps 130:3; Mt 6:12; Rom 2:4, 5.
14. Q. Can any mere creature pay for us?
- A. No. In the first place, God will not punish another creature for the sin which man has committed.¹ Furthermore, no mere creature can sustain the burden of God's eternal wrath against sin and deliver others from it.²
- ¹ Ezek 18:4, 20; Heb 2:14-18. ² Ps 130:3; Nahum 1:6.
15. Q. What kind of mediator and deliverer must we seek?
- One who is a true¹ and righteous² man, and yet more powerful than all creatures; that is, one who is at the same time true God.³
- ¹ 1 Cor 15:21; Heb 2:17. ² Is 53:9; 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 7:26. ³ Is 7:14; 9:6; Jer 23:6; Jn 1:1; Rom 8:3, 4.

Scripture Reading:

John 6:41-65

Romans 5:1-11

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 86:1,2

Psalm 75:6

Psalm 130:2,4

Psalm 51:3,4,5

Hymn 27:1,2,3,4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The Lord's Day before us this afternoon admits in the first question that, Yes, "according to God's righteous judgment we deserve temporal and eternal punishment." The question has its roots in what we confessed in Lord's Day 3: though God had created us perfect and in His image, we'd snubbed our nose at God, disobeyed Him, joined the devil.

God's response, we'd confessed in Lord's Day 4, was nothing to wave our hand at; God says we "deserve temporal and eternal punishment." It's a horrible prospect; let everybody in church, in town, in the world be aware!

There, now, is the question for today: how in the world can we escape that punishment and be again received into God's favor? Is there a way to escape the anguish and torment of hell?

In our Catechism we repeat after God the answer He gives us in His word. Yes, God says, there is a way to escape His wrath. What that way is? You have to *pay*. If somehow we can organize that "full payment ... be made, either by ourselves or by another," well, then the dark judgment will be replaced with grace....

But –says this Lord's Day- we are not able to make payment ourselves, and we can't arrange for some animal or angel to make the payment for us either. What's left? Only the fearful prospect of experiencing the full load of God's justice, receiving that punishment in this life and in the life to come....

That conclusion sounds terrible? Indeed, congregation, it does. But God would have us know that admitting our bankruptcy is the first step to enjoying God's free redemption in Jesus Christ. So I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE CHRISTIAN REPEATS AFTER GOD THAT HE IS DEAD IN SIN.

1. The depths of our misery
2. The heights of Christ's deliverance

1. The depths of our misery.

In the course of the centuries, much study and discussion has taken place in Christian circles about the natural nature of man. How is humankind to be characterized? Is one to understand that the human race can best be qualified as "dead", or ought one to conclude that people are "sick"?

The question has come up in the past in the context of what a person is able to do toward his salvation. LD 5 had mentioned the need for making payment to satisfy God's justice and so escape His dreadful punishments. What can a person contribute?? We all understand that the "dead" person can contribute nothing (for the dead *do* nothing), while the "sick" can at least indicate a *willingness* to escape that wrath, can maybe even pay the first few cents or dollars of the payment. How ought one to qualify the human race: dead, unable to contribute so much as a sigh to the needed payment, *or* sick, able to contribute at least the smallest beginning?

This discussion has raged throughout church history ever since the days when the Bible was finalized. Pelagius argued that people were sick, maybe even desperately sick, but not so sick that they couldn't ask for help and even cooperate with the doctor. Over against him, Augustine defended that people were dead, unable to contribute a thing to escape the punishment of God.

In later years Luther took up the position of Augustine over against the humanist Erasmus. And a number of decades later the Synod of Dort had to convene to demonstrate from the Scriptures that the Pelagian error of people being only sick (the error was raised again by Prof Jacob Arminius) was indeed wrong. At the time of the Secession of 1834 too it was Rev deCock's opposition to that doctrine of man being able to contribute something to his salvation that sparked the struggle with the apostate church. Yes, the discussion has been going on for years, more, this point has featured very strongly in the history of the church.

Yet despite the discussions that have occurred on this point, and despite the repeated insistence of the church that people are by nature not sick but rather dead, it yet remains so that the majority of people today who call themselves Christians insist that people are by nature not dead but sick. It's said today that people must themselves open their hearts to let Jesus in, must themselves come to the Saviour, must themselves ask for forgiveness before they can receive it – all things that a corpse cannot do. Not –this majority says- that people can pay for their own sins; these Christians maintain that the human race is far too sick for that. Rather –it's said- people are to express willingness to be

saved, are to open the doors of their hearts. That's the contribution for which God waits before He gives salvation to anyone.

But what, brothers and sisters, does the Bible say? Are you to understand yourself to be dead before God, or sick?

The apostle Paul writes in Eph 2 the following: "And you He made alive, when you were dead through the trespasses and sins in which you once walked..." (vs 1). Notice it: the apostle says that people are by nature "dead", so dead that there can be no life unless they are "made alive", raised (cf vs 5). Jesus makes the same point in the passage we read from Jn 6. Vs 44: "No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him." "Draws him," says Jesus, and the word that is used here pictures a stone, a lifeless object that is *dragged* from here to there. The contribution of the sinner in coming to God, says the chief Prophet and Teacher, is the same as the contribution of a stone to being moved to the other side of the garden. The reason for the total lack of cooperation is that stone has no will of its own, is stone dead. The reason for the total lack of cooperation on the part of the sinner is the same; he has no free will, is – spiritually- stone dead.

Later in the same chapter Jesus fleshes the point out further. Vs 63: "It is the spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing." This sentence was spoken in the context of the disciples' complaint that Jesus' preaching was too sharp, too condemning of man. To that complaint Jesus responded with a comment about the nature of the people who hear. What that nature is? The "flesh" doesn't *want* to hear, has no delight in being told that there is no life in a person unless that person eats the flesh of the Son of man and drinks His blood (vs 53). No life, and therefore the flesh is useless.

On the basis of that reality Jesus could also repeat in vs 65 what He had said in vs 44: "This is why I told you that no one can come to Me unless it has been granted him by the Father." 'No one is able to come', because by nature people are not sick, but dead, so dead that they can neither cooperate in paying for sin let alone show any willingness to be saved. That, brothers and sisters, is the teaching of Scripture: we are *dead*, have by nature no life in us.

To what, then, are we to compare the human race? Could we rightly compare the human race to the man who has jumped from the 43rd floor of a building, and now lies well and truly dead on the sidewalk below, oblivious to the fact that every bone and organ in his body is broken, that he is hopelessly and helplessly dead? Or are we to compare the human race to the man who jumped not from the 43rd floor but from the 3rd floor; he's now sprawled on the sidewalk, quite wounded, with a number of broken bones, but still quite able to call out for help and indicate an earnest willingness for the medics to assist him? Which image, do you think, does justice to the Lord's description of you and me?

It will be clear, I trust, that the comparison with the man who jumped from the 3rd floor is not Scriptural. That notion that we are only wounded, that we're sick –that concept is officially called Arminianism- is contrary to what the Lord has insisted in Jn 6 when He said of all people that "you have no life in you" (vs 53). As such, the understanding of what man is as held by the evangelicals of the world today is far too optimistic. We are to picture ourselves not as *wounded* or as *sick*, but rather as *dead*, very dead. The Synod of Dort convened nearly 400 years ago to fight the heresy of the Arminians summarize the teaching of Holy Scripture on this point as follows: "Therefore all men are ... incapable of any saving good ..., dead in sins" (III/IV.3).

With that instruction from Scripture in mind, congregation, we need now to go back to Lord's Day 5. Escape from the horrid punishment of God is possible only if we can somehow make payment for sin. Question & Answer 13: "Can we ourselves make this payment?" The Catechism says that the answer is definitely NO, we cannot pay. And now we also understand the reason why we can't pay; it's because we are dead, and the dead can't do anything, certainly can't labor to pay off debts. We can't pay, can't even begin to pay, can do nothing to indicate even a willingness to pay, and hence there remains only the fearsome and terrible wrath of God! Would that we were only sick, wounded! Then we could at least make a beginning to satisfying God's justice, could at least show our good will, our hearty desire to pay. But we can't! Scripture teaches that we're dead, as dead as a stone, and therefore we confess it: I am unable to begin paying, unable even to show any good will, yea, unable to *have* any sorrow for sin and good intentions to pay for sin. *Dead*, lost....

We hear it, and our thoughts go to the troubles and trials of our lives. If it's temporal and eternal punishment we

deserve because of our sins, and if we can't escape this punishment by paying, can't even express sorrow for sin and intent to make up, must we not conclude that the worries we face are indeed the beginning of the terrible punishment God has promised?! My struggle with the bank, my concerns with my children, my loneliness, my aches and pains: surely, these are but the beginning of the punishment I deserve because of my sins. And there's nothing I can do about it...; I'm lost, lost...!

2. *The heights of Christ's deliverance.*

But wait, brothers and sisters, we mustn't despair! A few weeks ago we confessed with Lord's Day 1 that we by God's grace belonged always to Jesus Christ. We said that not of the other person (though, thankfully, it may be true of him too); no, we said it in relation to *ourselves*. The first thing that's true of us, then, is not that we're hopelessly lost, dead in sin, crushed under the weight of God's wrath. No, the first thing that's to be said of us is that we belong to Jesus Christ. But now, with Lord's Day 5, we're asking *how we became* Christ's possession. Did we make it that way ourselves? Did we *buy* a close relation with Christ, *work* our way into His good books? There's the point of Lord's Day 5: I contributed *nothing* to becoming Christ's property. My going to church didn't contribute, my repenting of sin didn't contribute, my believing in Jesus Christ didn't contribute – nothing I did was either full or partial payment for my sins. Why I must insist that nothing I did was either full or partial payment? Simply, beloved, because *the dead don't do anything*, and by nature I am dead. *Yet I belong with body and soul to Jesus Christ!* How come? It's 100% God's doing - grace! That is: God has given the unworthy, the hopelessly dead –you, me!- the opposite of what we deserve, has given it without us contributing so much as a single sigh to that gift, without us even asking for it!

This is the glorious gospel about which Paul writes to the Romans. Chap 5: in the vss 6-10 Paul uses four different terms to describe the people for whom Christ died. Paul says that we were *weak*, *ungodly* (vs 6), *sinner*s (vs 8), and vs 10: *enemies*. The four descriptions are far from flattering to us. "Weak": yes, even Arminius would say Yes to that. But the other three descriptions are so terribly damning: "ungodly", that's anti-God, opposed to God; "sinners", that's those who miss completely the purpose for their existence, and hence forfeit the right to life; "enemies", that those who are at war with God. Each word in turn, then, spells out the hopelessness of our wretched condition. But what's Paul say happened to these wretched sinners, these enemies of God? Listen: "While we were still weak, ...*Christ died for the ungodly*." More, "God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners *Christ died for us*." Again: "while we were enemies *we were reconciled to God* by the death of His Son." There it is, beloved: Christ didn't die for the worthy, for the godly, for the lovely, for those with good intentions to pay their debt with God. No, Christ died for the wretched, for the miserable, for the damned, the dead. What a *love* from God is displayed here! It's one thing to show mercy to a person who struggles to help himself, to show love to an enemy who's sorry that he's hurt you. But it's something so very different to show mercy to one who doesn't want help, who's dead, so very different to show love to a person who has no apologies for the hurt he's done to you. But this is God: He loves *the wretched*!

"What do you need to know in order to live and die in the joy of this comfort?" Says the Catechism in accordance with the Scriptures: I need to know "first, how great my sins and misery are." Now I understand why I need to know my wretchedness before I can truly rejoice in the salvation I have. *I'll never understand how great my deliverance is, will never understand how merciful my Father in Christ is, unless I first have seen something of the misery from which God has graciously rescued me.*

But that's not all. The apostle Paul hastens to add that this undeserved work of salvation in Jesus Christ is now *the source of a tremendous security* for all of life. Rom 8: "He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (vs 32). The point is this: if the righteous Judge of heaven and earth was so moved with compassion at the sorry plight of wretched sinners, so moved that He sent His only Son to earth to satisfy for sins for people so undeserving and helpless and loathsome, *will that God turn around and reject these same people?*! Paul is insistent: the God who has shown such love, such compassion to people totally dead and unable to contribute in any way to escaping God's wrath, this God will certainly, *certainly* not forsake His love, now pour out wrath on those for whom Christ died. Paul repeats it: "who shall bring a charge against God's elect?" (vs 33). The inference is clear: because of God's loved displayed so long ago in Christ is there no-body and no-thing that can make a charge stick against any of God's people!

What, then, of the sufferings of this age? What about the tribulations or distresses or persecutions or deaths or poverty

we experience in this broken life? Are these then not the beginnings of the eternal punishment we deserve? See here, beloved, the practical comfort of what you may confess in LD 5. If your wretchedness before God wasn't absolute, if there was a little something you could do to encourage your own salvation, then you could indeed conclude that the trials of this life are expressions of God's punishment; you could rightly conclude that you were maybe doing not quite well enough the little bit you had to contribute to your salvation, to satisfying God's justice. But as it is, beloved, God knows how totally dead you are by nature, and therefore He worked a *total* salvation, including *full* payment for *all* your sins. *So it does not depend on you at all*. Escaping the wrath of God in this life and in the life to come is grace and only grace, and exactly for that reason may we all be assured today that we *always* escape the wrath of God, *never* taste it.

Now I ask you, brothers and sisters: what is better, what is richer, what is more comforting to you: to be an Arminian and embrace the notion that you need to add your two cents worth to your salvation? Or is it richer to be Reformed, to be Scriptural, and believe that you are dead by nature, that you can contribute nothing toward your salvation, that you are dependent totally and fully on the *grace* of the Lord in Jesus Christ? I know it now: to live and to die in the joy of the comfort of LD 1, I need to believe the deadness confessed in LD 5. What a God I have, that a wretch like me should receive such a total salvation! Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 50 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 5 October 2003.

"IN OUR PRAYER FOR BREAD WE ADMIT DEPENDENCE ON THE LORD FOR ALL OUR BODILY NEEDS."

Text:

Lord's Day 50

125. Q. What is the fourth petition?

A. Give us this day our daily bread. That is: Provide us with all our bodily needs[1] so that we may acknowledge that Thou art the only fountain of all good,[2] and that our care and labour, and also Thy gifts, cannot do us any good without Thy blessing.[3] Grant therefore that we may withdraw our trust from all creatures, and place it only in Thee.[4]

[1] Ps. 104:27-30; 145:15, 16; Matt. 6:25-34. [2] Acts 14:17; 17:25; James 1:17. [3] Deut. 8:3; Ps. 37:16; 127:1, 2; I Cor. 15:58. [4] Ps. 55:22; 62; 146; Jer. 17:5-8; Heb. 13:5, 6.

Scripture Reading:

Proverbs 30:7-9

Luke 12:13-34

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 104:7,8

Psalm 136:12,13

Psalm 145:4,5

Psalm 127:1,2

Psalm 34:4 & Hymn 47:5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We begin today with the second half of the Lord's Prayer. The body of this prayer, you will know, can be divided into two parts; with the first three we ask about God (Hallowed be Your Name, Your kingdom come, Your will be done), with the second three we ask about ourselves (our bread, our sins, our temptations). Of those three –our bread, our sins and our temptations- we ask God first about bread. That may not sound sufficiently spiritual to our ears, but this is the way the Lord has commanded it. Heavenly matters are not more important than earthly matters, or spiritual matters more important than bodily matters; the point is that heaven and earth, what is spiritual and what is bodily, is to focus on God and His glory. Our request for bread has that purpose also.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

IN OUR PRAYER FOR BREAD WE ADMIT DEPENDENCE ON THE LORD FOR ALL OUR BODILY NEEDS.

1. The Source of daily bread.
2. The Amount of daily bread.
3. The Purpose of daily bread.

1. The Source of Daily Bread.

Jesus instructs us to ask the Lord for 'bread'. The term 'bread' does not refer strictly to a sandwich, but to food in general, as well as to clothes, shelter, transport, freedom, health, etc. In the words of our Lord's Day: with the fourth petition we ask for "all our bodily needs."

Still, the Lord instructs us in this petition to ask specifically for "bread", as opposed to clothes or shelter or health. That will be because bread, food, is the most basic of human needs. There are people in this world who survive without shelter, without clothes, without freedom, or without health. But none can survive without food. Every person on this earth knows that, and so each –to greater or lesser degree- is busy day after day with obtaining food, preparing food, eating food. Bread is basic.

Where does food come from? It's common knowledge: food comes from this earth. Food does not come from Mars, or from outer space. Food comes from the ground, through a process of seeding, watering, cultivating, harvesting, processing, distributing, baking, cooking; there's an entire economy based on the production of food. And that process of obtaining food is identical for unbeliever and believer alike, for Christian and Hindu: everyone (as God said after the fall into sin) eats his bread "in the sweat of his face" (Gen 3:19).

The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. Said He to them: in your prayers you must ask God for your daily bread. That is: that process of getting food, what you sweat about repeatedly, should be topic of your conversation with God.

That's intriguing. Our daily experience is that food comes from this earth; to get food you need to look *down*. No, says Jesus to His disciples: to get food you need to look *up*. We wonder: why?

The apostle Paul proclaimed the gospel to the heathen of Lystra. Said he to them: the God who created the world has left evidence of His continuing care for His creatures. That care is this: "He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with food and gladness" (Acts 14:17). Notice: Paul is speaking to *unbelievers*, to heathens, and tells them that over the centuries of their existence their daily food came from *God*. Though they never asked Him for food, let alone thanked Him for it, it was God who supplied their needs (cf Acts 17:25).

Paul has learned this principle from God's revelation in the Old Testament. The psalmist in Ps 104 looked carefully at creation, at how the birds have their nests and the animals obtain their food. He sums up God's word on the matter in vss 27ff:

"These all wait for You, That You may give them their food in due season.
What You give them they gather in; You open Your hand, they are filled with good.
You hide Your face, they are troubled; You take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.
You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; And You renew the face of the earth."

Here is *dependence*; all creation receives food from God's almighty hand. Ps 145 says the same:

"The eyes of all look expectantly to You, And You give them their food in due season.
You open Your hand And satisfy the desire of every living thing" (vss 15f).

It's this reality that prompts the church to make its *confession of dependence* in Lord's Day 10: God so governs all creatures that "leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things, come not by chance but by His fatherly hand."

This confession, we need to know, is not just ours. Lord's Day 10 puts into words what the *Bible* teaches. Inasmuch as Peter and Andrew and John and James and the other disciples believed God's revelation in the Old Testament, they believed also what you and I confess in Lord's Day 10. *These* are the men who one day asked Jesus to teach them to pray. In His answer Jesus included the fourth petition: "Give us this day our daily bread." The point? This: the disciples need to take seriously the confession of Ps 104 and Ps 145, that is, if "the eyes of all look expectantly to You, and You give them their food in due season," then the right thing for the hungry to do is to *ask God for bread!* If "food

and drink ..., indeed, all things, come not by chance but by His fatherly hand," then we can't pass God by in our hunger but *need to go to the source of bread itself*. You see: the *confession* that all comes from His hand is the *reason to pray*. To put it differently: Lord's Day 50 is based on Lord's Day 10. Deny the confession of Lord's Day 10, and you have no reason left to ask God for daily bread. Stick to the confession of Lord's Day 10, and you have every inducement to pray, to ask our Father in Jesus Christ for all our bodily needs. You see: we are *dependent*. Here is the point of the last part of Lord's Day 50: "Grant, therefore, that we may withdraw our trust from all creatures, and place it only in You."

There's an implication here that I need to draw out. We need another car. What do we do? Perchance we refinance, then head of to the car yards to see what's available and what deal we can make. Yet Jesus' instruction is that *first you pray*. That is: exactly because we acknowledge that all things come from God's fatherly hand –that includes, then, another car!- it is foolish to avoid God when looking for another car. All things come from His hand; so: go to Him for all your needs! And He will show you which car He has lined up for you.

The young people want to get their drivers' license, need to write their exams at school? All things come not by chance but by God's fatherly hand. Good and well, then *be consistent* and go first on your knees before you front up for your exam.

Here is a truth, we understand, for all of life. Those who confess God's providence, who confess that all things come from God's fatherly hand, are *necessarily people of prayer*, necessarily people who repeatedly appear before God's throne of grace with the fourth petition. For needs big or small, it is for us to turn to God in prayer, describe to Him what we need, and ask Him to supply it. You see, it's in our prayer life first of all that we show that we take seriously the confession of Lord's Day 10.

If, then, we are persuaded that we need to ask the Lord our God for all our needs –day by day, hour by hour- how much should we ask for? That brings us to our second point:

2. The Amount of Daily Bread.

The unbelievers around us do not look up to God for their daily needs; they look down. God's people are different on this point, for we recognize that every good gift comes from above, from the Father of lights (as James puts it, 1:17). Is the difference between unbelievers and believers, though, only a disagreement on the *source* of our daily bread? Should believers seek *as much* daily bread from God as unbelievers seek from this earth?

The question is important. We in Australia live in a highly materialistic society. That is: our society cultivates and encourages the notion that people have a right to *more, bigger, better*. Houses are bigger and stocked with more elaborate entertainment equipment than a decade ago. To eat out once or twice a week and to take an extravagant holiday to some exotic place are seen as Australian rights. If the neighbor can do it, I should be able to do it too. More, bigger, better: it's the taste of the day.

We live in this culture, and we're invariably affected by this mentality. How does this emphasis on more, bigger, better affect our prayers? Should we ask God for bread, or for bread-with-jam? Should we ask God for a house, or for a castle? Should we ask God to play the game well, or to win the game?

Jesus answers the question for us in the formulation of the fourth petition. He tells us to ask God this: "Give us this day our daily bread." Jesus' point is clear: we ask God not for sufficient for the rest of our lives, but we ask God for sufficient for *today*.

How much do we need *today*? Here I draw to your attention the words of Agur in Proverbs 30. Agur request God please to take falsehood and lies away from him – a request that doesn't concern us today with Lord's Day 50. His second request interacts directly with our question about how much; he asks God to "give me neither poverty nor riches." He doesn't want too little, lest he be poor and be tempted to steal and so profane the name of God; he also doesn't want too much, lest he "be full and deny" the Lord, conclude that he doesn't need God. That second possibility, having too much, is possibly more of a danger for us in our materialistic age than the first. The song Moses taught the people of Israel proves the point. Deut 32: Israel "grew fat and kicked; You grew fat, you grew thick, You

are obese! Then he forsook God who made him, And scornfully esteemed the Rock of his salvation" (vs 15; cf 8:11ff). Agur sees the danger of having too much, and so deliberately asks God to be moderate in what He gives him – not too little, but also not too much! You see, Agur wants to *retain a sense of dependence on God*. He knows his human weakness, knows his inborn inclination to conclude in his abundance that he doesn't *need* God day by day.

How much should we ask for? Just bread, or also jam on the bread? Just a house, plain and adequate, or a castle? Just a car, or a BMW? Look at the way the Catechism is worded: "Provide us with all our bodily needs so that we may acknowledge that You are the only fountain of all good." The sentence does not stop after the first line, so that we ask God to "provide us with all our bodily needs" – full stop. Rather, the sentence continues with a *purpose clause*, and explains *why* we ask God to give us our bodily needs. The purpose is this: "so that we may acknowledge that You are the only fountain of all good." Here is the instruction of Prov 30: don't give me too little, so that I steal and so state through my actions that You are not the only fountain of all good. At the same time: don't give me too much, so that I lose my sense of dependence on You and think that I'm self-sufficient. Give me just enough, says Lord's Day 50, so that I acknowledge and keep acknowledging that I'm dependent on You, that You are the only fountain of any thing that can touch my life.

If that, brothers and sisters, is the thrust of this petition –don't give me too much, and don't give me too little; give me just enough so that I keep acknowledging my dependence on You- if that's the thrust of this petition, it will be clear that this petition cuts two ways. We are very accustomed to the obvious way, that God *give* us bread; our plate is empty, Father, will You give us bread for the day. But it goes the other way too, that God *take* bread from us; Father, we have so much that we are forgetting that we are dependent on You, and so we pray that You take some away, that You give us less, so that we acknowledge our dependence on You.

That second element sounds foreign to us, actually doesn't sit so well with us (for we, like society around us, like to have more, bigger, better...). But consider this. I mentioned earlier that the fourth petition involves more than bread alone, but also food in general, as well as clothes and shelter and transportation and freedom and health, etc. In the past year we have had a couple of brothers in the congregation afflicted with life-threatening illnesses. By the grace of the Lord, both brothers have received good health again. As they and their families look back on the dark hours of ill health, what do they say? This: that illness has driven home to us how dependent we are on God! You see: the Lord has answered the fourth petition, gave daily bread (in this instance health, or lack of it) in such an amount that we all were confronted with our frailty and our dependence on God; we all were driven in the brothers' illnesses to acknowledge that our Father in Jesus Christ was the only fountain of all good. In giving those illnesses, the Lord was answering us as we prayed the fourth petition!

So it is in other areas of life also. There are those in the churches who have prospered in their business activities over the years, and through this circumstance or that have lost it all. That is to say: God for a period gave less daily bread than in the past, even *took away* what He had previously given. There are those whose marriages have fallen apart, and that's to say: God took something away that He'd earlier given. And what do you hear when you talk to these people? Certainly, you hear of pain, but you *also hear of growth* in the Lord's service, specifically an increased awareness that God alone is the only fountain of all good, an increased awareness of dependence on Him.

For how much do we ask in this petition? For bread, as well as for jam on the bread? For just a car, or also a Merc? For strength to do our work, or also for applause from the boss? The world wants more and more of material things, but the child of God wants more and more of spiritual things, a greater and greater sense of *dependence* on his heavenly Father. So *that* is the focus of our prayer.

Can one then survive with little?! Does one not need much to live this life? Little – and one can think of Joseph in Egypt, a slave, a prisoner...; he had little. And we say: that's no life! And much – one can think of the rich man of the parable of Luke 12; his crop was so good that he built himself new sheds and told himself to take his ease, "eat, drink and be merry." And we say: that's life! But Joseph, brothers and sisters, went on –despite himself!- to become ruler of Egypt, while the rich man –despite himself- died the night his new sheds were finished. Can one survive on little? Most definitely, and happily so, *when one has the blessing of the Lord!* Does one need much to survive? Experience tells us that abundance certainly helps, but the Scriptures, beloved, stress that abundance doesn't help one a dot *unless one has the blessing of the Lord!* The blessing of the Lord: *that's* what makes one rich! God's blessing, God's favor,

God's smile upon you: *that's* worth infinitely more than material abundance. When the rich man of Luke 12 died and appeared before God's judgment seat, he had no chequebook with him, nor a Diners Card; his wealth helped him nothing. And on the day of Christ's return, all the wealth we've amassed in this life will go up in smoke; it will help us nothing. This is Jesus' point in Luke 12:21: "So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God." What one needs to life is not riches on earth, but riches in heaven, and that's to say that one has God's blessing, God's favor. And one has that blessing, that favor, when one acknowledges *dependence* on the Lord, *trust* in our Father in Christ. Again, the concluding part of Lord's Day 50: "Grant, therefore, that we may withdraw our trust from all creatures, and place it only in You."

For how much do we ask? Agur's words teach us well: "give me neither riches nor poverty." Make me to confess daily, Father, that I am *dependent* on You, completely dependent for all my bodily needs.

So I come to our last point,

3. *The Purpose of Daily Bread.*

We ask the Lord, then, for not too little nor too much, but just enough to be continually aware of our dependence on Him. The Lord in His mercy answers our petition and gives us daily bread. What, now, are we to do with blessings God gives us? I want to give two answers to that question.

The first answer flows from the structure of the Lord's Prayer itself. The body of the Lord's Prayer, we recall, contains six petitions, the first three revolving around the word 'Your' ("Hallowed be Your Name, Your kingdom come, Your will be done"), while the second three revolve around the word 'us' (give us bread, forgive our sins, keep us from temptation). This second set of three does not function separately from the first three, but is instead directly connected. Specifically: in the second set of three petitions (those focusing on 'us'), we ask the Lord God for the *wherewithal* to do our bit to hallow His name, make His kingdom come and do His will. That is: we can't hallow God's name, can't make His kingdom come, can't do God's will, unless God gives us the resources to do so. That, now, is the place of the fourth petition. We ask for daily bread, all our bodily needs, *so that* we can obey God's will for us and accept His will for us, we ask for our bodily needs so that we might make God's kingdom come, might bring glory to His holy name. Recall Agur's prayer: don't give me too little, lest I steal and profane God's name – and that would be against God's will, and certainly doesn't hallow God's name (it 'profanes'). Similarly, to have too much opens the temptation to deny God, and that doesn't hallow God's name or make His kingdom come or cause His will to be done either. It's also the point of our Lord Jesus Christ in Luke 12. "Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing," says Jesus (vs 23), and that's to say that we are created for *God* and His glory. Hence the instruction of vs 31: "seek the kingdom of God, and all these things will be added to you." Food and clothes, health and wealth, is given for a purpose; you receive daily bread so that you can function in God's kingdom, do His will, hallow His name.

That brings us to the second aspect of the answer. Why might it be that in this petition Jesus formulates the request with the plural word 'us' instead of the singular pronoun 'my'? Certainly, here is an aspect of the communion of saints; the Lord would have us pray for each other. I'm not just to concern myself with *my* food, *my* health, *my* affairs. I'm also to concern myself with *your* food, *your* health, *your* affairs. That is, I'm to *pray* also for you, and you for me.

But there's another element here that's so important in our prosperous society. You see: the *Lord does not necessarily give to each person his bread directly*.

That's a thought with which we're very familiar. A family of growing children must all eat, must all be clothed, must all be housed. Yet the Lord does not give food, clothing, shelter, to each family member *directly*; He instead gives the means to buy food and clothes and housing generally to the father of the family, the wage earner. And we understand: the father is not meant to stick the money in his own pocket and let his children fend for himself; Dad has received that pay cheque in order to feed others. We pray: "give *us* this day *our* daily bread," and the Lord gives that bread to some of us directly and to others of us indirectly, through the wages He gives Dad. To put it differently: we recognize that the Lord has given the children's portion to the father so that the father might in turn pass on to the children what the Lord has given him.

We're familiar with the same principle in the congregation. In all our homes we pray this fourth petition, but do not

pray it for ourselves alone; we pray it also for each other. For we recognize that the Lord supplies for some of us directly (through wages) and for others of us indirectly (if I may so term it), ie, through the deacons. So we take of our income and put a portion in the collection bag for the benefit of others. We pray for *our* daily bread, and then we act according to that word 'our'; we share what we have for the benefit of those to whom God has given less. To put it differently: we recognize that the Lord has given to us bread designated for the other, so that we might pass it on. It's clear to us that what God has given us –be it food or house or health- is not meant for *me* individually.

What, brothers and sisters, do you think? Should this principle be restricted to family and congregation alone? We are sufficiently familiar with the circumstances of our world to realize that many millions receive not enough to live but too much to die. Could it be that the Lord has given their portion to us, so that we in turn might share our abundance with them? Would the Lord want to answer their cries for bread through our generosity – even as He answers our children's cries for food through us parents?

After Jesus spoke that parable of the rich man who built those new sheds, Jesus drew out the implications for His disciples. Vs 22: "Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; nor about your body, what you will put on." Then Jesus referred to the birds and the flowers, and added in vs 30: "For all these things the nations of the world seek after, and your Father knows that you need these things. But seek first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added to you." That is: don't worry; your Father in heaven will give you your daily bread, day by day. Store up for every possible tomorrow as the rich man did? No, says the Lord in vs 33. "Sell what you have and give alms; provide yourselves money bags which do not grow old, a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches nor moth destroys."

Our Father in Jesus Christ is sovereign Lord, and gives to each as each needs. So we have much to pray for; in the midst of our daily needs, it's foolish, so very foolish not to ask the Giver. It's equally foolish to ask for too much, for that undermines trust in Him. And when He gives more than we need, it's wrong to keep the extra for ourselves alone. Our Father in heaven is merciful, and makes the rain to fall and gives bread to eat to both the just and the unjust. And sometimes He is pleased to give my portion to another, so that the other might share it with me. Or give another's portion to me so that I might share it with him.

Jesus teaches us to pray, pray also for our daily bread. We realize: here's a topic that keeps us praying *all the time*. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 6 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 18 May 2002.

" UPSTAIRS OR DOWNSTAIRS: WHERE DOES RECONCILIATION WITH GOD BEGIN?"

Text:

Lord's Day 6

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

A. He must be a true man because the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should pay for sin.¹ He must be a righteous man because one who himself is a sinner cannot pay for others.²

¹ Rom 5:12, 15; 1 Cor 15:21; Heb 2:14-16. ² Heb 7:26, 27; 1 Pet 3:18.

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

A. He must be true God so that by the power of His divine nature¹ He might bear in His human nature the burden of God's wrath,² and might obtain for us and restore to us righteousness and life.³

¹ Is 9:6. ² Deut 4:24; Nahum 1:6; Ps 130:3. ³ Is 53:5, 11; Jn 3:16; 2 Cor 5:21.

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

A. Our Lord Jesus Christ,¹ whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption (1 Corinthians 1:30).

¹ Mt 1:21-23; Lk 2:11; 1 Tim 2:5; 3:16.

19. Q. From where do you know this?

A. From the holy gospel, which God Himself first revealed in Paradise.¹ Later, He had it proclaimed by the patriarchs² and prophets,³ and foreshadowed by the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law.⁴ Finally, He had it fulfilled through His only Son.⁵

¹ Gen 3:15. ² Gen 12:3; 22:18; 49:10. ³ Is 53; Jer 23:5, 6; Mic 7:18-20; Acts 10:43; Heb 1:1. ⁴ Lev 1-7; Jn 5:46; Heb 10:1-10. ⁵ Rom 10:4; Gal 4:4, 5; Col 2:17.

Scripture Reading:

John 1:1-14

I Corinthians 1:26-31

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 124:1,3

Psalm 30:2

Hymn 15:3

Hymn 24:1,5

Psalm 138:1,4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Is reconciliation with God something that starts in heaven or on earth, with God or with men, from Upstairs or from

Downstairs?

The question is critically important. Last week with Ezekiel 8 I made mention of the Babylonian god Tammuz, that god who died when the paddocks turned brown and came alive again when the paddocks turned green – or, better put (I said), Tammuz came alive and therefore the paddocks turned green again. But to ensure that this god in fact came alive again (and therefore the paddocks turned green), people had to bewail his death at the time the paddocks turned brown. The point: the trigger that made this god come alive again was what happened on earth.

Baal worship amongst the Canaanites was the same. Baal wouldn't give rain and fertility unless you on earth performed the prescribed rituals on the high places. That is: the trigger for his blessing was Downstairs, in your possession.

Modern religions are the same. In the Muslim religion, how can one be accepted by Allah? It's not that Allah does things for people; it's rather that people have to make it their business to satisfy Allah – roll out the prayer-mat so many times a day, keep the fast of Ramadan, travel to Mecca, possibly even give your life as a suicide bomber for Allah's cause, etc. In Hinduism too to discover the godhead you have to meditate. And so it is, brothers and sisters, for every religion of this world; the trigger for contact with the deity lies Downstairs, on this earth, in your hands.

The only exception to this pattern is the Christian faith of the Bible. Not, let me hasten to add, that everybody who calls himself a Christian admits that reconciliation with God begins in heaven and not on earth. Roman Catholicism, for example, though it is considered Christian, has adopted the mindset of the heathens and officially teaches that the trigger for reconciliation with God lies on earth; you through your good works win the approval and favor of God.... Arminianism in principle says the same. But the Lord teaches us the opposite. In Lord's Day 6 the Christian puts into his own words what he has heard God say in the Bible: reconciliation with God does not begin on earth but in heaven, is not something from man but from God, is not from Downstairs but from Upstairs.

Before I draw that out, I need to tell you that human nature resists the notion that salvation comes from heaven and not from earth. The fact that every religion on earth has the trigger for reconciliation with the deity on earth is a warning to us that human nature wants to keep the trigger in our hands; we want to have control over good relations with the gods, and so insist that reconciliation is from Downstairs. The fact that so many Christian religions, despite claiming to be faithful to the Bible, nevertheless accept a theology that has the trigger for reconciliation *on earth* simply demonstrates that all men by nature want control of that trigger ourselves. *And we are not above that urge!* This reality gives *urgency* to the material of our Lord's Day; it is critically important that we understand salvation to *begin and end* in heaven – if we are not swept along with the flow of thinking acceptable to mankind and so common in our society.

I preach to you the word of God using this theme:

UPSTAIRS OR DOWNSTAIRS: WHERE DOES RECONCILIATION WITH GOD BEGIN?

1. Reconciliation begins not downstairs,
2. Reconciliation begins upstairs.

1. Reconciliation begins not Downstairs.

To follow the line of thought of our Lord's Day this afternoon, we need to reach back for a moment to Lord's Day 5. You recall from last time that Lord's Day 5 begins with a confession. Q 12: "according to God's righteous judgment, we deserve temporal and eternal punishment." As we consider the question of whether reconciliation with God begins in heaven or on earth, we need to picture ourselves on earth and God in heaven having in His hand a cup of divine wrath intended for us. Lord's Day 5 had asked how we can escape this punishment, how we can stop God from tipping the contents of His cup-of-wrath onto us. The answer, we confessed in Lord's Day 5, was that we had to *pay*. Notice: with that answer we confess that the onus lies on earth, with that answer we say that reconciliation with God rightly begins with us Downstairs. But, we were disappointed to confess in A 13, we cannot make this payment because we daily increase our debt. And we added in A 14 that we can't find another creature able to pay for us either. So: God in

heaven continues to hold that cup of wrath, ready to tip its dreadful contents onto us, and there's *nothing we on earth can do* to escape the impending judgment. Yet –for it was we who sinned in the beginning- the onus remains on us to make payment; payment *must* come from Downstairs.

That led to the conclusion of Question & Answer 15: we have to go *searching*. Q 15: "what kind of mediator and deliverer must we *seek*?" We on earth *have* to search, have to *find* a deliverer, someone who can somehow satisfy God's justice so that God will not pour out that wrath upon us. What kind of deliverer we have to find? "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 closing statement of Lord's Day 5 raises, of course, the inevitable question: is it really true that the deliverer we seek answers to those three criteria, ie, is a true man, is a righteous man and is true God? *Is it true?* We want the answer to be No, No!, because, as we confessed in Lord's Day 3, we'll never find a righteous man on this earth – for all men "are totally unable to do any good and inclined to all evil." We want the answer to be No, we want to be told that the man we seek doesn't have to be a righteous man after all (let alone true God) because otherwise reconciliation with God *can never come from this earth* – even though our natural inclination agrees with all the religions of the world that Yes, reconciliation with the deities does begin Downstairs with us on earth. That's why the Catechism makes a point of asking Question & Answer 16 & 17: *why* must the deliverer we seek be a true and righteous man, *why* must He at the same time be true God? For the Catechism would cut off any thought that it's not so necessary after all that the man we seek be a true man and a righteous man and true God at the same time....

Let's look, then, with more detail at Question & Answer 16 & 17; *why* must the needed deliverer be a true man, a righteous man and true God?

"He must be a true man," we have heard Scripture teach, "because the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should pay for sin." This is simple the principle God first stipulated in Paradise. In relation to that one tree He told Adam that "in the day you eat of it you shall die" (Gen 2:17). Notice: God did not say that in the day Adam ate of that tree his dog would die; no, when you eat *you* die. That's the principle: you sin, *you* pay. In the words of our Lord's Day: "the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should pay for sin." That the Lord insists on this principle is pointed up by Paul's words when he describes the work of Christ like this: "since my man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead" (I Cor 15:21). Man sinned, man pays. So Yes, we must seek a true man.

"He must be a righteous man," we heard Scripture teach, "because one who is himself a sinner cannot pay for others." This principle God instilled upon His people Israel from the very beginning of His covenant with them at Mt Sinai. For the Lord God commanded that once a year, on the Day of Atonement, the High Priest had to make a special sacrifice before God for the sins of the people. But before the high priest did so he first had to offer a separate sacrifice for himself (Lev 16:6ff). That is: with the offering of a bull he first had to clear his own sins away before he could present a goat to God on behalf of the people. If the High Priest would offer that goat to God *while his own sins still remained*, God would not accept his sacrifice for the people; his own sins would stand in the way of the sacrifice. That's the principle: a sinner cannot pay for others; he has to get rid of his own sins first. That the Lord insists on this principle is pointed up in the letter to the Hebrews, when the apostle says of the Lord Jesus Christ that He did not, like those high priests of old, need to offer up more sacrifices than one, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, for Christ was "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners" (Heb 7:26ff) – and therefore His sacrifice acceptable to God.

In the third place, we learn from Scripture, "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." The point here is the intensity of God's wrath. We can survive when people pour out human wrath on people. But what if God pours out divine wrath on people? The Lord tells us through Nahum that no one can stand before God's indignation or endure the fierceness of His anger; even hills melt and mountains quake before Him (1:5f). Suppose we could find a righteous man on earth, one untouched by sin, and present him to God to pay for sin; he'd still perish under the infinite load of God's blazing fury. That's the point of Q 17: only one who has the power of God can survive under the weight of God's anger.

So we're back to our question: can *we* find someone who could kick start a process of reconciliation with God? We'd

love it to be so, we'd love to have some contribution to the reconciliation process, would even love to have control over the process. But with Question & Answer 16 & 17 we confess that God closes this door. It is *He* we need to satisfy, and *He* sets criteria we *can't satisfy*. So: does reconciliation with God begin in heaven or on earth? With us or with God? Downstairs or upstairs? The answer is emphatically: *not Downstairs!*

That brings us to our second point:

2. Reconciliation begins Upstairs.

Question & Answer 18 asks, "But who is that Mediator who at the same time is true God and a true and righteous man?" Given the demands of Question & Answer 16 & 17, one would expect here this question: "can we ever find such a mediator?", and the answer "No," and that would be the end of the Catechism – and of our hope. But the Lord God from heaven on high, brothers and sisters, has told us *what He did*. He in heaven saw our misery in Paradise, saw that we on earth could not produce the payment His justice demanded, could not find on earth a true and righteous man who could bear the burden of God's wrath against sin, and so *God acted!* Reconciliation does *not* start Downstairs, but Upstairs. God reached out to fallen man on the very day that man fell into sin. God reached out with the promise of what *He* was going to do, and *He* said that He'd cause the seed of the woman to conquer the seed of the serpent. That gospel of *His actions* He 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. Always the message was the same: *God* was working to bring about reconciliation for the people who had snubbed Him in Paradise. That is: God *in heaven* was working to redeem *people on earth*. It's the consistent message of God's Old Testament revelation: reconciliation comes not from Downstairs but from Upstairs.

That divine work from Upstairs came to its climax when God sent His only Son into the world. The apostle John begins his gospel with drawing our attention to heaven, to the Word who is God, yes, who is so much God that the world was created through Him (Jn 1:1ff). Then John hastens to add: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (vs 14). 'Word': our thoughts are directed to heaven, where the Word has His eternal home. 'Flesh': now our thoughts are directed to earth, where God has given finite man –flesh– a home. And see: John links the two, links heaven and earth, Upstairs and Downstairs, for he says that "the Word *became* flesh." That, we understand, is a reference to Christ's birth in Bethlehem, Christmas. Christmas, Christ's birth, was not people reaching up to God, but God reaching down to people.

John repeats that same downward action from Upstairs to Downstairs a couple of chapters later, in Jn 3. The apostle quotes the very Jesus who "became flesh" as saying, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (vs 16). Notice: "God gave." The action takes place Upstairs. And the purpose of the action is to save those who are Downstairs: believers may receive everlasting life.

Paul picks up the same point in Phil 2. He says of Jesus Christ that He was "in the form of God," even "equal with God" (vs 6). Statements like that send our thoughts to heaven, where Jesus was with God in glory from eternity. Then Paul adds: Jesus "made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men" (vs 7). This action on Jesus' part takes our thoughts to earth, for this is where Jesus came in the likeness of men. The process, though, is not from earth to heaven, from Downstairs to Upstairs; the process is from heaven to earth, from Upstairs to Downstairs.

Of course, no one will dispute that these passages of Scripture describe the action as moving from heaven to earth, from Upstairs to Downstairs. The question that remains, though, is this: what got the action started? Was the *trigger* that prompted the Word to become flesh in heaven or on earth? That is: did people do something to prompt God to send His Son – as the Canaanites triggered Baal to give them fertility by their cultic prostitutes in the high places? You see: if the trigger that prompted God to send His Son to earth is to be found on this earth, *then we still have control* of reconciliation with God – for we can decide to pull the trigger or not.

But the Bible is so clear on the point. The trigger *can't* be on earth because –as we confessed with Lord's Day 2 and 3– we are by nature spiritually dead. And any soldier knows that the dead can't pull triggers! So it's a relief to read from Jn 3 that the trigger is distinctly in heaven. Said Jesus: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten

Son...." The action is in heaven: "God ... gave." But the trigger for the action is equally in heaven: "God *so loved* the world that He gave...." That is: God's action of reaching out to the earth lies in *His love*. And that love is not His reply to our first loving Him; no, His love comes from *within Himself* (cf I Jn 4:9f). And that is to say that the trigger of all contact between heaven and earth lies *in God alone*.

Of the various texts the Catechism could quote to prove that reconciliation between us and God comes 100% from Upstairs (and therefore 0% from Downstairs), the Catechism settles on Paul's statement in I Cor 1:30: "whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption." As with previous passages, so also here: the action is with God, and so our thoughts have to go to heaven; in heaven "God made" Jesus wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption for us on earth.

"Wisdom," says the apostle, and the point is that God knows the goal –reconciliation between heaven and earth- and the best way to reach that goal. God's chosen way to achieve that reconciliation? He chose what is foolish in the world, including that salvation should come from heaven and not from earth (a concept that runs against the grain of every depraved human; witness that all the religions of the world see the action moving from Downstairs to Upstairs). But God knows that no one will find a true and righteous man on earth, let alone one who is true God also, and so redemption cannot move from Downstairs to Upstairs. So He in wisdom (though people may mock it!) set to work Upstairs to reach out to man Downstairs; He "made" Jesus "our wisdom".

God made Jesus "righteousness" also, says Paul, and the point is that God in heaven sees sinners as the sinners they are, and therefore deserving the cup of wrath He holds poised to pour out over us. But the Christ God gave has stepped between God and us, so that He copped the load of God's wrath on our behalf, paid for sin. Now God looks at us and sees us no longer as sinners but as righteous instead, Not Guilty of sin for Jesus' sake.

Even that's not all. God made Jesus also our "sanctification." Here the point is that sinners are renewed, changed so that they act like children of God; they're sorry for sin and holy in conduct. No, not perfect yet, but God's renewing work in sinners has begun – and the eye can see it. And that beginning, that change, that sanctification, has its roots in the Jesus God sent from heaven to earth.

The last gift Paul mentions is that God made Jesus "our ... redemption." The term catches the result of the other fruits of what God made Jesus. Redemption: that's the reconciliation with God we sought in the first place. That cup of God's wrath: how do we escape it?! We can't, we said, but God Himself redeems us from the fear of that cup! His perfect wisdom is that He gave Christ so that we might be righteous before God, and therefore set free from the anguish that freezes those who fear the justice and wrath of God. In a word: reconciliation with God comes completely from God, from Upstairs! So, says Paul: let him who boasts boast in the Lord!

The fact that reconciliation with God comes from Upstairs and not from Downstairs has two consequences for us. The first is that we have no grounds for any *pride* or smugness in relation to ourselves. There is not a thing that we on earth can do to move God in heaven to bestow on us some sort of favor – be it in making our crops grow or blessing our children or taking away strife from our homes. We are completely and totally deserving of that cup of God's wrath, and in no way can we turn that cup of wrath away. Wailing as the women did for Tammuz will not help, even if it's wailing over sin. Cultic ceremonies as the Canaanites did for Baal will not help, even if it's putting big money into a collection bag or praying at length in church. Doing particular deeds as the Muslims must do for Allah will not help either, even if it's obeying every one of the Ten Commandments to the point of laying down your life. Nor will meditating as the Hindus do help in any way, even if it's reflection over an open Bible. Reconciliation with the God we offended in Paradise moves *from Heaven to Earth*, and not from Earth to Heaven! We are dependent on God's grace, and not on our works, in any way, shape or form. So there is here no place for human pride, for human contribution. Reconciliation with God is *grace alone*, 100% grace. So we need to be humble.

There's a second consequence. Exactly because reconciliation with God comes from Upstairs and not from Downstairs does the gospel of Jesus Christ give enormous *comfort*. For God is not like man. We begin a project, and after some time we lose enthusiasm and give it up. But not God! He began a work of salvation, set out to reconcile sinners to Himself, *and what He began He will bring to completion* (cf Phil 1:6; Ps 138:8). That gives us the assurance that reconciliation with God is in fact real, is achieved. If the rains didn't come and the crops didn't grow, the Baal

worshiper could only conclude that he had to offer more, *more*, had to conclude that his efforts on his high places weren't good enough – and so he had to try harder, *harder*. Luther had the exact same struggle in Roman Catholicism; he didn't feel reconciled to God and so concluded he had to do more, *more*, try harder, *harder*. But it was a slavery; trying harder, *harder*, gave no peace. And it can't give peace, because reconciliation is then tackled from the wrong side, from Downstairs instead of from Upstairs. God insists reconciliation *is completely His work*, and since He completes what He began may His people have comfort, the assurance that Yes, there is peace with God. Peace, not because we try so hard or because we hold the trigger, but peace because *God* took the initiative, and *God* did the acting. *He* acted, and so "...to us a Child is born, To us a Son is given, And on His shoulders He shall bear All power in earth and heaven" – power strong enough to bear the burden of God's wrath against sin and deliver us from it forever! Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 7 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 2 June 2002.

" FAITH IS TAKING THE INVISIBLE GOD FOR REAL."

Text:

Lord's Day 7

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

A. No. Only those are saved who by a true faith are grafted into Christ and accept all His benefits.[1]

[1] *Matt. 7:14; John 1:12; 3:16, 18, 36; Rom. 11:16-21.*

21. Q. What is true faith?

A. True faith is a sure knowledge whereby I accept as true all that God has revealed to us in His Word.[1] At the same time it is a firm confidence[2] that not only to others, but also to me,[3] God has granted forgiveness of sins, everlasting righteousness, and salvation,[4] out of mere grace, only for the sake of Christ's merits.[5] This faith the Holy Spirit works in my heart by the gospel.[6]

[1] *John 17:3, 17; Heb. 11:1-3; James 2:19.* [2] *Rom. 4:18-21; 5:1; 10:10; Heb. 4:16.* [3] *Gal. 2:20.* [4] *Rom. 1:17; Heb. 10:10.* [5] *Rom. 3:20-26; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8-10.* [6] *Acts 16:14; Rom. 1:16; 10:17; I Cor. 1:21.*

22. Q. What, then, must a Christian believe?

A. All that is promised us in the gospel,[1] which the articles of our catholic and undoubted Christian faith teach us in a summary.

[1] *Matt. 28:19; John 20:30, 31.*

23. Q. What are these articles?

A. 1. I believe in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth.BR> 2. I believe in Jesus Christ, His only begotten Son, our Lord;

3. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary;

4. suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; He descended into hell;

5. On the third day He arose from the dead;

6. He ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of God the Father almighty;

7. from there He will come to judge the living and the dead.

8. I believe in the Holy Spirit;

9. I believe a holy catholic Christian church, the communion of saints;

10. the forgiveness of sins;

11. the resurrection of the body;

12. and the life everlasting.

Scripture Reading:

Hebrews 10:32-11:11

James 2:14-26

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 43:3

Psalm 62:1

Psalm 27:1,6

Psalm 84:4,5,6

Hymn 53:1,2

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

One of the more central words in Scripture and Christian thinking is the word ‘faith’. The term is central to our Lord’s Day also; indeed, we confess here that we need ‘faith’ to be saved. That puts us face-to-face with the big question: what is faith? More specifically: what does faith look like in real life? We need to be able to answer these questions because we need to answer whether *we* have faith.

What faith is? ‘Faith’, brothers and sisters, is not simply an optimism that things will turn out. Faith is also not simply knowing certain facts about God and Jesus Christ, about sin and salvation. Faith is *taking God for real*, in all His majesty, in all His promises, in all His works. That’s why faith can never be put on the shelf as something to admire or as something to help you in old age. Instead, that’s why faith colors every step of one’s daily life.

I summarize the sermon this afternoon with this theme:

FAITH IS TAKING THE INVISIBLE GOD FOR REAL.

1. The need for faith.
2. The essence of faith.
3. The look of faith.

1. The need for faith.

The first topic that needs our attention this afternoon is why faith is necessary. I can possibly best draw this matter out by following the line of thought of the Catechism itself.

We confessed in Lord’s Day 3 that the Lord God had created the human race. With the whole human race the Lord also established His covenant of grace, so that in Paradise there was a bond of love between God and man. The human race, however, did not appreciate this bond of love, instead deserted God and joined Satan; that’s the fall. We confessed God’s response in Lord’s Day 4; He was and is terribly displeased with our original as well as actual sins, and will punish them by a just judgment both now and eternally. So we sought in Lord’s Day 5 for a way to escape this punishment, and learned that there was no way open to us; God wants payment, but we can’t pay. As we wait for God to pour out His wrath upon us, we can do nothing else than cry out for God to have mercy, have mercy upon us. And here, we heard last time with Lord’s Day 6, is the delightful marvel of the gospel; God *does have mercy!* For God from heaven on high was pleased to *give* His only Son to redeem an undeserving people for Himself. To God be all glory!

That brings us to the first question of Lord’s Day 7. God gave Christ to save sinners. OK: "are all men, then, saved by Christ just as they perished through Adam?" With Adam’s fall the whole human race deserted God and joined the devil; does the mirror opposite happen as a result of Christ’s work on the cross – all people taken from Satan’s side back to God’s side?

A couple of texts from Scripture will answer the question for us. I refer first to Gabriel’s words to the virgin Mary. Said he: "you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). Notice, brothers and sisters, that here the angel divides the human race into two groups. The one group he calls "His people" and the others, well, they’re passed by, they’re not mentioned as benefiting from Jesus’ saving work.

Consider also Jesus’ prayer before He went to the cross. He said in Jn 17: "I pray for them. I do not pray for the world but for those whom You have given Me, for they are Yours" (vs 9). That is: Jesus prays for *some*, and not for others. Shortly after He prayed this prayer Jesus was arrested, tried and crucified. What do you think: for whom did Jesus lay down His life? For those for whom He prayed? Or also for those for whom He refused to pray? We understand: Jesus divided the human population into two groups, prayed for the one *and for these He laid down His life*.

I refer finally to Jesus' words in Mt 25. "When the Son of Man comes in His glory....," Jesus says of His return on the last day, "all the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats. And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left. Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world....' [And] He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels..." (Mt 25:31ff). It can't be clearer: the Lord divides the human race into two groups, of which one is reconciled to God and inherits eternal life, while the other remains under the curse of God's eternal wrath against sin.

The fact that God has divided the human race into two groups, and sent His Son to redeem the one group and not the other, raises for each person the pressing question: *which group am I in?* Directly linked to that question is another: has God set a criteria I must satisfy so that I may belong to the one group and not the other? On that question of criteria, congregation, God's answer is clear: yes, there is a criteria each person needs to satisfy. The Holy Spirit says in Jn 3: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that *whoever believes in Him* should not perish but have everlasting life" (vs 16). God's gift to salvation was most generous –His only Son- but only those who *believe in Him* will benefit from His saving work. That is the criteria one needs to satisfy to be numbered with the sheep on the right instead of with the goats on the left – one must *believe*, have *faith*. That in turn is why the Bible insists: "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). And: "he who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16:16). To believe, to have faith: God holds men responsible to *do* that, and we are in one of those two groups depending on whether we submit to this command of God or not.

Let the point be clear, beloved. The criteria God uses to judge whether we go to the right amongst the sheep instead of to the left amongst the goats is not: did you go to church? The criteria is not either: were you a covenant child? Nor is it: did you learn your Catechism, or did you stay away from the night-clubs, or did you give liberally for worthy causes in God's kingdom? *The* criteria is *faith*, and *faith alone*. That's why it's imperative that each of us grapples with that critical question: *do I have faith?*

That brings us to our second point:

2. The essence of faith.

If you must have faith to be saved, *what is faith?* The question presses upon us, and, truth be told, we find it hard to put into words. So I draw your attention to the portion of Scripture we read from the letter to the Hebrews.

The section we read from Heb 10 makes clear that the Christians addressed in this letter were in trouble. They had years ago come to faith (vs 32), and initially had endured the resulting persecution with good courage. But of late they were dropping their bundle, says vs 36; the trials that characterize the Christian life were just getting too much.... So the apostle seeks to encourage. How? By reminding the Hebrews that Jesus Christ is soon coming again. That's the punch of his quote in vs 37: "yet a little while, And He who is coming will come and will not tarry." His coming will bring relief from the trials of this life, indeed. But the Bible is also clear that His coming will not benefit all men; His coming means judgment and hell for some. Who will survive His coming? Vs 38: "the just shall live by faith." That is: faith is essential for salvation. In that context, where the Hebrew Christians were in danger of drawing back from the faith, of giving it up, the Holy Spirit moves the apostle to explain to these embattled Christians what faith really is.

What it is? The apostle describes faith in chap 11:1: "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." It needs to be fixed in our minds first, brothers and sisters, that the apostle is here not supplying the Hebrews with a dictionary definition of faith. Rather, the apostle is outlining the *function* of faith. He gives color to this function of faith by the various examples of faith he gives in the course of chap 11 – to which we'll turn shortly. First, though, I need to say something more about vs 1 itself. The word 'substance' actually translates a word that means 'foundation', 'basis', 'that upon which one stands.' The psalmist complains that he "sinks in deep mire, where there is no standing" (Ps 69:2), and that's the same word; there's no bottom in the mire, no foundation. The Christian, now, looks into the future, into the day to day struggles against attacks from the devil, the world, and one's own flesh. What hope does he have of surviving? What's the foundation, the basis for his hopes for the future? That, says the

apostle, is *faith*; "faith is the substance, the basis, the foundation of things the believer hopes for."

The second part of the sentence says a similar thing; "faith is ... the evidence of things not seen." The footnote in our translation says that the word 'evidence' could also be translated as 'confidence'. That's a better translation; faith supplies the confidence that God's promises –though still unseen because they're still future- will certainly come about.

If faith, then, supplies the foundation upon which your hopes for the future is based, what is the *content* of this faith? Is it enough to believe that it will rain this month? Or that alignment of the stars will benefit your life? No, brothers and sisters, that's not the content of the faith the apostle speaks of. In the earlier chapters of his letter he drew out how God in heaven is busy reconciling a world to Himself through Jesus Christ; *that's* the content of faith. And at the heart of that content is first of all this that *God exists*; after all, Jesus' work of reconciling sinners to God makes no sense if God does not exist in the first place. That's vs 6: "he who comes to God must believe that He is." To put it in plain language: the essence of faith is that *one takes God seriously*.

The point is critical, brothers and sisters. We walk the road of life day by day, be it as mothers in our homes, as children at school, as fathers in the workforce, etc. As we go about our daily activities we meet so many people who do not take God seriously. The vast majority of Australians don't take Him into account because either they deny that He exists or they see Him as that old man in the sky who can't do much about the evils happening on earth – in other words, He's small, pathetic. Especially the notion that there is no God has a cold and compelling logic to it. That logic is this: no one has ever seen God. Ask your mates at work, talk to the scientists at uni: no one in Perth has ever seen God, no one has ever touched Him. And there's no experiment available either that will prove that He exists. In such a context the pressure is certainly on to cave in to society's ridicule of those who believe that God exists. For: *what grounds have you to insist that God is real?* And therefore: what grounds have you to believe that God will care for you tonight and tomorrow and Tuesday?

Here, congregation, is the function of faith. We acknowledge that no one has seen God - we haven't either- and yet we maintain that God is real; more, we take Him seriously in all His actions and His words. *That* is faith. It's the conviction that things not seen are true nevertheless. In the words of vs 3: we weren't there when God created the world in the beginning, and we've never seen the non-existent suddenly come into being at a word of command either. But never mind what we haven't seen; there's more to reality than meets the eye. God Almighty is real, and so we accept as fact "that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible." Similarly, we acknowledge that the man who was crucified on Calvary so long ago was sentenced as a criminal, and criminals are not obvious saviors. But we're convinced nevertheless that Christ has obtained the redemption we long for and reconciled us to God. We've never yet seen a person rise from the dead, but that doesn't stop us from insisting that Jesus Christ did arise on the third day. We've never yet seen a man ascend from off our planet and travel through space into heaven, but we accept as true that Jesus Christ did so. *That* is faith. It's the conviction that things not seen are true nevertheless, true because *God is real* and He does actions that are out of the ordinary range of daily experiences.

The apostle draws this material out through various examples in the remainder of chap 11. "By faith," he writes in vs 4, "Able offered to God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain." We can picture it: two men in a field, neither of whom had seen God, let alone the anger of God on their sins. Both offered a sacrifice, each for reasons of his own. The one took God for real, and so knew that something had to be done to pay for sin and avert His punishment on sin; that's why Abel came humbly to God with the firstborn of his flock. His brother did not take God for real, did not accept as true that he would perish under the burden of God's wrath against sin unless atonement was made; that's why Cain did the done thing without humility and sincerity. That Abel took God seriously, though he'd never seen God, is faith-at-work; "*by faith* Abel offered to God a more excellent sacrifice" – and so expressed the ground for his conviction that his tomorrows would be well supplied.

The apostle mentions Noah. According to Genesis 6 God came to him one day with His promise to destroy all men from the earth with a flood, and that's why Noah should build an ark so long and so high and so wide. What Noah did? He'd never seen a flood big enough to destroy all flesh. He'd never seen a boat big enough to house two of every species of animal, let alone the food required to feed them. His culture didn't have chainsaws, let alone lumber mills.

But Noah dropped his daily work, went bush with an axe over his shoulder, and began to chop down trees..., and with his axe he made planks from the logs..., and over the space of a hundred years he assembled his trees into an ark. What do you think: did his community applaud Noah for his labors? When he explained to them what he was doing – building this huge boat because God is going to send a flood to drown all creatures- when he explained to them what he was doing, how would they have responded? We need no imagination, beloved, to understand that Noah will have been laughed out of town. Fancy spending a hundred years on a boat because you think a flood is going to happen – when no one has ever seen such a flood before, indeed, no one has ever yet seen the God who promised such a flood! ‘Noah, you’ve lost your marbles; wake up to reality, get your feet on the ground!’

But this, now, beloved, is faith: *Noah took God seriously*. True, he’d never seen God, and he’d never seen a flood like the one coming up, but *he knew that God was there, that God was mighty, that God was faithful, that God would and could do what He’d said He’d do*. So Noah hammered on, never mind the ridicule of his community. So by his faith he saved his household. Do you get a taste here, beloved, of how faith colors one’s actions??

Consider also Abraham. 75 years old he was when God told him to leave Ur of the Chaldeans to go ..., never mind where, just go.... In fact, in that new land God would make Abraham a blessing to the nations.... How? God doesn’t say straightaway...; Abram just has to go. Abram’s response? He put up a For Sale sign, gathered his wife and his servants, and set off to go – who knows.... Make sense? Make no mistake, beloved: the devil, the world, and his own flesh will have told Abram that migrating to a new land at age 75 was ridiculous; he ought instead to be booking a room in an old-age home.... But Abram *took God for real*, and so he quietly obeyed this God, convinced that the future this God had talked about would come to pass. That is faith: doing the will of God though the naked eye sees no value and no sense in doing it.... That is faith: building your hopes and dreams for the future on the promises of God alone, though the promises made no sense to the human mind.

The Hebrews were in danger of giving up their Christianity, collapsing under the pressure of tribulation. The apostle encourages them –how?- by telling them of the need for faith, telling them what faith is. They’re told that faith is *taking God for real*, more real than the ridicule of those around you. They’re told that faith is *taking God seriously*, more seriously than the questions our sinful minds throw up in the face of God’s commands. It’s true for the Hebrews in their circumstance and it’s true for us in ours: by faith we accept that God is real and all His promises are sure, and on that basis we’re sure that the forgiveness of sins we do not see is ours nevertheless, and the reconciliation with God we do not see is ours nevertheless, and the care we need this evening and tomorrow and Tuesday –though we don’t see it in the fog of our troubles- will be there nevertheless. This *faith* gives encouragement to go on, on, on, never mind the anguish of the moment. Faith: I’m sure that God is *there*, that God gave His Son for *me*, that God is *my Father*, and He has my future securely in His almighty hands.

So we find ourselves in our last point:

3. *The look of faith.*

What I’ve just said gives us some indication of the *look of faith* in real life. James insists that you can’t separate faith from works; "faith by itself," he says, "if it does not have works, is dead" (2:17). Given what we’ve learned from Hebrews 11 that’s perfectly clear. At the heart of faith, we learned, is that one takes God seriously. And taking God seriously obviously mean that one obeys God. That’s clear: Noah would not be taking God seriously if Noah had ignored God’s command to build that ark. Instead, taking God seriously meant that *each morning anew* Noah had to resist the urge to agree with the folk of town, meant that *each morning anew* he had to be prepared to act contrary to what all his human senses told him was logical. Taking God seriously *determined Noah’s conduct every day*, and that’s equally true for Abram, and that’s equally true for us. That’s what faith concretely looks like. Faith is something different than obedience, but you can’t separate faith from obedience. Faith is something different than good works, but you can’t separate faith from good works. That’s why it will never, ever do to say that what’s important is what’s in the heart – as if the outside is less than important. To contrast the outside from the inside, to contrast what you do with what lives in your heart is a false dilemma, for the one is directly linked to the other. The faith in your heart *shows itself* by the things you do; Noah showed that he took God seriously by going back to his boat-building every morning anew for a hundred long years.

Not all men are saved by Christ as they perished in Adam, but only those are saved who *by faith* are grafted into Jesus Christ. We want to be among those saved, among the sheep at the Judge's right hand and not among the goats at His left. So we need to *believe*, and that's to say that we accept God for real, *and therefore also accept every word of His for real*. That includes what He says about the saving work of Jesus Christ on the cross, and includes also what He says about stealing. It includes what He says about the providence of God and also what He says about committing adultery. It includes what He says about the church gathering work of the ascended Christ and also what He says about loving your neighbor. By faith we take God seriously every moment of the day, take seriously every word He ever spoke – even though we've never seen God, and His commands may seem right down ridiculous in our specific circumstances. But *by this faith* we *obey* whatever He says, and that is why the believer has a different lifestyle than the unbeliever. Faith without works-of-obedience is dead, because the person who doesn't obey God doesn't take God for real – and therefore he demonstrates that he doesn't believe after all.

Please don't misunderstand. I do not say that the person who *falls* into sin does not believe. The Holy Spirit has not perfected us yet, and so we shall all stumble in many ways (cf James 3:2). I speak rather of the person who is *characterized* by not taking God seriously in the nuts and bolts of daily life. *Such* a one does not believe. *Such* a one has decided to succumb to the pressure of the devil, the world, and his own flesh, has decided to take what the eye sees more seriously than what the eye does not see. Such a one does not ask each step of the day: Lord, what do you want me to do? – and then expect that his sense of happiness in the next hour lays in obeying the commands of his Father in Jesus Christ.

Who shall be saved? Indeed, he who believes. And we understand it now: faith is not something you put on a shelf to admire, and say: see, I have faith, it's over there. Rather, faith is action, faith is taking God seriously in everything He says, in every step of every day.

This faith takes seriously what God revealed about Christ dying for sin of Calvary's cross. This faith also takes seriously what God says about the ridicule of the world upon the believers, and so isn't surprised at scorn. And this faith takes seriously that the Christ who ascended will come again as He went. We've never seen God, have never seen Christ appear on the clouds of heaven. But we take Him for real nevertheless, and live that way, because we're sure: "Yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry." Then we'll see Him face to face, and our faith in Him vindicated. And those who scorned the godly will see that the believers were right all along.... Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 8 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 8 June 2002.

" THE GOD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH IS TRIUNE ."

Text:

Lord's Day 8

24. Q. How are these articles divided?

A. 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. Q. Since there is only one God,[1] why do you speak of three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? A. Because God has so revealed Himself in His Word[2] that these three distinct persons are the one, true, eternal God.

[1] *Deut. 6:4; Is. 44:6; 45:5; I Cor. 8:4, 6. [2] Gen. 1:2, 3; Is. 61:1; 63:8-10; Matt. 3:16, 17; 28:18, 19; Luke 4:18; John 14:26; 15:26; II Cor. 13:14; Gal. 4:6; Tit. 3:5, 6. God the Father and Our Creation*

Scripture Reading:

John 3:1-21

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 148:1

Hymn 6 ([Athanasian Creed](#))

Psalms 73:8

Hymn 3:1,2,3

Hymn 2:1,2

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We said last week with Lord's Day 7 that only those are saved who believe; *faith* is absolutely necessary for salvation. So we took a moment last week to describe what faith was. Faith, we said, was accepting that God exists, and then taking this God seriously. That's why you can't separate faith from obedience.

But saying all of that raises the next question. If faith involves accepting that God exists, *who is this God?* That question is important, for there are all kinds of perceptions of who God is. Ask the average Australian whether he believes there is a God, and you'll find that the vast majority answers the question with Yes. But now ask the next question is: what do you mean by God? And you'll get all kinds of answers. That's why it's important that the church confess straightaway who the God is in whom one must believe to be saved. And that's Lord's Day 8. Here the catechism describes the God in whom one must believe as Triune, three in One. More precisely, here *we* –who live in modern-day Australia- confess the only true God to be Triune, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

I intend this afternoon first to try to lay before you something of what society understands by the term 'God'. Then I want to turn to the Scriptures to learn from there what the God of heaven and earth has said about Himself. That will in turn provide material of encouragement and instruction for us in our modern world.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE GOD OF HEAVEN AND EARTH IS TRIUNE.

1. Two modern concepts of God.
2. Three distinct Persons are one God.
3. One glorious identity of God.

1. Two modern concepts of God.

It seems to me, congregation, that Australia's media reflects primarily two concepts of god. The first is based on evolution, and has slowly become the accepted way in which our culture looks at God. The second jumped into its own as a result of the terrorist attacks on America last September, and is really the Muslim way of looking at God – a way that the media tends to confuse with the God of the Bible. We look first at the evolution concept of God.

Evolution

The second half of the last century has seen the people of the street adopt the evolution theory as the true explanation of where life comes from. You will know the theory: billions of years ago an inexplicable Big Bang began the universe. In the course of millions of years molecules somehow got together in such a form as to be called life, and this early life evolved and changed with the circumstances and the climate to form the various life forms we see around us today, ourselves included. This teaching has no room for a God in heaven who either created the world in the beginning or upholds the world today. All there is to existence is *this* world.

But evolutionists have had to recognize that tribes and nations have a religion, and in their religion they have deities. The pressing question is: if there is no God in heaven who has revealed Himself to man, how come man has religions, how come man worships deities? The answer is runs as follows.

When primitive man first began to think, says the evolutionist theologian, he noticed that if you stand outside in full view of this yellow thing in the sky, you get all warm on the side facing this yellow thing. So: there must be a something in this sun, an unexplainable energy. Or: early man noticed that the paddocks were brown after a hot, dry summer, then it rained, and after some days the paddocks turned green. So: there must be a something in the rain, an unexplainable energy that makes things grow. Or: early man once witnessed a storm, saw an enormous flash of lightning, heard an awful lot of noise, and then noticed that yonder tree was split in half. Conclusion: there must be an energy, a force in the thunder, and this time it's not a friendly force but something to be scared of. So –says the evolutionist theologian- primitive man got to thinking that this energy out there was a *living force* (they didn't have the science to learn that it's just the way of nature). Once the thought arose that this energy was a living force, early man developed the concept of this force being satisfied with you or being angry with you. So there developed a sense of duty in primitive man: man should do things to keep this force happy, lest that force send you a terrible thunderstorm to scare the daylights out of you. Hence the notion of sacrifices, and of good or bad behavioral standards.

As time went on, this energy received a name. The Egyptians called him Ra, the Canaanites called him Baal, the people of Israel called him Yahweh, the aboriginals of Australia called him Bula, the Indians of North America called him the Great Spirit, and so on. As to how to keep this Force happy, well, different cultures developed different sacrifices and liturgies and feasts and dances.... So speaks the evolutionist theologian.

From this line of thinking, brothers and sisters, a number of conclusions follow quite logically. In the first place, everybody serves the same god (whether they realize it or not). This God is not the almighty Creator who revealed Himself from heaven in Holy Scripture; this god is rather that Energy people have noticed in the world around them and given their different names. This god is not real in the sense that he actually exists, because science can today show how the sun has energy, how the rain makes the grass grow, etc. Instead, this god is real *in the minds of the people*, and *they* have developed ways of worshiping their understanding of this Energy – ways others should respect. That's the second conclusion: there is no right way or wrong way to serve this Energy, this Deity, this God. People who live in the desert do it differently than people who live in the bush, and that's OK because they experience this god differently. People of aboriginal background do it differently than people of European background, and that's OK too because they're understanding of this Energy and so their way of worshipping this Energy is culturally determined.

So there's a third conclusion: now that people from England and from Thailand, from India and from Argentina, from Iran and from the Barbados all live together in one society called *Australian*, we should respect each other's traditions – and therefore not criticize each other's theologies or ways of serving our god. Instead, we should celebrate what binds us together (we all worship the same Energy) and at the same time celebrate our differences (we all worship the one Energy differently). That's why Rev John Shepherd's congregation –the Anglican Church on St George's Street– quite appreciated that a monk from the Buddhist Monastery in Serpentine came to preach to them last year.

Ask now your average Australian whether he believes in God. Most will say Yes, they believe there is a God. But ask for details, and you'll find this evolutionary concept forming the beliefs of so many of our fellow citizens. We need to live in this land, and we need to know what's around us.

There is another concept of God that needs our attention, and that's the concept of Islam.

Islam

Ever since the Muslim faith was catapulted to center stage last September, the Muslim concept of God has also received more attention. This Muslim concept of God comes so very much closer to that of the Bible than the evolutionary concept, because the Muslim concept takes God for real, that is, Islam insists that God is there in reality and not just in people's minds. In fact, Allah is the Creator of the world, and upholds the world day by day. That sounds very similar to the teaching of the Bible, and that's also why Allah and God tend to get mixed up in people's thinking as if Allah is the God of the Bible.

But he's not. The Koran –that's the Muslim bible– presents Allah as exalted in the heavens, sovereign and majestic. The Koran also says that Allah is merciful, compassionate, vengeful, just – all attributes we also recognize from the Scriptures as true of the Lord. But in reality Allah's mercy and compassion have no function; Allah is instead the sovereign deity who coldly insists on obedience from every person on earth. There is no gospel that people have to believe; they need only accept that Allah is God and Allah is one (and Mohammed is his prophet), and so obey Allah in every aspect of life. It is by acknowledging Allah (through your deeds) that you earn his favor and so receive a place in heaven.

That thought also supplies, congregation, the explanation for September 11, as well as the suicide bombers in Israel today. For Allah cannot stand those who do not acknowledge him, and Israel doesn't acknowledge him. So: destroy the Israelis, and destroy Israel's big supporter, America. That pleases Allah, and so earns you a favored place in heaven. If in the process thousands die, that's just the way it is; on that Allah is cold, unmoved – as long as he is acknowledged.

There you have, brothers and sisters, two very different concepts of God found in our society today. In that climate you confess in Lord's Day 7 that to be saved you must believe in God. But: do either of these concepts agree with what the Lord has revealed? *What sort of God* must you take seriously? That brings us to our second point:

2. *Three distinct Persons are one God.*

In Lord's Day 8 we repeat after God what we have heard Him say about Himself in the Bible. We say: this one God is three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. To draw out that three distinct Persons are one true and eternal God I draw your attention to the passage we read from John 3.

The passage tells us of Nicodemus coming to visit Jesus one night. This ruler of the Jews comes with a compliment for the preacher from the Galilean back-woods, and says: "Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs You do unless God is with Him" (vs 2). That was a nice thing for Nicodemus to say, and no doubt was designed to stroke Jesus the right way. But Jesus wasn't to be sidetracked from His heavenly mission by such compliments, and so changed the topic to lay before Nicodemus the conditions for salvation. "Most assuredly," He said, "I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (vs 3). And since this was French to Nicodemus, Jesus elaborates in vs 5: "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

What's intriguing now, brothers and sisters, is that this last verse is the first of a series of texts in the gospel of John

where the three Persons of the Godhead are mentioned together in one sentence. Jesus speaks of 'I': "*I* say to you." This 'I', of course, is Jesus, the One described earlier in this gospel as the Word who was with God, yes, who *is* God, and has become flesh, the "only begotten of the Father" (Jn 1:1ff, 14). Jesus speaks of "the Spirit", and that's of course the Holy Spirit through whose power one must be born again if one wishes to enter the kingdom of God. And there's the third Person, God to whom belongs the kingdom Jesus announces, and that, we realize, is the Father. Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Jesus mentions all three in the same breath when He impresses on Nicodemus the need to be born again.

In the verses that follow vs 5, Jesus takes the opportunity to expand for Nicodemus' sake what He said in vs 5. In the process Jesus also unfolds how the three Persons of the Godhead work together to obtain salvation for sinners. He speaks first of the work of the Holy Spirit (vss 6-10). The rebirth that's required is not a matter of entering again into Mom's womb and being born again as happened in infancy; the rebirth that's required is instead a miracle mysteriously worked by the Holy Spirit. In vs 10 Jesus says that He expected Nicodemus, "a teacher in Israel", to know these things, and so it follows that what Jesus says about the rebirthing work of the Holy Spirit was already taught in the Old Testament. Amongst the various Old Testament passages behind this text is also Ezekiel 11, where the Lord promises to give His people one heart and a new spirit; He'll "take the stony heart out of their flesh, and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in My statutes and keep My judgments and do them" (vss 19f; cf 36:25ff). Sinners are changed so radically that their change boils down to a rebirth, a totally fresh start to one's life – and that's the work of God the Holy Spirit.

This was material, Nicodemus had said in vs 9, that stumped him and his fellow teachers in Jerusalem. "How," he asked, "can these things be?" In His reply Jesus says in vs 11: "We speak what We know and testify what We have seen, and you do not receive Our witness." Notice Jesus use of the plural pronoun 'we'; "*We* speak what *We* know..., and you do not receive *Our* witness." Who is Jesus referring to? He explains it in vs 13: "No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven." In fact, vs 16, "God [the Father] so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish." This only begotten Son who came down from heaven is Jesus Himself, and on earth He testifies accurately to the things He has seen in heaven. That's why the plural pronoun in vs 11: God the Father is speaking through and with God the Son. Jesus' work and the Father's work are in step, are the same, and that's because He and the Father are one (cf 10:30; 17:11,21ff). That's why it's so imperative that Nicodemus and the other rulers of the Jews listen to what this Messenger-sent-from-God has to say about the kingdom of heaven and what it takes to be saved.

Before we condemn the Jewish leaders for not listening to the Messenger God sent, we should ask ourselves whether we are any wiser than they on this point. For in our chapter Jesus is also teaching *us* spiritual things, telling us how imperative it is that we are born again. So, will we let Him teach us the way into God's kingdom? The question is important because Jesus expands on what it takes to be saved, and says that the Son of Man whom the Father sent to earth must be "lifted up" even as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. The point of the serpent Moses lifted up was that every Israelite bitten in the snake-plague God sent could look at the serpent and so be healed, saved. Jesus must be lifted up, crucified, so that every sinner can look at Him, believe in Him, and so be forgiven of sin, saved.

What we have here in Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus? Jesus, brothers and sisters, lays out the way of salvation, yes. But that way of salvation is inextricably interwoven with the reality of the Trinity! The way of salvation, says Jesus, includes that one must be born again – and that's the work of the Holy Spirit. Delete the Holy Spirit, then, and you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Similarly, the way of salvation, says Jesus, includes that one look to the crucified Jesus as Israel looked to the serpent on Moses' staff, believe in Jesus for the forgiveness of sins. Delete the Son, and you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Once more, the way of salvation, says Jesus, includes that one acknowledge the work of God the Father as the one who speaks through the Son, indeed, as the One who sent His only Son to earth (3:16). Delete the Father, and you cannot enter the kingdom of God because you deny that it was He who opened the door for you by sending His only dear Son to earth in the first place. Father, Son and Holy Spirit: all three have their own separate contribution to your salvation; deny any and you have lost salvation itself. That's the burden of Jesus' message to Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.

One could, of course, argue that the work of the three Persons does not necessarily mean that the three are one God; one could see them as three separate Beings who work closely together. Now, there are various texts of Scripture that

leave no room for that interpretation, and our Lord's Day lists a long row of them. But aside from such texts as that, congregation, consider this thought. If the three Persons worked separately, even as three Friends, what guarantee do you have that Each is satisfied with the work of the Other, and accepts it with no questions asked? We realize: if you separate the three as separate Beings, all with perfect standards, you have undermined one source of comfort for the Christian. As it is, any sinner chosen by the Father for life eternal is *guaranteed* redeemed by the Son, for the Father and the Son are one. So too, any sinner redeemed by the Son is *guaranteed* renewed by the Spirit, for the Son and the Spirit are one also. And the Father most certainly receives those whom the Spirit has renewed, for the Spirit and the Father are one also. "These three distinct Persons are the one, true, eternal God," and the three together make the way of salvation.

I come now to our third point:

3. *One glorious identity of God.*

The unity of the three Persons has within it a glorious gospel. The Son has been with the Father in the glory of heaven from eternity, not as a stranger to the Father or even as a Friend, but –says the Scripture- "in the bosom of the Father" (Jn 1:18). This notion of 'bosom' captures the closeness of Father and Son, and echoes the love that is caught in the term 'only begotten'. One Son the Father has, and this Son is so close to the Father as to be called His "beloved", "in whom [the Father is] well-pleased" (cf Mt 3:17; 17:5).

It is, brothers and sisters, this closeness of Father and Son –the two are one- that makes the gospel of salvation so absolutely glorious. For see, despite the love, the oneness between the Father and the Son-of-His-bosom, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (Jn 3:16). That is: so deep was God's love for sinners, so moved was He with compassion on account of the misery into which we had plunged ourselves, that the Father sent His "only begotten", dearly beloved Son-of-His-bosom out of His glorious company and into the misery of the fallen world (cf I Jn 4:17ff) – why?- to save sinners from the wrath of God, to reconcile to Himself those who broke the covenant God established with mortal man! That God would send a messenger from heaven to save sinners is one thing; that God would send *His only Son*, true God with the Father and the Spirit, away from His own bosom to the anguish of the cross – *that*, beloved, points up as nothing else does how compassionate the God of the Bible is, how dearly He loves the people He's chosen to life eternal! It's specifically the doctrine of the Trinity that opens up the vistas onto this glorious identity of the God of the Bible. That *such* a God is your God and mine: how delightfully comforting, how wondrously glorious! No wonder the Christian learns what love is!

But then it's clear too, congregation, that this God is a far cry from the god of the Muslims. Sure, the Muslims speak of their god as almighty, as the creator and sustainer of life. But Allah knows not what love is, Allah was not touched in the pit of his stomach by the misery into which man plunged himself, Allah shows no compassion to sinners. Allah wants obedience, simple obedience – and gave no Son to pay for sin nor any Holy Spirit to renew redeemed sinners. That is why the devote Muslim and the true Christian have such radically different behavior. The devote Muslim will kill the infidel, regardless of cost in human suffering; he hasn't a clue what love is because his god knows not what love is. But the devote Christian will give, possibly even his life, to benefit the other; he's tasted the love of God in Jesus Christ and has been renewed through the Spirit of this God, and so he loves even his enemy. That in turn is why the Middle East will find no peace without the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the renewal of hearts through the Holy Spirit. Muslims need to learn what the love of God is, a love so wondrously displayed in the Trinity.

This God is also such a far cry from the God the believers of evolution talk about. Their god is not real, and therefore does not love. That is why in turn those who believe in this sort of a god have difficulty with true love, with emptying the self for the benefit of the other. Our society condones abortion and euthanasia, drunkenness and shooting drugs, counseling and empathy, and all of that comes from being busy with the self, about keeping the self happy and prosperous. But love as Triune God displayed it in His three-Person work for sinners' salvation is so very, very different; that is not self-love but self-emptying for the benefit of the other – unworthy though he be. What the evolutionist needs is the gospel of God's love, of how the Father was so moved with compassion at the misery of man that He gave His only begotten Son, and that Son gave up His life to reconcile the unworthy to the Father, and the Spirit seals that love through His renewing work....

And from whom, brothers and sisters, will the Muslim and the evolutionist, indeed all of society, learn what love really is? That can only be from those who know the identity of God, who have tasted His love for the unworthy –so deep that Triune God emptied Himself!- and so these believers *reflect that love* in the way they treat the neighbor. Reflect that love: *that* is how the believer shows that he knows the God of heaven and earth, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 9 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 16 June 2002.

***" IN MODERN LIFE I CONFESS THAT MY FATHER IS THE WORLD'S CREATOR
."***

Text:

Lord's Day 9

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 6:19-34

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 148:1,2

Psalm 33:2

Psalm 73:8

Psalm 62:5,6,7

Psalm 146:3,4,5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Lord's Day 9 is about "God the Father and our Creation". That topic automatically sends our thoughts to the distant past, to the time of Genesis 1. That mental travel in turn drives a wedge between the material of this Lord's Day and our specific circumstances today. For what, we wonder, has 'long ago' got to do with 'today'? As I struggle to make ends meet, as the children insist on *that* pair of shoes (twice the price, of course), as I'm trying to sort out how big the new home entertainment unit should be, what value has a Lord's Day that wants us to think of God's act of creation so many thousands of years ago?? Isn't that just too remote from today?

It is true, congregation, that Lord's Day takes our thoughts back to Genesis 1. But we have to notice that that is not where the first accent in this Lord's Day lies! Rather, this Lord's Day would lay a finger on our circumstances *today*. Look at the first sentence of the answer. If you peel away all the clauses and the sub clauses, you are left with this sentence: "the eternal Father of our Lord Jesus Christ ... *is* ... my God and my Father." "Is", present tense: you can't get more here-and-now than that! With this Lord's Day we're saying –while our hands are dirty with the grit and grim of *this* life- we're saying that we have a Father.

How God became our Father we can leave to one side for now. Fact is: for Jesus' sake He established His covenant of grace with each one of us in our infancy, so that today He is our Father and we are His children. The bigger and pressing question on our mind today is this: *what kind of a Father is this God?* In a very unbelieving and very materialistic world, what value, what comfort, what instruction is there in knowing that your Father is none else than the world's Creator?

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

IN MODERN LIFE I CONFESS THAT MY FATHER IS THE WORLD'S CREATOR.

For this reason:

1. Our eye is to be fixed on the Creator.
2. Our eye is not to be on the Creature.

1. Our eye is to be fixed on the Creator.

This morning, brothers and sisters, with the celebration of the Lord's Supper, we were directed to fix our attention on the things above, and not on the things of this earth. That instruction from Col 3 applied specifically to the work of Jesus Christ on the cross and its consequences for how we live on this earth.

As it is, this instruction to focus on things above holds true also in relation to the confession of Lord's Day 9. Today our eyes see the bricks of this building and our lips savor the Sunday cake. Tomorrow our eyes see the huge pile of laundry and the bills the mailman brings. These are all earthly things, things that fill our minds, demand our attention, drain our energy. But the Lord would not have these things be the focus of our attention. He Himself made this world, with everything in it that we see and hear and taste and smell. All of it, the Lord would have us know, speaks of Him, tells His glory. That is to say: creation reveals who the Creator is, and it's on him our eye must be focused – if we are to receive any comfort in the rush of this life.

How, you wonder, does creation reveal the Creator? According to Genesis 1, God created the world, and did so by His Word of command. "God said, 'Let there be light; and there was light.... So the evening and the morning were the first day.'" Again, "Then God said, 'Let the earth bring forth grass...'; and it was so.... So the evening and the morning were the third day."

Question. When God commanded the existence of light, how long did it take for the light rays to appear? When God commanded the earth to bring forth grass, how long before clover covered a given space of ground? We are accustomed to answering those questions with, "Instantly." To justify such an answer, we appeal, eg, to Ps 33, where the Holy Spirit has the psalmist say concerning God's work in creation that "He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast" (vs 9). Instant.

But we live, brothers and sisters, in today's world. Our world has embraced the theory of evolution, and so the notion that this earth evolved over a space of billions upon billions of years. Last week I mentioned that this evolution theory has no place for God; evolution assumes that God does not really exist. That puts the evolution theory at opposite poles to Christianity, for Christianity insists that God does exist. But did you know: there is also a half-way position between the evolutionists and the Christians? This half-way position says: the Bible tells us that God created the world, but doesn't give us details on how He did it. Science tells us that the world has existed for billions and billions of years, and that over the span of these billions of years plants and animals evolved from primitive matter to the complex organisms we see around us today. This half-way position, now, says that the Lord God created this world *by means of* the evolution process. This teaching is called Theistic Evolution, a phrase that translates to mean: God-driven evolution. So, says this teaching, we have to understand that the Lord God determined to make light, and in the course of millions and billions of years the light God wanted evolved to the point as it exists today. Similarly, God determined to make grass, and in the course of millions and billions of years grass evolved from initial single-celled living matter into the clovers and rye grasses and kikuyi of the completed development today. What happens, then, to the 'day' of Genesis 1? Each of the six days of creation, Theistic Evolution says, were in effect ages of millions of years, certainly not the normal day we are used to.

What do you think, brothers and sisters, of this teaching? That question is important because there are churches around the world who call themselves conservative and Bible-believing –some even have the same confessions we have- and yet leave room for or embrace this Theistic Evolution. Do you think this teaching agrees with God's revelation? And: does this teaching influence daily living?

In reply to this teaching, congregation, I want to say two things. In the first place, the Lord God uses the word 'day' various times in the course of the Bible. It's very obvious that the term 'day' in the gospels describes a normal day, as we are used to it. And the fact of the matter is that the Lord Himself does not give any indication that we are to understand the term 'day' in Genesis 1 as different from the customary. If He yet meant something different than the normal understanding, would that not mean that we couldn't take God's words at face value? If the word 'day' in

Genesis 1 means something different than the common understanding, does the word 'resurrection' later in the Bible also mean something different than we expect? You see, Theistic Evolution questions God's integrity, questions whether God actually says what He seems to say.

There's a second aspect that needs our attention, one that reaches to the heart of our confession in Lord's Day 9. If the Lord God gave a command for grass to develop, and then sat back for millions of years while grass slowly evolved, what does that say of God's power? Contrast that, now, with the picture you get when you read Genesis 1 at face value. God said, "Let there be grass," and presto, there it was. God said, "Let the waters abound with an abundance of living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth..." and instantly it was so. There was no grass, no fish, no bird; God spoke, and they were there, a field of grass flowing in the breeze, trout and salmon and dolphins cruising through the water, canaries singing the trees, thornbills picking seeds off the grass. "He spoke, and it was done; He commanded, and it stood fast" – and so God displayed His majesty, His power. In fact, that's why the angels of God burst forth into songs of praise on the day of creation! (Job 38:7). The critical question in the discussion of theistic evolution is this: *who do you think God is?* Big enough to create in an instant? Or a God that needs time, very much time, to get things right?

That question, of course, congregation, touches our personal lives directly. The Lord God established with each of us His covenant of grace, so that today He is our Father and we are His children. But: *what sort of Father is He?* Is He a mighty God, so great that He uttered one word, and the grasses of the field and the birds of the air came instantly into being as we see them today? Or is He a small God, who needed millions of years with trial and error to perfect the grasses and birds we see around us today?

Ours is a world of much anxiety. That's because life is so fast, it's also because September 11 showed how vulnerable we were to terrorists. In a world of anxiety, of change, of distrust and betrayal, we confess that the Creator is our Father, our Father is the Creator. Is there sufficient encouragement in His identity to comfort us in anxious times? *Who really is this Creator that's become our Father?*

The Lord Jesus Christ answered this question for His disciples. I refer now to the last part of the passage we read from Mt 6. Jesus was outside, addressing His disciples in the Sermon on the Mount. He tells them how to manage their worry and stress. What they have to do? No, not go boating or take a holiday. Instead, vs 26, they have to "look". Lord at what? "Look at the birds of the air." For all I know, as Jesus was speaking to His disciples on the mountain side, there were seagulls from the lake nearby floating on the breezes. But Jesus' point, of course, applies to us in our backyards too. On the back fence is a willy-wagtail twisting his tail this way and that, hopping off the fence to snatch up a passing bug, darting into a tree to pick up a mosquito.... Where did that seagull of long ago, that willy-wagtail of today, come from? There was a time when those birds weren't there. God spoke, and there they were, perfect birds, the descendants of which sit on the fence today.... How do they know how to catch insects? How to build a nest? How to feed their young? How to fly? Jesus' point: see there, disciples, *your God!* "The heavens declare the glory of God," and so do the birds that fly through the heavens. God spoke, and it was done, He commanded, and instantly it stood forth. With *such* a God as your Father, Jesus asks His disciples, are you not safe, completely safe? *See in creation who your Father is!*

And to impress the point on His disciples the Lord also told them to "consider the lilies" growing yonder. The disciples were to look at them, and they were to place themselves under the instruction caught in the shape and the color and the beauty of those lilies. Lovely orange petals curved and shaped just so, with that black line running up the middle of each petal, and the pistil up the center of the flower, and if you look long enough you see a bee coming along to feed in the flower. Where did that lily come from? It wasn't there, then the God who has become your Father spoke, and presto, it was there – ancestor to the plant in front of you now. Solomon had his seamstresses working day in day out to make for him and his family garments worthy of royalty. But God in a moment dressed up that lily more beautifully than Solomon's favorite daughter could ever be dressed. What a God, to make something so precise, so beautiful, at a word! You see, creation reveals the Creator, draws out the majesty and power of the God who has become your Father for Jesus' sake!

If *such* a God is your Father, why be anxious? Will He not care well for you? Should I be anxious because of what terrorists might do? Should I be worked up because of what my doctor tells me? Should I be uptight because things at

work aren't turning out the way I wish? "Be anxious about nothing," says the Lord, "but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:6f). Your Father made the birds, and made the cotton in the laundry pile. He made the flowers, and He made the paper on which your bill is written. *And all these parts of His creation spell out His greatness and His majesty!* Lift up your eyes then on high, to the Creator-who-is-your-Father-for-Jesus'-sake. By showing you His creation He would give you so much comfort.

But the fact of the matter is that we get anxious, and that brings us to our second point:

2. Our eye is not to be fixed on the creature.

You see, we look at the bricks of our house, and we say: it's not big enough, we need a new house. Or we look at the pile of laundry, and we say: that shirt is out of style, I should get him a new one. Or we look at the work of the decisions we've made, and we say: that was stupid; whatever will people think of me! Stress.

Jesus' instruction to look at the birds and the lilies came in a context. He tells the twelve in vss 25-34 not to worry, not to be anxious about food or drink or clothing, but notice that vs 25 begins with the word 'therefore'. In other words, the section about the birds and the flowers is tied directly to the preceding section of Jesus' sermon, vss 19-24.

What Jesus says in those verses? It all boils down to instruction to worship not the creature but the Creator. Look at vs 19: "do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal." Jesus mentions two possible locations for your treasure: heaven and earth. Heaven: that is the dwelling of the Creator, and that is Jesus' point: fix your eye on the Creator, your Father by covenant for Jesus' sake. Earth, on the other hand, is that which the Creator made, this creation, what the eye sees. This creation, though, is vulnerable. You can put treasures of clothes in your wardrobe, only to find after some time that the moths have eaten holes into your favorite jumper. You can save up treasures of denarii, but rust can get into your money bag, or thieves can walk away with it, and what you have left? Jesus' point is: everything of this creation is temporary and passes away. In fact, when Jesus returns on the last day, this whole earth will be burned, included everything that we've worked so hard to achieve. What moths and rust and thieves do today with your jumpers and cars and handbags simply foreshadows the big destruction that Jesus Christ will unleash on the world on the last day. And all of it together points up that the important thing is not *what's created*; important is *the Creator*. The birds and the lilies, the fabric of our clothing and the metal of our cars *all remind us of the Creator – your Father!* But why, O why, should people then treasure *what's created* - as if the created thing could exist apart from the Creator, is an end in itself?! No, beloved, it will not do to keep our eye fixed on creation; that is perversion before God (cf Rom 1:25).

Jesus is empathic on the point. Vs 22: "The lamp of the body is the eye." If that eye is focused on created things –be it having nice clothes or a comfortable car or a bigger house or even things going your way in business or church life- if that eye is focused on created things, the whole body is going to be full of darkness. Conversely, if that eye is focused on the Creator who made what's around us (and still upholds it all), then one's whole being and one's view of life also is healthy – even though you wear out-of-style clothes or drive an old bomb, or things don't go the way you wish in business or church life. It's when the eye is focused on what's created, on things of this earth, that you get bogged down on things of this earth, and eventually you can't see past your nose to the Creator who's meant to be your focus. And that's to say that you're filled with darkness; your life is dark, your future dark, everything dark. And so you become cynical and bitter....

Jesus repeats the matter in vs 24. "No one," He says, "can serve two masters." In the context, the two possible masters Jesus refers to are the Creator and the creature. Either you will hate the Creator and love the creature (and then the point is that you are not giving God your full attention and that's what God calls 'hatred'), or you will be loyal to God and despise what's created – and the point is that you set proper priorities, devote your attention to God and leave the brokenness on this earth for God to sort out in His time and manner. But to focus on Mammon - and that's to say on matter, on material things, created things- to focus on Mammon is to get your eye off the Creator. That will never do, for that's what leads to worry, anxiety, stress. Hence Jesus' instruction in vs 33: "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." That is: keep your focus on God the Creator, and get

your focus off created things – be it the old shirt in the laundry pile or the fact that your neighbor has a faster boat than you. Get your eye on the God who created and cares for the birds and the flowers, because this God is your Father for Jesus' sake and He will supply all your needs as long as He gives you life in this creation.

Here, my brothers and sisters, is room for serious self-examination. We live in a culture that is very earth-centered and very materialistic. The well-being of our country is measured by the strength of the economy. The prosperity and affluence of our society doesn't pass us by, and certainly we may thank the Lord for the abundance He gives. But with the abundance comes the grave temptation to move the eye away from the Creator and fix it instead on created things. As if we *have* to have that bigger house, that nicer car, that special holiday, that new jacket, those trendy shoes.... The desire to have it reflects an earth-centeredness, materialism. Think it through, beloved: if your treasure is in heaven, if your eye is fixed on the Creator, is the opinion of your peers about your shoes or your boat of any importance to you? Moth, rust, thieves, depreciation, inflation, the fire on the last day will destroy all your treasures. Why, then, insist on the latest and the best? The eye has to be on the Creator, and He promises to supply all His children in Jesus Christ with all they need. The eye has to be on the Creator, and that's to say that every dollar He gives, and every boat and every bike and every boot also, is to be used to His glory and honor.

But the problem, congregation, lies not only in materialism. For one can be earth-centered without being materialistic. One is earth-centered, has the eye focused on creation instead of on the Creator also when one insists that things have to go one's own way or when one can't get passed the hurts of what people have done to you. Here again the Lord's will is that the eye is not fixed on creatures – whether the creatures be *possessions* (I've got to have a better boat or better boots) or on *people* (I've got to get back to him for what he did to me, or: he's got to admit he did me wrong). It's when the focus is on creatures instead of on the Creator that we get anxious, for in the brokenness of this life we will not get the possessions we want (and if we do they will disappear on us in due time) and we can't change people to the way we want them to be either.

Sunday by Sunday each one of us confesses with the church of all ages that "I believe in God the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth." With that confession we acknowledge that the God who established His covenant with us for Jesus' sake is *greater*, infinitely *greater* than the creation we see, for He made it by His word of command. In our modern times we need to be consistent with that confession. We need to insist to ourselves that our Father is the Almighty, and therefore worthy of all glory and praise. *And so we give Him glory and praise* –how?– by fixing our focus on Him all the time.

That perspective will make us radically different from the people of our society. Earth-centered, creation-centered people are materialistic, want this, want that, and are not content with what they have. They need more, more in terms of possessions, more in terms of having their own way.

Not so those whose attention is fixed on the Creator. They know: this Creator is my Father, and so He'll provide for all my daily needs. The things of this earth will pass away, be they possessions or people, and so I don't need an extra this or a new that, and I don't need it my way either. Instead, I'll fix my eye on my Creator-Father, and I'll trust that He supplies my every need. Soon the Lord will return on the clouds of heaven, and then this creation will be burned up, but the Creator will endure. And I, His child, will be with Him forever. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 10a of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 7 July 2002.

" OUR FATHER IN JESUS CHRIST CONTROLS ALL THINGS TOTALLY."

Text:

Lord's Day 10a

27. Q. What do you understand by the providence of God?

A. God's providence is His almighty and ever present power,[1] whereby, as with His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures,[2] and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty,[3] indeed, all things, come not by chance[4] but by His fatherly hand.[5] [1] Jer. 23:23,24; Acts 17:24-28. [2] Heb. 1:3. [3] Jer. 5:24; Acts 14:15-17; John 9:3; Prov. 22:2. [4] Prov. 16:33. [5] Matt. 10:29.

28. Q. What does it benefit us to know that God has created all things and still upholds them by His providence?

A. We can be patient in adversity,[1] thankful in prosperity,[2] 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;[3] for all creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move.[4]

[1] Job. 1:21, 22; Ps. 39:10; James 1:3. [2] Deut. 8:10; I Thess. 5:18. [3] Ps. 55:22; Rom. 5:3-5; 8:38, 39. [4] Job 1:12; 2:6; Prov. 21:1; Acts 17:24-28.

Scripture Reading:

Psalm 147

Psalm 139:13-18

Genesis 45:1-8

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 147:1,3

Psalm 145:4

Psalm 27:6

Psalm 139:8,9,10

Hymn 27:1,2,3,4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

There's a sentence in Lord's Day 10 that raises so very many questions. So many things have happened in our personal and congregational life that we experience as painful, even sinful. We have seen people make mistakes, commit sin, and the result is so much damage, so much hurt, so much confusion. We can't help it: every time we feel the pain, every time we see the damage, we think of the sinner, the *person* (or maybe *persons*) who did such-and-such, and feelings of bitterness and possibly distrust arise in our hearts toward that person or body of persons.

In the face of that reality Lord's Day 10 is so very puzzling. For in this Lord's Day the church –and that's you and me– says that "all things come not by chance but by His fatherly hand." "All things ... by His fatherly hand": really? Evil things too? And: if evil things come from God's hands, how can we ever love or trust this God?!

This morning I proclaim to you the word of God about your Father's sovereignty over all of life, all evil included. I

need first to show from the Scriptures that Yes, the Lord controls absolutely everything in all life. Then I need to draw out how God would have us respond to this gospel. I summarize the sermon with this theme:

OUR FATHER IN JESUS CHRIST CONTROLS ALL THINGS TOTALLY.

1. The extent of Father's control.
2. The response befitting Father's children.

1. The extent of Father's control.

The church's confession in Lord's Day 10 about the sovereignty of our heavenly Father, brothers and sisters, comes straight from God's revelation in the Bible. We've had some rain this past week. Science can explain for us the processes of evaporation and condensation, and that's all very interesting. But in so doing, say the Scriptures, science does nothing else than lay out for us *how the Lord God makes it rain*. For that, says the Lord, is the reality; no drop of rain fell to the ground this past week without God's will. Ps 147: God "covers the skies with clouds, He supplies the earth with rain..." (vs 8). And later: "He spreads the snow like wool and scatters the frost like ashes; He hurls down His hail like pebbles..." (vs 16f). The Lord insists: what we've seen this past week in rain and hail, and even snow on the mountains, has come from the hand of the God who has become our Father for Jesus' sake.

Similarly, it is God who gives "leaf and blade". Again Ps 147: God "makes grass grow on the hills" (vs 8). Ps 104 says that trees bud at His command (vs 30), and come spring time we can see it happening. Jesus tells the disciples to "consider the lilies of the field, how they grow" (Mt 6:28), and His point is that the disciples need to see God's hand in the development of the lily. He tells them also to "look at the birds of the air," and again the point is that the birds keep flying because their heavenly Father governs the lives of these birds. As Jesus says elsewhere: "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" (Mt 10:29).

I cannot comprehend it, beloved, but this is the word of the Lord: every blade of grass in my backyard, every leaf in Australia's forest, every parrot and sparrow is in the firm and absolute control of God Almighty. He spoke a word in the beginning, and the stars and trees and flowers were instantly there; with the same mighty hand He daily upholds and governs every aspect of all He made. This is what our God tells us in His Word, and that's why we echo His word in the Catechism: "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."

This instruction from the Lord, though, raises other questions. For: if rain comes from God's hand, what about *too much rain*? And the human suffering that comes from floods, the devastation of the crops, the grief at the drowning of loved ones? Does that come from God? If yes, can I keep serving a God who let's evils happen??

And what shall we say when disaster is the result of human actions? We grant that rain comes from God, and have to admit too that *too much rain* also comes from God. But what shall we say when *human error* is the cause of the dam bursting under the pressure of the rain? Does the resulting flood and devastation in that case also come from God?

You will know that there are theologians who argue that God does not control everything. They tell us that God would love to stop evil things from happening, but sometimes He can't; He isn't big enough for that, things get out of His hand, and He cries with the people who cry in the face of the evil things happening to them.

But let it be clear, congregation, that the Lord speaks differently. I've mentioned already God's total control over the rain, the grass, and the birds. The Holy Spirit tells us that also the *thoughts of people's minds* are in God's control – and therefore also the things people do. Prov 21: "the king's heart is in the hands of the Lord; He directs it like a watercourse wherever He pleases" (vs 1). That is: as people dig ditches to get water to where they want it, so God turns the king's heart (his mind) so that the king does the things God ordains. So I read in Is 10, for example, that the king of Assyria is simply the tool in God's hand by which God punishes Jerusalem. True, says that passage, the king doesn't think in terms of being but a tool in God's hands; he thinks he's his own boss and can do what he wishes. But the Lord says, "I dispatch him against a people who anger me..." (vs 6). Similarly, when Peter on Pentecost day reminds the crowds before him that *they* crucified Jesus (and therefore they have to repent of that sin!), Peter makes a

point of saying first that the crowds crucified Jesus "by God's set purpose and foreknowledge" (Acts 2:23). You see: sufficient rain *and too much rain*, good crops *and the devastation that comes from flooding* come from God's hand. So too, the thoughts of Osama bin Laden's mind and the actions that resulted in New York come from God. Such is the extent of His control....

In a world that sees God as small, this is a point I need to press. The apostle Paul somewhere writes that God "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will"; that's Eph 1:11. That purpose, says Paul in the same passage, is embodied in a "plan"; in the course of time He "works out everything in conformity with" the plan God ordained for each person before the foundation of the world. It's because of God's total control of all things that David says what he says in Ps 139. We read it: "All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (vs 16). That is: David pictures God as having a book in which God had written all the events that would happen in the course of David's life. So: that David's father would be Jesse of Bethlehem, that David would be the youngest of a long row of older brothers (and a couple would no doubt be bullies), that David would tend the sheep for his father, that on a given day a lion would come to snatch a sheep and David would kill the lion, that David would be anointed king when he was still a lad, that Saul would persecute him, that David would one day see Bathsheba bathing down below and commit adultery with her, that David would kill Urijah and months later confess his sin before Nathan – all of that and so much more were recorded in God's book before a single one of these things happened. That's the thrust of David's words in Ps 139; all these things happened in David's life *because God had so ordained them to happen*.

The implication for us today, beloved? If God "works out *everything* in conformity with the purpose of His will," then we are bound to confess that not just the bits and pieces of *David's* life were recorded in God's book *but so are the details of our lives!* In Jesus Christ, our sovereign Creator has us so securely in His hands that in our lives "leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, [church struggles and personal struggles], indeed, all things, come not by chance but by His fatherly hand."

The question that jumps at us now, of course, is the one about human responsibility. The fact of the matter is that certain evil things have come upon us *through the sins of people*. Would our Lord's Day now say that these people have no responsibility for their conduct?

In answer, let me first say this. Though God says in His Word that He is 100% sovereign over every detail of all life (my life included), the Lord also says that He holds each person 100% responsible for his sins. People are not animals; God created people in the beginning with *responsibility* for what they do. That is why every sinner needs Christ's redeeming blood for *every* transgression he commits before God, and that's equally why God has His Ten Commandments held before us time and time again; He holds us *responsible*. Those who flew those four planes on September 11 have all appeared before the judgment seat of God, and they all had to give account to God for what they did; they were responsible. Those who have hurt us in the past have also already appeared before God's judgment seat to give account to Him for their transgressions, or they will still appear there; either way, God holds each person responsible for his deeds. You and I too, brothers and sisters, regardless the nature of our sins, secret or public, are responsible for what we did and ever will do, and will have to give account to God. I cannot emphasize the matter enough: all men are *completely responsible* for every sin we commit.

Then it's true: my limited mind cannot fathom how God controls all things totally, including even my thoughts, and how I am yet responsible for every thought I think, every word I speak, every deed I perform. To my limited mind, God's 100% sovereignty means that I'm a puppet on God's strings, invariably dancing to God's wishes – and therefore no more responsible than a puppet. But Almighty God speaks otherwise. So I am duty bound to accept what He in wisdom had revealed, and confess both God's total sovereignty and my total responsibility. Probably the best I can do here is draw your attention to Article 13 of the *Belgic Confession*: [**READ** first paragraph, *Book of Praise*, pg 449].

On this tension between God's total sovereignty and man's complete responsibility, there's a second thing I have to say here. That's this: when bad things happen to us, the Lord does not wish us to fix our attention on the people who did the evil to us; the Lord rather instructs us to recognise that these bad things *have come to us by His hand* – be it that God was pleased to use other sinners as tools to put these things on our path. Then yes, we may have to speak to the sinner concerned and urge his repentance as the Lord commands in Mt 18. But as we digest what happened to us

God wants us first to acknowledge that this came from His hand. That's also the reason why our Lord's Day does not speak of people's sins against us; in our Lord's Day the church instead echoes the perspective that God has taught us in His word, and that perspective is to recognise that *our Father in Jesus Christ* has let these things happen in our lives.

That brings us to our second point:

2. *The response befitting God's children.*

This is the point of Question & Answer 28 of our Lord's Day. "What does it benefit us to know that God has created all things and still upholds them by His providence?" We've been speaking so far of bad things happening. The natural human response when bad things happen? We know it from experience. We focus on the hurt, and so our minds zero in on the person or persons who did the hurt to us. Feelings of betrayal overwhelm us, and with feelings of betrayal come feelings of distrust toward the offending party. Or we feel angry - at ourselves for letting it happen, and at others for doing it.... Then arise feelings of revenge, or bitterness, or cynicism.... I think older and younger of us can relate to these sorts of feelings; they're so human, so predictable in the face of adversity people heap on us....

But these very human reactions, congregation, are not the responses God desires. These are the responses that come when we focus on people, but the Lord would have us lift up our eyes to heaven to where our Father in Jesus Christ rules all things sovereignly, totally. That is: in our reactions to what happens in our lives, the Lord God would have us take seriously that even evils come *from His hand*.

And who is He? Sure, He's the almighty Creator of heaven and earth, in full control of all things. But He's not a cold despot, brothers and sisters! Remember: this is the God we snubbed through our disobedience in Paradise, and so earned for ourselves His wrath, every manner of hurt, including the total rejection of hell. But our Creator "so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" to save sinners from the wrath and damnation they deserve! That is: almighty God *acted*, He had mercy on sinners, and so reached down to us and gave His Son to be the propitiation for our sins - unworthy though we were. For Jesus' sake, then, this Creator is our *Father*, who *loves His children dearly*.

This is the God, now, who unfolds in our life the counsel He has ordained from the beginning, including who our parents would be, whether our brothers would be jealous of us, what career we'd receive, whether we'd be hounded by our classmates, whether we'd see a bathing beauty and what thoughts would go through our mind at the sight. As God ordained every detail of David's life, so God ordains every detail of our lives. More, this almighty God ordains every detail in perfect wisdom and in perfect love. No, I do not understand that, because my limited mind can't wrap itself around the wisdom of God. More, I do not understand God's ways with me because my sinful mind can't wrap itself around the love of God - and definitely my sinful mind can't wrap itself around His love when He has let painful adversity enter into my life. But this is His revelation in His word, and *faith accepts what God says*, acknowledges that Yes, my Father directs and controls all things in my life *in perfect love and wisdom*. Working with the reality of God's identity in the painful circumstances of my life - He's the almighty Creator who's become my faithful Father in Jesus Christ - working with God's identity *produces patience* in the midst of life's painful adversities. We have so many questions: why did this have to happen?! And we're so tempted to keep staring at the guy who hurt us, and let human-centered perspectives control our feelings - anger, distrust, bitterness, cynicism.... But, beloved of the Lord, acknowledging God's sovereignty means that we *look past* the people who hurt us to the *God* who ordained long before my birth that I would be hurt - and so lifting our eyes off the earth and onto Him who controls all things. And acknowledging God's fatherly love means that we look past the hurt He gave and focus instead on the fact that Father has His sovereign purpose in placing on our path the adversities He lays there.

For you see: it's because He loves His people that the pain He gives is bearable. In love for their child, parents may have to compel their son to go to the dentist; not nice, but that's love. Similarly, in love for their child, parents may have to discipline their child for his misbehavior; not nice for the child, but that's love. And it's an awareness of the parents' love that makes the pain bearable for the child. So too with the Lord God. He loves us in Christ - look at the cross to get a picture of the depth of God's love - and so in wisdom reaches into our lives with the trials we experience. If we forget who He is, if we don't believe His love for us in Christ Jesus, our focus will invariably be on the hurt we feel, and therefore also on the people through whom this hurt has entered our lives. But God's will is that we see His

hand in all that happens, and believe that He provides 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" (Lord's Day 9). In the words of our Lord's Day: Father would have us be "patient in adversity."

In a time and manner of His choosing, brothers and sisters, our sovereign Father has reached into the lives of each of us with the difficulties we experience today. The Lord has done it, and now He *watches carefully how we respond*. He wants to see whether our response is driven by faith in Him –as in: we know ourselves safe in the hands of the God who loves us so deeply in Christ- *or* whether our response is driven by earthly feelings, as in pity for self or rage against another or cynicism with those in positions of power over us. With the reaction of patience and trust God is pleased, and He blesses it; with the reaction of bitterness or anger God is displeased, and He demands repentance.

Again, beloved, please do not misunderstand me. As I say this I am very aware that those who hurt us are 100% responsible before God for their sins. But I am responsible before God not first of all for what the other does; I am responsible before God first of all for what *I* do. And when my heavenly Father in wisdom places adversity on my path, of whatever nature and by whatever means, He holds *me* responsible for how *I* respond to that adversity.

In the last while my thoughts have gone repeatedly to Joseph. How wrong, how terribly, terribly wrong his brothers were to sell him!! And there's no way that Joseph, as he trudged the long road to Egypt or was he was put up for sale at the slave market, that he understood the why and the wherefores of it all. But he, by God's grace, did not become bitter. That's to say: he did not stare at *people* - be it at himself and his problems, or at his brothers and their cruelty. He kept his eye on God and His promises, and so, when his brothers finally stood before him again in the famine and he told them who he was, he could tell them not to be angry with themselves or dismayed, for –he adds- "*God* sent me here before you to preserve life." How wonderfully, gloriously amazing! "Love covers a multitude of sins," says Paul, and it's true; God's love in Jesus Christ covers our sins, and that's why Joseph could look past his brothers' sins and fix his attention on God's bigger picture.

Is it possible for sinful, hurt people to be patient in adversity? Is years of trouble not enough to wear anybody out? What, beloved, does the Lord say on the point? This: the same God who gives the strife we experience says that He *gives* patience in adversity. For this same God has poured out His Holy Spirit, and this Spirit works spiritual fruit in our hearts and lives. One of these fruits, says Paul in Gal 5, is *patience*.

So: can we be patient in adversity? Yes, beloved, yes! For your Father in Jesus Christ loves you so much that He has given you His Holy Spirit. So we can sing with David:

"Wait for the Lord; be strong and undismayed.
The Lord is faithful. Why then be afraid?
Take courage, for His steadfast love is sure.
Wait for the Lord; His mercy shall endure" (Ps 27:6 – rhymed).

Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 10b of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 14 July 2002.

" GOD REQUIRES US TO SHOW OUR THANKFULNESS FOR THE PROSPERITY HE GIVES ."

Text:

Lord's Day 10b

27. Q. What do you understand by the providence of God?

A. God's providence is His almighty and ever present power,[1] whereby, as with His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures,[2] and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty,[3] indeed, all things, come not by chance[4] but by His fatherly hand.[5] [1] Jer. 23:23,24; Acts 17:24-28. [2] Heb. 1:3. [3] Jer. 5:24; Acts 14:15-17; John 9:3; Prov. 22:2. [4] Prov. 16:33. [5] Matt. 10:29.

28. Q. What does it benefit us to know that God has created all things and still upholds them by His providence?

A. We can be patient in adversity,[1] thankful in prosperity,[2] 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;[3] for all creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move.[4]

[1] Job. 1:21, 22; Ps. 39:10; James 1:3. [2] Deut. 8:10; I Thess. 5:18. [3] Ps. 55:22; Rom. 8:38, 39. [4] Job 1:12; 2:6; Prov. 21:1; Acts 17:24-28.

Scripture Reading:

Deuteronomy 8

II Corinthians 8:1-15

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 67:3

Psalm 147:4

Psalm 37:9,10

Psalm 112:1,2,3,4

Hymn 63:1,2

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

This afternoon I ask your attention, again, for Lord's Day 10. Last week I showed to you from Scripture that "leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things, come not by chance but by [God's] fatherly hand." When I worked out the implication of that reality for us today, I laid the finger specifically on the fact that we need to be patient in adversity. In the brokenness of the life, I said, things repeatedly do not go as we'd like, but we are responsible for how we react to what God in wisdom puts on our path. So, instead of getting angry or bitter or cynical in the face of life's adversities, God would have us be patient. That was last week's material.

Thankfully, there is more to life than adversity. Besides drought or sickness or poverty, there is also fruitful years, food and drink, health, riches, etc – prosperity. These things too, say the Scriptures, come not by change but by God's fatherly hand. So: how should respond to the prosperity God gives? In our Lord's Day we say: in prosperity we need

to be *thankful*. That's the element I want to draw out today.

You may wonder why I make a point of asking your attention for this aspect of Lord's Day 10, given that I dealt with the same Lord's Day last week. I have a couple of reasons. The first is this: which, do you think, is harder – being patient in adversity or being thankful in prosperity? I realize well that being patient in adversity can be a real trial. But it seems to me, congregation, that being thankful in prosperity can be harder still. I say that simply because it is in us to think in terms of being self-sufficient, independent of God; that's fallen human nature. So when things go well, we find ourselves praying less than when we're faced with adversity. Show God that we're thankful for the prosperity He gives? That's hard....

I have a second reason. We live in a very prosperous society, a society that does not acknowledge God as the source of "life and breath and everything". Our society encourages us to be earth-centered, even self-centered in the way we respond to the abundance we have. We live in this culture, are influenced by this culture, and so need to have it impressed upon us that Yes, we need to make a point of being thankful to God for the prosperity He gives. And make no mistake, brothers and sisters: we *are* prosperous. Australia is the envy of billions around the world. Think of the poverty in the townships of South Africa (you may have seen the video shown in this building last month), think of the unrest in Afghanistan, think of the countless children in Kenya whose parents have died of AIDS. Prosperous? The abundance of food we have, the warm, dry homes we live in, the cars and telecommunications we possess, the extensive medical assistance available to us, the education available to us: we're the envy of billions. Add on top of that the stability and love that characterizes the average Free Reformed home, and compare that to what is found in the average Australian home with its single parent, broken marriage, strained relations, etc. On top of that still add the hope of faith that God gives to His children in Jesus Christ.... Prosperous? Absolutely, we are. So the big question: *how are we to respond to the abundance God has given?*

The Catechism catches the answer in one word: we are to be *thankful*.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

GOD REQUIRES US TO SHOW OUR THANKFULNESS FOR THE PROSPERITY HE GIVES.

1. Why we are to show thankfulness.
2. How we are to show thankfulness.

1. Why we are to show thankfulness.

The question of why we are to show thankfulness, brothers and sisters, flows directly out of the material we confessed last week. The point is that "leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things, come not by chance but by [God's] fatherly hand." So: prosperity comes from God also. We need to reflect that reality in our response to God's blessings.

But human nature is otherwise inclined. King Nebuchadnezzar was once walking about the royal palace of Babylon and uttered these boastful words: "Is not this great Babylon, that I have built ... by my mighty power and for the honor of my majesty?" (Dan 4:30). This is precisely the attitude that God warned Israel against in Dt 8. Beware, said God in vs 17, that "you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.'"

The warning, beloved, is so up-to-date. Who got the glory for Brazil's win in the World Cup? Sure, after the game there was a prayer to God (whoever that god may be – given Brazil's paganism), but when it came to the celebrations there was one name only on everybody's lips, and it wasn't God's! Steve Fossett had his media conference after his successful solo balloon circumnavigation of the globe, and who gets the praise? Not the Lord God! Yet Rinaldo and Fossett once did not exist. Who was it that wove their beings together in their mother's womb? Both were once babies, and who gave them the life and health to grow to maturity? There was a time Rinaldo couldn't walk. Who gave him the ability to use his feet, let alone the skill to kick the goals? Who directed the winds so that Fossett could actually get around the globe? What Nebuchadnezzar once said captures exactly what is so acceptable in today's world: *I did, so I get the praise*. In as much as that man-centered attitude characterizes major-league sports, a Christian cannot be

comfortable in that environment. This is idolatry, trusting in persons and praising people for what belongs to God.

The Lord God knew that this selfishness and this self-praise lived deep in the hearts of fallen man. So, when He took out of Egypt the people He claimed for Himself, He determined to teach them their *dependence on Him* before He brought them into the Promised Land with its prosperity. From Egypt to Canaan was a highway that followed the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, and traders could travel the distance from Egypt to Canaan in a couple of weeks. But the Lord God did not lead His people along that route, took them instead through the desert –why?– so that He might teach them their dependence on Him. That's Dt 8: the Lord God led Israel these forty years in the wilderness to humble and to test Israel, to see whether they would *learn* their dependence on Him (cf vss 2f).

How He taught them this dependence? When the people left Egypt they presumably had enough food with them to last the distance to Canaan along the Coastal Highway. But because the Lord led them instead into the desert, the day came when the mothers of Israel had nothing to feed their children. So the Lord promised manna; each day He'd rain manna upon the camp, and the mothers could collect whatever they needed for breakfast, lunch and tea. But, God commanded, nothing was to be left for the next day (except on Friday); whatever the people would save for tomorrow would breed worms.

Do you see, brothers and sisters, the practical implication of God's instruction about the manna? The implication was this: each night every pantry in Israel was empty! It's a thought we can't fathom, because none of us can recall an empty pantry in the last thirty, forty years. But that was the way God deliberately organized things for Israel; for forty years the mothers never had a thing in their pantries, except on the night before the Sabbath. Similarly, the mothers never had to go shopping for new clothes, for the Lord led things in such a way that Israel's "garments did not wear out" (vs 4). The lesson of the desert, the reason why God led them through the desert, was this: God's people by covenant should learn their *total dependence on Him*. That is: "food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things, come not by chance but by His fatherly hand."

And this God was completely reliable in supplying their needs not only because He was the almighty Creator who once made and still upholds and governs heaven and earth; this God was completely reliable in supplying their needs because of the gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed in the sacrifices commanded at Mt Sinai. Those sacrifices preached the good news that sins were forgiven through the blood of Another; Christ would die in their place so that God's blessings might fall upon them. Well, if God loved them so much as to supply so fully such a fundamental need as the forgiveness of sins, then surely this Father in Jesus Christ would supply their daily needs, bread and clothes included. In their sojourn through the desert Israel literally experienced the truth of that glorious confession!

But the forty years come to an end. Moses preached the sermon known to us as the book of Deuteronomy just before Israel crossed the Jordan River to enter the Promised Land. That is: God instructed Moses to remind Israel *at this point in their history* about the nature of His care in the past years and so instruct Israel about *their complete dependence on Him*. They had to know this because of the nature of the land they were entering. Unlike the desert, the Promised Land was fertile, productive; it grew an abundance of "wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; a land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing." Even such luxuries as iron and copper would be readily available to the people. The temptation? The temptation was real, beloved, for Israel *to think they could manage without God*, to forget their complete dependence on Him. That's why God gives that prohibition of vs 11: they may not forget that they live by God's grace alone, may never say –vs 17– "My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth."

You see, beloved, both the rain in the Promised Land and the drought Israel experienced in the desert came from God's fatherly hand. So would the fruitful years in the Promised Land and the barren years they experienced in the desert. The food and drink they received in the desert came directly from their Father in heaven, and so would the grain and wine in the Promised Land. The only difference between the desert and the Promised Land was that in the desert the Lord gave food and drink *in an unusual manner* –the food came in the form of manna, and water came from hitting a rock– while in the Promised Land food came through men's cultivation of the crops and water came from the rains of heaven and the flowing rivers. When people get used to seeing crops grow on the land and ripen at harvest time, it's tempting to conclude that 'my power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth,' but that's simply naïve; "leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches

and poverty, indeed, all things, come not by chance but by [God's] fatherly hand." That He was pleased in the desert to give food via manna and drink from the rock, while in the Promised Land He gave food via human cultivation of crops and drink from the rivers is His good pleasure; *either way it still all came from God*. Hence God's command to Israel in vs 10: "when you have eaten and are full, then you shall *bless the Lord your God* for the good land which He has given you."

We live in an entirely different situation today. Few of us grow our own food; instead we buy in supermarkets food grown with the latest in technology. And if there is drought in our part of the world, the supermarkets simply import food for us from somewhere else. But none of those modern developments, congregation, alter the underlying principle we confess in our Lord's Day, and that is that the food and drink on our tables comes from God's fatherly hand. Sure, He supplies for us food today *differently* than He did for His people of old, but a different *manner* of supplying food does not mean there's a different *source* to the food. Israel's transport was by foot or maybe by donkey, whereas ours is by automobile or even airplane, but a different *manner* of transport does not mean that the ability to get about now comes from ourselves and our technology. The people of old engaged in distance communication by smoke signals while we today use telephones and internet. But a different *manner* of communication does not signify a different *source* of communication technology, as if we can praise ourselves for developing the latest technology. Not only has the Lord God created the technology we've discovered; He's also given the human race the wherewithal to discover the possibilities He put in creation. The talent of Rinaldo's foot, the financial strength of Steve Fassett to afford his balloon, the movement of electrons through our computers all comes from the Lord our God; "leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things, come not by chance but by [God's] fatherly hand." Though years go by and we live in a culture so very different from Israel's, this fundamental point has not changed. That is why we –like Israel of old- need to acknowledge our dependence on God for every detail of our very modern lives. And acknowledging dependence on God implies that we show our gratitude for His gifts.

That brings us to our second point:

2. How we are to show this thankfulness.

Built on the reality of Israel's dependence on the Lord God was the instruction God gave about showing gratitude. Leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years came from the Lord, and so Israel, when they harvested the crop the Lord sovereignly gave, had to take the firstfruit of the harvest and bring it to the priest (Lev 23:9ff). So: the first basket of apples, the first sheaf of grain was not for the self; it had to be brought to the priest as a symbol of your awareness that the whole crop came from the Lord, and therefore at bottom belonged to Him. Similarly, at the end the year the people had to bring a tithe of their income to the priest. By bringing that tithe –10%- you were confessing that the whole crop came from the Lord and belonged to Him.

The point of it all? The Lord God taught Israel how to express their gratitude for the good gifts He in mercy had given to them. They showed their gratitude by acknowledging that all they had *came from God* and therefore all *was for God*. Not just the firstfruits and the tithe came from God and therefore was for God; no, *all* they had belonged to Him and was for Him. The 10% had to go to the Levites, and the other 90% you had to use *not for yourself* but *for God*.

The passage we read from II Cor 8 shows us how the Christians of Macedonia understood and applied this principle. Two circumstances in their midst came together to produce a peculiar result. The two circumstances were in the first place "the abundance of their joy" and in the second place "their deep poverty". The first one, "the abundance of their joy", is a reference to their faith in Jesus Christ; they knew how the Lord had emptied Himself of His heavenly glory in order to save unworthy sinners from the wrath of God, and they were deeply thankful for the spiritual prosperity the Lord had bestowed on them through Jesus Christ. The second is a reference to the material poverty that characterized the people of Macedonia; they were poor, had a hard time making ends meet. *We* would expect: their poverty compelled them to be very careful in their giving. *But it's not so!* The gratitude the people felt for God's profound grace upon them in Jesus Christ prompted them to dig deep into their nearly empty pockets so that they might be able to help the neighbor in distant Jerusalem. Vs 2: "the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality." They had tasted the love of God for them in Jesus Christ, and so they knew that their heavenly Father would supply their every need; "leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and

drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things, come not by chance but by [God's] fatherly hand." This confession of dependence on God gave these Macedonian Christians the freedom to dare to dig deeply into their pockets to share with others of the little they had. They understood: today there's a need in Jerusalem, and tomorrow the Lord our Father will supply our needs again, and so their trust in God, their confession of dependence, led to them giving "according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability" (vs 3).

It pleases the Lord God to give us a great abundance; our material prosperity in Australia makes us the envy of billions around the world, and our spiritual prosperity also –we need to know- gives us an enormous wealth before God – there is no wealth as great as being children of God. That reality prompts us to acknowledge that *our abundance is God's gift*. For reasons we do not have to understand, our Father in Jesus Christ has given us in Australia so incredibly much more in financial wealth than He's given to so many of His children in Brazil. For reasons we do not have to understand, our Father in Jesus Christ has given us in Australia so incredibly much more in freedom than He's given to so many of His children in China. For reasons we do not have to understand, our Father in Jesus Christ has given us in Australia so incredibly much more in spiritual heritage than He's given to so many of His children in South Africa. We need not understand the reasons, but God distinctly holds us *responsible* for how we *respond* to what He in wisdom has given to us. To treat our possessions, our freedom, our heritage as *ours*, to take it for granted, simply does not do justice to the fact that *we are dependent on our Father in Jesus Christ* for all we have. Israel had to acknowledge that all they had was *God's* property, had come to them not through own sweat or merit but through His grace; we need to do the same. We express our gratitude not by sitting on the wealth we have (be it financial or spiritual), nor by using it for our enjoyment or development first of all; we express our gratitude by acknowledging in deed that our prosperity come *from* God and therefore is *for* God.

How we do that concretely? We show that thankfulness, beloved, by following the example of our Savior Jesus Christ. That's Paul's inspired instruction in II Cor 8: Christ emptied Himself of His eternal glory in heaven with the Father and the Spirit, set it all aside in order to help the unworthy – you and me (vs 9). As the Macedonians did, we show our thankfulness for the spiritual wealth the Lord has given us in Jesus Christ by *giving freely* of our material possessions – whether much or little- to others who have little.

As it is, we don't know of any culture in the history of the world that's been as affluent and prosperous as ours. That is God's gift to us in Jesus Christ, and we enjoy this affluence, are thankful for it. The other side of this coin is: there has never been a culture in the history of the world that has as *big a responsibility* as we have to *give*. Around the world are innumerable millions who live in abject poverty, who don't know where their next meal is to come from. There are innumerable millions who hunger for the wealth of the gospel, and don't know where to look to find it. Because of the enormous wealth God has entrusted in our society, we have an awesome responsibility to *help*.

Where to start? The task looks overwhelming, and therefore the temptation great to leave our resources in our own bank accounts – and eventually spend it on our own needs. But *thankfulness for the prosperity God gives won't be satisfied with that*. Thankfulness *gives*, not according to the needs of a church budget, but *gives according to the measure of the blessings with which God has blessed you!* That expresses gratitude! With great gratitude the consistory noted in May that the church collections had reached the amount budgeted for the Theological College in Hamilton, and so too the monies required for the support of needy theology students from Indonesia. The result was that the collections for last month of the financial year could be targeted for the support of the disenfranchised in South Africa. Wonderful development, brothers and sisters; we thank the Lord for it. Keep it up! *Give according to the measure of the blessings with which God has blessed you*, so that consistory in turn has to *look* for ways and means to use these gifts responsibly in God's kingdom.

It is said that a contributing factor to the tensions in certain parts of the world is the envy that the have-nots have toward those who have much. There may be truth in that. However it may be, let it never be that the church of Jesus Christ is associated with those who have much, in the sense that the church members of the world's rich nations look after their own needs before those of others. Our Lord and Master *emptied* Himself for the poor, and so made us rich. In gratitude for the riches He gave, let us give *much*, and let us give *freely* –even if it means lowering our standard of living somewhat- and so setting an example for how our society as a whole should give to help others less fortunate as we. Causing the gospel to go out to those who live in heathendom, helping those who hunger for the true Word, giving support in mission posts: there you have the beginning of what we can. And, by the grace of the Lord, we *are* doing

these things. Let us continue, and in gratitude do more and more, according to the measure of the blessings with which God has blessed us.

Does that mean that we'll end up poor? Far, far from it, brothers and sisters! For the almighty Creator and Sustainer of heaven and earth is our *Father* for Jesus' sake. "In Him I trust so completely as to have no doubt that *He* will provide me with all things necessary for body and soul" – as He did for the Macedonians of II Cor 8.

Not my bank reserves or my superannuation secure my future, but my Father in Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 11 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 4 August 2002.

"GOD IS OUR FATHER BECAUSE JESUS IS OUR SAVIOUR"

Text:

Lord's Day 11

29. Q. Why is the Son of God called Jesus, that is, Saviour?

A. Because He saves us from all our sins,[1] and because salvation is not to be sought or found in anyone else.[2]

[1] *Matt. 1:21; Heb. 7:25. [2] Is. 43:11; John 15:4, 5; Acts 4:11, 12; I Tim. 2:5.*

30. Q. Do those believe in the only Saviour Jesus who seek their salvation and well-being from saints, in themselves, or anywhere else?

A. No. Though they boast of Him in words, they in fact deny the only Saviour Jesus.[1] For one of two things must be true: either Jesus is not a complete Saviour, or those who by true faith accept this Saviour must find in Him all that is necessary for their salvation.[2]

[1] *I Cor. 1:12, 13; Gal. 5:4. [2] Col. 1:19, 20; 2:10; I John 1:7.*

Scripture Reading:

Psalms 54

Genesis 3:15-24

Matthew 1:18-25

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 86:1

Psalms 40:4

Psalms 27:5,6

Psalms 54:1,2,3

Hymns 55:1,2

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The Apostles' Creed we confessed together some moments ago divides into three parts. With Lord's Day 9 and 10 the church makes confession of what Scripture teaches concerning the first section, of "God the Father and our Creation". We've spent some weeks on those Lord's Days, and learned how very much comfort and encouragement God gives us in the nuts and bolts of life. For the Creator of heaven and earth is our Father; "leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed all things, come not by chance but by His fatherly hand." That we can be children of *such* a God makes us completely safe no matter what may come on our path. Here is material that pertains very much to the here and now of our daily lives; no confession is closer to the kitchen sink than this.

We move on today to the second section of the Apostles' Creed, of "God the Son and our Redemption." This section will largely take our thoughts back to events in Palestine some 2000 years ago. Christ's birth, ministry, crucifixion, death, resurrection may strike us as far removed from the dirt and dust of real life. As it is, though, congregation, with the material of this second section of the Apostles' Creed (and that covers Lord's Days 11-19 of the Catechism) we're making confession of *the reason why* God in heaven is our Father today – and therefore provides all we need today for

body and soul. You see, what we confessed in Lord's Days 9 and 10 about God being our Father is so very rich and real-in-daily-terms, but those Lord's Days didn't explain *how come* God is our Father, and we His children. That's what we have to flesh out now; God is our Father, we are His children, *for Jesus' sake*. To flesh that out, to explain *Jesus' role* in God becoming our Father: that's the purpose of the coming Lord's Days. As we flesh that out with Lord's Day 11 this afternoon, we learn that Jesus' saving work profits us not just in the life to come, but touches us directly at the kitchen sink.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

GOD IS OUR FATHER BECAUSE JESUS IS OUR SAVIOUR.

1. This reality determines what we do with all our problems.
2. This reality is rooted in God's gift of His Son.
3. This reality drives us daily back to God.

1. This reality determines what we do with all our problems.

David was a man of like nature to ours. But at a given moment in his life, he found himself in a bind. Samuel had anointed him to be king over Israel, and so the current king chased him up and down the countryside to kill him. David finally found some refuge in a forest in the Wilderness of Ziph, a few days of peace and quiet. But word came to him that the locals had betrayed him to Saul.... Again, then, David was not safe, again he'd have to flee for his life (I Sam 23).

What, now, does David do? According to the title above our Psalm, David's reaction to news of this betrayal was that *he prayed*, prayed the words of Ps 54. That's striking. We find ourselves in a spot of trouble, hear some bad news, and the natural thing to do is cast about for ways to solve the problem. Neighbourhood bullies are on our tail, and our automatic response is to look for a way to shake them. A client does us the dirty, and our natural reaction is to look for ways to save the deal. David's reaction was not like that. He did not call a counsel of war; his response to the news was instead a *prayer*. That's the title: "a contemplation of David when the Ziphites went and said to Saul, 'Is David not hiding among us?'"

This response on David's part, brothers and sisters, follows directly from the confession that God's hand reaches into, yes, controls *every area of life*. To say it with the words of Lord's Day 10: "Leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years," etc, "come not by chance but by His fatherly hand." So: this betrayal by the Ziphites came also from the Lord God. In that light, that David first went to God with his problem was distinctly the correct thing to do. Vs 3: "strangers have risen up against me, And oppressors have sought after my life." That's the Ziphites, and Saul....

But notice, congregation, what more David says in the Psalm. He doesn't *complain* to God, in the sense of: how could You –for You are meant to be my faithful Father-by-covenant- how could You let this happen to me?! No, he comes instead with a *request* for God. Vs 1: "save me, O God, by Your Name." He seeks deliverance, seeks salvation in the face of this particular problem.

Now, I should add right away that when we hear the word 'salvation', we think right away of eternal life. And indeed, the term 'salvation' does have that aspect to it. But that's not complete. The concept 'salvation' occurs numerous times in the Old Testament, and the vast majority of these references describe deliverance from real enemies and out of real catastrophies. Ps 54 is a case in point; David asks God to 'save' him, David asks God to be his Saviour, to deliver him from Saul and the Ziphites.

Why, now, does David ask *God* to 'save' him? Why not bank on his own ingenuity, or brainstorm with his advisors? That, congregation, is not simply because God was his Father; it was rather because David worked with the Word of God he had. For: according to the Scripture David could have, what was the underlying cause of David's trouble? Think it through, beloved: had David lived before the fall into sin, he would have had none of the difficulties reflected in Ps 54! Before the fall into sin, there was only peace, there was only contentment, love for God and neighbour alike. But with the fall into sin that all changed, and *that* is the root reason why David experiences the trials of his life. For

the *harmony with God* is gone, is replaced instead with the *wrath* of God. That is why David in his troubles doesn't just address the troubles-as-the-eye-sees-them, but he reaches down to the *root* of his troubles, to "the cause of his eternal hunger and misery, with is *sin*." Sin provokes the wrath of God, and so David-the-sinner has to face up with *God*.

It's a point, beloved, so critically important for ourselves also. We read a portion from Gen 3. After the fall into sin, the Lord God spoke to the serpent in the hearing of both the man and the woman, said: "And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel" (vs 15). Question. How do you experience that word from God in your daily life? Make no mistake, beloved: you experience that enmity between Satan and God's people when you're called a Dutchie, when you are derided because you go to church, when you stick by Christian principles in your work, etc. My point: numerous of the troubles that characterize this life stem directly from the Lord's response in Gen 3:15 to our fall into sin.

The same is true in relation to God's words in vs 16. Said God to the woman: "I will greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children." These words take our thoughts to the hours of childbirth, and rightly so. But the Lord's point in these words is not limited to those hours. The discomfort that comes with pregnancy, the difficulties that come with raising children, even the discomforts of hormone changes at adolescence and in later life are all caught in the Lord's words here. Had Adam and Eve received children before the fall into sin, the anxieties that characterize parenting today would not have characterized that family. My point: all the troubles that come with womanhood and receiving children have their roots in the fall into sin.

The same point is true in relation to the struggles to get bread on the table. "Cursed is the ground for your sake," said God to Adam; "In toil you shall eat of it All the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you.... In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread...." The struggle to survive, to feed and clothe the family, to pay the bills, to keep the equipment going at work, etc, has its roots in the fall into sin. So does death, and the sicknesses that lead to death, and the loss of teeth and the need for a walking stick, etc, etc. All of these difficulties and discomforts are not so many discomforts that stand on their own, as in: "that's life", but all are direct results of the fall into sin, direct results of the judgment of God on our transgression. Lord's Day 4: God is "terribly displeased with our original sin as well as our actual sins" and "will punish them by a just judgment both now and eternally."

What, then, brothers and sisters, must a man do in the face of sickness? Simply call the doctor? What must a man do when he can't make the payments on his house, can't feed his family? Look for ways out of the problem – and if all else fails turn to God in prayer? What should we do when the equipment breaks down? Simply bring in the mechanic? No, beloved, every problem we encounter in this life *has its roots in the fall into sin, has its roots in the judgment of God on sin*. It speaks of shallow thinking to address each problem as a separate little problem, and fail to address the underlying problem: *sin*. And the only way to address the underlying problem is to go to the God whose displeasure we provoked through our sins. That is what David did in his troubles; he understood that the *cause* of his misery was *sin*. *And people can't get rid of sin, people can't satisfy for sin*. Only God can do that, more, that's what God promised to do in that protevangel of Gen 3:15, when He said that the Seed of the woman would bruise the head of the serpent. That is why David goes to God, and then doesn't tell God what he has done so far to solve his own problem, and then ask God to do the last bit; no, he goes to God with empty hands, tells God what his problem is, and cries out, "Save me, O God."

And the thing is: God answers David's plea. The Lord God showed David the way he had to go to escape his enemy; yes, according to I Sam 23 the Lord God caused the Philistines to attack the land of Israel so that Saul had to leave off pursuing David. But: *why* did God answer? *Why* did He deliver David? At bottom it was because his sins were taken away in the Saviour God would send into the world. That's our second point:

2. This reality is rooted in God's gift of His Son.

At the time of His choosing, the Lord God sent the second Person of the Holy Trinity to earth to be born as a man. Before His birth, Joseph was told what name to give to the baby. "Jesus," the angel said, "you shall call His name Jesus" (Mt 1:21). The word 'Jesus' is the Greek equivalent of the Old Testament Hebrew name 'Joshua', and means "the Lord saves". That's why we say in Lord's Day 11 that 'Jesus' means 'Saviour'.

The name captures the task God gave to this infant. He sent His Son to earth with the mandate to "save His people from their sins" (Mt 1:21). Just how He accomplished that task will be the topic of coming Lord's Days. For now it is sufficient to notice that Jesus' work touched the lives of God's people in the midst of their daily concerns. Jesus came to take away sin, came, that is, to take away the *cause* of people's hunger and misery. So, once Jesus began His public ministry, He touched people's lives precisely in those areas listed in Gen 3. The fall into sin had meant that man had to *toil* to earn a crust, to feed the family. The disciples laboured all night, and caught nothing. At a word Jesus had their nets full to the point of breaking. The fall into sin had meant that life would be characterized by aches and pains; sickness would prefigure death. Jesus healed so many sick, so many blind, so many deaf, even raised so many dead. You see, Jesus reached into the lives of the people of Judea *precisely where they were*, and showed them what the effect of His life's task was; by taking away sin He was taking away the cause of their miseries. There's a direct link between His work on the cross and the health of their homes.

On the cross of Calvary He atoned for sin, satisfied the justice of God. The apostle Paul records the consequence of Jesus' work in Rom 5. He says, "Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (vs 1). Notice those words: "we have peace with God." That's exactly the relation we had with God in Paradise before the fall into sin! Before sin entered the world there was peace with God, no anger from God, no displeasure from God – and therefore no pain, no sorrow, no tribulation. The apostle repeats the notion a couple of chapters later: "there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (8:1). No condemnation, no judgment; only favour, peace with God! And notice the timing: "there is there *now* no condemnation." The reference is to *today*! See there, beloved, the result of Jesus' work; He came to save His people for their sins, and the result is that *today* –and for us that August 4, 2002- today there is no condemnation from God for His people. For the sin that causes misery has been taken away! And because that sin is taken away, because Jesus has obtained peace for us with God, is God again our Father, a Father who uses His almighty power to direct "leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed all things" in such a way that all things benefit His children. You see: Jesus' work *as Saviour* provides the *foundation* for the glorious material confessed in Lord's Days 9 and 10.

But Jesus' work as Saviour goes beyond establishing the foundation for God being again our Father and we His children. He came to take away the cause of our miseries and troubles, which is sin, and to spell that out to the people of His day He healed so many of them from their illnesses. That is, He spelled out to them that He came to take away the *cause* of their misery –how?- by taking away from them the *effects* of the fall into sin. Indeed, He didn't take away every effect, nor did He take these effects away permanently. But He showed by His healings what the purpose of His work was, and its consequences: by atoning for sin He in principle took away the results of sin.

Then it's true: today we still see the results of our fall so vividly. The rage of the devil, the pain of childbearing, toil in our daily work: it's all still there. But, brothers and sisters, by faith we realize that the *curse of God* is out of these tribulations! For the child of God whose sins are forgiven in Jesus' blood these pains and tribulations are not judgments; the child of God knows that God is His Father who "turns to my good whatever adversity He sends me in this life of sorrow." So the anguish is out of the trials of life!

But that gospel, brothers and sisters, has a very direct consequence, and that's our third point:

3. This reality drives us daily to God with all our troubles.

For: what are we going to do now in the face of trouble? We have a headache; shall we find a solution *without God*? Or shall we turn to God only when panadol doesn't help? We've got tension in our marriage; shall we turn to the marriage counsellor for help – and to God only when our backs are really up against the wall?

Here, congregation, is the material of Question & Answer 30. "Do those who seek their salvation or well-being in saints, in themselves, or anywhere else, also believe in the only Saviour Jesus?" Remember: with the word 'salvation' in this question our thoughts should not go directly to eternal life, to how we fare when we reach the judgment seat of God. The reference in the Catechism is first of all to the here-and-now, and that's shown up by the Catechism's use of the word 'well-being' as a parallel term to the word 'salvation'. Indeed, it cannot be different; if God will be favourable to us *on the last day*, He will be favourable to us *now already*. Jesus' work was to take away sins, and the

result, says Paul, is that "we *have* peace with God", "there is *now* no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." That's the question: do those who seek their sense of well-being *for this life* in saints, in themselves, or anywhere else also believe in the only Saviour Jesus?

The answer, beloved, is a loud No! The people of five hundred years ago who in a concrete sickness cried out to St Andrew or to St Bartholomew or to St Anne for deliverance and healing were in fact denying Jesus – even though they could speak about Jesus at length. We today don't cry out to a saint for healing in our sicknesses, but that doesn't mean that there's no lesson here for us. For in principle there is no difference between crying out to a saint for help or crying out to a doctor for help.

Let me try to be very clear. The saint will never help, because the saint is dead and so will neither intervene with things on earth nor intercede with God for the sick earthling. A doctor, on the other hand, can indeed prescribe this treatment or do this or that to bring about a healing. In that sense, it makes a big difference who you turn to.

But my point lies at a deeper level. My sickness has its roots in the fall into sin. If I ignore that fact, and simply go to the doctor, I've not taken seriously the *cause* of my illness, have not taken seriously either that Jesus came into this world to *take away* that cause – and so to give me peace with God. That sickness, now, has not come upon me by chance, but my Father-for-Jesus'-sake has permitted this sickness to come upon me for my good. So, in the face of illness, I need first of all to go to the God I offended in Paradise, need to acknowledge my unworthiness and sinfulness before Him, and plead for His grace upon me for Jesus' sake. As long as His judgment and wrath remain, I can go to a thousand doctors, but I haven't addressed the root problem. That is why I need to go to God with my problem *first*, embrace again the gospel of Jesus' saving work, seek His blessing and His answers to my medical problem, and *then* possibly go to the doctor.

The same is true in the face of any other trouble in life. The equipment breaks down, and my natural reaction is to phone up the repairman. Fine, but life has a deeper dimension, I may not forget the connection to Gen 3 and therefore the need for a Saviour. To seek my wellbeing in that repairman instead of the Lord Jesus does not do justice to the depths of Jesus' saving work. So I lay the problem before my God first, and then possibly call up the repairman.

I may feel lousy about myself, and think I need a boost to feel better. In today's climate, the temptation is there to seek a solution to that low feeling in drink, or in drugs, even drugs picked up from the chemist. But those lousy feelings we have about ourselves would not have been there had we been living before Gen 3! The cause of the down feeling is *sin*, and we've got to take that reality seriously and therefore work with what God did in giving a Saviour to deliver us from our sins – consequences included. So we turn in prayer to our Father in Jesus Christ, work with His gospel – and see whether *He* wants us to make use of a drink or of drugs.

Our Lord Jesus Christ came to take away the cause of the troubles we encounter day by day. The effects of His work do not pass us by; already we have peace with God, no condemnation from Him, no wrath in the midst of life's brokenness. That gospel already takes away an enormous amount of worry and stress from the life of God's children. And soon, when Jesus comes again on the clouds of heaven, every tear will be gone at last, pain will be no more, troubles banned forever from this earth. Then we will experience in full what we taste today in part: Jesus is a *complete* Saviour, we find in Him *all* that is necessary for our salvation – today and forever. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 12a of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 11 August 2002.

" GOD PRIVILEGES HIS PEOPLE BY MAKING THEM PROPHETS ."

Text:

Lord's Day 12 Q&A 31a, 32a

Q. Why is He called Christ, that is, Anointed?

A. Because He has been ordained by God the Father, and anointed with the Holy Spirit,[1] to be our chief Prophet and Teacher,[2] who has fully revealed to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption;[3] our only High Priest,[4] who by the one sacrifice of His body has redeemed us,[5] and who continually intercedes for us before the Father;[6] and our eternal King,[7] who governs us by His Word and Spirit, and who defends and preserves us in the redemption obtained for us.[8]

[1] Ps. 45:7 (Heb. 1:9); Is. 61:1 (Luke 4:18; Luke 3:21, 22. [2] Deut. 18:15 (Acts 3:22). [3] John 1:18; 15:15. [4] Ps. 110:4 (Heb. 7:17). [5] Heb. 9:12; 10:11-14. [6] Rom. 8:34; Heb. 9:24; I John 2:1. [7] Zach. 9:9 (Matt. 21:5); Luke 1:33. [8] Matt. 28:18-20; John 10:28; Rev. 12:10, 11.

Q. Why are you called a Christian?

A. Because I am a member of Christ by faith[1] and thus share in His anointing,[2] so that I may as prophet confess His Name,[3] as priest present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him,[4] and as king fight with a free and good conscience against sin and the devil in this life,[5] and hereafter reign with Him eternally over all creatures.[6]

[1] I Cor. 12:12-27. [2] Joel 2:28 (Acts 2:17); I John 2:27. [3] Matt. 10:32; Rom 10:9, 10; Heb. 13:15. [4] Rom. 12:1; I Pet. 2:5, 9. [5] Gal. 5:16, 17; Eph. 6:11; I Tim. 1:18, 19. [6] Matt. 25:34; II Tim. 2:12.

Scripture Reading:

Exodus 6:28-7:2

Acts 2:14-21

Matthew 10:16-42

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 96:2,4

Psalm 40:4,5

Psalm 115:5,6

Psalm 71:9,10,13

Psalm 119:18 & Hymn 41:3,4

Lord's Day 12.31A,32A

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

The familiar word 'Christ' isn't English; it's Greek. In the Greek language the term simply means 'anointed'. Jesus is called 'Christ' because on the day of His baptism God the Father anointed His only-begotten Son with the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:21f), and so equipped Jesus to carry out the task for which God sent Him into the world. Through this anointing on the day of His baptism, God made Jesus of Nazareth prophet, priest and king at the same time. This is what we confess in Question & Answer 31 of our Lord's Day.

The word 'Christian' comes from the same Greek word, and means 'anointed ones'. That's because the 'Christian' shares in the anointing of Christ, with as result that the Christian also has an office, a duty including three distinct aspects; the Christian is Prophet, is Priest, is King. In fact, we all are Christians, anointed with the Holy Spirit, and therefore prophets, priests and kings. We confess this in Question & Answer 32 of Lord's Day 12.

There is much to say about each of these three offices. For that reason I intend to spread Lord's Day 12 over three Sundays, dealing successively with the three offices of prophet, priest and king. Today, then, the matter of "prophets". I summarize the sermon with this theme:

GOD PRIVILEGES HIS PEOPLE BY MAKING THEM PROPHETS.

1. The task of the biblical prophet
2. The fulfillment in the chief prophet
3. The mandate of the modern prophet

1. The task of the biblical prophet.

Prophets we are, says Lord's Day 12. What, beloved, is a prophet? The term 'prophet' is popularly used today to describe someone who has insights into the future, who tells us about the things that are going to happen. On that understanding, our function as prophets would be that we tell others about the things that are yet to happen, and we might then think of earthquakes and famines, of the return of Jesus Christ and the final judgment.

But that is not how the Scripture uses the term. What Scripture means by the terms 'prophet' is possibly best illustrated by what we read from Ex 6 & 7. The Lord instructed Moses to "speak to Pharaoh ... all that I say to you" (6:29). Moses objected to this command on the ground that he wasn't very eloquent, that he expressed himself awkwardly. God responded to Moses' complaint with this word: "Aaron your brother shall be your prophet" (7:1). What that means is amplified by what God says next: "You shall speak all that I command you; and Aaron your brother shall tell Pharaoh...." From that passage we learn what a prophet is; a prophet *speaks on someone else's behalf*, a prophet *is some else's mouthpiece*.

Yet in Scripture a prophet is not simply a person who speaks for some other person; in Scripture a prophet is specifically someone who speaks on behalf of *God*. So we read in Dt 18 these words from God: "I will raise up for them a prophet...; and I will put words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him" (vs 18). So it is that the prophets of later generations prefaced their words with that phrase: "thus says the Lord." The prophet did not speak his own word; he was rather "moved by the Holy Spirit [and so] (spoke) from God" (II Pet 1:21).

Here, beloved, is a most marvelous thought. The almighty Creator in heaven on high is pleased to speak to people on earth, to creatures, sinful creatures. But God does not speak directly from heaven; He did that at Mt Sinai, and the people were afraid when they heard God's voice, and so asked that God speak to Moses and let Moses please pass on God's words to the people (Ex 20:18f). *And so it happened!* No longer has God spoken directly from heaven to men, but He takes certain people to function as mouthpieces on His behalf. God wants His Word heard among men, and certain persons received the privilege to be the medium God used to bring His word among people.

Of course, those who heard God's prophets were obligated to *listen*. After all, the prophets spoke *from God*. This word, exactly because it came from God, was *life saving*. Through His prophets God told His people Who He is, told people what man is and how he is to worship this God. In His care for His people, the Lord revealed through His prophets all we need to know about the fall into sin, about how God saves us in Jesus Christ, about His being our Father, about His providence, about the resurrection of the body, about the church, about the Holy Spirit, about the Last Things, etc. God had these life-saving realities spoken amongst men in circumstances of peace and in circumstances of sorrow, in circumstances of obedience and in circumstances of disobedience. But always the fact that *He sent His Word* meant that the hearers were obligated to *listen!*

But see: time and time again the prophets of the Old Testament experienced so painfully that the people did not want

to listen to what God was saying through them. They ignored the prophets, they ridiculed the prophets, they persecuted the prophets. Jezebel threatened to kill Elijah (I K 19). The youths of Bethel echoed the mind of the time when they mocked Elisha and told him to "Go up, you baldhead! Go up, you baldhead!" (II Kings 2:23). Micaiah was slapped across the cheek and placed on a diet of dry bread and water in some prison (I K 22). Amos was told to go home (7:12). Against Jeremiah the plot was made to put him to death; because he spoke as he did, he ended up in a well with a quicksand bottom (ch 38). In a word, there was a distinct danger in being a prophet.

And yes, we can understand that danger. For who of us likes to be told that a habit of ours is *sin*? We, like they, catch ourselves from time to time not wanting to hear God's word as *God's* word, find ourselves deriding those around us who speak to us God's Word. Yet a faithful prophet hasn't the choice whether to speak or not, hasn't the choice whether to water down what God wants him to speak or not. God gives a command – "say this" – and the prophet is obliged to say exactly that..., even if it be at the cost of his own life. That's what being a prophet is all about.

And that makes it clear: to be a prophet was far from easy. To be a prophet took a lot of courage. And it took a lot of insight too. And a lot of wisdom. And none of the prophets of old had the necessary courage and insight and wisdom. But with the calling to speak God's Words, to be prophet, came also the needed strength. As God said to Moses: "I will be with your mouth and teach you what you shall speak" (Ex 4:12). The Sender of the prophet was faithful.

2. The fulfillment in the chief prophet.

Of all the persons that the Lord was pleased to use as His mouthpieces, Jesus Christ is presented to us in Scripture as the "chief". Now that we know what the task of a prophet is, we can also easily understand why Christ is called the "Chief Prophet and Teacher". For Christ is Himself God, and so every word He speaks is invariably a word of God. So it is that we read in the gospels that Christ "speaks the words of God" (Jn 3:34). Indeed, "I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak" (Jn 12:49).

Remember, Jesus Christ was Son of God, and that's to say that He was from eternity in the bosom of the Father. If anyone on earth, then, was equipped to declare the Father to earthlings, surely it was Jesus of Nazareth! (cf Jn 1:18). That is why in Jesus Christ the line of prophets came to its climax; in the Son of Man God has revealed the fullness of what He wishes men to know. Chief Prophet and Teacher: in Christ Jesus, God has made Himself fully known. What God says of human corruption, of substitution by grace, of atonement for sin, of providence, of the resurrection, of the church: that Prophet of prophets has revealed it all to the full. That is why that voice came from heaven on the Mt of Transfiguration and told the disciples: "This is My beloved Son...; *listen to Him*" (Mt 17:5).

How privileged, then, how very privileged were the people of Israel in Jesus' day to have this Chief Prophet and Teacher in their midst! Here was grace from God; the Creator wished to speak to men, and used *His own Son* as the means to do so!

But the people did not appreciate this wealth. Certainly, His miracles, and even the authority of His teaching, made Him popular at the beginning of His ministry. But when He laid before the people all the glorious promises of God and all His demands, when He exposed their sins for what they were and urged repentance, when He told them they had nothing they could contribute to their salvation but were dependent on God's grace completely, He was rejected out of hand. En masse, the people deserted Him (Jn 6:60). The Pharisees told Him that He had a devil and tried to discredit Him in His prophesying, to unmask Him as a fake, to prove that God was not speaking through Him. Make no mistake, beloved: to be Chief Prophet and Teacher was for the Christ no easy office. But the Lord God had anointed Him to the office of prophet, and with the anointing came the strength to carry out the office. So John could write that "He whom God has sent speaks the words of God, *for God does not give the Spirit by measure*" (Jn 3:34). That is: when Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit, God gave the Spirit to Jesus *in fullness*. Even when Jesus was arrested, afflicted, spit on, scoffed at, nailed to the cross, He continued to speak words that came from heaven alone – Chief Prophet and Teacher.

After His resurrection from the dead, the Christ spoke the Word of God on earth for forty days more. Then His task as personal spokesman for the Father was completed, and He was carried aloft to receive from God the throne at God's right hand. Yet that ascension, beloved, did not mean that now Jesus' task to be prophet was ended. Ten days after His

ascension He poured out His Holy Spirit, the Spirit who spoke not His own words, but spoke rather the words of Christ (Jn 16:14). Through this Spirit the Chief Prophet and Teacher would lead the apostles further into all the truth (Jn 16:13). So it is that our Chief Prophet, through His Holy Spirit, caused the apostles to put God's revealed Word into writing; the Bible is the Word of God given to us by that chief prophet and teacher. When that Bible is opened today, the Christ who sits at God's right hand still speaks to the Church, yes to all the world. Once He was anointed to be Prophet; always He functions as Prophet, continually.

How wonderful, brothers and sisters, the grace and mercy of the Lord your God! Though we are sinful, and live in a world of unbelief, the Lord God would have us hear His Word, would speak to us – the Bible! How much, then, are we to treasure that Word in our homes, and to treasure that Word also when it is preached to us in church. *God our Father speaks to us still!* We praise You, Lord, for your marvelous works!

3. *The mandate of the modern prophet.*

The fact that Christ is *chief* prophet implies that God has ordained others to be prophets with Him. When the Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ moved Peter to speak these words: "... this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, That I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh; Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy...'" (Act 2:16f). Says Peter: with the Spirit's outpouring today, Joel's prophecy is fulfilled; common people, your children, are now prophets, spokesmen from God! Amazing, beloved, but that's the force of Peter's words. *God speaks to sinners through sinners, yes, through common people, through you and your sons and your daughters!* What mercy that is! That's also why this same Peter can tell the saints of the dispersion in his first letter that they are "God's own special people that you may *proclaim* the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light" (I Pet 2:9). And Paul can consider *confessing God's Name* to be normal Christian activity. Rom 10: "... if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved" (vs 9f). No, not that there's something new in the thought that common folk are prophets; what happened at Pentecost fulfills what Moses longed for at Mt Sinai already when he said: "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!" (Num 11:29). On the day of Pentecost it happened; by pouring out His Spirit on all His people, the chief Prophet and Teacher in heaven has ordained *all His people* to be prophets, spokesmen from God amongst sinners.

See there your identity and mine, beloved. At our baptism the Lord God promised that His Holy Spirit would dwell in us. In the strength of this Spirit, we can speak the Word of God in our daily circumstances. True, we don't do it identically to the prophets of, say, the Old Testament. Whereas God may have given to them particular revelations that they were to pass on to the people, we receive no revelations from God. For us it is instead to open the Bible left to us by the Chief Prophet, and confess in our particular circumstances what the Lord God says. Be it circumstances of sorrow or sin, of grief or gladness, we are equipped to confess God's mighty acts, to bring His life-giving Word to bear on sorrow around us or the sins we witness.

I cannot say it strongly enough: here is an enormous privilege!! It pleases the Father in heaven and His ascended Son to have the Word of God heard on this earth. Though He knows well how our society has rejected that word, and that so many millions have no regard for God and His life-saving revelation, the Lord does not turn His back to this world. Instead, He causes the Bible the Spirit inspired to be readily available in our community, and causes the Word of the Bible to be preached also at particular places Sunday by Sunday, and that's wonderful indeed. But God does more! Such is His interest for our community that He sends His people into this community *as prophets*, as persons anointed by the Holy Spirit and so equipped to speak words from God in the particular circumstances in which God in wisdom leads us. "Leaf and blade, food and drink, health and sickness," etc, come not by chance but by His Fatherly hand, and that's true too of the place of employment God gives us in this community and the neighbors we have and the person we bump into on the bus. God in heaven causes us to rub shoulders with specific people, and so God through His children-as-prophets causes His Word to cross their paths!

No, that's not to say that as soon as God puts a person on our path we need to speak the gospel to him. There is also such a thing as manners in speaking, and that includes respecting the other person's space and earning the right to speak about intimate matters. Here is need for wisdom, and courage, and therefore need for prayer.

Yet, brothers and sisters, it's not first of all to the people of the world that the Lord makes us prophets. For so many of us, the people with whom we spend most of our time are brothers and sisters in the faith. The *family* is such an integral part of our lives, be it our children, our parents, our brothers, our sisters, our grandparents, our grandchildren, and maybe even cousins. The *church community*, and therefore the *school community*, also provides so very many of our day-to-day contacts. Here first of all we are prophets, appointed by God the Father and anointed with the Holy Spirit to speak His Word in changing day-to-day circumstances.

By the grace of God, we do speak God's word as we rub shoulders at home, at school, at soccer, etc. Yet we find to our dismay that the more readily we speak God's word the more square we're seen to be. Parents feel it in the home with growing children, especially youth feel it at school with their peers; it's just not cool to bring up the Lord and His service in normal, daily conversations. Yet the Lord, brothers and sisters, tells parents to speak of God to their children "when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up" (Dt 6:7). So, even on the soccer field there is place for parents to speak with their children of the Lord and His Word. And if it's fitting for parents to be spokesmen for God in any and every circumstance of life, there's no reason why the same would not be true for friends among friends, older or younger. Our coffee klatches should not be forums to discuss the latest in gossip, but occasions where older women encourage younger women in the biblical art of good housekeeping and loving their husbands – as Paul writes to Titus (2:3). Our BBQs should not be events where the fellows drink themselves in a knot, but occasions where –again, as Paul writes to Titus– the young men and older show themselves to be sound in faith and displaying a pattern of good works, with speech that cannot be condemned (2:1,6ff). That is: we're prophets around the clock, always, everywhere.

I know: speaking according to God's word invariably prompts a response from the hearers. The prophets of the Old Testament were scorned and ridiculed because they spoke the word of God, and so was Jesus in His day. That's because the human heart does not want God's word to interfere with our lives; that's human. What Jesus said to His disciples is true for us today too: speaking God's word will "set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law" (Mt 10:35). We find it very painful, but Jesus has told us that we will experience what the prophets of the Old Testament also experienced. It wasn't the Babylonians who put Jeremiah in the pit, but God's own people in Jerusalem, Jeremiah's brothers and sisters. It wasn't the heathen Moabites who slapped Micaiah across the face, but a fellow prophet from Israel (I Kings 22:24). It wasn't the Romans who demanded Jesus' crucifixion, but Jesus' own people. We are prophets first in the home, then in the church and school community, and *there* is where we will experience rejection first of all; "a man's enemies will be those of his own household" (Mt 10:36). Let no one surprised at hostility, even in home and church communities.

How much more, then, shall we receive ridicule from the public community! On the train and at work we're prophets too, appointed and anointed to confess Christ's name. The reaction of the public will not be more favorable than reactions from the brethren; ridicule is the lot of those who would speak the word of God. As Jesus said: "A disciple is not above his teacher.... If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of His household!" (Mt 10:24f). Hence Jesus' words in Mt 10:17ff: "they will deliver you up to councils, and scourge you in their synagogues. You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake.... and you will be hated *by all* for My name's sake" (10:17ff).

Truly, it's enough to frighten us off. That is why two more things need to be said. The first is Jesus' promise in vs 19: "...do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking in you" (vs 19f). As the Spirit of God moved the prophets of the Old Testament to say what they had to say, and gave them the courage to say it too, and as the Spirit was poured so fully on Jesus Christ so that He could speak God's word fully and faithfully during His three year ministry on earth (Jn 3:34), so the Spirit of God gives us the words we need to say, and the courage to say them, and the wisdom to know when to speak. That is true in the home and true at school, true on the train and true at work. The Lord God has anointed us with the Holy Spirit, and so appointed us to the office of prophets of God in this sin-filled world, and so *He gives the words and He gives the strength*. It is for us to *work with His promises* in our specific situation. An opportunity to speak does not come by chance, but comes from God's Fatherly hand; well then, when this Father-for-Jesus'-sake puts us in such a circumstance, He will certainly supply the words and the strength. It is not by accident that Jesus spoke to the disciples about the value of sparrows and the hairs on people's heads *precisely in the context of the response faithful prophets experience*. The disciples should know, and we should know, that our

God *does not fail*; with Him we're always safe.

Here is enormous encouragement for us. We don't desire to be on the receiving end of scorn, neither at home from family members nor at school from our peers nor on the bus from a stranger nor at work from our mates. The Lord knows that, and that is why He encourages us with the reminder of His sovereignty and the promise of strength from His Spirit. So we do well, beloved, to begin each day with the prayer that God please give us the grace and strength and words He promised, and give us too the confidence of faith to *trust His leading*.

The second thing that needs to be said relates to vs 39 from Mt 10. In the context of being prophets and the negative reactions the disciples may expect, Jesus told them that "he who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it." Jesus' point here was both to warn His disciples and to encourage them. The person who wants to be 'in' with the crowd on this earth will have to embrace people's sinful aversion to God's word, and therefore refrain from confessing Christ before men. Such a person, says Jesus, may "find his life" on this earth, be accepted by men, but he will lose it on the last day. For, vs 33, "whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven." In other words, Jesus will not intercede for God's mercy on behalf of that child of His who didn't confess Jesus before men. Jesus is frank with His disciples –and with us- about the cost of failing to be the prophets God called us to be.

On the other hand, says Jesus, "he who loses his life for My sake will find it." The person who speaks up for the Lord God on this earth will lose his life here, be ridiculed and scorned and betrayed by family and friends and mates. But the Lord will not desert him, and having God on our side is true life today already. And on the day when the Lord Jesus Christ returns to judge the living and the dead, Christ will Himself intercede before God's throne on behalf of this faithful child of His. This faithful Christian was willing to take up His cross and follow the Lord, even into ridicule, and so he'll receive the crown of glory.

God the Father has granted you, brothers and sisters, the unsurpassable privilege to be anointed with the Holy Spirit. To Him be all glory! He made us prophets, now and forever, and He does not fail! Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 12b of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 18 August 2002.

" GOD PRIVILEGES US BY MAKING US PRIESTS."

Text:

Lord's Day 12 Q&A 31b, 32b

Q. Why is He called Christ, that is, Anointed?

A. Because He has been ordained by God the Father, and anointed with the Holy Spirit,[1] to be our chief Prophet and Teacher,[2] who has fully revealed to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption;[3] our only High Priest,[4] who by the one sacrifice of His body has redeemed us,[5] and who continually intercedes for us before the Father;[6] and our eternal King,[7] who governs us by His Word and Spirit, and who defends and preserves us in the redemption obtained for us.[8]

[1] Ps. 45:7 (Heb. 1:9); Is. 61:1 (Luke 4:18; Luke 3:21, 22. [2] Deut. 18:15 (Acts 3:22). [3] John 1:18; 15:15. [4] Ps. 110:4 (Heb. 7:17). [5] Heb. 9:12; 10:11-14. [6] Rom. 8:34; Heb. 9:24; I John 2:1. [7] Zach. 9:9 (Matt. 21:5); Luke 1:33. [8] Matt. 28:18-20; John 10:28; Rev. 12:10, 11.

Q. Why are you called a Christian?

A. Because I am a member of Christ by faith[1] and thus share in His anointing,[2] so that I may as prophet confess His Name,[3] as priest present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him,[4] and as king fight with a free and good conscience against sin and the devil in this life,[5] and hereafter reign with Him eternally over all creatures.[6]

[1] I Cor. 12:12-27. [2] Joel 2:28 (Acts 2:17); I John 2:27. [3] Matt. 10:32; Rom 10:9, 10; Heb. 13:15. [4] Rom. 12:1; I Pet. 2:5, 9. [5] Gal. 5:16, 17; Eph. 6:11; I Tim. 1:18, 19. [6] Matt. 25:34; II Tim. 2:12.

Scripture Reading:

Leviticus 1:1-9

Romans 12

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 40:2,3

Psalm 54:3

Psalm 51:6

Psalm 50:7,11

Psalm 118:7,8

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

By the ordinance and anointing of the Lord, you and I are priests and priestesses. That's not, I think, something we think much about day by day, but it's true nevertheless. Rev 1: Jesus Christ "has made us kings and priests to His God and Father" (vs 6). And 1 Peter 2: "You are a ... royal priesthood, a holy nation." It's true of all God's children in the New Testament dispensation; older and younger, male and female, healthy or not, are priests. As we bike to school, we are priests. As we construct that cabinet, we are priests. As we iron the clothes, we are priests.

But what, congregation, does that mean? Just how are you a priest? Why, for that matter, would God make us priests? What promises and what obligations follow from God making us priests?

To answer these questions, we need first to look at Scripture's instruction about the Old Testament priesthood. Then we need to turn to Christ's work as priest. That will set the stage for us to understand what the Lord promises to us in our being priests, and what He requires from us.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

GOD PRIVILEGES US BY MAKING US PRIESTS.

1. The task of the biblical priest.
2. The fulfillment in the only High Priest.
3. The mandate of the modern priest.

1. The task of the biblical priest.

The task of the biblical priest is drawn out for us in some detail in the instructions the Lord gave His people at Mt Sinai. You recall that at Mt Sinai the Lord established with Israel His covenant of grace, adopted Israel to be His people. Part of that covenant of grace was God's desire to live amongst His people. Hence His instruction to Moses that the people should build for Him a tabernacle. The last part of the book of Exodus explains what this tabernacle had to look like, explains how the people built it, and, in Ex 40, that the Lord actually came to live in this tabernacle.

Important for our purposes today is the fact that the tabernacle was constructed in such a way that God's dwelling in the tabernacle was *at a distance from the people*. That is, He dwelt in the Holy of Holies in the back of tabernacle, while the people could get no closer than the door of the tabernacle. This layout of the tabernacle was a reminder of God's response to the fall into sin in Paradise; God told Adam and Eve to get out of His presence, out of the Garden. At the same time God promised to work reconciliation. Well now, that there was *distance* between God and the people in that tabernacle recalls man's expulsion from Paradise. That God nevertheless lived amongst His people recalls the promise He gave to prepare redemption.

In the tabernacle of Mt Sinai God was pleased to bridge the distance between Himself and the people by *placing an altar* between His dwelling place in the Holy of Holies and the people outside the door. On this altar sacrifices had to be offered, sacrifices that spelled out how it was possible for sinful people to be reconciled to holy God. By the ordinance of God, the priest received a task at this altar.

We find the details of the priest's work at the altar in Lev 1. Immediately after the tabernacle was set up in Ex 40 and God made His home amongst His people in the Holy of Holies, the Lord gave instruction to Israel about bringing sacrifices. Any Israelite, said God, could bring a burnt offering to the Lord whenever he wished, but God stipulated what ritual had to occur at the tabernacle. Vs 4: the person bringing the offering had to "put his hand on the head of the burnt offering." The purpose of the ritual was to transfer sin from the sinner to the animal. Thereupon, vs 5, the worshiper had to kill the animal he'd brought to the tabernacle. The point here is that God had said in Paradise already that if mankind would sin, man must die. Man did sin, so man must die; certainly he can't appear in God's presence. So sin is transferred to the animal, and the animal killed *in place of the sinner*.

At this point the priest appears on stage. Vs 5: the priest had to collect the blood of the killed animal, carry it through the door into the courtyard of the tabernacle, and sprinkle it around the altar that stood between God and the sinner outside. That is: the priest had bring the blood to the Lord on behalf of the sinner, and so 'tell' the Lord (in a manner of speaking) that Yes, outside was a sinner who deserved to die, but the animal had died in his place, and would the Lord now have mercy on this sinner and let him live, Yes, let him be near to holy God.

There, brothers and sisters, you have the first distinct task of the priest. The priest in Israel had to *stand between* the sinner and God, had to *approach God on behalf of the sinner*, and so had to *intercede* for the sinner. His bringing the blood to the altar constituted a prayer to God on behalf of the sinner imploring God to accept the sinner on grounds of the shed blood.

That being done, the priest had to go back outside to the dead animal, remove its skin and cut up the body into sizeable pieces. Then he had to put wood on the altar, lay the meat on the wood, and burn the lot. The purpose of that is described in vs 9; this is "a sweet aroma to the Lord." That is, here the Lord was sending a signal to the sinner outside that Yes, He was pleased to accept the blood shed on behalf of the animal, so that the sinner might go free from the judgment he deserved, is reconciled to God.

There, then, is the second part of the priest's task. The priest in Israel not only stood between the sinner and God to intercede before God for the sinner; the priest also *stood between God and the sinner* in order to assure the sinner that Yes, the Lord *accepted* the sinner so that the sinner was reconciled to God.

It's obvious, of course, that these two aspects of the priests' work involved more than silently enacting certain rituals at the altar. In the process of carrying out his task, the priest had to *tell the people* why he was doing what he was doing. As such, the priest through deed and word had to *preach the gospel of God's free grace* to the sinners of Israel (cf Lev 10:11; Dt 31:9-13; Mal 2:7). For that's what the tabernacle worship was all about; all those sacrifices *were* the preaching of the gospel. That is: God and man could be reconciled through the shedding of blood, specifically animal blood foreshadowing Jesus' blood, and that glorious result is that man could live in the presence of God, God would adopt sinners to be His children. It's because that gospel was repeatedly proclaimed at the tabernacle that the psalmist could long so much to be in the tabernacle, to go to the house of the Lord (cf Pss 42, 84, 122). That proclamation of the gospel lay at the heart of the priest's work. How much a *privilege* it was, then, to be a priest, and how much a *privilege* it was for Israel to have priests in her midst!

Before I step off this first point about the biblical priest, there's one more thing I need to say. The priests' work was centered around the altar of the tabernacle, so that he took a place between holy God and sinful Israel. The priest's closer proximity to God meant that God required greater holiness from the priest than He did from the people. For example, the priest was not allowed to join in the customary mourning ceremonies when a friend of his died – I read in Lev 21. The reason is that death is the wages of sin, and the priest is engaged in preaching the gospel of *life*. He had to stay away from death, and the point is that he had to stay away from all that smelled of sin. To live that way required *self-sacrifice* on the priest's part; he had to commit his life in a special way to God, had to sacrifice himself to God.

Yet that sacrifice-of-self should not be a difficult thing for the godly priest, simply because of the *riches* involved in his work. To be allowed to proclaim the gospel of redemption to sinners: there was no task more privileged than that!

We move on to our second point:

2. The fulfillment in the only High Priest.

When Jesus of Nazareth was baptized at the beginning of His public ministry, God the Father anointed Him with the Holy Spirit so that Jesus might also be priest. So the author of the letter to the Hebrews can say of Jesus that God appointed Him to the office of High Priest (Heb 5:5f,10; 7:17).

As Priest, Jesus –like the priest of the Old Testament- received from God a place between holy God and His sinful people. God sent Him to earth to redeem His people from their sins (Mt 1:21). Jesus did that, though, not by standing at the altar to sprinkle before God the blood of calves and goats that the people might bring. The New Testament speaks of Jesus as "the Lamb of God", and the point is that Jesus is Himself the animal that is sacrificed. But Jesus is more than the sacrificed animal; Jesus is also *the officiating priest* at the sacrifice of Himself. That's what the Scriptures mean when they say that "He offered up Himself" (Heb 7:27). He gave Himself as a sacrifice, and that's *priestly* work. Here's the perfect fulfillment of the self-sacrifice of the Old Testament priests.

The priest of the Old Testament had to enter the courts of God with the blood of the animal killed outside, and sprinkle that blood around the altar. Jesus did the same, though the blood He carried with Him was not the blood of an animal, but His own blood. Hebrews 9: "not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all" (vs 12), and that Most Holy Place is the presence of God. He came with His own blood, and so fulfilled all the Old Testament shedding of blood. Sinners came by the thousands to the tabernacle in the Old Testament, and each deserved to die on account of his sins. Each came with an animal, laid his hand on the animal to transfer sin to the animal, and then killed the animal as a substitute for himself – with the blood of the animal sprinkled

around the altar as a prayer that God will please accept the death of the animal in place of the death of the sinner. But the blood of animals can never pay for sin or satisfy the justice of God (Lord's Day 5), and that's why one day a righteous and holy man had to come to shed his blood to pay for sin. Well, there was Christ's work as priest. He officiated at the sacrifice, not of an animal, but of *Himself*, and then He presented to God not the blood of an animal but *His own blood*. In so doing Jesus Christ appeared before God *on behalf of* sinners, and implored the Father to forgive the sins of all those whom the Father had given to Him. 'Those sinners,' Jesus would say to God, 'are sinners, O Yes. *But I shed My blood on their behalf!* So, Father, do not look at their sins, do not treat them according to what they deserve, show them You are their Father and they Your children for My sake!' You see, beloved, here's Jesus' work as Intercessor!

And Yes, this priestly work of our Lord Jesus Christ continues on and on. True, one time only He officiated at the altar, when He sacrificed Himself to God on Calvary to pay for sin. One time only He appeared before God with His only blood, when He cried out on the cross that all was finished (Jn 19:30). But the work of intercession begun there continues through the generations and centuries. Heb 7: "He always lives to make intercession." That's why John can write that "if anyone sins" –and we all do!- "we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (I Jn 2:1). And Paul adds that Christ "is even at the right hand of God, [and there] makes intercession for us" (Rom 8:34).

Here, beloved, is enormous encouragement for us in the midst of our sins, for always we can go to God in prayer, and be assured that sins confessed are sins forgiven; Christ our advocate pleads before the Father on our behalf! There's His priestly work, continuing today, rooted in priestly work done long ago on Calvary. What glorious privilege for us to have in Christ such a High Priest!

We move on to our third point:

3. The mandate of the modern priest.

From the texts I quoted at the beginning of the sermon it's clear that the saints of the New Testament dispensation are all priests, whether we be older or younger, man or woman, sick or healthy. The time has come to answer that question of the beginning: in what way are we priests? What does it mean to be a priest?

The biblical priest, we learned, had a role to play *between* the people and God. That is, the biblical priest took the blood of the dead animal and sprinkled it around the altar – and in so doing approached God on behalf of the sinner with the request that God accept the sinner for the sake of the coming Savior. For our part, though we are priests today, we understand that we do not have to come with blood before God on someone else's behalf, for Jesus Christ has put an end to the shedding of blood with His priestly work on the cross. Yet there is, brothers and sisters, an element from this work of the Old Testament priest that remains for us today. Through the blood he brought before God, the priest of the Old Testament *interceded* for the other. In fulfillment of this function of the Old Testament priest, Jesus Christ as Priest continues today to do the same. We, beloved, *have the same mandate*. Paul tells Timothy that "supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks" is to be made "for all men," particularly for those in authority over us (I Tim 2:1f). Notice: here is instruction to *intercede* for others, to plead with God on behalf of the other. Our Lord Jesus Christ gives us the same instruction in the Lord's Prayer. He did not tell us to address God as "*my* Father," nor to ask God to "*give me* this day *my* daily bread, and forgive *my* sins...." Rather, Jesus taught us to pray for each other; "*Our* Father," we are to say, "*give us* this day *our* daily bread, and forgive *our* sins...." God has established His covenant of grace not with me alone, but with many, all of who are my brothers and sisters in Christ, washed with His blood and sealed with His Holy Spirit. In my prayers to God the Lord would not have me pray about me alone (though there is certainly place for that); God would have us remember each other before God's throne of grace, plead with God on each other's behalf.

So, brothers and sisters: when was the last time you in your personal prayers mentioned before God's throne of grace the straying of the congregation? When was the last time you mentioned the sick? Or the teachers at school? No, I don't mean a general prayer now, as in, 'Be with the sick,' or, 'Be with the schools.' The priest of the Old Testament entered the courts of God with the blood of the *individual's* sacrifice, and Jesus in heaven intercedes for us *individually*. As priests we have a similar role to pray for each other, and let us not hesitate to mention each other *by name* and *by need* before the throne of God's grace. Let the fathers in the family prayers set an example for their

children how to intercede before God for the needs of that straying brother and that ailing sister.

But there is more to our task as priests, congregation, something more profound, more out-in-the-open than our personal prayers. No, we're not called upon to sacrifice at an altar of stone as the Old Testament priest was. Yet make sacrifices we are certainly to do. The Old Testament priest foreshadowed that role we have by keeping his distance from anything that smelled of death. Keeping this distance involved self-denial, self-sacrifice, especially if the deceased person was a close friend. Jesus Christ displayed this element of priestly self-denial perfectly when He laid down His life for His people. This is the instruction that very much remains for the priest of the New Testament dispensation. Peter writes that God has made us "a holy priesthood," and then explains our task as priests like this; he says that God would have us "to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (I Peter 2:5). Paul picks up the same theme in his letter to the Romans, when he beseeches his readers to "present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God" (Rom 12:1).

Just how the Lord would have His people offer the sacrifice of their bodies is also spelled out in Scripture. When Peter says that we are priests and so need to "offer up spiritual sacrifices," he fleshes that out with the instruction to "abstain from fleshly lusts" (vs 11). The "fleshly lusts" which he would have the believers resist is particularly the urge to know best yourself. After his instruction to "abstain from fleshly lusts" Peter insists that his readers are to "submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake" – be it to the civil authorities or to the masters the Christian slaves had or even to the husband. That can involve much self-denial, self-sacrifice, especially when the king is a Nero or the master is brutal or the husband insensitive. The temptation is then so great to resist, to rebel, to take justice in your own hands, and that's called "fleshly lusts". But here's the priestly task God has given to His people: God would have His own deny themselves, sacrifice their own feelings and urges, in order to obey God's commands.

The apostle Paul gives a similar instruction in Romans 12. He tells his readers to "present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God," and then proceeds to flesh that out. The Christians of Rome are not to "be conformed to this world," but are to be "transformed by the renewing of your mind." That is, they're not to be like people of the world who follow the dictates of their sinful hearts; they're rather to deny themselves, be changed, be transformed through the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. That means specifically that love for the other is to be genuine, even though you find lots of fault with the person to whom you show love (vs 9). It means that the Christian is to "abhor what is evil," even though the Christian's flesh continues to be attracted to the evil (vs 9). It means the Christian shows kind affection to the brother, moving aside for the sake of the brother – even though that's the last thing human nature wants to do (vs 10f). It means one is patient in tribulation, not throwing in the towel when the going gets rough (vs 12). Sacrificing oneself means that you "bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse" (vs 14). It means one doesn't insist on one's own opinion (vs 16), and it means that one does not take justice in one's own hand (vs 17ff). Instead, one denies the self, sacrifices the self to God in the conviction that the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ cares perfectly for His children, in His wise way.

Let me be clear, beloved. The Lord has ordained us to be priests, and so would have us sacrifice ourselves to Him, deny our own will to do His will in every circumstance of life. In the Old Testament the priest had to engage in sacrifices in order to work atonement between God and the sinner. The sacrifices we need to bring have nothing to do with working atonement between God and us, for our only High Priest has completed that work on the cross, reconciled us to God. But now that God has become our Father, the Lord would have us in thankfulness to entrust ourselves so completely into His care that we never follow our own heads, do what is right in our own eyes, but instead obey His will for us. That is the self-sacrifice He wants. It's a sacrifice that reflects thankfulness, a sacrifice that shows that we know ourselves completely safe with the God who has become our Father – no matter what He in wisdom puts on our path. It's a sacrifice that requires so much self-denial, for our sinful hearts would have us believe that *our* way is the best way. But that's how we are priests in this society; we present ourselves a living sacrifice of thankfulness to God.

Can we be such priests? Certainly, beloved, we can! For when the Lord made us share with Christ in His anointing, He did not pour out His Spirit in small measure! If the Holy Spirit of holy God has made His home in our hearts, He will give us the strength to deny ourselves and make the sacrifice God desires of us. With the task God gives comes the strength to do it – to His greater glory! Amen.



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Sermon on Lord's Day 12c of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 1 September 2002.

"GOD MADE US KINGS SO THAT WE MIGHT SERVE."

Text:

Lord's Day 12 Q&A 31c, 32c

Q. Why is He called Christ, that is, Anointed?

A. Because He has been ordained by God the Father, and anointed with the Holy Spirit,[1] to be our chief Prophet and Teacher,[2] who has fully revealed to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption;[3] our only High Priest,[4] who by the one sacrifice of His body has redeemed us,[5] and who continually intercedes for us before the Father;[6] **and our eternal King,[7] who governs us by His Word and Spirit, and who defends and preserves us in the redemption obtained for us.**[8]

[1] Ps. 45:7 (Heb. 1:9); Is. 61:1 (Luke 4:18; Luke 3:21, 22. [2] Deut. 18:15 (Acts 3:22). [3] John 1:18; 15:15. [4] Ps. 110:4 (Heb. 7:17). [5] Heb. 9:12; 10:11-14. [6] Rom. 8:34; Heb. 9:24; I John 2:1. [7] Zach. 9:9 (Matt. 21:5); Luke 1:33. [8] Matt. 28:18-20; John 10:28; Rev. 12:10, 11.

Q. Why are you called a Christian?

A. Because I am a member of Christ by faith[1] **and thus share in His anointing,**[2] so that I may as prophet confess His Name,[3] as priest present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him,[4] **and as king fight with a free and good conscience against sin and the devil in this life,**[5] **and hereafter reign with Him eternally over all creatures.**[6]

[1] I Cor. 12:12-27. [2] Joel 2:28 (Acts 2:17); I John 2:27. [3] Matt. 10:32; Rom 10:9, 10; Heb. 13:15. [4] Rom. 12:1; I Pet. 2:5, 9. [5] Gal. 5:16, 17; Eph. 6:11; I Tim. 1:18, 19. [6] Matt. 25:34; II Tim. 2:12.

Scripture Reading:

Deuteronomy 17:14-20

Matthew 20:20-28

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 72:1,2

Hymn 19:1,2,6

Psalm 21:1,4

Psalm 8:1,4,5

Psalm 110:1,2,3

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Story books abound of the pauper who became a prince and the pretty peasant girl who married the king. The theme sparks the imagination; everybody is somehow attracted to the notion of being royalty, enjoying the perks and privileges of being on top of the ladder. In real life, so few make it.

We confess in Lord's Day 12 that the Christian, by virtue of sharing Christ's anointing, is a king. The concept is fully Biblical. Peter says that the saints of God are "a royal priesthood" (I Peter 2:9) - royalty! John adds that the Lord Jesus Christ "has made us kings and priests to His God and Father" (Rev 1:6). That couldn't be clearer, beloved; He "made us kings." That's our God-given identity today.

But what, brothers and sisters, does this identity mean for real life? How does our identity as kings (and queens) affect our daily living? This is the material we need to address today.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

GOD MADE US KINGS SO THAT WE MIGHT SERVE.

1. The task of the biblical king.
2. The fulfillment in the eternal King.
3. The mandate of the modern king.

1. The task of the biblical king.

As we seek to understand the Lord's will for us as kings in our modern society, we shall need first to come to grips with the Lord's meaning of the word 'king'.

It pleases the Lord God from heaven above to govern affairs on the earth beneath. In His governing of things amongst men, it pleases Him in His wisdom to use authorities, governments, kings. That is: God ordains certain persons to be tools in His hands through whom He is pleased to govern others. These persons, then, receive *authority over* those under them. But these authorities themselves are not the top of the pile. They are themselves *under authority*, ie, they are *under God*. That, in turn, determines the way they are to exercise their authority over those under them.

In the world of Israel's day, the position that most epitomized the notion of authority was 'kingship'. According to the passage we read from Dt 17, it was OK to God if Israel should desire a king, a man "over" the people (vs 14). God added straightaway, though, particular restrictions for any king in Israel. Said God: this king may "not multiply horses for himself", nor may he "multiply wives for himself", "nor shall he greatly multiply silver and gold for himself" (vs 16f). Were a king to multiply horses for himself, he'd have the capacity to give expression to his ego and so to triumph over other nations and make himself emperor of a large kingdom, and God said No to that. If he'd multiply wives for himself, he'd be acting as Pharaoh did when Abram and Sarai came to Egypt, bullying women away from others for personal satisfaction and reputation – and so feeding his own ego. Greatly multiplying silver and gold again was not on, because that revealed a self-centered spirit. You see, beloved, that's the common denominator in it all; the king in Israel was *not to be selfish*, not to be *egocentric*. That's to say: God did not give him his position for his own benefit (so that he could demand of the people under him that they stroke his ego); instead, God gave him his position so that he might be a fitting tool in God's hands to rule the people on God's behalf. So there was no place for selfishness; there was place only for *service*. That is the critical word in understanding the biblical notion of the king: *service!* It is service first to God, and in serving God it is service also to the people of his realm.

This notion goes very much against the popular notion of what a king is. We hear the term 'king', and our thoughts go to palaces and servants and comforts and riches. And together with palaces and servants and comforts our thoughts go to giving instructions, getting things done *for* you, being pampered. Our thoughts go to people giving you homage, people looking up to you, people kowtowing to your wishes. We confess in our Lord's Day that we are 'kings', and it's this sort of thing that have in mind. But that's distinctly not the picture of Dt 17.

In fact, our Lord Jesus Christ underscores the instruction of Dt 17 in the passage we read from Mt 20. The mother of the sons of Zebedee approached Jesus with a request for her two sons. She knew Jesus would bring in the kingdom of heaven, knew that in this kingdom Jesus would be the King, on top of the pile. But wouldn't it be nice if her sons could have the second to top positions! Please, Lord, "one at Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom" (vs 21).... The one Prime Minister, please, and the other Treasurer.... Top of the pile.... How human, and how worldly....

Of interest to our point today is the reaction of the other disciples. Vs 24: "when the ten heard it, they were greatly displeased with the two brothers." That the two tried to get those top positions before the others could put their hats in the ring, heh, that wasn't fair! And we say: the ten are right. For we all somehow want that top position. To have

authority, to call the cards, to be served: it sits right with all of us!

Listen, then, beloved, to Jesus' response. Vs 25:

"But Jesus called them to Himself and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet *it shall not be so among you*; but whoever desires to become great among you, *let him be your servant*. And whoever desires to be first among you, *let him be your slave....*'"

You see, congregation: here's the same theme as God impressed upon Israel in Dt 17. The attitude the king has to cultivate within himself is not: how can I compel others to serve me? The attitude he needs to develop in himself is rather: *how can I serve others?*

Let's go back for a minute to Dt 17. After God forbade that a king in Israel should multiply horses and wives and riches for himself, the Lord gave this instruction:

"Also it shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book, from the one before the priests, the Levites. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life..." (vss 18f).

What, do you think, is meant by "this law" that the young king had to copy into a book? That phrase, congregation, refers to the whole word of God as it existed at the time. That's what a new king had to do: write out for himself a personal copy of the whole word of God. Then he had to read it, day by day. Why? Said God:

"that he may learn to fear the Lord his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted above his brethren, that he may not turn aside from the commandment to the right hand or to the left, and that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he and his children in the midst of Israel" (vss 19f).

You see: the king in Israel did not receive his throne for his own benefit, but God gave him that throne so that the king might be the means God was pleased to use to care for His people. So the king had the *responsibility* to govern *under God*, to govern the people *in the way God would govern them*. That's why he had to be busy with the Word of God day by day; it was through the Word that God had revealed *who* He was. And who was He? What did the Word of God reveal about God and God's approach to His people? Certainly, it contained commands to the people about how they were to serve their God, yes. But these commands came *after* God had first shown His people what He in mercy did for them! That is, the commands were instruction to a sinful people how they were to show their thankfulness to God for the redemption He in mercy had given to them. And how had God given redemption? *By emptying Himself for the sake of the people!!* The sacrifices of Leviticus proclaimed the gospel of the forgiveness of sins, a gospel possible only because God would *give* His only Son to crush the seed of the serpent. How God emptied Himself for the good of the unworthy: that's what the king of Israel had to learn daily by constant study of the Bible, and that's the attitude he had communicate to the people by the way he carried out his office. He was there not to *be served*, but to *serve*.

That is why a king like David could receive compliments from the Lord. Certainly, he was a sinful man, and he failed miserably to be the perfect king-under-God that God wanted him to be. But he repented of his attempt to multiply wives for himself, and he returned to that spirit of *service*, of self-denial in carrying out his office. Solomon did the same, in the first part of his reign. But toward the end he gave away God's instruction to the king, and followed the dictates of his sinful heart – with all the misery that followed. Horses, wives, riches: he multiplied all for his own gratification, and the result was that the Lord took the kingdom from him.... For God's definition of a king is not a man who demands to be served, but rather a *man who serves*.

We come to our second point:

2. The fulfillment in the eternal King.

Our Lord Jesus Christ was ordained by God the Father and anointed by the Holy Spirit to be our eternal king. And see:

He was the perfect example of the king God described in Dt 17.

Directly after Jesus was anointed to the office of king, the Holy Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness "to the tempted by the devil" (Mt 4:1). The third of Satan's temptations zeroed in specifically on Christ's office as king. "The devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, 'All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me'" (vss 8f). That is: 'You were anointed to be king, isn't it? But look, God hasn't given you a kingdom! See now, I'll give you all of this if you but bow the knee to me.' And indeed, beloved, Jesus would have become king over all, king of kings – at the right hand of *Satan*, had he bowed the knee to the devil. But you and I would have received no salvation, would not be redeemed from Satan's power, would not be made children of God! So Jesus responded to Satan's hellish offer with His word of command, "Away with you, Satan!" You see, Jesus obeyed the instruction of Dt 17, He did not seek to *be served*, did not seek to be king *to be on top of the pile*; He rather sought *to serve*, sought to *empty Himself for the benefit of others*. That's an attitude totally foreign to Satan, but fully characteristic of the Lord God.

In the course of His public ministry the Lord Jesus Christ was once asleep in His disciples' boat when a great storm arose. He spoke one word, "Wind, be still," and there was a great calm (Mk 4:40ff). His disciples were amazed; "who is this that even wind and sea obey Him!" Such was His kingly power; top of the pile indeed! Shortly thereafter He came to the land of the Gadarenes (Mk 5), and a demonic met him from the tombs. Jesus cast the demons out of the man, sent them into the pigs.... The demons protested, didn't want to go, but such was Jesus' kingly authority that they had no option.... He came across dead people and raised them, came across sick people and healed them, came across hungry people and fed them, and so on. Miracle after miracle showed the infinite power this King had, with authority over every aspect of God's creation – man and beast, wind and sea, devil and demon alike. *But where*, brothers and sisters, *where was Jesus' palace?* And where were His servants who did His bidding?? "Foxes have holes," Jesus told His disciples, "and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Mt 8:20). That is: though Jesus had so much power, was king over all, *He did not use His kingship for His own benefit!* Here He obeyed perfectly the command of God in Dt 17. King He was, and the evidence was there for the taking, but in no way did Jesus use His position *for Himself*. As Jesus said it in Mt 20: "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (vs 28). So the King "laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself," knelt before the disciples and "began to wash the disciples' feet" (Jn 13:4f). Behold the Scriptural picture of a king.

Our Lord Jesus Christ presented the same picture when Judas and the chief priests came to arrest Him. Peter pulled out a sword to fight for His master, and his point was that Jesus – King as He was! – should follow that example and fight also. But Jesus' reply was this: "do you think that I cannot now pray to My Father, and He will provide Me with more than twelve legions of angels?" (Mt 26:53). The point: 'I have infinite angels at My disposal. One word from Me, and the chief priests are no more.' But you see, beloved, *that was not the spirit of Dt 17!* So Jesus the King, in obedience to God's command for kings, looked not to His own advantage but *emptied Himself for the good of His subjects*. He let Himself be arrested, molested, crucified, killed – though it was all injustice to the extreme. The justice side of it He left to God, while He Himself laid down His life *in order to benefit those over whom He was king*.

Pilate hung a sign over the crucified Jesus: "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews." The human eye saw only that this was a most disgusting joke; surely, He was anything but a king! But the believer knows that precisely on the cross Jesus was King. He emptied Himself to serve – how kingly!! And He fought, fought against sin and Satan, *and won* – how kingly! He satisfied the justice of God against our sins, and so could majestically arise from the grave on the third day – king over death itself! Forty days later He rode the clouds of God into heaven, and there received from God a throne at His right hand – King over all the kings of the world! From there He rules even today over man and beast; nothing on this earth is outside His control. *Yet even now this King does not govern in order to be served!* Well does the Catechism say it: from heaven on high our eternal King today "governs us by His word and Spirit, and ... defends and preserves us in the redemption [He] obtained for us." There's the purpose of His reigning today: to defend and preserve His church! That is: from heaven *He serves* His people; from heaven He does not *milk* His people for all they're worth, but He abundantly *provides* for His people.

From this material, brothers and sisters, it becomes clear to us what, according to the Bible, a *king* is. We learned before that the Lord has anointed us also to be kings. What, now, does all this mean for our office as kings? That's our

third point:

3. *The mandate of the modern king.*

This much is clear straightaway: God has not anointed us to an office where our sinful selfishness is allowed free reign! Kings we are, yes, and so we are to rule. But it's to be a ruling *geared to serving the other*.

When the Lord decided to make man, He described the function He would give to mankind. Said God: "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth" (Gen 1:26). Here is the kingly position God has given to man from the beginning; we were created to have dominion over all creation, to rule over all creation, to be kings and queens. When the Holy Spirit says in the New Testament that we are today kings, the point is that we rule over all God's handiwork. Snails and snakes, fish and fowl, plants and planets: all are put under our feet, God gives us dominion over all.

From this reality flows our cultural mandate. That is, exactly because God made us kings over all creation are we to develop this creation, dig out of the ground the minerals God has put there, explore the plants to know what potentials the Lord has put in them (be it for food or for medicine, etc), learn how to farm the ocean to supply food for mankind, etc. But this kingly position God has given over creation does not mean that we are allowed to *exploit* the creation. Where Christians in the past –or even today- use their power over animals or plants to exploit these animals or plants, these Christians transgress the will of God caught in our function as kings. For kings, remember, *serve*; kings, according to the Bible, are not to be self-centered.

This Biblical teaching about our kingship has a direct bearing on today's discussion about the effects of industrialization on the environment. Some of the negative effect of industrialization was due to ignorance (think of salination of the soils); people just didn't know what the effect of removing too many trees might be. Others of the negative effects were due to sloppiness or greed. Either way, we remain kings and therefore are to be sensitive to what we do with God's world. We hear sounds to the effect that our environment cannot continue to sustain the standard of living we demand from it in our prosperous western world. If that's indeed the case, congregation, our office as kings means that we lower our standard of living, deny ourselves in order to take good care of the environment God has entrusted to us. For *kings serve*.

God makes us kings in Christ. That means, brothers and sisters, that we exercise dominion first of all over ourselves. How, though, can we lose control over ourselves? One example is by losing our temper. God has made us kings, we're to have dominion over ourselves, and so giving up our self-control through rage is not according to God's will. This is the point of the psalmist: "be angry, but do not sin" (Ps 4:4).

We can lose control over ourselves also through abuse of alcohol or drugs. That may feel good, and we might see benefits for ourselves (at least for the short term), but the fact that God has made us kings over creation means that we need to rule over our urge for a fix, and not let the urge rule over us. So say it differently, we need to rule over the bottle, and not permit the bottle to rule over us. This point, of course, is valid for every urge. We are kings, and so it is the Lord's will that we control our urge to binge, and not let our urge to eat control us. We are kings, and so it is the Lord's will that we control our sex-drive, and not let that drive control us.

The same concept is true in our relation with other people. Some of us have an obvious position of authority over others, be it as parents in the family, as teachers in the school, as office-bearers in the church, as managers at work, etc. Others of us have positions of authority over others in a less obvious manner. I think of the influence a strong personality can have in one's peer group at school or at work. I think too of the influence an older sibling can have over younger siblings at home. It is so natural to use that position of authority or influence in order to serve the self, be it in getting another person to do what you want, or even imposing your line of thought over the other. Either way, this position of authority and influence is used to serve the self, to promote your own way. And that's not right, neither for parents over the children at home nor for teachers over the students at school nor for office-bearers over the congregation nor for strong personalities over weaker personalities. That's being king in the worldly sense. According to God's definition of kingship, we are to use the positions God entrusts to us –be it of authority or of influence- in order *to serve* those under us. To fulfill our office as kings in the world today, the Lord would have us to *empty*

ourselves for the benefit of the other.

How, concretely, shall we empty ourselves to benefit the other? How shall we rule well in our modern world – be it at home or at school or in church or at work? The instruction the Lord gave to Israel’s kings remains valid for us today too: be busy with the Scriptures! No, we need not write out a copy of the Bible, simply because we all have copies. But study the Scriptures we must, so that we might keep learning how our God emptied Himself for the benefit of His people, how He time and again in the Old Testament contained His wrath, sent His prophets again and again, how in the fullness of time He sent His only Son from the glories of heaven to the humiliation of the cross for the redemption of the unworthy, how He poured out His Holy Spirit to enable His broken and sinful children to be kings nevertheless, etc, etc. Here is God’s *Handbook for Kings* for our modern times, and so it’s this volume we need to continue to master.

Can we be kings in this modern age? Granted, beloved, it’s always been difficult, difficult because "the devil, the world, and our own flesh do not cease to attack us." So we need to fight, always to fight against sin and the devil, and that’s not so easy. But our ascended King, brothers and sisters, has poured out His Holy Spirit so that we might be anointed, and that’s to say that with the office comes the ability to carry out the office! If God calls us to be kings – and He does!- He also gives the strength!! That’s His promise, a promise we need to work with as we seek to exercise *God-centered* dominion over ourselves, our homes, those under us at work, and yes, over creation itself. God has ordained us, so it’s for us to *believe* that we’ve been anointed to the office, to *believe* that God gives us strength to be kings. And therefore *to be* what God *made us to be*. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 20 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 24 November 2002.

" GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT HELPS US TO SURVIVE SATAN'S HATRED."

Text:

Lord's Day 20

53. Q. What do you believe concerning the Holy Spirit?

A. First, He is, together with the Father and the Son, true and eternal God.[1] Second, He is also given to me,[2] to make me by true faith share in Christ and all His benefits,[3] to comfort me,[4] and to remain with me forever.[5]
[1] Gen. 1:1, 2; Matt. 28:19; Acts 5:3, 4; I Cor. 3:16. [2] I Cor. 6:19; II Cor. 1:21, 22; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 1:13. [3] Gal. 3:14; I Pet. 1:2. [4] John 15:26; Acts 9:31. [5] John 14:16, 17; I Pet. 4:14.

Scripture Reading:

John 15:18-16:11

Acts 7:51-8:4

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Hymn 3:1,2,3

Psalm 51:4

Hymn 36:3

Psalm 25:2,7

Hymn 41:1,2,3,4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We have in the last weeks been speaking about the ascension of our Lord into heaven, and the effects of that ascension upon us today. Lord's Day 18: Christ's ascension means that He intercedes before the Father, acts as lawyer in heaven on our behalf, so that we can pray openly and boldly. Lord's Day 19: Christ's ascension means that He rules all the world for the sake of the church – and so we today need not be alarmed at the developments of world history, for our Savior has all things firmly in His control. We understand: it's indeed to our advantage that Christ ascended into heaven.

As it is, brothers and sisters, Christ's ascension into heaven has further implications for us. Christ's ascension means – says Rev 12- that Satan has been cast out of heaven, and now stalks the earth, hunting down the children of God. In the words of that chapter: "woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time." It's the material of Jn 15: "If the world hates you, you know that it hated Me before it hated you" (vs 18). And vs 20: "if they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you." That's life today, brothers and sisters: live in a world with devils filled, each threatening to undo us, and this is a direct consequence –says Rev 12- of Jesus' ascension into heaven.

What, now, does our Lord Jesus Christ do about this state-of-affairs? Does He from heaven on high leave us to fight the devil and his army on our own? The answer, of course, is No. Jn 15: Jesus describes the hatred His people will experience in the course of history, and then adds the words of vs 26: "But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth...." You see: the Holy Spirit is the gift the ascended Christ has sent to earth to strengthen His people in the face of Satan's hatred (cf Lord's Day 19.51). As we live our lives in this world of

devilish hatred, we do well to understand what God has revealed about the Holy Spirit.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT HELPS US TO SURVIVE SATAN'S HATRED.

1. The identity of the Holy Spirit.
2. The work of the Holy Spirit.

1. The Identity of the Holy Spirit.

I ask your attention first for the identity of the Holy Spirit, and do so on purpose. Allow me a comparison to make my point. If your Datsun 1200 is bogged in 10 cm of sand, you'll have to cast about for help. So too: if your cement truck, fully loaded, is bogged in the mud of a construction site, you also need to look for help. But we understand: you need a different sort of tow truck to free your cement truck than you need to free your Datsun. The size of your problem dictates the size of your answer.

The ascended Christ knew that the Satan He cast out of heaven was very angry at the church and the people of God, would hate His church and His children with hellish hatred, and so would persecute cruelly. The ascended Christ knew also that His redeemed people remained weak, could offer no real resistance to that rebel of rebels. In a word: the problem for God's people on earth was *enormous*. Town's smallest tow-truck might suffice to pull your Datsun out of the sand, but to free your cement truck you need something significantly bigger. So too here. The rage of the devil requires no dinky-toy help; the rage of the devil requires –by God's judgment- the presence of none less than *the Holy Spirit* on this earth.

Who is the Holy Spirit? Says the church in Lord's Day 20: "First, He is, together with the Father and the Son, true and eternal God." "True and eternal God": really?? Is the rage of the devil so great that we need "true and eternal God" in our midst to cope with this rage?!

Yes, brothers and sisters, that is the revelation of Holy Scripture. Christ after His ascension sent to earth none less than one who is "true and eternal God" "with the Father and the Son"! Consider the proof-texts mentioned in our Lord's Day. Gen 1:1,2:

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters."

The point of the proof-text is to show that the Spirit was involved in creating the world. Yet only God can create; no creature can fashion the world. That is: the Spirit is true God, Creator. Mt 28:19:

"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are mentioned here on a level; indeed, a baptizing in the name of the Father and the Son is to include also the Holy Spirit. That is: whatever is to be said here of the Father and the Son is to be said also of the Holy Spirit. As the one is God, so the other is God. So too Acts 5:3,4:

"But Peter said, 'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? ... You have not lied to men but to God.'"

Here Peter simply calls the Holy Spirit 'God'.

Who is the Spirit our exalted Savior sent to earth? Let it be fixed in our minds, beloved: the Holy Spirit is not a power, not an 'it'; the Holy Spirit is a Person, true God, "He". From eternity He has been one God with the Father and the Son, in no way less than the Father and the Son. In the words of Art 11 of the *Belgic Confession*: "of one and the same

essence, majesty, and glory with the Father and the Son."

But see: when Christ ascended into heaven He directly sent this Third Person of the holy Trinity *out of heaven again*, directly poured out His Holy Spirit upon the earth – Pentecost. Why He did so? The reason given in Jn 15 is distinctly the *hatred* God's children would experience in the world! The rebels in Christ's kingdom would not be neutral to the obedient citizens of that kingdom, would instead be filled with hatred against the obedient citizens and persecute them. So Jesus promised His disciples a "Helper", the Holy Spirit – true and eternal God.

The point, beloved, is significant, for it highlights the depths of our problem. By the judgment of the ascended Christ we were not a little-bit-stuck (so that a small tow truck would suffice); given the hatred and the wrath of the devil and his hosts, we needed more than an angel, more than a host of angels, we needed *none less than the Holy Spirit – true and eternal God!*

That's highly instructive for us. In our tolerant Australian society we don't experience much true hatred from the rebels against the church of God. But the Lord, congregation, tells us that that hatred is there nevertheless, and so intense that we need none less than the Holy Spirit to survive the attacks of the devil and the world. So: let us not be lulled into a false sense of being accepted in our society. Satan is so crafty as to present himself as tolerant of faithful Christians, but the Lord tells us he is not tolerant at all. It is for us to bear in mind that Christ's kingdom –this world- comprises obedient citizens (who acknowledge Christ's kingship) and disobedient citizens (who do not acknowledge that kingship), believers and unbelievers, loyalists and rebels. And between these two groups *God* has placed enmity, hatred, an antithesis. Let none of us think that the world is a friendly place, that here we can somehow be at home. God says we need none less than the Holy Spirit –true and eternal God- in order to survive! Shall we disagree with God and smudge the difference between rebels and loyalists?? God forbid!

At the same time we recognize that we have here a source of very much comfort. That our ascended Savior would send us no less a Helper than the Holy Spirit Himself: how encouraging for God's people in the face of Satan's attacks! We need not fear the evil one, for with us is more than with them. Indeed, what love the Lord has shown in giving so much to preserve His own from the evil one. How marvelous, Lord, are Your works and how wonderful Your grace! We thank You that the help You give is so *great!*

We come to our second point:

2. *The Work of the Holy Spirit.*

The ascended Lord, then, has sent His Holy Spirit –true God- to earth to help the church in the face of Satan's rage. How, now, does the Holy Spirit help us? Does He, for example, stand *between* the rebels and God's people, and so shield us from the rebels' attacks? Or does He stand *beside* us to help us resist the devil?

Both answers, brothers and sisters, are wrong. The Lord Jesus Christ has sent His Spirit not to stand *between* the rebels and us, nor to fight *beside* us in the battles of faith; the Lord has sent His Spirit instead to *dwell within* us. I think of that passage of Scripture where the apostle says that God's people are temples of the Holy Spirit and that the Spirit is "in you" (1 Cor 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor 6:16). It's a thought beyond comprehension, but true nevertheless: true and eternal God, the Holy Spirit, has made His home in us, dwells in us! God the Son ascended into heaven, but God the Holy Spirit descended from heaven; God the Son is busy in heaven for our benefit, but God the Holy Spirit lives in our hearts for our benefit! This is the gospel of Immanuel, God-with-us: true and eternal God dwells in human hearts – Oh, the depths of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! To be temples of the Holy Spirit: what in all the world equals that in privilege!!

That's the more so when we consider what the Holy Spirit does in those whom He indwells. These persons in whom He dwells were once all rebels, for all of us had fallen into sin – and so were all by nature dead in sin, subject to God's wrath, on Satan's side. But the Father had chosen certain persons to salvation in Jesus Christ, and on the cross of Calvary the Son of God paid for the sins of these people so that God saw these sinners as righteous before Him. These are the ones for whom the Son intercedes before the Father. And *these* are the ones in whom the Spirit makes His home. That is: all those whom the Father has given the Son, all those for whom the Son died, are also indwelt by the Spirit (cf Rom 8:9ff). And these people He *changes*, He makes them spiritually alive, works faith in their hearts,

regenerates. As the Spirit was involved in creating the world in the beginning, so the Spirit is involved in recreating the people of God today. The people of God: while they were still dead in sin, still rebels, they produced works of the flesh – "adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like." But now that the Spirit lives in their hearts, they are *changed*, renewed so that they produce "the fruit of the Spirit": "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal 5:19ff).

The work of the Spirit goes beyond changing hearts, making spiritually dead people alive. The Spirit also makes a point of directing our attention all the time to Jesus Christ and His work. He's like the floodlight that lights up a building. A floodlight doesn't draw attention to itself, but wants passersby to notice the building upon which the floodlight shines. The Holy Spirit does not draw attention to Himself, does not ask us to question whether we have the Holy Spirit; rather, the Holy Spirit wants us to look at the Christ and to believe in Him. He has changed us, He has renewed us so that through the eye of faith we can *see* Christ for who He is: crucified to pay for my sins so that now the Father now accepts me as righteous before God for Jesus' sake. More, the Spirit makes us see Christ in His intercessory work in heaven, and in His governing work too – always busy for the benefit of the church, myself included. Always the Spirit directs us *to Christ*, and so the child of God learns to keep looking to Christ, and Christ alone. For *there* is his salvation and his victory.

Then it's true: Satan keeps on attacking; he and the rest of the rebels hate God's people with hellish passion. But what does the child of God do? Look at all the rebels, all the enemies, and become afraid? Let us be honest: that is human nature. We look at the rebels on the bus, at work, we count noses, and we feel out-numbered, and so we pull our heads in, and look for ways to be less conspicuous as loyal citizens of Christ's kingdom. We say: maybe if we don't speak the gospel so clearly they won't notice us, and they won't tease us. We say: maybe if we act just a little bit like the rebels, we won't stick out as loyalists and they won't persecute us. Sure, we'll still go to church, and we'll read the Bible at home, and we'll send our children to God-centered schools..., but we can't be *too* different..., because then we draw attention to ourselves....

But the Holy Spirit, brothers and sisters, would focus our attention onto Christ. That's to say: He would have us see Christ triumphant in His work on the cross, so that sin is paid for and Satan bound. Then Satan may attack, and the rebels tormenting us may be many, but in the strength of the Spirit the child of God looks not at all those rebels –that's too unsettling- but looks instead at the Lord Jesus Christ. So the child of God is encouraged to believe that there are more on our side than on the other side, yes, the victory is ours in Christ. You see: that's how the Holy Spirit helps us in the struggles against the rebels. He helps us not be shielding us from the rebels, nor by fighting for us, but He helps us by directing our attention to Christ and His victory. We're made to look to Christ, and so made to believe in Him, yes, to work with the faith the Holy Spirit has put in our hearts. We look to Christ, and so are reminded that for His sake we are children of God and therefore safe in the Father's hands – no matter how much Satan and his hosts attack; none can pluck us from the Father's hand. We look to Christ, and so are reminded that our sins are paid for and we are righteous before God; no sin on our part can prevent God from loving us – for Jesus continues to intercede for us.

It's a perspective, congregation, we must keep in mind. Pentecostals and charismatics keep having us ask whether we have the Spirit, whether we are filled with the Spirit, whether we are in tune with the Spirit. In a similar way, New Age mystics and Asian gurus would have us consider whether we are listening well to the spirit within. But, beloved, the Holy Spirit does not draw attention to Himself; He dwells in our hearts in order to draw our attention time and again to Jesus Christ. So the question is not: do you have the Holy Spirit? The question is rather: do you believe in Jesus Christ? Always it is Christ whom the Spirit puts center-stage, He who paid for sin and defeated Satan and now labors in heaven for the benefit of His people, yea, even poured out His Holy Spirit to help His people in the face of Satan's hatred. *That* is the question: in the face of Satan's hatred and the cunning and persistent attacks of the rebels around us, *do we keep looking to Jesus Christ?* Do we believe His victory – and therefore are unafraid of the attacks of the evil one?

The question is so important. Satan attacks, persistently, endlessly. We do not like it that way, but that is the reality of this broken life. How do we respond? By collapsing before his temptations, and so giving ourselves to fornication or to outbursts of wrath or to works of the flesh mentioned in Gal 5? By nature we'll do that, particularly when the pressure of the attacks gets so strong – and Satan *is* a strong enemy. *Or* shall we respond to his attacks with the fruits of the

Spirit: patience in the face of enmity, kindness in the face of evil, love in the face of hurt? The Spirit tells us to look at Christ, Christ has already defeated Satan and his rebels, and so there's nothing hindering us from turning the other cheek. Why do we have to destroy Satan, if Christ has done so already?? Why do we have to get upset when sinners hurt us – given that Christ has already conquered sin and promises to execute justice on those who oppress us and guarantees us the New Jerusalem?

You see the point, beloved: when our eyes are *off* Christ, we've got every reason to fight our own battles, counting noses, pulling our head in when we see how many enemies we have and how strong they are. But when our eyes are *on* Christ, we've got no reason at all to fight our own battles, for Christ has defeated Satan, bound him. Then the fact that so many in the world are on the side of the rebels doesn't worry us, simply because on our side is the King of kings, the victorious Christ. You see the riches of the work of the Holy Spirit? He has us look to Christ, and so be courageous in the face of Satan's attacks.

So: let the devil attack. Christ has said he would, and so it shall happen; he'll attack, he'll incite our workmates against us so that we're scorned, ridiculed. As they hated Christ, so they will hate us – Jesus said so, it be so. *But be intimidated – No!* For in the strength of the Holy Spirit we keep looking to Christ-who-triumphed, and so we take the sufferings of this life cheerfully. In time to come there is for us a weight of glory that far surpasses the troubles and tribulations of this life. I know it, I believe it, because my Lord Jesus Christ has given His Holy Spirit so keep focusing my attention on Him, on His victory. I look to Christ, and so keep speaking of Him too – even if the result may be more suffering at the hands of the rebels.

I refer here to the action of the early church shortly after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Acts 7 records the first martyrdom; Stephen was stoned because he spoke the word of the ascended Christ. That stoning was the beginning of a "great persecution" against the church in Jerusalem. So much so, says the passage, that the believers "were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria" (8:1). Here was fulfillment of Jesus' word in Jn 15. Result? We'd expect these believers to pull their heads in, to zipper their mouths, to blend with the rebels, to look inconspicuous. But it did not happen. Why not? Because the Holy Spirit had been poured out, and this Holy Spirit caused these believers to look not at the people and people's hatred, but to look instead at Jesus Christ and Him crucified, risen, ascended. They kept looking to Christ Victorious, and therefore also kept speaking of this Christ! That's what the passage says: "those who were scattered went everywhere *preaching the word*" (8:4). Preaching the word, says our translation. The Greek word is literally "evangelizing". They kept gossiping the gospel to their new neighbors, in their new shops, at work. Their eye was on Christ, not on the people who hated them, and in the strength of the Holy Spirit they were so taken by the wealth they saw in Christ crucified, risen, ascended, that they kept talking about His victory – and the salvation He obtained for them. The result: the word of God grew; more and more came to faith in Jesus Christ.

That, brothers and sisters, is the recipe today too for church growth. We don't need organized outreach events, but we need people who heed the prompting of the Holy Spirit to keep their eyes so focused on Jesus' work that they are filled with gratitude for His redeeming grace – and so talk of His work and live that gospel, irrespective of public opinion and the hatred of the world.

The ascended Christ has poured out His Holy Spirit into this world with devils filled, each threatening to undo us. With this gift of the Holy Spirit –true and eternal God!- the ascended Christ has equipped the church to survive every hellish effort to upset our faith. Blessed are the people who received the Spirit, for they keep *seeing Christ's work* on their behalf – and so responding with abundant fruits of the Spirit. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 13 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 8 September 2002.

"GOD'S ONLY BEGOTTEN SON IS OUR LORD."

Text:

Lord's Day 13

33. Q. Why is He called God's only begotten Son, since we also are children of God?

A. Because Christ alone is the eternal, natural Son of God.[1] We, however, are children of God by adoption, through grace, for Christ's sake.[2]

[1] *John 1:1-3, 14, 18; 3:16; Rom. 8:32; Heb. 1; 1 John 4:9.* [2] *John 1:12; Rom. 8:14-17; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 1:5, 6.*

34. Q. Why do you call Him our Lord?

A. Because He has ransomed us, body and soul,[1] from all our sins, not with silver or gold but with His precious blood,[2] and has freed us from all the power of the devil to make us His own possession.[3]

[1] *1 Cor. 6:20; 1 Tim. 2:5, 6.* [2] *1 Peter 1:18, 19.* [3] *Col. 1:13, 14; Heb. 2:14, 15*

Scripture Reading:

Luke 2:8-20

Acts 2:29-36

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 98:1

Psalm 110:1,2

Psalm 121:1,2

Hymn 19:1,2,4

Hymn 60:1,2,5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

In the brokenness of this life we struggle time and again with our sense of self-worth. The one battles with it more than the other, the one also battles with it more openly than the other does, but in our heart of hearts we all have those moments when we don't like ourselves.

The Lord God comes to us with His revelation about Himself, and His saving work in Jesus Christ. God's revelation about Himself addresses us also on the matter of how we see ourselves, what thoughts we are to have about ourselves. Last week, when we spoke about our office as kings, I said that God created us to have dominion over all creation, and the point includes that we are to control our thoughts and moods and attitudes. Well now, congregation, God's revelation of Himself as we confess it in Lord's Day 13 gives us grounds to know that we are very special in His eyes. That's a reality we need to work with when we struggle with our sense of self-worth.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

GOD'S ONLY BEGOTTEN SON IS OUR LORD.

1. The profound content of this confession.
2. The powerful consequence of this confession.

1. The profound content of this confession.

The Scriptures call Jesus Christ the 'only begotten Son' of God. I think, for example, of Jesus' own words in Jn 3: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (vs 16).

The fact that Jesus Christ is the Son of God means that He is Himself true God. So: whatever characteristics apply to God apply also to Jesus Christ. Athanasian Creed: "...the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one, the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit." So, what the church confesses in Article 1 of the *Belgic Confession* - that God is "eternal, incomprehensible, invisible, immutable, infinite, almighty, perfectly wise, just, good, and the overflowing fountain of all good" - is true not just of God the Father but also of God the Son. As God's "only begotten Son," Jesus is true God in every sense the Father is, and therefore that list of characteristics is true with respect to Him also.

It is true: "the only begotten Son of God came to earth in Bethlehem to live amongst men. While He lived on earth so much of these divine characteristics were hidden; the eye of men saw but a man, flesh. But always He was and He remained "the eternal, natural Son of God," yes, true God and therefore eternal, incomprehensible, immutable, almighty, just, good, perfectly wise with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

This confession has a direct bearing on Jesus' title 'Lord'. The term 'Lord' is used countless times of our Savior in Scripture, with a range of meanings. At the simplest level, the term is the equivalent of 'Sir', and simply reflects respect, much in the same way as a student calls his teacher 'Sir'. I think, for example, of how the Samaritan woman at the well of Sycher addressed Jesus; "Sir," she says in our translation, "give me this water" (Jn 4:15; cf vs 11). More often the term 'Lord' involves the notion of authority, similar to the term 'king' (Mt 6:24; 21:40). Here our thoughts may go to the custom of centuries ago, where European society had kings and barons and lords and knights, and the common people looked up to these kings and lords, obeyed them. With this understanding of the word 'Lord' we come close to the material of our Lord's Day, where we confess that Jesus Christ has ransomed us so that we are "His own possession." He's our Master, He's our Owner – Lord.

Valuable as this comparison with the figures of history may be, brothers and sisters, it does not do justice to what the Lord has revealed about the term 'Lord' in the Bible. If you will bear with me for a moment, I need to tell you something about the Hebrew and Greek languages. You are aware that in our translations of the Old Testament the term 'Lord' appears in two forms. You find it printed in your Bibles in lower case letters, and then the term captures the notion of master; it translates the Hebrew word Adonai. So a servant addresses the king with the term 'My Lord'. That same phrase also gets used in relation to God, and the point is that someone addresses God as his Master, his Owner.

But the Old Testament also has thousands of instances where the term 'Lord' appears in upper case letters. We've heard it numerous times in the past; where the term 'Lord' appears in capital letters in our translations, the Hebrew has the word 'Yahweh', God's covenant name. We understand that this name 'Lord', Yahweh, is used of God Almighty alone.

Well now, the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek not all that long after the Old Testament was completed a couple of centuries before Jesus' birth. The thing is now that the translators chose to use *one Greek word to translate both of those Hebrew words*. Both the Hebrew word 'Adonai' and the Hebrew word 'Yahweh' comes into Greek as 'kurios'. And that term is consistently translated in the New Testament with the English word 'Lord'.

What that means? On the night of Jesus' birth an angel appeared to the shepherds in the field, with the good news that "there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:11). What did that sentence mean to the shepherds? The angel says that the baby is the 'kurios', is 'the Lord'. These shepherds hear that term with their Old Testament ears, and what do they hear: that a master is born, the equivalent of a king? *Or* do they hear in the term 'kurios' the name of their covenant God, and so conclude that Yahweh is born? Some verses later we

read that the shepherds reported their experiences to others, and these others "marveled" (vs 18), and the point is that they were astonished, surprised. Given the Old Testament background to the Greek word 'kurios', their astonishment is no surprise to us at all; that the Kurios is born is to say that Yahweh is born – how astonishing!!

I draw your attention also to Elizabeth's word when Mary came to visit her. Luke 1:43: Elizabeth welcomed Mary with this question: "why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" What does Elizabeth mean with the term 'Kurios' here? Simply that the child in Mary's womb is her Master, is a king? Given that the Greek term 'kurios' translates the Old Testament term 'Yahweh' there is certainly more caught in Elizabeth's greeting than an acknowledgement that the coming baby is some form of royalty. Here's an awareness that Yahweh Himself comes in the flesh! The only begotten Son of God, true God with the Father and the Holy Spirit, becomes a man; Yahweh on the face of the earth!!

This understanding of the term 'Lord', brothers and sisters, gives profound depth to what God's covenant with sinners is really all about. Almighty God had established a covenant of love with people in the Garden of Eden, bound Himself to people as their God, made these people His children. But with the fall into sin the human race rejected God, broke that covenant, and joined the devil. But God is 'Yahweh', is the I am who I am, and the point is that He does what He says He'll do, is faithful to His promises. He had bound Himself with a covenant of love to the human race, and so directly after the fall He remained faithful to that covenant – with its promises and its obligations. The promise was that if man would eat of the forbidden fruit, man would die – eternally. Yet God wished to be God for people, and wanted people to be His children. So the Lord promised that the Seed of the Woman would take on Himself the punishment that people deserve, so that God's children might go free. But who would that Seed of the Woman be? Indeed, it would be *God Himself*, in the Person of His Son. Yahweh, God of the covenant, sent His Son to earth in order to ransom from Satan's power those whom God chose to eternal life. This Son of God when He came to earth remained *true God*, and therefore the title 'Yahweh' belonged to Him also, yes, that's why the angel calls Him 'Kurios', 'Yahweh'. In maintaining His covenant with sinners God went *that far* to demonstrate His faithfulness to His covenant promises!

The 'Kurios' lived on earth as true man for some 33 years. True, the human eye did not see that He was true God, Yahweh in the flesh; the human eye saw only a man, be it one who could raise the dead and still the storms at sea. But 'Yahweh' He was, the God of the covenant come in the flesh. That is why, on the cross of Calvary, He could fight against sin and the devil, and *triumph*, yes, that is why on the cross of Calvary He could pay for sin with the price of His blood, and so ransom God's children from the power of the devil. Here is displayed the radical faithfulness of God to the promises He made in the beginning; He is Yahweh, thoroughly faithful!

So, after Jesus' resurrection from the dead, the disciples Thomas met Him with his statement of faith; "my Lord and my God," he said of Jesus. He uses the word 'Lord', 'Kurios', and sets the term side by side with the term 'God', and so there is no ambiguity as to what Thomas meant when he called Jesus his 'Kurios'; He was deliberately attaching to Jesus the Old Testament personal name of God, 'Yahweh'. That Jesus should suffer and die on the cross to pay for sin, and so deliver Thomas from Satan's power: here is pointed up the glorious heights of what it means that the Lord God is Yahweh, God of the covenant! Exactly because this covenant God is so faithful is salvation so very certain for Thomas – and for all who believe!

Some short weeks after Thomas' confession about Jesus' identity, God the Father took the triumphant Christ into heaven, and gave Him a seat at His right hand. On the day of Pentecost the apostle Peter described to his hearers what the significance was of this ascension. Said Peter: "let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). Here again you have the word 'Kurios'. This time, though, it appears in the context of Peter's quote from Ps 110, about the Lord God saying, "Sit at My right hand, Till I make your enemies Your footstool." Here the picture is very much that of authority, of being a Master over another. That's exactly Jesus' words before His ascension, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Mt 28:18). And that is why John in his vision could see Jesus having a name written on His robe and on His thigh, "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev 19:16). But that passage from Acts 2, brothers and sisters, relates far, far more than simply the notion that God gives authority to Jesus of Nazareth. For the One who receives this total authority over every creature of heaven and earth –so, over angels and demons and people and winds!- is none other than the Son of God, *Yahweh*! In fact, it's exactly because He is Son of God, Yahweh, that this total authority is given to *Him*! Kurios

He is, Master and Owner, *because He is Kurios, Yahweh*. And that identity in turn determines how He carries out His function as King of kings and Lord of lords; He rules today *as God of the covenant*. What He does in governing world history, what He does in governing the weather, what He does in governing the ups and downs of the stock market is all determined by His identity as Kurios, as Yahweh, as God of the covenant.

With the church of all ages we confess that Jesus Christ is 'our Lord'. We understand it now: here's a most profound confession. That confession, of course, must have consequences. That's our second point:

2. The powerful consequences of this confession.

There are, brothers and sisters, two consequences I want to draw out this afternoon. The first relates to safety, the second to service.

So Jesus Christ is our Lord, our Master; we are –as our Lord's Day says it- "His own possession." In the course of the history of the world there have been numerous lords, many with much property. Stories abound of how the child of one of these lords was kidnapped, held for ransom. Point is: there was a certain danger that came with belonging to a lord.

We belong to *the* Lord. Are there any risks in that? I mean: do you stand a chance of being kidnapped, snatched away from the power and safety of your Lord?

The answer, of course, is distinctly No. The Lord God has made His covenant of grace with you and me, and so claimed us as His. So deep is His love for His people, and so deep is His commitment to His covenant, that God sent His only begotten Son to pay for our sins. This Son of God –true God, Yahweh- laid down His life to deliver you and me from the bondage of the devil.

So: *how important are you in the eyes of God?* How special, how valuable to Him? Will He permit us somehow to end up outside His range of interest, so that we are vulnerable to an enemy snatching us from His care? We know the answer: we are His possession, and therefore so special to Him that He never lets us outside His range of care. In fact, our Lord, this 'Kurios', has received such power that He Himself guarantees that not a hair can fall from our head apart from the will of our God. More still, precisely because Jesus Christ is the Kurios, Yahweh, does He bind us to Himself and Himself to us with all the love and mercy that characterizes God's covenant.

It is this reality, brothers and sisters, that produces the glorious confession of Lord's Day 13. Says the church here, Christ "has ransomed us, body and soul, from all our sins ... with His precious blood, and has freed us from all the power of the devil to make us His own possession." Notice: here's the same drift as Lord's Day 1. Our only comfort in life and death, we confessed there, is that "I belong with body and soul, both in life and death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and set me free from all the power of the devil." "Possession," says Lord's Day 13. "Belong," says Lord's Day 1. Both me: I am the *property* of the Lord Jesus Christ. And who is this Christ? Says the church in Lord's Day 13: this Christ is none other than Yahweh! The One who today has all authority in heaven and on earth is the very same One who established with me His covenant of grace. I'm so completely safe with Him because I'm so precious to Him, so precious, in fact, that He laid down His life in order to ransom me from Satan's power. This almighty God of the covenant will use His infinite power to save me from any attack of the devil. That is why I am safe, completely and perfectly safe in His hands all the time.

Yes, brothers and sisters, this is the faith the Holy Spirit has worked in your hearts and mine, and so we join the church of all ages in confessing Sunday by Sunday that the only begotten Son of God is also our Lord. Exactly because the Holy Spirit has worked this faith in our hearts does the obligation follow that this is a gospel we need to *work with* concretely as we face the ups and downs of life.

You know how it goes. Time and again it's our sins that stare us in the face, for we can't seem to get above our urge to raid the fridge or to let our explosive temper fly or to waste time on the internet. It bothers us, bothers us to the point that we feel useless, worthless; we don't like ourselves and are sure God doesn't like us either..., and prayer becomes so difficult, God to our feeling so far away.

But the Lord, beloved, comes to us today to remind us of who He is, and therefore of what we are. Lord He is, our Master, and yet not a small master but the Almighty to whom was given all authority in heaven and on earth. Lord He is, our Master, and yet not a brutal, heartless despot, but Yahweh, the Son of God who keeps the covenant; He even laid down His life to pay for our sins, to ransom us. So: we're *precious*, very precious. Shall I then let myself wallow in my feelings of worthlessness, uselessness? No, beloved, No! I'm so valuable to God that the Son gave His life *for me!!* Now I'm the property of the Lord of lords; surely, I couldn't be richer! And exactly because He knows how we keep struggling with our sense of self, how we keep staring at our brokenness, He sets before us in His time –next week, in fact- the table of the Lord. He instructs us to sit at that table –why?- to impress on us *how much He loves us*, how much He gave for us – His blood! He instructs us to sit at table with *Him* –with who??- the *Kurios*, the exalted Master who is Himself the God of the covenant! *He* wants to dine with us –why?- to encourage us in the faith, to impress on us how rich we are, how precious to Him. And so to assure us too how *completely safe* we are in His sovereign and almighty hands; nobody in all creation can touch us apart from Him.

That glorious safety is the one consequence that flows from His identity as 'Lord'. The second revolves around the notion of service. The thought is this: if He is our Lord, if we are His possession, it follows that we need to *obey*, need to *serve*.

It's true that the concept of obedience, of service, sits wrong with our sinful flesh; we want to do things our way. That's why I stress again who this Lord is. The lords of history were sinful men, and certainly could impose harsh, even brutal laws on their subjects, laws very painful to obey. But that is not the case with the instructions given us by our Lord in heaven! This Lord is Yahweh, the God of the covenant, the one who loves us with a perfect love – witness how much He emptied Himself in order to free us from the power of the devil! If *this* Kurios, now, gives us particular instructions, will those instructions be harmful to us?! Or will those instructions be *inherently good* for us? We know well what the answer is; His identity as Lord guarantees the *positive value* of His instructions.

That is why, because of faith in this Lord, we delight in God's laws, want to do them. But we experience it time and again: our sinful hearts continue to buck against His instructions, declare these instructions bad for us. Here, brothers and sisters, we need again to work with the faith the Lord God has placed in our hearts. If we confess Sunday by Sunday that Jesus Christ is Kurios, the God of the covenant, then we also need to draw the inevitable consequence and admit that Yes, His instructions are good, obeying them is healthy.

Abraham Kuyper once said - so correctly!- that there was not a square inch of life of which Christ does not say: Mine. What happens in the church falls under Christ's command, for He is Kurios of the church – and therefore all that's done here must conform to His revealed will. That's equally true in the shed, or in the kitchen, equally true on Saturday night or Wednesday morning; all that happens in the shed or in the kitchen, on Saturday or on Wednesday falls under Christ's command, for He is Lord of *all* – and therefore all that's done *all the time, anywhere* must conform to His revealed will. The unbeliever –he has his head in the sand- will not acknowledge that reality, and will pay the penalty. But woe to him who confesses Sunday by Sunday that Jesus Christ is Lord, and then on Monday goes and does his own thing! That is hypocrisy, and it will not go unpunished – simply because Jesus is the Kurios!

Of what value is your confession that Jesus Christ is Lord? We understand: the content of our Lord's Day is profound, and the consequences of this confession powerful. Tomorrow we return to our work, as servants of this Kurios. Because we are bonded to Him in His covenant of grace with us we have boldness to obey, convinced that He looks after us perfectly. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 14 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 15 September 2002.

" THE INCARNATION OF JESUS CHRIST DISPLAYS THE INFINITE GRACE OF GOD TO UNWORTHY SINNERS."

Text:

Lord's Day 14

35. Q. What do you confess when you say: He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary?

A. The eternal Son of God, who is and remains true and eternal God,[1] took upon Himself true human nature from the flesh and blood of the virgin Mary,[2] through the working of the Holy Spirit.[3] Thus He is also the true seed of David,[4] and like His brothers in every respect,[5] yet without sin.[6]

[1] John 1:1; 10:30-36; Rom. 1:3; 9:5; Col. 1:15-17; I John 5:20. [2] Matt. 1:18-23; John 1:14; Gal. 4:4; Heb. 2:14. [3] Luke 1:35. [4] II Sam. 7:12-16; Ps. 132:11; Matt. 1:1; Luke 1:32; Rom. 1:3. [5] Phil. 2:7; Heb. 2:17. [6] Heb. 4:15; 7:26, 27.

36. Q. What benefit do you receive from the holy conception and birth of Christ?

A. He is our Mediator,[1] and with His innocence and perfect holiness covers, in the sight of God, my sin, in which I was conceived and born.[2]

[1] I Tim. 2:5, 6; Heb. 9:13-15. [2] Rom. 8:3, 4; II Cor. 5:21; Gal. 4:4, 5; I Pet. 1:18, 19.

Scripture Reading:

Luke 1:26-38

Luke 19:1-10

Romans 8:31-39

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 86:1,2

Hymn 14:4

Hymn 2:3,4

Hymn 16:1,2,3,4

Hymn 27:1,4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We celebrated today the Supper of our Lord Jesus Christ. This supper did not come out of the blue, nor did the Calvary to which this Supper points. This Holy Supper has its roots in the work of grace God accomplished when He sent His only-begotten Son from heaven to earth. Now that we have tasted the goodness of the Lord at His table, it's to this root that I draw your attention this afternoon.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE INCARNATION OF JESUS CHRIST DISPLAYS THE INFINITE GRACE OF GOD TO UNWORTHY SINNERS.

1. the manner of the incarnation
2. the motive for the incarnation
3. the marvel of the incarnation

1. The manner of the incarnation.

The question of how it was that the Son of God became man touches our sense of imagination. The angel told Mary that she would conceive in her womb and bear a child, one who would "be called the Son of the Highest" (Lu 1:31f). Mary's immediate response concerned the *how* of this promise; said she: "How can this be, since I do not know a man", I have no husband? In answer, Gabriel spoke the words of vs 35:

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God" (vs 35).

As a result of those words, we somehow imagine that the Holy Spirit *took the place of* a human husband in terms of generating pregnancy.

We are to note, though, that this is not at all what the text says. "The Holy Spirit," says the angel, "will come upon you." In the Old Testament, the Holy Spirit had been active in very much; He did work in the Old Testament just as in the New, though He had not yet been poured out and therefore worked more –shall we say– behind the scenes. There is one work of the Holy Spirit, though, that receives particular attention, one work very relevant to Gabriel's word in Luke 1. That work is this: *the Holy Spirit was God's agent in creation*. Gen 1:

"the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters" (1:2).

Years later the Lord Himself recorded what He meant by that phrase "the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." Says God in Ps 33:

"By the word of the Lord the heavens were made,
and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth" (vs 6).

"By the *breath* of His mouth," say our translation. But the word that's used is the same as that of Gen 1: Spirit. That is: all the hosts of heaven were made by His Spirit. So too Ps 104:

"You send forth Your Spirit, they are created;
and You renew the face of the earth" (vs 30).

There you have it, congregation: the Holy Spirit was God's agent in creating the world, and is God's agent in upholding the world God made.

Now the angel tells Mary that she shall conceive as a result of the Holy Spirit coming upon her. Are we then to think that the Holy Spirit simply *takes the place of* a human husband in making Mary pregnant? It's to be clear in our minds, beloved, that this is categorically not the case. The message of Gabriel's words to Mary is instead that here God is active –through the Spirit as His agent– active doing something different. The Holy Spirit was here sent by God to *create something new*, to do a work of creation as marvelous as those works of Gen 1. The Holy Spirit would come upon Mary, and the result would be that what was conceived in her was not half God and half man, a child having genes from the Father in heaven and genes from mother Mary on earth. Rather, the Holy Spirit would come upon Mary, and something *unheard of* would result; God would come in the flesh, true God in "human form" (Phil 2:8), true God sharing fully of the nature of man (Heb 2:14). Here is the unexplainable as echoed in the Catechism:

"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."

No, our finite minds cannot grasp it. We have yet so many questions about how God can become man, how the

Almighty can become a fetus in the womb of a virgin. But these are questions to which God has given no answer. We do not know either how God in the beginning could call into existence the things that did not exist (Heb 11:3). But just as that work of creation in the beginning is something we're meant to believe and accept, so too is this new work of creation in the womb of Mary something we're to believe and accept. What we're to realize is this: with the incarnation of the Son of God, with His becoming man, we're confronted with a *new* work of God, something God had never done before. Here is a new creation, a new beginning, a beginning as radically new as was the beginning of Gen 1.

That, congregation, is also why we need not be surprised that this work of creation in the womb of the virgin Mary is today denied by the skeptics of society. Society denies the doctrine of creation-in-the-beginning, and so this work of creation-in-the-incarnation must logically also be denied. At bottom it's a question of denying God's power.

If now this incarnation of the Son of God was something so different, so new, was in effect a new creation, *why* did God do this new work? That's our second point:

2. The motive for the incarnation.

The Lord Jesus Christ has explained motive for His incarnation amongst other places in Luke 19. He said: "...the Son of man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (vs 10). For our part, we need to understand what He meant by the term 'lost'. And: who are the "lost"? In what way were they "lost"?

Jesus' statement that He came to seek and to save the lost finds its context in the story of Zacchaeus. When Jesus announced that He would go to Zacchaeus' house for tea, the people expressed their displeasure; Jesus, they felt, was associating with a "sinner". In that context Jesus announced that He had come "to save that which was lost." Jesus' reference to the "lost" is then in first instance to Zacchaeus himself; Zacchaeus, said Jesus, was lost.

As to what Jesus meant by the word "lost", we need to consider Zacchaeus' situation. That little man was a social outcast, rejected by the people because he was a tax-collector for the hated Romans. In practical terms, this rejection meant for Zacchaeus that he was lonely, he had no support from his own people; he did not benefit from the communion of saints, he was "lost".

Yet that does not get us to the heart of the matter. For: *why* was Zacchaeus the outcast he was? This man, brothers and sisters, *tasted in the concrete circumstances of his life the bitter effects of the fall into sin*. Whereas Paradise had known no friction between people, Zacchaeus experienced friction and dislike all around him. He was a *fallen* man, and therefore his life knew misery, troubles. And in that he wasn't alone. The Bible tells us of a Joseph who in the concrete circumstances of his life was hated by his jealous brothers, and therefore thrown into that pit and eventually sold into Egypt. The Bible tells us of a people enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt, who groaned under the burden of their bondage. The Bible tells us of a David hounded by Saul, depressed by the trials of life, rejected (so he felt) by man and God alike. Scripture even tells us of people given up to dishonorable passions, of women who have exchanged natural relations for unnatural, of men who have given up natural relations with women because they're consumed with passion for one another (Rom 1:26f). And we can expand the list with our own experiences; in this life we taste daily the bitter results of our fall into sin. Paradise had been so delightful, but God so hated sin that He in wrath sent us out of His holy presence, sent us into a world of hostility and enmity, of strife and trouble, of sweat and tears. "Lost": *that word captures all the tragic consequences of our fall into sin*.

And we're to note too: the fault here is fully our own. It was *we* who purposefully transgressed the command of God in Paradise, rejected God, exposed ourselves to all the wrath of an offended God. So that wrath is so very deserved; God would deal so justly if He would today drown the entire human race with a deadly flood, would deal so justly if He would cause each one of us to perish through the difficulties we today face. Lost we are, as a result of our own sins, and that should mean for each of us *hell*. Zacchaeus in his life tasted the beginnings of the horrors we've all brought upon ourselves.

But behold here now, beloved, the glory of God Most High! For instead of giving us the death, misery, hell we deserve, the Lord in mercy gave His Son to seek and to *save that which was lost!* Consider the words of the Belgic Confession (Art 17) about the fall into sin:

"We believe that, when [God] saw that man had...plunged himself into physical and spiritual death and made himself completely miserable, our gracious God in His marvelous wisdom and goodness set out to seek man...."

Notice those descriptions of the *lostness* of man: man "plunged himself into physical and spiritual death", made himself "completely miserable". Truly, that is *lost*. But this is what God did, beloved: He "set out to seek man." Here is displayed the *grace* of God, His *goodness*. God's response to the sins of the human race was not that we should be left in the misery into which we had plunged ourselves; His response was rather *pity, compassion, mercy*. I draw your attention again to Luke 1. In the song which Zechariah uttered at the circumcision of his son John, Zechariah was moved by the Spirit of God to speak of why God would give His Son. Vs 78: Zechariah speaks in our translation of "the tender mercy of our God." But the word that Zechariah actually uses is bowels, intestines; he speaks literally of "intestines of mercy". The point is that God was moved to the pit of His stomach, He had –we'd say– no appetite left as a result of the misery into which the human race had plunged itself, the lostness of the human race. Zechariah is moved by the Spirit to portray God as so upset by the misery of man that God acted to work redemption, acted to save the lost. That's the notion echoed in that Article we just read from the Belgic Confession:

"...when [God] saw that man had...made himself completely miserable, our *gracious* God in His marvelous...goodness set out to seek man...."

Gracious: so moved was the Most High by our total misery that He gave up His own Son, sent the Spirit to Mary to have His Son conceived in her virgin womb.

And now, brothers and sisters, we can answer too *why* it was that the Son of God became man, what the motive for the incarnation was, what caused it. What prompted that incarnation was, beloved, *ourselves*! It was *our own sins* that prompted God to send His Son to earth. That God had to make a new beginning in Mary's womb, that He had to do something at the incarnation never done before, is result of our fall, our sins. From eternity the Son of God had been with the Father in heaven, but now He had to leave, had to humble Himself, become a servant, a man, and *it was we ourselves* who prompted this humiliation for the Son of God. We consider Christmas to be a season of rejoicing, and indeed it is. But in the first place, brothers and sisters, Christmas is a season of *shame for ourselves*. Were it not for our sins, the Son of God would not have had to leave heaven, become man. But now He did, *because of us*. He did, because we had made ourselves lost, "completely miserable", and this was something the Lord God did not wish to stomach.

We are to notice, then, beloved, that one cannot believe that the Son of God became man *unless one first realizes and believes one's own depravity*. Had we not sinned, were we somehow able to save ourselves, the incarnation would not have been necessary. But as it is, we are lost, depraved, exiled from God's presence so that we hurt day by day, and we're not able to do anything about it, *and that's why the incarnation was needed*. Deny your total sinfulness, your complete depravity, and you undermine the need for the incarnation.

There you have a second reason why our society would deny that the Son of God became man. Not only does our society deny the power of God displayed in creation (and therefore His ability to do a new work of creation in Mary's womb); society is also quite content with human nature, denies that human nature is *lost*, needs redemption.

The conception and birth of Jesus Christ, then, gives us cause for shame. But exactly because of our unworthiness does this incarnation point up also the endless glory of God in heaven – third point:

3. The marvel of the incarnation.

That God Most High, brothers and sisters, was so bothered by the lostness and the misery of His chosen children that He set out to seek and to save them – that glorious gospel can prompt only to praise! No wonder the angels on the night of Jesus' birth broke out into songs of jubilation: "Glory to God in the highest..." (Lu 2:14). For this is a God beyond compare, so infinite in His grace, so boundless in His mercy. Then yes, at Christmas we do well to recall what prompted the incarnation, and so consider our sins and misery. But God, beloved, has given us reason too to step beyond that sense of shame. With the angels we may sing aloud of the grace of God as displayed in the manger of Bethlehem. What a marvel that this God should give up His Son for sinners as we! Here's the surprise of the gospel.

What a God!

And that's why the apostle Paul can shout out with enthusiasm about the security he has with this God. Paul knows that life has so many difficulties, so many trials. The rejection Zacchaeus experienced, the envy Joseph tasted, the hatred David felt, the anguish of our lives: it's all, says Paul, part of this earthly existence. Tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword: *that's* this vale of tears. And we who live in the shadow of September 11 know that only too well. But in the midst of it all Paul had this assurance: if God in His grace has given up His only Son, has sent Him to earth "for us and our salvation" (as the Nicene Creed so nicely puts it), sent Him to deliver us from Satan's power and free us from all the consequences of sin, then surely, surely our Father in Jesus Christ will give us all we need in this life! The apostle is so convinced: "He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all" will surely "give us all things with Him." More, given this grace, this love from God, there is nothing in all creation able to drive a wedge between God and any of His own, none able to separate us from God's love. God gave up His only Son, sent His Spirit to overshadow Mary so that she became pregnant with the Son of God; what a security, what a comfort the apostle is allowed to have for the grind of his daily life!

O yes, for today the hurts and the griefs resulting from our fall into sin remain so real; we feel them all so deeply. But today God loves me, cares for me perfectly. And tomorrow, tomorrow the Son of God will come a second time to earth, this time to rid the earth of all sin and of every result of sin. How glorious that day will be! Small wonder that the book of Revelation shows us angels singing upon Christ's return, singing even more than they did on the day He was born!

That is why we sing today already, sing with the church of all ages and places of God's glorious work at Christmas:

"...Thou didst not despise the Virgin's womb, O Savior,
When Thou didst take upon Thee mankind to deliver.
Thou hast defeated death and Satan's power infernal,
That all believers might inherit life eternal" (Hy 2:3).

Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 15 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 29 September 2002.

" BECAUSE JESUS CHRIST SUFFERED SO LONG AGO IS THE STING OUT OF OUR SUFFERING TODAY."

Text:

Lord's Day 15

37. Q. What do you confess when you say that He suffered?

A. 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.[1] Thus, by His suffering, as the only atoning sacrifice,[2] He has redeemed our body and soul from everlasting damnation,[3] and obtained for us the grace of God, righteousness, and eternal life.[4]

[1] Is. 53; I Tim. 2:6; I Pet. 2:24; 3:18. [2] Rom. 3:25; I Cor. 5:7; Eph. 5:2; Heb. 10:14; I John 2:2; 4:10. [3] Rom. 8:1-4; Gal. 3:13; Col. 1:13; Heb. 9:12; I Pet 1:18, 19. [4] John 3:16; Rom. 3:24-26; II Cor. 5:21; Heb. 9:15.

38. Q. Why did He suffer under Pontius Pilate as judge?

A. Though innocent, Christ was condemned by an earthly judge,[1] and so He freed us from the severe judgment of God that was to fall on us.[2] [1] Luke 23:13-24; John 19:4, 12-16. [2] Is. 53:4, 5; II Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13.

39. Q. Does it have a special meaning that Christ was crucified and did not die in a different way?

A. Yes. Thereby I am assured that He took upon Himself the curse which lay on me, for a crucified one was cursed by God.[1]

[1] Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13.

Scripture Reading:

Mark 15:1-32

Hebrews 12:1-13

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 9:1,5

Psalm 43:5

Psalm 23:2,3

Hymn 21:1,3,4

Hymn 56:1,2

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Lord's Day 15 concerns itself with suffering. That's a very timely subject, if only because the world is so full of suffering. A virus hits us, and we feel sick, miserable. We break some bones, and suffer. We're under pressure because of financial constraints, and that pressure makes us suffer. We loose a beloved family member through death or desertion, and we suffer. We feel shunned by our peer's, not accepted by the class at school, and that means suffering. We look across our national boundaries to the agonies endured by the people of the Middle East today or the countless AIDS orphans of Africa or the people who tried so hard to flee the horrors of Afghanistan or Pakistan to come to our fair shores.... There's so much suffering....

LD 15 is about suffering, about the suffering of Christ, and its consequences for us. The Lord's Day would have us know that the sting is out of our suffering today because Christ suffered 2000 years ago in our place.

BECAUSE JESUS CHRIST SUFFERED SO LONG AGO IS THE STING OUT OF OUR SUFFERING TODAY.

1. The cause of suffering.
2. The climax of suffering.
3. The school of suffering.

1. The cause of suffering.

Why is there suffering in the world? Where does anguish, difficulty, pain, grief, come from? It is a question that has teased the minds of philosophers for centuries. But the answer is not so difficult.

The world God made was a world without suffering, without curse, without anguish. God's creation was "very good," with as result that Paradise was a place of inner peace and happiness, a place of no grief, no suffering.

That changed with the fall into sin. God had said to Adam on the first day of his life that he could eat of every tree of the Garden, except that one in the middle. And if Adam should choose to eat despite what God said, he would surely die. Death: the whole concept involves suffering. So Adam could know that disobedience to God was the road to suffering; eating meant death, eating meant suffering.

Despite the warning God had given, Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden tree; they sinned. And in so doing, they died; spiritually straightaway, physically after a number of years. And with that dying came suffering; they were afraid and hid themselves at the sound of God's coming. To the woman God announced suffering: "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing." Bringing children into the world, yes and also raising them, would be a painful, even a heart-rending experience. Motherhood implies suffering.

So also Adam. The Garden used to supply an abundance of food; Adam and Eve did not have to toil and sweat to eat. But now they're exiled from the Garden, sent out to seek a living from a land cursed by God. For so spoke God: "Cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life; thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you." Such would be Adam's life, would be the life of every person: toiling, struggling, suffering.

Then came the day when Adam's and Eve's two oldest boys did not return home from the field, the day when they went out looking, and found one dead and the other gone.... talk about suffering.... Suffering *because* of the fall into sin. That fall: that was the cause of their suffering, the cause of their hunger, their misery - SIN.

But what is the relationship between sin and suffering? Why is suffering the result of sin? That, congregation, is because of the wrath of God. Recall Lord's Day 4: the justice of God requires that sin committed against the most high majesty of God be punished with extreme, that is, with everlasting punishment of body and soul. God's wrath: that's the link between sin and suffering!

That link is drawn out where Scripture speaks of God's response on covenant disobedience. What that response is? God's wrath becomes apparent through drought, war, sickness, death – in a word, through suffering (cf Lev 26:14ff). Think too of what Paul writes to the Romans: "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men who by their wickedness suppress the truth." The chapter tells us that God expresses His wrath by darkening people's minds, with as result that they give themselves up to more and more sin, which in turn results in sickness, hatred, jealousy, loneliness, grief. *Suffering*.

Where does suffering come from? Make no mistake, beloved: suffering comes from the fall into sin. And that fall into sin provoked the wrath of holy God, yes, and the sins people commit day by day provoke the wrath of God still. The wrath we bring upon ourselves is no gentle wrath, and that is why our Lord's Day speaks of such things as "damnation," speaks of the "severe judgment of God that was to fall on us", speaks of "the curse which lay on me."

Indeed, how terrible it is to fall into the hands of the living God!

But the LD we have in front of us does not accent our sufferings as such. Lord's Day 15 focuses on Christ's sufferings. So we shall do well to direct our attention for now not to our sufferings but to Christ's.

Christ suffered, we confess, suffered "during all the time He lived on earth." That would mean that already in Bethlehem Jesus was suffering. And His sufferings as a baby were not just the sufferings that come with being colicky and possibly sick. Rather, He suffered in that He "took on Himself true human nature," becoming "like His brothers in every respect"; Jesus too suffered the consequences of sin. More, His suffering began even before He was born. For His mother, heavy with child, was told that there was no room for them in the inn in Bethlehem; here already, Jesus was rejected. Son of God from eternity enjoyed the glory that belonged to His Godhead, but now had to be born in a stable. Wise men came from the east to pay homage, but scarcely were they gone when Herod brooded out his satanic plan to murder every boy in Bethlehem age two years and under. For "the dragon stood before the woman... that he might devour her child when she brought it forth." *Suffering*.

At the age of 12 He went with His parents to Jerusalem, and when He stayed there and they found Him after three days, they chastised Him for the worry He had inflicted on them. But all of that included suffering for Jesus, for His parents did not understand Him, did not appreciate His exact identity and calling, did not realize that He had to be about His Father's business.

He reached the age of 30, and began to reveal Himself to Israel. Immediately the Holy Spirit drove Him into the desert, where He received not so much as a crumb to eat for forty days and forty nights. As He suffered those hunger pains, Satan urged Him to turn those stones into bread.... How cruel, how painful the suffering....

After the temptations in the wilderness, "He came to His own people" with mighty words and signs and miracles, but "His own received Him not" (Jn 1:11). They followed Him by the thousands: they also deserted Him by the thousands again. Even His own disciples did not understand Him; despite what He said, they kept looking for Him to restore the political kingdom to Israel. The birds had nests, the foxes had holes, but the Son of Man did not even have a place to lay His head. And after three years of that, He was betrayed not by a lifelong enemy, but by an intimate friend, a companion, betrayed with a brotherly kiss (Ps 55). He was led to the Judgment seat of Pilate, and the people cried out with one voice in His hearing that He ought to be crucified. Rejected He was, by Israel the people of God, by the leaders of Israel, even by His own disciples. And all that abuse the Lord had to take. The soldiers thought to hail Him as king, and so they crowned Him with a wreath of prickly thorns – ouch! They spat on Him, slapped Him, mocked Him, laughed Him to scorn. Then led Him out to crucify Him, telling the exhausted Jesus to carry His own cross.... *Suffering*.

Our understanding of Christ's life is somewhat sentimental and romantic. But His life, brothers and sisters, was anything but that! Thirty three year's He lived amongst men on earth. Thirty three years He suffered. Holy God that He was, without sin, saw around Him only sin, lives broken by sin, people rejecting Him because of sin. And it hurt Him every time anew. Then it's true that His suffering intensified acutely "at the end" of His life. But that does not take away from the fact that "during all the time He lived on earth" He was suffering.

And why? Why did Jesus suffer? Here too we have to go back to the *cause* of suffering. For Jesus, like we, suffered because of *sin*. So He suffered as we all do, could be sick and suffer in His sickness, stub His toe and suffer the pain that comes with that, etc. But that doesn't get to the heart of Jesus' suffering! Jesus' suffering was much more than ours, for Jesus was Himself made sin! *That* is the secret of Jesus' suffering during all His life, and especially at the end; Jesus was made sin! And on sin comes the wrath of God. *That's* what made Jesus' suffering so special, so unique; the God whose wrath He bore was none else "than His own Father".

That God the Father was indeed angry with Jesus and so made Him to suffer is pointed up by what happened in the palace of Pontius Pilate.

Pilate. He was governor in the time of Jesus' ministry on earth. But when the Catechism reminds us that Jesus suffered "under Pontius Pilate", we are not told simply what time in history it was that Christ suffered the ultimate anguish of the cross. Rather, the reference to Pontius Pilate points up that Jesus suffered *at the hands of God*. For who was Pilate?

Like any other government official, he was appointed by God, represented God. When Jesus, then, was brought by the chief priests and the elders and the scribes to the judgment seat of Pontius Pilate, Jesus was brought before *God's* tribunal. Pilate rules, and Pilate judges, and Pilate passes sentences, *in the name of God*. That the unbelieving Pilate didn't acknowledge that his position came from God did not alter the fact one bit. As Jesus Himself said to Pilate: "You would have no power over Me unless it had been given you from above" (Jn 18:11).

Pilate judges Jesus to be guilty, condemns Him to death. In truth, he ought not to have done that; Jesus had broken not a single law in all the land. And the fact that he did so nevertheless was sin on Pilate's part, for which he will have to give account to God. But none of that takes away from the fact that Pilate *did* condemn Jesus to death. And because of his position as representative of God did *God stand behind that judgment*. In other words, through Pilate *God* condemned Jesus to death. Why God did so? Because God saw Jesus as guilty. And God saw Jesus as *guilty* because God saw Jesus as *sinful*, as full of sin. And on sin comes wrath; sin is the cause of suffering.

Yet Jesus had not sinned, and so should receive no wrath. But *here is the point*: Jesus had taken the sins of His people from off their shoulders *and placed these sins upon Himself*. Because Jesus had taken these sins upon Himself was Jesus, in God's holy eyes, guilty, worthy of wrath. Sin. And that's why Jesus had to suffer; He suffered *because of our sins*.

We come to our second point:

2. The climax of suffering.

What was the nature of the suffering Jesus should receive? Ought it to be a gentle, easy-to-take suffering? A tick on the fingers indicating God's displeasure with sin? No, beloved, not at all. In fact, in Jesus Christ all suffering comes to a climax. For Jesus was sentenced by Pontius Pilate, that representative of God, to *hang on a cross*.

What's so bad about a cross? One could argue that Jesus was sentenced to death on a cross simply because crucifixion happened to be the way Romans put criminals to death. And it's true, that's how the Romans did it. But even this did not happen by chance; sovereign God Himself ordained that Jesus should be crucified. And Jesus had to be crucified because of the special significance of hanging.

We are to recall that God in the Old Testament had made stipulation that a criminal offender be stoned to death, and after death his body be strung up on a tree. That hanging symbolized that this particular criminal was too gross a sinner to live on earth; with that hanging, men committed the offender to God for further punishment. So we read in Dt 21 that a hanged man was accursed by God (vs 23; cf Gat 3:13).

Because of the cruelty of crucifixion, the Romans would crucify only traitors and runaway slaves. In His providence God saw to it that in the time of Jesus' sojourn on earth Rome was the ruling power in Palestine – and so death on a cross possible for the Son of God. Why would God want His Son to die on a cross, as opposing to dying from an accident or illness or even stoning? The reason is simply this: Jesus must be *cursed* and experience that curse in the fullest way possible on earth.

What does that mean: to be cursed? Why did Jesus have to be cursed? Cursed: that is to be *rejected* by God, it is to be shunned, excommunicated from the presence of the Father in heaven. Jesus was sin, was, in the eyes of God, one mass of sin. The reality of that total sin meant that wrath had to come on Jesus, total wrath. And that intense wrath found expression in the fact that Jesus had to suffer that most bitter anguish of body and soul on the tree of the cross. So Jesus on the cross *suffered* like no person has ever suffered before. Not just the horrible anguish of crucifixion itself caused Jesus to suffer on the cross, but added to that was the curse of God that led to His rejection – a rejection symbolized by the fact that God turned the sun off so that Jesus was enveloped in total darkness. In that darkness, Jesus was alone, alone with the demons of hell attacking Him in whatever way they wished. So He suffered, in body and soul, the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race, suffered the damnation we deserved, took on Himself the curse which lay on us.

But see: precisely in the midst of all that suffering Jesus *paid for sin*. For He carried the burden of God's awful wrath on sin, carried that burden and did not collapse under the weight of it!

And here is the gospel: exactly because Jesus carried the burden of God's wrath, because He paid for sin, *is God's wrath for him gone*. And because God's wrath was satisfied could there come an end to Jesus' suffering. That's why the light returned after three hours of darkness. That was also why Jesus could cry out that all was finished, and why Jesus could commit His spirit into the hands of His Father in heaven and die in peace. Sins were paid for, and therefore could there come an end to the extreme suffering that Jesus underwent on the cursed cross.

This is a gospel that touches every child of God so delightfully. By His sufferings and death, Jesus Christ atoned *for the sins of all God's people*. The result of that atoning sacrifice is that the sins of those who embrace Jesus Christ with a true faith are forgiven, washed away. And the implication of receiving forgiveness is that there *is no wrath from God on our sins anymore*; the wrath we deserved has been poured out on Jesus Christ instead.

But, beloved, if there is no wrath left on us, there can be no damnation left either, not in this life, nor in the life to come. Instead of wrath, there is grace; instead of death, there is life. And that means nothing else than that the punishments and the sufferings we deserve on our sins do not come over us; we go free from the wrath of God! Talk about gospel: *there is no wrath for God's people anymore*, and *therefore no suffering under the burden of God's wrath on our sins either*. It's all so neatly stated in the Lord's Supper Form: "He bore for us the wrath of God under which we should have perished eternally," with as blessed result that "He has taken our curse upon Himself that He might fill us with His blessing." How delightful, how gloriously delightful!

It's a wonderful reality, beloved. But it's not one we can claim willy-nilly. For Christ's death does not satisfy for the sins of every person on earth; it satisfies instead only for those who believe in Him. That means concretely: those who are sorry for sin, who turn from sin, who seek their salvation and well-being only in Jesus Christ. The gospel of Jesus' suffering is rich, so gloriously rich, and precisely for that reason is the need so great that each one of us time and again engages in that self-examination mentioned in the Lord's Supper form: do I *believe* that the work of Jesus Christ on the cross was done also for me? Blessed are those who can answer that question with a positive Yes; for such there is no wrath from God at all anymore, neither in this life or the life to come. But those who do not believe remain under the wrath of God still, and shall experience it day by day in the sufferings of this life.

It's a glorious gospel, yes. But it also presents new questions. So sins are forgiven, and therefore there is no condemnation for us anymore, no wrath. So: there ought to be no suffering either anymore, is it not? If the wrath of God is stilled, the link between sin and suffering is gone. Yet we know so well that suffering is very much part of our lives. How are we to explain that now? That's our third point:

3. The school of suffering.

Yes, brothers and sisters, suffering remains a daily reality, be it suffering because of illness, or suffering because of rejection by friends or workmates, or suffering because of death, etc. But for the child of God the reason for that suffering is no longer due to God's wrath on our sins; in Lord's Day 15 we confess that those sins are gone, that Christ suffered the wrath we deserve.

So: why is there still suffering in our lives? Yes, we can say that we are to bear the consequences of our sins. A theft can land one in jail, and the experience is not pleasant - suffering. But even here we are not to confuse God's wrath with the consequences that flow out of sins. For the child of God that wrath is gone, forgiven is forgiven. Yet God would have us suffer –why?– in order to *teach* us. It is through suffering (amongst other things) that the God who for Jesus' sake became our Father, trains and moulds His children so that we might share His holiness the more.

That's the concrete instruction of Hebrews 12. The addressees suffered, were possibly being persecuted (though they did not yet have to shed their blood). To encourage these despairing Hebrews, the apostle tells them not only to look to the example of Jesus Christ who also suffered and yet persisted; the apostle also instructs the Hebrews to recall God's word in Prov 3, where reference is made to God's discipline. For, says the apostle, God is such a Father for His children that He disciplines, chastises, punishes. But it's not a disciplining and a chastening in wrath, a punishing according to what we deserve; it's rather a disciplining, a punishing according to what we *need* – and that's a whole different thing. As an earthly parent will discipline his child out of love –though the child might not appreciate what his parent gives!– so the Lord disciplines those who fear Him. So: "shall we not much more be subject to the Father of

spirits and live?" If Father in heaven in wisdom gives suffering, it's not for us to despair in the thought that God is angry with us; it's instead for us to bear it patiently in the conviction that the God who gave His Son to pay for our sins wants to teach us something. So the child of God says with David: "even in the valley of the shadow of death I fear no evil, for You are with me, Your rod and Your staff (though they may hurt so much!), they comfort me." Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 16 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 6 October 2002.

" THE DEATH OF CHRIST MEANS THE DEATH OF DEATH."

Text:

Lord's Day 16

40. Q. Why was it necessary for Christ to humble Himself even unto death?

A. Because of the justice and truth of God[1] satisfaction for our sins could be made in no other way than by the death of the Son of God.[2]

[1] Gen. 2:17. [2] Rom. 8:3; Phil. 2:8; Heb. 2:9, 14, 15.

41. Q. Why was he buried?

A. His burial testified that He had really died.[1]

[1] Is. 53:9; John 19:38-42; Acts 13:29; I Cor. 15:3,4.

42. Q. Since Christ has died for us, why do we still have to die?

A. Our death is not a payment for our sins, but it puts an end to sin and is an entrance into eternal life.[1]

[1] John 5:24; Phil. 1:21-23; I Thess. 5:9, 10.

43. Q. What further benefit do we receive from Christ's sacrifice and death on the cross?

A. Through Christ's death our old nature is crucified, put to death, and buried with Him,[1] so that the evil desires of the flesh may no longer reign in us,[2] but that we may offer ourselves to Him as a sacrifice of thankfulness.[3]

[1] Rom. 6:5-11; Col. 2:11, 12. [2] Rom. 6:12-14. [3] Rom. 12:1; Eph. 5:1, 2.

44. Q. Why is there added: He descended into hell?

A. 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[1] but especially on the cross, has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell.[2]

[1] Ps. 18:5, 6; 116:3; Matt. 26:36-46; 27:45, 46; Heb. 5:7-10. [2] Is. 53.

Scripture Reading:

Romans 5:6-21

I Corinthians 15:51-57

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 30:2,3

Psalm 6:1,3

Psalm 90:5,6

Psalm 116:1,2,3,4,8,9

Hymn 51:7,8

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The topic of the Lord's Day 16 is death. Christ had to die, was even buried to prove that He was dead; we have to die, even our old nature has to die.

Death. It's not the most pleasant of subjects. Most of us scarcely think of death; we're too young for that. It's not until we hear of the death of a young acquaintance, or that a congregation member has terminal cancer, that we really think of death.

Yet, beloved, the fact of the matter is that we all shall one day die, unless Christ comes back first. In the midst of all the unknowns of life - whether we'll go through life healthy or sick, happy or not, married or single, in Australia or elsewhere- this fact is very much a fixed certainty: all of us shall die. So wrote the apostle: "It is appointed for men to die" (Heb 9:27). How we shall die we do not know, and when we shall die we do not know either. But the fact stands firm. In the words of the Preacher: there's "a time to be born, and a time to die" (Eccl 3:2).

So, brothers and sisters, we do well to think about death. What has the Lord God told us about death? What is it? Where does death come from? Need we fear death? How is death to affect life?

The Bible gives us the answers. The Scriptures would have us look at death through the labors of our Lord Jesus Christ. For Christ has overcome death, so that death itself was put to death. That is why, in the words of Lord's Day 16, death is for God's people "an entrance (a door) into eternal life. "

That being so, we may use this afternoon this theme:

THE DEATH OF CHRIST MEANS THE DEATH OF DEATH.

1. The nature of death.
2. The conquest of death.
3. The preparation for death

1. The Nature of Death.

Everyone, says the Bible, dies. Tragically, our experience confirms it. Does that mean that death is a natural, normal development in the lives of people?

The answer, congregation, is distinctly No. On the sixth day of creation, the Lord God fashioned the creature man. He gathered together soil, molded it into a body, and breathed into the nostrils of this corpse the breath of life. Then "man became a living being" (Gen 2:7); Adam *lived*. "And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good" (Gen 1:31). God had made life, and the life God had made could not be snuffed out in a moment, could not fizzle out over the span of years either. Adam might be gone to the far end of the Garden of Eden, and be somewhat late in returning to Eve, but Eve did not have to fear that Adam may have drowned in one of the four rivers that flowed through the Garden. For Adam death was unnatural, was something unknown, strange. Death was not there in the beginning, death is not a normal thing in life.

But death *was* a known thing, at least in theory. For when God put Adam in the Garden, He told him that he was not to eat from the tree in the middle *on threat of death*. Said God: "in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen 2:17).

You see, beloved, death would be the consequence of eating, of sin. Why *death* would be the consequence of disobedience? To answer that question, we are to have straight in our minds *what death is*. And to understand what death is, we need first to know what life is.

From a scientific, biological point of view, life is that the heart is beating, that there are electric vibrations in the brain. That's also how we speak of life; life is that one is breathing. And it's when one quits breathing, when the heart stops, when there is no brain activity left, that we speak of a person being dead; there's no life any more.

But as it is, congregation, that's not a Scripturally complete understanding of what life is. The life God gave to Adam was more than breathing, more than the heart ticking. For God established a *relation* with Adam, and that relationship, that communion between God and man, *that* is what life really is. Adam had life in the deep sense of the word, and that's pointed up by the fact that in the garden God *came* to him, *spoke* to him. Life: that's enjoying a *bond of*

friendship with the God of life!

But if life is essentially *living in communion with God*, we understand too what death is. Death is the *absence* of that friendship with God, and hence the absence of communion with God. Death is not simply that there is no brain activity of any kind anymore. Death is that one is *separated* from the God of life.

But if that's what life is and that's what death is, then we can also understand why God said that Adam would surely die on the day that he ate of the forbidden fruit. That eating was disobedience, and disobedience means that one consciously breaks the bond of life with God, separates oneself from communion with God in favor of communion with Satan. That is death; it is *separation from God*.

So Adam would die, would die physically and spiritually. He would die in the sense that His body would be separated from his soul, would die also in the sense that he would be separated from his God. And what makes physical death so terrible is that physical death is a *symbol* of spiritual death; the separation of soul from body is the symbol of separation of the sinner from God.

So: is death natural? Be not fooled, beloved; death happens only to *sinners*. And it happens to sinners only *because* they are sinners. Rom 6: "the wages of sin is death" (vs 23). No, death is *abnormal*, is as abnormal as sin is abnormal. God no more created life for death than He created Adam for sin.

People fear death. Tell the average person that he is incurably ill, and panic seizes him. He may put on a brave face, but inwardly he feels isolated, paralyzed, drained of strength. But now we also know why people fear death. And that's because people know that death is not simply the end. Physical death, the separation of body and soul symbolizes separation of man from God. And *that's* what people cannot stomach. *Physical death symbolizes spiritual death!* How true people find the words of Bildad the Shuhite (one of those friends of Job); he said that death is "the king of terrors" (Job 18:14). How true the characterization is to the experience of millions!

But what, then, is so wrong with separation from God? What is wrong with separation from God, beloved, is that God does not appreciate that separation! God created man for life, for communion with Him. To separate oneself from God is to *bring divine wrath upon oneself*. And it is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God! Adam sinned, and so died, separated himself from God, broke the communion of friendship with God and aligned himself to Satan. God's response was to *exile* Adam from the Garden into a wilderness of thorns and thistles, was, in other words, to exile him from out of His comforting presence into a life without comfort on cursed ground. And that exile from Paradise in turn symbolizes *eternal exile* from God in hell. Adam sinned, Adam died, and therefore had to face the *judgment* of God. People still sin, and sinners still die, and therefore have to face the judgment of God.

And the God who judges sinners today has not become more sympathetic to sinners in the course of the years since the fall in the beginning! For God, Scriptures declare, does not change. If His response to Adam's sin was exile in a cursed wilderness of thorns and thistles as a foretaste of death eternal, His response to sinners since the days of Adam is just as radical. In fact, Scripture leaves no room for doubt: those who die must appear before the judgment seat of holy God. And before that judgment seat these sinners who have passed through the door of death must give account of every word they have spoken, every action they have done in this life. And because no sinner is able to give adequate account of every thoughtless word he uttered, every foolish thing he did, shall that sinner invariably be *cast out of God's presence* for all eternity. He shall die that second death, that eternal separation from God in the unquenchable flames of hell everlasting.... It is not a pleasant truth, but since God spoke it we are bound to accept it. One can deny it in this life, but even that does not change the facts, as all shall discover upon death.

Death: it is the door to the awful judgment seat of God, it is for sinners the entrance to hell. Well does Bildad put it; death is the "king of terrors". Given half the opportunity, the whole human race would join Adam and Eve in hiding from the presence of God, and so join those who call for mountains to fall on them and hills to cover them if that would spare us from having to appear before the judgment seat of holy God, and so avert the terrible sentence of death eternal....

But, beloved of the Lord, we need not run from God as Adam did, nor cry out for hills to cover us. For the Son God sent into the world has *conquered death!* That's our second point:

2. The Conquest of Death.

Bildad said that death was "the king of terrors." Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the apostle Paul did not agree with him. To the Philippians he writes that "to die is gain" (Phil 1:21). In fact, Paul even sings about death, and says, "where, O death, where is your sting?" (I Cor 15:55). And the answer of Paul is that the sting of death is *gone*. Dying, says Paul is not the king of terrors!

What then, is Bildad all wrong? Yes, says Paul, Bildad is all wrong! Death is not something one ought to look up against. For, says Paul, *God has given us the victory in Jesus Christ our Lord!* And what that comes down to is this: because of Jesus Christ death is changed from being something fearful to being *gain*.

Jesus Christ, the Scriptures tell us, died. But the Scriptures tell us too that only sinners die. Ezekiel 18: "the soul that sins shall die" (vs 4). And Romans 6: "the wages of sin is death" (vs 23). But of Jesus Scriptures say that He sinned not. And therefore it is surprising that Jesus should die! His life ought to have continued without end.

But Jesus died. That is because *sins were transferred* from the chosen of God onto Jesus Christ, so that God saw Jesus Christ as one bundle of sin. So Jesus, by God's decree, had to die. The wages of sin is death, and so through Pontius Pilate God had Jesus sentenced to death.

Jesus went to the cross, and there He died. More, on that cross He died in both senses of the word death. He died in the sense that He gave up the ghost, stopped breathing, His soul was separated from His body. More: He died in the sense that He was separated from God. In fact, He was separated from God, descended into hell *before* He died in the physical sense.

For a period of three hours darkness enveloped the cross on Calvary. In the course of those three hours of darkness Jesus was deserted by His Father in heaven, rejected because God saw His Son as one bundle of sin. God cannot tolerate sin, and therefore drove Jesus out of His presence. This rejection by God is presented in the Apostle's Creed as His descent into hell; it was during this period of rejection, during these hours of darkness that all of hell broke loose against Jesus, Satan with his demons ganged up on the rejected Son of God on the cross. This was *death* for Jesus, rejection by His Father, left alone with the devil and his angels. This was death, death in that spiritual sense, death in the sense of separation from God, death in the deepest and most agonizing sense of the word.

But the wrath God poured out on Jesus in the three hours of darkness did not crush Jesus Christ! Though He'd become all sin, Christ endured the rejection of the Father, endured this spiritual death. And because He could endure the weight of God's wrath on sin could He *make payment* for sins, could He *satisfy the justice of God*. So it was that after the end of those three hours of darkness, Christ could cry out that all was finished (Jn 19:30). All was finished, He said, for satisfaction had been made for the sin that caused death. All was finished, the sins once piled onto Jesus Christ were atoned for, and therefore could Jesus be again accepted by God. *That is why*, congregation, *that is why* there came an *end* to Jesus' separation from God, an end to hell, an end to being left alone with the devil and his angels. "It is finished," He said, and the three hours of darkness ceased and Jesus spoke His final words; "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit." And He breathed His last....

Was that physical death now an enemy for Jesus? Not at all, beloved. He died, but death did not take Jesus; Jesus rather *let Himself die*. And this physical death was for Him not the door to God's judgment hall; God had already judged Jesus Christ, judged Him first to be a sinner and therefore condemned to death, and after three hours judged that He paid for sin and so received Him again. No, beloved, Christ's dying was for the Son of God not the door to God's judgment hall; His dying was instead the door into God's eternal dwelling. That was why Jesus could speak those final words: "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit. " That's why Jesus' physical death was not the terror death is for so many; Jesus' death was *gain* for Him. For now He returned to the Father with whom He had lived since all eternity. He breathed His last – and entered into the joy of His Father!

Yes, and that death is all gain *for us* too. The very fact that Jesus could die without fear, could calmly commit His spirit into the hands of His Father, is because sin had been paid for. Physical death, we said, symbolizes spiritual death; the separation of body and soul symbolizes separation from God. But for Jesus, physical death did *not* symbolize

separation from God. By enduring God's rejection on the cross, Jesus had satisfied for sin and now *nothing could separate Him from the love of His God anymore*. That's why Jesus could commit His spirit into the hands of His Father; Jesus' death was made a symbol of the fact that He was now *accepted* by God. Jesus' death had no sting in it because there was no wrath left from God on Him; Jesus' death was not bitter because it was the door to being with God, was the entrance into eternal life. *His death was proof that He was accepted by God*.

What now of us? We have to die, said God, because of our sins; "the wages of sin is death," and so the years of man is three score and ten, or by reason of strength four score, and we die. *But what if there are no sins left?* Must we then still die? Why?!

For *that*, brothers and sisters, is the case with the child of God; our sins have been taken from us and laid onto Jesus Christ with as result that "Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). In the words of Question & Answer 42: "Christ died for us," and therefore: "why do we still have to die?"

We need to understand, beloved, that for the child of God *death is no longer directly connected with sin*, and therefore is that death also not the door to God's judgment anymore, to condemnation. Instead, the Lord is pleased to use death now as the door through which His children must go *to enter into life eternal in God's presence*. This life is a vale of tears; we face so many challenges, frustrations, disappointments, and the least of these is certainly not that we find ourselves repeatedly grieving our God with sin. But, since Christ has died for us on Calvary is our death no longer the wages of sin; death is instead gain, death means the end of tears, death means the beginning of life in the presence of God. It is the door into the chambers of God's grace through which we must pass to hear those words of salvation: enter into the joy of your Master. In truth, death is *gain*.

Shall we then look up against death? Do we do wrong to struggle to hold on to life on this earth? Let's not forget that God created us for life on this earth, did not create us for life in heaven as such. Besides, God has given us a task to carry out on this earth. Let no one, then, seek to escape this life before the time God ordains, on the grounds that death is gain for the Christian. On the other hand, there is no need for the child of God to resist death till the bitter end. Especially for those who have received the allotted three score and ten, there is no gain in holding off the day of glory. To go through that door of death may give butterflies in as much as it's new (for we've never been through those doors before), but the Lord would have us know that it's gain, only gain for His children. And He even assures us that "even in the valley of the shadow of death" we need fear no evil, for He stays with us as we approach those doors and pass through, and He ensures that His children receive that crown of glory.

Bildad told us that death was the king of terrors. Paul disagreed. The different perceptions between the two come down to reckoning with the death of Jesus Christ on Calvary. Bildad did not reckon with that death, and therefore he saw reason to fear death. And he was so right; without Christ death is fearsome indeed, for then death is the door to God's judgment hall, the door to the verdict of hell eternal. But Paul knew of Jesus Christ, believed in the promises God had given Paul in Christ. Paul knew that Christ died, with as happy consequence that *death itself was put to death*. So the child of God need not fear death; thanks to Christ death is the door to life eternal!

That brings us to our last point:

3. The Preparation for Death.

You and I, old or young, shall all one day die. What, then, my brothers and sisters, do you see death to be? Would you agree with Bildad that it's the "king of terrors"? Or would you agree with Paul that death is "gain"? The question is important, for it determines whether you will resist death to the lost gasp, or whether you will acquiesce to God's decision to deliver you from life's tears and pains. More: the question is important because inherent in your answer is whether you are afraid of God's judgment seat *or* whether you know your sins forgiven in Jesus' suffering and death.

We shall all one day die, but none of us knows when, nor how long the dying process will take. Once that moment of death arrives, it is too late to come to grips with the consequences of Jesus' death on the cross. That is why it is so important that we *make the necessary preparations today* for the death we shall all die tomorrow.

How does one make the necessary preparations? Older and younger of us need again and again to *accept* the promises

of God in Jesus Christ as true for ourselves – even as God gave them to us in our baptism. One of those promises we confess Sunday by Sunday in the Apostles' Creed with those brief words: He "died, and was buried." We utter those words easily, *but what do they mean to you?* God's promise in those words is that the death of Christ means the death of death – and so we need not fear death anymore! That's the good news God has given to you, brothers and sisters, and so it's the good news God wants you and me to embrace day by day again – both in health and in sickness, both in old age and in youth.

So, beloved, with whom do you agree? With Bildad or with Paul? Amen.

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**Sermon on Lord's Day 21 Q&A 55 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on
Sunday afternoon, 8 December 2002.**

" THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS IS CHRIST'S GIFT TO HIS PEOPLE."

Text:

Lord's Day 21 Q&A 55

55. Q. What do you understand by the communion of saints?

A. First, that believers, all and everyone, as members of Christ have communion with Him and share in all His treasures and gifts.[1] Second, that everyone is duty-bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members.[2]

[1] Rom. 8:32; 1 Cor. 6:17; 12:4-7, 12, 13; 1 John 1:3. [2] Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 12:20-27; 13:1-7; Phil. 2:4-8.

Scripture Reading:

Galatians 5:16-26

1 Corinthians 12:1-11;12:27-13:8

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 68:7

Psalm 71:8

Psalm 16:1

Psalm 133:1,2

Hymn 38:1,2

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

By the grace of our God, we could sit together today at the table of the Lord; together we ate one bread, drank from one cup. Therein expression was given to the unity which the Lord has worked in our midst. The *Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper* catches this aspect of the table's significance like this:

"By the same Spirit we are also united in true brotherly love as members of one body. For the apostle Paul says, *Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.* As one bread is baked out of many grains and one wine is pressed out of many grapes, so we all, incorporated in Christ by faith, are together one body. For the sake of Christ, who so exceedingly loved us first, we shall now love one another, and shall show this to one another not just in words but also in deeds."

With these well-known words, the Form says that the unity known as the communion of saints is the work of Jesus Christ, His gift to His people. Exactly because this communion of saints is Christ's *gift* is this communion of saints also His *mandate* to His people.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS IS CHRIST'S GIFT TO HIS PEOPLE.

1. The delightful flavor of this gift.

2. The stimulating mandate in this gift.

1. *The delightful flavor of this gift.*

The Father, we heard last week, chose a people for Himself before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4). These chosen ones the Father in turn gave to the Son (Jn 17:6). The Son died for all whom the Father gave Him, and now in the course of church history causes the gospel to come to the attention of these elect persons. Through His Spirit He works faith in their hearts. Then the Lord does not leave these believers alone; rather, He gathers them from their various homes in the several suburbs of a given town, and brings them together – church. This church gathering work occurs all over the globe, amongst people of any tribe and tongue and race. That was last week's material.

This church, now: how do the members of this church get on? What sort of chemistry occurs between these members?

The question is important. After the fall into sin, Adam was content to blame Eve, point his finger. Cain, driven by envy and selfishness, killed his brother (Gen 4). The Psalms repeatedly describe the wicked –and that's all people by nature since the fall into sin- as having a mouth "full of cursing and deceit and oppression" (Ps 10:7). Material like this and so much more leads to the list of Gal 5:

"Now the works of the flesh [that's fallen man!] are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like..." (vs 19ff).

To be with such a group cannot be rewarding; here is strife, trouble, driven by selfishness. Here is lots of 'take' and no 'give'. The church Christ gathers, though, breathes a different atmosphere. The reason is that the ascended Christ has sent His Holy Spirit to *change people's hearts*, make alive that which was spiritually dead. What this change looks like? People who produced the "works of the flesh" now produce "the fruit of the Spirit." That is: people whose conduct and attitudes were characterized by lewdness, envy, outbursts of wrath, etc, now reflect conduct and attitudes characterized –says Gal 5:22f- by "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." This is distinctly a different atmosphere!

We need to get a better handle on what this changed atmosphere tastes like. Belonging to a group of people characterized by love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, etc: what do you think, how does that feel? We recognize: there's something desirable about such a group! And indeed: the psalmist says precisely that. I think of Ps 16: "As for the saints who are on the earth, 'They are the excellent ones, in whom is all my delight'" (vs 3). The psalmist longs to be with the saints; being with them is *delightful*. Ps 133 says the same. "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is For brethren to dwell together in unity" (vs 1). It's "good", it's "pleasant".

But why? What makes this communion of saints so good and pleasant, so delightful? Surely, beloved, it's this: the body of people whom the Spirit has renewed produce spiritual fruit *made in heaven*. The list includes love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, and so on. Those are precisely the gifts the Lord Jesus Christ Himself displayed when He left the glory of heaven to come to earth. 1 John 4: "in this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (vss 9f). Love: that's the *self-emptying* of the Son, love is that He *gave* Himself to take on His shoulders the eternal wrath of God we deserved. *That* is love: *giving* of self for the benefit of another. If *that's* the attitude that characterizes this group renewed by the Holy Spirit, this communion of saints, it's no wonder that belonging to this group is 'delightful'.

Let's draw it out a bit further. In 1 Cor 13:4ff the apostle describes what love is like. "Love suffers long," he says, and we recognize that this is the same term Paul had mentioned in Gal 5 as a fruit of the Spirit: longsuffering, patient. Love travels miles with the brother, never mind weaknesses. "Love ... is kind," says 1 Cor 13, and that too was a characteristic mentioned in Gal 5. "Love does not envy," 1 Cor 13 continues, and that's also the same as Gal 5; there envy was mentioned as a work of the flesh. But love doesn't envy, love doesn't put oneself first, and so "love does not parade itself." Love does not put others down either, "does not behave rudely." Nor does love think evil of the brethren, does not distrust the brethren. Even if a brother does not quite say things perfectly, doesn't do something just right, love refuses to take offense; love trusts the other, love accepts that the other also wants to serve the Lord, love

accepts that the other (like the self) also has but a small beginning of the obedience God requires, and so love doesn't want to see the other's weaknesses; love instead "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." To be with such a group is delightful indeed!

The flavor of this love, the delight of this togetherness, comes out in Acts 2. I'd like us to have a look at this passage. The chapter tells us of the events of Pentecost, how the Holy Spirit was poured out and thereafter Peter had his Pentecost sermon. Then we read in vss 41-47 the following words....

Here, congregation, we taste something of the love, the giving, the self-emptying that characterizes the communion of saints, the body of those renewed by the Holy Spirit. I mention love, giving, self-emptying, and our thoughts go immediately to the words of vss 44f, how these new converts "had all things in common" and even "sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need." But that, brothers and sisters, is not the first evidence of love, of sharing, of self-emptying that the Holy Spirit records for us in this passage. The first evidence is the material of vs 42: "and they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers." What kept them busy was the apostles' doctrine, something to which they held doggedly in all the challenges of life. Then the point is not that they went to church on Sunday and maybe a Bible study course during the week and so learned their doctrine – while for the rest this doctrine did not mean much; the point is rather that they spoke about it together. They exercised a fellowship together, and their time together was characterized by speaking of the gospel. "They continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship:" that is, they encouraged each other with the riches of the gospel, shared their knowledge and insights with each other in the nuts and bolts of daily living. That concept is pointed up further when we're told that they broke bread together. The term makes us think straightaway of Lord's Supper as we know it. But that's not correct. When the apostle in 1 Cor 11 speaks about the Lord's supper, it's evident that Lord's supper was somehow part of a communal meal, a general eating together. And what do you talk about when you eat together? We know it from experience; when you sit together around a table to eat you talk about all sorts of bits and pieces that make up this earthly life. These early Christians did too, and in so doing they kept bringing in the doctrine of the apostles, kept pointing each other to the Lord and His triumph on Calvary. So they could also pray together. After talking about the Lord's works in the grind of daily life, they remembered each other before the throne of God's grace, lay each other's concerns and struggles before God.

We understand: here is a love, here is a sharing, here is a self-emptying that is much richer than simply sharing your lawn mower – valuable as that may be in its time. This, brothers and sisters, gives us the *flavor* of what communion of saints really is, what the renewing work of the Lord through His Spirit really is amongst His people. Giving, sharing of *self*, speaking of the Lord and His works in your life, in your circumstances, and so encouraging others, and praying together too: here the one draws the others attention to *God*, and so in turn one reflects the love of God, the peace of God, the patience of God, the kindness of God, etc – *communion of saints*. And to be involved in such an atmosphere is a *privilege*, a blessing so very rich! This is obviously not the work of man, *but the work of the ascended Christ through His Spirit!*

Now: what do you think, beloved? This communion of saints, this sharing, this love, this self-emptying: does God work it in the midst of this congregation? We've just sat together at the Lord's table and so gave expression to a unity we said exists among us. What do you think: was it real, or was it show?

People differ. Some are inclined to see the dark side of things, and so to draw attention to the imperfections of things. Others want to see the bright side of things, and so accent the positives. But here's a dilemma, congregation, we should not fall into. The fact of the matter is that the fruits of the Spirit are present in our midst. Look in your home, if you will, those saints nearest to you. Do you see in your home hatred and strife, lewdness and rage? *Or* do you see in your home love and joy and peace and patience with one another and kindness and the other fruits of the Spirit? So too in the congregation: do you see hatred and strife, outbursts of wrath and envy? *Or* do you see love for the brethren, and so patience with one another and kindness to one another and peace with one another? I recognize straightaway: we are not perfect. Plenty of faults remain. But *what characterizes the congregation?* We *believe* a communion of saints, believe that the ascended Lord works a change in His people so that they produce the fruits of the Spirit – and therefore live together in the love of the Spirit and the peace of the Spirit and the patience of the Spirit. We *believe* the Spirit works, therefore may look for *evidence* of His work. So what do you think: is this evidence apparent in the congregation?

Then it can't be denied, brothers and sisters : the fruits of the Spirit *are present!* There is love for one another, there is joy in the Lord together, and peace with each other, and longsuffering and kindness! So: the Lord lets us see evidence, manifestations of the Spirit's work in our midst, in our homes, in our selves! And that is surely something to be so thankful for, to be so excited about!

Now I come to our second point:

2. The stimulating mandate in this gift.

That mandate is simply this: we are to *be* what Christ through His Spirit has made us to be. Christ's gift of communion of saints gives us the responsibility to *be* communion of saints, in all its delightful flavor. That responsibility is stressed repeatedly in the pages of Scripture precisely because brokenness remains; none of us have reached the goal of perfection. So while we thank the Lord for His gracious work in us –evidence of love and joy and peace and patience with each other and kindness to each other, etc- we recognize that we have but a small beginning of the obedience God requires, and so we make it our business to develop these gifts in our ourselves and in each other.

Here I draw your attention to 1 Cor 12. The chapter had begun with Paul reminding the Corinthians that they used to be Gentiles (and behaved that way), but the Lord has changed them so that they through the Spirit can confess that "Jesus is Lord" (vss 1-3). Then the apostle moves on to explain that the one Holy Spirit gives "diversities of gifts" (vs 4), and straightaway adds - vs 7- that "the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one" (cf 1 Peter 4:10). That is to say: every saint receives some evidence that he or she has received the Holy Spirit, and the evidence lies in the *gifts* the Spirit has given. Vs 8: "to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, to another the word of knowledge through the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healings by the same Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another discerning of spirits, to another different kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues." Various different gifts present in Corinth, "but one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually as He wills" (vs 11). Another list appears in vs 28: "God has appointed these in the church: first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of tongues." Elsewhere in Scripture other gifts are mentioned; no list is complete (cf Rom 12). The point is: *everybody* has gifts, if not this gift than that. But –the apostle insists in 1 Cor 12- the gift that really counts is the gift of *love*. Important is not gifts of speech or of wisdom or of helping each other, etc – here we're all born with talents. But there is a gift we're not born with, and *that's* the one we're to develop most of all, and that's the gift of *love*. 1 Cor 12:31: we are to "earnestly desire" this gift, develop it, cultivate it, practice it, perfect it. Here's our mandate.

And we recognize: if we have love for each other, if we cultivate an attitude of being long suffering with each other, kind with each other, then we shall use all the other gifts we have for the benefit of each other also. We have the gift of wisdom? Then in love for the brother in need we'll speak words of wisdom from the Scriptures of God, to the brother's edification. We have the gift of knowledge? Then in love for the sister in need we'll speak from God to the sister's edification. It's what the early church of Acts 2 did; they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine, speaking with each other about the things of the Lord in the midst of life's struggles, praying with each other, and so encouraging each other in the hope of faith. We have the gift of helping? By practicing the gift of love, perfecting love, we'll use our ability to help, we'll share our possessions and talents to benefit the other. So the one body builds itself up in love.... And each member increasingly tastes the delightful pleasures of belonging to the body of the *changed* – the church of Jesus Christ.

In fact, so much so does the ascended Christ want His church to grow in unity and mutual love that He gave specialized gifts to His church specifically to encourage this growth in the communion of saints. I think of Eph 4. "And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers." Purpose? "For the equipping of the saints" so that the saints might be able to do "the work of ministry," the work of serving each other. Through that work of brother serving brother and sister serving sister, the body of Christ is edified, is built up "till we all come" –that's the goal- "till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (11ff). Note it well, congregation: pastors and teachers –we call them elders and ministers- were given precisely because the ascended Christ has first

given the gift of communion of saints, and this communion of saints needs to be built up – the gift implies the mandate. There's the task of the pastors and teachers: encourage the congregation to work with the gifts God has given, so that we may increasingly be the one body Christ has made us to be, one body working harmoniously together. So pastors and teachers have to instruct, and pastors and teachers have to encourage, and they have to admonish too, so that each member of the body in fact produces those fruits of the Spirit abundantly and uses their varied spiritual gifts of each other's edification. Under their guidance, the communion of saints is to abound in the doctrine, speaking together of the things of the Lord in the circumstances of daily life, praying together, helping each other in all things pertaining to this life and the life to come.

But in the brokenness of life there can be practical impediments to the proper functioning of the communion of saints. In the days of the early church something so simple as a language barrier prevented all the members of Jerusalem's congregation from sharing properly of the pleasures of the communion of saints. Hence the Holy Spirit gave the church deacons. The deacons' task was not to take over the congregation's task of selflessly extending love to each other, using their respective gifts for mutual benefit. The task of the deacons appointed in Acts 6 was instead to do what it took to overcome the practical hindrances preventing the proper functioning of the communion of saints.

So it is today. We tend to see deacons as the persons who distribute money to the needy, and that certainly is the most visible task our deacons have. But it's not central to their work! As communion of saints is not first of all a matter of sharing possessions or giving money, but –according to Acts 2- is first of all a matter of sharing the faith with each other, each member using his gifts to encourage each other in Christ in the nuts and bolts of real life, so it is for the deacons to see to it that nobody gets forgotten in the encouragements and mutual prayers we all need. That's why the deacons need to know the needs of the flock, and therefore visit in the homes. And the deacons may do well to tap a given brother or sister on the shoulder to direct their attention to a particular need in somebody's home. That's their work: supervise that everybody in the congregation is active in ministering to each other, so that nobody misses out on sharing the love of Christ through the brotherhood.

You get the picture, beloved. The Lord has given us a beautiful gift in the communion of saints, a gift so beautiful that "in their midst my soul will be delighted." No, the communion of saints is not yet perfect; for that we await the great and glorious day of Christ's return. Meanwhile, we acknowledge the gifts God has given, and strive to use these gifts to mutual edification. So the ascended Christ receives the glory, and we are encouraged in His service. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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**Sermon on Lord's Day 17 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on
Sunday afternoon, 20 October 2002.**

***" THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST CHANGES THE DAILY LIVES OF
GOD'S PEOPLE."***

Text:

Lord's Day 20

45. Q. How does Christ's resurrection benefit us?

A. 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.[1] Second, by His power we too are raised up to a new life.[2] Third, Christ's resurrection is to us a sure pledge of our glorious resurrection.[3]

[1] Rom. 4:25; I Cor. 15:16-20; I Pet. 1:3-5. [2] Rom. 6:5-11; Eph. 2:4-6; Col. 3:1-4. [3] Rom. 8:11; I Cor. 15:12-23; Phil. 3:20, 21.

Scripture Reading:

Romans 6:1-14

I Corinthians 15:1-28

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Hymn 26:1,2

Psalm 17:4,6

Psalm 30:1,2,7

Hymn 28:1,2,3,4

Psalm 39:2,3; Hy 51:8

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The subject of Christ's resurrection is well known to us; it's part and parcel of the Christian faith we've been taught over the years. The question I lay before you today, though, is this: in what way does that resurrection affect *you*? No, I am not asking about the effect of Christ's resurrection on your own resurrection from the dead on the last day. I ask about *today*, while you go about your daily affairs. What effect does Christ's resurrection of long ago have upon your life today? To put the question differently: would your life today be any different if Christ had not been raised?

In Lord's Day 17 the church repeats after God God's answer to this question with the confession that Christ's resurrection radically changes the daily lives of God's people. So I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS CHRIST CHANGES THE DAILY LIVES OF GOD'S PEOPLE.

1. The need for Christ's resurrection.
2. The reality of Christ's resurrection.
3. The response to Christ's resurrection.

1. The need for Christ's resurrection.

Lord's Day 17, brothers and sisters, mentions three distinct benefits for the believer flowing from the resurrection of Jesus Christ from His tomb. Of the three, it's the second I lift out today for special attention. That second reads as follows: "by His power we too are raised up to a new life."

That sentence as printed in our Lord's Day implies a rather unpleasant thought. Inherent to a "new life" and being "raised up" is the thought that the old life was somehow *not good enough*. The natural life, the old, must be replaced by a new life, and somehow we cannot obtain that new life unless Christ be raised from the dead....

Just what is this 'old life'? From what kind of existence were we raised up? To answer that question, we need to go back to the days of Adam and Eve.

Those two people, Adam and Eve, were created without sin, were perfect. It pleased the Lord God to establish a warm relation with these two people, a covenant of peace of love. Result: Adam and Eve tasted God's care, God's love, God's protection. They knew no tension, there was no friction between God and these two; Adam and Eve could know themselves absolutely safe in the hands of their God-by-covenant. In a word: these two persons enjoyed *life* in the full sense of the word. Their labors were not futile, their relaxation was not a waste of time. *Life* they had, without grief, without pain, without tears. Life, for they lived close to God. If you will: they had "fullness of food" and "prosperous ease" (Ezekiel 16:49).

It all changed when they ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. God had already said that on the day they ate of that tree they would die. At the instigation of the devil, in deliberate disobedience, they ate anyway. According to God's promise, these two persons died that same day. Spiritually they were dead, became what the Bible calls "dead in sin". That is: depravity washed over them, corruption disfigured them, so that they were inclined to all evil, incapable to doing any saving good. Because of that *deadness in sin* they could no longer exist in the presence of God; their deadness in sin implied that they could do nothing else than commit sin, and so they always had sins on their hands, sins that triggered the wrath of holy God. Dead they were in sin, and therefore holy God of heaven and earth exiled them from His presence, cast them out of the Garden where He used to converse with them.

So: did Adam and Eve still *live* after the fall? O yes, their hearts ticked on. But have life in that rich Biblical sense of the word they did not. Dead they were, dead in sin. That tragic reality affected their lives day by day in such a profound fashion. The peace they were used to was now replaced by fear, tension. The abundance they were used to was replaced by toil and labor. The happiness they were used to was replaced by anxiety, pain. Their spiritual deadness would invariably lead one day to their physical deadness; "you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3.16ff). What purpose human life still had? Because people were dead in sin life could have no purpose anymore! In the words of the Preacher of Ecclesiastes; "vanity of vanities; all is vanity" (1:2). One may labor from dawn till dark, may struggle to accumulate wealth and comfort, but ... all die, rich and poor alike, and in their death there is no difference. So what's the benefit of the toil? Vanity, says the Preacher, all is vanity. This life of deadness-in-sin has no purpose....

See there, brothers and sisters, why people need *new life*! That old existence into which we plunged ourselves with our fall into sin is empty, vain, futile. We need new life, life that has purpose, meaning, a goal. But where can we obtain such a new life? What shall we do in order to achieve this better life? Congregation, *there is nothing we can do to obtain a better life*! Human effort to be rid of terror, of hunger, of pain, of suffering is vain – simply because God said in the beginning that our lot is pain and toil, is sweat and curse, and the end of the matter is death, physical death flowing out of the spiritual death we already possess. And try though we might, we can't undo the curse of God on our fall into sin....

Behold here now, congregation, the gospel of Jesus Christ that God has prepared for you! Says the Catechism: "by His power we ... are raised up to a new life." "Vanity of vanities," said the Preacher, "all is vanity." Wait a minute, says the Christian in Lord's Day 17, all is not vanity. For new life is available! The Son of God arose from the dead to a new life, and the people of God as it were *ride on His coat tails*, are raised from their deadness also to a new life. Vanity of vanities? The eye of faith has seen the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and so the heart believes and the mouth confesses that on Easter Sunday a new reality entered the

world, something new, something profound, something touching the roots of life itself: "By His power *we too are raised up to a new life.*"

That concept of being raised to a new life comes from the words of the apostle Paul. It's what he says in Eph 2; "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, *made us alive* together with Christ..., and *raised us up* with Him" (vs 4f). In his letter to the Romans, ch 6, the apostle broadens those words. There he speaks about the union there is between the believer and Christ, a union which implies that when Christ was crucified the believer was crucified also, when Christ was buried the believer was buried also, and when Christ arose the believer arose also. Yet the apostle does not mean that the believer was physically present with Christ, visibly nailed to the cross with the Savior, bodily buried with Him and raised. The apostle speaks instead of a *spiritual* presence. When Christ died, in a way I can't understand, all believers from Adam to the end of the ages were included in His death. When Christ was buried, in a way I can't understand, all believers from Adam to the end were included in His burial; spiritually they were buried with Him. So too when Christ arose; in a way I can't understand, all believers from Adam to the end were raised with Him. Christ arose for a purpose, and that purpose was not simply to demonstrate His power over death as such; it was also *to obtain new life for the elect*. This is what the Old Testament had said –the saints would not remain in the clutches of Sheol- and this is what the apostle draws out in Rom 6 under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and so we're told that Christ's resurrection was not just the resurrection of Jesus Christ alone; His resurrection implied *our* resurrection, implied not just our glorious resurrection on the last day, but implied our spiritual resurrection today. In this life already the believer is raised to a new life; behold, the old has passed away, the new has come.

But what means this resurrection of the Christian? How does such a spiritual resurrection benefit him? This resurrection, beloved, means that *the relation of the believer to God is repaired!* Recall: that sin of the beginning resulted in Adam and Eve becoming dead in sin, and that's to say they could no longer stand before the throne of God; that deadness implied such corruption that all their deeds were defiled and therefore they themselves worthy of certain hell. Hence the drone of the Preacher that all was vanity....

But the child of God has been raised to a new life by the power of Christ. Then, yes, he is sinful still; "in this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of the obedience God requires of us" (LD 44). But being raised to a new life has as blessed consequence this that God sees before Him not a defiled sinner worthy of damnation but rather *a delivered saint* who can expect His grace. "Raised up to a new life": it means that *those words of the Preacher are no longer true for us!* The Preacher spoke of all things being vanity, because this life of sin, of spiritual deadness, invariably would end in death, physical deadness, and then hell. But with the resurrection of Christ those chosen to life have been raised also, so that they can enjoy *now already* a new relation with the Father, a relation not of distance and anger on sin, but rather a relation of nearness and peace. Instead of being dead to God, we are now "alive to God" (Rom 6:11). "Raised to a new life;" it means that the curse spoken in Gen 3 is gone, gone!

Was it then necessary for Christ to rise from the dead? Listen to Paul: "If Christ has not been raised, then ... your faith is in vain" (I C 15:14). Again: "if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (vs 17). Once more: if Christ has not been raised, "we are of all men most to be pitied" (vs 19). Why? Simple: without the resurrection of Christ, we *would still be dead*, dead in our sins today and therefore still burdened under the weight of God's righteous anger on our sins, and so life would be futile, would be judgment today and forever.

Our first point this afternoon was the need for Christ's resurrection. The answer is plain now. If Christ had not been raised, the words of the Preacher would be valid for all of us today; "vanity of vanities, all is vanity." And life would have no purpose, no perspective. As it is, Christ has arisen – O glorious gospel! That brings us to our second point:

2. The reality of this resurrection.

The gospel of Christ's resurrection is glorious, so very rich. But: *do the dead actually arise?*

We know the answer. None of us have ever seen a dead man live again. We also know that a resurrection is biologically impossible, all the more so for a body dead for three days. After all, the process of decay sets in immediately, and it's impossible to reverse the deterioration.

Well now, brothers and sisters, that hard reality given massive troubles to many when they contemplate the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yes, the Bible says Jesus arose. But we all know the dead can't arise. Hence critics have come with various theories to explain the biblical account. Jesus wasn't really dead, say some; He simply fainted, was presumed dead, and after three days of rest in the quiet of the grave pulled Himself together and got up: resurrection. Others prefer to speak of a grave robbery; the disciples stole the body and spread the story of His resurrection. Again others are convinced that Jesus is in the grave still, and explain the stories of His resurrection from the emotional traumas the disciples experienced; so attached were they to their Rabbi that they could not accept the fact of His death and so they dreamed up the fiction of His resurrection and kept preaching it until they themselves (and many others) believed it. What are we to think?

Let this be clear to us first of all, congregation: *no one can prove the resurrection*. Everyone who reads the Bible can only conclude that the Bible teaches Jesus' resurrection. *That is why this word must be believed!* The reality of Jesus' resurrection cannot be proven to the finite and sinful human mind; none today can point to the actual tomb in which Jesus was buried and then demonstrate beyond a shadow of doubt that that tomb is empty, not because the body was stolen, but rather because He arose. It's not provable, but it must be believed – on grounds that God has said so. And it *can* be believed only if one has great thoughts of God, only if one is convinced that God has the power to raise even the dead, convinced that Jesus was Himself true God and so could master death. This matter of the resurrection –like any other part of God's revelation- can be received only by faith. Those who seek logical, visible proof for that resurrection are looking in vain; God is not provable to human minds and His works are not either.

But we need to take the matter a step further. What do you think, beloved: can you *afford* to doubt, to deny the resurrection of the Savior? The apostle Paul answered that question in the passage we read from I Cor 15. He insists: if Christ has not been raised, *all is still vanity*. You see, brothers and sisters, your whole understanding of life hinges on what you say about the resurrection of the Savior. Is He raised? Then there is new life, and so a new relation with God. Is He not raised? Then there is no new life, and no new relation with God; He is angry with you still. You look for evidence of His resurrection? Forget the evidence; if God says Christ arose, then it is so. It will not do for sinners to question whether God's word is correct. In this also it is imperative that we today have a totally different mind-set than the people of our society. Around us people challenge God; God must prove what He says. The antithesis demands that we have a different attitude; ours is to be one of *humble acceptance*. God says that Christ has been raised, and so that's the way it is. And God says also that the child of God has been raised with Christ, and so that's the way it is too. These are real facts, though they are not and cannot be proven in a scientific laboratory. These are real facts, embraced by simple faith alone.

That brings us to our last point:

3. The response to this resurrection.

Sunday after Sunday we recite in our hearts the Apostles' Creed, including the part that Jesus died, was buried, and on the third day He arose again. Thereby we state that Yes, we believe Christ arose. Question: is that a sufficient response?

Remember, congregation, what we said before: Christ's resurrection *touches us today*. I said: Christ was not the only one to die on the cross, to be buried, to arise from the dead; the people of God were spiritually present with Christ and so they died with Him, were buried with Him, arose with Him. Died to what? Died to sin, and so were raised to a new life, a life not dominated by sin. Says the apostle Paul of Christ: "the death He died He died to sin, once for all, but the life He lives He lives to God." Then he adds concerning the Christian: "*So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus*" (Rom 6:10f). Dead to sin and alive to God: that's what the Christian *is*, insists Paul; these are facts, facts as real and true as is the resurrection of Christ itself (cf vs 2). That's why Paul can make an astounding statement in vs 14: "Sin will have no dominion

over you." That's not a wish, as in: I hope sin will have no dominion over you. It's not a command either, as in: don't let sin have dominion over you. It's rather a *statement of fact*: "sin will have no dominion over you." This is the reality for all who died and rose with Christ; such a person has died to sin, has been raised to a new life *with as result that sin is no longer his boss*.

So: what response should the gospel of Christ's resurrection bring forth? Who actually believes that Christ arose from the dead? Is it the person who opens his mouth to recite the Apostles' Creed, the person who says: "I believe that Jesus Christ died, was buried, on the third day arose from the dead"? Lord's Day 17, brothers and sisters, would have us conclude that No, the confession of the mouth is not sufficient! Lord's Day 17 would have us know that the *Christian necessarily has been raised to a new life* and that's a very real and visible thing.

Here is then the question: *are you raised to a new life*? Christ arose, of that the Scriptures are clear. With His resurrection His people are also raised to a new life; of that the Scriptures are also clear. And the wealth of this resurrection is also promised to you in the covenant God made with you. So then: are you raised to a new life? Are you dead to sin, do you hate sin, do you flee from sin? Or does sin still dominate over your life such that you produce works of darkness, be these pride and selfishness, hatred and enmity, jealousy and envy, materialism and greed? It's easy to say with the mouth that one believes Jesus' resurrection. But whether one really believes that resurrection is ultimately demonstrated *by one's works*; those works demonstrate whether one is raised to a new life, and as such is united with Christ in His death and resurrection.

Here, then, is also the reason why I formulated the last of our three points as I did: the response to this resurrection. One can respond to that resurrection by simple words: I believe Christ arose. One can also respond to that resurrection by works. Words are cheap; words are not the fruit that reveal what kind of a tree one is. One can sing the Apostles' Creed while he continues in works of darkness. But such a person is a fraud and a liar. Such a one must repent of hypocrisy and embrace in true faith the reality of Christ's resurrection. The new life that results *cannot be hidden*; it will be obvious for all to see – yourself included. How that new life is obvious? Listen to Paul: "if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is.... Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on the earth" (Col 3:1f). There you have it, beloved; that's what being raised with Christ is all about. It's to have one aim in life, one focus in life, and that's not pleasure or self or work or money, but it's Christ, *Christ*.

How does the resurrection of Christ benefit us? He arose so that we might be raised from the spiritual death into which we'd plunged ourselves at our fall into sin. He arose so that we might have life, and have it abundantly. He arose, and so my existence today is not futile; my existence is today rich beyond measure, for I have communion with God again, a communion even death can never destroy. Life: in the midst of brokenness I have peace-under-God's-care. Paradise restored! Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 18 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 3 November 2002.

"THE ASCENDED CHRIST IS OUR ADVOCATE BEFORE THE FATHER."

Text:

Lord's Day 18

46. Q. What do you confess when you say, He ascended into heaven?

A. That Christ, before the eyes of His disciples, was taken up from the earth into heaven,[1] and that He is there for our benefit[2] until He comes again to judge the living and the dead.[3] [1] Mark 16:19; Luke 24:50, 51; Acts 1:9-11. [2]

Rom. 8:34; Heb. 4:14; 7:23-25; 9:24. [3] Matt. 24:30; Acts 1:11. 47. Q. Is Christ, then, not with us until the end of the world, as He has promised us?[1] A. Christ is true man and true God. With respect to His human nature He is no longer on earth,[2] but with respect to His divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit He is never absent from us.[3]

[1] Matt. 28:20. [2] Matt. 26:11; John 16:28; 17:11; Acts 3:19-21; Heb. 8:4. [3] Matt. 28:18-20; John 14:16-19; 16:13.

48. Q. But are the two natures in Christ not separated from each other if His human nature is not present wherever His divinity is?

A. Not at all, for His divinity has no limits and is present everywhere.[1] 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.[2]

[1] Jer. 23:23, 24; Acts 7:48, 49. [2] John 1:14; 3:13; Col. 2:9.

49. Q. How does Christ's ascension into heaven benefit us?

A. First, He is our Advocate in heaven before His Father.[1] Second, we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that He, our Head, will also take us, His members, up to Himself.[2] Third, He sends us His Spirit as a counter-pledge,[3] 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.[4]

[1] Rom. 8:34; 1 John 2:1. [2] John 14:2; 17:24; Eph. 2:4-6. [3] John 14:16; Acts 2:33; II Cor. 1:21, 22; 5:5. [4] Col. 3:1-4.

Scripture Reading:

Luke 24:50-53

1 John 1:5-2:2

Hebrews 4:14-16

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Hymn 31:1,2,3

Psalm 42:5

Hymn 2:4,5

Psalm 62:3,4

Hymn 33:1,2,3,4,5,6

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

After Jesus' resurrection from the dead, Jesus spent 40 more days on earth. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus spoke to

His disciples, visited with them, ate with them, taught and comforted them. No doubt it was all very encouraging for His disciples.

But the day came that Jesus left this earth. The result is that today Jesus will not appear in our homes –nor even in this church building- as He appeared in the disciples’ midst years ago. Nor can we plan a visit to Jesus’ house to ask Him questions.

It strikes us as somewhat of a loss. Given the unbelief of our western world, would it not be great if the Lord Himself could preach some sermons for the public? People could put their difficult questions directly to Him; Lord, where was God on September 11? We could even bring our sick to Him for healing....

According to the passage we read from Luke 24, the disciples witnessed Jesus’ ascension into heaven and *they were filled with great joy* – says vs 52. Somehow, to their minds Jesus’ departure was *exciting news*. How come? We for our part –very modern people living in a very modern (and turbulent) world- we for our part need to understand *why* the disciples could be so joyful at Jesus’ departure. We need to understand so that we might be excited about His departure also.

I realize that last week a sermon was already read on Lord’s Day 18. There is, however, so much encouragement in our Lord’s Day for God’s people in our troubled world that I take the opportunity to devote a second Sunday to this Lord’s Day. I trust there will not be too much overlap.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE ASCENDED CHRIST IS OUR ADVOCATE BEFORE THE FATHER.

1. How Jesus ascended into heaven.
2. What Jesus does in heaven.
3. How the church shows her joy.

1. How Jesus ascended into heaven.

The passage we read from Luke 24 tells us that "it came to pass, while He blessed them, that He was parted from them and carried up into heaven" (vs 51). Of significance for us now is Luke’s use of the *passive form*, Jesus "was parted." The point of the phrase is that somebody else acted upon Jesus. Luke presents Jesus as passive; Jesus did not storm the gates of heaven in an attempt to invade heaven. Rather, "He was parted from them and carried up into heaven."

A significant detail is given in Acts 1. I read there in our translation: "He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight" (vs 9). We picture in the eye of our mind that Jesus began to rise from the earth, went up, up, up, and a cloud drifted by to block the disciples’ view of Jesus, and when the cloud had passed Jesus was gone.... But the verb translated as ‘received’ describes the action of coming down to pick someone up. We may think of how a wind gets under leaves or dust and lifts this dust on high. The cloud of Jesus’ ascension did not move horizontally across the sky (and so block the view); this cloud rather moved vertically, came down from above to pick Jesus up and carry Him aloft.

You will recall from the prophecies of Ezekiel the vision the prophet saw by the River Chebar. Chapter 1: "Then I looked, and behold, a whirlwind was coming out of the north, a great cloud with raging fire engulfing itself; and brightness was all around it and radiating out of its midst like the color of amber, out of the midst of the fire" (vs 4). As this great cloud came closer to Ezekiel, the prophet could make out more detail, including the four living creatures and wings and wheels and eyes all around, then a platform and on the platform a throne, and on high above the throne was God Himself. "This," Ezekiel said at the end of the chapter, "was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord" (vs 28). The cloud: it was the vehicle of God, the chariot carrying the Almighty. That’s an image we meet more often in the Old Testament: clouds form God’s chariot, God’s vehicle (Ps 18:10f; Ps 104:3; cf 2 Kings 2:11). The disciples saw a cloud come down from heaven to pick Jesus up and carry Him aloft. That’s to say: the disciples witnessed that God Himself sent His divine vehicle to transport Jesus from earth into heaven!

What that means in turn, brothers and sisters? This: Jesus was royally *welcomed* into heaven, indeed, God *desired* Him there.

That is a remarkable thing. Remember: God once *sent the Son out of heaven*. I read in Jn 3:17 that "God ... sent His Son into the world ... that the world through Him might be saved." Similarly, I read in Gal 4 that "God *sent forth* His Son ... to redeem those who were under the law" (vs 4). Though the Son and the Father had enjoyed the glory of heaven together from all eternity (to be sure, together with the Holy Spirit), the Father sent His Son out of His glorious company, sent Him to earth for the express purpose of reconciling a people to God. Some 33 years after the Father sent His Son to earth, this same Father directed His divine chariot to *pick up* His Son again and return Him to the bosom of the Father. *That* is Jesus' ascension.

Question. Why would the Father welcome His Son so royally to His bosom again? Surely, brothers and sisters, that is because the Father was *so satisfied* with the Son's work on earth! God had sent the Son to earth to redeem a race of sinners, and to accomplish that goal Jesus had taken upon Himself the wrath of God against man's sin and satisfied God's justice; that was His work on the cross. Well now, by transporting Jesus into heaven in such a marvelous manner, the Lord God *publicly places His stamp of approval on Jesus' work*.

And for people living on earth, beloved, *that is so exciting!* For people on earth live every day under the eye of the Almighty. It is He who created us in the beginning, He who we offended so bitterly with our fall into sin, He who consequently drove us out of the Garden of Plenty into the Wilderness of thorns and thistles. That much of Australia is today a dust bowl is the direct result of the fall into sin in Paradise, and is part and parcel of the judgment of the God with whom we have to do day by day. That our lives know so many thorns and thistles –and we all experience so many in our marriages and families, in our church life and work- that our lives know so many thorns and thistles is again the direct result of the fall into sin in Paradise, and is part and parcel of the judgment of the God with whom we have to do day by day. Then Yes, this God in deep compassion sent His Son into the world to redeem sinners to Himself, but the conclusive evidence that God was pleased with Jesus' work lay in the fact that God Himself *received Jesus into heaven so royally again*. With that act of picking Jesus up in His divine chariot and transporting Him into His heavenly residence, God has publicly declared that Jesus work was well done, that sinners are reconciled to God. Instead of anger from God on our remaining sins, there is *divine favor*, forgiveness of sins, grace unbounded – both for this life and for the life to come. Already the first of the human race has been received into the presence of God, and if God accepted the first one others will surely follow in due time!

Now we understand why the disciples in Luke 24 were so excited! That God should send His heavenly limousine to pick up their dear Master – what glorious evidence this was of the success of Jesus' labors! God accepts man again, Paradise in principle *restored* – how rich the gospel!

We come to our second point:

2. What Jesus does in heaven.

There are in particular two things that the exalted Son of God does in heaven. Both are directly connected with our relation with God, and therefore of critical importance for us and comfort to us. The church confesses the first in the first part of Question & Answer 49, where we echo God's revelation in the Bible like this: "He is our Advocate in heaven before His Father." The church echoes the second in Lord's Day 19, where we confess that the ascended Christ is "Head of His Church, through whom the Father governs all things." The second we leave till next week; the first needs further attention today.

Our fall into sin offended God deeply. He was terribly displeased with our original as well as actual sins, and determined to punish them by a just judgment, we confessed in Lord's Day 4. In His unfathomable mercy He sent His only Son to earth to bear the punishment we deserve; Christ suffered and died *for us, in our place*. That God received Christ into heaven confirms us in the good news that Christ indeed paid the penalty God would otherwise have poured out on us.

But see: *day-by-day we continue to sin*. Fight though we might, we collapse time and again in the face of the devil's

attacks and the world's temptations; we are just too weak.... So sin again gets between God and us, so that we earn for ourselves again His just judgments.... As God exiled Adam and Eve out of His presence and His favor when they sinned in the beginning, so we on account of our sins may expect holy God to exile us out His presence and His favor again. And that's the more so because we keep on offending God *despite the infinite display of His love in giving us His only Son*.

But see here, brothers and sisters, the glorious work of the ascended Savior! God has transported His Son into heaven, received Him again in glory, but Jesus *has not therefore forgotten us on earth!* Granted, He doesn't come to visit us in our homes. But in the courts of God in heaven He remembers us day by day and so continually intercedes with the Father on our behalf. He knows very well that we sin time and time again, and He knows also that in so doing we offend the Father severely, and *that is why Jesus makes it His business to take up our cause in heaven, to speak up in our defense*. This is the point of the passage we read from John: "if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 Jn 2:1).

Advocate. We scarcely use the word in today's English, but it's meaning is parallel to the modern word 'lawyer'. The point is that we have offended God again with our sins, and so the Judge calls us to give account of what we have done. For our part, of course, we can't give satisfactory account. So the ascended Christ steps in a lawyer, to plead our cause before the Father. No, as an Advocate Jesus does not present God with various excuses to try to explain away our transgressions. Instead Jesus reminds the Father of the work He accomplished on Calvary, how it was that the sins of that sinner were piled onto Jesus Christ and He paid for those sins, and therefore there is no place anymore for further wrath from God on that sinner. He pleads, intercedes before God on our behalf, and always, always God hears the pleas of His only Son. Romans 8: "Who shall bring a charge against God's elect?" And make no mistake, beloved: Satan lays countless charges against us (cf Zech 3), and we well know that we give Satan plenty of ammunition to lay countless charges against us. But who shall condemn us? Shall God? No, says Romans 8, for "it is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us" (vss 33f). He pleads, and *because the Father took Him into heaven* may we be assured that God *always hears Jesus' intercession*.

We understand: here is a most wonderful gospel. It is with *God* that we have to do day by day, it is *God* we offend day by day with our ongoing sinfulness and sins, and so we cut off the blessing we need so very much in every circumstance of life. Here is the gospel: Christ in heaven intercedes, pleads for us, so that God does not deal with us day by day according to what we deserve but instead pours daily upon us His gracious blessings! We can *live*, we can expect God's grace, not only because Christ died for us long ago, but also because Christ today labors in heaven's courts on our behalf.

We for our part say: it would be nice if Jesus were still on earth, could visit us, preach for us, answer our questions and heal our sick. But now we understand something of the disciples' "great joy" at Jesus' ascension into heaven. That He labors there on our behalf before the God with whom we have to do day by day is such a glorious gospel! This is far richer than if He would appear in our midst to give us a word of comfort! Given our ongoing sins it's an *Advocate before the Father* that we need so much. And precisely *this* is what God has granted to His children on earth. Indeed, it is better that Christ has gone to heaven (cf Jn 16:7); it gives cause for rejoicing because His departure guarantees that we keep a good and healthy relation with the Father.

So we come to our third point for this afternoon:

3. How the church shows her joy.

The Savior God transported so marvelously into heaven is busy there, daily pleading our cause before the Father. As a result of His work there, God in heaven does not reject us on account of our sins; instead, He forgives those sins and treats us daily as His children and heirs. That means in turn, beloved of the Lord, that we *can* - and therefore *must-speak with this God*.

Recall Paradise. Before the fall into sin there was an open communication between God and man. The Lord God came regularly to Adam and Eve in the cool of the day, so regularly that Adam and Eve could recognize the sound of His coming (Gen 3:8). But as soon as they sinned God sent them out of the Garden, and with that expulsion came an end to God's visits and therefore to unhindered communication with God. True, the Lord taught mankind to make

sacrifices, and through the sacrifices still to approach God in prayer. And those sacrifices in turn pointed forward to the work of Jesus Christ on the cross, that work where He would pay for the sins that had hindered prayer ever since the fall in the beginning. Christ on the cross has paid for sin, and so opened the way for us to speak to God again. Yes, and God has placed His stamp of approval on Jesus' work by transporting Him so gloriously into heaven. *The result of it is, congregation, that we can speak to God again!* Add on top of that the fact that Jesus Christ is in heaven interceding for us: what wonderful incentive that is to pray!!

This, in fact, is the specific instruction of the apostle in his letter to the Hebrews. We have, He says in 4:14, "a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God." As High Priest, we understand, Jesus keeps reminding the Father of the sacrifice He presented on the cross; there's His work as Advocate, Intercessor. In His reminding the Father, He sympathizes with us in our weaknesses, for Satan has tempted Him as he tempts us, and the world has put pressure on Him as it puts on us, and He was afflicted with the weaknesses of the flesh as we are; He "was in all points tempted as we are" – so much can He sympathize with our weaknesses. The fact that Christ intercedes for us, and does so as One who sympathizes with our weaknesses must, writes this inspired author, *must* prompt a response from the church, and the response has to be this: "let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (vs 16).

In other words: the reality of Jesus' ascension must drive the church *to prayer*. God Himself took one of us –Jesus Christ, true man- into heaven because He was pleased with the work Christ accomplished on the cross. *This* man –true man like we, and at the same time true God- continually intercedes on our behalf before the Father. It's the combination of those two facts that must drive the people of God to take up again with confidence the communication with God we broke through our fall into sin. That's the instruction of the apostle: "let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace." Boldly, says the apostle, and the point is not that we come arrogantly, as if we have rights we can demand from God or have no need to be ashamed on account of our sins. No, with the term 'boldly' the Scriptures teach us to work with the reality of Christ's blood and His continual intercession on our behalf, and so to be sure that our sins do not hinder access to God; they're forgiven for Jesus' sake. So come boldly; confess sin, yes, and then move on to speak openly with the Father about all that is in your mind.

The church has understood this glorious aspect of God's revelation, and echoed it in Art 26 of the *Belgic Confession*. Look with me please on page 460 of your *Book of Praise* (or 459 if you have an older version yet). **Read – and add comment.**

How, then, shall the church respond to the reality of Christ's ascension? We live, brothers and sisters, in a very modern world, amongst much godlessness and much restlessness. The devil continues to attack us and the world does also, and we meanwhile are weak, so inclined to all evil. Would it be better if Jesus were still with us to visit and to encourage? *By faith* we say: it is better, much better, that our Lord and Savior has ascended into heaven, because herein we are assured that the God we offend with our sins has *accepted* Him, and therefore also *heeds Christ's intercessions on our behalf*. So we're confident: in this troubled world our Father for Jesus' sake supplies all the grace we need day by day.

More: we're joyful. As did the disciples of long ago, we respond to news of Jesus' ascension with "great joy", a joy that drives to *prayer*, boldly, openly, abundantly – confident that for Jesus' sake Father hears and answers. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 19 Q&A 50, 51 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 10 November 2002.

"THE ASCENDED CHRIST IS KING OF KINGS."

Text:

Lord's Day 19 Q&A 50, 51

50. Q. Why is it added, And sits at the right hand of God?

A. Christ ascended into heaven to manifest Himself there as Head of His Church,[1] through whom the Father governs all things.[2]

[1] Eph. 1:20-23; Col. 1:18. [2] Matt. 28:18; John 5:22, 23.

51. Q. How does the glory of Christ, our Head, benefit us? A. First, by His Holy Spirit He pours out heavenly gifts upon us, His members.[1] Second, by His power He defends and preserves us against all enemies.[2]

[1] Acts 2:33; Eph. 4:7-12. [2] Ps. 2:9; 110:1, 2; John 10:27-30; Rev. 19:11-16.

Scripture Reading:

Ephesians 1:15-23

Revelations 20:1-3

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 110:1,2

Psalms 97:1

Hymn 2:3,4

Hymn 31:1,4,5

Hymn 41:1,2,3,4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Christ's ascension into heaven, we said last week, means that the Lord is not bodily in our midst; we cannot go to visit Him with our questions, nor will He come to us to preach for us. Yet, we added, that is not a loss, for the Lord remains hard at work in heaven on our behalf. Specifically, He intercedes for us before the Father, and so makes it possible for us –sinners though we be- to speak with God. So we may be people of prayer, making the most of the opportunity God has given to pour out our hearts before the God who created us and still upholds us day by day. In all the turmoil of this broken life, the possibility of prayer –and the assurance that God hears- is great wealth.

Our Savior in heaven, though, does more than intercede before the Father. He also, says the Scripture, governs the world from His throne at God's right hand. Mr Howard is not at the top of the ladder in Australia, but our Lord Jesus Christ is. It's of this material that we make confession in the first two Question & Answer of Lord's Day 19, and it's to this gospel that we may listen this morning.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE ASCENDED CHRIST IS KING OF KINGS.

1. The reality of Christ's reign.

2. The consequence of this confession.

1. *The reality of Christ's reign.*

The Lord God sent His chariot from heaven to transport His Son back into His heavenly glory. Upon His arrival in heaven Jesus "sat down at the right hand of God" – I read in Mk 16:19. That phrase - "at the right hand of God" - does more than describe a location; the phrase at bottom describes a function.

We sang from Ps 110, where David speaks about the right hand of God as the place where foes are made one's footstool, the place from which one rules over enemies. In a word, the place describes the notion of having *power*. Paul captures the significance of "the right hand of God" when he says –Eph 1- that God "seated [Christ] at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but in that which is to come" (vss 20f). Principalities and powers and might and dominions: these are the demons, the powers of the air (3:10; 6:12), but Christ has a position of power far above them. The names that are named: think of the Caesars of Paul's day, and the big men of world history ever since - Napoleon, Hitler, Stalin, even bin Laden- but Christ has a position of power and authority far above them also. That's what's caught in the phrase "the right hand of God." It is as Jesus said to His disciples just before His ascension: "all authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Mt 28:18). So in Rev 1 Jesus is given this glorious title: "the Ruler over the kings of the earth" (vs 5).

We understand, congregation, that this doctrine is very rich in its content. Christ as king over all: how rich! This King is the very same person who loved us so much that He laid down His life for us on the cross to ransom us from Satan's power! *This One*, who loved us so much: *He* now rules the world, is King of kings and Lord of lords – yes, that's rich! Through Him who loved us so much the Father now governs all things: what comfort for the church!

Is it really, congregation? Look around you, and what do you see? How many people in Australia in fact acknowledge Christ as king? How many do you meet when you walk the streets of town? Truly, there's so few! Everywhere around us we see so much evil, unbelief, blatant transgression of the laws of the King of the world! Does that hard reality not give the lie to the confession that Christ is King, is seated securely at the Father's right hand as Master of the Universe?

It is true, brothers and sisters: the naked eye sees *no real evidence* of Christ's kingship. But the Christian lives not by sight; the Christian lives by faith. That's to say: the Christian's view of reality is not determined by what the eye sees or by what the newspapers report. Rather, the Christian's view of reality is determined by *what the Lord has revealed* in the Bible. God has said that the Christ who was transported into heaven received that seat of authority and might at God's right hand, and *so the Christian confesses it to be so*. Despite the unbelief of our society, despite the fact that sin is publicly condoned throughout so very much of the world –and therefore Christ's kingship ignored or denied- the Christian confesses nevertheless that Christ is in fact King of kings in today's sin-filled and turbulent world. In fact, the Christian confesses that his Savior directs each and every event of today's difficult politics. Nothing comes by chance, totally nothing; the Father governs all through the Christ who died for us, arose and sits at God's right hand.

Still, we need some explanation for the evil around us. How can Christ be King over the kings of the world, if most strong men of today's world do not acknowledge Him? How can Christ be King over the people of the world, if people by the millions totally disregard His laws?

Here I need to bring up the imagery of *rebellion*. History has plenty of examples where a king ruled a given country, but the people chose to disobey his instructions. From the Bible I think, for example, of Solomon's son Rehoboam. Certain of the people within the kingdom rebelled against the king, refused to acknowledge Rehoboam as king, refused to obey his commands. Rehoboam could have sent out his soldiers to compel obedience, and it would have become full blown civil war, with Israelite fighting against Israelite (with all the misery of that) had God not told Rehoboam to leave off sending his troops in to compel obedience. So the northern tribes set up their own king, and Rehoboam continued to reign over Judah. But not every rebellion ends up in a parting of ways. Rebellion can be ongoing, and that's civil war, an ongoing struggle within the kingdom – with the rebels trying to topple the king, and the king trying to compel the rebels to submit to his authority.

When the Lord God first created this world, every creature He fashioned submitted readily and cheerfully to His authority. God's creation was God's *kingdom*, and every creature acknowledged God as king. But there came the day when certain angels under the leadership of Satan rebelled against God, refused to accept His kingship (Jude 6). The devil and his angels were still within God's kingdom, were still within the realm over which God reigned, but they refused to acknowledge God's sovereignty. That rebellion grew when Adam and Eve, at the instigation of the devil, also disobeyed God's command. Man's disobedience in Paradise did not dethrone God, nor did it shrink the size of God's kingdom. But it did mean that rebellion had entered God's kingdom, that certain of the citizens of God's kingdom refused to acknowledge God as King.

It's true that the Lord God announced enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, so that life on earth would be characterized by warfare. But it's equally true that in the course of the centuries of human existence so many millions have joined Satan's side and lived in rebellion against the king, while –in relative terms- so few have lived in submission to God's kingship. In the Old Testament, for example, we see Israel gathered around Mt Sinai, people of God who acknowledge God as king. But at that very moment when Israel acknowledged God's kingship, the people of Egypt did not, and the people of Canaan did not either. Nor did the civilizations of Australia or of China or of South America or of Europe: around the world was unlimited unbelief, rebellion, while only that relatively small number around Mt Sinai acknowledged the Lord's place as King of kings.

Worse, as time passed, that relatively small number around Mt Sinai joined the rebels. In the matter of the golden calf they disobeyed God. Later, in the land of Canaan, they bowed down to the gods of the Canaanites and so joined the rebels in rebellion against the King of the world. So it went through the generations. Listen to the prophets God sent to Israel: time and again they have to complain about Israel's disobedience. And all the while, all the rest of the world – heathen nations all!- did not acknowledge God as king, but belonged with the rebels. My point: if one were to look at the history of the world in Old Testament times, the overall picture the human eye would see is that God is not king of the world; the rebels have *triumphed!*

But faith, brothers and sisters, clings to God's word! So the psalmist, despite the unbelief and apostasy of his day, could sing with exuberance: "The Lord reigns; Let the earth rejoice!" (Ps 97:1). It's true: the world is full of rebellion, but "He who sits in the heavens laughs; the Lord holds them in derision" (Ps 2:4 – ESV). For the Lord in heaven on high knows of the victory Christ would accomplish on the cross of Calvary, a work by which Christ would not only pay for sin but also *defeat the devil and his demons*. Indeed, throughout the Old Testament already even Satan could not move apart from God; even the rebels in God's kingdom were dependent on Him.

In the course of time Christ went to the cross, battled Satan, and triumphed. That's why Rev 20 says that the devil was "bound". By His binding the devil, Christ earned for Himself the *right* to be crowned Lord of the universe, and that's why God crowned Him with glory and honor, and made Him King over all. So the ascended Christ is today Lord of this world every bit as much as the Creator was sovereign over His creation on the day He fashioned it. That so many in Christ's kingdom today live in rebellion against the King does not change the fact of His sovereignty and His kingship one dot.

I mentioned Rev 20. You will know that there is a doctrine about known as millennialism; it comes in 'pre-mil' and 'post-mil' varieties. The mainstay of this teaching is that at some time still to come the Lord Jesus Christ will return from heaven to earth in order to set up His throne on earth and rule the nations; the throne will be in Jerusalem. The teaching is said to be based on the Lord's words in Rev 20, where the passage relates that the Devil was bound a thousand years in a sealed pit so that he should no longer deceive the nations (vss 1-3). The thing is now: those who adhere to this future millennialism do not see Christ as king today. Today, it is said, Satan is still free to come and go on earth to deceive the nations, and that's to say that the rebels in Jesus' kingdom still have the upper hand. So these millennialists look to the future, to the time of the millennium, in the expectation that *then* Christ will reign supreme.

But the Bible is so clear, beloved, that Christ is king *today*. When Rev 20 speaks about a thousand-year reign, the reference is not to a period still in the future. This thousand-year period began with Christ's ascension and catches the whole New Testament dispensation until Christ's return on the last day. True, Christ has ascended nearly 2000 years ago, much longer than the 1000 years of Rev 20. But the figure '1000' in Rev 20 is not meant literally, no more than the dimensions of the New Jerusalem in Rev 21 are meant literally, or the total of the elect in Rev 14 –144,000- is

meant literally. In keeping with the nature of the Book of Revelation, these are symbolic figures. The number 1000 captures the notion of a full period of time, and that's to say that Christ reigns for the entire duration of the New Testament dispensation – even though the naked eye sees so much rebellion on earth.

Is Christ in fact King in the world today? Dear brothers and sisters, let there be no doubt! Faith accepts what the Lord has revealed in the Bible, and that revelation is plain. The naked eye may see something different, but the child of God lives not by sight but by faith. So we continue to confess in our apostate, rebellious world that Christ remains King of kings and Lord of lords; all authority in heaven and on earth is His.

I come now to our second point:

2. The consequence of this confession.

There is, first of all, enormous comfort flowing out of this confession of Christ's sovereignty. The very one who laid down His life for our salvation is today Lord of lords, and that's to say that the One of top of the world's ladder *loves* His people most dearly. That in turn means that He directs the history of the world *to the well being of His church* (cf Eph 1:22). It cannot be differently; such is the depth of the love He displayed on Calvary.

As we look at the world around us today, this fact is truly comforting. There is plenty of war-talk in relation to Iraq, and what the consequences of such war might be in the Muslim world is anybody's guess. But this much is clear: the Lord Jesus Christ will only permit a war in the Middle East if it somehow serves for the gathering and preservation of His church. We for our part do not have to know the details of how a war can provide opening for the gospel, or be instrumental in Christ's church-gathering work in the Middle East. It is enough for us to believe that He who sits on the throne of the world loves His bride perfectly, and so preserves His people. That gives comfort in the face of all the war-talk of the day.

At the same time we need to be aware that a possible war in the Middle East has a purpose not only for the Middle East. We realize very well that the entire western world will be very much touched by such a war. Think of the effect on the economy, as well as the increased possibility of further terrorist attacks. But here is the comfort of Lord's Day 19 in our turbulent time: the Father governs all things through Jesus Christ *for the good of the church*. That's true in Australia too, and throughout the western world. Time and again we read in Scripture of how the Lord stirred up nation against nation, even world powers, with a view to pouring out His judgment on covenant children of His who had joined the rebels; think of the various enemies who attacked Israel in the days of the Judges (see also Dan 7ff). The Lord's point is to *work a change* amongst those rebellious covenant children; they should come to repentance. And that, we understand, is an expression of the Lord's love for His people; He does not wish that they should perish, but rather should repent and live. When the Lord in our day –and remember that He loves His people– when the Lord in our day leads history in such a way that tensions have risen dramatically around the globe in the last year or so, leads history in such a way that war appears likely in time to come, then He has His eye also on those covenant children of His in the western world who have joined the rebels in opposing Christ's lordship. He laid down His life for all those whom the Father has given Him, and so will not permit a single one to be snatched from His hand. He will use even war, and all the plagues and trials that come with war, to impress upon His own that Yes, He is King, and so there is no place for rebellion; these citizens of His kingdom must turn again and submit to Him.

That in turn, congregation, is why there is no place for anxiety on our part as we look into the future. The One who loves His church so much that He died for her is leading history –in Australia too– in order to promote His church gathering and His church-preserving work. We need not understand the details; it is enough that we know and confess the sovereignty of our Savior. So we're comforted as we look into the future.

There is another consequence that flows from the reality of Christ's Kingship over the world today. This consequence concerns the way we live and act in today's world.

Some of us live in rather protected environments, inasmuch as we do not daily rub shoulders with the rebels of the world around us. Others of us do; at university or TAFE, in the office or in the factory we work and study with people who have not an ounce of regard of God's ordinances and Jesus' sovereignty. Working with such people day after day increases the pressure on us to conform to their patterns of behavior – be it in ethics or in dress style or word choice or

attitudes, etc.

If now we keep in mind that the Lord is King, and millions of those around us live in rebellion against the King of kings - yes, and are in principle already defeated!- then our place on the job site comes into perspective. For us to talk or dress or act in a manner that removes any distinction between the rebels and us is nothing less than treason against the King! And that, of course, is incentive for the rebels to carry on in their rebellion, incentive for them to think that their rebellion against the King is successful. No, beloved, it is for us to make abundantly clear that our Savior *is* King, it is for us to acknowledge His kingship in every aspect of life. In all we do, day in, day out, the question is to stay with us: Lord, precisely because you are King, what is Your wish for me in this situation? How do You want me to speak, what attitude do You want me to adopt, what stand do You wish me to take on this issue....

Meanwhile, we experience that it takes courage to stand up in this world as obedient citizens of Christ's kingdom; somehow we *fear* the response of those around us. Yet, congregation, we know well that no civil war is ever won by the loyalists being afraid of the rebels. It's for us to keep the *cause* in mind. More, it's for us to keep in mind the reality of Christ's *victory* over sin and Satan. Already the devil and his rebels are defeated; the Devil in Rev 20 is "bound". Why, then, should we fear the reactions of the rebels?! Even if the naked eye sees the rebels making progress in their rebellion against Christ, the fact of the matter is that Christ has triumphed. It's only a matter of time before the naked eye will see the King of kings on the clouds of heaven, and Satan and his rebels (people and demons alike) swept out of Christ's kingdom and sealed in the bottomless pit. That reality has to *encourage* the people of God to stand up for their King in the midst of the rebels around us! Indeed, that reality has to *drive* us to place all of life – family, education, politics, culture, economics, *everything*- in submission to the will of the King of kings. That is part and parcel of the mandate that logically falls upon those who acknowledge Christ's sovereignty; in deeds we need to spell out that there is not a square inch of life of which Christ doesn't say "Mine". So the fathers in the home (and the mothers as their helpers) must see to it that every aspect of family life is consistent with the confession of Jesus' sovereignty. The teachers and the school board (and the parents and students also) must see to it that every aspect of school life is consistent with the confession of Jesus' sovereignty. To the degree that we receive positions of influence in our work environment, it is for us to exert ourselves to ensure, as much as possible, that the work environment and work ethics conform to the reality of Christ's sovereignty. We catch the point: the confession of Lord's Day 19 has consequences for how we live and what sort of environment we tolerate around us.

And say not, congregation, that the pressure of the rebels around us makes it too difficult in our modern world to be obedient citizens of Christ's kingdom. Well does the church confess in Lord's Day 19 that Christ from the right hand of God has "poured out heavenly gifts upon us, His members." The Holy Spirit has made His home in the hearts of His people, and with His presence gives gifts of faith, of love, of patience, of perseverance. These gifts –and there are so many more- are the gifts we may work with in our godless age, and so be assured that our ascended King supplies our needs day after day so that we *can* be obedient citizens of His kingdom. Need we be afraid that we don't know what to say when the heat is on? Says our King: "do not worry about how or what you should speak. For it will be given to you in that hour what you should speak; for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you" (Mt 10:19ff).

So, beloved, fight on against the rebels around us! The naked eye is not going to see a great deal of victory, but that may not deter the believer, simply because the believer embraces the reality as the Lord has revealed it in His Word. The naked eye sees growing rebellion, but the believer rejoices in the knowledge that His Savior is Lord of lords in today's world, and so the believer calmly and resolutely obeys his King – despite the negative response he knows he'll get from the rebels around him. The believer is sure: soon the day comes when the King of kings will appear on the clouds of heaven, and then every knee in heaven and on earth and under the earth –every rebel included- will acknowledge that Christ was King after all, and the cause of the obedient citizens right and just.

Maranatha, come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 19 Q&A 52 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 17 November 2002.

" CHRIST SOON RETURNS IN GLORY."

Text:

Lord's Day 19 Q&A 52

52. Q. What comfort is it to you that Christ will come to judge the living and the dead?

A. 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.[1] 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.[2]

[1] Luke 21:28; Rom. 8:22-25; Phil. 3:20,21; Tit. 2:13, 14. [2] Matt. 25:31-46; I Thess. 4:16, 17; II Thess. 1:6-10. God the Holy Spirit and our Sanctification

Scripture Reading:

1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11

2 Peter 3:10-13

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 68:2,3

Psalm 96:8

Psalm 98:1,4

Hymn 57:3,4

Hymn 50:1,2,6,7

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Our Lord Jesus Christ has ascended into heaven. We learned two weeks ago that in heaven He intercedes on our behalf, and so we can pray, yes, *must* be people of prayer. Last week we learned that in heaven our Savior also rules over the entire world; He is King of kings and Lord of lords. In our turbulent times that reality gives us much comfort.

We said last week too, though, that not everybody in Christ's kingdom actually *admits* that Christ is King. The devil doesn't, nor do his demons. So too the millions of unbelievers on this earth; they paid no heed to the instructions the King of kings has given in His word. I described all these demons and people last week as *rebels*.

For our part, we live in this world, amongst these rebels. These rebels –devil and world alike- put pressure on us to join the rebels, to sin against our God, to ignore or deny Christ's kingship. We for our part are weak, even inclined to all evil. The result is the situation as it's described in our Question & Answer for this afternoon; life includes so much "sorrow and persecution", life is a vale of tears.

In that situation, brothers and sisters, the Lord our God comes to us with His Word of comfort. He tells us that the Christ who once ascended will return. Said Jesus once to His disciples: "They will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory" (Luke 21:27). The angels repeated the thought to the disciples while they gazed into heaven on the day of Jesus' ascension. Said the angels: "This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). That promise gives glorious perspectives to the

church in her sufferings.

I preach to you the gospel of Jesus' return using this theme:

CHRIST SOON RETURNS IN GLORY.

1. The manner of the return.
2. The timing of the return.
3. The preparation for the return.

1. The manner of the return.

Details concerning what will happen on the day of Christ's return are laid out for us particularly in Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians, chap 4.

The people of Thessalonica were once heathens, rebels within Christ's kingdom who did not acknowledge Christ as king. In His grace, the Lord sent His servant Paul to Thessalonica to preach the gospel of Christ crucified for vilest sinners. Those in the city whom the Father had given to the Son came to faith.

In the time Paul spent in the city, he taught these young believers about the work of Christ on the cross and His resurrection, taught them too that No, they could not visit Jesus anywhere because Jesus has ascended into heaven – there to intercede for us and to rule over all the world. But, he added, the Christ who ascended will return to earth.

The Thessalonian Christians embraced this gospel eagerly, including the reality of Jesus' return. In fact, they very much expected Jesus' return *any day*. They knew that God had created the world, and had themselves not witnessed this mighty display of God's power. They knew that God had sent His only Son into the world –Christmas- and they had not witnessed this mighty display of God's grace either. They knew that the Son of God had paid for sin on the cross and then risen from the dead, and had themselves not witnessed this glorious display of God's mercy. They knew that the Lord had ascended into heaven and ten days later had poured out His Holy Spirit, but this display of heavenly majesty they had not witnessed either. But that last final act of salvation history, the return of the Son of God in glory on the clouds of heaven, they were sure they would see it themselves with their own eyes, and join in the choruses of praise that holy angels and godly men would shout forth to the praise of God Most High.

But: in the midst of that expectation a problem arose in the congregation. The problem was this: a member or two died. That meant, to the mind of the remainder, that these brothers and sisters *would not be able to witness the return of Christ in glory*. They were a communion of saints together, and they wanted to be *together* on the day of Christ's return, *together* to welcome Him back to His kingdom, this earth. But some in the congregation died, were no longer alive to experience Christ's return, and that gave questions. How could this be, that believers died before Christ returned?! They'll miss out on seeing that last great work of salvation history! This question came to Paul's attention, and he penned an answer in chap 4.

Notice, brothers and sisters, that the Thessalonian saints did not put the date of Christ's return into the distant future. They expected Jesus' return in their own lifetime! And Paul, in his inspired answer, did not reprimand the Thessalonians for this conviction, did not tell them that Christ would not return for many years yet (because first this had to happen, and this, and this...). In fact, in his answer Paul makes clear that he himself also fully believed that Jesus could return during his own lifetime. Look, for example, at vs 15. "This we say to you by the word of the Lord, that *we* who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord..." "We", says Paul, and the point is that Paul includes himself amongst the persons that could still be alive on that day of glory. I'll say more about this in our second point, the Lord willing.

Some in the congregation of the Thessalonians had died. When Paul writes about these deceased people, though, Paul does not use the word 'death'; he instead uses the term 'sleep'. That's vs 13: "those who have fallen asleep," and vs 14: "those who sleep in Jesus." Why, brothers and sisters, does Paul describe the deceased saints with the term 'sleep'?

Sleep. We all know that sleep is temporary. We experience it day after day; those who sleep *wake up*. That's a reality

not true –according to our experience- with the dead. We have never experienced a resurrection; to our experience the day stay dead. But Paul would impress upon the Thessalonians that those congregation members who died will not stay dead, but will arise. To communicate that thought the apostle uses the word ‘sleep’. So the term has within it a comforting promise.

There’s a second element caught in the word ‘sleep’. It’s this: those who sleep wake up *soon*. I mean: we do not measure sleep in terms of years; we measure sleep in terms of hours. Sleep is by definition a short-term thing. When Paul uses the term ‘sleep’ in relation to the saints who died, he’s not only telling the Thessalonians that they will awaken but is telling them also that these saints will awaken *sooner* rather than later. In other words, Paul confirms the correctness of their expectation that Christ will return *soon*.

There’s a third element caught in the word ‘sleep’. More often than not we awaken not when we’re fully rested, but when the alarm clock goes (or we expect it to go). That is: through sound (or the expectation of sound) we wake up. So it is too, says Paul, with those who die in the Lord. Vs 16 speaks about a shout, the voice of an archangel, and the trumpet of God. There’s noise, a call, and those who sleep will respond; "the dead in Christ will rise."

When will they arise? The shout, the trumpet, will sound when "the Lord Himself will descend from heaven" (vs 16). That descent is described in vs 15 with the word ‘coming’ –"the coming of the Lord"- a word unique in its meaning.

Coming. The Greek word is here ‘parousia’. The term was commonly used in Paul’s day to describe the victory parade of the victorious general. After his triumph on the battlefield, the general would return home with his soldiers accompanying him and the captives and booty following along. Such a victory parade traveled the dusty road to town, while trumpeters at the head of the procession announced to people far ahead that the victory parade was approaching. The people of town would respond to the sound of the trumpet by streaming out to greet the general, give him their adulation, and escort him into their town.

Paul uses in vs 15 the word ‘parousia’ in relation to Jesus’ return, and his point is that Christ Jesus is a victorious general, returning to His kingdom in triumph. He has defeated sin and Satan on the cross of Calvary, and now at His time returns in triumph to celebrate His victory with all His people. The trumpet of God sounds, the people in Christ’s kingdom hear of the parousia of their victorious general, and they stream out to meet Him. No, they do not meet Him along the road; they meet Him in the air. But: *who meets Him first?* Vs 15: "we who are alive and remain until the parousia of the Lord will by no means precede those who sleep." Do you hear it, beloved? There are two groups of people mentioned here, "we who are alive" and "those who sleep". The first group, those who are alive, shall not precede the second group, those who sleep. That is: it is not so that the living shall go out to meet their approaching Hero, while the dead stay behind. No, says Paul in vs 16, when the trumpet sounds the first thing to happen will be that the living rush out to meet their Hero; when the trumpet sounds the first thing to happen will be that the dead will awaken from their sleep, rise from their graves. The second thing to happen, after the dead have awakened, is that the living and those who were dead "shall be caught up together ... in clouds to meet the Lord in the air."

Do you see the point, beloved? The saints of Thessalonica feared that their dead would miss out on witnessing and experiencing that last great event of history, would not witness the majestic return of Lord in glory. Paul sets the matter straight. It is true: we did not witness God’s work of creation, did not witness God doing His work of redemption in Jesus Christ, did not witness the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost. But the Lord would have us know that *all* His people –those who are still alive when Christ returns as well as those who have died- *all His people* will personally witness and experience the return of the ascended Christ to earth. How glorious the perspective: *our* dead will not miss out either! Eyes that have closed for the sleep of death will open in an instant at the sound of God’s mighty trumpet, and they and we together will be caught up in clouds of God to meet the Lord in the air! Front seat views we’ll together have of that glorious conclusion to world history! Even death –that bitter fruit of our fall into sin- shall not prevent us from partaking in the victory parade of our Savior!

"Therefore comfort one another with these words," the apostle adds. And we are comforted....

2. The timing of the return.

It appears that the Thessalonians had a second problem in relation to the return of Christ. Yes, they expected Christ

any time, even before congregation members could die. But there seems to have been some ambiguity about "the times and the seasons" – as chap 5:1 has it. That is, there was some puzzlement as to what indicators (if any) there would be that would herald Christ's coming. You see, with a parousia the people of a given town were told ahead of time that their general would be coming some time next week. Would it be the same with the Lord's parousia?

Paul's answer is plain. "But concerning the times and the seasons, brethren, you have no need that I should write to you." This matter is so simple. After all, "you yourselves know perfectly well that the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night;" Jesus Himself had said so (Mt 24:42). Signs of Jesus' parousia? No, says Paul, there will be none, no more than a thief announces when he's going to break into your house. Thieves by definition work in secret, on the sly. We know that, and that's why we all locked our houses before we went to church, it's why we install immobilizers in our cars. We take the sorry reality of thieves seriously.

So too Christ's return. We shall receive no indication that His parousia is about to happen. Paul does not tell the Thessalonians that between the day Paul wrote this letter and the parousia *this* must first happen, and this, and this. He instead tells the Thessalonian brethren that "the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night." So: there is as much chance that He comes tonight as sometime next year or in 20 years' time. And if that was true, brothers and sisters, for the Thessalonians, how much more is it true for us today. We receive no indication that the parousia is near, indeed, we are not told that between today, November 17, 2002, and the actual return *this* must first happen, and this, and this. It is true today too that "the day of the Lord so comes as a thief in the night." As it is possible for a thief to break into your house tonight (and that's why you lock your doors before you go to bed), so it is possible that the Lord's parousia occurs tonight. Vs 3: "when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them...."

I say this with emphasis, congregation. The thought exists in the midst of the churches that Christ's return will not take place until some tribulation overtakes us; first –it's said- there must come persecution or a great apostasy or the rise of the Antichrist. The effect of that line of thought is that Christ's parousia is put into the hazy future, and that is both wrong and dangerous.

To be clear: I do not say that Christ's return will certainly happen within the next few days, nor do I say that there will be no tribulation or persecution or Antichrist in the time between today and Christ's return. I *do* say: the Lord has nowhere told us that such a tribulation or persecution or Antichrist will arise between today and His return, and that is why we may not insist that first the times must get worse before Christ can return. It must not pass us by that the Holy Spirit does not correct the Thessalonians' expectation of Jesus' coming during their lifetimes yet. More, the Holy Spirit tells us that Jesus comes totally unannounced, comes while people are saying, "Peace and safety!"

I said a moment ago that the expectation of tribulation and persecution before Jesus' parousia is both wrong and dangerous. I trust that the 'wrong' of this expectation is clear to us, given what Paul writes in our chapter. The 'dangerous' part I need still to work out, and that's our last point:

3. The preparation for the return.

This is the material of vss 4-11. The apostle has made clear that no signal will be given that Christ's parousia is about to happen; His coming will be sudden, surprising. "But," he adds in vs 4, "you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you as a thief," that is, should catch you not prepared. Since the Thessalonians were "not in darkness," were instead "all sons of light and sons of the day" (vs 5), the saints of Thessalonica should "watch and be sober" (vs 6). As sobriety means that we take precautions against the thief, so sobriety means that we take precautions to be ready for Christ's return. What precautions? In vs 8 Paul explains what he means by being sober. He means that the Thessalonian believers are to "put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet the hope of salvation." They need this "faith and love" and this "hope of salvation" because when the victorious General comes back He is going to judge the citizens of His kingdom and cast out all the rebels. What distinguishes the obedient citizen from the rebellious citizen? What will let him survive the judgment? Only his *faith in Jesus Christ*, and so his love for God and the neighbor. The obedient citizens of Christ's kingdom *long* for the parousia of their Lord, their Savior, even *expect* their Lord to come *any day*, and so these citizens prepare themselves well, prepare themselves by building up the inner man of faith and godliness.

But think it through, brothers and sisters. What happens when the parousia of the Lord is put into the hazy future? We

know it well: a town that's told that it's general is coming within the next five years will respond much differently than if it's told the general will come next week. The news that the general's parousia is next week will stir the town to *action*, to preparation, to excitement, whilst the news that the parousia might happen in the next five years will do nothing more than call for a planning committee; the people's lives will continue as normal. So it is too with the parousia of Jesus Christ. What we confess is Lord's Day 19 is not material that calls for a sermon from time to time reminding us that Jesus will come some day in the distant future; what we confess in our Lord's Day requires *action, preparation, excitement!* Christ comes, and He comes as unannounced as a thief; OK, *are you ready?* The last remaining act of salvation history will occur at any time now and you will see it with your own eyes; *does that thought excite you, determine what you do?*

You see: people whose vision is *this* life, whose vision does not include the impending return of the Lord, devote their money and energy and dreams to earthly pleasures, to the here-and-now - be it sport, be it boats, be it the fineries of a big house, etc. But the Scriptures teach that Christ can come back tonight. And when He comes, what shall become of the sport's team, of the boat, of the big house? According to the passage we read from 2 Peter 3, brothers and sisters, "both the earth and the things that are on it will be burned up." So: our houses, our wardrobes, our cars will go up in smoke. If that is the reality, beloved, what is the sense if pouring energy and money and dreams into a lavish house and an extravagant wardrobe and a posh car? To put the question stronger: if we knew that Lord would return before next Friday, who of you would get out there yet to buy that nicer car, that extra blouse? I trust you see the point: if Christ's return is a possibility for the hazy future (for *this* first has to happen, and this, and this...), sure, we're going to make the most of the immediate future, and focus our minds on the here-and-now - including padding ourselves with earthly pleasures. But if the matter of Christ's parousia is a reality for *this week*, we'll surely pour our energy and our money and our dreams into *getting ready*. Then our focus will be on the inner man, on faith and godliness - instead of on the outer man. Preparation: we know that when Christ comes back we will *together* meet Him in the air, *together* sit at the marriage feast of the Lamb, and so today already we put the petty squabbles of this life where they belong -in the bin- and today already we put the earthly focus that characterizes the rebels of Christ's kingdom where they belong too - also in the bin. And we focus on the Lord-who-is-coming, and we pour our energy and money and dreams into preparing ourselves and those around us to meet the victorious Judge.

Here is a challenge, brothers and sisters, older and younger. By virtue of the fact that we live on this earth and daily we *see* the things of this earth, it's so understandable that we get caught up in the things of this life - bigger, better, my ego, my reputation, my pride. But the confession that "Christ will come to judge the living and the dead" must drive the people of God to put such earthly things into perspective. "Bodily exercise profits a little," says Paul, "but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come" (1 Tim 4:8). There is a place for sport, and a place for a car and a place for a house and a place for a boat, O yes. But in terms of the big picture -the only outstanding event of history is to happen anytime and we shall witness it ourselves- in terms of the big picture sport and cars and houses pale into insignificance; they "profit [only] a little." "But godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come." We expect Christ any day, and so it's the godliness we need to build up in ourselves and in each other.

In fact, that's precisely the apostle's point in 1 Thessalonians 5:11. "Therefore," he writes, "comfort each other and edify one another, just as you also are doing." "Comfort," says our translation, but the term equally means, "encourage". That's the apostle's point: he would have the Thessalonians *speak with each other* about the parousia of Christ. Paul wants the subject to *stay alive* among them, and so when the saints of Thessalonica speak with each other about their holiday plans and the new chariot they're hoping to buy and the addition that desire for their villa, they should do it with the return of Christ in mind. Indeed, as they speak with each other about developments in town and the race in the arena, they should keep that parousia in mind. And we well understand: talking about that parousia, keeping that parousia in mind when one develops building plans for another villa will definitely affect those building plans! The reality of the parousia is going to drive the believer to direct his energy and money and dreams to preparing himself and others -inside the church and outside- for the coming of the Lord! It will, for example, direct one's focus to mission work, instead of to more brick and mortar.

Christ comes again, beloved, comes maybe tonight, maybe Wednesday morning, maybe next month. Ask yourself, ask each other this question: how does this confession determine your priorities, your behavior? Amen.



Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 21 Q&A 54 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 1 December 2002.

" CHRIST GATHERS HIS CHURCH TODAY – AND WE ARE PART OF IT!"

Text:

Lord's Day 21 Q&A 54

54. Q. What do you believe concerning the holy catholic Christian church?

A. I believe that the Son of God,[1] out of the whole human race,[2] from the beginning of the world to its end,[3] gathers, defends, and preserves for Himself, [4] by His Spirit and Word,[5] in the unity of the true faith,[6] a church chosen to everlasting life.[7] And I believe that I am[8] and forever shall remain a living member of it.[9]

[1] John 10:11; Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11-13; Col. 1:18. [2] Gen. 26:4; Rev. 5:9. [3] Is. 59:21; I Cor. 11:26. [4] Ps. 129:1-5; Matt. 16:18; John 10:28-30. [5] Rom. 1:16; 10:14-17; Eph. 5:26. [6] Acts 2:42-47; Eph. 4:1-6. [7] Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:3-14. [8] I John 3:14, 19-21. [9] Ps. 23:6; John 10:27, 28; I Cor. 1:4-9; I Pet. 1:3-5.

Scripture Reading:

John 17:1-8

Acts 16:6-15

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 122:1,2,3

Psalms 115:6

Hymn 40:1,2

Psalms 87:1,2,3,4,5

Hymn 46:1,2

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

If one had to list doctrines about which there is confusion, one would have to mention also the doctrine concerning the church. A generation or so ago one knew it was the Lord's will that one be and remain Free Reformed. That general certainty is gone, and the evidence lies in the fact that in the last number of years people have much more easily withdrawn from the church than was the case in years past. A second indicator of change on the point is the ease with which faithful members of the congregation spend Sundays away, and either go to a different church or content themselves with not going to church at all; they instead listen to a tape.

In the face of this increasing lack of clarity about the Lord's revelation on the church, I need today to open with you God's word on the matter. I want to do so by highlighting two points. First I need to draw out the Savior's sovereign work. Then I need to accent our responsibility.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

CHRIST GATHERS HIS CHURCH TODAY – AND WE ARE PART OF IT!

1. The sovereign work of Jesus Christ.
2. The responsibility of today's Christian.

1. The Sovereign Work of the Jesus Christ.

Before the Lord God created the world, He had determined all that would happen in the history of the world He was about to fashion. That includes who would be saved. I read in Eph 1 that God "chose us in [Christ] before the foundation of the world" (vs 4). That is: from out of the whole human race that would populate the earth in the course of time, the Lord elected a certain, definite number to salvation in Jesus Christ. Imagine two circles, the outer one representing the total population of earth over the centuries of history, and the inner one the total number of the elect.

In the passage we read from Jn 17, the Lord tells us that God has *given* these elect persons, this inner circle, to the Son. Vs 6, says Jesus: "I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me out of the world. They were Yours, You gave them to me..." (cf vss 2,9,11,12, etc). These are, of course, the elect whom the Father had chosen before the foundation of the world. At Jesus' birth the angel told Joseph to call the baby's name 'Jesus' because –he said- "He will save *His people* from their sins" (Mt 1:21). "His people": that's a reference to the elect of God whom the Father would give to the Son. It was *for them* that the Christ came into the world, for *them* that the Son laid down His life on the cross. Their sins were transferred to the Son, the Son paid for those sins so that these elect persons are now righteous before God; they are heirs of eternal life.

Who are these people whom the Father chose to life eternal and gave to the Son? The Scriptures are emphatic: they are not only Jews or Europeans. It's true that in the Old Testament God chose Abram for Himself and established His covenant of grace with him and his seed. That's why the Old Testament tags specifically *the people of Israel as God's people* – in distinction from the Moabites and the Egyptians and the Greeks, etc. But when God first set Abram apart for Himself, He straightaway said God would make Israel a blessing *for the nations* (cf Gen 12:3). So the Lord also took a Rahab from the Canaanites and engrafted her into the people of God. And God took a Ruth from the Moabites and engrafted her also into the people of God. Indeed, the Holy Spirit moved the prophet Zechariah to announce that "Many nations shall be joined to the Lord in that day, and they shall become My people" (2:11; cf Is 45:23). That includes the Europeans of the world and the Arabs of today! With the death of Christ on the cross the dividing wall God had placed between Jews and Gentiles was broken down (Eph 2:11ff). So when Jesus before His ascension told His disciples that all authority had been given to the Son in heaven and on earth (for the whole world is Christ's kingdom), the disciples were *therefore* to go and make disciples of "all nations" (Mt 28:19f). Peoples of every tribe and tongue and race on earth must to be told of the saving work of God in Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of their sins and their redemption from the judgment of God. For God has elected persons of every tribe and tongue and race, and given them to the Son. So the disciples did according to Christ's command; they preached the gospel throughout the world – and so churches were established throughout the known world of those days.

Before I draw out this thought further, brothers and sisters, in terms of today's world, I need to explain the link between Christ's sovereignty in heaven and the labors of the apostles. I do so by referring to the passage we read from Acts 16.

The apostles, says that chapter, went "through Phrygia and the region of Galatia," but "they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia" (vs 6). Again, "they tried to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit did not permit them" (vs 7). We need to know: the Spirit is always the Spirit *of Christ*. That is: through the Spirit *the ascended Christ* did not permit His messengers to preach the word in Asia and Bithynia. Instead, through His Spirit Christ directed His apostles to Troas. In Troas the Lord gave Paul a vision of a man pleading him to come to Macedonia. So Paul went, and began to preach the word in Philippi. And behold: "a certain woman named Lydia heard us.... The Lord opened her heart to heed the things spoken by Paul" (vss 14f). "The Lord": that's the ascended Christ (cf Acts 2:36). *This* woman came to faith. Why did she come to faith? Because she was one of those whom the Father had chosen to life before the foundation of the world, and therefore one of those whom the Father had given to the Son! Yet she could not benefit from Christ's saving work until she came to faith. And faith comes from the Holy Spirit through the preaching.... So Christ from heaven above sent preachers to Philippi to bring her the good news....

Do you see, beloved, how Christ is at work here? Yes, He has ascended into heaven, and from His throne He governs the world. But He governs with His people in mind! So Christ through His Spirit forbade Paul from preaching in Bithynia and Asia (for there were in those regions none whom the Father had given to the Son who now had to hear the gospel!); Christ instead sent Paul to Philippi *because in that town there were those whom the Father had given to*

the Son and they should now come to faith. This is the point the church confess in the *Canons of Dort*, Chap 1, Art 3, pg 532. Here the church echoes God's revelation like this:

"So that men may be brought to faith, God mercifully sends heralds of this most joyful message to whom He will and when He wills. By their ministry men are called to repentance and to faith in Christ crucified."

Let it be fixed in our minds, congregation: that preachers go out with the word of God to this nation and that town is not the work of men, but is *Christ at work*. It is Christ gathering His church!

The point is important. We confessed with Lord's Day 19 that our Savior is in heaven, and that from heaven He directs the events of world history. But whatever He does in world history is done with a view to His church-gathering work. The Father had given certain persons in Philippi to the Son, and so the ascended Christ directed the events of history in such a way His apostles would not go to Bithynia and Asia, but would go instead to Philippi. Again, because the Father had given certain persons in Philippi to the Son, the ascended Christ saw to it that language would not be a hindrance for the preaching of the gospel; though the gospel came from Judea, Christ chose a preacher fluent in the language and culture of Greece – where Philippi was located.

Christ's divine leadership in history was not limited to those days. Today still the Lord leads world history in such a way that preachers can bring the gospel to those whom the Father has given to the Son. It may well be that the turbulence in the Middle East today will prepare the way for preachers to preach the gospel amongst the Arabs; there may be those whom the Father has given to the Son, and so the Son works opening for the preaching in that part of the world. However that may be, the fact of the matter is that Christ is busy causing the gospel to go to all those whom the Father has given to Him – of every tribe and tongue and nation. That's His church-gathering work.

Acts 16 tells us another aspect of Christ's church-gathering work. After Lydia and her household were baptized, Paul and Silas ended up in prison. Through an earthquake and the preaching that followed, the jailer also came to faith. In other words: the Father had given this jailer also to the Son, and so the Son caused the Word of life to cut across the jailer's life and meet with faith in his heart. After the apostles' release from prison we read this amazing conclusion: they "entered the house of Lydia; and when they had seen the brethren, they encouraged them and departed" (vs 40).

My point is this. Christ has worked faith in Lydia, has worked faith also in the jailer. *But after the departure of the apostle, Christ does not desert these two persons.* Yes, He has worked faith in their hearts, and now He *continues His work with them*. There is no indication that Lydia and the jailer knew each other before they came to faith. There is no indication either that the two of them lived in the same part of the city. But after Paul's release from prison he returned to Lydia's house, and *there met the brethren* – says vs 40. You see, the Lord Jesus Christ, after He had worked faith in these two persons, *brought them together*. And He did that not once, but time and time again. Here is more of the Savior's church-gathering work; these people of Philippi in whom He worked faith are not deserted, nor left as so many regenerated individuals scattered across town, each separate from each other. No, the Christ who caused the gospel to come to them now *gathers them together* to be His church in that town. The church is not all the elect of God scattered as so many regenerated individuals over the face of the earth; the very word 'church' means literally in the Greek language an 'assembly', a 'gathering' (cf Acts 19:32,39,41).

This work of Christ in Philippi whereby He *gathered together* those in whom He worked faith became a pattern in every town where there were persons whom the Father had given to the Son. From Philippi the apostles traveled on to Thessalonica, and preached the word. And there also those persons who were chosen to life before the foundation of the world came to faith. These believers did not remain as so many islands to themselves in Thessalonica, for the ascended Christ gathered them together to form His church in Thessalonica, the assembly of His people. So the apostle Paul could write a letter "to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 1:1). The same happened in Berea and in Athens and in Corinth, and the other places where the Father had given elect persons to the Son. Always, brothers and sisters, this is *Christ at work*; it is He who sovereignly, graciously, sends His servants to preach, works faith, and gathers the elect together. All of it is His church-gathering work

That's a work that continues in the course of church history, that continues today too, even in Australia, yes, in Kelmscott. We're so used to being church, so used to coming to church, but it's to be fixed in our minds that what we

see here Sunday by Sunday is the work of the exalted Christ! From heaven above He is busy in Kelmscott, and in Albany and in Amsterdam and in countless places around the world, some known to us and many unknown. He has His elect, those whom the Father has given to the Son, and so He sent His preachers to proclaim the gospel and these elect came to faith; more, then Christ gathers these believers together to form His church in that town. Please, beloved, let us not get used to it, but let us marvel instead: Christ is busy in November 2002, is busy all over the world causing the word of life to be preached here, there and everywhere where there are persons whom the Father has given to the Son. Christ is busy even in our little corner of the globe, in Kelmscott, and we are allowed to see something of His work with our own eyes – here, today! We see it, more, we're even allowed to be part of it – how amazing!! And how encouraging!

I said at the beginning of the sermon that there's a measure of confusion in relation to the doctrine of the church. I trust, now, that this much is clear (and it's a critical point!): the church is not the work of men! The church *consists* of people, yes, but it is not the *product* of people. The Holy Spirit draws our attention to *Christ*, we said last week, and it is *in the church* that we see very concretely something of what Christ is doing today. The Christ who died on the cross and today governs the world from the Father's right hand has gathered and is gathering into one assembly the people whom the Father has given to Him, elect persons from every tribe and tongue and race. It's this *gathering of those who trust in Christ that constitutes the church*. That's why the *Belgic Confession* describes the church as it does in Art 27. Says this confession concerning the church (pg 462):

"[It] is a *holy congregation and assembly* of the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by the Holy Spirit."

Christ takes the believers and *brings them together*, and that body of believers is His church in a given place. He gathers His people together anywhere on the face of the earth, and that's what caught with the term 'catholic'. The term means 'universal', and the point is that Christ does His church gathering work anywhere around the world – in Kelmscott and in Albany and in Amsterdam and in so many other places known to us or unknown. Again in the words of Art 27:

"Moreover, this holy church is not confined or limited to one particular place or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed throughout the entire world. However, it is joined and united with heart and will, in one and the same Spirit, by the power of faith."

Here is the fulfillment of passages of Scripture as Zech 2, the passage I quoted before, where the Lord says that "Many nations shall be joined to the Lord in that day, and they shall become My people" (2:11). Persons of every tribe and tongue and race have been chosen by the Father and given to the Son, and that is why there is no place for any form of racism amongst the people of God; Christ is busy anywhere in the world gathering His own together. It's for us to see it, to take encouragement from it, and so to acknowledge that persons of other tribes and cultures are our brothers and sisters in Christ, washed by one blood, joined and united with us to the one Christ.

Today so much brokenness can keep the people of God apart, can prevent so much understanding and respect for Christ's worldwide church-gathering work. But on the day of Christ's return all the brokenness will end; on His great day we'll all congregate together and together sing the praises of the Lamb who died for us all and gathers that catholic church! In the brokenness of this life, it's for this day that the church longs so eagerly!

I come to our second point:

2. The Responsibility of today's Christian.

The ascended Lord, then, gathers His church. Around the world He takes His own Sunday by Sunday from their houses and beds, and brings them together around His word. But *how* does He do that? How, concretely, did the Lord bring *you* church today?

He does that, brothers and sisters, by activating our responsibility. He gives us the *command* to gather together, to go to church. In the Old Testament already the Lord told His people that on the Sabbath day they had to gather together. Lev 23: "the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation" (vs 3), "a sacred assembly" (NIV). After

Jesus' ascension the New Testament church did precisely that; on the Day of Pentecost –the first day of the week- the believers of Jerusalem "were all with one accord in one place" (Acts 2:1). In the rest of the New Testament you find that very pattern; the believers came together on the first day of the week (cf Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2; Rev 1:10). So the apostle can give this instruction to the Hebrews: "Do not forsake the assembling of yourselves together, as is the manner of some" (Heb 10:25). It's on the basis of material as this that the church confesses in Lord's Day 38, about the fourth commandment, that "especially on the day of rest I diligently attend the church of God." You see: Christ in heaven gathers His church on earth, and does so by giving us the *command* to leave our homes Sunday by Sunday and come to church. He gives us no option here; He wants His people together, and He brings that about by activating our responsibility.

So we have this picture, brothers and sisters. On the one hand we marvel at the work the Lord is doing in today's world, a work that reaches across the globe and extends even into our own community, yes, that touches even ourselves. We marvel at His church gathering work, and we praise Him for it. At the same time we recognize the way in which the Lord is pleased to operate and take the consequences seriously, that is, we recognize that the Lord gathers His church *through* us obeying His commands. So, exactly because we delight in His church gathering work in our modern world, we make it our business to gather along with Him. We make it our business to bring ourselves together, to come to church Sunday by Sunday. This is what the church confesses in Art 28 of the *Belgic Confession*:

"We believe, since this holy assembly and congregation is the assembly of the redeemed and there is no salvation outside of it, that no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, no matter what his status or standing may be. But all and everyone are obliged to join it and unite with it...."

Notice the strong words of the confession here. "All and everyone are obliged to join" this holy assembly and congregation – that's the gathering of God's people as we see it Sunday by Sunday, and no one is permitted to withdraw from it. Joining: that's not a matter of including your name in a membership register (as if the church is some sort of a club); no, joining is first of all a reference to coming together when the Lord calls His people together, and that's Sunday by Sunday. "All ... who draw away from the church or fail to join it act contrary to the ordinance of God."

Yes, that's strong language. The Father has given certain people to the Son, and these persons the Son does not leave as so many isolated individuals in their various homes across town, but rather He gathers them together for their edification and worship of God. Because Christ is at work in gathering His church, no one has the right to refuse to come together; all are obliged to heed Christ's church gathering work in Kelmscott and so gather along with Christ, take seriously the responsibility the Lord has given us. That's so because the church is *Christ's* work.

Then I realize well that any assembly of the redeemed will remain riddled with faults. If Paul can say to the Romans that he can will what is right but can't do because of the sin that remains in him (Rom 7), shall we be surprised, or even offended, when we see faults in each other? No, I do not say that we have to ignore each other's faults; we certainly have a duty to encourage each other to ever greater holiness. But at the same time we need to keep in mind that the church is *Christ's* work, and He is pleased to gather *sinners* together, not perfect people. He knows that I have faults, yet He brings me here. He knows that you have faults, yet He brings you here too. Even while we encourage each other in the Lord's service, we keep our eye first and foremost on the Christ-who-gathers-you-and-me-together, and as long as we keep our eye on *Christ* we shall not stumble over each other's remaining weaknesses. But once the eye is off of Christ, the sins we see in each other become offensive, and the temptation so great to withdraw from the church and to try to find a more holy gathering of believers, or one where we feel more comfortable. But that's not the way the Head of the Church wants it! Our eye is to stay on Him, and therefore wait patiently for *Him* to perfect the church. That will happen on the last day, for that's when we will be delivered of this body of death – so inclined as it still is to sin. Meanwhile, we recognize Christ's work in our midst, and for His sake we join and continue to join the gathering He works, Sunday by Sunday.

But that raises another question. *Where* are we to go to gather with the saints of God? There is in Kelmscott any number of buildings opening their doors on Sunday for public worship, all with the term 'church' on the building or a nearby sign. On Railway Ave there's a Roman Catholic Church, on Third Ave a Baptist Church, on the top end of Lake Road the Church of Christ, here the Free Reformed Church, also on Railway Ave the Westminster Presbyterian

Church. What's my responsibility here: where would Christ have me to gather with His people? May I take my pick? May I go where my friends are? Where I feel comfortable?

The answer, brothers and sisters, is determined by whether my eye is on Christ or not. It's the emphasis of Scripture, it's the emphasis on our Lord's Day, it's the emphasis of this sermon: the church is *Christ's* work. Then yes, we have a responsibility, and that is that we gather *where Christ is*, where He is sovereign, where people (as much as possible in this fallen world) do not get in the way of Christ being at work. So the people He uses in His work must submit themselves with all their strength and insight to His revealed will. This is the point of the well-known three marks of Art 29. The gathering I must join is that which

"... practices the pure preaching of the gospel. It maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them. It exercises church discipline for correcting and punishing sins. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head. Hereby the true church can certainly be known and no one has the right to separate from it."

That's why we gather here in this place. As far as we can tell, here Christ reigns and all is done (again, as much as possible in this broken world) in accordance with Christ's will.

And those who do not gather with us, who attend other churches of town or perchance don't go to church at all? Are they necessarily unbelievers or non-elect people? No, beloved, no! In the brokenness of this fallen world there are persons whom the Father has given to the Son who do not go to church where they ought. That is a truth as true as the fact that there are hypocrites within the Free Reformed Church. I stress the point for two reasons. The first is that we are not to think evil of all those who attend another church. They do wrong, it's a fact (for the Lord would have them gather where He calls), but that gives us no right to look down our nose at them. Despite our best efforts, we do not do everything right either. The second reason for stressing the point is that we are not to think that our being Free Reformed is evidence that we will be saved. Only those have forgiveness of sins and will inherit life eternal who *believe* in the Lord Jesus Christ, and going to a particular church is not of itself evidence of faith. Here we all need to examine ourselves as to why we attend the particular church we attend.

The church. There's confusion about what the church is, and so where the church is. That's simply because the eye is taken off of Christ and the work He is doing, and the eye is shifted to people. But alas, as soon as one looks at people one sees faults..., and the longer one is with a particular group of people, the more faults one sees.... Then the temptation is great to move along to a new group, less known, and therefore less offensive.... But people are people, always imperfect, always annoying.... In the course of time one will see more faults..., and so one moves again....

The church. The Holy Spirit would have us look at *Christ*. When our eye is firmly fixed on Him, we see Him at work, around the world and even in our community. *He* never disappoints, and so we know where to go to church, where to hear Jesus' word – the bread of life. Amen.

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**Sermon on Lord's Day 21-22 Q&A 56,57,58 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman
held on Sunday afternoon, 29 December 2002.**

"CHRIST'S SATISFACTION FOR SIN LEADS TO THE END OF DEATH."

Text:

Lord's Day 21-22 Q&A 56,57,58

56. Q. What do you believe concerning the forgiveness of sins?

A. I believe that God, because of Christ's satisfaction, will no more remember my sins,[1] nor my sinful nature, against which I have to struggle all my life,[2] but He will graciously grant me the righteousness of Christ, that I may never come into condemnation.[3]

[1] Ps. 103:3, 4, 10, 12; Mic. 7:18, 19; II Cor. 5:18-21; I John 1:7; 2:2. [2] Rom. 7:21-25. [3] John 3:17, 18; 5:24; Rom. 8:1, 2.

57. Q. What comfort does the resurrection of the body offer you?

A. Not only shall my soul after this life immediately be taken up to Christ, my Head,[1] but also this my flesh, raised by the power of Christ, shall be reunited with my soul and made like Christ's glorious body.[2]

[1] Luke 16:22; 23:43; Phil. 1:21-23. [2] Job 19:25, 26; I Cor. 15:20, 42-46, 54; Phil. 3:21; I John 3:2.

58. Q. What comfort do you receive from the article about the life everlasting?

A. Since I now already feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy, [1] 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.[2]

[1] John 17:3; Rom. 14:17; II Cor. 5:2, 3. [2] John 17:24; I Cor. 2:9.

Scripture Reading:

Ephesians 2:1-10

Genesis 2:15-17; 3:15-24

Revelations 21:1-8

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 103:1,2

Psalm 103:4,5,6

Hymn 55:1,2,3

Psalm 130:2,3,4 (Psalm 31:12)

Hymn 53:1,2

Beloved Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ!

The ascended Christ has given gifts to His church. In the course of the year now passing, we have tasted so many of these gifts....

On this last Sunday of the year, I want draw out for you the wealth of three of these gifts, the last three mentioned in the Apostle's Creed: the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. These three are connected with a common thread. That common thread is the word of God in Gen 2: "in the day that you eat of [the tree], you shall surely die" (vs 17). That is: *sin leads to death*. Q & A 56 discusses sin, specifically the forgiveness of sins through Jesus' blood. Q & A 57 discusses death, specifically Christ's victory over death so that the Christian is also assured of the resurrection of the body. And Q & A 58 again discusses death, specifically the total destruction of

death leading to the life everlasting. It's that thread I want to lay before you today, so that, as we pass from one year into the next, we may encourage each other in the riches of God's salvation. So too, as you profess the faith today, Teresa, you may be encouraged in that perspective of Paul: "to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

I summarise the sermon with this theme:

CHRIST'S SATISFACTION FOR SIN LEADS TO THE END OF DEATH.

1. The forgiveness of sins,
2. The resurrection of the body,
3. The life everlasting.

1. The forgiveness of sins.

The life that God gave to Adam and Eve in the beginning was a life of bliss. Paradise: here was communion with God, an abundance to eat and drink, never a tear, no pain, no sickness, only happiness and pleasure. In the words of Q & A 58: here was perfect blessedness such as no eye today has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man able to conceive. In Paradise, Adam and Eve could praise God in all they did day by day.

But, at the instigation of the devil, in deliberate disobedience, Adam and Eve ate of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, and so sinned. The result –according to God's righteous ordinance- was that death entered the world. Straightaway Adam died spiritually; he became what Eph 2 calls "dead in sin." Physical death entered his body also, and the process of decay that then began led to his death 930 years later (Gen 5:5).

The spiritual death Adam died on the day he sinned meant the end of the perfect blessedness of Paradise. The sweet communion he'd enjoyed with God ended the moment he sinned; when God in the cool of the day came to visit Adam and Eve, they "trembling fled from Him" (*Belgic Confession*, Art 17). The abundance they'd had to eat and drink also came to an end, for the Lord God exiled them out of the Garden into a wilderness of thorns and thistles where Adam and Eve and their descendants would have to eek an existence out of obstinate land through sweat and toil. The freedom from pain and sickness ceased also; Eve would bring forth and raise her children in pain, and sickness would characterise their lives until they would die.... In a word: because of the fall into sin the blessedness of Paradise was replaced by the curse of life-as-we-know-it. What we consider 'normal existence' –pain, death, strife, tension, loneliness, sadness, tears, etc- what we consider 'normal existence, God reveals as the penalty we brought on ourselves through our fall into sin. It's the reality of Eph 2: people have become "dead in trespasses and sins" and so we "conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of our flesh and mind." That form of conduct made us "children of wrath"; on such behaviour had to come the judgment of God Most High, and that judgment means more misery and more strife and more curse.

Here's a link, brothers and sisters, that we need to keep in mind. In the year past we've seen so much misery, brokenness – be it in our personal lives or in the reports of the newspapers. The Lord would have us know that had we still lived in Paradise, had the fall into sin not happened, *none of this misery would have come on our path either*. The troubles we've experienced this past year –and yes, that's life as we are accustomed to it- *are a direct consequence of the fall into sin*.

But precisely *there*, brothers and sisters, lies the gospel, and it's that gospel that teaches us how to look at the year the year that's gone by, and how to look at the year that's ahead. For –Christmas!- the Lord God so loved this world – fallen, to be sure!- that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but receive eternal life (Jn 3:16). The Lord has poured the judgment we deserve onto His only Son, so that we might be freed of the judgment that was to fall on us! As the church puts it so richly in the Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper: "He bore *for us* the wrath of God, under which we should have perished eternally.... He was bound that He might free us from our sins.... He was innocently condemned to death that we might be acquitted at the judgment seat of God...." It's the gospel we've heard so often in the year past: Christ "took our curse upon Himself that He might fill us with His blessing."

This, congregation, is the glorious gospel of the forgiveness of sins. Christ's work on the cross –God proclaimed it already in Paradise directly after the fall into sin, and He spelled it out for the people of Israel through the sacrifices and other ceremonies of the law, and He had it announced repeatedly through the prophets of old- Christ's work on the cross is the reason why God's people of old and God's people of today may know their sins forgiven!

Ps 103: "He has not dealt with us according to our sins, Nor punished us according to our iniquities" (vs 10). Instead, "as far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us" (vs 12).

Ps 130: the Lord does not mark transgression, does not deal with us according to what we deserve.

Old Testament Scripture has a number of illustrations that point up this glorious gospel of mercy.

The law of Moses spoke time and again was 'washing', and we realize well that dirt washed off your hands is gone, removed, and you can't get it back.

Hezekiah put the gospel of forgiveness of sins in these words: "You have cast all my sins behind Your back" (Is 38:17). The picture is of one eating an apple, and discarding the apple core over your shoulder. Gone, forgotten, of no effect any more as you keep on walking the road of life.

Micah says, "You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea" (7:19). What's dropped into the sea is retrievable with today's modern technology, but for the people of old whatever fell off a ship was utterly and totally gone, irretrievable, of no effect any more.

The Holy Spirit moved Isaiah to speak of forgiveness like this: "I, even I, am He who blots out your transgressions for My own sake; And I will not remember your sins" (Is 43:25). Blots out: the picture is of an entry of sin made into a record book, and then of the entry being blotted out by a big spill of ink; no auditor can read the entry any more, and therefore no auditor can make an issue of the transgression once recorded there. That's why the Spirit adds that God "will not remember your sins" any more. "Remember": in the Bible the term does not mean that God develops a memory blank, but means instead that God comes into action. Think of Noah in the flood; Gen 8:1 says that after he floated on the waters for 150 days "God remembered Noah." The point is surely not that the Lord had clean forgotten Noah for those 150 days; the point was instead that now the Lord *did* something about the flood waters, He sent a wind to dry the water off the earth. So here: the entry of our sins is blotted out of God's record book and so God does not remember them, that is, God does not respond to them, does not deal with us according to our transgressions.

That is why in Q & A 56 we say concerning the forgiveness of sins that "God because of Christ's satisfaction will no more remember my sins." The point is that God has removed those sins from us as far as east from west extends, has washed them away as dirt from your hands, has tossed those sins over His shoulder, has cast them into the sea, has blotted them out, and that's to say, for all practical intents and purposes, that these sins just *do not exist any more*, have no impact on God's thoughts towards us! In the words of Lord's Day 23: God treats us as if we never had nor committed any sin! See there, congregation, the glorious gospel of forgiveness!! Undeserved, not earned, yet freely given. This is *grace*!

Yet even this is not all. For the Lord knows very well, even better than we, that day by day we continue to sin; try though we might we cannot get our thoughts and our words and our deeds to conform perfectly to His revealed will for us. As Paul put it: we can will what is right, but we cannot do it (Rom 7). Yet even that frustrating reality does not prompt God to recall our sins of the past, nor does it move Him to deal with us according to what we deserve. Such is His mercy in Christ Jesus that He not only no more remembers my sins, but He also makes no issue of my sinful nature against which I have to struggle all my life long. That is to say: *day by day*, despite our repeated failures –and He *knows* we have failed and will continue to fail- day by day He for Jesus' sake forgives and continues to forgive, does not deal with us according to our sins and *continues* not to deal with us according to what we deserve. In the words of Paul to the Romans, chap 5:1, after he had described the work of Christ on the cross: "therefore, having been justified by faith, *we have peace with God* through our Lord Jesus Christ." "We have peace with God": how glorious the gospel! And again, chap 8:1: "There is therefore now *no condemnation* to those who are in Christ Jesus." You hear it, beloved? "Peace with God", "no condemnation": that's the reality that dominates the way the God of heaven and earth

views His children! Peace, no condemnation: it's the atmosphere of Paradise as it was before the fall into sin!

This, we need to realise, is the wealth God has promised to each one of us in the covenant of grace He established with us. You know how it goes: it's one thing to confess the riches of the forgiveness of sins, but in the midst of our sins and misery it's another thing to confess this forgiveness in relation to *ourselves*, to make it *personal*. But that's what God has done to all with whom He established His covenant! I refer to the Form for Baptism: "When we are baptised into the Name of the Son, God the Son promised us that He washes us in His blood from all our sins.... Thus we are freed from our sins and accounted righteous before God." God established that covenant of grace with each of us, brothers and sisters, and that's to say that God promised to forgive our sins, or –to say it with the words of the images of the Old Testament- to wash those sins away, to toss them over His shoulder, to cast them into the sea, to blot them out. So: those sins of 2002 –and we have all committed so many, whether we recognise them as sin or not- those sins of 2002 He has promised to forgive, freely, graciously to wash away, to blot out, to cast overboard, to remove as far as east from west extends. That's the gospel, beloved, that by God's grace could be proclaimed to you so many times in the course of the year, the gospel God would have us apply in the face of our concrete transgressions. The promise of the gospel: *because of Christ's satisfaction God will no more remember my sins nor my sinful nature*. This is the gospel with which God would have us end the year!

Then it's true: the covenant contains two parts, a promise and an obligation. The Lord wants us to embrace as true the riches He has promised. I *show* that I embrace this glorious gospel by being sorry for my sins, hating my sins, fleeing from the sin that remains in me. That is: I need to repent of my sins before I can rightly claim the gift of forgiveness as my own. And, by the grace of the Lord, we can *and must* acknowledge the work of the Lord in our hearts and lives: He *does* work sorrow for sin, repentance from sin, and so we may be confident at the end of the year that God *will no more remember my sins nor my sinful nature*. We may farewell the old year, with all its mistakes and transgressions, with *peace in our minds*. That is also why we may enter the New Year with optimism. For God does not take our bad baggage of last year along into the New Year! God's forgiveness means that those sins have been blotted out, washed away, cast overboard, tossed over His shoulder, and so our actions of last year will not provoke God's displeasure in the New Year! And the fact that we remain sinful and so shall surely transgress in the New Year does not prompt God either to anger; at the beginning of a new year He reminds us - again!- that He remembers neither our sins nor our sinful nature against which we'll need to struggle throughout 2003. That's the glorious promise in the covenant: there is abundant grace, free forgiveness of sins!

But if that's the case, brothers and sisters, a wonderful consequence follows. It's our second point:

2. The Resurrection of the Body.

We'd learned from Gen 2 that God placed a link between sin and death; "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23). Here, then, is the wonderful consequence: if sin is forgiven, if sin is removed as far as east from west extends, if sin is cast overboard, then *there's no place any more for the consequences of sin!* Then communion with God is restored again – as Paul had said: there is peace with God, no condemnation. That in turn means that death is no longer an enemy, no longer God's penalty on our sins. Yes, we still have to die, but –as we could confess with Lord's Day 16- death is no longer "a payment for our sins, but it puts an end to sin and is an entrance into eternal life." Loved ones have died in the year past, and we shall surely face more of death in the year to come. But, says the Lord concerning those who die in the Lord, death is now a door through which God brings us from one room into another, from life on this earth (where we continue to taste so many bitter fruits of our fall into sin) into the next room, life with God, Paradise! The Holy Spirit moved David to say long ago that after his death he would see God's face in righteousness and glory (Ps 17:15). Jesus told the repentant criminal on the cross that "Today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Lu 23:43). In the words of A 57: "my soul after this life [shall] immediately be taken up to Christ, my Head." Death: *then* is answered the prayer Jesus prayed before He went to the cross, "Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me" (Jn 17:24). That is why Paul could be so emphatic: to die is far better, for to die is to be with Christ (Phil 1:23). See there the gospel: sin is taken away, and so the bitter wage of sin is emptied of its sting also; death is now gain for the child of God! So we do not lament the passing of those who have died in the Lord, and we do not fear death ourselves either; the gospel of the forgiveness of sins means we have such peace with God that we shall live with Him always!

But it's not just my soul that benefits from Christ's payment for my sins and the forgiveness God grants. It's true: what we see of death is an empty body, and that body is buried, decomposes. It's the promise of Gen 3: dust you are and to dust you shall return. But, beloved of the Lord, exactly because of the gospel of the forgiveness of sins must this bitter effect of our fall also be undone! And that's the promise of the Lord. The Christ who died to pay for our sins will return on the clouds of heaven with a cry of command, "and the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thes 4:16). *For the very Christ who died for sin arose from the dead*, and that's to say that He broke the link God established in the beginning between sin and death. Eph 4: "God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (...), and raised us up together..." (vs 4f). Sin is paid for, and therefore our death cannot endure; as the soul upon death immediately benefits from Christ's payment (and so is taken up to Paradise), so "this my flesh" shall in due time be "raised by the power of Christ ... and [be] made like Christ's glorious body." 1 Cor 15: "The sting of death is sin" (vs 56), sin is forgiven, and therefore "death is swallowed up in victory" (vs 54). It is a matter of time, beloved, and the dead in Christ will be raised incorruptible. Will it happen in 2003? We do not know. But we certainly look forward to that wonderful fruit of Christ's victory, that wonderful consequence of the forgiveness of sins!

That brings us to our last point:

3. *The Life Everlasting.*

For the resurrected body, the Lord reveals, will be reunited with the soul that upon death had been taken to Paradise. When body and soul are reunited, the body will be changed, glorified, "made like Christ's glorious body." That is: here finally all the bitter consequences of our fall into sin will be removed completely. On that glorious day of Christ's return this earth will be cleansed of all sin and all the works of sin, and this earth renewed into a new Paradise. The New Jerusalem will come down from heaven, says Rev 21, and then the dwelling of God will be with men – and *that's the communion of Paradise restored*. Today we have it already in principle, but tomorrow, when Christ comes back, we'll have that communion in all its glory, for we'll see God face to face (1 Jn 3:2). Not only that; "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Rev 21:4) – *Paradise restored*, all those bitter effects of the fall into sin taken away! It's "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." In truth, what a glorious future awaits the children of God!

Do you see, brothers and sisters, the link between forgiveness of sins and life eternal, the golden thread between those last three articles of the Apostles' Creed? As sin leads to death, so the forgiveness of sins leads to the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting! That's the glorious gospel God in His grace had proclaimed to you throughout the year of our Lord 2002. That's the glorious gospel that God sets before us as we farewell the one year and welcome the next. For this is the gospel that gives perspective and hope! All our sins forgiven, and therefore their bitter fruits also emptied of their power. Perchance in the New Year we will die, perchance in the New Year Christ will return. Either way we look forward to Paradise restored, receiving the fullness of the forgiveness of our sins and so life in its perfection with God our Savior. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 25 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 19 January 2003.

" GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT SOVEREIGNLY USES THE EAR TO WORK FAITH IN HIS PEOPLE ."

Text:

Lord's Day 25

65. Q. Since then faith alone makes us share in Christ and all His benefits, where does this faith come from?

A. From the Holy Spirit,[1] who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel,[2] and strengthens it by the use of the sacraments.[3]

[1] John 3:5; I Cor. 2:10-14; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29. [2] Rom. 10:17; I Pet. 1:23-25. [3] Matt. 28:19, 20; I Cor. 10:16.

66. Q. What are the sacraments?

A. The sacraments are holy, visible signs and seals. They were instituted by God so that by their use He might the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel.[1] And this is the promise: that God graciously grants us forgiveness of sins and everlasting life because of the one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross.[2]

[1] Gen. 17:11; Deut. 30:6; Rom. 4:11 [2] Matt. 26:27, 28; Acts 2:38; Heb. 10:10.

67. Q. Are both the Word and the sacraments then intended to focus our faith on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation?

A. Yes, indeed. The Holy Spirit teaches us in the gospel and assures us by the sacraments that our entire salvation rests on Christ's one sacrifice for us on the cross.[1]

[1] Rom. 6:3; I Cor. 11:26; Gal. 3:27.

68. Q. How many sacraments has Christ instituted in the new covenant?

A. Two: holy baptism and the holy supper.[1]

[1] Matt. 28:19, 20; I Cor. 11:23-26.

Scripture Reading:

Ezekiel 37:1-10

II Corinthians 5:9-21

II Timothy 1:8-14

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 93:2,4

Hymn 29:1

Hymn 36:2

Psalm 85:3,4

Psalm 25:2,4 & Hymn 37:2

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Western society, like so many other cultures, has for generations been a *culture of listening*. In the last number of years, that has changed. With the arrival of television and videos, our's has become a *culture of looking*.

Communication today takes place more through the eye than through the ear. What one *sees* on television makes a

bigger impression on a person than what one *hears*. The result is that people's ability to *listen* for any length of time becomes more difficult; communicators are finding that, in order to keep people's attention, they need to resort to humour or suspense.

This shift in our culture presents its challenges to preachers of the gospel. It's said that preaching has had its day, is becoming a thing of the past –why?– because people don't know how to listen anymore. What we need instead is something that uses not the ear but the *eye* as the means of picking up a message. Instead of preaching, we should maybe introduce the video screen to church, or maybe drama....

LD 25 speaks of a Scriptural truth that allows for no video screen in church to replace the pulpit. For, says this LD, Scripture teaches that the Lord in the Holy Spirit works faith "by the preaching of the gospel". Says this LD: the Lord is sovereignly pleased to use the ear as the sense through which He grants the gift of faith. So the preaching remains critically important for the salvation of sinners. I summarize the sermon with this theme:

GOD THE HOLY SPIRIT SOVEREIGNLY USES THE EAR TO WORK FAITH IN HIS PEOPLE.

The means God uses to work faith,

The message God's people are to hear

1. The means God uses to work faith.

LD 25 begins a new section of the Catechism. That's indicated by the words printed in our *Book of Praise* above LD 25; we read there the words "Word and Sacraments". That's the material dealt with in the next 7 LD's, from 25-31.

As to *why* the Catechism deals now with the matter of "Word and Sacraments", we're to note the material that has come before. You will recall that LD 7 had stated that only those with faith in Jesus Christ could be saved (Q & A 20). In the following LD's (8-22), the Catechism had discussed the *contents* of this faith, had done so following the outline of the Apostles' Creed. Then in LD 23 (we heard it two weeks ago), the question was asked: OK, now that you believe all that God has said in the Bible, what's the benefit for you? To which was answered: "that I am righteous before God and an heir to eternal life." That, then, is the benefit of faith, the benefit of believing all that God has promised in the gospel: I am righteous before God, I am an heir to eternal life, my sins are forgiven, I have salvation. All of that is mine *when I believe*, when I have faith. It's all summed up in the first Question of our LD today: "faith alone makes us share in Christ and all His benefits."

That reality, of course, prompts the next question. If it's faith that I need in order to be saved (and that's what the Scriptures teach), *where am I to get that faith?* That's now the question of our LD: "where does this faith come from?"

The answer as given in our LD is this: faith comes "from the Holy Spirit." That's what the Catechism has learned from the Scripture. I think of a passage as I Cor 2: "God has revealed [His gospel] to us through His Spirit" (vs 10). And Rom 5: "...the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (vs 5). I Cor 12 says the same thing: "...no one can say the Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit" (vs 3). And we understand that one cannot say that "Jesus is Lord" unless he has faith.

Now, the fact that faith comes from the Holy Spirit may seem to us to be very straight forward. Yet I remind you, beloved, that the church once had to struggle very intensely with people in her own midst who denied that faith came from the Holy Spirit. Some 400 years ago in the Netherlands, there was a teacher in the church named Jacob Arminius. He gained a following known to us as Arminians. What these Arminians taught? They taught that faith comes from oneself. These Arminians were of the opinion that each person is able to decide for himself whether or not to believe, and then can make a point of actually believing.

Over against this teaching of the Arminians, the church spoke a firm No. The church did so because the Scriptures teach the doctrine of total depravity, teach that every person is dead in sin (Eph 2:1), and since the dead can do nothing is no person able to place faith in one's own heart. So over against these Arminians the church drafted the Canons of Dort. Here we read the following (chap III/IV, Art 11; it's on page 555):

God "powerfully enlightens [men's] minds by the Holy Spirit, so that they may rightly understand and discern the things of the Spirit of God. By the efficacious [ie, effective] working of the same regenerating Spirit He also penetrates into the innermost recesses of man. He opens the closed and softens the hard heart, circumcises that which was uncircumcised, and instils new qualities into the will...."

And later, Art 14:

"Faith is therefore a gift of God –how so?– because it is actually conferred on man, instilled and infused into him."

By so saying, then, the Church insisted that the Arminians were wrong; faith is not something I can decide to place in my heart, but it's rather something which the Lord God sovereignly, through His Spirit, works in my heart. I want to come back to this point later on.

If it may be established then that faith is worked in the hearts of sinners *by the Holy Spirit*, the next question is: *how* does the Holy Spirit work this faith? The answer of the Scriptures on this point is straight forward. I think of a text as Rom 10: "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (vs 17). Because the Holy Spirit works faith *through hearing*, Jesus could say that His sheep "hear My voice" (Jn 10:27). So it was that when Paul was sent out to do mission work in Asia Minor, he came with his voice; he preached because it's through the word, the preaching, that the Holy Spirit works faith. That's illustrated beautifully in what the Lord tells us about Lydia. Acts 16:

"Now a certain woman named Lydia *heard* us.... The Lord opened her heart to heed the things *spoken* by Paul" (vs 14).

Note the way it's said: she heeded the things spoken by Paul. She *listened*, and came to faith. And this turns out to be the pattern throughout the book of Acts. Believers arose in Paul's wake –how so?– Paul preached, and those chosen to life listened. It's because of the truth of that principle –faith comes through hearing– that Paul says to the Corinthians that "it pleased God through the foolishness of the message *preached* to save those who believe" (I Cor 1:21).

And we should not consider it a surprise, brothers and sisters, that the Lord in the Spirit is pleased to work through the preaching, through the Word. When God set out to create the world in the beginning, He did not collect matter and from it fashion heaven and earth, with all that's on it. No, God rather *spoke*. "Let there be," God decreed, and lo, there was. And now that God is recreating the heart dead in sin, working faith where there is only deadness, God does the same as He did in the beginning: He *speaks*. He causes His Word to go forth, and lo, people dead in sin come alive, they believe. The prophecy of Ezekiel concerning the dry bones is here to the point (37:1ff). Concerning that valley full of dry bones, God said to Ezekiel: "Prophecy to these bones, and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord!'" And the result? The bones came alive, what was dead lived; here is recreation. And we're to know: people are like dry bones, dead in sin, they cannot come alive unless God sovereignly works upon them by His Word of power.

Yet there is this difference between God's speaking at creation in the beginning and His speaking today when He wishes to work faith in dead hearts. For in the beginning it was God Himself who spoke; *God* said: "let there be". Today, though, it is not God's actual voice we hear (as Israel heard it at Mt Sinai; cf Ex 19f). God is rather pleased to speak *through people*. Indeed, God has appointed His ministers to speak His Word; ministers are God's *mouthpiece* (cf Dt 5:28ff). So it was that Paul could say to the Thessalonians:

"...when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God..." (I Thes 2:13; cf Gal 4:14).

And in the passage we read from II Cor 5 Paul says:

God "has given us [that's the apostles] the ministry of reconciliation" (vs 18).

And because the apostles have received that ministry of reconciliation Paul can add:

"Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's

behalf, be reconciled to God" (vs 20).

There it is: Paul's word was not the voice of man; through Paul the Lord caused people to hear *His* Word.

Yet it is not only through the apostles themselves that the Lord God lays His Word on His people. Timothy was not an apostle, and yet was –say the Scripture– a "minister of Jesus Christ" (I Tim 4:6). As minister he was not to preach what he felt like preaching; he rather had to proclaim what he had himself received in the Scriptures of the OT and in the teaching of Paul (I Tim 4:6,11,16). As Paul writes to Timothy:

"Hold fast the pattern of sound words *which you have heard from me...*" (II Tim 1:13).

But here too: Timothy could not be the only one who was to preach that gospel. Paul told Timothy to establish a training for the ministry. II Tim 2:

"And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (vs 2).

So it is that the church through out the centuries has had ministers of the gospel, person equipped to preach the word of life to the people. And what was true for Paul is equally true for these ministers of the gospel even today: ministers are ambassadors of Christ, God Himself speaking to His people through them.

Now I want to come back to the matter of those Arminians I mentioned earlier. The thing is that the thinking of these Arminians has not at all disappeared since the days of the Synod of Dort nearly 400 years ago. You know that Arminianism is alive and well today; it's popularly understood that people are not dead in sin, are able to make a choice for God, are able to make faith live in their own hearts. So it is that it is commonly understood today too that you do not really need to go to church to be a Christian, do not really need the preaching of the gospel in order to believe. The result is that so many who call themselves Christians seldom hear a sermon. And of those who do go to some church or another, numerous do not hear *the gospel* proclaimed; the preacher has a religious talk, and that satisfies the hearer. That's the thinking of our day.

Let it be clear in our minds, then, beloved, that we are *dead*, that we cannot work faith in our hearts; that's something only God can do. And the means by which God is pleased to work that faith is through the *preaching* of the gospel; "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom 10:17). If then we wish to be saved, if then we wish to receive faith, it is for us to *make use of the preaching*. That trend of our day to minimize the need for the preaching is something we need to resist because at stake is nothing less than salvation itself. The Holy Spirit does not work faith in the bush or at the beach; He has been pleased –sovereign God that He is– to use the means of the preaching. So our duty is –if we wish to be saved– our duty is to *avail ourselves of that preaching*. In a word: *be in church*. When all is said and done, the increasing practice of skipping church, of being in church just once, is a nod to the error of the Arminians. To confess that God the Holy Spirit works faith through the preaching (and strengthens it by the preaching too) is to acknowledge the need to be in church faithfully, regularly, as often as humanly possible.

And we understand: it helps nothing to sit in church asleep. Faith comes through the hearing. Very well: then we're to listen. That means: be alert. And be able to concentrate, to *hear* what the Lord's word is. In turn that means that we shall need to resist also the trend of our society to becoming a culture of looking. The dangers of television are legion, but here's one to focus on today: see to it that you do not lose the gift of being able to listen, to concentrate on the spoken word for long periods of time. More, see to it that your children learn to listen. The Spirit is pleased to use the preaching in order to work faith; very well, we shall need to be good *hearers*, for our salvation's sake.

2. The Message God's people are to hear.

We move on now to our second point for this afternoon. So there is need for listening, need for it because the Holy Spirit is pleased to work faith through the preaching. But what is it that is to be preached? Or to ask the question differently: what are we to listen to? What's the message God would have us hear?

LD 25 gives the answer of Scripture. Says A 65: the Spirit works faith in our hearts by the preaching *of the gospel*. It's

not preaching of Bhuddism that the Spirit uses, nor the proclamation of New Agism. The Holy Spirit uses instead the preaching of *the gospel*. Now the question is: what's meant by "the gospel"?

For our part, brothers and sisters, we surely have our answers ready for that question. "The gospel": we're sure that that's the good news of Jesus Christ crucified. And we're right.

Yet think for a moment, congregation. Is it only the doctrine of Christ crucified that the Spirit uses to work faith? If I may say it this way: does the Spirit use only this central doctrine of salvation through the atoning work of Christ? The answer is No. The Spirit uses the preaching of God's *whole* Word, including not only the central message of Christ crucified, but also God's revelation concerning creation, concerning providence, concerning the incarnation, concerning the last things, etc. I remind you of what we confessed in LD 7: the Christian must believe *all* that God has promised, and not simply the material surrounding the cross of Calvary.

The evidence from Scripture is here for the taking. Paul told Timothy to be a good minister of Jesus Christ. How Timothy could be a good minister? Says Paul: by instructing the brethren "in these things" (I Tim 4:6). In what things? All things that Paul had taught to Timothy. Paul repeats the point in his second letter to Timothy:

"Hold fast *the pattern of sound words* which you have heard from me..." (II Tim 1:13).

What is that "pattern of sound words" that Timothy must cling to, must preach? It's *all* that Timothy heard from Paul. Timothy may make no variation on that gospel, may leave nothing out, may add nothing to it. The whole gospel, as God has given it: that's what Timothy –and every preacher after him– is bound to proclaim. "The people in the pew should not be exposed to the private ideas of the preacher but [should be exposed] to the doctrine of the Word of God." Why that's so? Because God the Holy Spirit is sovereignly pleased to use the hearing of God's *whole* revelation to work faith in the hearts of those chosen to life.

That is why it will not do, brothers and sisters, simply to go to *a* church, not even to go to any orthodox church that still preaches Christ crucified. The church we're to go to must preach the *whole* counsel of God, must preach it as God has revealed it. The church we're to go to isn't to preach 80% of the Word or 90%, isn't to twist a small part of it either; it's to lay God's whole revelation before God's own, is to lay it *all* before God's own because the Lord is pleased to use it *all* to work faith. And saying this is nothing new; it's precisely this that the Church has learned from Scripture long ago and confessed in the Belgic Confession. Art 28: all must join the church, none may separate from it –why?– because "there is no salvation outside of it". For the true church "practises the pure preaching of the gospel", proclaims God's whole Word, "rejecting all things contrary to it" (Art 29), and it is through the preaching of that Word that the Spirit is pleased to work faith. So: according to the decree of God, salvation is not available outside of that true church. Since that's the reality God has ordained, we're to be consistent in our actions: we're to belong to that true church, and we're to bring our children there, lest salvation be endangered for ourselves and our offspring into numerous generations.

Now you will say: surely there are those outside the true church who are being saved! Does the Lord not work faith also elsewhere? And indeed, I will not deny it. But we must, brothers and sisters, keep two things apart here. The Holy Spirit is true God, and hence almighty; He is most *able* to work faith in the heart of a dead sinner in whatever way He wishes, even without that person so much as once hearing the gospel. But the fact that God the Spirit is able to work faith without the preaching of the gospel, or (shall we say) with the gospel presented in a twisted fashion, does not mean that people are free to absent themselves from the pure preaching of the whole gospel. How God acts is His business. We for our part are bound to obey the *norms* God has established. The norm is: God the Spirit is pleased to work faith through the hearing of His Word, through the preaching. What kind of preaching? The norm is: the proclamation of the *whole* Word of God. That's what we confess in LD 25. So we're to be consistent: be in church, submit to the preaching. Which church? Be in that church where God's whole Word is faithfully proclaimed, that church where the voice of the Good Shepherd is heard. It is not for us to bother our heads about what the Lord is able to do elsewhere, or what the Lord actually is doing elsewhere; it is for us instead simply to *do* what the Lord asks us to do. And we're to do God's will on this point not just when life is normal, when we're at work and the children are at school; we're to do God's will on the matter during holiday periods as well. God works faith, and God strengthens faith, in a certain manner and hence at a certain place. It's the realization of that reality that drives us to church, to

God's church, Sunday by Sunday – without fail.

And say not, beloved, that this whole matter of going to church, or even where one goes to church, is actually not such an important point. God in mercy has given up His only Son to work salvation for sinners. Sinners can benefit from that saving work of Jesus Christ only by embracing it in true faith; without faith one is lost. But *faith comes from somewhere*. Faith is not plucked out of the sky, faith is not something you put in your own heart; faith is instead the gracious work of holy God in the hearts of dead sinners. *And God is pleased to use a particular means to work that needed faith*. If we then should belittle that means, should assume that God will mercifully work that faith somehow else (because, after all, He is able to), we threaten our own salvation. This is no unimportant point; at stake is salvation itself.

Since that's the case, there remains one conclusion for us. Despite what we see around us in our world, it's for us faithfully and diligently to attend the church of God, to be present in the workshop of the Holy Spirit. In His gracious care for us, there is where He would work and strengthen faith in the hearts of dead sinners chosen to life. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 27 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 15 February 2003.

" GOD CLAIMS FOR HIMSELF THE CHILDREN HE GIVES TO BELIEVERS ."

Text:

Lord's Day 27

72. Q. Does this outward washing with water itself wash away sins?

A. No, only the blood of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit cleanse us from all sins.[1]

[1] *Matt. 3:11; 1 Pet. 3:21; 1 John 1:7.*

73. Q. Why then does the Holy Spirit call baptism the washing of regeneration and the washing away of sins?

A. God speaks in this way for a good reason. He wants to teach us that the blood and Spirit of Christ remove our sins just as water takes away dirt from the body.[1] But, even more important, He wants to assure us by this divine pledge and sign that we are as truly cleansed from our sins spiritually as we are bodily washed with water.[2]

[1] *1 Cor. 6:11; Rev. 1:5; 7:14.* [2] *Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; Rom. 6:3, 4; Gal. 3:27.*

74. Q. Should infants, too, be baptized?

A. Yes. Infants as well as adults belong to God's covenant and congregation.[1] Through Christ's blood the redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit, who works faith, are promised to them no less than to adults.[2] Therefore, by baptism, as sign of the covenant, they must be grafted into the Christian church and distinguished from the children of unbelievers.[3] This was done in the old covenant by circumcision,[4] in place of which baptism was instituted in the new covenant.[5]

[1] *Gen. 17:7; Matt. 19:14.* [2] *Ps. 22:11; Is. 44:1-3; Acts 2:38, 39; 16:31.* [3] *Acts 10:47; 1 Cor. 7:14.* [4] *Gen. 17:9-14.* [5] *Col. 2: 11-13.*

Scripture Reading:

Genesis 17:1-8

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 145:2

Psalm 105:3,4

Psalm 12:4

Psalm 78:2,3

Psalm 111:3,4,5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Can you know whether your children really belong to God? If your child were to die tonight, could you know whether the baby would go to heaven or to hell? How can you know?

The answer given by the greater part of Christianity is that of course your child would go to heaven. Why *that* answer is given? That, brothers and sisters, is because it is generally assumed that *all* children who die go to be with the Lord. For, it's said, God is merciful and will surely not reject those who haven't had a chance to reject Him, will not cast into hell those who don't know their right hand from their left.

But that thought is wrong, beloved. As a result of the fall into sin, the entire human race, children included, belong by nature to Satan. Nobody, not even a child, is on some sort of neutral ground before God. When one who is on Satan's side dies, whether young or old, he goes to hell; nowhere does the Bible say that age makes a difference.

So the question I asked earlier is thrown back at us with greater force: Can you know whether your children really belong to God? How can you know? This is the material of which the church makes confession in Lord's Day 27.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

GOD CLAIMS FOR HIMSELF THE CHILDREN HE GIVES TO BELIEVERS.

1. This fact has been disputed
2. This fact is Scriptural
3. This fact gives obligations

1. This fact has been disputed.

It's quite a statement, brothers and sisters: God claims for Himself the children He gives to believers. That statement would leave no doubt about the identity of your children and mine: in as much as we are believers, our children belong to God, are His possessions. So our children have a Father in heaven who cares for them even in infancy, have a God who forgives their childish sins, a God who renews them. Even death cannot take them from their Father's hands; if it should happen that the Lord would take one of our children out of this life, we as parents would have no reason to doubt our children's destination. Yes, this is comfort.

There was a time not so long ago, though, when precisely this comfort was denied to parents. You will know that some 60 years ago the Second World War was ravaging Europe, including the Netherlands where so many of our parents and grandparents then lived. As wars go, our grandparents' saw their families threatened by shrapnel and sniper fire and bombs and famine. Particularly the famine affected the vulnerable, the children, with as result that our ancestors brought infants to the baptism font in church, only to bury them within a year or two. That made the question very real to our parents and grandparents: were these children God's children or not, and hence saved or not?

We would say today: of course those children belong to God; after all, God claims for Himself those children whom He sovereignly gives to believers. The thing was, though, that in the decades before the War broke out, there was quite some discussion in the Dutch churches about the identity of the children of believers. There were those who insisted that Yes, children of believers belong to God; when they die they go to heaven. Others were equally insistent that No, children of believers do not all necessarily belong to God, do not all necessarily go to heaven when they die. The opposition came largely from the disciples of Abraham Kuyper, who *contrasted* covenant with election.

The discussions came to a head when the churches met in Synod. In 1943, just as the war was most difficult, the Synod ruled on the place of children in the covenant, and stated that all children of believers were not necessarily truly God's children. That statement of the Synod put our grandparents in limbo; could they then not believe that their youngsters, if they should die in the war, would go to heaven? So it was that our forbears had specific reason to weigh up carefully what the synod said.

What it was that the Synod said? The learned brethren at that Synod, brothers and sisters, divided the covenant into two parts, said at bottom that there were two covenants. They spoke, then, of an *internal covenant* and an *external covenant*. What they meant by these phrases was this: the covenant (that's God's bond of love with sinners), said they, could *truly* be made with you, and if that was the case then you were *in* the covenant, internal. It could also happen that the covenant was *not truly* made with you, that it only looked like the real thing, and in that case you were *out* of the covenant, external.

Now, where did this distinction come from? It must be said first that throughout the centuries of church history this distinction of internal and external covenant had been made more often; the brothers of the Synod of 1943 did not think that they presented anything new. But then again, there isn't anything new under the sun, not in heresies either, and so one is bound to look at Scripture: what has God revealed, what has God told His people to believe?

The brothers of that Synod considered that they had Scriptural bases for their teaching. They read in the Bible, for example, that God had made His covenant with Abraham and his seed, including, therefore, both Jacob *and* Esau. They knew further from Scriptures that Jacob later in life believed the gospel and went to heaven when he died, while Esau later in life did not believe the gospel and upon death went to hell. And does Paul not say in Rom 9 that "they are not all Israel who are of Israel"? (vs 6). So the brothers at this Synod concluded: Esau was not truly *of the covenant*, God had never truly made His covenant with this grandson of Abraham, never really established with him His bond of love. O true, Synod went on to say: while Jacob and Esau were babies, toddlers, youngsters, you could not notice that one was not really in the covenant while the other was. That didn't become apparent until later in life, when faith was obviously present with Jacob and absent with Esau. Well, they said, there you have it: internal covenant and external covenant, complete with Scriptural grounds.

Then the brothers of this Synod went a step further. For: if you can't know until later in life whether your child belongs to the internal covenant or to the external covenant, if you can't really know whether your new-born baby truly belongs to God or not, why in the world should you bother with baptism?? The answer Synod gave was this: you should *assume* that your new baby is truly a child of God, you should *assume* that your baby belongs to the internal covenant, that God loves your child. Then they worked out a whole theory surrounding regeneration, about how you as parents should presume that God has already planted the seed of faith in your child's heart so that in fact your baby is already regenerated and that seed of faith will later in life grow into living faith so that your child actually believes the gospel. And on the basis of this *assumption* –the assumption that the seed of faith is already in your child's heart, the assumption that your child is a Jacob and not an Esau, the assumption that your child belongs to God and not to Satan– on the basis of those assumptions, said the Synod, you should bring your child to the baptism font to receive the sign and seal of the covenant. You will have heard of this doctrine before under the name "presumptive regeneration".

But think about it now, beloved: as hunger lurked at the door of your grandparents' house, and as shrapnel and sniper fire and bombs and the other horrors of war threatened the home, what comfort did the teachings of the church leaders in the synod of 1943 give? As your grandparents had to bury the infant who fell victim to the ravages of war, what comfort was there in the *assumption* that this little Johnny was in the internal covenant, in the *assumption* that this little child belonged to God and not to Satan? We understand: in *assumptions* there is no comfort.

Small wonder, then, that our parents and grandparents had to look into the Scriptures themselves to see whether this teaching as presented by Synod 1943 was in fact true. And what did they find in Scripture? That's our second point: that God claims for Himself the children He gives to believers is a *Scriptural* teaching.

2. This fact is Scriptural.

Consider the passage we read from Gen 17. God spoke to Abraham of His decision to establish His covenant with the man Abraham and with His offspring. Vs 7: "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations..., to be God to you and your descendants after you." Our fathers noticed: God mentions no assumptions here, no maybes or ifs. God's covenant is established not with *some* descendants but with *all*. And it's not different kinds of covenants that God makes with different children of Abraham; rather, "I establish My covenant (there is only one) between Me and you and your descendants (all of them, not some only)..., to be God to you and (all) your descendants after you." That text already gave the lie to the teaching of the fathers in that Synod of 1943.

But our grandparents knew of more texts in Scripture. Peter on the day of Pentecost reminded the people of Israel of the promise of the covenant mentioned in Gen 17. Said Peter: "For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off..." (Acts 2:39). Here too, our parents noticed, are no assumptions, no maybes. The promise of the covenant belongs not just to some children of believers, but to all. They read also what Paul wrote to the Corinthians, that church of Greeks where many families had but one believing parent (for the other had not (yet) come to faith). Despite the tension that may result in marriage from one person becoming a believer, Paul was insistent that the Christian partner should not move out or divorce the unbelieving partner. For, says Paul: "...the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband; otherwise your children would be unclean, but now they are holy" (I Cor 7:14). You hear that: "Now they are holy." Paul does not say that the children

of a believing parent are *assumed* to be holy; rather, the apostle is moved by God's Holy Spirit to be categorical: the children of a believing parent *are* holy. And what does it mean to be holy? To be holy means that there is a relation to God, that one is claimed by God to be His.

These texts on which the fathers built their opposition to the teaching of the Synod: what did it all come down to? To say it with the words of our LD: "infants as well as adults *belong* to God's covenant and congregation." They belong, for God's covenant is fully for adults *and* for children, for believers *and* for their seed. So: "through Christ's blood the redemption from sin and the Holy Spirit ... are promised to [infants] no less than to adults." Whatever comfort there is in the fact that we adults are baptized into the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is as real and true for our children also. Children are part of God's covenant, fully and truly, with all the rights and privileges attached thereto, are part of that covenant *without assumptions*, and they should be baptized not on the *assumption* that they belong, not on the *assumption* that God is their Father who cares for them and that the Son has washed their sins away and that the Holy Spirit lives in their hearts, but baptized rather because they *do* belong, they *have* a Father, Christ *is* their Saviour, the Holy Spirit *is* their Renewer. It's what the *Form for the Baptism of Infants* says, pg 585 (second paragraph):

"Although our children do not understand all this...**read on till:**Therefore, infants must be baptized as heirs of the kingdom of God and of His covenant." [As read, draw attention to fact that the texts mentioned are the ones we already covered.]

Notice, beloved: here is no doubt, no assumptions, no mention of an internal and an external covenant; here is only *certainty*: "they *are*, without their knowledge, received into grace in Christ"; infants are "heirs of the kingdom of God and of His covenant." That is the glorious teaching of Scripture about the children God gives to believing parents!

And exactly because their children *belonged*, exactly because God had claimed our grandparents' children to be His children, did our grandparents not have to be concerned about whether God cared for their little ones in the course of the years of the war, nor about where their little ones went when God took them from this life. As God's children, their little ones were safe with God the Father, safe both in this life and in the life to come. And this wealth, brothers and sisters, which our grandparents recovered again from Scripture was not something new; it was exactly what their fathers' generations before them had confessed. Turn with me to the *Canons of Dort*, I.17 (pg 539). [**read** entire article]

It makes one query: if the material of Scripture and confession is so clear and is so rich, why could the brothers of that Synod in 1943 not see the point? That blindness, brothers and sisters, was due to the fact that they did not *dare* to take God's Word at face value. Though that statement may sound bold, that is nevertheless where things were at. These fathers of the Synod had learned to look *within oneself* to find certainty about whether or not one was a child of God; they'd grown up with that. So when the issue of the place of children in the covenant came to a head during the war, these fathers at the Synod taught parents to find proof that their children belonged to God not in God's Word but rather *in the child itself*: was there faith in the child? And because the parents couldn't find evidence of faith until their child was mature, they had to *assume* faith was there, assume their child belonged to God....

But that, beloved, is the key point: what is the proof that your child belongs to God? Does the proof lie in your child or in God? Of course, the proof lies *in the God who claimed your child for Himself*. How do you know He claimed your child? Because He said in His word –we looked at the texts already- that He establishes His covenant with believers and their seed. And you are a believer, is it not? That is: *you take God's Word at face value*, do you not?

Think back to Abraham. When God said to Abraham that He made His covenant with all Abraham's descendants, was Abraham to take that promise as it stood? Or was he to doubt it until confirmation arose in the course of years when his offspring showed they were believers – and only *then* conclude that God had spoken the truth, yes, these descendants turned out to be children of God after all? That's the fine point of it all, congregation: can you take God's Word at face value? Our parents, by the grace of God, in the concrete circumstances in which they found themselves in the Second World War, answered that question positively; they said Yes, you can take God's Word at face value, and therefore we believe that our little children belong to God, are safe in Father's mighty hands even as the war rages outside, that our little children have their sins washed away, have the assurance of God's Holy Spirit that He dwells in them. They took God's word at face value, and so embraced God's promises gladly and were comforted in their

distresses and refused to let the Synod take this comfort from them. So, when the Synod nevertheless tried to rob them of the comfort that belongs to taking God's word at face value and insisted that all parents had to confess that their infants were only *assumed* to be sanctified in Christ, our fathers liberated themselves from the errors of the synod and its lordship. Behold there the Liberation of 1944. And see there too the reason why we call ourselves the "*Free Reformed Churches*".

This glorious teaching of Scripture about the children God entrusts to us has a consequence. That's our last point:

3. *This fact gives obligations.*

At the heart of baptism is the fact that God *has spoken*, has said of the children He entrusted to us that they are *His*. On the basis of that word from God, our children are exceedingly rich. Not the neighbor's children but *our* children have a Father in heaven who cares for them, have their sins forgiven, have the assurance of the Holy Spirit to live within them. They are rich, much richer than the richest neighbor on the street.

But look: little children do not automatically know these glorious facts. In the words of the *Form for Baptism*: "our children do not understand all this." Hence the obligation God lays on parents: "as [the children] grow up, their parents have the duty to instruct them in these things."

Instruct them in these things. *Parents are the means God is pleased to use to teach His children of their royal identity and its wonderful implications.* Dt 6: God tells the parents of Israel to teach His words diligently to the children; you "shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up" (vs 6f). God wanted those children to know that in heaven they had a gracious Father for Christ's sake who provided them with all good and averted all evil or turned it to their benefit, and parents had to tell them. God wanted those children to know that they had a Savior in God's Son who washed their sins away and made them righteous before God, and parents had to tell them. God wanted those children to know that the Holy Spirit dwelt in their midst, renewed them and on the last day would perfect them, and parents had to tell them. All the commandments contained in the books of Moses taught Israel that wealth, and this is the treasure the parents were to pass on to their children as they did the dishes and chatted at bed-time. *Their identity demanded God-centered training!*

Over the years that have followed nothing on this point has changed. God still makes His covenant with believers and the children He entrusts to them. God still is pleased to use the parents to instruct His children of their glorious identity. So we today have a wonderful –and at the same time awesome– duty of impressing on our children what their glorious identity really is.

And to do that we ourselves need first to *believe* that our children are God's children, that our children have a fundamentally different identity than do the children across the street. Let's face it: if I as a parent do not believe that my children are different, different because they belong not to Satan but to God, why should I bother raising my children differently than the neighbor does? Here, then, beloved, we are faced at heart with the same question our grandparents faced years ago: do we accept God's Word at face value or not? He said our children are His; do we believe it or do we not? If we accept that word, we have no choice but to impress on our children that they are different, have another Father than do the other children on the street, and therefore other comfort and purpose in life and ways of living.

So, brothers and sisters, our faith on the point *results in concrete action*. To embrace what we confess in our Lord's Day means in practice that we talk with our children at the table and the kitchen sink, on the beach and in the garden about their privileged identity. To embrace what we confess in our Lord's Day means in practice that we ensure that the influences that mold our children's attitudes and character agree with their identity as God's children. To embrace what we confess in our Lord's Day means in practice that at home and at school, in extra-curricular activities and through friends we see to it that our children receive different instruction than other children receive, that we pump different values into our children than other children receive, that we expect different responses from them than what other children can get away with. In a word: we impress upon them, through word and deed, that they are *different*, "distinguished from the children of unbelievers" – as our Lord's Day has it.

That implication gives us something to think about. We take God's promises seriously, and so teach them in the home

God's revelation in Scripture, and we send our children to reformed school, to church and to catechism, and so on. And all of that is wonderful. But look around you now. What else do we do? We let our children dress as the world does, including earrings and anklets as well as spaghetti straps and bare midriffs (despite what exposed flesh does to persons of the opposite sex). We allow children to talk with the same tone of disrespect to authority as the neighbor's children, allow our children to go to the same sports events which the world around us idolizes, watch the same programs on TV, play the same computer games, appreciate the same music. But if we as parents permit these things, beloved, we teach our children that they are different from the world only *in degrees*, only on the surface or only on Sunday; underneath they can still appreciate the humor of the world, the attitudes of the world, the values of the world, etc, and so still belong to this world. But such a message, congregation, is not in agreement with God's declaration at baptism that these children belong to Him. They are different, they are enormously rich in God through Christ, and in no way are we older generation allowed to let the younger generation understand that this difference is only in degrees. Rather, we need to put into radical practice what we confess in our Lord's Day, what we believe about the special identity of the children God entrusts to us. By the grace of God we believe God's promises about our children, and so in His strength we need to treat them as very special, and so distinguish them clearly and completely from the children of unbelievers. It's by so doing that we demonstrate that we've understood the lesson God taught us in the Liberation of 60 years ago, and understood too the riches of His promises to us. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 28 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 2 March 2003.

" CHRIST NOURISHES OUR SOULS RICHLY AT HIS TABLE ."

Text:

Lord's Day 28

75. Q. How does the Lord's Supper signify and seal to you that you share in Christ's one sacrifice on the cross and in all His gifts?

A. In this way: Christ has commanded me and all believers to eat of this broken bread and drink of this cup in remembrance of Him. With this command He gave these promises:[1] First, as surely as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup given to me, so surely was His body offered for me and His blood poured out for me on the cross. Second, as surely as I receive from the hand of the minister and taste with my mouth the bread and the cup of the Lord as sure signs of Christ's body and blood, so surely does He Himself nourish and refresh my soul to everlasting life with His crucified body and shed blood.

[1] Matt. 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24; Luke 22:19, 20; I Cor. 11:23-25.

76. Q. What does it mean to eat the crucified body of Christ and to drink His shed blood?

A. First, to accept with a believing heart all the suffering and the death of Christ, and so receive forgiveness of sins and life eternal.[1] Second, to be united more and more to His sacred body through the Holy Spirit, who lives both in Christ and in us.[2] Therefore, although Christ is in heaven[3] and we are on earth, yet we are flesh of His flesh and bone of His bones,[4] and we forever live and are governed by one Spirit, as the members of our body are by one soul.[5]

[1] John 6:35, 40, 50-54. [2] John 6:55, 56; I Cor. 12:13. [3] Acts 1:9-11; 3:21; I Cor. 11:26; Col. 3:1. [4] I Cor. 6:15, 17; Eph. 5:29, 30; I John 4:13. [5] John 6:56-58; 15:1-6; Eph. 4:15, 16; I John 3:24.

77. Q. Where has Christ promised that He will nourish and refresh believers with His body and blood as surely as they eat of this broken bread and drink of this cup?

A. In the institution of the Lord's supper: The Lord Jesus on the night when He was betrayed took bread, and when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes (I Corinthians 11:23-26). This promise is repeated by Paul where he says: The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread (I Corinthians 10:16, 17).

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 26:17-30

Exodus 12:1-14

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 63:2,3

Psalm 84:3

Psalm 136:12,13

Psalm 81:1,4,9,14

Hymn 44:1,2

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Eating is a necessary, and largely enjoyable, part of life. We realize we need to eat in order to survive. We develop a sense of hunger, and we answer that sense with eating something.

Our souls are hungry also. Our souls want answers to difficult questions, questions as: what is the purpose of life? Is God angry with me on account of my sins? Will He give me eternal life, or not? True: our sense of hunger in our souls is warped due to the fall into sin, to the point that we may not even notice the hunger. But that doesn't take from the fact that we have need of a feed.

In His care for us the Lord our God nourishes and refreshes our hungry and thirsty souls with the true food and drink of life eternal. To His disciples Jesus once said,

"I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world" (Jn 6:50f).

Well now, this living bread –His own flesh!- Jesus gives to us in a meal called the Lord's Supper. It is *His* supper because He as host gives Himself to His people to eat.

From biology classes we can learn how the body benefits from our lunch; one can study how the body breaks down the food we take in, how the body absorbs its nutrients, etc. How, though, does the soul absorb the nutrition Christ gives us in the Lord's Supper? Just how does this supper benefit us? It is this element, brothers and sisters, that I want to draw out with you particularly today. As we listen to God's word on the point this afternoon, we bear in mind that the table of the Lord will be set before us in two weeks time, the Lord willing.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

CHRIST NOURISHES OUR SOULS RICHLY AT HIS TABLE.

1. The message of this nourishment.
2. The manner of this nourishment.
3. The mandate in this nourishment.

1. The message of this nourishment.

Our Lord Jesus Christ instituted the sacrament of Lord's Supper "on the night in which He was betrayed" (I Cor 11:23). We read the account from Mt 26. The disciples had asked the Lord where He wanted them to prepare for Him to eat the Passover (vs 17). It was while they ate that Passover together that "Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples" (vs 26). To understand the message of the Lord's Supper, we need first to come to grips with what Passover was all about.

The term 'passover' refers to the activity of the angel of death who went through the land of Egypt on the night before Israel's exodus from their slavery. That angel of death entered every house to kill the first-born of that house, but *passed over* every house where he found blood on the doorposts and lintel. That had been God's decree; the Israelites were to slaughter a lamb for a household, and then put some of the blood of the lamb on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the house (Ex 12:1-7).

Now: why would the angel of death kill the first born of every Egyptian home, and pass over the homes of the Israelites? We need to be aware, brothers and sisters, that every Egyptian deserved death. That is due to original sin as well as actual sins. In Paradise God had decreed that if one would eat from the forbidden tree, he would die. Since every Egyptian was responsible for his own fall into sin, each deserved to die. More, the Egyptians also lived in godless unbelief, even persecuting the people of God's choice. That also provoked God's wrath so that they deserved to die. That the first born of every household died was then a symbol of the fact that *every* Egyptian deserved to die. The action of the angel of death that night represented judgment for the whole land.

But why, then, were the Israelites spared?? Let it be clear to our minds, congregation: it was *not* because the Israelites were better! The Israelites were as guilty of original sin as the Egyptians were. On top of that, the Israelites themselves in Egypt committed daily sins, more, were guilty of gross sin that provoked God's anger (as the club discussions on Ezekiel 23 will bring out – see vss 3, 19). Yet the angel passed over Israel's firstborn. Why? Because the blood on the door pointed forward to the coming blood of Jesus Christ! That is: *Christ* would die *instead of* the Israelites, Christ would die *in place of* the Israelites. You see: here is the gospel, in all its glory! Christ in our place: it's the heart of Scripture, the good news of substitution – sinners are spared because Christ dies in our place! That's the gospel that spared the Israelites from the death they deserved.

The wealth of Passover, congregation, was more profound still. For the Lord also told His people what to do with the meat of the lamb whose blood was smeared around the door. Vs 8: "Then they shall eat the flesh on that night." Now, why would they have to eat it? And why eat it that night? That lamb, brothers and sisters, was a symbol of Christ; that's why the lamb's blood could prevent the angel of death from entering their doors. Here's now the point: the Lord wanted His people to *eat Christ*, and so be nourished with His gospel, yes, to show that they were united with Christ, shared in His benefits. The eating demonstrated *union*; the Christ they ate (as represented by the meat of the lamb) became part of themselves.

The striking events of the night described in Ex 12 were to stay in Israel's memory from here on in. Each year the people were to "keep it as a feast to the Lord throughout your generations" (vs 14). Year by year, then, the people were confronted with the gospel of substitution, confronted too with the good news of their union with the Redeemer God would send.

In keeping with that command, the disciples in Mt 26 asked the Lord where they were to prepare the Passover. More, in keeping with that command Jesus and His disciples actually sat down to eat that Passover. At that particular meal, Jesus and the twelve were recalling the events of Ex 12, remembering how the angel of death passed through the land to destroy sinners *but for Jesus' sake spared the people of Israel*. As they ate in Mt 26, Jesus and the twelve delighted in the gospel of *substitution*, were focused on their union with the coming Redeemer. Truly, a rich event!

So think it through, beloved: of what significance was it that the twelve ate the meat of the Passover lamb? The answer is easy enough: they were thereby confessing that they were united with the Lamb of God, the Substitute whom God was sending to die in their place. Though they did not adequately realize it, that Substitute was in their midst that evening; Jesus Christ was the Lamb of God whom God had sent into the world.

Further question then: of what significance was it that *Jesus Himself* ate the Passover lamb? That lamb pointed to *Himself*, signified that He had to die to pay for sin. That Jesus ate the lamb Himself drew out what Jesus' task was; *He soon had to go to the cross*. The disciples didn't realize it, but Jesus surely did: His eating that Passover lamb involved a *mandate*. And Jesus was prepared for the mandate implicit in the meat He was eating; He was ready to suffer the anguish of God's wrath against sin and then die for the salvation of all who in faith had eaten that lamb over the years.

That's also why the wording of vs 26 is so significant. We read: "as they were eating, Jesus took – bread." We read that, are so used to it that we find nothing surprising in it. But given that there's also meat on the table, and that meant points forward to His own coming work, why did Jesus not pick up *meat* and declare of it, "Take, eat; this is My body"? Why did He take up *bread* and declare that *it* signified His body? That, congregation, is because of the specific moment Mt 26 represents in the history of salvation. Jesus picks up this bread "on the night when He was betrayed," on the evening before He would be sacrificed on the altar of Calvary.

You cannot have meat without the shedding of blood. The Old Testament shedding of blood pointed forward to the death of the Lamb of God. At the moment of Mt 26, that Lamb will die *tomorrow*; Mt 26 takes place on the evening before Good Friday. By taking up bread instead of meat as symbol of His body, the Lord Jesus Christ declared on Thursday already that the events that would occur on Friday would most certainly be successful; His sacrifice on Good Friday would bring *an end* to the shedding of blood, an end *because He would be successful in paying for sin*. "The wages of sin is death," God had declared, and Jesus through His sacrifice would pay those wages *on the disciples' behalf* so that they could live, live forever. Here on this Thursday, with the institution of the Lord's Supper, was the *gospel* in all its depth and riches! Christ prophesied of His death, more, Christ prophesied of the success of His death,

a death He would undergo in order to deliver sinners from the house of bondage – not Egypt, but bondage to sin and Satan!

Then as He held up the broken bread He handed it out to His disciples and told them to "take, eat." That is to say: they had to swallow this symbol of Christ's body broken on the cross, swallow it as symbol of their union with this Christ. Though they deserved to die on account of their original as well as their actual sins, they could *live* instead, live because God had made them His in Christ, united them to the Christ who was about to die in their place.

So, brothers and sisters, the supper Christ instituted on the eve of His death reached to the very *heart* of the gospel of salvation. What is the message of the nourishment Christ gives us time and again at the Lord's table? It's this: with the bread and the cup of Lord's supper the Savior impresses upon us *the glorious gospel of substitution*. That is: on account of your sins you deserve to die, but I died for you so that you may have life forever. Recall that passage I quoted earlier from Jn 6:

"I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh..." (Jn 6:50f).

As the church echoes the matter in Question 75 of our Lord's Day: the Lord's Supper signifies and seals to us that we "share in Christ's one sacrifice on the cross and in all His gifts." Lord's Supper: here our hungry and thirsty souls are directed to the events of Calvary 2000 years ago, here were told to *remember* what God in Christ did for our salvation. That focus on Christ and His work on Calvary gets our concentration off ourselves and our failures, off our brokenness and transgressions, and onto the redemption God promised in Paradise, foreshadowed in the Old Testament sacrifices and ceremonies, announced through the prophets, and fulfilled in Jesus Christ. That focus on Christ and His work for us (instead of focusing on ourselves and our brokenness) provides nourishment for our hungry souls. Christ: at this table we're reassured that the bread of life God gave in Christ is really *ours* – forever. *How rich the message of the sacrament!*

We come to our second point:

2. The manner of this nourishment.

Old Testament Israel had to eat the meat of the sacrificed Passover Lamb. With that eating the Lord impressed on His people that the Christ symbolized by the Lamb was really *their* Savior. In the New Testament replacement of this Old Testament sacrament, the Lord Jesus Christ has told us to eat the bread and drink the cup. As the bread and cup represent Christ's body and blood, our eating and drinking has the same significance as the Old Testament eating of the Lamb; by having us eat the bread of the Lord's Supper and drinking the cup, the Lord would impress on us that Christ is really *ours*. As potatoes become part of us when we eat them, so Christ's work on Calvary becomes part of us when we eat the broken bread and drink the cup.

But how? Those questions of my soul –am I really God's child, are my sins really forgiven, am I in fact an heir to life eternal- those pressings questions of my soul receive here an answer. Yet it's not the eating itself that answers those questions, nourishes my soul. After all, one can eat and drink damnation to oneself too. Instead, we are strengthened when we eat and drink *in faith*. That is: I *believe* the promises God gave me at baptism, *believe* that God adopted me for Jesus' sake to be His child, *believe* that God's Son paid for my sins, *believe* that Christ's Spirit renews my heart. I believe it..., but that belief is repeatedly attacked in the struggles of this life, and therefore is bruised, hungry. That faith is there *before* we go to the table, but needs nourishment, strengthening, encouragement to carry us further in the struggles of life. Exactly how it is done is beyond our understanding, for we cannot comprehend the way the Holy Spirit works (cf *Belgic Confession*, Art 35). But this we know: the Lord strengthens us at His table *by faith*. Just as a body must be alive if that body is to benefit from a feed, so the soul must be alive to benefit from the heavenly bread granted us at the Lord's table. And that soul is alive when there is faith. That soul is strengthened when it reaches out in faith to embrace the bread and cup as sure signs of Christ's body and blood, shed for me. Through that bread and drink the Lord at His table tells me that indeed I deserve to perish on account of my sins *but He had His body broken for my benefit* – witness the bread being broken before my eyes and then given to me to eat. I deserve God's judgment, but at the table *I am united with Christ instead* – witness that I'm told to eat and drink the tokens of Christ's body and blood. My thoughts are driven back to Calvary, and it's by contemplation of the work of Christ on Calvary that my

hungry and thirsty soul is nourished and refreshed with the bread of life. So I'm assured, in all the doubts and struggles of life that Yes, I'm really delivered of my sins and Satan's bondage after all.

That in turn leads to our last point:

3. *The mandate in this nourishment.*

The mandate is caught in the opening words of Lord's Day 28: "Christ has commanded me and all believers to eat of this broken bread and drink of this cup in remembrance of Him." The word 'commanded' catches the mandate. It's rooted in the form of the verbs Jesus uses in Mt 26. He picked up the bread, "blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat'." "Take, eat": those are imperatives, commands. The disciples had no option; Jesus' commands are heavenly commands, and they must be obeyed. When the apostle Paul tells the Corinthians of the holy supper, he repeats this commands of Christ for the benefit of the Corinthian Christians; though that congregation was internally divided the brethren in Corinth had no option in the matter, they had to "take and eat" – says I Cor 11. Skipping Lord's Supper was simply contrary to the will of the Lord.

Why, though, has God *commanded* participation in the sacrament? That, brothers and sisters, is because He knows that our souls need nourishment. I refer here to Article 33 of the *Belgic Confession* (pg 465):

"We believe that our gracious God, mindful of our insensitivity and infirmity, has ordained sacraments to seal His promises to us and to be pledges of His good will and grace towards us. He did so to nourish and sustain our faith."

You see: because of our fall into sin, we've become so depraved that we do not rightly feel the hunger of our souls. God is "mindful of our insensitivity and infirmity", and therefore has not only made the sacrament *available* to us but has also *commanded* us to make use of it. The sacrament is His care, His grace; more, the *command to eat and drink* is His care, His grace. It's grace that He sets spiritual food in front of us; it's equally grace that He instructs us to eat it. As a child may need to be *told* to eat, for his own good, so we are *told* to eat, for our own good. If we should wish to be wiser than God on the matter, and decline to attend because ... (and we can have whatever reason our sinful minds can imagine), we simply live in transgression of God's command and therefore provoke His anger and deprive ourselves of His blessing. With Lord's Day 30 I hope to go into more detail here, for there we make confession of the need to be repentant of sin. Lord's Day 28 simply says that "Christ has commanded me and all believers to eat ... and drink," and that's the point I need to draw out now: attendance is a command, we have no option. And it's a command because of Christ's awareness that we are weak, we need the nourishment He would provide at His table.

A couple of implications follow. One notices that congregation members are away for holidays and then be in a place where they cannot reasonably get to church on Sunday. The wrong of that is addressed by the apostle when he says to the Hebrews that Christians are not to neglect to meet together (as is the habit of some, the apostle adds), and all the more as you see the Day of Christ's return approaching (Heb 10:25). In other words: we're meant to be faithfully in church, and not only when we're home or when it's convenient. But the item that needs addressing this afternoon is specifically the Lord's Supper. "Christ has commanded me and all believers to eat of this broken bread and drink of this cup in remembrance of Him" – and He's done so because He is mindful of our insensitivity to the hunger of our own souls. May we then be in Ningaloo when Lord's Supper is celebrated here? Or anywhere, absent from here? Does absence, brothers and sisters, not reflect an insensitivity to the hunger of our souls? More, does absence not reflect insensitivity to God's sensitivity? If God in His grace is mindful of our weaknesses, and so sets the table before us and tells us to eat, must we not respect His mercy and make it our business to be present when He wants to nourish and refresh us?? Let us, beloved, not be wiser than God. Instead, let us readily confess our radical depravity, confess that God knows our needs better than we, and so heed His command to eat and drink. And so make it our business to *be there* when the Lord's Supper is celebrated.

But that's not the only implication that follows. For if the Lord would nourish our souls at His table –how?– by directing our attention to the Savior's work on Calvary, then this is a focus I need to cherish in all of life. In other words: Lord's Supper may not be a moment, and then forgotten. Rather, I leave the table and take the message of the table with me as I return to the cares of this life. That message is Christ, that message is Calvary, that message is how

for Jesus' sake I'm reconciled to God and therefore the Lord God is not angry with me – even though things in my life do not go as I'd like them to go. True, taking the message of the table with me to work on Monday requires effort on our part, but it be so; it's in real life that we need answers to our real questions. Well now, in this real life God would direct our attention to Christ, and so we need to keep focusing our attention on the Christ, no matter what Monday or Tuesday may bring.

That Monday or Tuesday: that may also be the day of Christ's return. At the marriage feast of the Lamb on the Last Day, we sit with Christ at one table. Of that table the Lord's Supper is a foretaste. If *together*, beloved, we will sit at one table with the Lamb of God in the New Jerusalem, it is necessary that we sit together at one table *today already*. That is why disagreements between brothers, the disagreements that prevent sitting together at one table today, need to be cleared up. Our focus needs to be where God directs us at the table, and that's not on each other and each other's weaknesses, but that needs to be on Christ and His saving work on Calvary. That's where the focus will be on the last Day, and that's where the focus needs to be today. To get that focus there, and so nourish and refresh our hungry and thirsty souls, He wants us *all* at His table now already.

The Supper of our Lord is so wonderfully rich, rich because it draws our attention to the most important moment in world history – the sufferings and death of the Savior on our behalf. It's rich, and that's why we want to attend, must attend. To sit with Christ, to eat and drink the tokens of the forgiveness of ours sins, to be united with Him and so be assured of life eternal: in the storms of life, there's no event in the world more nourishing than that! Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 30 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 9 March 2003.

"THE NATURE OF THE TABLE DETERMINES WHO MAY ATTEND."

Text:

Lord's Day 30

80. Q. What difference is there between the Lord's supper and the papal mass?

A. The Lord's supper testifies to us, first, that we have complete forgiveness of all our sins through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which He Himself accomplished on the cross once for all;[1] and, second, that through the Holy Spirit we are grafted into Christ,[2] who with His true body is now in heaven at the right hand of the Father,[3] and this is where He wants to be worshipped.[4] But the mass teaches, first, that the living and the dead do not have forgiveness of sins through the suffering of Christ unless He is still offered for them daily by the priests; and, second, that Christ is bodily present in the form of bread and wine, and there is to be worshipped. Therefore the mass is basically nothing but a denial of the one sacrifice and suffering of Jesus Christ, and an accursed idolatry.

[1] Matt. 26:28; John 19:30; Heb. 7:27; 9:12, 25, 26; 10:10-18. [2] I Cor. 6:17; 10:16, 17. [3] Joh. 20:17; Acts 7:55, 56; Heb. 1:3; 8:1. [4] John 4:21-24; Phil. 3:20; Col. 3:1; I Thess. 1:10.

81. Q. Who are to come to the table of the Lord?

A. Those who are truly displeased with themselves because of their sins and yet trust that these are forgiven them and that their remaining weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ, and who also desire more and more to strengthen their faith and amend their life. But hypocrites and those who do not repent eat and drink judgment upon themselves.[1]

[1] I Cor. 10:19-22; 11:26-32.

82. Q. Are those also to be admitted to the Lord's supper who by their confession and life show that they are unbelieving and ungodly?

A. No, for then the covenant of God would be profaned and His wrath kindled against the whole congregation.[1] Therefore, according to the command of Christ and His apostles, the Christian church is duty-bound to exclude such persons by the keys of the kingdom of heaven, until they amend their lives.

[1] Ps. 50:16; Is. 1:11-17; I Cor. 11:17-34.

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 9:9-13

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 147:1

Psalms 25:8,9

Hymn 21:3

Psalms 103:1,4,5

Hymn 60:1,4,5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We listened last week to the word of God about the Lord's Supper as the church has summarized it in Lord's Day 28. We ought therefore to give consideration today to what the church confesses in Lord's Day 29. However, we look

forward to celebrating the Supper of our Lord next Sunday. Lord's Day 30 asks attention for who ought to attend that table – and it's rather back-to-front for me in the preaching to open Scripture with you on this question immediately *after* the Lord's Supper has been celebrated. So today I deal with Lord's Day 30, and next week, after we have been to the table, I will, the Lord willing, come back to Lord's Day 29.

Who should go to the table of the Lord? To answer that question we need to have very clear in our minds first of all what the table of the Lord is all about. That's the material of Question & Answer 80. Then we need to be clear on what criteria those attending the table need to satisfy. That's Question & Answer 81. The final Question & Answer draws our attention to those of the congregation who show in their confession and life that they are in fact unbelieving and ungodly, and what implications that has for attendance at the table of the Lord.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE NATURE OF THE TABLE DETERMINES WHO MAY ATTEND.

1. The nature of the table.
2. Who may attend.

1. The nature of the table.

We're so very familiar with the table of the Lord. With Lord's Day 28 last week, we repeated after God what His instruction about Lord's Supper is. We learned from God that the table with its elements sought to direct our attention to the events of Calvary 2000 years ago. That is: this is a table of *remembrance*, a table where we remember *what Christ did for us*. So the table lifts our eyes off of our own brokenness and the brokenness of those around us, and teaches us to lift our eyes to Christ; with Him is forgiveness, He through His work gives purpose, sense to our lives.

This focus on Calvary has been in dispute in the course of church history. At the time of the Great Reformation 450 years ago, the Roman Catholic Church insisted that the focus of the Lord's Supper was not Calvary but instead the activity of the priest in the front of the church. Their point was this: yes, they said, it's important that Christ died on the cross of Calvary so many years ago to pay for our sins, but that labor on Jesus' part does not help us unless the priest *still sacrifices Christ today*. How the priest does that? At the Lord's Supper, said the RCC, the bread changes into the real body of Christ and the wine into His real blood. Then the officiating priest takes that bread-become-Jesus' -flesh and sacrifices it anew –how?- by breaking it in the Eucharist celebration. That breaking constitutes sacrificing Christ anew, and that *renewed* sacrificing obtains the forgiveness of our sins.

Luther and Calvin and so many other leaders of the Reformation had insisted that this was not the Scriptural truth of the matter. So, when Zacharias Ursinus and Casper Olevianus wrote the Heidelberg Catechism in 1561 they put into their Catechism the material of Lord's Days 28 and 29, confessing in these Lord's Days that the table of the Lord directs our attention to the work of Christ on Calvary.

Well now, two years after the Catechism was completed (1561) the RCC held a sort of synod in the city of Trent. This Council of Trent (as it was called) compiled Rome's criticism of the Reformation into a series of statements. This criticism came in the form of curses, anathemas. That is: the Council declared cursed whoever believed that Christ's work on the cross of Calvary was our complete salvation, declared cursed whoever believed that Christ died once for all on the cross and was not to be sacrificed by the priests today. So they also declared cursed those who embraced the teaching of Scripture about Lord's Supper as summarized in Lord's Days 28 & 29 of the Catechism.

The RCC declares persons cursed. We need to bear in mind that the people who joined the Reformation had sensitive feelings about the RCC. To us today, the RCC is foreign, remote; few of us were raised in the RCC or have close family members in the RCC. But that was not the case in the days of the Council of Trent! Most of those who joined the Reformation had been born, baptized, raised in the RCC, and many still had loved family members in that Church. To hear this church voice an anathema over one self and one's beliefs: that had clout! That's why in turn the leaders of the Reformation sought to encourage their people with a clear summary statement of the teachings of Scripture on the point and a critique of the RC position. So two years after the Catechism was written they added a new Question & Answer to the Catechism; that new Question & Answer is the first one of Lord's Day 30, about the difference between

the Lord's Supper and the papal mass. With this Question & Answer the leaders set before the church membership in clear and unambiguous terms what the essence of the Lord's Supper actually was. Said they: "the Lord's Supper testifies to us ... that we have complete forgiveness of all our sins through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which He Himself accomplished on the cross once for all."

Notice, brothers and sisters, the emphasis on Calvary. Notice also the categorical language here. The people of the pew are taught first that we have "*complete* forgiveness." Then they're told that we have this forgiveness "through the *one* sacrifice of Jesus Christ." Then they add that this one sacrifice on the cross was offered "*once for all*". In other words: the Supper of our Lord directs us only and alone *to Calvary*, and assures us that Jesus' one-time work on the cross is all we need for the forgiveness of all our sins. So we don't need the labors of the priest to obtain forgiveness, and Christ does not have to be sacrificed for us again and again. The big moment of history is not what happens at each mass; the big moment is what happened on Calvary! Here is reassurance for the people: look always and only to Christ on the cross for your salvation!

The question arises whether we need a Question & Answer in our Catechism today that takes the RC doctrine of the mass apart so completely. True, you and I today are not confronted so directly with RC teaching as the brethren of Europe were 450 years ago. But the truth is drawn into sharp focus specifically through confrontation with error. And it's the glorious truth –complete redemption through Christ's sacrifice on Calvary alone- it's that glorious truth we need to see clearly – and consideration of the wrongs of Rome (they're still around us today) help us to do that.

We come to our second point. Since the Supper of the Lord directs our attention to Calvary alone for our complete salvation, who may attend the Lord's Supper? That's our second point:

2. *Who may attend?*

We have our ideas on the point. Members of the church may attend, we say, provided they have professed the faith and are repentant of their sins.

Indeed, that's correct. But to give the matter further depth, I want to draw your attention to the passage we read from Mt 9. I'm interested particularly in vs 10: "as Jesus sat at the table in the house ..., many tax collectors and sinners came and sat down with Him and His disciples." Question: would tax collectors and sinners be welcome at Jesus' table today? How would we respond if tax collectors and sinners would come forward next Sunday to sit at the Lord's table?

To be honest, brothers and sisters, we sympathize with the reaction of the Pharisees in vs 11. They objected. To the disciples they said, "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?!" For to the minds of these Pharisees, tax collectors and sinners were certainly not as good in the service of the Lord as the Pharisees (cf Luke 18:9ff) and therefore not fitting table companions.

Observe, then, the reply of the Lord to the charge of the Pharisees. Vs 12: "those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." For why was it, Jesus asks, that these tax collectors and sinners gather around Jesus? It's because they know that they are sick. More, it's because they accept that Jesus is the only doctor who can heal them. That's more than could be said of the Pharisees. Hence Jesus' instruction to them in vs 13: "Go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy and not sacrifice.' For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."

You see, congregation: the tax collectors and sinners of Jesus' day were more tuned in to spiritual reality than the pious Pharisees. Those tax collectors and sinners recognized that they had a need, were sick, needed a physician, and *therein they were correct*. The Pharisees were not tuned in to that reality. Those Pharisees took for granted that God was pleased with them, they had no needs with God because they did the right thing before God day by day – they fasted often, gave tithes, kept the law, etc, and so God was surely happy with them, and so *they* ought to be permitted to sit freely at table with a man of God. Jesus compliments the attitude of the tax collectors, and criticizes the mindset of the Pharisees; He didn't come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance. And see: these tax collectors and sinners are tuned in to that reality, they know they have a need, and so they come to the Lord for healing.

Who may sit at table with the Lord? Would tax collectors and sinners be welcome? Jesus' answer, beloved, is yes! And bear in mind that by nature *we all are tax collectors and sinners*, that is, unworthy of God's grace, not measuring up to God's standards, deserving of His judgment. Yet is *every* tax collector or sinner welcome at Jesus' table? No, not at all. Only those are welcome who *recognize that they are sick* and that *Jesus is the only doctor* able to heal them. Then it matters not whether one is a tax collector or a Pharisee; both are welcome as soon as they recognize that they are sick (to stay with the language of Mt 9) and recognize that Jesus alone can heal them.

What does Jesus mean in our passage with the term 'sick'? Jesus' words in vs 12, of course, constitute a parable, and the explanation is found in the last part of vs 13. Those who don't need a physician are those who are righteous in themselves, those who think they can justify themselves before God. These are your spiritually arrogant people, those who do all the right things and assume that *by doing those things rightly* they win points with God. The sick, meanwhile, are the sinners, those who know they have nothing with which to impress God, who know that they daily provoke God's anger and so have desperate need of God's mercy. In the words of our Catechism: the sick are "those who are truly displeased with themselves because of their sins." These are they who recognize that great "weakness" remains in them, so great that they haven't a hope of a chance to impress God. They are "sick", and so they come to Jesus' hospital to seek His healing. Where that hospital is? That's Calvary, for on the cross He took on Himself the wrath of God all sinners deserve, more, on the cross He satisfied that wrath, paid for sin. The sick come to Jesus' hospital for healing, and that's to say that they come to Calvary in the conviction that *there* they can receive the forgiveness and the mercy they so desperately need.

But Calvary: today there is nothing to be found on Calvary; the hill no longer has a cross, let alone the Savior hanging on the cross. Where one must go to see Calvary today? That's in the sacrament of holy Supper, at table with the Lord Jesus Christ! The Lord's Supper: *there* the Great Physician Jesus Christ is at work, healing the sick. For at the table the Lord assures the sick that "we have complete forgiveness of all our sins through the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which He Himself accomplished on the cross once for all." Who are welcome at this hospital? In the words of Mt 9: those who are sick. Or in the words of our Lord's Day: those who are truly displeased with themselves because of their sins.

Now another question arises, beloved. We say in Lord's Day 30 that those may come "who are truly displeased with themselves." What do you think: *how* displeased do you have to be with yourself before you qualify to attend? Or in the language of Mt 9: how sick must you be?

It's a question that sits on our minds. For we think that actually we can't go to the table because we are not sufficiently displeased with ourselves.... We think: we should be *totally* displeased, completely detest ourselves because of our sins. But we don't..., and so we shouldn't go..., our sins obviously don't bother us enough.

Now, it is a fact, beloved, that the standard God holds before us is perfection. That means also that we ought to be *perfectly* aware of our sins, and perfectly sorry for them too. Yet the Catechism in our Lord's Day, brothers and sisters, does not say that we need to *perfectly* displeased before we can go to the Lord's hospital. That's because the Catechism takes into account what the apostle Paul has argued in Romans 7 and the church confesses in Lord's Day 44: even the holiest have only a small beginning of the obedience God requires. That is: though God demands perfection from us (and so we keep striving to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect), He at the same time remembers that we are flesh, are but dust; we shall not achieve the goal that He sets for us. If only those could come to the table who were perfectly displeased with themselves on account of sin, *nobody could ever come to the table!* For in this life nobody is ever perfectly displeased with the self on account of sin; *we don't even know so many of our sins!* The Catechism is so Scripturally sound, and so pastorally sensitive, when it speaks about being "*truly* displeased." It's not the healthy, those who have achieved perfection in their sense of displeasure at their sins, who may come, but it's the sick, those who's displeasure at their sins is so flawed, so broken, *but true nevertheless*. "Truly displeased": the point is not how *perfect*, how *deep*, is your displeasure; the point is rather: *is* there displeasure. And you know whether your sense of displeasure is dinkum or show.

The same argument holds in relation to whether we believe Jesus is the only physician able to heal us. Or, in the words of our Lord's Day, whether we trust that our sins are forgiven us. We keep saying: our trust, our faith, has to be of a certain caliber before we can attend the table. True, the norm we need to shoot for is indeed perfect trust, perfect faith.

But, as with anything else, we shall not achieve that standard in this life! Nor need that alarm us since our Savior achieved it for us. God knows we are but dust, flesh, weak, sick, and so He welcomes to His table not those with *perfect* faith but those who *have* faith – though it remains weak.

The point, brothers and sisters? This: we are not set the threshold to the table higher than God has set it. The threshold the Lord has set is this: 1. We need to know that we are sick, and 2. We need to know that only Jesus Christ can heal us. While we pursue a perfect awareness of how sick we are, and while we pursue a perfect trust in Christ Jesus as the only Physician, we accept that Jesus does not welcome only those with perfect displeasure at their sins or only those with perfect faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus welcomes those who are aware that they are sick, and aware that Christ is the only Doctor.

So: the fact that you have been in church every Sunday since last Lord's Supper does not entitle you to attend the Lord's Supper next week. The fact that you have a good family does not entitle you to attend either. Nor does the fact that you have helped your brother in his need or read your Bible faithfully or never swear. While all those things are exactly what the Lord wants, they are not the standards Christ has set for those who may attend His Supper.

By the same token: the fact that you have deceived the tax man in the past does not automatically mean that you may not attend the Lord's table next Sunday. The fact that you have missed church without legitimate reason does not mean either that you may not attend. Nor does the fact that you visited ungodly sites on the web. While all those things are distinctly sin against God and provoke His judgment, they are not the standards Christ has set for who may attend His Supper.

Rather, the standard Christ sets catches us all where it hurts the most, whether we be seen as upright in the eyes of men or sinners in the eyes of men. The standard Christ sets is: *do you recognize that you are a sinner?* Do you recognize that you have a problem with God, that your sins are a barrier, and you can do nothing about it yourself? In the words of Mt 9: that you are *sick*? Or in the words of our Lord's Day: that you are "truly displeased" with yourself because of your sins. That's point 1. And point 2 is: do you recognize that only Jesus Christ can deliver you from the just judgment of God you deserve, and He in fact has delivered through His sacrifice on Calvary all those who believe in Him? In the words of Mt 9: that Jesus Christ is the only Doctor able to heal you? Or in the words of our Lord's Day: that you trust that your sins are forgiven you and your remaining weaknesses covered by the suffering and death of Christ. *Those* are the standards.

I say here nothing new. Turn with me please to the Form for the Celebration of the Lord's Supper. We hope to read the whole Form together next Sunday, but for now, in relation with Lord's Day 30, I want to read with you the top of page 595 (re true self-examination). **READ.**

You notice, brothers and sisters, how the Lord's Supper Form has picked up Jesus' instruction in a passage as Mt 9. Who may come? Not the self-righteous. Nor those who love their sins. Nor those who don't look to Jesus' work on Calvary *alone* for redemption and forgiveness. In the words of Question & Answer 82: such persons are "unbelieving and ungodly", and so may not attend the table of the Lord.

Does the Lord welcome *you* to His table next Sunday? Here, my brothers and sisters, is where you need to engage in serious self-examination. Are you, like the sinners and tax collectors of Mt 9, aware that you are sick? In the words of our Lord's Day: truly displeased with yourself because of your sins? Or do you feel more for the mindset of the Pharisees, feel rather righteous and smug about yourself, certainly that you're better-before-God than the pervert in the next pew? Are you, like the sinners and tax collectors of Mt 9, aware that Jesus alone can heal – and has obtained healing through His work on the cross? In the words of our Lord's Day: trust that your sins are forgiven through Jesus' blood and your remaining weakness is covered by the suffering and death of Christ?

Know this: Christ welcomes with open arms those who know themselves sick, those who seek redemption in His blood. The souls of such He nourishes at His table with the bread of life prepared for His people on Calvary, and encourages in further struggle against sin. But hypocrites and those who through confession and conduct show that they don't really think they are sick and need Christ are simply not welcome. They are called instead to repentance. *And then they are welcome!* Amen.



Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day Lord's Day 31 Q&A 83-84 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 30 March 2003.

***" WITH HIS GIFT OF KEYS TO THE DISCIPLES, CHRIST STRESSES THE
FUNDAMENTAL ROLE OF PREACHING ."***

Text:

Lord's Day 31 Q&A 83-84

83. Q. What are the keys of the kingdom of heaven?

A. The preaching of the holy gospel and church discipline. By these two the kingdom of heaven is opened to believers and closed to unbelievers.[1]

[1] *Matt. 16:19; John 20:21-23.*

84. Q. How is the kingdom of heaven opened and closed by the preaching of the gospel?

A. According to the command of Christ, the kingdom of heaven is opened when it is proclaimed and publicly testified to each and every believer that God has really forgiven all their sins for the sake of Christ's merits, as often as they by true faith accept the promise of the gospel. The kingdom of heaven is closed when it is proclaimed and testified to all unbelievers and hypocrites that the wrath of God and eternal condemnation rest on them as long as they do not repent. According to this testimony of the gospel, God will judge both in this life and in the life to come.[1]

[1] *Matt. 16:19; John 3:31-36; 20:21-23.*

Scripture Reading:

Isaiah 22:15-23

Matthew 16:13-20

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 45:1,6

Psalms 86:3

Hymn 11:2

Psalms 96:2,8

Psalms 22:10,11

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

How important to your salvation is the preaching? Will your children in 20 or 40 years' time *need* the preaching?

The question is important. The number of students at the College in Hamilton is about sufficient to replace the ministers of Canada and Australia who will retire in the next four years. The number of young men known to be preparing themselves to go to Hamilton is again about sufficient to replace the ministers who will retire when these young men are ready to enter the ministry. The point: there are not enough ministers for the congregations that are currently vacant. That's to say nothing of new congregations or mission work. This phenomenon is the same in the Dutch sister churches.

Does this represent a problem? Yes, brothers and sisters, this represents an acute problem. Why? Because, as the church confesses in Lord's Day 31, the preaching has a critical function in God's plan of salvation. In fact, the preaching is the key that opens the kingdom of heaven to sinners. Without preachers people are not saved. Without

preachers for the years ahead the kingdom will not be opened for your children and grandchildren! That is why we need to work today to ensure that there will be sufficient preachers for the time to come.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

WITH HIS GIFT OF KEYS TO THE DISCIPLES, CHRIST STRESSES THE FUNDAMENTAL ROLE OF PREACHING.

1. What keys are for.
2. How the key works.

1. What keys are for.

Our Lord's Day speaks about "the keys of the kingdom of heaven." There is one place only in the Bible where we come across that phrase, and that's in Mt 16, where Jesus says this: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (vs 19). To understand the Lord's phrase we need first to consider what He means by the term 'the kingdom of heaven'.

The kingdom of heaven is that domain over which heaven reigns. Jesus Christ has ascended to the right hand of God, where all authority in heaven and earth was given to Him, and so He is today Lord of lords and King of kings. All the world, therefore, is His kingdom.

Yet from Scripture and experience we know that much of the world lives in rebellion against the King of kings, refuses to acknowledge Christ as king. That reality does not diminish Christ's ability to exercise His will over the rebels, but it does point up that these rebels (that's the unbelievers) do not enjoy, do not participate in, the benefits that belong to Christ's kingdom. These rebels, these unbelievers are *in* Christ's kingdom, but are not *of* Christ's kingdom. The gifts that Christ has obtained for sinners on the cross –and these gifts include the forgiveness of sins, peace with God, and so on- are not distributed to the unbelievers; they are distributed only to the believers, those who acknowledge Christ's kingship.

Now Jesus speaks about "the keys of the kingdom of heaven." What picture is this phrase to conjure up in our minds? Are we to think of a room with big doors –that's the kingdom of heaven and its privileges- and to get through those doors we have to get hold of some keys? If yes, what are those keys?

As I said a moment ago, Jesus used the term "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" in the passage we read from Mt 16. But the notion of 'keys' in that passage is not new with Jesus; He picked it up from God's revelation in the Old Testament. I refer specifically to Isaiah 22:22: "The key of the house of David I will lay on his shoulder; So he shall open, and no one shall shut; And he shall shut, and no one shall open." To understand Jesus' words about the keys of the kingdom of heaven, we need to come to grips with the Lord's word in Is 22.

"The key of the house of David I will lay on his shoulder," says the passage. On whose shoulder? Who would receive the key? According to vs 20, that's "Eliakim the son of Hilkiah". This man God would clothe –vs 21- "with your robe..., I will commit your responsibility into his hand...." Who is God speaking to here? Who gets told that "I will clothe him with your robe..., I will commit your responsibility to his hand"? That's vs 15: Isaiah had to go and speak to Shebna. This Shebna was "steward", was "over the house." God would replace this Shebna with a new steward, Eliakim.

What was a steward? The point of the term is this. Israel's king was meant not only to govern the people, but also administer justice (cf Ps 72:1). So the people were to have access to the king; think of the two women with their two boys (one dead) who came to Solomon for justice. But how does that work? Could the people just willy-nilly knock on the doors of the king's throne room and expect the king instantly to have time for them? Understandably, the answer is No. The king appointed a 'steward', a man who was 'over the house', and this man was (among other tasks) to make the appointments for the king. Yet it's clear too that not every Israelite could come to the king with whatever complaint he might have; the king would be far too busy for them all. So the steward was also entrusted with the task of screening the requests and determining which was of sufficient importance to come to the king. If the steward

agreed that your case was worth the king's time, he'd make you an appointment, and on the appointed day you could front up to the king's chamber and the guards would let you in – because the steward had said so. Conversely, if the steward felt that your case was frivolous, he would deny you a slot to see the king, and so when you approached the guards to enter the king's presence they wouldn't open the door for you. You see: the steward would open access to the king and no one could shut; or the steward would deny access to the king, and no one could open it.

So it's clear: the steward had an enormous responsibility, and in fact had great power too. If a steward was a corrupt man, he would give appointments not according to the severity or rightness of your complaint but according to how much you were willing to pay him.... And that was the case with this Shebna. He'd enriched himself through his office as steward, to the point that he prepared for himself a tomb fit for royalty. Hence God's judgment, vs 17: "the Lord will throw you away violently, O mighty man...." And vs 20: "I will call My servant Eliakim...; I will clothe him with your robe...; I will commit your responsibility into his hand.... The key of the house of David –that's access to the king!- I will lay on his shoulder." As Shebna used to do, so Eliakim would now do: "he shall open, and no one shall shut; And he shall shut, and no one shall open." That is: he shall give access to the king and that decision shall be final; alternatively, he shall deny access to the king, and *that* decision shall be final." Only thing is: unlike Shebna who used his position corruptly, Eliakim would use it rightly (vs 21b).

This material, congregation, forms the Old Testament background to Jesus' words in Mt 16. Jesus says in vs 19: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." Those keys: as with Eliakim in Is 22, the point of keys is the question of *access*. With Eliakim the point was access *to the king* and therefore access to the king's justice in your particular dispute. In Mt 16 the point is access *to the Christ*, the King of kings, and therefore access to His justice, ie, whether His atoning work on Calvary can be your righteousness before God, whether you can enjoy forgiveness of sins for Jesus' sake, whether you can be assured of peace with God. As Eliakim's decision to open access to the king meant that no one could shut, and Eliakim's decision to deny access to the king meant that no one could open it, so in Mt 16 the decision of the person with the keys is final; "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

This makes it clear, brothers and sisters: this concept of the keys of the kingdom is no insignificant thing! What the Lord has entrusted in Mt 16 is something of fundamental significance for all who wish to enjoy the privileges of the kingdom of heaven – including such blessings as forgiveness of sins and peace with God! Those keys: they are vitally important; whoever has those keys determines who has access to the kingdom, determines who may enjoy the privileges of the kingdom and who may not. Whatever he decides is ratified in heaven!

That raises a critical question: *who has the keys?* To whom did Jesus entrust these keys in Mt 16? At first reading it appears that the Lord Jesus gave these keys to Peter. Vs 18: "I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give *you* the keys...." On the basis of that reading the Roman Catholic Church builds its doctrine that the Pope –successor, it is said, to Peter- the Pope determines who can be saved....

But is it really true, congregation, that Jesus addressed His words about the keys only to Peter? The answer is No, and there are a couple of reasons why I say that. The first is this: while it's true that the passage about the keys in vs 19 is addressed first to Peter, the fact of the matter is that Jesus was speaking to *all twelve*. Vs 13: Jesus "asked His *disciples*, saying, 'Who do men say that I ... am?'" After they had offered the opinion of the public, Jesus replied with this question, "But who do *you* say that I am?" The 'you' here is plural; Jesus wants the opinion of the twelve. Simon Peter voiced the opinion of the twelve, and told Jesus that in their opinion He was "the Christ, the Son of the living God" – and there follows the exchange about the keys of the kingdom. Then we read in vs 20 that Jesus "commanded *His disciples*" –so not just Peter- "that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ" – as they had just confessed through Peter's mouth. Point: Jesus was speaking to *all twelve*, though He was looking at Peter – the one who was first to voice the true confession of Jesus' identity.

That Jesus is speaking to all twelve here is pointed up by Jesus' words in Mt 18. For when the Lord speaks there about church discipline He says this: "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" – literally just as He'd said in Mt 16. But this time the pronoun 'you' is in plural form, and the point is that Jesus is distinctly speaking to *all twelve* and telling them all that their

actions of binding and loosing –in other words, their using the keys- opens and shuts the kingdom of heaven. In the same way, Jesus' words in Mt 16 about Peter being the rock upon which the Lord builds His church is applied in Eph 2 to all the apostles (vs 20). So, to limit Jesus' words in Mt 16 to Peter alone, and insist that Peter alone (or a successor to Peter) controls the keys to the kingdom of heaven is simply wrong.

Let Jesus' reference be, then, to the twelve. To *them* Jesus gives the keys to the kingdom of heaven, and that's to say that when *they* open the kingdom to you, the kingdom *is* open and when they close the kingdom to you the kingdom *is* closed.

But now a new problem arises. Is it really so that *our* access to the gifts of heaven is somehow determined by these twelve? How does that work? I can best answer that question by looking with you at the first key, the preaching of the gospel. That our second point this afternoon:

2. *The working of the first key.*

The benefits of the kingdom of heaven include such gifts as the forgiveness of sins and peace with God. The Bible is emphatic that one can receive forgiveness *only by faith*. It is what Jesus has said; "he who *believes* ... will be saved, but he does not believe is condemned" (cf Lord's Day 7.20).

If *faith* is so necessary, *where does this faith come from?* Says the Scripture: "faith comes by hearing" (Rom 10:17), and that hearing happens through the *preaching* of the gospel (Rom 10:14; cf Lord's Day 25).

But now think it through, brothers and sisters. While Jesus was on earth, He preached much, taught the people many things. But what about His disciples? When did they begin to preach that Jesus was the Christ, the Savior sent by God to pay for sin? That, congregation, was after Pentecost. Before His ascension into heaven Jesus told His disciples that all authority in heaven and on earth was give to Him (His was the kingdom!), and therefore the disciples were to go out and make disciples of all nations, teaching them to observe all that God had commanded (Mt 28:19f). But they didn't go preaching right away; they waited (according to Jesus' command) till they were endued with power from on high, had received the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8).

So: what happens on the day of Pentecost? This: as soon as the Holy Spirit is poured out, as soon as the disciples were endued with power from on high, *they began to preach!* Acts 2: Peter, the very man to whom Jesus spoke in Mt 16 when He promised the keys of the kingdom, *Peter* began to preach. To whom? To the very people who fifty days earlier had cried out to "Crucify Him, Crucify Him," even adding that Jesus' blood be upon them and their children. It's obvious: given their crime on Good Friday the kingdom of heaven is well and truly closed to these people.

But see: Peter preaches to them anyway. What he preaches? He preaches that *Jesus is the Christ!* He proclaims that God worked mightily through Jesus of Nazareth so that this man –whom the audience had crucified!- did not stay in the grave but was raised from the dead and enthroned at God's right hand. Vs 32: "this Jesus God has raised up." More, this Jesus is "exalted to the right hand of God" (vs 33), is now King of kings. Conclusion, vs 36: "therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."

Does Peter say that the benefits of Jesus' kingdom are closed to the crowd before him? True, when the crowds heard Peter's proclamation of Jesus' lordship, they panicked; "they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostle, 'Men and brethren, what shall we do?'" And Peter doesn't say, 'Sorry, there's no hope for you'; instead, Peter says, vs 38, "Repent, and let everyone of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins." That is: Peter is throwing the doors of the kingdom wide open, Peter is saying that the privileges of the kingdom are *for them*.

But how did Peter get the crowds to be cut to their heart? He did that *through the preaching*. That is: *the preaching is the key that opens the kingdom of heaven!*

Here I need to take you back for a moment to that passage from Mt 16. That passage had concluded with this note: "then [Jesus] commanded His disciples that they should *tell no one* that He was Jesus the Christ" (vs 20). But precisely this is what Peter *does* do in Acts 2; he proclaims "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and

Christ." In Mt 16 Peter and the other disciples were not allowed to tell that Jesus was the Christ; now, in Acts 2, Peter *does* tell. Why the difference? That is because the Holy Spirit has been poured out, and through the working of the Holy Spirit the disciples now realized what they had not sufficiently understood before, namely, that Jesus was the Christ, was the Messiah who reconciled sinners to God through the shedding of His blood on the cross. They didn't realize it sufficiently before, and that's why they were not to preach; it would only hinder the gospel. Now by the power of the Holy Spirit they realize it, and so now they can preach. And preach they do; the book of Acts relates so many apostolic sermons, tells us of so many missionary journeys.

What is this ability to proclaim Jesus so freely as the Christ? This, congregation, is *fulfillment of Jesus' promise in Mt 16!* Jesus had spoken in that passage about the keys of the kingdom, but He had not given that gift immediately. Jesus spoke in *future* tense; "I *will* give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." Those keys Jesus gave at Pentecost. For the key that opens wide the doors of the kingdom of heaven is nothing else than the preaching of the gospel. Preaching is the key, because through preaching the Holy Spirit works faith, and faith is absolutely essential to enter the kingdom and enjoy its privileges; without faith there is no justification before God, no forgiveness of sins, no peace with God. The disciples preach, and in the preaching declare that the kingdom of heaven is wide open for all who believe that Jesus is the Christ, and declare also that the kingdom of heaven is shut tight against those who refuse to repent of their sins and believe in Jesus Christ.

Do you see, congregation, the *fundamental position* the Lord God has given to the preaching? An Israelite in the Old Testament could not get to the king apart from the steward; the man who had the key to the house of David determined access to the king. That's the role the disciples receive in the New Testament; no one shall see God unless he believe, and faith comes through the preaching. The preaching is so critically important for those who would access the King of kings and enjoy the privileges of His heavenly kingdom; it's the preaching that opens wide the doors of the kingdom. It's because the disciples understood the crucial function of preaching that they in turn preached so diligently and let nothing stop them from their preaching. They knew: sinners' access to the kingdom of heaven and its privileges –forgiveness of sins and peace with God- went *through them*. And that's, of course, why Satan opposed the apostles so vehemently, seeking to intimidate them, imprison them, silence them. For Satan did not want the doors of that kingdom thrown open to sinners!

Then it's true: the apostles in time died, and with their death their preaching ceased. But the principle remained: faith comes through the preaching, and so God saw to it that there remained preachers. Timothy was not an apostle, but the Holy Spirit called him to office as preacher in Ephesus, and so Paul gave Timothy this emphatic command: "I charge you therefore before God and the Lord Jesus Christ, who will judge the living and dead at His appearing and His kingdom: *Preach the word!* Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching" (2 Tim 4:1f). And other preachers were appointed beside Timothy, other preachers through the ages by whose ministry God would open wide for sinners the doors of the kingdom of heaven. Through the preaching of the gospel the kingdom is opened; through the preaching the Spirit works the faith one needs to benefit from Christ and His gifts. The keys of Mt 16 have functioned ever since Pentecost and will continue to function till the day of Christ's return; the gospel will be preached for the salvation of all those whom God has called to eternal life. Lord's Day 31: "the kingdom of heaven is opened when it is proclaimed and publicly testified" –and that's the preaching!- "to each and every believer that God has really forgiven all their sins for the sake of Christ's merits as often as they by true faith accept the promise of the gospel." That's the fundament role of preaching; by God's ordinance preaching is critical to salvation.

Two consequences follows. The first is this: *appreciate the preaching!* Our day and age undervalues the preaching, for people want *action* instead of words. But the Lord says that the first key that opens the kingdom of heaven is the preaching, and so we need to value that preaching. That means concretely: *pray* for preachers, pray that they receive insight and wisdom and faithfulness and boldness to preach the word. And: *be in church*, work with the preaching. Notice the way Lord's Day 31 puts it: when the gospel of salvation in Christ is proclaimed the doors of the kingdom stand wide open for all believers *as often as they accept the promise of the gospel*. That's to say: Sunday by Sunday we are to *respond* to the preaching, Sunday by Sunday *make a decision anew* to accept what the Lord says in His Word to us in our circumstances. But you can't respond to that promise when you're not in church to hear that promise proclaimed – and it's the proclamation that opens wide the doors of salvation!

It's the second consequence I need to emphasize today: *pray that there be adequate preachers!* The privileges of the kingdom are given to men through the means of preaching. That means we need preachers, it means the world needs preachers! Today's preachers will not last forever; tomorrow the churches and the world need new preachers, other ministers and missionaries. So: *pray* that God will raise up young men able and willing to use the keys of the kingdom, to open the gates of salvation! But prayer, of course, needs to be accompanied by work, and that means that we also need to *encourage* young men to consider the preaching. Parents, speak with your sons about the critical role God has given to the preaching in His kingdom, and develop interest in them for that wonderful work of preaching the gospel. Young people, encourage each other to take seriously the pivotal function God has given to preaching, and *talk up* the ministry as a desirable career. Brothers and sisters of the congregation, encourage young men, talk up the office of minister of the word. So much is at stake; it is through the *preaching* that the kingdom of heaven and its privileges of forgiveness of sins and peace with God is given to men! That's exactly why Satan wants to stifle the preaching, and how better can he do it than by making the task of the preacher appear burdensome, an office no young person really wants. *That way the kingdom of heaven will not be opened to the next generation!*

You see, your children and grandchildren will need the preaching in 20, 30 years time as much as we need it today, for it's through the preaching that the kingdom is opened to them. But if there are no preachers, who will open the kingdom of heaven for your children? Or for the world? That's why it's so critically important that we be busy today encouraging young men for that glorious office!

I stress it: for the sake of the salvation of many, *talk up the office of the preacher!* I know: the preachers of today are sinful men, and it's so easy to find fault with us preachers, and critical comments more often than not have basis in reality too yet. But to criticize today's preachers does not help the youth to aspire to the office – and that plays exactly into Satan's hand. And that in turn has grave consequences for the coming generation.

What are the keys of the kingdom of heaven? How is that kingdom opened for you and for me, for your children and mine, for the thousands and millions of our world who live in darkness? The primary key is "the preaching of the holy gospel." May the Lord God in mercy grant that many young men give themselves to be preachers, to be ministers in the churches and missionaries in the world. Amen.

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**Sermon on Lord's Day 31 Q&A 85 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on
Sunday afternoon, 6 April 2003.**

" CHURCH DISCIPLINE IS GOD'S GIFT OF LOVE."

Text:

Lord's Day 31 Q&A 85

85. Q. How is the kingdom of heaven closed and opened by church discipline?

A. According to the command of Christ, people who call themselves Christians but show themselves to be unchristian in doctrine or life are first repeatedly admonished in a brotherly manner. If they do not give up their errors or wickedness, they are reported to the church, that is, to the elders. If they do not heed also their admonitions, they are forbidden the use of the sacraments, and they are excluded by the elders from the Christian congregation, and by God Himself from the kingdom of Christ.[1] They are again received as members of Christ and of the church when they promise and show real amendment.[2]

[1] *Matt. 18:15-20; I Cor. 5:3-5; 11-13; II Thess. 3:14, 15. [2] Luke 15:20-24; II Cor. 2:6-11.*

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 18:15-20

2 Thessalonians 3:6-15

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "Book of Praise" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 122:1,2

Psalms 16:1

Psalms 141:3,4,5

Psalms 32:2,3

Psalms 119:25,27

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The keys of the kingdom of heaven, we learned last week, play an essential role in one receiving salvation. The kingdom of heaven: that's where Christ rules, where people enjoy the benefits of Christ's kingship – such treasures as the forgiveness of sins and peace with God. Whoever has the keys determines access to this kingdom, to these treasures; you can't enjoy the riches of Christ's kingdom if you refuse to acknowledge the keys. So: those keys are vitally important!

The first key, we heard last week, was the preaching of the holy gospel. One needs faith in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, and the Spirit works faith through the preaching. To ignore the preaching, to be critical of the preaching, to avoid the preaching means that the doors of the kingdom cannot be thrown open to you. Similarly, if there are no preachers left the kingdom can't be opened either. Hence our responsibility to pray for preachers, our responsibility to support preachers, our responsibility to come to church humbly wanting to hear what the Spirit says through the preaching.

Yet we understand that hearing the word is not sufficient to enter the kingdom of heaven; we need also to respond to the preaching with faith. In the words of A 84: we need "by true faith [to] accept the promise of the gospel." That is, we need to *believe* what we hear. And believing it means that we *put it into action*, that we *live* according to the will of God.

But what, now, if a congregation member refuses to believe what he hears proclaimed in the preaching? What if a member refuses to live according to the standards of God's word? Is the kingdom of heaven still open for him then? Let it be clear, beloved: No, then the kingdom of heaven is not open for this congregation member anymore. It may be that he still comes to church, it may be that he still goes to club, may still lead his family in prayer, but if he does not believe what the Lord says the Lord will not give him the privileges of the kingdom - forgiveness of sins and peace with God. Similarly, if a member does not live according to God's will, lives in defiance of a particular command of God, he thereby shows that he does not belong to Jesus Christ; after all, Christ's sheep hear His voice, and they listen to Him (Jn 10:2-4, 14-16,24-27). If he shows himself *not* to be a sheep of the Lord, he cannot expect to receive the privileges Christ has prepared for His own. So he may *think* he will go to heaven, but on the day of his death will wake up on hell.

Well now, brothers and sisters, that sort of terrible surprise God wishes on none of His covenant children. That is why the Lord has given His church a second key to the kingdom beside the preaching of the gospel. For the salvation of those who refuse to work seriously with the first key, the Lord has given a second: church discipline. Through discipline the Lord Himself would grab His straying child by the scruff of his neck and confront him with the reality of his sins and its consequences. God does not wish His children to be lost, to wake up in hell, and to catch their attention He is pleased to use *discipline*.

So, congregation, let it be fixed in our mind that discipline is an expression of God's *love* for His own! We don't like the concept of discipline, and especially our tolerant society frowns on the notion of discipline - our society would let everybody do what he wants; who are you to tell another that he is wrong?! But the Lord says that discipline is an expression of love, is an effort on God's part to prevent that we think we're going to heaven but in fact will wake up in hell.

Today I preach to you the word of God about His gift of discipline. I use this theme:

CHURCH DISCIPLINE IS GOD'S GIFT OF LOVE.

1. The place of church discipline.
2. The manner of church discipline.

1. The place of church discipline.

The term 'discipline', brothers and sisters, sends our thoughts straightaway to *church* discipline. Yet in the Bible there is a form of discipline that must function *before* church discipline enters the picture. Indeed, church discipline enters the picture only because this other form of discipline has failed. I refer here to self-discipline, or (as it's also called) self-control. It's when you do not sufficiently discipline yourself that the communion of saints is called in to help you.

When the Lord God first created the human race, He decreed that man should have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, over the cattle, and over all the earth (Gen 1:26). That includes, of course, that man should have control over himself. As Adam was not to let the fruit of the vine have dominion over him but instead he was to have dominion over the fruit of the vine, so also Adam was not to let his personal urges have dominion over him but was instead to have dominion over his urges. God equipped Adam in Paradise with the ability to have dominion over his urges; Adam was able to exercise perfect self-control, self-discipline.

With his fall into sin, Adam lost that ability to have dominion over himself, lost the ability to exercise perfect self-discipline. So Noah gave in to his urge for drink, and as a result lost control too over whether he was wearing clothes. Moses gave in to his frustration with the people and in anger hit the rock. Peter gave in to his sense of fear, and in self-defense gave in to the urge to lie to the servant girl.

The Lord, though, has given His Holy Spirit to renew His people. One of the fruits of the Spirit is, indeed, "self-control" (Gal 5:23). Exactly because self-control, dominion over self, is one of the fruits the Spirit works in the redeemed, is it the responsibility of the redeemed to *make a point of exercising self-discipline*. Hence the instruction of the apostle Peter:

"But also for this very reason, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue, to virtue knowledge, to knowledge self-control, to self-control perseverance, to perseverance godliness, to godliness brotherly kindness, and to brotherly kindness love. For if these things are yours and abound, you will be neither barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:5-8).

Notice: here's the duty for God's own: develop (among other gifts) that gift of self-control. To do so will make you fruitful in God's kingdom. On the other hand, whoever fails to develop this gift will end up in trouble. Vs 9: *"he who lacks these things is shortsighted, even to blindness, and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins."* That is why the Holy Spirit in the book of Proverbs talks up the notion of self-discipline as a wonderful thing. Consider the following texts:

"Whoever has no rule over his own spirit Is like a city broken down, without walls" (Proverbs 25:28).

And:

"He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty, And he who rules his spirit than he who takes a city " (Proverbs 16:32).

To rule one's own spirit: the Lord holds that before us as most desirable. And we can understand it: a person who can't control himself, who gives in to his whims and urges, has no backbone, is not a man, is swept along by the currents of the day. Such a man so readily gives in to sin. But the person who exercises self-control can say No to the urges arising within him, can say No to the temptations arising around him. So such a person can stay away from sin, and so can show by his deeds that he loves the Lord and accepts that God's commands are good commands.

But the fact of the matter is that in this life even the holiest will fail, will fail also in exercising adequate self-discipline. Even the holiest fall into sin, do what God has forbidden, neglect what God has commanded.... Then what? Of course, he must repent, turn to God again in humility and seek his forgiveness. And those whom the saints hurt through their lack of self-discipline? He must seek them out and pursue full healing of the relations he broke through his sin, his lack of self-discipline. That is the will of the Lord in the face of failure in self-discipline.

But see, brothers and sisters, the tragic fact is not only that children of God do not exercise adequate self-discipline (and so give themselves to evil); the tragic fact is also that children of God sometimes do not repent of their sins. That could be because they do not see their action as sin, or it could be that they know it's sin but are so in love with their sin that they don't want to repent of it, break with it. Here now is the love and the mercy of the Lord: He does not want His own to be lost, and so *He* reaches into their lives by means of other believers. This is what we call "Church Discipline". Notice the place church discipline has: *church discipline kicks into action only when self-discipline has failed!* In other words: the onus is first on the individual believer himself to live according to all God's commands, to show through his deeds that he loves the Lord and believes His word. But when the individual believer fails in his responsibility, the communion of saints has a task. And the task is to save the sinning brother from the hell that certainly awaits him if he does not repent.

I intend to come back to this church discipline in more detail in our second point. Before I do that, I need to draw out that the Bible speaks of a *third* form of discipline beside self-discipline and church discipline. That third form is *God's discipline*.

I think here, for example, of Ananias and Sapphira. The Holy Spirit had been poured out richly so that the early church was characterized by abundant love, so much so that believers sold their extra possessions and brought the proceeds to the apostles for distribution to the poor. Ananias and Sapphira sold their extra property also for a particular sum (let's say \$100,000), and brought a bit less than that (let's say \$95,000) to the apostles and told them that the 95 was the price they got for the land. They were certainly allowed to keep 5000 for themselves (for there was no compulsion to give it all away), but they agreed together to lie about the matter and so look as if they were giving 100% of the proceeds to the poor – how good for their own reputation! They didn't exercise sufficient self-discipline, for the Lord had commanded them not to lie. Yet in the face of their failure in self-discipline the Lord's backup system (church discipline) could not kick into action because nobody knew of their sin. So the Lord Himself stepped in, and killed

them both on the spot. That's an example of God's discipline.

We find another example in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. We read in chap 11 that the rich in the congregation would eat their fill in one side of the room while the poor sat drooling in the other side. When the rich had their baskets empty (and some were drunk) and the poor still had their stomachs growling, they pushed the tables together and celebrated the Lord's Supper. Paul reprimanded the congregation for their conduct, and told them to examine themselves before they ate the bread and drank from the Lord's cup. Then he adds this:

"For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep" (vss 29f).

That's another example of God's discipline. He reached into the congregation and made various members sick or even dead. And why? Vs 31: *"For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged."* You see: that's what the Corinthians had not done. They did not exercise adequate self-discipline, and in the face of that failure the communion of saints did not step in with church discipline either. So God Himself stepped in with His discipline. And why did He do it? Says the apostle in vs 32: *"But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world."* That's the reason: that we may not be condemned. Here's God's love! When self-discipline failed and when church discipline failed too, God Himself exercised discipline! For He doesn't want His people lost!

Now, these two examples I've mentioned speak of very radical measures on God's part. Does God always step in with such radical discipline? No, beloved, He does not. Think of David. He writes in Ps 32 that the Lord pressed His heavy hand upon him so that the fun was out of his life, his conscience bothered him, he couldn't sleep well, his whole life dried up, psychological problems developed, etc. Why did that happen? David himself says it was because he'd sinned. His sin of adultery with Bathsheba and murder of Urijah? Maybe, we're not told. But the fact of the matter is that he did not exercise sufficient self-control, and those around him did not move him to repentance either, and so God pressed His hand upon him. Did others notice? Maybe, maybe not. Did they know right away why God pressed His hand upon David? Not likely. But God's point was that David should repent of his sin! And see: in due time David did repent – and so the kingdom of heaven with its privileges was open again for David.

The Lord our God has not changed over the years, beloved. Today too He reaches into the lives of His people with His discipline – when our self-discipline fails and our church discipline does not act as sufficient backstop. But always His discipline is given in love, and so it's for us to submit ourselves to His firm hand, and break with our sins in repentance.

Note: this is not to say that every affliction God permits in our lives is His hand of discipline! There are more reasons mentioned in Scripture why the Lord reaches into the lives of His children. The topic today is discipline, and so that's all I need mention now.

What, then, is the place of church discipline? From what's been said, brothers and sisters, it's clear that church discipline has a place *between* self-discipline and God's discipline. The Lord would have us exercise such discipline over ourselves that we're always asking for God's will and making a point of doing it – in denial of our own sinful will. When we fail and persist in our sins, the Lord comes with His discipline. Between the two, God has placed church discipline, the discipline exercised by the communion of saints. That brings us to our second point:

2. The manner of church discipline.

When we speak about church discipline, brothers and sisters, we can differentiate between two forms of church discipline. We can speak of *informal* discipline and of *formal*. Both are covered in the passage we read from Matthew 18, and both are mentioned in our Lord's Day.

Under 'informal' church discipline, we're talking about the role the communion of saints plays before the sinner's transgression is brought to the attention of the consistory. You notice a congregation member is not in church and find out his reason is not legitimate. You learn a brother has developed a romance with a girl from outside the church. You discover that a mother wastes her day with computer games. You find out that a brother loves pornography. You

observe that a young sister is dressing herself immodestly. In all these cases self-discipline has failed. Now the Lord calls you to be your brother's keeper. What do you do? Quietly, secretly, between you and the sinner alone, you speak with your brother about what you know. This is Galatians 6:

"Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted." (Galatians 6:1)

Or as Jesus says to His disciples:

"Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother" (Matthew 18:15).

This addressing each other is driven by love and is characterized by love. The easy way out is to pretend that you are not aware of your brother's transgression, or to convince yourself that you are not in a position to approach him on his sin (and it's easy to convince yourself with all sorts of reasons why you should say nothing). But the Lord will have nothing of that mentality. Leviticus 19:

"You shall not hate your brother in your heart. You shall surely rebuke your neighbor, and not bear sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord." (Leviticus 19:17f)

Notice: God says here that refusing to speak to your erring brother is actually hatred for this brother. God wants His people to love the other, and one shows that love by speaking the truth to each other about the sins they see in each other. We understand that. No one wants to see his brother in hell; so, out of love you try to rescue him.

That love, then, also determines the *manner* in which you approach the erring brother. I mentioned already that text from Galatians 6: "if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one *in a spirit of gentleness*" (vs 1). A spirit of gentleness: here's no place for putting yourself above the erring brother, as if you're better. Here's no place either for admonishing somebody in order to prove that you are right. Nor is there place for trying to get your pound of flesh out of him. The point isn't either that you disagree with what he did, or that he did something unwisely or insensitively. The fine point of the conversation is not even to be how the other party hurt *you*. The point of the conversation is instead to show the brother how his conduct affects his relation with *God*. For those who belong to the Lord, those for whom the kingdom of heaven is open, listen to the voice of the Shepherd (Jn 10). So you need to show the brother how his deed was sin against the Lord, and you need to show how his refusal to repent is also refusal to heed the voice of the Shepherd. That's what you want: to encourage submission to the Lord, and that's to say that you seek repentance, an acknowledgement of wrongdoing before God. And you seek that in a spirit of gentleness, of meekness, of full awareness that but for the grace of God you would have committed exactly the same sin.

We say: visiting another to speak about these things is so difficult, we don't know what to say, and we're afraid he'll bite our head off. The Lord, my brothers and sisters, knows those fears. John writes that "perfect love casts out fear" (1 Jn 4:18); love for the brother raises one above the fears that sit in our belly. More to the point: when Jesus told us to go and tell the brother his fault, He concluded the passage with this promise: "*where two or three of you are gathered in My name, there am I in the midst of you*" (Mt 18:20). There's you, visiting the brother in whom you've seen sin – two of you. The Lord says: I'm there with you, Immanuel. And if He is with us, will He not give the courage, the words, and the strength? He gave the command, beloved, to love the erring brother so much; He will certainly give the strength to speak to him!

Here another matter arises. I draw your attention to Jesus' words in Mt 5:

"Therefore if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift." (Matthew 5:23f).

Notice: you've seen no sin with your brother, but you feel in your bones that he's got something against you. Now

why would he have something against you? More than likely, that's because he feels that you have done something wrong, have somehow hurt him. So what do you do: wait for him to come to you with an admonition according to Mt 18? Not at all. Jesus' instruction is that you –on the strength of your awareness that your brother has something against you- you leave your gift before the altar (in New Testament terms we'd say: you break off your prayer) and you go to your brother and talk out whatever there may be between you. Point: don't wait for the other to come to you, but you be the least, you be the first to go to him. That is the point: *the onus is always on yourself*.

I come back to that passage from Mt 18. You address your brother from out of the word of God. He listens to you, and that's to say that he listens to the voice of the Shepherd in Scripture; he acknowledges wrong. *That's to be the end of the matter*; "you have gained your brother." So you talk about it with no one anymore. You protect his good name, and so keep his sin a secret.

But it may also be that he refuses to concede wrong. What can you do? Out of love for him you increase the pressure on him. How? Says the Lord: you bring along witnesses who do two things. These witnesses witness how you explain to the brother that his deed was sin before the Lord as well as his response. Further, these witnesses also add their own pressure to yours, in an effort to bring the erring brother to submit to the voice of the Shepherd – and so prove that he is a sheep of the flock after all and therefore an heir to the privileges of God's kingdom.

If that effort of love still meets with no success, you bring the matter to the attention of the church – and that's *formal church discipline*. You do it in an orderly manner, and therefore relate the problem to the elders for their attention. They in due time will advise the congregation – unless, by God's grace, there has come repentance. Then the church together, under the leadership of the congregation, excommunicates the hardened sinner, tells the sinner that he has no part in the people of God, no part in the privileges of the kingdom of heaven either; the kingdom is closed to him.

How do you treat such a hardened brother, such an excommunicated person? Our human emotions want to keep things normal, want to treat the person as we used to, as we would anybody else. In a society that wants us to respect another in his beliefs, it's so very difficult to disassociate yourself from such a brother. But that, congregation, is the will of the Lord. – and we dare not be wiser than God. I refer here to Paul's instruction to the Thessalonians. 2 Thessalonians 3:6:

"But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us."

"Withdraw." That's a strong word. And vs 14:

"And if anyone does not obey our word in this epistle, note that person and do not keep company with him, that he may be ashamed."

"Do not keep company." That's even stronger. And it's very painful, very hard. But look at the reason Paul mentions: "that he may be ashamed." Point is: we want the person to repent, we don't want that person in hell! So keeping distance, disassociation, is *driven by love*!

Does this mean we ignore the ex-brother altogether? No, not that either. Vs 15: *"Yet do not count him as an enemy, but admonish him as a brother."* So: you take whatever opportunities there still are to seek to correct him in a spirit of gentleness and love – as you would a brother.

For the rest, you leave him to the Lord. He has failed in exercising adequate self-discipline, the backup system God ordained –church discipline, in both its informal and formal stages- did not achieve its desired effect, and so now you leave him to the Lord to administer His discipline at His time and in His manner. God's discipline can be in this life, geared to moving the sinner to repentance still; God's discipline can also be in the life to come – His eternal justice on refusal to repent.

Is church discipline cruel? Far from it, beloved. In this broken life, self-discipline is not always as effective as it ought to be. Between self-discipline and God's discipline the Lord in mercy has placed the church, the communion of saints. For this gift we thank Him. In love for the erring brother, we do our part to hold on to him by speaking with him about

the sins and failings we see in him. We do it in gentleness, we do it in love, we do it in obedience to the Lord our God – fully aware that we are no better than the brother we admonish. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 32 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 13 April 2003.

" CHRIST'S GRACE MAKES US DO GOOD WORKS."

Text:

Lord's Day 32

86. Q. Since we have been delivered from our misery by grace alone through Christ, without any merit of our own, why must we yet do good works?

A. Because Christ, having redeemed us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit to be His image, so that with our whole life we may show ourselves thankful to God for His benefits,[1] and He may be praised by us.[2] Further, that we ourselves may be assured of our faith by its fruits,[3] and that by our godly walk of life we may win our neighbours for Christ.[4]

[1] Rom. 6:13; 12:1, 2; 1 Pet. 2:5-10. [2] Matt. 5:16; 1 Cor. 6:19, 20. [3] Matt. 7:17, 18; Gal. 5:22-24; II Pet. 1:10, 11. [4] Matt. 5:14-16; Rom. 14:17-19; 1 Pet. 2:12; 3:1, 2.

87. Q. Can those be saved who do not turn to God from their ungrateful and impenitent walk of life?

A. By no means. Scripture says that no unchaste person, idolater, adulterer, thief, greedy person, drunkard, slanderer, robber, or the like shall inherit the kingdom of God.[1]

[1] 1 Cor. 6:9, 10; Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:5, 6; 1 John 3:14.

Scripture Reading:

Ephesians 2:1-10

Romans 6:1-14

1 Peter 3:1-7

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Hymns 24:1,5

Psalms 19:3

Hymn 24:6

Psalms 119:41,42

Hymn 37:3,4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Lord's Day 32 begins with a statement. Take away the opening word 'since' and the closing question, and you have this statement: "We have been delivered from our misery by grace alone through Christ, without any merit of our own." That statement catches neatly and concisely the glorious gospel we've confessed in the previous Lord's Days, the gospel of salvation by grace alone. The emphasis lies on the word 'alone'; the Lord has granted us forgiveness of sins and life eternal without any contribution from our side. Free, grace.

That reality automatically prompts the question about good works. If forgiveness of sins and peace with God are God's gifts of grace, freely granted to us without contribution from our side, *why must we yet do good works?* They contribute nothing, so why bother with them?

Actually, the question is a bit stronger. The question is not: why *ought* we yet to do good works? The question is:

"why *must* we yet do good works?" It's an obligation, a duty, a *must*. And to be honest, brothers and sisters, that raises our hackles somewhat. Salvation is free, by grace alone. Back in Lord's Day 24.64 we confessed that good works *cannot but follow* God's gift of salvation as expression of gratitude. Is it then not overdone to speak in Lord's Day 32 of '*must*'?

No, brothers and sisters, it is not overdone. The duty of our Lord's Day is part and parcel of the grace of Jesus Christ. We *must* do good works because of Christ in grace has renewed us. Once we see that point, two blessed results follow, one with regards to ourselves and the other with respect to the neighbor.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

CHRIST'S GRACE MAKES US DO GOOD WORKS.

1. The divine cause of good works.
2. The personal comfort of good works.
3. The neighborly benefit of good works.

1. The divine cause of good works.

The gospel of deliverance through the blood of Jesus Christ comes at no cost to ourselves, is by grace alone. But how far, brothers and sisters, does grace extend? What is caught under the concept of 'grace'?

Grace. We hear in the term the notion that the Lord Jesus Christ has shed His blood for sinners. With His self-sacrifice on Calvary our sins are washed away so that we are righteous before God. It's the material we confessed in previous Lord's Days. I think of Lord's Day 23: God freely imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteous and holiness of Christ so that He sees me as without sin. I think of the sacrament of holy baptism (Lord's Day 26,27): as water washes away dirt from the body, so Christ's blood washes away the dirt of my soul. It's also the gospel driven home in Lord's Supper (Lord's Day 28ff): the broken bread and shed blood signify the broken body and shed blood of the Savior; He gave His blood to ransom us from Satan's power and return us to God as His children and heirs. Freely, by grace, our sins are washed away so that we are righteous before God, have peace with God. This is called *Justification*.

This gospel of justification by faith alone in Jesus Christ is the gospel of grace. But the thing is: this gospel of justification is not the *sum-total* of the gospel; it's only *one aspect* of God's gracious work! You see: God in the beginning created us to be perfect, alive, able to image God. With the fall into sin and our joining Satan we *died* (say the Scriptures, Eph 2:1), became so depraved that were able only to sin. That is: instead of imaging the Lord our Maker we imaged Satan our destroyer. With our fall in Paradise we provoked God's wrath; with our continuing daily sins we continue to provoke His wrath.

In His grace the Lord God through Jesus' blood ransomed us from Satan's bondage and returned us to God's side so that we're righteous before Him, have forgiveness of sins; it's called Justification. But *does the Savior leave us dead in sin?* Does He take us, spiritual carcasses, back from Satan's side to God's side (justification) and *let us continue to be spiritual carcasses, dead in sin?* No, brothers and sisters, He does not! Says Paul to the Ephesians: "But God, who is rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)..." (2:4f). Notice: we were dead but God in Christ "made us alive". Becoming alive again is not our work but God's work – just as much as paying for sin is not our work but God's work. More: this being made alive is, says Paul, is distinctly God's *grace*. The apostle says in Eph 2 that "by grace you have been saved", and his reference is not to the work of Christ in shedding His blood to make us righteous before God; in this passage his reference is to the work of the Lord in regenerating us, making us alive again. It needs to be fixed in our minds: God's grace in Christ is not just that our sins are forgiven, that we are righteous before God, that we are taken from Satan's side back to God's side; *that's only half the picture*. God's grace in Christ is also that we are changed, are made alive, are renewed – and that's called *Sanctification*. Justification and sanctification *both* are God's work in us, *both* are His gifts of 'grace' for us and in us.

Allow me an illustration to clarify. You've got very sweet memories of a 1964 Holden, and you'd love to drive one again. You've found one, but the engine has long ceased, the mice have long ago finished the seats, the windows have

long ago been smashed; it's an empty body, an automotive carcass – dead. But you pay the price, so that this wreck of a Holden is now yours. So you bring the thing home, and set it in your shed; it's *yours*. That's justification: though we're spiritual carcasses Christ has paid the price for us and brought us home; we *belong* again in Father's house, are acceptable before God.

Yet we all understand that you didn't buy the car in order to leave it in your shed as a wreck. The buying is the one half of the story; the other half is that you want to restore it, make it look like new, drive it again. That, beloved, is sanctification, the other half of God's grace in Christ. He not only bought us, redeemed us, brought us back to the Father; He also restores us, renews us, makes us alive again. The two are different, buying the car and restoring it, justification and sanctification. But you can't separate the two! As buying the car without restoring it is a job half done, so justification without sanctification is a job half done. Grace is the *whole* package!

If grace is *both*, is justification *and* sanctification, a consequence follows. When I speak about this '64 Holden, we all understand that buying the wreck does not mean that the wreck is instantly restored, drivable again; that can takes months of hard work. Indeed, it is possible that the car sits in our shed as an automotive carcass for years before we get around to restoring it.

But the renewing work of our Lord Jesus Christ occurs *at the same time* as His delivering us from Satan's power. I remind you of Eph 2: "God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ..." Notice here the *tense* the apostle uses. "We were dead," and now *are made alive*. Being alive is a *present reality*, says Paul; it's not something the Lord *will do to us* when He has time some day down the track. The apostle says the same thing in Romans 6. "Shall we," he asks in vs 1, "shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" "Certainly not," he answers, and then gives as explanation the fact that we already have "newness of life" (vs 4). Vs 11: "reckon yourselves to be dead indeed (with respect) to sin, but *alive (with respect) to God in Christ Jesus our Lord*." The renewing, restoring work of the Lord is not something of the future, but it's something the child of God receives at the same time as he is made righteous in Jesus' blood.

We say of ourselves that we are righteous before God, have forgiveness of our sins; that's the statement we make in Q 86. But then, beloved, we also have to dare to say the second half, need also to acknowledge that we are new creatures, spiritually alive, no longer a wrecked Holden but restored and drivable! It is the emphasis of Scripture: those who are righteous before God through Jesus' blood are *also renewed* through Jesus' Spirit! You can't separate the two, and so must dare to acknowledge both as true for ourselves; it's how we have to look at ourselves and it's how we need to speak of each other – as renewed people, restored Holdens!

I say here nothing new. Page back with me for a moment to Lord's Day 26. We're all baptized. Now then: "How does holy baptism signify and seal to you that the one sacrifice of Christ on the cross benefits you?" Answer: "Christ instituted this outward washing and with it gave the promise that, as surely as water washes away the dirt from the body, so certainly His blood and Spirit wash away the impurity of my soul, that is, all my sin." Notice the reference here to *both* Christ's blood *and* His Spirit. Hence the next question: "What does it mean to be washed with Christ's blood and Spirit?" That first part, to "be washed with Christ's blood," is easy enough. A 70: "to be washed with Christ's blood means to receive forgiveness of sins from God, through grace, because of Christ's blood, poured out for us in His sacrifice on the cross." That's the matter of justification, being righteous, having forgiveness of sins through Jesus' blood. But that second, to be washed with His Spirit: what's that mean? Says A 70 further: "to be washed with His Spirit means to be renewed by the Holy Spirit and sanctified to be members of Christ, so that more and more we become dead to sin and lead a holy and blameless life." Notice: to be washed with Christ's Spirit is the notion of being *renewed*, of being *made alive*, being *restored*. No, the restoration is not perfect; we're not a brand new Holden again. But we're restored nevertheless, drivable again.

That, beloved, is how we need to see ourselves! We must look at ourselves not simply as persons who are righteous before God and forgiven of our sins on account of Jesus' blood; we must see ourselves as changed, as renewed, as restored through the working of Jesus' Spirit!

So we can come back to the question of the beginning. "Why *must* we do good works?" Is the 'must' not overdone, not too strong a word? No, beloved, it's not. *Christ* has done a work in us, He's restored us through His Holy Spirit,

and so we need to *make a point of acting restored*.

Here's where the analogy with the Holden falls apart. No matter how far you've restored your Holden, it still can't *do* anything; *you* still have to drive it. But a restored sinner *can* do something! God created us in the beginning with the responsibility to image Him, and –despite our fall into sin- God has continued to hold us to that responsibility. Now that God has renewed us through His Holy Spirit we are *made able* to carry out again the responsibility God gave us in the beginning *and therefore we have the duty to act according to that responsibility*. That's the instruction of the apostle in Romans 6:12: you are alive to God in Christ Jesus, and "*therefore*," he says, "do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts." The *command* not to let sin be boss in your life follows consistently on the renewing work of the Holy Spirit. You are made alive, restored, renewed? Then you *must* do good works, have the *duty* to do good works. Is it a burden to do good works? No, it's not a burden – though sin remains us and keeps encouraging us to act according to the will of the flesh; there's a struggle involved here, indeed (cf Rom 7). And that's exactly why we need to have our *responsibility* in the matter laid before us time and again. We *must* do good works simply because Christ has renewed us. We *must* do good works, and so show our gratitude for the grace God has given in giving us both justification and sanctification, in both ransoming us from Satan's power through Christ's blood *and* restoring us through Christ's Spirit. That's Lord's Day 32: we *must* do good works "because Christ, having redeemed us by His blood, also renews us by His Holy Spirit to be His image, so that with our whole life we may show ourselves thankful to God for His benefits." We *must* do good works because *Christ has made us able to do them*.

That brings us to our second point:

2. *The personal comfort of good works.*

Our Lord's Day mentions a second reason why we are to do good works. "Further," says A 86, "that we ourselves may be assured of our faith by its fruits."

The key word here is 'assured'. Yet the assurance is not about whether there actually is a God in heaven, nor about whether the Bible is really true. In the Catechism it is the *believer* who speaks, and so the existence of God and the truth of His Word is taken for granted. But in the life of the true believer, of the person justified by Jesus' blood and renewed by Jesus' Spirit, there remain from time to time those moments of doubt (for we're not perfect yet). The fine point of the doubt is this: are my sins really forgiven? Notice: the question is not whether I believe that God forgives sins in general; the question is whether God actually forgives *my* sins. It's something with which every one of us, at some time or other, struggles. We recall a particular evil deed on our part, or we experience some calamity in our lives, or we approach the day of death, and the question floods over us: are *my* sins really forgiven? Does God actually see *me* as righteous? It's in that context that the catechism speaks of being "assured of our faith by its fruits."

How this works? Let's go back to the Holden. The fact that the Holden rolls out of your shed all restored and sparkling says something about the car's ownership. You don't spend hours and hours restoring what you have not bought in the first place. More, the restoration demonstrates what you think of that Holden; this machine is your pride and joy. So too the Christian. Because of our fall into sin we once belonged to Satan, were His property. With the price of His precious blood our Savior bought us, ransomed us from Satan's power, and returned us to God – so that we have forgiveness of sins and peace with God. The proof that He bought us? This: He *restored us*. He has given us His Spirit to change us, to renew us, to make us alive again. *For Christ does not renew those whom He has not ransomed*, does not restore cars still at the wreckers. Justification and sanctification belong together! Do you want proof, then, that you really belong to Christ, have forgiveness of sins, are righteous before God? The evidence lies in the renewal of your life, lies in the fact that you are alive to God, do good works. Those good works: they provide *assurance* that you really belong to God; by the fruits you produce, the good works you do, you receive assurance of your faith.

No, not that we have to look for perfect fruits in ourselves. A peach with a scab isn't perfect, but it's a peach nevertheless and evidence that the tree in question is truly a peach tree. The works we do are far from perfect, but –by the grace of the Lord- are good works nevertheless (and next week we'll find out exactly what good works are – Lord's Day 33)- and therefore evidence of what kind of tree we are – whether still a Holden wreck or restored. So: whilst we pursue perfection, we need not achieve perfection in ourselves before we can conclude that we are restored

by the Holy Spirit – and therefore also washed by Jesus' blood.

That conclusion, brothers and sisters, has a second side to it. What about those members of the church –they've made profession of faith, attend the table of the Lord, are maybe even esteemed members of the church community- who fail to produce good works? What must one think of those whose external behavior conforms to God's revealed will, but they keep a closet sin? Here's Question & Answer 87: such persons are "ungrateful". Though the Lord comes to them with the promises of the gospel –be it in the sacrament of baptism in their infancy, be it in the preaching Sunday by Sunday, be it even in the sacrament of holy Supper from time to time- they do not demonstrate that they've been restored by the Holy Spirit *and therefore they may not conclude that the Lord has redeemed them with His blood*. Since they've not been redeemed, they remain in bondage to Satan – and therefore cannot be saved. That's A 87: "no unchaste person, idolater, adulterer, thief, greedy person, drunkard, slanderer, robber or the like shall inherit the kingdom of God." The fruits of renewal are external only, the evidence of being restored through the work of the Holy Spirit turns out to be but a veneer covering up a love for sin, and therefore one cannot claim to be redeemed by Jesus' blood. So there is no forgiveness of sins, there is no peace with God. Justification and sanctification –though two different things- cannot be separated. That is why there is need for repentance.

Here is a warning for us. Question & Answer 87 does not speak in first instance about unbelievers, those outside the church who live in their sins. Question & Answer 87 speaks first of all about persons *inside* the church, persons who have tasted the goodness of God, but remain *ungrateful* for God's gifts. So we need to examine ourselves: do I permit pornography in my life – I'm an unchaste person? Do I place my trust in my money or my talents to carry me through my troubles – I'm a closet idolater? Do I keep a secret affair with a secretary at work – I'm an adulterer? Do I skim company profits for myself – I'm a thief? Do I insist on more and more comforts for myself – I'm a greedy person? Do I need my bottle before I go to bed – I'm a drunkard? Do I pass on twisted or damaging information about another – I'm a slanderer? We don't like such self-examination, but it's so important; such persons can exist in the congregation of Jesus Christ, and yet will not be saved! We do good works so that we can be assured of our faith by its fruits. But the argument cuts the other way too; where we do good works in public, but keep secret sins on the side, the public may draw one conclusion *but we shall have to draw the other one* – and repent before it is too late.

I come to our last point:

3. The neighborly benefit of good works.

Our Lord's Day mentions, briefly, a third reason why we must do good works. The third 'must' is driven by concern for the neighbor. In the world in which we live, there are so few people who are eager to hear the gospel; most have chosen not to go to church and chosen not to read a Bible. Yet these people will not be saved unless they come to faith in Jesus Christ. If they are not open to hearing about the gospel, how shall they come to know the gospel? This is the concern of the last part of A 86: "that by our godly walk of life we may win our neighbors for Christ."

We read that passage from 1 Peter 3. The passage addresses wives who have come to faith but their husbands have not. The instruction of the apostle is this: "Wives, ... be submissive to your own husbands, that even if some do not obey the word, they, without a word, may be won by the conduct of their wives, when they observe your chaste conduct..." (vss 1f). That wives "be submissive to [their] own husbands" is a command of Scripture for all times and places. Doing good works includes that we obey the law of the Lord. By doing good works, by being submissive to her husband, the believing wife shows her unbelieving and hostile husband not just that she's the property of Jesus Christ but also that her Savior has renewed her, restored her. Demonstrating that she is restored, and no longer living in sin, is a powerful argument for an unbeliever to think again about the value of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is the point: to make such an unbeliever jealous of what the Lord has given – and so come to believe also. This principle is valid for all of us in every aspect of our lives.

Why *must* we yet do good works? We're saved by grace, without contribution from our side. Now that the Lord has both redeemed us *and* restored us, good works are *possible* and *therefore obligatory*; the Lord wants us to *be* what we *are*. The consequence is rich; as restored Holdens we are ourselves assured that we really belong to our faithful Savior because of the restoring work He did on us, and the neighbor also is made to see something of the power and love of the Great Restorer. Amen.



Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 33 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 20 April 2003.

" REPENTANCE FROM SIN IS IMPERATIVE FOR SALVATION ."

Text:

Lord's Day 33

88 Q. What is the true repentance or conversion of man?

A. It is the dying of the old nature and the coming to life of the new.[1]

[1] Rom. 6:1-11; I Cor. 5:7; II Cor. 5:17; Eph. 4:22-24; Col. 3:5-10.

89. Q. What is the dying of the old nature?

A. It is to grieve with heartfelt sorrow that we have offended God by our sin, and more and more to hate it and flee from it.[1]

[1] Ps. 51:3, 4, 17; Joel 2:12, 13; Rom. 8:12, 13; II Cor. 7:10.

90. Q. What is the coming to life of the new nature?

A. It is a heartfelt joy in God through Christ,[1] and a love and delight to live according to the will of God in all good works.[2]

[1] Ps. 51:8, 12; Is. 57:15; Rom. 5:1; 14:17. [2] Rom. 6:10, 11; Gal. 2:20.

91. Q. But what are good works?

A. Only those which are done out of true faith,[1] in accordance with the law of God,[2] and to His glory,[3] and not those based on our own opinion or on precepts of men.[4]

[1] Joh. 15:5; Rom. 14:23; Heb. 11:6. [2] Lev. 18:4; I Sam. 15:22; Eph. 2:10. [3] I Cor. 10:31. [4] Deut. 12:32; Is. 29:13; Ezek. 20:18, 19; Matt. 15:7-9.

Scripture Reading:

Luke 13:1-5

Romans 6:1-14

Colossians 3:1-17

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalm 25:7,8

Psalm 40:7

Psalm 34:6,7

Psalm 32:1,2,3

Psalm 1:1,2,3

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Our chief Prophet and Teacher was very categorical to the Jews who brought Him the latest news. Pilate had killed some Galileans as they were bringing their sacrifices? Said Jesus: "unless you repent you will all likewise perish." Jesus repeated the point with His reference to some old news about the collapse of the tower in Siloam that took 18 lives; "unless you repent you will all likewise perish." "Perish": Jesus' reference is ultimately to the judgment of God in hell. To this chief Prophet and Teacher it's one of the other: repent or perish. No one wants to the agony of hell, and

the only way to escape it is to repent. That's Jesus' pointed instruction in Luke 13. And just how seriously Jesus means this instruction is pointed up by the theme of His first preaching; Matthew relates that after He triumphed over Satan in the temptations of the desert, "Jesus began to preach and to say, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand'" (Mt 4:17).

Who must repent, lest they perish? We understand: it's not just the crowds around Jesus in Luke 13. Nor is it only the people who heard His preaching in Mt 4. Jesus' point is true for *all men*; all must repent, or else they perish. It's true for us too. That in turn makes it essential that we understand well what repentance is. That's the material of which the church makes confession in Lord's Day 33, with its question about what the true repentance or conversion of man might be. Our Catechism answers the question with reference to actions and attitudes, with reference also to emotions of the heart.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

REPENTANCE FROM SIN IS IMPERATIVE FOR SALVATION.

1. Repentance involves new attitudes and actions.
2. Repentance touches the emotions of the heart.

1. Repentance involves new attitudes and actions.

Both the Hebrew and Greek languages use the term 'repent' in a variety of ways. Always, though, the common element in their use of the term is the notion of *changing direction*. That is: one is headed in a given direction, and for whatever reason does a 180 degree turn, goes back in the direction from which he came. That picture helps us to understand what is meant by repentance in our Lord's Day. Ever since our fall into sin we have been traveling in a direction *away* from God. To repent is to change this direction, is to turn around and travel back to God. That picture is true also in relation to falling into specific sin; to repent is to *turn around* and do again the will of the Lord.

Apart from this overriding characterization of repentance as *changing direction*, the Bible presents us with a number of other pictures to teach us what repentance really is. I want to pay particular attention to two of them this afternoon, with reference first to Romans 6 and then to Colossians 3.

Romans 6

I'd mentioned Romans 6 last week already, when I spoke about the restoring work of the Holy Spirit. I didn't, though, go into a great deal of detail, and I need to do that now.

The apostle's argument in the previous chapters had been that sinners are made righteous before God on account of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. His work, made ours through faith, ensures that we have peace with God, the forgiveness of our sins.

That glorious gospel raises the question of 6:1: "Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" Freely we receive grace; shall we then do more sin so that we may receive more grace? The answer of the apostle is clear: "Certainly not! How shall we who died to sin live any longer in it?" "Died to sin," says Paul. In this chapter Sin is presented as a king, a boss who tells you what to do (see vs 12, "sin reigns"). But when you die, you no longer can do what a king tells you to do; he can give you a thousand commands but you are free of his instructions, you are dead with respect to that king. That is Paul's point in vs 2: we "died to sin," and therefore that king called 'Sin' can no longer tell us what to do. Hence his conclusion: don't listen to that king called Sin anymore, don't live in sin any longer!

The inevitable question, of course, is this: *when* did we die to sin? And *how*? Paul answers that in vss 3ff. "Do you not know," he writes, "that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." Notice how Paul speaks here about Good Friday and Easter Sunday. He speaks about Christ's death, Christ's burial and His resurrection, and says that in some way we died with Christ, we were buried with Christ, and we were raised with Christ. We think of Good Friday, of Christ being nailed

to the cross, and our thoughts are limited to *Christ alone* being crucified, Christ *alone* being buried. Not so, says Paul. Vs 5: "we have been united together in the likeness of His death." Vs 6: "our old man was crucified with Him." Vs 8: "we died with Christ." Christ, says Paul, was not the only one who was crucified on Good Friday; in a way I can't understand we were crucified with Him. Christ was not the only one who died on Good Friday; in a way I can't understand we died with Him. And when Christ was taken down from the cross and buried in that tomb in the garden, we were somehow buried with Him. So too Easter Sunday; when Christ arose from the dead, we arose with Him.

That reality has a consequence. What's the reason why we should no longer live in sin? This: when Christ died on Good Friday, we died to sin – and therefore may no longer live in sin. When Christ arose on Easter Sunday, we arose with Him – and therefore are made able to walk in newness of life. Since that's the marvelous work of God, an obligation follows for us. Vs 12: "therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts." It's what we said last week: "*be* what you *are*!"

It's on this material, congregation, that the Catechism builds its instruction about true repentance. Question & Answer 88: "What is the true repentance or conversion of man?" The answer is this: "It is the dying of the old nature and the coming to life of the new." The first proof text listed is Rom 6. What is repentance? This: God unites us with Christ so that we died to sin and were raised to new life. The old nature, the old man, our sinful self, is crucified with Christ, put to death with Him, and as we're raised with Christ in His resurrection we receive from the Lord a new nature, a new man, a sanctified self. That old nature, that sinful self, traveled *away* from God; the new nature, the sanctified self, travels *to* God. That 180-degree turn, that repentance, is God's mighty work in us. And its results are obvious; this U-turn results in a radically different set of attitudes and therefore in a radically different manner of living.

To draw out this new manner of living, I ask your attention for Colossians 3 and its description of repentance.

Colossians 3

The passage begins with Easter Sunday, and Christ's resurrection from the dead. "You," says Paul, "were raised with Christ." That reality has consequences. Since you are a new man, have a new nature received from Christ, OK, then "seek those things which are above, where Christ is," in heaven. The old nature is earthly, seeks the things of the earth, including earth-centered attitudes and actions. No, says Paul in vs 3 (with reference to Good Friday): "you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God." So don't be earth-focused, but instead be heaven-focused. Hence the obligation of vs 5: "therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry."

Then the apostle, congregation, picks up a new set of imagery to describe what repentance is. In vs 8 he speaks about 'putting off', and in vs 12 he speaks about 'putting on'. Putting off, putting on: it's the language of clothing. You take off the one coat, and put on another. Which coat do you take off? Says Paul: you put off a set of evil attitudes and actions. Like what? Vs 8: "anger, wrath, malice, blasphemy, filthy language out of your mouth. Do not lie to one another...." Those kinds of attitudes and actions belong to the sinful self and characterize the old nature that was crucified with Christ. Since God has united you with Christ so that you were crucified with Him, died with Him, buried with Him, raised with Him, the *obligation* follows that we *be* the new creatures God in Christ has raised us to be. And that's to say: there's no place for these old attitudes and actions anymore! You died with Christ, were raised with Him; "therefore put to death your members which are on the earth," take off that old coat of sin. In its place put on that new coat, the one that characterizes what new life with the resurrected Christ is all about. Vs 12: "put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering." Attitudes like that lead to godly actions towards the other. Vs 13: "bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do." Christ showed you mercy when you were unworthy, Christ extended kindness when you were His enemy: put that same attitude into practice in your conduct towards those who hurt you. "But above all these things," Paul continues in vs 14, "put on love" – as Christ loved you and gave Himself up for you....

This passage from Colossians, brothers and sisters, lays the emphasis on our responsibility. The Romans passage drew out that repentance is God's work in us; we certainly can't unite ourselves with Christ and die with Him, let alone raise ourselves from the dead. But Colossians 3 develops the other side of the coin. Exactly because repentance is God's work in us do we have a distinct responsibility to work along with God. Since God has had us crucified with Christ

and raised us to new life, we have the specific responsibility to act as new persons. That responsibility is driven home with the imagery of putting off and putting on. Others don't undress or dress us; we do that ourselves. By using the imagery of clothing, Paul drives home the individual responsibility we all have in relation to repentance.

It's a point, beloved, that I need to press home. Our Lord Jesus Christ insisted that one either repents or perishes; it's one or the other. The Lord our God unites His people-by-covenant to His Son Jesus Christ so that we die with Him and are raised with Him. Recall the Form for Baptism from this morning: "when we are baptized into the Name of the Son, God the Son promises us that He washes us in His blood from all our sins and *unites us with Him in His death and resurrection*." That's baptism: we die with Christ on Good Friday and arise with Him on Easter Sunday; the wonderful truth of Romans 6 is promised to us all. But that does not mean that we have satisfied the demand of Christ: repent or perish! For we have a responsibility, says Col 3, and that is that we *put off* the old nature that was crucified with Christ and we *put on* the new nature we receive when we arose with Christ.

To be specific: where I retain anger in my heart (be it against people for what they've done to me or against God for what He's let happen in my life), I am not in a state of repentance. Where I retain rage in my heart, where I let myself fly off the handle at a drop, I am not in a state of repentance. Where I retain malice, hatred of persons in my heart, I am not in a state of repentance. Where I give myself to some filthy language, I am not in a state of repentance. Where lies fall easily off my lips, I am not in a state of repentance (vs 8f).

I may say the same in relation to the list in vs 5. Where I enjoy a bit of fornication (be it with a secret partner or with a late night movie or with an internet chat room), I am not in a state of repentance. Where I let my passions go, where I satisfy my evil desires, where I want more and more, I am not in a state of repentance. *And that means in turn that I shall perish* – unless I repent!

Flip side: where I have put off the old nature and put on the new, my conduct shall be characterized by the attitudes of vs 12. Not anger, wrath, hatred, etc, but attitudes of mercy, kindness, humility, meekness, patience shall characterize my actions. More: I shall bear patiently with another's weaknesses and idiosyncrasies, I shall readily forgive as Christ forgave me, I shall let the peace of God rule my heart, I shall be busy with the Word of God, shall speak it and sing it and pray it day by day. Such conduct and attitudes are evidence of repentance, and therefore freedom from the sentence of damnation.

So, my brothers and sisters, older and younger: look at your own attitudes in your family circle, and the actions that follow. Is your attitude to your parents one of humility and meekness, or of knowing it better? Is your attitude to your spouse one of mercy and kindness, or not? Is your attitude to your neighbor one of forbearing and forgiving –as Christ forgave you though you were so unworthy- or is it one of intolerance, impatience, judgmental? You see: repentance cannot be hidden; those who died with Christ and were raised with Him live by the principles of the new nature, make a point of putting off earthly attitudes and putting on heavenly ones. Your attitudes to spouse, family, neighbors are earthly? I tell you: then you are not repentant! Yet Jesus says that one must repent, else he perishes!

As it is, the Lord God has not yet called us to appear before His judgment seat; He still gives us time to repent – and that's His patience. More, in His care for us He has brought us to church so that we might be confronted with His ultimatum: repent or perish. So the onus, congregation, is completely upon us; it is for us to take to heart what the Lord says about repentance and so see to it that we *put off* whatever is earthly, and *put on* what is of heaven. And no, that's not something we're to do once only; it's something we're to do *day by day*.

Repentance, then, involves new attitudes and actions, patterns of behavior rooted in heaven. Yet repentance involves more than attitudes and actions; repentance touches ones emotions also. That's our second point:

2. Repentance touches the emotions of the heart.

The Scriptures, we learned from Rom 6 (and Col 3) describe repentance as dying with Christ and coming alive with Him again. The Catechism echoes this revelation from God with these words: repentance "is the dying of the old nature, and the coming to life of the new." But what is this dying of the old nature? And what is this coming to life of the new? They remain concepts somewhat out of reach for our understanding....

The Catechism explains the two in terms of our emotions. Question & Answer 89: the dying of the old nature is "to grieve with heartfelt sorrow that we have offended God by our sin...." Question & Answer 90: the coming to life of the new nature "is a heartfelt joy in God through Christ...." Heartfelt sorrow and heartfelt joy: we know what sorrow and joy are. Sorrow: it brings tears, anguish of heart, restlessness. Joy is its opposite; it brings laughter, contentment, peace. Both, says the Catechism, have a place in repentance.

The Scriptural evidence is easy to find.

After David admitted his transgression with Bathsheba, his mood was one of sorrow, grief. Ps 51 (and that's the prayer David prayed after Nathan the prophet confronted him with his sin): "have mercy upon me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness.... For I acknowledge my transgressions, And my sin is always before me.... A broken and a contrite heart – these, O God, You will not despise" (vss 1, 3, 17). And he fasted and lay on the hard ground in sorrow for his sins, pleading for God's mercy, till the child had died (2 Sam 12:15ff).

Peter denied the Lord those three times, and when he realized what he had done "he went out and wept bitterly" (Mt 26:75).

Paul had persecuted the Christians, dragging them off ruthlessly to jail. When the Lord appeared to him on the road to Damascus, and Paul realized how wrong he'd been, he neither ate nor drank for three days – a Scriptural indication of his sorrow for his sins (Acts 9:9; cf vs 19).

One can easily make the list much longer.

Yet we need to understand well, beloved, that not all sorrow for sin is automatically the sorrow of repentance. Judas Iscariot realized the wrong he'd done in betraying Jesus, but he didn't cast himself on the mercies of God in repentance; he in sorrow and despair instead went out and hanged himself. Esau too regretted greatly that he sold his birthright to Jacob, and "sought it diligently with tears" (Heb 12:17). But his were not the tears of repentance, and so God rejected him. It's a point we need to be aware of: one can sorrow for sin because we've hurt God; we can sorrow for sin also because we've been caught out. That second, sorrowing because we've been caught out, is simply not repentance; that's self-pity.

To catch the difference between the two, we need to appreciate the *cause* of the "heartfelt sorrow". The cause of the sorrow is not that we were caught out; the cause is instead that "we have offended God by our sin." This God has done so much for us in Christ; He even sent His only Son in order to die in our place, yes, God united us with Him in His death and resurrection. And *in response* I have done what displeases God, have offended Him? That, *that* causes sorrow, heartfelt sorrow as David worded it in Ps 38: "I acknowledge my transgression In confession, Deeply troubled by my sin." *That* realization makes you stop in your tracks, makes you turn around, and seek again the God of your salvation.

That's the other side of the coin of repentance, the coming to life of the new nature: "it is a heartfelt joy in God through Christ." That return is the joy of being secure in God's everlasting arms, forgiven of sin, washed in Jesus' blood, peace with God again. This aspect too is amply illustrated in the Bible.

David fasted and sorrowed over his sin, but did not stay in mourning; in due time he focused his attention on the redemption God had promised and delighted in God's forgiveness. So he could sing out his jubilation in Ps 32: "Blessed is the man whose transgression is forgiven, Whose sin is covered," and conclude his psalm like this: "Be glad in the Lord and rejoice, you righteous; And shout for joy, all you upright in heart!"

Peter "wept bitterly", but did not continue to weep bitterly till the day of his death; he delighted in God's forgiving grace and praised God.

Paul fasted for three days, and when Ananias baptized him he not only ate but took it upon himself to preach the gospel of redemption. Time and again his letters give the instruction to rejoice – for joy is the emotion befitting the sinner who knows his trespass covered.

It's clear: the joy of the forgiven Christian is not limited to an emotion tucked away in the heart; this emotion drives to action, to cheerful and eager obedience to the commands God in wisdom has given. That will of God is the *delight* of the forgiven sinner!

Repentance from sin is essential to salvation; one either repents or perishes. What is this repentance? It's something so genuine, something so truly from *inside*, that it touches the emotions in very real terms: heartfelt sorrow, heartfelt joy. Something so deep as that in turn determines attitudes: not anger, not hatred, but mercy, kindness, humility, patience, love. And those attitudes produce godly conduct: forgiving the other as Christ forgave us, patience toward those around us, yes, cheerful obedience to all God's commands.

Repent or perish, Jesus said. Woe to him who is not sorry for his sins, who does not grieve wholeheartedly that he has hurt God with his attitudes and actions. Blessed is he who has died with Christ and been raised with Him, who has put off the old nature and put on the new. His attitudes and actions today foreshadow the redemption he shall enjoy eternally. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 34 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 4 May 2003.

" GOD'S LAW MAKES ONE WISE TO THE CHALLENGES OF THIS LIFE ."

Text:

Lord's Day 34 Q&A 92,93

92. Q. What is the law of the LORD?

A. God spoke all these words, saying: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

1. You shall have no other gods before Me.

2. You shall not make for yourself a graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Me, but showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

3. You shall not take the Name of the LORD your God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless who takes His Name in vain.

4. Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your manservant, or your maidservant, or your cattle, or the sojourner who is within your gates; for in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and hallowed it.

5. Honour your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which the LORD your God gives you.

6. You shall not kill.

7. You shall not commit adultery.

8. You shall not steal.

9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.

10. you shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbour's.[1]

[1] Ex. 20:1-17; Deut. 5:6-21.

93. Q. How are these commandments divided?

A. Into two parts. The first teaches us how to live in relation to God; the second, what duties we owe our neighbour.[1]

[1] Matt. 22:37-40.

Scripture Reading:

Proverbs 1:1-19

Deuteronomy 4:1-14

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalm 24:2,3

Psalm 25:1,2

Psalm 19:3,4

Psalm 111:3,4,5

Psalm 119:37,39 & Hymn 36:4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We're so very familiar with the law of God. Sunday by Sunday we hear it proclaimed to us, always a mirror in which to compare our lives and learn again that we have fallen short of God's holy standard. It makes one wonder: since we can't keep the law anyway, why lay such emphasis on it? Has our Lord not has fulfilled the law, so that our emphasis ought to lie on God's love for us and hence the need to love one another? Does emphasizing the law not give an unwanted warp to the Christian mind?

Today, brothers and sisters, I lay before you the instruction of Scripture about the law. God did not give us His law in order make life difficult for us, to take the fun out of life; rather, God gave us His law because He wants us to *enjoy* the life He gave. Particularly the book of Proverbs tells us that the Creator of life gave His Ten Commandments to His people in order that His beloved people might know how they can make the most of life. I work this out for you today by laying the Law of God beside the first chapter of Proverbs. The sermon may be summarized with these words:

GOD'S LAW MAKES ONE WISE TO THE CHALLENGES OF THIS LIFE.

1. What wisdom is
2. How one is wise
3. Who is perfectly wise

1. What wisdom is

Solomon, Scriptures tell us, was the wisest man of his day. That's what God promised Solomon on the day he asked for wisdom; said God: "behold, I give you a wise and discerning mind, so that none like you has been before you and none like you shall arise after you" (I Kings 3:12). In accordance with that promise, "God gave Solomon wisdom and understanding beyond measure, and largeness of mind like the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon's wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the East, and all the people of Egypt" (I Kings 4:29f). As a result of this great wisdom, Solomon "uttered 3000 proverbs; and his songs were 1005" (4:32). Many of these proverbs and songs have become lost in the course of the ages, but some God has caused to be preserved in the Bible book known to us as "Proverbs".

Our world today has countless books containing much practical wisdom, insight gleaned from years of life experience. Yet the book of Proverbs is different from the books of wisdom available today. The book of Proverbs is in a class totally different from the works of Plato or Mao; the book of Proverbs –containing the wisdom of Solomon- is "Scripture inspired by God" and therefore is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness" (II Tim 3:16f). In the book of Proverbs one finds not the wisdom of men but the wisdom of *God*. Shall we say: in the book of Proverbs the *Creator of life* tells men about the life He made, tells men His divine wisdom about how to live that life. And the Spirit who inspired Solomon, of course, does not change, and so His instruction of the book of Proverbs is as valid for today as it was 3000 years ago when the Spirit first moved Solomon to write it down.

From the first few verses of Proverbs it is obvious that Solomon wrote this book in order to teach wisdom. What, though, is this wisdom Solomon speaks about? The term 'wisdom' appears regularly on the pages of Holy Writ. Never has the term got anything to do with one's IQ, with having a keen intellect, or even with having some university degree. The term is used instead to refer to *expertise* in some trade or another. The tradesmen employed to supervise the construction of the tabernacle were, say the Scriptures, *wise* men and the point is that they were expert in their field, professionals in construction (Ex 28:3). Similarly, the Bible speaks of sailors having to put all their wisdom to work in the face of a storm at sea, and the point is that these sailors need to call upon all their expertise, all the experience they have picked up over the years on the water (Ps 107:27). Again, Scriptures speak of merchants who by their wisdom have amassed a certain fortune. The point is that their experience results in rich returns (Ezek 28:4f,12).

Now Solomon wants to write about wisdom. Yet it's not the expertise of the seaman he's writing about, nor the expertise of the carpenter. What Solomon involves himself with is *life* itself, and when he speaks about wisdom he's talking about *the how of living*. It takes experience to sail a ship from port to port, takes experience to build a

tabernacle or a house or a cabinet successfully; similarly –says Solomon in Proverbs- it takes *experience* to live this life, it takes wisdom. In as much as it's disastrous for a tradesman to entrust his work to a rookie, so too is it disastrous to try to go through life without experience, without wisdom.

We all know that no one becomes a tradesman without taking an apprenticeship; to become a qualified professional you need to learn from the hand of someone who has experience, you need to study. That is true of plumbing and carpentry; it is equally true with regard to life itself. In fact, it is *more* true for life itself than it is for plumbing and carpentry; exactly because we are all dead in sin, totally depraved, no one –if left to himself- can become truly expert at living, become truly wise in the art of living. Though one live a hundred years no sinner left to himself will understand the art of life *unless* he takes an apprenticeship in the school of the Creator of life.

It is now *this apprenticeship* –if I may say it this way- that God through Solomon would give to His people in the book of Proverbs. Here Solomon –moved by the Spirit of God- would impart wisdom and instruction, would instruct people in wise dealing, righteousness, justice, and equity (1:3), would –in a word- teach people the art of living.

There's the reason too why Solomon in this book addresses himself repeatedly to the *youth* (cf vs 4,8). It's particularly the youth who don't have experience in living, and yet it's that practical wisdom that they need so much. I should add straightaway: the word Solomon uses in vs 4 for 'young man' does not refer to persons –say- in their upper teens. The word appears elsewhere in the Bible for anyone in the first half of life, shall we say, up to age 40 (cf II Chron 13:7). Then, yes, in vs 4 Solomon places beside the word 'young man' the word 'simple', but we're not to think that Solomon considered all youth simple, dumb; the word translated in our Bibles as 'simple' may be better translated with 'inexperienced'. These youngsters may be decent young folk, but Solomon knows that lack of experience in the art of living implies that the youth will make silly mistakes, will make wrong judgments in the various difficulties they face. So this wisest of men in Israel considered it imperative that these inexperienced youngsters be taught, be instructed, be trained in the art of living, be given wisdom.

Yet it's not the younger only whom Solomon intends to train. He tell us in vs 5 that the 'wise man' is also to increase in learning, the man of understanding is also to acquire greater skill. The fact of the matter is that as no sailor has ever learned all there is to know about the art of sailing, and as no carpenter has ever learned all there is to know about the art of building, so too has no person ever learned all there is to know about the art of living. Though Solomon has his eye on the youth first of all, he would have every man and every woman, irregardless of age, come to his school to learn more perfectly the art of living this life.

That brings us to our second point:

2. *How one is wise*

How is one, then, to become expert in the art of living? The Spirit of "the only wise God" (Rom 16:27) moves Solomon to give this answer: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction" (vs 7). In that sentence, 'knowledge', 'wisdom', 'instruction' all boil down to basically the same thing; though each term has its own color, yet all refer to that basic wisdom needed to live life well, all refer to the expertise all need to get the most out of life. Of that expertise, of that basic wisdom to live life well, says Solomon, "the fear of the Lord is the beginning." There, he says, is where it all starts: fear the Lord. Without that fundamental fear of the Lord, one will never be expert at living, will never be able to get the most out of the life God gave.

"The fear of the Lord." The word 'fear' can mean one of two things. 'Fear' can refer to fright; it can refer also to awe. In Solomon's statement that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge", Solomon would have us know that it's not terror before God that starts one on the road to wisdom; it's rather awe for God. I'll say more on that in a moment.

It's the "fear of *the Lord*" that Solomon holds before his readers. The word 'Lord' is printed in capitals, and so refers to God's covenant name Yahweh, the name that captures His faithfulness in doing what He said He would do. Yahweh, the Lord: that's the God of the covenant who graciously took an unworthy people out of the bondage of Egypt and made them His own. That is: this is a God who *cares* for His people, who is *concerned* for their well-being, is the God who *has a heart* for His people; that's why He delivered them from the slavery of Pharaoh. But, we need to

notice, the concern which this God had for His people did not stop once He delivered them from their cruel bondage; no, His heart continued to go out so much to His people that He *gave them specific instructions* to follow so that they might get the most out of the free life He mercifully gave to them. He brought Israel to Mt Sinai, and there gave to His people-by-covenant a set of Ten Commandments encompassing every area of life. And as Israel was receiving these Ten Commandments, they were to recall that the God who gave those instructions was Himself the Author of life – and therefore more than qualified to tell men how best to live that life.

The Ten Commandments: in His *care* for the people He had redeemed from bondage in Egypt the Lord –caring covenant God that He is- gave *these* rules for the lives of His people. Moses characterized these laws as "righteous" (Dt 4:8); by living according to this law, even the nations around Israel would be impressed with the quality of the instructions the Lord had given to His people. "Keep them and do them," said Moses, "for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (4:6). These laws were good, the Ten Commandments would make Israel wise, because in these commandments the God of life graciously told His sinful people the 'tricks of the trade' of living.

David understood the point. That's why he said in Ps 19 that "the law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, *making wise the simple*," making expert the inexperienced. More, says David, the law of the Lord makes the heart rejoice, it enlightens the eyes (Ps 19:7f) –why?- because this law tells you what you ought to do and what not to do in order to stay away from trouble and harm. And there's why David in another Psalm could express his love for God's law; "Your commandment," says he, "makes me wiser than my enemies," indeed, "I have more understanding than all my teachers" (Ps 119:97ff). For the enemies don't know the tricks of life, don't know that "he who commits adultery...destroys himself" (Prov 6:32), don't know that it's foolish to initiate strife because by doing that you let loose a whole quarrel and where will that end up (Prov 17:14). No, if one would live peacefully, if one would make the most of life in this sinful world, there is one way only to do it, and that is by *appreciating the good instruction* God has given in His Ten Commandments.

"The fear of the Lord", the God of the covenant. To stand in awe of this God is to *embrace eagerly* whatever He may say. To adore this God means to *accept readily* the wise instruction He gives for living this life. That fear of the Lord, that awe for this caring, gracious God, this eager acceptance of the good guidance He gives: *that*, says Solomon, is the beginning of becoming *proficient in the art of living this life*. Without that fear of the Lord, one shall never, never be able to live this life to the full.

It was with Israel of old that the Lord God made His covenant, to Israel that He gave His gracious law telling people what was good for them and what was not. It pleased the Lord in grace to make His covenant also with us. In fact, the covenant He made with us is richer than was the covenant He made with Israel. For Israel of old was delivered from a physical Egypt, from bondage to Pharaoh; the Israel of today is delivered from a spiritual Egypt, from bondage to Satan. God showed great love to His people of old in rescuing them from bondage in the Exodus from Egypt; He showed *greater love and care* for His new Israel in that He gave up His only dear Son for His own. His care for Israel of old did not stop after the Exodus from Egypt (for the Lord graciously gave His Ten Commandments to teach His redeemed people the art of living this life). So too, His care for His new Israel has not stopped either after He delivered us from bondage to Satan. Said Jesus to His disciples, and in them to the whole New Testament church: "a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another" (Jn 13:34). And what is love? It is the fulfillment of the law, yes, it is the thrust of the whole law, the heart of the law. It's with the word 'love' that Jesus elsewhere summarized the Ten Commandments: "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 hang all the law and the prophets" (Mt 22:37ff). That's the summary of the law, and in as much as love is *the* command for the New Testament church are the Ten Commandments still very much in force for the New Testament church. So it's no surprise that you find so many references in the New Testament to these Ten Commandments. God has delivered His people from bondage to Satan, and now loves His people so much that He does not wish them to wallow through life on the insights of their own depraved minds. So great is His care for us that He wants us be *wise* to this life, be experts in the art of living, and *so He gives us His law*. Remember what Paul wrote to the Romans: "He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him freely give us all things?" (Rom 8:32). God's *law* is part of the "all things" He's given us with

Christ; He has even given to us the Ten Commandments so that we might know how to live this life to the full! Talk about care, talk about His love! That's why we readily confess today, with David of long ago, that the law of God makes the simple, the inexperienced *wise*, gives light to the eyes. See in these commandments, brothers and sisters, something of the *grace* and the *mercy* and the *love* of your caring God and Father!!

So we are compelled, brothers and sisters, to make a decision. What do you think: what should we do with the law of God? Consider it a treasure or a nuisance? Evidence that God wants to take the fun out of our lives, or evidence that God wants us to *enjoy* life? Evidence of His interference or evidence of His care?

The question is important. Our sinful nature likes to think that we're quite wise in ourselves, that we don't need advice from anyone. Our society urges us to think that the divine spark inside us inherently knows what is good for us, and you sin only when you go against that inner judgment. So we can do whatever we know is OK for us. But look at the results: so many abortions are committed because folk thought it was right at the time, and countless mothers (and fathers) spend the rest of their lives weighed down by the knowledge that they have killed. So many marriage end in divorce because it was the easy way out, and the countless children are victimized in the process. That's human nature: how tempting, how tempting, to base ones actions "on our own opinions or on the precepts of man" (Lord's Day 33.91), and that temptation is great for us also!

That's why the question is so important: what do you really think of God's law? Is it a treasure or a nuisance? It's a question *each of us* needs to answer, and then draw the consequences consistently.

As it is, all of us fail to be the wise person God really wants us to be. That brings us to our last point:

3. *Who is perfectly wise.*

Despite the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, no one by nature successfully avoids all the pitfalls that meet us on the path of life be; time and again we fail to obey the good instructions our caring God has given us in His law. But, congregation, there was once One who did obey God's every instruction. Though Jesus Christ had much to learn in the school of life (cf Heb 5:8), He yet was wise from the beginning in that He knew how to apply the good laws of His Father in the various challenges He encountered. With Him there was a deep fear of the Lord, a holy awe for His heavenly Father and so for the law of His Father, and He made it His business to work with that law day by day. So He was expert at living, was a master at the trade of life, knew how to live well.

No, that did not mean that the Lord Jesus Christ never grieved, never felt hurt, had a life free of difficulty. In this world of sin there was so much misery around Him, He was Himself also victim of sins from us, so that His life was not at all a paradise any more than are ours. But His appreciation for God and His law had made Him wise so that He never brought misery upon Himself through His sins. And therein He is ever an example to all. He feared His God, and so was wise, and so in turn He knew how to live this life to the full. Not for nothing did Jesus say of Himself that He was the "greater than Solomon" (Mt 12:42), the One who surpassed Solomon in wisdom and understanding.

Then came the day when His life fell apart around Him. On the cross He was made sin, and because of the sin God saw in Him could His life no longer receive God's holy blessing; His life became a living hell with God His greatest enemy. Yet even in the midst of that living hell Jesus did not follow His own opinions or the precepts of men; He continued steadfastly to appreciate God's good laws and so faced the challenges of the cross by obeying those laws. His God had said that it would never be advantageous to have another god in place of Yahweh, and so Jesus on the cross –though rejected by God- did not withdraw His trust from God and place it in another. His God had said that it would never be helpful to curse God, and so Jesus on the cross –though cursed by God- did not revile God in turn. His God had said that it would never be of benefit to hate another person, and so Jesus on the cross –though rejected by all around Him- hurled no words of hatred at a single by-stander. He acted only "in accordance with the law of God." Though God and neighbor alike hated him, He continued to love both God and neighbor alike - and lo, He was allowed to rise from the dead, to live eternally in the holy courts of His gracious Father!

Of what benefit to us is His obedience to God's law? This: the Lord God writes His obedience to our account! Though we transgress God's law day by day, God does not damn us because of it; He instead attributes Christ's obedience to us – and so He looks upon us as if we never had nor committed a single transgression against any of God's

commands! You see: *His obedience is our salvation!*

And not only that! This same Jesus has poured out His Holy Spirit upon all His own, and that Spirit –say the Scriptures- is *the Spirit of wisdom* (Is 11:2). That Spirit renews, converts sinners so that these sinners might fear God, might so stand in awe of Him, and so in turn live not according to their own precepts but according to the law of the Creator of life. That Spirit *you* have, beloved, and so Yes, *you* can be wise, you can be experts at living, you can be adept at obeying God's good law in the circumstances that of your lives.

No, that's not to say that you have now arrived, that you need not study the Ten Commandments anymore, need not reflect on whether you indeed obey the Ten Commandments adequately in your life. We hope in the coming weeks to listen to God's good instruction in each of the Ten Commandments, hope to do that so that –as Solomon said- "the wise man...may...increase in learning, and the man of understanding acquire skill" (1:4).

Meanwhile, the fact of the matter remains: by God's grace, through the working of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ we may be wise, made proficient at living. Such is the love and care of our Father: He's given us His law, has written that law upon our hearts so that we might be able to make the most of the life He graciously gave us in Jesus Christ. Indeed, what a God we're allowed to serve, *how deep His care for us*. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 35 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 18 May 2003.

" GOD INSISTS THAT WE MAKE NO IMAGES OF HIM, LEST WE PROVOKE HIS JEALOUSY."

Text:

Lord's Day 35

96. Q. What does God require in the second commandment?

A. We are not to make an image of God in any way,[1] nor to worship Him in any other manner than He has commanded in His Word.[2]

[1] Deut. 4:15-19; Is. 40:18-25; Acts 17:29; Rom. 1:23. [2] Lev. 10:1-7; Deut. 12:30; I Sam. 15:22, 23; Matt. 15:9; John 4:23, 24.

97. Q. May we then not make any image at all?

A. God cannot and may not be visibly portrayed in any way. Creatures may be portrayed, but God forbids us to make or have any images of them in order to worship them or to serve God through them.[1]

[1] Ex. 34:13, 14, 17; Num. 33:52; II Kings 18:4, 5; Is. 40:25.

98. Q. But may images not be tolerated in the churches as "books for the laity"?

A. No, for we should not be wiser than God. He wants His people to be taught not by means of dumb images[1] but by the living preaching of His Word.[2]

[1] Jer. 10:8; Hab. 2:18-20. [2] Rom. 10:14, 15, 17; II Tim. 3:16, 17; II Pet. 1:19.

Scripture Reading:

Exodus 32:1-14

Job 42:1-9

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 95:2,3

Psalms 115:5,6

Psalms 85:3,4

Psalms 106:9,10,11

Psalms 106:23,24

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

What Israel did at Mt Sinai –construct a golden calf and worshipping it- strikes us as so bizarre; surely, we say, it's not something we would do. Make graven images? No, we know better.... Result: we put the second commandment at arm's length from ourselves; we don't really relate to it....

In His care for His people, congregation, the Lord our God has given to His people of long ago, and to us today, also the second commandment. He sees danger for His people here, a way for His people to offend Him, provoke His jealousy, and so get hurt. It's true that this command has a very outdated taste to it, but it's so very modern in its application.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

GOD INSISTS THAT WE MAKE NO IMAGES OF HIM, LEST WE PROVOKE HIS JEALOUSY.

1. The ancient setting of this command,
2. The modern application of this command.

1. The ancient setting of this command.

The Lord God delivered a people from bondage to Egypt and brought them to Mt Sinai. In cloud and smoke, with thunder and lightning He came to His people congregated at the foot of the mountain, and spoke to them the Ten Commandments. We heard last week that the Lord forbade all idolatry amongst His people; they were to have no other gods before the Lord. So: they were not to seek their happiness in Baal or in Sex or in Approval, etc.

Hard on the heels of the first commandment, the Lord voiced a second: "You shall not make for yourselves any graven image." Straightaway we wonder: what is really the difference between the second command and the first? No idols, said the first commandment; no images, says the second – what's the difference?

This: with the first the Lord forbade *other gods*; His people are to find their happiness in Him alone, serve Him. But in their service of their God, Israel must not make any image *of God*. In the words of Lord's Day 35: "We are not to make an image *of God* in any manner."

Now, why would the Lord give Israel an instruction not to make any image *of Him*? To understand the point, I need to take you back to Israel's time and to the habit of their day. For Israel –like we- lived *in* the world and were invariably influenced by the thinking of the peoples around them.

Israel had lived in Egypt for so many years. According to the Egyptians, there were any number of gods, none almighty, but all able to do something for you. There's a god of fertility and there's a god of flood, there's a god of storm and a god of war, etc. If you in your circumstances, then, wanted the attention of the god of war (for, say, your enemy was attacking), you had to do something to get this god's attention. For all you know, he could be sleeping, or on holidays, or fighting a war somewhere else. Or maybe he had a grudge against you.... So what did you have to do? First you had to get him into your house, and then you had to ensure his favor.

How you got the desired god into your home? You made an image of this god. You took some creature from heaven above (a bird), or from the earth beneath (maybe a cow), or from the waters under the earth (perhaps a fish), and used that to portray the god whose attention you sought. You took the most flattering creature you could think of, the creature that most appropriately captured the qualities you saw in your god. You set this image in your house, then worshipped your god through the image. You prayed to this god in front of this image and explained your need, did ceremonies in front of it and offered sacrifices to impress this god. You'd offer the best bull from the paddock, maybe sacrificed your oldest son – that would really demonstrate your devotion to this god! The purpose of the exercise? To get the god to do what you wanted – help in the war against your enemy!

Do you follow, brothers and sisters, the line of thought here? It's this: through making an image you can *influence* the god of your choice, can exercise some control over him, persuade him to come into your house and do this-and-that for you. The thought behind this thought? The gods are whimsical, moody, certainly not almighty and caring; they're open for your influence, need to have their backs stroked. And since these gods don't speak and tell you what they want, you decide what they want and how to stroke them.

This is the environment in which Israel lived. When the Lord, then, established His covenant with Israel at Mt Sinai, He addressed this popular theology and *forbade* it amongst His people. They were, He said, to make no images of God, were not to take a creature from heaven above or the earth beneath or the waters under the earth in order to portray what they thought God was like and worship God through that creature.

Why God forbade it? Simple: no creature adequately conveyed what He was like. No stallion or bull or fish or star conveyed His holiness and His power and His love and His justice, etc. But more: *you didn't have to persuade God to*

come to you to begin with! After all, the Lord Himself had just said in the Introduction to the Ten Commandments that He was *Israel's* God, and it was His firm intent to *live amongst His people*. On top of that, He didn't sleep or go on holidays; He was always there with His people so that they could always pray to Him, tell Him their needs. More still: no one had to *stroke* this God to win His favor; the Lord *loved* His people, was a Father to them, supplied them with all good and averted all evil or turned it to their benefit. That was the lesson of all the Israelites had seen of God so far: the ten plagues displayed God's mighty arm and His love for His people; the dry path through the Red Sea displayed again His mighty power and His care for His children; the manna in the desert displayed the same. In a word: this God was always *there*, always *caring*, using His almighty power –for He's the Creator!- to protect His people – for He's *Father*. *That's* the lesson of the introduction to the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." And exactly because *this is Who I am*, **therefore** "you shall not make for yourselves any graven image...." I'm not like the gods of the heathens, and therefore you may not treat Me as if I am!

But see: it didn't take long for the people of Israel to transgress precisely this commandment. That is: it didn't take long for the influences Israel had received from their environment to affect the way they worshipped their God-by-covenant. I refer to the passage we read from Ex 32.

Scarcely a month after the Lord had given the Ten Commandments to His people, and while the cloud and smoke remained over the mountain, the people feared that God –like the gods of the Egyptians- had deserted them. For "Moses delayed coming down from the mountain" – was he dead? And to be alone in the desert without this God – how terrible! So "the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him (says our translation), 'Come, make us gods that shall go before us'" (vs 1). But that translation can be improved. For it's the same with the Hebrew word for 'God' as it is with the English word 'sheep'; the word 'sheep' can be both singular and plural. So here: you can translate both as the NKJV has done, so that the people tell Aaron to "make us gods", but you can also translate as, "Come, make us God." That the people in fact mean 'God', the Lord, is clear from vs 4; once Aaron has an image together, the people say of it, "This is your God, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!" And in vs 5 Aaron declares that tomorrow is "a feast to the Lord." The thinking amongst the people was that the God who had delivered them from Egypt and made His covenant with them at Sinai was *gone* –like the heathen gods would come and go- and so they had to bring Him back somehow. Hence the people's willingness to give so much gold for this image; *they want God*, and hence also their rejoicing once the image is complete; they're convinced they have God back in their midst again.

But see, beloved, God's response! Vs 7: "Go, get down! For your people whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves." Notice the word 'you' and 'your'. God *disowns* this people, doesn't call them 'My people' anymore, but "yours". More, He says to Moses in vs 10 to "let Me alone, that ... I may consume them." Back in the second commandment God had said something about His being "a jealous God," and here He displays it. The people would treat Him as if He were like those bumbling heathen gods that don't really exist?? The people think they can influence God, carry Him hither and thither as they please? No way! God is *there*, God is *almighty*, God is not dependent on people stroking Him! They would do it nevertheless? Hereby they *demean* God, and that in turn *offends* Him; hence the anger of Ex 32. And it's only because Moses intercedes for the people, mediates for them, that the Lord turns from His holy anger and spares this nation of sinners.

Can you think now, brothers and sisters, of other examples where the people sinned against the second commandment? Take that the passage about the ark being taken to the battlefield against the Philistines. The reason for bringing the ark to battle? Israel had been defeated in the first round of fighting, and so the question arose: how do we get God to help us? And the answer was: bring God to the battlefield! Hence they took the ark from the Holy of Holies..., as if moving the ark will move Him who is enthroned over the ark.... The Philistines understood the point: "God has come into [their] camp! Woe to us!" But you know what happened: God will not let people move Him around, and so God let Israel be defeated in the battle and the ark be captured (1 Sam 4). As He said in the second commandment: He's a *jealous* God....

Do you see, brothers and sisters, what this sin against the second commandment really is? The heart of this sin is not making a graven image per se; the heart of this sin is having in your mind a concept of God different from what He has revealed in His word. That is: you have a *mental image* of God. Once you have a warped mental image of God, a

twisted perception in your mind of what God is like, you are open for serving this God *as the heathens serve their gods*. That was Israel's problem at Mt Sinai, they had a faulty perception of God, one not based on God's own revelation, and so they felt free to worship God as they had seen the Egyptians worship *their* gods.

Here we have to take instruction also from the passage we read from Job. Job was the richest man in the East, and godly also, but in one day he lost his every possession, including his children, and even his wife told him to curse God and die. His friends came to bemoan his loss with him and comfort him. But at the end of the book, God's wrath was aroused against the three friends, and God insisted that Job pray for them as Moses had to pray for Israel. Why God's anger was aroused against the three friends? It's because they insisted on a faulty understanding of God, that is, they were guilty of sin against the second commandment. In their speeches they portrayed God as spiteful. They said: 'Job, God punishes evil doers, you are being punished, so it's clear that you have sinned; you must repent.' But is that how God had revealed Himself? Not at all! God Himself has said that He has more reasons for reaching in the lives of His children; in fact, exactly because He is *God* can He do whatever He wishes – as Job said in vs 2. These friends, then, had a *mental image of God* that portrayed God as being bound to people's behavior; if people act uprightly God must give you good things, and if people sin God must give you bad things. Here God's sovereignty and freedom was forgotten; these friends did not accept what God had revealed about Himself, but let their understanding of God be determined by some influence outside of God. And see: that provoked God's anger. Said God to the friends at the end of the book: "My wrath is aroused against you..., for you have not spoken of Me what is right" (42:7). Here's the jealousy of God as described in the second commandment!

Let's move now to our second point:

2. *The modern application of this command.*

We live in different times than Israel did in the Old Testament. Certainly our culture does not think in terms of using images to compel the gods to come into our homes and do what we want them to do. But there's a more significant change: the God who established His covenant with Israel at Mt Sinai has sent His only Son into the world to reconcile sinners to Himself. This Son was the perfect image of the Father, showed mankind exactly what the Father was like – in all His love and holiness and wisdom and justice and grace. During all the time He lived on earth, the Lord Jesus Christ obeyed the second commandment perfectly, never permitted in His mind an understanding of God that differed from His holy revelation. Even when the Father rejected the Son on Calvary, the Son did not make an image of God – neither molten nor mental- in an attempt to get God to do what He wanted Him to do. Always He remembered *Who* God was, what He was like, and so served Him not as was easy and attractive but as was pleasing to God.

Through His perfect obedience to the second commandment, the Son of God has paid for the sins of God's people – including our sins against the second commandment. More: through His obedience the Son of God has obtained for us the life-giving Spirit. That Holy Spirit dwells in our hearts, and that's to say that the Lord our God is *always with us* – *Immanuel*. More: this God –our Father in Jesus Christ- *speaks to us*. How? He speaks to us through His Word, and so through the preaching of that Word.

To deny that, to under-value that Word – yes, then one can still serve God, keep the first commandment, but then one has embraced a different perception of what God is like than God has revealed in Scripture. That's sin against the second commandment. That's why our Catechism –written as it was in the time of the Reformation some 450 years ago- mentions something called "books for the laity".

"Books for the laity." The word 'laity' refers to the *people* as opposed to the *clergy*. The expression 'books for the laity' comes from the practice of the Roman Catholic Church in the time before the Reformation to teach the people through dumb images; those images were 'books for the laity'. Roman Catholic teaching had it that God was far removed from the uneducated masses of the street, and these uneducated folk could not understand God. That's why they couldn't pray directly to Him, but had to pray via saints (cf Lord's Day 34.94). Equally, that's why they weren't allowed to have a Bible; only the clergy, the priests, could have the Bible (and even they were bound in their reading of the Bible to the official Roman Catholic interpretation). How could the people, then, get to know anything about God? The churches were packed with images, images of Mary or of Jesus on the cross or of Jesus carrying a lamb or of Peter doing something, etc. That God actually *speaks* to His people through the Bible and the preaching of His

Word – no, that was a perception of God not embraced in the RCC. You see, they still spoke of God, still served God (and not Baal or Zeus or Allah), but had *embraced a different perception of God than what God had revealed in the Bible* – just as the friends of Job had a different perception of God than God had revealed. They had a *mental image*, which in turn prompted the RCC at the time to try to teach the people through images, and that provoked God's jealousy.

This particular problem –doctoring your perception of God so that it differs from God's self-revelation- abounds today. It pleases God to speak to His people, to speak to them through the Bible and the preaching of the Bible. But what does one see in the modern liturgical movement? One sees a shift away from the preaching, and an emphasis instead on drama and entertainment. That shift comes about because of a changed perception of who God is. That is: the Biblical understanding of God is replaced by a more user-friendly understanding, a God who likes to see His audience enjoy themselves, feel good. That changed perception of who God is results in different conduct in church. But it provokes God's wrath, and therefore leads to empty churches, apostasy.... This is the point of our Lord's Day, where we confess that we are not "to worship Him in any other manner than He has commanded in His Word."

We can, brothers and sisters, bring the matter much closer to home still. A warped perception of God occurs not only in church. Consider this: when we tell a dirty joke, where, to our minds, is God? Beside us? No. In practice we deny His omnipresence; subconsciously we've removed God from the picture and act as if He didn't hear that dirty joke. We visit a pornography page on the internet, and again, subconsciously we've removed God for the moment; He didn't see that I visited that page. Whilst we won't say it out loud, in fact we permit into our thinking a perception of God that has God being with us, say, on Sunday and at club and when we read the Bible at the kitchen table, but has Him being absent, say, when I'm online or out for my Friday evening out with the boys. It may all be subconscious, but it's a mental image of God nevertheless, and it does not agree with His revelation of Himself.

Again: we know that God hates sin. But, we tell ourselves, God hates *that* brother's sin more than *my* sin. And actually: *he* ought to repent; how dare the consistory let *him* get away with this and that! But me, well, God understands..., so leave me alone.... Again, here we've made an image of God in our minds that does not agree with God's revelation about Himself – as if He easily turns a blind eye to *my* sin but not to *his* sin. Let it be clear to us: it's sin against the second commandment!

That's why we need to know how much such mental images provoke God's jealousy! It's what He said in the second commandment, it's what He displayed in Ex 32, it's what He displayed with the loss of the ark, and it's what He declared to Job's three friends. And God, congregation, does not change – so He has revealed!

What God does with those who make an image of God – be it molten or mental? Says the Lord: He "visits the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Him." "Hate Him," He says. That's a strong word for those who 'only' doctor their understanding of God somewhat. But that's what God calls it, beloved! This God revealed Himself in all His wonderful glory, and if someone would replace that glorious God with a different perception of Him, that can only be because He *does not love God as He really is* – and God calls that hatred! Then He makes His jealousy felt in the generations, three generations, four – unless the children repent from the sins of the fathers. But let us be honest: my children shall certainly pick up from my conduct what I really think of God – notwithstanding all my pious talk. And they shall serve God not according to my *talk*, but according to my *example*. That is why it is so imperative that I make sure I have a correct perception of God in my mind, and not one with which I'm comfortable. No mental image; instead, I must serve the Lord according to His Word. Then *He* holds on to His own, to the thousandth generation of those who serve Him faithfully.

Getting doctrine right is the first step to getting your life right. It's true also of our doctrine of God. That's why we're so very, very comforted that our Lord Jesus Christ knew His Father so well, had His doctrine of God *right*. That's our salvation. In gratitude for His redemption, we shall stay busy with the Scriptures, always striving to listen humbly to God's revelation, and so to serve Him not as suits us but as He has revealed. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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**Sermon on Lord's Day 36 & 37 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on
Sunday afternoon, 1 June 2003.**

***" THE LORD TEACHES US TO USE HIS WONDERFUL NAME WITH REVERENCE
."***

Text:

Lord's Day 36 & 37

99. Q. What is required in the third commandment?

A. We are not to blaspheme or to abuse the Name of God by cursing,[1] perjury,[2] or unnecessary oaths,[3] nor to share in such horrible sins by being silent bystanders.[4] In short, we must use the holy Name of God only with fear and reverence,[5] so that we may rightly confess Him,[6] call upon Him,[7] and praise Him in all our words and works.[8]

[1] Lev. 24:10-17. [2] Lev. 19:12 [3] Matt. 5:37; James 5:12. [4] Lev. 5:1; Prov. 29:24. [5] Ps. 99:1-5; Is. 45:23; Jer. 4:2. [6] Matt. 10:32, 33; Rom. 10:9, 10. [7] Ps. 50:14, 15; I Tim. 2:8. [8] Rom. 2:24; Col. 3:17; I Tim. 6:1.

100. Q. Is the blaspheming of God's Name by swearing and cursing such a grievous sin that God is angry also with those who do not prevent and forbid it as much as they can?

A. Certainly,[1] for no sin is greater or provokes God's wrath more than the blaspheming of His Name. That is why He commanded it to be punished with death.[2]

[1] Lev. 5:1. [2] Lev. 24:16.

101. Q. But may we swear an oath by the Name of God in a godly manner?

A. Yes, when the government demands it of its subjects, or when necessity requires it, in order to maintain and promote fidelity and truth, to God's glory and for our neighbour's good. Such oath-taking is based on God's Word[1] and was therefore rightly used by saints in the Old and the New Testament.[2]

[1] Deut. 6:13; 10:20; Jer. 4:1, 2; Heb. 6:16. [2] Gen. 21:24; 31:53; Josh. 9:15; I Sam. 24:22; I Kings 1:29, 30; Rom. 1:9; II Cor. 1:23.

102. Q. May we also swear by saints or other creatures?

A. No. A lawful oath is a calling upon God, who alone knows the heart, to bear witness to the truth, and to punish me if I swear falsely.[1] No creature is worthy of such honour.[2]

[1] Rom. 9:1; II Cor. 1:23. [2] Matt. 5:34-37; 23:16-22; James 5:12.

Scripture Reading:

Exodus 3:1-15

Psalms 148

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalms 54:1,2

Psalms 86:3

Psalms 34:1

Psalms 74:11,12,13

Psalms 148:1,2,3,4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The name of God in heaven and His Son Jesus Christ is frequently used in our society, so often carelessly and in vain. In this society we live, and here we are told not to use the name of our God in vain. That instruction gives us not only an obligation to use the holy name of God only with fear and reverence, but also to do what we can to prevent that others abuse this wonderful name.

To obey the Lord's third commandment in our ungodly society is not easy. For that reason I open with you the Word of our God, so that we may be encouraged on the point.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE LORD TEACHES US TO USE HIS WONDERFUL NAME WITH REVERENCE.

1. The Significance of God's Name.
2. The Protection of God's name.
3. The Proper Use of God's name.

1. The Significance of God's Name.

"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain," said God in the third commandment. In the Introduction to the Ten Commandments God had also mentioned what His name was; "I," He'd said to His people at the foot of the mountain, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt...." Lord: that was His name, and the specific point of the third commandment is that Israel may not take *this* name in vain. To understand the command, we need to appreciate the significance of God's name 'Lord'. Why not take it in vain?

The term 'Lord' is printed in capital letters, and so translates into English God's proper name 'Yahweh'. He first explained that name to Moses at the burning bush, Ex 3. The ground upon which Moses was standing, said God, was holy ground, and so Moses ought to take his sandals off. Then God explained why this was holy ground, that is, explained who the God was that visited Moses in the burning bush. Said God: "I am the God of your father – the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob."

Now think it through, brothers and sisters. Why would God's identity as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob demonstrate that the ground was holy, that Moses ought to take off his sandals?

The thing is this: though Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were all dead for hundreds of years, *the Lord had given them promises*, and *God keeps those promises*. God had told the fathers that they would have many descendents, and these descendents would serve as slaves for many years in Egypt, and then God would take them out of Egypt and give them the Promised Land of Canaan. God was busy *fulfilling* those promises; Israel in Egypt had become a numerous nation, and yes, they were slaves in Egypt – as God has promised. But, God adds now, "I have surely seen the oppression of My people who are in Egypt.... So I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up from that land to a good and large land..." (vss 7f). That's why Moses the shepherd has to go to Pharaoh, and bring Israel out of Egypt (vs 8).

But Moses had concerns about that mandate. Vs 13: "When I come to the children of Israel and ... they say to me, 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them?" His point: the God of the fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob hasn't done a thing for 400 years, so why should Israel listen to Moses now?! So: what's His Name, what's His reputation, what are His credentials that we should get excited, that we should trust that something will happen? Then we get the words of vs 14: "And God said to Moses, I am who I am." That, says God, is My name. And that name I am who I am, we need to know, contracts in Hebrew into the word 'Yahweh', Lord.

We hear that, and we conclude: the Lord doesn't *reveal* Himself through that name; He rather *hides* Himself in that name. And there's truth in that. For those who don't know God, this name doesn't mean much at all. But for those who know God and His plans and His promises, and trust in Him, this name reveals so much. A good hearer as Moses understands that with this name the Lord declares that He actually *is there*, and He demonstrates His presence *through doing what He promises to do long ago* – including specifically those promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. That is

God: this almighty Creator is busy in this world carrying out the promises He made. He's not remote, He's not weak, He's not detached; He's rather *here*, doing specifically what He said He'd do.

So when God a couple of years later collected His people around Mt Sinai, and He addressed them from the top of the mountain with His Ten Words of the Covenant, and reminded them that He was Yahweh, the Lord, the I am who I am of Ex 3, then His people *understood*: this is the mighty God who *acts*, the God who reaches into *this* world and *does* what He said He'd do; *in the last couple of years they'd seen it with their own eyes!*

When God then in turn told His people that they were not to take His name in vain, they understood what this 'name' was. Yahweh, the God who *acts*, the God with the mighty hand and the outstretched arm who could take His enslaved people out of bondage: *this* name may not be taken in vain.

We, brothers and sisters, are not amongst the people who were encamped around Mt Sinai. We're modern people, *and exactly for that reason have we seen more* of God's acts, of God's divine working in this world. For the promises God gave to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob involved more than deliverance from Egypt and the gift of the Promised Land; those promises included the gift of His only Son, Jesus Christ. In faith we have seen God fulfill the promise of His Son. He sent Christ Jesus into this world (Christmas), and this Son has obeyed God's commands, including the third commandment. Christ Jesus went to the cross to pay for our sins and so reconciled us to God. He arose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and today –we believe it- rules over *this* world. Our Savior is not distant, is not detached from this life, but from heaven on high He acts *here*. The evidence? He works faith in your heart and mine, gathers, defends, preserves His church. He is *busy*, and so both reveals and upholds His name in this world. In the 2000 years since His ascension He has governed world history in such a way that His name is today widely known in this world. Certainly in our country there are so very, very few who have never heard of our Lord Jesus Christ; witness how many people abuse His name. *That* is our God, congregation: His name is glorious, He's the God who *acts*, who is busy in this world fulfilling His promises. That includes our *salvation!*

That is why the punch of the third commandment hits us even more than it could hit the people at Mt Sinai. Take God's name in vain? *Yahweh* is not just the God who delivers from Pharaoh; Yahweh is the God who delivers from sin and Satan. And He's delivered *us*; shall we then take His name in vain?! God forbid!

I come to our second point:

2. *The Protection of God's Name.*

"You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain." Just how does one do that? The verb translated for us as 'take' means literally to 'lift up'. We're not to 'lift up' the name of God "in vain". Those last two words, 'in vain', describes the notion of lifting up God's name emptily, carelessly.

Consider a gun. It's common knowledge that one is to handle a gun with a good measure of respect. To pick up a rifle carelessly, playfully, and point it around just any direction is simply not acceptable behavior; that's lifting up a rifle "in vain" – and in today's world the people around you will let you know! So too with God's name. When I lift up that name, when I take it on my lips, I need to be as cautious about how I do it as I am about picking up a 303. As that rifle is to be treated with respect, with reverence, so also the name of God is to be treated with respect, with reverence.

Lord's Day 36 mentions three examples of abuse of God's name, three examples of using that name carelessly. The first example is **cursing**. It's what happens so frequently in our ungodly society. In anger or in pain or maybe for no reason at all, someone mentions God by name. It fills in a space, or serves as an explicative. More often than not, those who curse are scarcely aware that they are using God's name, but that takes nothing away from the seriousness of it. This God who *acts to save*, this God who is *here*, this God who keeps His promises, is treated as if He is a *nothing* – as light-heartedly as careless use of a gun. And that hurts God, offends Him, and He will act to defend His honor. It's the promise of the third commandment: "the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain."

The second example mentioned in the Catechism is **perjury**. The term presumes that (as Lord's Day 37 puts it) we may swear an oath by the Name of God in a godly manner. That happens, for example, in court or in a royal commission. With calling upon God you promise to speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. But if

then you deliberately speak falsehood, you are guilty of perjury, guilty of breaking your oath. This calling upon God to bear witness that you speak the truth, when in fact you intend to lie, is making light of God, is calling upon Him as carelessly as picking up a rifle and pointing it around the circle. So again God is treated as a plastic gun, as a *nothing*. That hurts God, offends Him, and He will act to defend His honor. It's the promise of the third commandment: "the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain."

The third example mentioned in our Lord's Day is **unnecessary oaths**. Again, the concept presumes (as Lord's Day 37 says) that we may swear oaths. But to bring God's name into the picture willy-nilly in order to persuade the other that you're speaking the truth amounts to a vain use of God's name. Such an unnecessary oath may not be false, but it's not necessary and therefore vain. Instead we need to cultivate personal reputations whereby we're known to be true to our word, that our Yes is Yes and our No is No. Here too we need to take God's promise in the third commandment seriously: "the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain."

Though it's not in our Lord's Day, I want to mention a fourth example of abusing God's name. It's this: one can call upon God to **maintain ungodly practices**. One can think of the false prophets of the Bible. To speak up and say, "Thus says the Lord," when in fact God did not command that utterance, is an abuse of the name of the Lord on the part of that false prophet. The apostle Paul rounded up Christians in the name of the Lord and put them in prison, but after his repentance he acknowledged that this behavior was in fact blasphemy (1 Tim 1:13); in the name of the Lord he did what was sin.

It's this point that is so vitally important today. The recent discussions surrounding Dr Hollingworth have driven home the point that churches and their officials need to act in a manner agreeing with the Word of God. Society understands that there is a connection between the church and God. If church leaders, then, abuse children and the church in turn covers up these evils, it's understood to be done in the name of God. And thereby God's name is brought into disrepute. It is imperative that the church act according to God's Word and be publicly seen to do so – for the sake of God's name!

The same point applies to church members. You and I are known in our community as churchgoers, and so we are seen as image of God. To the degree that we in any area of life maintain ungodly practices, we take God's name in vain. And "the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes His name in vain."

What God does to protect His name? Q & A 100 picks up the topic. "No sin is greater or provokes God's wrath more than the blaspheming of His Name. That is why He commanded it to be punished with death." The proof text refers to Lev 24, a passage of Scripture that speaks of an Israelite cursing in a fight. God's penalty on the man was the death sentence.... Said God: "Whoever blasphemes the name of the Lord shall surely be put to death" (vs 16).

Then it's true: not every Israelite of the Old Testament who abused the name of God through cursing or perjury or unnecessary oaths or maintaining ungodly practices in the name of God was personally put to death. But death was nevertheless the penalty he deserved. And *that is why the Lord Jesus Christ was put to death!* Though He personally never abused the holy name of God in any way –neither by cursing nor by perjury nor by unnecessary oaths nor even by maintaining an ungodly practice while the public knew Him as a child of God- Jesus nevertheless received the penalty of Lev 24, the death penalty mentioned in our Lord's Day. He received that penalty because He died *in place of* His people – of both the Old Testament and the New Testament dispensation. The saints of old and the saints of today transgress that third commandment and so earn the death penalty (for God does not hold guiltless those who take His name in vain), but Jesus by God's mercy died in our place! The blessed result is this: God does not hold against His people their sins against the third commandment! How rich, how infinitely rich is His mercy! To protect His name God almighty *acted* in this world, displayed His justice – that we might receive mercy!

I come to our last point:

3. The Proper Use of God's Name

How, now, are we to use God's name? For use it we must! God from heaven on high has revealed His name, told people on earth Who He is. When God forbids the wrong use of His name, the alternative is not silence but the *correct* use of His name.

A 99 summarizes the instruction of Scripture on the point like this: "we must use the holy Name of God only with fear and reverence." It's like that gun. A soldier must use it, but the important thing is *how*: with respect. God's name must be used, but with respect. The Catechism draws out this proper use in a 99 with three examples.

The first is this: "that we may **rightly confess Him**." Those words come from Jesus' instruction in Mt 10. Said Jesus:

"Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven" (Mt 10:32f).

God is busy in this world, is not detached from this world in any way. Here He continues to work in your life and mine, and in the lives of so many others also, in the little bits and pieces of daily life. In this world He is busy gathering His church, making His kingdom come also through the big things of the newspaper. It is not enough that we *believe* these things; we also need to *speak* about these things in our society, with our contacts, at work. To act as if God is not involved in daily life, as if somehow He doesn't care about the nuts and bolts of normal life, is to fall into the heresy of the Anabaptists. They said God was too holy to bother with this sinful, broken life – and *therefore* they refused to swear oaths, to call upon God to witness earthly conversations (and that's what sparked the first question of Lord's Day 37 about whether we may swear an oath in a godly manner). That's why these Anabaptists also separated themselves from real life, lived separately, refused to join in the army or take up a public office in the community. We make the same mistake when we decline to bring up God in daily conversation. Then we divide life into two parts, and speak of God at home and in church (as if that's His realm), and not in daily life. Yet it's precisely *in daily life* that God is acting, it's *real* people with *real* problems that He saves in Jesus Christ. So it's on the street and in the office, there where real people struggle with real problems, that the work of our Lord God needs to be mentioned. Ps 148: every person, every creature is to extol the Lord. That begins with *us*, with you and me "rightly confessing Him."

The Catechism mentions a second way to use God's name "with fear and reverence." Lord's Day 36 mentions also that we are to "**call upon Him**." The reference is to prayer. In private life and public it is for God's people to "call upon Him." By doing so we show that we take seriously the fact that God is busy in *all* of life. Prayer in public is a statement, is an action that communicates to others that God is *real*, God is *there*, God is busy. That is also why we should not be afraid to pray for our meals at work or at a conference. It's a testimony to the public: we take God seriously. Doing so also makes it easier to speak up when we hear blasphemy. We all know how difficult that is, but we also know that it's easier to do if we've first *earned the right* to speak about God. And you earn the right by publicly *doing* things that demonstrate that you take God for real.

To "call upon Him" is not only a reference to prayer as such. Also with an oath we call upon God to bear witness that I speak the truth (A 102). If necessity or law requires us to take an oath, we should not at all hesitate to do so; it gives us opportunity again publicly to express that we take God seriously, that we recognize that God is involved in every aspect of life – including our choice of words.

The Catechism mentions a third way to use God's name only with fear and reverence, and that's that we "**praise Him in all our words and works**." We do that in part when we confess Him and when we call upon Him. We do it too when we sing words of praise (as Ps 148 has it). But there's more to it. God is busy in this world, and part of His work is the change the Holy Spirit works in sinners. By God's grace He through His Spirit has made His home in our hearts, has changed us so that we image to those around us what God is like. So *all our activity*, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, needs to reflect what God is like. We are a picture to society, and people will always see us and interpret what they see us do. It is *our responsibility* to see to it that our actions and words give others occasion not to think little of God but to think *much* of God. We are Christians and known to be such in our community; so our actions and words need to demonstrate to those around us that we take God seriously, that His Name means much to us.

Are we able to take up God's name with fear and reverence, even defend that wonderful name in our godless community? Most certainly, beloved, yes. For the God who is busy on earth has poured out His Holy Spirit to dwell in our hearts. In the power and wisdom of this Holy Spirit we can speak of our God in a way that gives Him glory, and we can live as children of God that also gives Him glory. Yes, our efforts will remain so broken; we can only be thankful that our Savior died in our place so that we need not perish on account of our transgressions against the third commandment. But exactly because we are righteous before God for Jesus' sake, let us with courage take up the Name

of our God with reverence and awe – to His greater glory. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 38 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 8 June 2003.

" IN THE SABBATH GOD'S PEOPLE RECEIVE A FORETASTE OF PARADISE RESTORED ."

Text:

Lord's Day 38

103. Q. What does God require in the fourth commandment?

A. First, that the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained[1] and that, especially on the day of rest, I diligently attend the church of God[2] to hear God's Word,[3] to use the sacraments,[4] to call publicly upon the LORD,[5] and to give Christian offerings for the poor.[6] Second, that all the days of my life I rest from my evil works, let the LORD work in me through His Holy Spirit, and so begin in this life the eternal sabbath.[7]

[1] Deut. 6:4-9; 20-25; I Cor. 9:13, 14; II Tim. 2:2; 3:13-17; Tit. 1:5. [2] Deut. 12:5-12; Ps. 40:9, 10; 68:26; Acts 2:42-47; Heb. 10:23-25. [3] Rom. 10:14-17; I Cor. 14:26-33; I Tim. 4:13. [4] I Cor. 11:23, 24. [5] Col. 3:16; I Tim. 2:1. [6] Ps. 50:14; I Cor. 16:2; II Cor. 8 and 9. [7] Is. 66:23; Heb. 4:9-11.

Scripture Reading:

Exodus 16:11-31

Leviticus 25:1-22

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 136:12,13

Psalm 42:1,2

Hymn 7:5

Psalm 84:3,4,5

Psalm 63:1,2,3

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

In her confessions the church repeats after God what she has heard God say in His Word. Concerning the fourth commandment the church confesses that God first of all requires "that the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained." The "ministry of the gospel": that's a reference to the preaching, be it in the churches of the land, be it on the mission field. And "the schools": that's a reference to the Theological College, to the training institution for the ministry of the gospel. That stands to reason too; if the Lord wants that the ministry of the gospel be maintained, then there must today be training facilities so that there can be preachers tomorrow. And of course, the point is not only that a College exists but also that we see to it that there be students who attend this College.

That "the ministry of the gospel ... be maintained" means also, says the church in Lord's Day 38, that each of us "diligently attend the church of God to hear God's Word, to use the sacraments, to call publicly upon the Lord, and to give Christian offerings for the poor." Again, that's so understandable: if God requires that the gospel be proclaimed, then there's need not just for preachers but also for an audience. More, the gospel has to be proclaimed for a reason, and that reason requires that the congregation come faithfully together. "Diligently," says the Catechism, and that means Sunday by Sunday, every time the gospel is proclaimed. So there's no place for oncing.

The question now is this: on what grounds can the church say that *this* is required in the fourth commandment?

"Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy," says that commandment. Why does the church make out of that that "the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained, and that, especially on the day of rest, I diligently attend the church of God"? What is the connection between this commandment and the obligation confessed in our Lord's Day?

That question, brothers and sisters, is important because the Sunday is increasingly becoming a point of discussion. It's not only so amongst the Dutch sister churches, but also in our own midst. Think only of the fact that 15 odd years ago it was frowned upon to spend a Sunday away from church. Today it's quite normal. That's a development that requires evaluation.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

IN THE SABBATH GOD'S PEOPLE RECEIVE A FORETASTE OF PARADISE RESTORED.

1. The message of the Sabbath.
2. The celebration of the Sabbath.
3. The continuation of the Sabbath.

1. The message of the Sabbath.

The people of Israel were camped at the foot of Mt Sinai. From the top of the mountain came that voice from God Almighty: "I am the Lord, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt." That voice continued with the consequence of that opening statement: "Remember the Sabbath Day to keep it holy...." "Remember," says God. What, specifically, was Israel to "remember" about the Sabbath day?

To get to the point, consider Anzac Day. The last time you remembered Anzac Day, what did you do? We realize: to remember Anzac Day is to draw to mind the things that happened at Gallipoli back in 1917 (and the various wars since then). To remember Anzac Day is to remember a specific day and a specific event.

Now the Lord tells Israel to "remember the Sabbath Day." What is this Sabbath Day they were to remember? No, they were not remember next week's Sabbath, just as we on Anzac Day do not remember next year's Anzac Day. Israel was instead to remember a specific Sabbath day of the past. Which one?

The answer can't be so difficult because God had mentioned the Sabbath to Israel only once before. That's in the passage we read from Ex 16. That passage had described how the people after their escape from Egypt hungered in the desert, and so God promised to "rain bread from heaven for you" (Ex 16:4). But this manna would not fall every day. Six days it would fall so that the people might collect it each morning, but on the sixth day (Friday) the people were to collect a double portion because –said God- "tomorrow is a Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the Lord" (vs 23). God repeats the instruction in vs 29: "the Lord has given you the Sabbath; therefore He gives you on the sixth day bread for two days." The people understood, and "rested on the seventh day" (vs 30).

God made a point of driving home to His people what His ordinance about the Sabbath was. We do not know on what day of the week the manna began to fall. Whenever it was, Moses told the people in vs 19 that they were not to leave any of it till morning – for they were to trust that God would supply tomorrow's bread tomorrow. Some, though, kept some manna aside for tomorrow, "and it bred worms and stank" (vs 20). But see: on the Sabbath that didn't happen! God impressed it on Israel: this day is *different*, this day is *special*. Here's a day when you don't have to work, more, here's a day when you *are not* to work.

At Mt Sinai the Lord commanded His people to "remember the Sabbath day." That is: every week anew they were to remember that day of Exodus 16, how the Lord gave them double food the day before and preserved the gathered manna so that it was fresh on the Sabbath – that the people in turn might be able to rest. While the people were at Mt Sinai the manna kept falling each day, but not on the Sabbath, and so the people were confronted each Sabbath anew with the wonderful gift of *not having to work* on that day.

Now: *why* did God give Israel this Sabbath day in Ex 16? And *why* did God include the Sabbath among the commandments He gave His people at Mt Sinai? The answer lies in the Introduction to the Ten Commandments. For

here God introduced Himself as "*your* God." That is: God established a *bond* between Israel and Himself. He had taken Israel out of Egypt, and this was now *His* people and He *their* God. So: He would supply their needs, day by day. And giving double on the Friday so that His people didn't have to labor on the Sabbath certainly spelled that out. But there's more. Since Israel was now *God's* people, they ought to *image* God, copy God. As He Himself had worked six days in creating the world, and then rested on the seventh (Gen 2:2f), so God's people should do the same. Fourth commandment: "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord *your* God" (notice that covenantal language!), and God even explains why: "*for* in six days the Lord made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day." God's pattern should be their pattern.

Yet there is more to it still, congregation. In Paradise God's people had all they needed; they could freely eat from every tree of the garden. But with the fall into sin that free access to an abundance was denied the human face. "Cursed is the ground for your sake," said God to Adam and Eve as He sent them out of the garden. "In toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life" (Gen 3:17). And so it was: for fallen man to survive there was need to labor, to toil, to sweat, and not just two days out of seven, or five or six, but *seven* days. Life after the fall into sin was a drudge, a toil. Israel in Egypt had experienced it. They were slaves, in a culture that knew no days of rest; so the people of Israel *toiled* in Egypt, day after day after day. They experienced first hand the curse God had promised after the fall into sin; "Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life" (Gen 3:17).

But at Mt Sinai God the Lord reminded Israel that He had *taken them out of Egypt*, out of their bondage; they were *free*. But that deliverance from Pharaoh was in turn a symbol of their deliverance from bondage to sin and Satan, and so also from the *curse* of the fall into sin. Specifically that point is driven home in the fourth commandment, with God's command to "remember the Sabbath day." Over against the toil of Gen 3 God gives daily bread, more, gives *time out* from that toil! For the Israelites at Mt Sinai, who had such vivid memories of their seven-day toil in Egypt, that one day off in seven was a glorious symbol of the wealth of the gospel of redemption; *they were God's people, and therefore the curse of the fall into sin was undone!* How wonderfully rich then was God's gift of the Sabbath! It spoke of redemption, it spoke of the end of the curse, it spoke of a return to Paradise!

Now God in His fourth commandment to His people-by-covenant tells His people to "remember the Sabbath day." The point is clear: the people were to *keep the gospel of redemption in mind!* Never should they forget that for them the curse of Gen 3 was undone, undone because they were God's people by covenant. Toil on the Sabbath? Labor on the Sabbath? Work on the Sabbath? No, said God, No! You may rest, may enjoy the same rest from your labors that I enjoyed after I created the world. *For Paradise is in principle restored!*

This wealth of the Sabbath, brothers and sisters, God impressed upon His people in further instruction He gave at Mt Sinai. Every *week* the Sabbath day returned, and with it the opportunity to remember specifically what the Sabbath was all about – God's redemption in Jesus Christ. But, God added, every seven years the people and the land had to enjoy a *Sabbath year*. That is, for a whole year the people did not have to toil or sweat to get the crop in or get the harvest off the land, for the Lord their God would supply their needs – just as in Paradise. Of course, in that Sabbath year there were things that had to be done, just as Adam had things to do in Paradise in tending and keeping the garden. But for the Israelite the *pressure* was off, he had *time out*, a whole year of it, and so could enjoy the redemption God gave in Jesus Christ, the undoing of the bitter effects of the fall into sin.

So too the *Year of Jubilee*. Ever 7th Sabbath year, so every 50th year, was the Year of Jubilee. Debts were forgiven, property freely returned to the original owner, slaves got their freedom back; everyone in Israel went back to their inheritance without owing anyone a penny! Here's again that curse of Gen 3 undone! It's the principle of the Sabbath; Israel is God's people, and therefore in essence Paradise is restored. Every seventh day, every seventh year, every seventh Sabbath year the people were to taste this gospel in such glorious terms! How wonderfully encouraging for the people.

That very wealth of the Sabbath, brothers and sisters, also gives the reason why the Lord God was so angered by Israel's *misuse* of the Sabbath. Already in Ex 16 God expressed some frustration at Israel's stubbornness in keeping the Sabbath (vs 28f). Some time later one of the people of Israel was found gathering sticks on the Sabbath day (Num 15:32ff). God's penalty on the offence was capital; "the man must surely be put to death," God decreed. And so it happened. *For here was a man who through his actions made clear that he did not appreciate the wealth of the gospel*

of redemption, of Paradise restored; hence his willingness to toil and labor on the Sabbath.

For the same reason the prophets spoke up loudly against Israel's neglect of the Sabbath. In fact, their refusal to rest on the Sabbath and treat the day as God's holy day was one of the reasons for the exile (cf Jer 17:19ff; Ezekiel 22:6ff). More, the duration of the exile –70 years- was determined by the number of Sabbath years Israel neglected to celebrate; for 490 years the land never received the rest God ordained, 70 Sabbath years were skipped, and therefore the people had to spend 70 years in exile (Lev 26:43; 2 Chron 36:21). All of that points up how much value the Lord put on the Sabbath. In their lives as God's people-by-covenant, keeping that Sabbath meant so much (cf Ex 31:12ff).

We come to our second point:

2. The celebration of the Sabbath.

Given this glorious message of the Sabbath, what was Israel to do on the Sabbath day? Was it a day to loaf? Was it a holiday, what we would call a free Saturday?

No, brothers and sisters, it most certainly was not that. The day was given for a specific purpose, and so had a specific message built into it. The people were to "remember" the Sabbath, to remember that message week after week, and that remembering required specific conduct. To help you remember Anzac Day, its origin and its meaning, you go to the Dawn Service, or to the Anzac Day Parade. To help the Israelites remember the Sabbath, its message, God instructed the people on what they had to do Sabbath by Sabbath. Lev 23: "Six days shall work be done, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of solemn rest, a holy convocation" (vs 3). A "convocation" is a getting together, a gathering. In other words, on the Sabbath the people of Israel were not to stay in bed, nor were they to stay at home; they were instead to *get together*. Yet they were not to get together for a soccer game; it was to be a "holy convocation". It was a Sabbath *to the Lord*, and so they were to gather around the Lord, around the tabernacle. And that tabernacle, of course, preached the gospel. Sacrifices were offered to the Lord day by day, but on the Sabbath twice as many as usual (Num 28:9f). Because of the fall into sin every Israelite ought to die on account of his sins; life should be toil and labor and anguish until one died – and then faced the judgment of God, eternal death. But God decreed that Another would die instead of the sinner, and that gospel was spelled out by an animal dying instead of *you* – for sin was transferred from you to the animal. That tabernacle: here was *gospel*, glorious gospel that confronted each Israelite Sabbath by Sabbath. In other words: the tabernacle spelled out how Paradise was regained!

How encouraging the Sabbath was then, precisely in its celebration! Tomorrow the people had to return to the cares and struggles of this life, the toil and the weeds, but by bringing His people to the tabernacle Sabbath by Sabbath the Lord gave such *encouragement*. Life a drudge, a vain toil, no purpose? Far from it; the very things the people had to do on the Sabbath confronted them with the message of redemption God prepared in Jesus Christ.

Just how pervasive that redemption was is pointed up too in God's list of who had to rest. It wasn't just you, but also your son and your daughter. Nor just family members, but also your manservant and your maidservant, your hired hands, employees – whether Israelite or foreigner. They too should taste something of the gospel of redemption, something of the undoing of the curse of the fall into sin. That *they* should taste it is no surprise; did God not ordain that Abram, and so Israel with him, was to be a blessing to all nations? (Gen 12). Further, also your ox and your donkey were to rest, enjoy a Sabbath. Why so? Because, brothers and sisters, *all creation* groans with travail on account of man's fall into sin! And *all creation* benefits from the atonement God would work in Jesus Christ! Not for nothing does the Revelation to John tell us of *trees* that will bear fruit once per *month*. You see, even the *animals of Israel* were granted the privilege to celebrate the undoing of the fall into sin, were given the privilege on the Sabbath to taste God's grace in Jesus Christ.

So our Lord Jesus Christ Himself celebrated the Sabbath. What He did? On the Sabbath He rested from His daily work. More, writes Luke, "as His custom was, He went into the synagogue on the Sabbath day", that place in His day where the people of Israel gathered together to hear God's Word (Luke 4:16). And what did He do in the synagogue? Time and again He *taught* (Mk 1:21; Lu 4:17). He spoke of that which was central to the Sabbath, of how God had ransomed a people for Himself and made them His own, how God in Christ had undone the curse of the beginning and was restoring Paradise for His own. *That's* also the reason why Jesus did not hesitate to heal on the Sabbath. For with that healing the *message of the Sabbath*, the gospel of Paradise-restored, was set out to the people!

I know: the Pharisees objected, said that Jesus was working on the Sabbath, misusing the Sabbath. But those Pharisees missed the point of the Sabbath, for God's purpose with the Sabbath was to drive home to His people the gospel of redemption, and on the Sabbath that redemption should be proclaimed, should be celebrated, should stir sinners to rejoice in God their Savior and so receive new perspective for the work of the coming week. So said the Lord: "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath" (Mk 2:27).

I come to our third point:

3. The continuation of the Sabbath.

All this wealth now that God has built into the fourth commandment He gave Israel: is it of significance for the New Testament church? It has been argued that there is no command in the New Testament that repeats the thrust of the fourth commandment given at Mt Sinai. Then it's added that that's remarkable because all the other nine commandments are repeated in some form in the New Testament, and therefore obviously still in force for us today. And given that the fourth is not mentioned, it's somehow not in force....

But the argument, brothers and sisters, goes the wrong way; it assumes that somehow the fourth commandment is somehow a *burden*, and we'd be easier off if we didn't have to keep it. But that's not so! The child of God who delights in the gospel of redemption, who longs for the undoing of the curse of Gen 3 about toil and labor, who can't wait for Paradise to be restored and believes that *Christ has accomplished Paradise restored* (in essence), *doesn't need* the fourth commandment to be repeated in specific terms! The child of God who treasures Christ's work knows that the wealth of the Old Testament Sabbath is richer today, and so the day is a foregone conclusion! The New Testament child of God knows that this is *richer* dispensation than the Old, for Christ has triumphed over sin and Satan. We are *closer* to Paradise than were the brethren of the Old Testament. Does a Sabbath celebration then require a specific command?? It's the other way around; if God did *not* want us to keep the Sabbath anymore, we'd expect a command to *that* effect!

No, beloved, it is no surprise that the fourth commandment is not specifically repeated in the New Testament. More, it's no surprise to find *so many traces* of the Sabbath commandment in the behavior of the saints of the New Testament. I read in Acts 11:26 that the church in Antioch regularly assembled together, and Saul with them. That regular assembling is an echo of the Old Testament Sabbath command. I read in Acts 20:7 that "on the first day of the week" "the disciples came together to break bread." (Between brackets: that shift from the seventh day to the first day is the church's response to Jesus' resurrection on the first day of the week and His appearance to His disciples exactly one week later, again on the first day of the week – Jn 20:19, 26. But let me not go into detail on his point; it will take me away from my point.) That gathering together of Acts 20 is the practice legislated in the fourth commandment: remember the Sabbath day of Ex 16, how you don't have to toil according to the curse of Gen 3, how for Jesus' sake you get to rest instead according to the pattern of God Himself at creation – and so come together to encourage one another in the service of this God through the preaching of the gospel. 1 Corinthians 5 mentions that same practice of coming together, when the apostle tells the church of Corinth to drive out the sinner from their midst (vs 4). 1 Corinthians 16 mentions the habit of the Christians again; Paul tells them to set something aside for the poor on this first day of the week. Hebrews 10 mentions the concept again when the readers are instructed not to neglect assembling together (vs 25). And so I can go on, mentioning more echoes in the New Testament of the Old Testament command about the Sabbath.

It is all of this material together, congregation, that makes the church say in Lord's Day 38 that God requires of us – you and me- "first, that the ministry of the gospel and the schools be maintained." That gospel of Jesus Christ, that *message* of the Sabbath, the proclamation of Jesus' triumph over sin and Satan and so restored us to Paradise, must be preached, and it is your duty and mine to see to it that the preaching can go on, that ministers are maintained, that future ministers are trained. Equally, that's why –the Lord's Day continues- I must "diligently attend the church of God to hear God's Word, to use the sacraments, to call publicly upon the Lord, and to give Christian offerings for the poor." That gospel of Christ's triumph, that message of the Sabbath, is not only to go *out*; it is also to go *in*, into my ears and into my heart, so that I –child of God that I am- have renewed perspective and hope for the new week. Life *looks* so much like a drudgery, a toil, a struggle, and the temptation is certainly there to look at the new week and its

challenges with weariness in your bones. But Sunday by Sunday the Lord God, congregation, would set His word of life before us and so make us see again the work of Christ on the cross, the redemption He obtained from the toil of labor, so that in turn life looks *good* again. Because that's the glorious message the Lord Himself would set before us Sunday by Sunday, I'm *diligently* to attend church, and not sporadically. More, because that's the glorious message God prepared for us in Christ, I'm today too to abstain from work on the Lord's Day. The gospel of redemption is to be bigger than the demands of work; more, the privileges of Paradise restored are to characterize the way I view my work. Never may I see myself enslaved to work, never may I see myself dependent on my work to earn my crust; my God supplies, it's the promise of Ex 16 (cf Mt 6: 25ff). That's the wealth I'm to "remember" on the Sabbath day. So you see that the church's confession in Lord's Day 38 about God's requirement in the fourth commandment is built on and assumes all God's revelation in the Old Testament about the Sabbath. Its message applies today as much as it did then, and so its celebration applies today also. Here's a day to rejoice in God and His redemption, and nothing I do on the Sunday may take my focus away from that glorious gospel!

And then, encouraged as I am through the preaching and the communion of saints, I can tackle the challenges of the new week also. How? As I return to my work on Monday –be it in the factory or at school, in the kitchen or in the office- "I rest from my evil works, let the Lord work in me through His Holy Spirit, and so begin in this life the eternal Sabbath." The wealth of that Sunday echoes throughout all my life! Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 39 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 15 June 2003.

" IN HIS CARE FOR HIS CHILDREN, GOD GIVES THEM PARENTS TO SHOW THEM THE WAY OF SALVATION."

Text:

Lord's Day 39

104. Q. What does God require in the fifth commandment?

A. That I show all honour, love, and faithfulness to my father and mother and to all those in authority over me, submit myself with due obedience to their good instruction and discipline,[1] and also have patience with their weaknesses and shortcomings,[2] since it is God's will to govern us by their hand.[3]

[1] Ex. 21:17; Prov. 1:8; 4:1; Rom. 13:1, 2; Eph. 5:21, 22; 6:1-9; Col. 3:18-4:1. [2] Prov. 20:20; 23:22; I Pet.2:18.

[3] Matt. 22:21, Rom. 13:1-8; Eph. 6:1-9; Col. 3:18-21.

Scripture Reading:

Exodus 13:1-16

Ephesians 6:1-4

Singing: (*Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter*)

Psalms 22:8,11

Psalms 48:4

Psalms 34:5

Psalms 78:1,2,3

Hymns 45:3,4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Why should children obey parents? To put the question differently: why should parents *insist* that their children obey them? Or, for that matter, why should teachers *insist* on respect and obedience from the students at school?

The answer is simple, yet critical. Children must obey their parents, and parents must insist on obedience and respect because *God said so*.

Our culture, however, acts as if heaven is empty; God is not there. It follows: so God did not tell children to honor and obey their parents. If we are the result of evolution, humans have no more right to insist on children obeying parents than chimpanzees do. That, congregation, is why authority disappears in today's western society. And what shall the consequence be? This: the next generation shall not live long in the land God has given us.... For God is *there*, and He has *spoken*.

Over against the drift of modern teaching I open with you all, older and younger, the word of our God in the fifth commandment. In His *care and love* for His children, He tells children to honor father and mother, and adds the promise that obedience to this command leads to long life on the earth.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

IN HIS CARE FOR HIS CHILDREN, GOD GIVES THEM PARENTS TO SHOW THEM THE WAY OF SALVATION.

1. The task of parents
2. The promise to the parented.
3. The manner of parenting,

1. *The Task of Parents*

From the top of the mountain the Lord God addressed the people below, and told them that He was the Lord *their* God, who brought this people out of Egypt. *Their* God: what age groups are we to think of? We see in the eye of our mind all these *adults* congregated around the mountain. Yet that's obviously incomplete. At the foot of the mountain were also *children*. They as well as adults were included in God's covenant and congregation; they were God's children redeemed from bondage to Egypt as much as their parents.

All ten Words of the Covenant, then, were directed *also to the children*. Yet one commandment was pitched *specifically* at the youth, and that's the fifth: "Honor your father and your mother." The question arises: why did God address the youth around the mountain with this command? Is the parent-child relation really so important for the well being of God's people that it's worth a commandment? The answer lies in the *task* that God had earlier given to the parents of Israel.

What task that was? Before the Lord sent the eighth plague upon Egypt, the Lord spoke these words to Moses: "Go in to Pharaoh; for I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his servants, that I may show these signs of Mine before him, and that you may tell in the hearing of your son and your son's son the mighty things I have done in Egypt, and My signs which I have done among them, that you may know that I am the Lord" (Ex 10:1f). Notice: one reason for hardening Pharaoh's heart is that *Moses may have something to tell his son and his grandson*. Yet the point is not limited to Moses: parents in Israel must tell their little ones of the stubbornness of Pharaoh's heart; more, they must tell their boys and girls of God's mighty deliverance from Egypt's bondage.

The same thought arises in Ex 12. On the night of the Passover the Lord told the people to smear blood around the door of their homes, and then added that they were to repeat this ritual every year when they come into the Promised Land. Why? Says God: "And it shall be, when your children say to you, 'What do you mean by this service?' that you shall say, 'It is the Passover sacrifice of the Lord, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt when He struck the Egyptians and delivered our households'" (vs 26f). You see: the ritual had to be reenacted year by year so that parents would have opportunity to tell their children about God's work of delivering Israel from bondage. That is the task of parents: they must *tell*.

Ex 13 repeats the point. In the Promised Land the people had to keep the Feast of Unleavened Bread year by year. Part of that feast was the removal of all leaven from the house, and a diet of unleavened bread for a full week. The people were to use the occasion, said God, to "tell your son in that day, saying, 'This is done because of what the Lord did for me when I came up from Egypt'" (vs 8). So too in vs 14: "So it shall be, when your son asks you in time to come, saying, 'What is this?' that you shall say to him, 'By strength of hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.'" Here was the obligation of parents: they had *tell their children* about God's works of redemption!

In the book of Deuteronomy this task-of-the-parents is drawn out with greater clarity. I think of Dt 4:9f. Said God to the people through Moses: "Only take heed to yourself, and diligently keep yourself, lest you forget the things your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. And teach them to your children and your grandchildren, especially concerning the day you stood before the Lord your God in Horeb, when the Lord said to me, 'Gather the people to Me, and I will let them hear My words, that they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth, and that they may teach their children.'" What their eyes have seen? The reference is to the plagues in Egypt and the exodus itself, how God divided the Red Sea and drowned Pharaoh's hosts. The reference is to God's care for His people in the desert, how He supplied manna and water, clothing and protection, etc. *These* are the things the parents of Israel must teach to their children and grandchildren. But especially, says God, parents in Israel must teach their children about the events of Horeb (that's Mt Sinai), when God made His covenant with this people and gave them His Ten Commandments, and all the laws about the tabernacle and the sacrifices which the people had to

bring, etc – all of which spoke of the *gospel of redemption in the blood of the coming Savior!* That was the task of parents: *tell, teach!* God's words, God's works in the past were not to be forgotten, but to be passed on from generation to generation. And no, not only were parents to tell their children what they had experienced of God's power and mercy in the exodus and in the desert; they were to tell their *grandchildren also*.

Nor were the parents and grandparents to speak of God's works and words only once in a while, or, say, when the atmosphere was sort of religious-like. Dt 6:7: God told the parents emphatically that "you shall teach [My commandments] diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up." "Teach", says God here, and the word that He uses means to impress, to drive the point home through repetition. That's also why God says that His commandments –be it about the law itself, be it about the tabernacle and the sacrifices and the gospel of salvation embodied in the tabernacle- were to be points of conversation "when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up," in other words, *anytime during the day*. They were not to wait for a particularly religious sort of moment, but were to speak of the Lord at any time, all the time. And that's so understandable: God does not claim or involve Himself only in small sections of people's lives, but He has authority over every square millimeter of all existence. So it is fundamentally wrong to exclude God from *any* area of life. In the kitchen and in the bedroom, when you watch TV or play computer games, when you drive down the road or go fishing: always God is *with* His people, more, always God is *actively involved* with His people *and wants them to remember Him and to speak of Him*. And God gives parents the responsibility to set the tone on this point; *they* have to make a point of speaking about their God and Savior, be busy with His service, any time, all the time (see also Dt 6:20ff).

So there was no place in Israel for so-called neutrality in education! In no way were the parents of Israel allowed to let the children decide for themselves what they would believe about God or how they would serve Him or even whether they would serve Him. Parents were to teach, parents were to tell, parents were to impress the gospel and commandments of God upon their children day by day, morning and evening, at work and at play.

Why? Because, brothers and sisters, *these children of Israel were God's children by covenant*, as much as were the parents; *God loved them!* So those boys and girls had to come to know their Father in heaven and His saving work in Jesus Christ. How should they be taught, come to know God? In His love for those little ones, *God gave them parents*, themselves also covenant children of God who had seen much of God's power and mercy and care. In His love for those little ones, *God told those parents to speak with their children about their God and His words and works*. Parents: they are God's gift of love to His children!

But now a problem. Suppose the children of Israel, the teenagers, the boys and girls, thought their folk were too religious? We can see it happening: Dad speaking with his son about the unleavened bread they need to eat, telling about God's work of deliverance from Egypt, but Junior's heard it all before and he wants to go play – whittle a whistle, kick a ball.... So he rolls his eyes, and he taps his fingers on the table.... And Dad's God-given task to teach – for *God* wants the next generation to know; it's His love!- Dad's God-given task to teach hits a frustrating wall of impatience or unwillingness to listen. Then what? Dad's task is made impossible by the attitude of the son! And *there* you have the reason for the fifth commandment! That commandment God spoke specifically to the children of Israel is built upon and assumes the task God had already given to parents. With this commandment the Lord gives the youth of Israel the responsibility to *be open* to the good instruction of their parents.

What a wonderful display this commandment is, then, of God's *love* for His people, also for the children! He is pleased to use parents to guide His youth to maturity in His service –for their salvation's sake!- and *that's* why He tells them to *honor* their parents. Truly, that is *love*, that is *care*. How foolish, then, how utterly, utterly foolish the youth who opt *not* to honor their parents, who go their own way! At bottom it's rejecting God's love! And in the end this dishonoring, this disobedience will hurt, hurt bitterly.

That brings to our second point:

2. The Promise to the Parented

This fifth commandment says more than that children are to honor their father and mother. At Mt Sinai already God

attached a *promise* to this commandment. It's this: "that you may live long in the land which the Lord your God is giving you."

God had just delivered His people from their bondage in Egypt, and the people were on their way to the land of Canaan. This land, God said, He would give to His people-by-covenant, freely. But the point, of course, is not only that you *receive* a land; you need also to *keep* it. And on this point the Lord mentions the fifth commandment. The younger generation would stay in the land that God would give to their parents? The key to keeping the land was that they as youth would honor, esteem, respect father and mother! You see: the children's future happiness was tied to their obedience today to the fifth commandment!

Why, congregation, might that be so? The answer is not that difficult. The Canaanites had filled up the measure of their sins, and so the land spewed them out (Lev 18:25). If Israel would commit the same sins, the land would expel them also. Yet how could Israel keep from committing the same sins? They could be spared those sins only by serving the Lord faithfully. Yet how shall a new generation learn to know and serve God? How shall a new generation learn to follow *not* the desires of the sinful flesh, but to do what God wants? *That's the task of the parents!* And that is why the attitude of the young people to their parents is so critical; if they are negative to their parents, critical of authority, intent on following their own heads, these children shall end up with a lifestyle as the Canaanites had – and so the land will spew them out. Conversely, if those youth recognize the care and grace of God in His gift of parents, and so esteem them highly, listen to them, learn the way of God from their parents, they shall become godly adults – and therefore be able to enjoy God's blessing in the land of promise (cf Lev 26:3ff).

Now, it should be added straightaway: when children despise the fifth commandment and do not honor their parents, it is not correct to point a finger first at the youth. Though they most certainly have a responsibility (for the fifth commandment speaks specifically to the youth), it is to *parents* that God gave the charge to teach the children how to honor and obey. And parents by virtue of their greater maturity have a greater and a primary responsibility before God. Where parents do not insist that their children show them the honor God decreed, if parents do not teach their children how to obey, those parents are themselves the cause for their children's wickedness. Let this be clear: if children do not learn to honor and obey parents they can see, how shall they ever honor and obey God whom they cannot see? Problems with the youth begin with the parents!

That God meant what He said about His promise to the parented is clear from Israel's history. Parents were the tools God was pleased to use to teach the next generation the way of the Lord. But generation after generation in Israel did not appreciate the teaching of parents about the Lord, and chose to serve God in their own way or even to serve other gods. The result was, eventually, the exile; the land spewed out God's people by covenant. The children did not live long in the land that the Lord gave them....

That is why the obedience of our Lord Jesus Christ to His parents is so rich in gospel. Luke tells us emphatically that our Savior "was subject" to Joseph and Mary, His God-given parents (Luke 2:51). He knew: His Father in heaven was pleased to teach Him the way of the Lord through these two people. So He honored them, esteemed them, was obedient to them. The result? He *did* learn the way of the Lord, learned how to live as God's child in this world, learned how to obey even at cost to Self.

Does that mean that Jesus lived long in the land God gave Him? No, it doesn't. For the sins of all those children of the Old Testament against the fifth commandment (and the New Testament dispensation too) were piled onto Him, and that means that God saw Him as Sin personified – and therefore He had Him exiled from the land. That's why He went to the cross, there to be crucified, cursed, killed. *He* took the penalty that parents deserve because of failure to tell the children persistently enough and faithfully enough of their God in heaven. *He* took the penalty that children deserve because of their failure to honor Dad and Mom properly, and their failure to obey all that they say. *He* took the penalty, so that covenant youth of Old and New Testament alike might live long on the earth – as Paul says it to the Ephesians (6:1ff). You and I, and our little ones, shall by God's grace live *forever* on this earth, for the New Jerusalem shall come down from heaven *to earth*, and here God shall live with man to all eternity.

That, brothers and sisters, younger and older, is the promise in the fifth commandment today: honor your father and your mother because God is pleased to use them to bring you to salvation, to bring you to the New Jerusalem! Eternal

life on this earth with God Himself: that is the reward God in mercy is pleased to give to those who keep the fifth commandment, who accept in faith that God has given parents –*these* parents!- so that He might lead me to life eternal.

So I say it again: how foolish, how utterly, utterly foolish those who disobey or dishonor their parents, who choose to go their own way! The bit of freedom they think they experience now will lead –unless God intervenes- to the eternal slavery of hell. *It's not worth it.*

We come to our last point:

3. The Manner of Parenting.

The role that God has given to parents in His kingdom, then, is manifestly a critical and most responsible one. How are parents now to carry out that role?

I referred earlier to that passage from Dt 6, where the Lord told the parents of Israel to speak with their children about the commandments of the Lord "when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up" (vs 7); *any time and all the time* the parents were to speak with their children of the Lord and His service. Then the question arises: isn't that overdone? Doesn't that turn the children off?

It's a danger, congregation, of which we need to be acutely aware. The answer, however, is not found in taking something away from God's instruction in Dt 6:7; that command comes from God and so must stand. The answer lies instead in one's *manner of living*. You see: if the children sense that in certain activities or parts of the day we live at arm's distance from God, and yet speak of God all the time, they detect a hypocrisy in us, an untruthfulness, a tension between what we say and what we do – and that will turn them off. To correct the problem we're not to speak less of God; to correct the problem we're to live more deliberately and consciously with the awareness that God is beside us all the time. The children, for example, know that we are not to take God's name in vain. But if they notice parents contently watching programs where God's name is taken in vain, then to their minds it is hypocrisy for parents to speak about God when the TV is on. And as parents we feel it too and then speaking about God feels forced, artificial.... So the answer is: do not contently watch that program.

This is the sort of thing that Paul means when he tells the fathers of Ephesus not to "provoke your children to wrath" (6:4). The parents' *lifestyle* has to be consistent with the gospel, and is not to give a confusing signal to the children. Where the lifestyle gives a confusing signal, where parents *say* one thing but *do* something else, or demand of their children more than they themselves do, the children get turned off, fed up, disheartened, embittered with religion, angry. It is the parents' duty to ensure that this does not happen, and that is why the *manner* of parenting is so important. And critical to the manner of parenting is that parents are good *examples* of godliness. Where parents *model the gospel* when they sit in the house or walk by the way, there the parents have the moral right to speak of the gospel when they sit in the house or walk by the way. The older generation needs to *walk with God* all the time, and *then* they are able to *talk about God* anytime – be it to their children or their neighbors.

Again, it is not just parents who then have the 'right' to speak with children about the Lord and His service. I quoted earlier from Dt 4, how the parents of Israel were to tell their children *and their grandchildren* of the Lord's words and works. Today too also *grandparents* have an obligation to those who come after them in the generations. Empty nesters, grandparents, have accumulated so much knowledge of God in their lives, and accumulated too so much experience in the struggles of life and living as God's children, and these are things they need to speak about with the Lord's covenant youth – be it their grandchildren or others. That generation gap the world used to talk so much about simply may not exist in the church of God; God uses the older, gives them a task, to train up the younger!

Here is a point that needs consideration. We look at young people in general in the churches, and yes, there is much for which to be thankful. But we also hear things from time to time that gives cause for concern. How much do the young people read? Do their contributions to church and school, to Fairhaven and Eucalypt, etc, show that they understand the need for church and school, for assisting the aged and the infirm? How much *at home* do the youth feel in this world? If there is a problem with any of these things, the first question needs to be: *are the older generations addressing the youth on it?* Let us face it: folly is bound up in the heart of the child (Prov 22:15), and so parents and

grandparents have an ongoing obligation to speak, always to speak with the youth! Maybe here's a problem with mothers increasingly joining the workforce: do they have adequate time and energy to speak with their young people (and those of other families) about the service of the Lord? And maybe here's a problem with fathers being so busy with all kinds of obligations: do they have adequate time and energy to speak with their young people (and those of other families) about the works and words of God? And maybe here's a problem with grandparents being occupied with coffee visits: do they take time and save energy to speak with their grandchildren (and other youth) about the promises of God – and so share the wisdom they have accumulated over the years? Indeed, do the youth see the older generations sharply focused on God and His service, or do they see the older generations living for today's comforts – be it with a Christian veneer laid on top?

A related matter comes up in connection with the above. May a parent who is a drunk or lazy or abusive insist upon obedience? Better: does the Lord require that children obey sinful commands? The answer is easy, for "we ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

The matter, however, is deeper. The *task* of the parent is to show the children the way of salvation. But if a parent lives a life of sin, he sabotages his own ability to carry out his God-given duty. More, he leads his children *away* from God instead of *to* God. Then yes, children still need to show honor to such a parent, but No, the parent may no longer insist that the children listen to him when he tries to speak about the Lord. For his life gives the lie to his words.

Here, I submit, is also where others need to step in. Where parents lose the 'right' to tell their children about the way of the Lord, how shall these children learn the way of the Lord? For –make no mistake- they need to learn; they are God's children by covenant! Here the wider family (grandparents, uncles, aunties) needs to offer its help, be it in addressing the sinning parent(s), be it in giving extra attention to the children. Here also is a task for the church community. After all, when a child is baptized, the whole congregation is called upon to witness the event for a reason, and to pray with and for the parents too, and that reason is that we all are out (little) brother's keeper.

Why should children obey parents? God told them to, told them to because He loves His children-by-covenant, and is pleased to use parents to bring the little ones to maturity in Him. So the task of the parents and the role of the child is very much a matter of *faith*. We believe God ordained the family, we believe God loves us in Christ, and so we make it our business, in the strength of the Holy Spirit, to be the families God wants us to be. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 40 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 29 June 2003.

" THE GOD OF LIFE TREASURES LIFE ."

Text:

Lord's Day 40

105. Q. What does God require in the sixth commandment?

A. I am not to dishonour, hate, injure, or kill my neighbour by thoughts, words, or gestures, and much less by deeds, whether personally or through another;[1] rather, I am to put away all desire of revenge.[2] Moreover, I am not to harm or recklessly endanger myself.[3] Therefore, also, the government bears the sword to prevent murder.[4]

[1] Gen. 9:6; Lev. 19:17, 18; Matt. 5:21, 22; 26:52. [2] Prov. 25:21, 22; Matt. 18:35; Rom. 12:19; Eph. 4:26. [3] Matt. 4:7; 26:52; Rom. 13:11-14. [4] Gen. 9:6; Ex. 21:14; Rom. 13:4.

106. Q. But does this commandment speak only of killing?

A. By forbidding murder God teaches us that He hates the root of murder, such as envy, hatred, anger, and desire of revenge,[1] and that He regards all these as murder.[2]

[1] Prov. 14:30; Rom. 1:29; 12:19; Gal. 5:19-21; James 1:20; 1 John 2:9-11. [2] 1 John 3:15.

107. Q. Is it enough, then, that we do not kill our neighbour in any such way? A. No. When God condemns envy, hatred, and anger, He commands us to love our neighbour as ourselves,[1] to show patience, peace, gentleness, mercy, and friendliness toward him,[2] to protect him from harm as much as we can, and to do good even to our enemies.[3]

[1] Matt. 7:12; 22:39; Rom. 12:10. [2] Matt. 5:5; Luke 6:36; Rom. 12:10, 18; Gal. 6:1, 2; Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:12; 1 Pet. 3:8. [3] Ex. 23:4, 5; Matt. 5:44, 45; Rom. 12:20.

Scripture Reading:

Genesis 9:1-7

Numbers 35:9-34

1 John 3:10-15

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 145:3

Psalm 103:5

Psalm 36:2

Psalm 23:1,2,3

Psalm 68:3 and Hymn 53:1,2

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

At first blink, the sixth commandment –especially its literal wording- seems rather remote from our daily lives. After all, who of us has murdered someone? Or has plans to do so? Yet, congregation, this commandment confronts us with a number of very contemporary issues. Matters of safety, be it traffic safety or safety in the workplace, fall under the sixth commandment. In our country thousands upon thousands of babies are killed each year before they are born – abortion. Dr Nitzchke is attempting to legalize and sell his death machine – euthanasia. Never in the history of the western world have there been so many suicides among young people as in our age. As youth see no meaning in life, they give themselves to more and more dangerous activities; think only of the use of potentially deadly drugs to get a

high. The selfishness of our society also produces more and more vengeance.... All these matters belong under the sixth commandment, and so it's clear: this commandment confronts us with very timely questions.

Add to that the depth our Catechism gives to this commandment! In Question & Answer 107 the Catechism confesses that with this commandment the Lord instructs us "to love our neighbor as ourselves, to show patience, peace, gentleness, mercy and friendliness toward him..., and to do good even to our enemies." This is far-reaching indeed! This commandment remote from our lives?! In truth, it's anything but!

Indeed, brothers and sisters, here the Lord of life teaches us how he treasures human life. And if He treasures human life so highly, we need to do so also.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE GOD OF LIFE TREASURES LIFE.

1. What is murder?
2. What is commanded?

1. *What is murder?*

Society around us operates on the premise that the God in whom you and I believe is not real. This world came into being through a process of evolution, we're told, so that people are in essence no different from dogs or frogs, and no different either from weeds or slime. So you get your animal rights activists, and you get your Save-the-Forests people; people and animals and plants are on the same level, and the rights of one should be accorded to the other.

The Lord God has revealed a different structure. He tells us that He created this world with its plants and animals and people, and set the human race *above* the plants and the animals. I read in Gen 1:29: "And God said, 'See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of all the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food.'" The point is clear: already in Paradise God ordained that people may kill plants to eat them.

Concerning animals as food the Lord gave a parallel instruction. Gen 9: "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. I have given you all things, even as the green herbs" (vs 3). Here is special permission from God that people may kill animals as a source of food. Around us are vegetarians who would argue that we may not eat meat or fish. It's a principle contrary to Scripture. The Lord has given mankind permission to eat not just plants but also animals. But notice: God adds right away that He forbids man to eat the blood of the animals. Point is: the animals remain God's property, and *He* sets the rules that man must keep. That's also why we may not kill animals –or plants for that matter– for the fun of it. Plants and animals are *God's* creations and remain His property, and so need to be treated with respect and care.

As God gave His instruction to Noah about killing animals, the Lord spoke also about man. Vs 6: "whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man." People may kill animals, and people may kill plants, but people may not kill people. The reason is simple: God made man in *His image*. That is: God has created man with a task and purpose that no other creature received. Dogs can't do it, and frogs can't do it; only *people* can image God, can reflect what God is like. You see: God has given to man a *unique* place in all creation, different from other creatures. God has bound man to Himself, is pleased to let something of *His characteristics* be seen in creation *through man*. If then an animal kills a man, God wants that animal killed; that animal has *touched God Himself* by removing from the earth one who could image God. Gen 9:5: "Surely for your lifeblood I will demand a reckoning; from the hand of every beast I will require it." But the same is true for man; if a man kills another man, the killer must be killed. Same verse: "From the hand of every man's brother I will require the life of man." The high position God ordained for man in creation –just under God as His image!– means that no one may kill a person. And anyone who kills a person, whether the killer be man or beast, must himself be killed.

The people of Israel were gathered around Mt Sinai. Those people at the foot of the mountain had particular experiences in their life's histories on the point of life and death. They'd been slaves in Egypt, dirt – and treated that way. In fact, Pharaoh had insisted that all the baby boys of Israel be drowned; here was infanticide. How many of the

parents at the foot of the mountain had lost their boys to Pharaoh's soldiers? They had in Egypt been treated as worse than dogs! Though created to image God, they and their little ones in Egypt did not receive from the Egyptians the *honor* that belongs to persons created in God's image! But God *did* show them that honor! With a mighty hand and abundant mercy the Lord brought them out of Egypt, brought them to Mt Sinai. At the mountain the Lord established His covenant of grace with this race of hounded slaves and told them that He was *their* God. Old people and young, talented and special, boys and girls: to all God said that they were *His*. To this people God now repeats the instruction of Gen 9, and tells them that they may not murder. God had honored them and so lifted them from their slavery to be His people; now they may not murder any other Israelite, indeed, may not kill any other person. As God *honored* them by treating them according to the status with which God created them –in His image- so they were to honor each other, honor all men. *People were not to kill people.*

Just how much God treasured life was pointed up for Israel with God's instruction in Num 35, in the passage about the Cities of Refuge. Notice vs 16: "if he strikes him with an iron implement, so that he dies, he is a murderer; the murderer shall surely be put to death." So too if he hits somebody with a stone or a wooden weapon so that the other person dies; the murderer shall be put to death. But it's specifically God's instruction about the manslayer, brothers and sisters, that drives home how seriously God takes the matter of killing another person. You know how life goes: accidentally, with no intent to hurt or kill, the stone you dropped over the cliff falls on someone so that he dies. Or the head flies off the ax and hits your companion so that he's dead. Or you came around a corner with your chariot and ran over another person on the road. Those are the hard, and cruel, realities of life. Then what? This: God permitted the next of kin of the dead man to pursue you and kill you – though you had not intended to kill his brother! For one created to image God had been erased from off this earth, and *God* took offence at that!

At the same time, the Lord was compassionate to the manslayer. For God ordained that the manslayer could flee to one of those Cities of Refuge. In that city you'd be tried, and if found innocent you could live. *But even though you had not killed your neighbor intentionally, you could not return to your home or your family*; you had to stay in that City of Refuge –in exile, in other words!- till the death of the high priest. You see the point? You'd done nothing intentionally wrong, but the very fact that you had shed blood required a penalty; you were grounded till the high priest died. And the high priest's death foreshadowed the death of the Great High Priest, Jesus Christ. Blood had been shed, a person created to image God had been snuffed out, and so the Lord required blood to set matters straight – *Jesus'* blood. See there how much the Lord hates the shedding of human blood; to kill one made in the image of God is to touch God!

In the years since the instruction of Mt Sinai and Num 35, our Lord Jesus Christ has come to die for sin. With His atoning sacrifice on Calvary, the Savior has washed away the sins of all those who believe in Him – including sins against the sixth commandment, yes, also sins of murder and of manslaughter. The result of His work is that Christ has opened the way for all sinners to be reconciled to God; people of every tribe and race, people of every background and track record, *can be forgiven* of sin. God after Christ's work on Calvary did not destroy all ungodly people, including murderers. Instead, the Lord caused the gospel to go out to the ends of the earth so that evildoers *of every sort* might come to faith in Christ. For people were created in the image of God, and so God does not write off some people as beyond salvation. Romans 2: "do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?" (vs 4). The point: though people are fallen and evil, God still treats people with the *honor* that belongs to being created in the image of God. *So God causes the gospel to go out to all men.*

But if that is so, brothers and sisters, how much more does the instruction of God in Gen 9 and Num 35 pertain to us today! May we kill another? May we destroy human life? May we treat human life as if it is on a level with animals, or even with plants? *No way!* By the ordinance of God people today need to *honor* life, respect life – not because human life is special in itself, or somehow because people have a 'right to life', but because *God* has created it, and created it in His image. More, Jesus Christ has died and risen *to save sinners*, and so God lets sinners live so that they may come to repentance. How imperative it is, then, that we honor human lives today and preserve them! That is also why the Catechism says right up front in its discussion on the sixth commandment that "I am *not* to dishonor ... my neighbor by thoughts, words, or gestures, and much less by deeds."

But what happens in our society? One may not murder, says God, and those who do murder are themselves to be killed – capital punishment. Our society agrees: one may not murder, and if one does there's a penalty to pay. But in

Australia the penalty is not capital punishment; the evil doer instead gets locked away for some years.... With that refusal to shed the blood of the murderer, society shows that we no longer see the depths of the evil of murder, no longer see that with murder we touch *God* – and therefore need to shed the blood of the murderer. And that is no surprise, for –says evolution- we are not created in the image of God....

That society no longer sees the depths of the evil of murder is pointed up by the *legalization* of murder in our land. I refer to abortion; each year tens of thousands of people are killed in Australia before they are even born, killed when they are most defenseless – in their mother's womb. A penalty for the abortionist and the mother who seeks the abortion? There is no legal penalty; by the laws of the land this murder is permissible. But the Lord, congregation, hears the silent screams of the dying infants, and *He* is hurt that persons created to image Him are robbed of their life. And make no mistake: *God's* hand weighs heavily upon the mothers; so many end up troubled afterwards with a guilty conscience. There is one way only to relieve that guilty conscience, and that is to turn to the Savior God gave in repentance and faith.

Do I, with saying this, make light of the problems facing those girls in our midst who find themselves unhappily pregnant? Far from it! Let's face it: it's tempting to drive to the other side of town where nobody knows you..., and pay a brief visit to that abortion clinic..., and Mom and Dad never have to know.... But listen, congregation, to the word God spoke to the girls of Israel long ago, and it's a word He still says to us in Jesus Christ today: "I am the Lord *your* God...." That reality is true for the Christian girl of today who falls into sin, and it is true of the covenant child she has conceived; "I am the Lord *your* God!" If God is *our* God, will He not care for all our needs? "He who did not spare His own Son but gave Him up for us all, how shall He with Him not freely give us *all* things?" Indeed, even the unwanted child has in Him a Father, for He makes His covenant with believers *and their seed*. Is abortion an option? Let it be fixed in the minds of girls and boys alike: it is *not* an option. God is emphatic in His command: "you shall not murder." And He is equally emphatic in His promise: "I am the Lord *your* God." That's a promise we need to embrace, in real life. And this is the good news we need to share with those who don't know God; for Jesus' sake the Lord will be a Husband for *all* who trust in Him, and for Jesus' sake be a Father for their baby also. This is the only hope for our land: *faith in Jesus Christ!*

The same is true in relation to suicide. Never before in the history of the western world is suicide among young people as high as it is today. That today's youth would commit suicide is understandable; if there is no God, life has no purpose or meaning, and death is simply the end. Then when everything looks hopeless, and you feel so blue yourself, why not put an end to things...? I can understand the statistic. But here too the Lord says: "You shall not murder" – not yourself either. Then it's true: Christians can feel very hopeless and helpless too, and suicide may appear to be the only way out the dark tunnel. But God has spoken: "I am the Lord *your* God!" That reality was signified and sealed to us in holy baptism, and God works faith in our hearts also so that we say with Lord's Day 1: "I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ." Even gray skies cannot change that reality! That gives comfort when a loved one has committed suicide. More, it gives perspective when one is tempted to consider suicide. "Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with Me" (Ps 23). And what is my Father's will for me? His will is that I do not kill, not myself either, but rather trust that He gives my life purpose and meaning, and preserves me in the darkest hour. And this gospel is the only balm for the hurting spirits of so many young people in our land; in their despair and hopelessness, they need to know that they are not just highly developed slime, on a level with a frog; they need to know that God created them *in His image*, and so for Jesus' sake will be Father for all who trust in Him. *Life need not be dark* because God treats man with the honor befitting those created in His image; He in patience gives space for the gospel to go out!

And what of euthanasia? The Northern Territories government legalized it some years ago, but the federal government disallowed it – thankfully. On what grounds? Government and media generally reject euthanasia with the "sanctity of life" argument. One shouldn't allow euthanasia, it is said, because there is something unique about human life; each person has the right to live. If you give people the right to die, the edges become fuzzy, and the fear is there that a monster will kill people he doesn't want – as Hitler did to the Jews. Yet the sanctity of life argument, beloved, is weak, simply because people do not respect the Creator of life. If in principle there is no difference between a person and a dog (for we both descend from the same original bacteria so many millions of years ago), then on what principle can you maintain that its OK to put down an old and crippled dog but wrong to do the same with a person?

But the child of God recognizes that the Lord God has created people to image Him. Then yes, through the fall into sin our ability to image God was so terribly marred. And a person afflicted with Alzheimers demonstrates nothing anymore of the dignity with which God once endowed man. But this person was still created to image God, and therefore must be treated with honor. That is why the type of care extended to the frail at Fairhaven is exactly in line with the sixth commandment. Dignity, honor, respect: this is what God wishes us to extend to the infirm and weak. And He at His time will graduate these infirm and frail with the ultimate dignity and honor befitting the image of God; He will give them the Crown of glory. Meanwhile, we cheerfully return to them the care they bestowed on us in our infancy, love them as they loved us (cf 2 Timothy 5:4).

That brings us to our second point:

2. What does God require?

Actions have a root; they do not come out of the dark. Cain killed Abel, the Bible says, because he did not love him – and therefore could not stand Abel's righteous works (1 Jn 3:11ff). That lack of love: that was the root of murder. When God forbids the outward act of murder, He forbids also the lack of love that produces murder.

This perspective has consequences. May I abort the baby I don't really want? No, I may not; in fact, I must *learn to love* that baby, this neighbor God has put on my path. May I kill myself, commit suicide? No, I may not; in fact, the Lord wants me *to love myself* – not in a selfish way, but recognizing that God has created me in His image, more, has given His Son for my sins, has made Himself my Father. May I kill an unproductive, twisted, frail senior - euthanasia? May I help in the person killing himself? No, I may not; in fact, the Lord wants me *to love* this frail senior, and so to extend sincere care. *That* is the instruction of God behind the sixth commandment; God wants us *to love our neighbor as ourselves*, and so to show him patience, peace, gentleness, mercy and friendliness – as God does to us in Christ.

Must I show love only to Christian people? Not so! The Lord gave His Son for us while we were still His enemies, says Paul to the Romans (5:8). Jesus puts it this way: "But I say to you who hear: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who spitefully use you" (Luke 6:27f). The Lord God makes His sun to shine and His rain to fall on believers and unbelievers alike; it is for us to show the same kindness and love to believers and unbelievers alike (cf Mt 5:44ff). God keeps these people alive, and He gives good things to them day by day so that they might learn to know Him and His Son Jesus Christ. We are created in God's image, and renewed to image Him through the Spirit; it is for us show through our words and works something of God's care and kindness also to the ungodly. That requires positive thoughts about the people around us, not negative. Those positive thoughts will in turn translate into acts of compassion also to those who do not know God, including those who contemplate suicide or abortion.

That also cuts off thoughts of vengeance. People may do evil things to us, may make themselves our worst enemies. But retaliate in some way, sue to get even, is contrary to the sixth commandment. "Love your enemies," says the Lord, and so we echo in our Lord's Day that we are "to do good even to our enemies." So we leave vengeance and getting even to God; that's His department.

People kill people because they don't see value in people. The Christian knows differently; the Christian esteems all people because he knows that God created us all in His image. So we treat all people with honor, despite race or gender or social standing, and so strive to show them all the riches of God's redeeming work in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 41 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 6 July 2003.

" IN HIS CARE THE LORD OUR GOD WARNS US AGAINST UNCHASTITY ."

Text:

Lord's Day 41

Scripture Reading:

Gen 2:18-25

Eph 5:22-33

Matthew 5:27-32

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 9:1,5

Psalm 139:13

Psalm 119:2,3

Psalm 16:3,4

Psalm 128:1,2,3

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Lord's Day 41 uses very negative terminology, words like 'cursed' and 'detest' and 'shameful sins'. Are we to get the impression that the Catechism, or the Bible for that matter, is negative on sexuality?

Let it be clear right away: the Bible is not at all negative on sexuality. I read in Gen 1 that God made man "male and female" (1:27) –so that includes sexuality- and that God said of His entire creation that "it was very good" (vs 31). That includes sexuality. Paul writes to Timothy that in the course of the New Testament dispensation there will arise those who "heed to deceiving spirits and the doctrines of demons," and one of their false teachings will be that people may not marry – as if there is something wrong with sexuality. But Paul opposes that categorically, and states that "every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving" (1 Tim 4:1ff). One can think also of the Song of Solomon, where the bride and groom each describe each other's bodies with great admiration – words put on their lips by none less than the Holy Spirit Himself. No, congregation, the Bible is not at all negative towards sexuality, but praises God for this wonderful gift.

Why, then, does the Catechism use such negative language in its explanation of the seventh commandment? Why words like 'cursed' and 'detest' and strong condemnation of "all unchaste acts, gestures, words, thoughts, desires, and whatever may entice us to unchastity"? The reason for that, brothers and sisters, is this: the Catechism is acutely aware of the weaknesses and sinfulness that continues to beset God's people. So the Catechism takes, if you will, on the function of a guard dog; the Catechism wants to *warn* God's people of particular dangers in relation to sexuality and marriage, dangers that lie so close at hand. And enemy Number One is here *unchastity*. The Catechism recognizes that sexuality is a wonderful gift from God, and so wants to *protect* it.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

IN HIS CARE THE LORD OUR GOD WARNS US AGAINST UNCHASTITY.

1. Why unchastity is cursed.
2. How sexuality is restored.

1. *Why unchastity is cursed.*

The word 'unchastity' is not one we tend to use in daily conversation. What, then, is meant by the term? A working definition would go something like this: unchastity is improper or unholy thoughts, words or actions in relation to sexuality.

Actually, congregation, unchastity is a form of greed. Greed: one wants more and more, but not for the benefit of the other; one wants more and more for the benefit of the *self*. The term 'unchastity' captures the notion that one is busy with sexuality for the sake of the *self*, satisfying one's own desires. The person engaged in unchastity does not concern himself with the *other*; this person is busy with himself even at the expense of the other, using the other for the sake of self. It's this self-centeredness that God hates, for it's the exact opposite of what Christ has done for unworthy sinners.

To be clear, then, we need to realize that unchastity is not just a sin that can occur *before* marriage or *outside* of marriage; unchastity can occur also *in* marriage. It is against the revealed will of God that unmarried persons behave together as if they are married. I refer here to Gen 2:24. The passage has three verbs: "a man shall *leave* his father and his mother and *be joined* to his wife, and they shall *become one* flesh." The order of these verbs is important. By the ordinance of God the man who lives in the parental home shall leave that home in order to be joined to his wife; first comes leaving and then comes joining – marriage. And only *then* comes the third verb, the one relating to sexuality, becoming one flesh. The 'becoming one flesh' is not first in the row, as if the Lord would give sexual activity a place before one leaves the parental home and before one marries. No, the Holy Spirit puts the 'becoming one flesh' *last* in the row, and that's because sexuality has a place *in marriage* and in marriage *alone*. So today's pattern of young people being sexually active before marriage flies in the face of the Lord's word. God calls this 'unchastity', a behavior He has cursed (cf Lev 18).

God has also cursed sexually activity *outside* of marriage. That is: one is married, but is sexually active outside of marriage. That text from Gen 2:24 puts the 'becoming one flesh' within the confines of marriage, that is, one has sexual relations *with the spouse*. In fact, in the laws God gave to Israel He commanded that adultery was to be punished with death (Lev 20:10). In the New Testament we read that fornicators and adulterers have no place in the kingdom of heaven (1 Cor 6:9). That's equally true for sexual activity with persons of the same gender. Today's world may consider homosexual activity acceptable, and the Anglican Church may even ordain homosexual clergy, but the Lord is emphatic that He considers homosexuality sin – just as He does adultery and fornication (cf Lev 18:13; 1 Cor 6:9). It is unchastity.

But equally: unchastity can also occur *within* marriage, and that also provokes God's displeasure. Where one is self-centered in marriage and so demands the other's body for the sake of the self (possibly even at the expense of the other), one is guilty of unchastity. Even in marriage, says Paul to the Thessalonians, "each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God" (1 Thessalonians 4:3f).

"All unchastity is cursed by God," says the Catechism. The question presses itself upon us: *why* is it so? Unchastity lies so close to us; we all know ourselves addressed in some way. What is there about unchastity that God hates so much? To answer that critical question, we need to go back to the institution of marriage at creation.

On the sixth day of creation, the Lord God first called into being "the living creatures according to its kind: cattle and creeping things and beast of the earth, each according to its kind" (Gen 1:24). God spoke, and there were at least two horses, a stallion and a mare; at least two deer, a buck and a doe; at least two pigs, a boar and a sow. Two separate animals of each kind....

Then God decided to make man. How many He made? Says Gen 2:7: God made *one* man. He took clay from the ground, fashioned it into the shape of a man, and "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being." This one single creature God put into the Garden He prepared for him, and told him "to tend and keep it" (Gen 2:15).

Then we read this remarkable word of God in vs 18: "It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him." Yet God did not utter a word of command so that a woman came into existence, nor did God collect more clay from the ground to fashion a woman from it. Instead, the Lord first summoned all the animals He had made and caused them to file past Adam. There they came: two horses, a stallion and a mare; two pigs, a boar and a sow; two rabbits, a buck and a doe; two cows, a bull and a heifer. Animal by animal came by twos, a male and a female. Through that process the Lord alerted Adam to the fact that he was by himself, did not have "a helper comparable to him" (vs 20).

Yet even then, after God had made Adam aware of his aloneness, the Lord did not call a woman into existence with His word of command as He had with the animals, nor did He now collect dust of the earth as He had when He made Adam and shape it into a woman. Instead, the Lord God did something different, something unique. What He did? He "caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam." And while he slept the Lord took a rib from the man, and made from it a woman.

Do you see, brothers and sisters, how *differently* God went about creating a partner for man than He did for the animals? A stallion got his partner as a *separate* animal, made from a different lump of dust as the stallion himself was. But *not so with man!* God took the woman *out of man* (1 Cor 11:8). From the word go there is a *unity* between man and woman, between Adam and his wife, a unity inasmuch as *she came from him*. That's also what Adam acknowledges when God brought the woman to him. He sings a song, and what does he say? No, he doesn't burst forth into song as the bridegroom in the Song of Solomon to extol the beauty of her hair and her eyes and her lips and her belly. Nor does he sing a song about the wonderful characteristics of this woman –the kindness written in her eyes, the graciousness with which she carries herself, etc- as you find in the book of Proverbs (ch 31). Instead, what *grabs* Adam, the topic that comes to his lips, is the matter of her *origin*, the matter of *their unity*. Gen 2:23: "This is now bone of my bones And flesh of my flesh," he says. He looks at her, and recognizes that she comes from him, that this woman *is his rib* transformed! So deep is the unity between the two!

What's the implication? What consequence flows from God having created the woman not from dust (so that man and woman are two separate creatures), but formed the woman from Adam's rib? The Holy Spirit draws out the consequence in vs 24. "Therefore," says the passage, "therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." *That's* the consequence. That closest unity God has placed between man and woman prompts the next generation to leave the parental home and marry a wife – and then that new couple becomes *one flesh*. One time only did the Lord take a rib from a man, make a woman, and give that woman to the man. But the unity, the oneness, that obviously characterized Adam's and Eve's marriage was, by God's ordinance, to characterize every marriage; by God's ordinance the marrying couple *became one flesh just as Eve was Adam's real flesh*.

In that unity sexuality has a place; it's a symbol of that unity. That is why sexuality amongst people is so different from sexuality among animals. For animals, sexuality is a question of instinct, simply a bodily function pitched to reproduction. By God's ordinance, amongst people it's so much deeper, it's an expression of the unity that God places between man and wife. This difference is something we need to be aware of, particularly in a society that embraces evolution and disregards what God says about how He created the world. If evolution were true, there is no principle reason against young people engaging in sexual activity, and no principle reason against married couples cheating on each other, and no principle reason against homosexuality. For we're just animals anyway...., and so may follow our drives.... But you and I take Genesis seriously, believe that God made a woman out of Adam's rib, and so God ordained unity, oneness, between man and wife. Sexuality gives expression to that oneness. *That* is why "all unchastity is cursed by God"! Those who engage in sexual activity before marriage or outside of marriage, those who engage in sexual activity to satisfy the self, in passion of lust, do not act consistently with God's instruction in Genesis 2 and the manner He created the woman. To thumb your nose at God's ordinance *cannot receive God's favor!* Our thoughts and actions in relation to sexuality need to demonstrate that we *believe* God's word in Genesis 1 & 2, that we take God seriously. By His ordinance, sexuality has a place *in* marriage, and in marriage alone – as display of the oneness God put between man and wife.

I come to our second point:

2. *How sexuality is restored.*

God, then, ordained *oneness* between husband and wife, a wonderful oneness that made the first marriage a bliss in every sense.

Yet there came the day when Eve answered the temptation of the devil and ate of the forbidden tree, and Adam did also. The Lord God came to this first couple in the garden and inquired about their circumstance. Adam's reply illustrates how terribly the fall into sin destroyed the unity of marriage. "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate, " he said (Gen 3:12). We realize: here's finger pointing, here's blame. The unity of which Adam sang in Gen 2:24 when he received Eve is gone; these words speak of division, hostility. That, beloved, is the bitter effect of our fall into sin!

Yet that's not all. For God says in 3:16 to the woman: "Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you." "He shall rule over you": what do you think, does that reflect the oneness of Adam's wedding song? We realize: No, these words do not reflect that oneness. One does not speak of ruling over one's rib; a rib is so much part of you, so much one with you, that 'ruling over' does not come into the picture. But here, again, is the effect of the fall into sin. So much is the oneness broken that the man can get heavy-fisted in imposing his will on his wife. How many marriages over the years do not testify of the pain and suffering that we have brought on ourselves through our fall into sin...?

I need to clarify a point here. It is indeed so that when God ordained marriage, He gave to the man the position of *leader* and to the wife the position of *helper*. Both Adam and Eve were created in the image of God, both received abundance of talents; there is no difference on this point. But in their relation together the Lord was pleased to ordain an *order*, and that is that Adam received from God the obligation to *lead* his wife, and Eve received from God the duty to *be helper* to her husband. It's an ordinance that remains valid for marriage today, a point to which I'll come back shortly.

But with the fall into sin also this good hierarchy between man and woman was damaged, warped. For the man would use his God-give leadership role now to 'rule over' his wife, even impose himself upon her. We realize: this is a *caricature* of how God ordained it to be. Within that caricature the woman is vulnerable, can be used by her husband. And that's true not just *in* marriage; it can be true before marriage too, or outside. The people of Israel were slaves in Egypt, and we may take it for granted that the Israelites –particularly the women- felt that vulnerability, and hurt because of it. Think only of how the Egyptians took Sarai from Abram for Pharaoh's harem (cf Gen 12:14ff).

Here, now, is the gospel of God's care! He delivered a people from Egypt, brought them to Mt Sinai, and told them there that He was *their* God; He established His covenant with Israel. In His care He also gave His people the seventh commandment, told them not to commit adultery. With that instruction God addressed the men and women amongst Israel, and addressed the boys and girls at the foot of the mountain also – all people who had the same hormones and the same struggles we have today. With this commandment not to commit adultery God took His people *back to the ordinances of Paradise*, of Genesis 2, and reminded Israel of how He created the woman and what consequences flow with respect to marriage. Break that unity somehow? Separate sexuality from that unity? Don't, says God to His people, don't do it! Live consistently with the principles of creation; only then is there a blessing for you in life!

But the people of Israel were as sinful as you and I. Time and time again the young people abused their bodies, gave in to their sexual drives, satisfied themselves for the sake of selves. Time and again the married of Israel imposed themselves on the spouse to satisfy the self. Always and again sin lay close at hand; there's nothing new under the sun. *That* is why the Lord God gave up His only Son, and Jesus Christ went to the cross of Calvary to suffer the righteous judgment of God on sin against the seventh commandment. He did not consider sin against this commandment too vile, too distasteful for His death; no, He laid down His life also for fornicators, adulterers, homosexuals, pedophiles, etc. With His precious blood He washed all those sins away – so that even adulterers of whatever stripe –and we all are in some way (cf Mt 5:27ff)- may be righteous before God! How abundant, how awesome, is His mercy!!

This Savior who emptied Himself for the unworthy, who gave His blood for persons who sin against their own bodies and the bodies of their neighbors, has now given His Holy Spirit. This Holy Spirit has made His home in the people

for whom Christ has died. It's a point we need to be very aware of, congregation: we do not only have hormones flowing through us, we also have the Holy Spirit living in us! That is the promise of God, signified to us in our baptism: "God the Holy Spirit assures us by this sacrament that He will dwell in us...." In the strength of this Holy Spirit we can begin to live according to the seventh commandment!

What that looks like in marriage? The Lord tells us in that powerful passage from Eph 5. "Wives," says the Lord, "submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord." There's the principle of creation, that God gave the husband the role of leadership. "For," the apostle continues, "the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body." Note: the husband's headship over the wife remains God's ordinance in marriages today! So the husbands in our midst need to *dare* to be the head! But what does this headship look like? Listen to Paul in vs 23: "the husband is the head of the wife, *as also* Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body." Note especially those last words: "He is the Savior of the body." How is He head? By making Himself the Savior! That is: by denying Himself, emptying Himself for the sake of the church! That's the model husbands need to follow. Instead of ruling over their wives, heavy-fisted, they are to *deny* themselves for the good of the wife. Vs 25: "Husbands, love your wives, *just as* Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish." That's the example husbands are to follow: "So husbands ought to love their own wives." You see: there is no place in marriage for selfishness, not in sexuality either. As Christ emptied Himself for His bride, "so husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies" – vs 28. With that statement the apostle reaches back to how God created the woman in Genesis 2 – not by a word of command, not from dust either, but from Adam's rib, and so Paul adds (vs 28f): "he who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh." You see, the wife *is his own flesh*! As Adam saw his own rib in Eve and sang out his excitement, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23), so also the husband is to recognize that his wife is, by God's ordinance, "one flesh" with him (Gen 2:24). *That's* why the husband is to nourish and cherishes her, "just as the Lord does the church" (vs 29).

Selfishness in marriage? No, brothers and sisters, that may not exist among the people of God, simply because our Lord Jesus Christ, the Head of the church, displayed no selfishness when He set out to save His people. Unchastity is a form of greed, a wanting sexual satisfaction for the sake of self. Jesus Christ emptied Himself so that in principle the marriage structure of Genesis 2 is restored, and that in turn means that the Christian husband and his godly wife are *one*, one flesh – and they express that to each other in their sexuality. That is why sexuality has a place only within marriage. That is equally why God hates divorce. What God has joined together –*He* made husband and wife to be one flesh, she from his rib- man may not break asunder without provoking the judgment of holy God.

Our culture idolizes sexuality, and so confronts us with so many sexual stimulations. To keep ourselves chaste in thought, word and deed is not easy – and that's true for adults as well as for youth. Yet keep ourselves holy we must, for God has cursed unchastity and His judgment lies ready upon it. How gracious He is, then, that He tells us the way forward! In His gracious care He gives us the seventh commandment. More, He tells us of His Son Jesus Christ, how He emptied Himself to wash away all our sins against this commandment. More still, He has given us His Holy Spirit – by whose power we can fight against unchastity and keep ourselves holy.

Yet how shall we fight? Prayer, of course, is so very, very important. Tell God, brothers and sisters, older and younger, tell God openly and honestly in the privacy of your room, what your struggles really are – be it with adulterous thoughts or pornography or homosexuality or whatever. Tell God, and tell Him how you fail, and seek His redeeming grace in Christ. Remember that our Lord Jesus Christ was tempted in every way as we are, and knows the pressures under which we live.

And: stay away from things and places that stimulate you sexually. You know where pornography is available, be it in the Newsagent or on the Internet or wherever – stay away. You know the Night Club can stimulate you to unchaste thoughts, or even deeds, and perchance the beach stimulates you too – stay away. Remember the word Jesus spoke in relation to adultery: "if your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for your whole body to be cast into hell" (Mt 5:29). In our promiscuous society we may need to be hard on ourselves; so be it. Here I want to speak a word to the girls and mothers also: please watch how you dress. Clothing that exposes the torso or outlines the figure does things to the guys, draws out

the unchaste desires that live in all of us. Husbands and fathers: you are the head in the family; on the point of clothing too the buck stops with you.

We all are our brothers' keepers, and that means that we are not to make it unnecessarily difficult for others. As a communion of saints together, we all, older and younger, male and female, need to keep the instruction of Scripture in mind about sexuality: God has given this wonderful gift a place *in marriage*, there to express *the oneness* God places between man and wife.

Marriage, sexuality: yes, these are wonderful gifts from our gracious God. But the Bible is clear: these are not the greatest gifts at all. In the New Jerusalem there will be neither marriage nor sexuality, for we shall be as the angels (Mt 22:30). Yet that shall not be a loss. For the God who said in the beginning that it was not good for Adam to be alone knows that in the New Jerusalem *nobody* will be alone. For in the New Jerusalem there will be permanent and perfect communion with God and with each other, a oneness and a unity that will far outshine the oneness and unity of marriage today. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 42 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 3 August 2003.

" THE OWNER OF ALL INSTRUCTS US HOW TO CARE FOR HIS POSSESSIONS ."

Text:

Lord's Day 42

110. Q. What does God forbid in the eighth commandment?

A. God forbids not only outright theft and robbery[1] but also such wicked schemes and devices as false weights and measures, deceptive merchandising, counterfeit money, and usury[2] we must not defraud our neighbour in any way, whether by force or by show of right.[3] In addition God forbids all greed[4] and all abuse or squandering of His gifts.[5]

[1] Ex. 22:1; 1 Cor. 5:9, 10; 6:9, 10. [2] Deut. 25:13-16; Ps. 15:5; Prov. 11:1; 12:22; Ezek. 45:9-12; Luke 6:35. [3] Mic. 6:9-11; Luke 3:14; James 5:1-6. [4] Luke 12:15; Eph. 5:5. [5] Prov. 21:20; 23:20, 21; Luke 16:10-13.

111. Q. What does God require of you in this commandment?

A. I must promote my neighbour's good wherever I can and may, deal with him as I would like others to deal with me, and work faithfully so that I may be able to give to those in need.[1]

[1] Is. 58:5-10; Matt. 7:12; Gal. 6:9, 10; Eph. 4:28.

Scripture Reading:

Exodus 22:1-15

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalm 24:1

Psalm 95:2,3

Psalm 37:13,16

Psalm 50:5,6,7

Psalm 112:1,2,3,4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

With the eighth commandment, the Lord addresses all matters in our society relating to the acquiring and use of money. One may think of outright theft, stealing, may think also of subtle ways of getting someone's else's money into your pocket as misleading advertising, crooked business deals, tax evasion, etc. The commandment covers also such loaded matters as which economic system is Biblical: capitalism or communism. The commandment speaks to such a contemporary topic as wealth distribution in our lopsided world. And so on. There's questions here that break the heads of normal people and economics specialists alike, and God covers it all in one basic command: "you shall not steal."

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE OWNER OF ALL INSTRUCTS US HOW TO CARE FOR HIS POSSESSIONS.

1. What God forbids.

2. What God requires.

1. What God forbids.

Every country in the world forbids stealing. That is: nowhere is it permissible to break into someone's home and take his stereo system. That's not acceptable behavior, and everybody acknowledges that.

The Biblical position on theft, however, goes a lot deeper than this surface understanding. According to the law of Australia, I am perfectly within my rights when I plan to the finest detail how to break into your home to steal your jewelry, and nobody will arrest me for spending hours of time in making such plans. I break the law only once I carry out my plan. But the Catechism speaks differently. Question & Answer 110: beside theft itself, "God forbids all greed" as well. Even *wanting* your jewelry is sin, and therefore laying plans to lay hands on it is transgression of God's command – let alone actually carrying out those plans.

Similarly, I'm fully within my rights as a resident of this country to take my pay packet each Friday afternoon into my backyard and ceremoniously burn it. Equally, I'm perfectly within my rights to spend my pay packet by souping up an old car, or spending my week's wages on entertainment. But the Catechism disagrees. God forbids not just theft itself and "all greed", but also "all abuse or squandering of His gifts."

Why, brothers and sisters, would the Catechism see this commandment addressing not just "outright theft and robbery" (in its various blatant or less than blatant forms), but also the deeper matters of greed and squandering? What's the thinking behind it all? It's this: the Catechism has learned from the Bible that *the modern concept of ownership is not Biblical!* Our society insists that heaven is empty, and all that really counts is what's on this earth, the things you can see and feel and touch. Certain things in this society are *mine*, and other things are *yours*. I may do with my things whatever I wish, exactly because they're mine (if I want to take a sledge-hammer to my computer, that's up to me), and you may do with your things whatever you wish – exactly because it's yours. That's a fundamental tenet of capitalism. And communism, at heart, has the same fundamental principle, except that communism says that the things you possess are not yours but *ours*, and so *we together* can decide to do with it whatever *we* want. Notice: both give ownership to *people*, be it the individual or the community.

But the Christian, congregation, has a fundamentally different starting point. The Christian *believes* that God is real, that God has created this world and has given His Son to redeem it. So the Christian takes seriously the word of the Lord in, for example, Ps 24, where David says: "The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness, The world and those who dwell therein" (vs 1). That is a *statement of ownership*: this earth with all that's in it *belongs to God*. It belongs not to *me* nor to *us*, but to *Him* - because He created it, because Christ laid down His life for this world. So God has given Jesus a seat at His right hand and made Him Lord of lords and King of kings, yes, put all the world under Jesus' feet (Eph 1:22). This world is *His possession*. Ps 50: "Every beast of the forest is Mine, And the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the mountains, And the wild beasts of the field are Mine" (vss 10f). And if that's true, beloved, of the animals and the birds, surely it's true too of the trees of the earth and the minerals as well. "The earth is the Lord's, and all its fullness."

May I say, then, that my car is *my* car, so that I can do with it whatever I want? Can I say that my acreage is *my* land, so that I can do with it whatever suits me? For that matter, can I insist that *I am mine*, so that my energy and my gifts are *for me* to use and enjoy as I see fit? And the cheque I may receive for doing some work, can I maintain that that is really *mine*, so that I can do with it whatever I want? It is clear: if all the world belongs to God, then *nothing belongs to me in the ultimate sense!* And of course: then nothing belongs to *us collectively* either.

That reality, beloved, shows us what theft actually is. Theft is not simply that I somehow help myself to my neighbor's goods. Theft is first of all this, that I *take from God!* Theft is that I take something in creation – be it your stereo or my pay cheque or even myself- and treat it as if it's mine. Whenever I ignore that the Lord owns all, *then already* I am guilty of theft.

So the first theft was committed right in the beginning, in Paradise. The Lord God had made a world, including a garden, and put Adam and Eve in that garden with permission to eat from every tree around them – except that one. He gave permission because all the earth was His. He withheld permission to eat of that one tree because ... all the world

was His. But Eve went to that one tree God had withheld from her, and ate anyway – theft, *theft from God!*

With this transgression of our first parents in Paradise, we all fell into sin, and learned the evil practice of stealing from God. It's now our natural inclination: we consider ourselves to be *ours*, we consider our possessions to be *ours*, we consider this world to be *ours*. And because we consider ourselves and our possessions and this world to be our own, we by nature do with ourselves and our possessions and this world what *we* want, instead of asking what the Lord-our-Master wants us to do, how *He* wants us to treat our bodies, our cars, our homes, our trees, our money. *That is theft*, sin against the eighth commandment. And it is clear: we all are guilty of sin against this commandment of God, we all treat ourselves, our possessions as *ours*.

Here, though, beloved, is the abundant mercy of our God! The people of Israel were as guilty of sin against the eighth commandment as anyone else. Yet God claimed this nation of sinners for Himself! He took them out of Egypt, and as they left the land He ensured that the Egyptians gave them plenty of material possessions in silver and gold. Throughout their desert sojourn He gave them more material possessions, manna day by day, and made sure their clothes and their sandals did not wear out. You see: He displayed to them that He was Lord of lords, the earth and all its potential at His disposal – He could command the quails to fly in to eat, He could rain down manna from heaven for them. He brought them to Mt Sinai, and established with them His covenant of grace; "I", He said, "am the Lord *your* God." This God was the Almighty, to whom belonged the cattle on a thousand hills and who from His abundance supplied the needs of His people day by day – witness the manna. *This God told His people-by-covenant that they were not to steal*. And yes, that meant that they were not to take from each other any of the gold and silver the Egyptians had given them, and not to take from each other any of the sheep and cattle the Egyptians had given too, and if they did they had to make good – as we read from Ex 22:1ff. But God could give this instruction exactly because *He owned all to begin with*. Stealing was not first of all an offence against your neighbor; stealing was first of all theft from God! For all remained *the Lord's*.

All remained the Lord's. In Egypt the people owned nothing; they were slaves. In the Promised Land each Israelite was to receive his own block of land. Yet that land did not become the peoples'. God's instruction was emphatic: "The land shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are strangers and sojourners with Me" (Lev 25:23). Sure, the people could use the land, and yes, the people could even sell it to pay off their debts, but in the Year of Jubilee it had to come back to them. You see, God was and remained the Owner, and so He determined how His people had to treat their land. And that principle was true not just for the land itself, but for all that the people of Israel possessed. It's the principle of Ps 24: "the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof."

But time and again the people of Israel treated their possessions as if they owned it absolutely themselves. The peoples' sins against the eighth commandment required the atoning blood of the Savior. So it was that in due time Christ suffered and died also for sin against this commandment. On the cross God took from Jesus every last shred of property; even His clothes were divided among the soldiers so that He had nothing left (Jn 19:23). God has given His people much over the years, but so often we *take* God's property and act as if it's ours; that's why the Lord *took* from Jesus every last vestige of property. Here was the curse we all deserve on our sins of theft! But even when God took every last rag from Jesus, Jesus did not curse God; instead He bore the wrath of God on our sins against the eighth commandment so that there might be forgiveness for us!

And because there is forgiveness, the Lord God, sovereign Owner of all, is pleased again to give us property, to entrust parts of His creation once more to our care. 2 Corinthians 8: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." "He was rich": the reference is to the glory Jesus had with the Father in heaven from all eternity. "He became poor": the reference is to His coming in the flesh, a helpless baby in Bethlehem. More, the reference is to His total self-emptying on the cross, including that He lost every last bit of property that He had. "He became poor" –why?- "that you through His poverty might become rich!" Rich, in that we receive forgiveness of sins and life eternal. More, rich also in that God gives us blessings that follow on from forgiveness of sins, including material possessions once more. From the abundance of His creation the Lord distributes parts of His possessions to His people, the one receiving this and the other that. We see it today: we have houses and clothes, cars and land, and so many other bits and pieces of God's property entrusted to us. Make no mistake: it all continues to belong to the Lord God, but He for Jesus' sake has given it to us.

What shall we do with it now? Treat it as our own? Most certainly not! To do so would be to make ourselves guilty of theft again! Christ has died to pay for our sins against the eighth commandment, and now it is for us to use God's property *as His*. That brings us to our second point:

2. What God requires.

All the world is God's possession, and He in wisdom has entrusted certain parts to each of us. How, now, shall we concretely treat it as *His property*?

The text I just quoted from 2 Corinthians appears in a context. Paul was telling the Christians of Corinth about the conduct of the brothers and sisters in Macedonia. He says of the Macedonians in vs 2: "in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality." Point: these Macedonians were so deeply thankful for the redeeming work of God in Jesus Christ that they wanted to give, to share, of whatever they had. As it is, they didn't have much; they suffered "deep poverty". But never mind: they were "liberal" in their giving. Or, as vs 3 says it, "they were freely willing", to the point that they "implored us with much urgency that we would receive the gift." These Macedonian Christians found out that the believers of Jerusalem were suffering much persecution on account of the faith and so were exceedingly poor, and so these Macedonians were keen to share whatever God had given them to help their poor brothers and sisters in Jerusalem – whom, we need to know, they had never met and probably never would.

This conduct of the Macedonians, now, Paul set before the Christians of Corinth as an example that they ought to follow. No, not that Paul is going to *command* the Corinthians to hold a collection for Jerusalem or *command* them to give abundantly. Vs 8: "I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence of others." And having shown them what the Macedonians were doing, Paul spells out the duty of the Corinthians with the example of Jesus Christ. How ought the Corinthian Christians to treat their possessions? "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich." If He emptied Himself to make you rich, what should you do: hog those riches for yourself?? The answer is clear: the Christians of Corinth need to hold a collection also for the benefit of the poor far away.

And how much should they give? Will a couple of silver or gold coins in the collection bag suffice for a wage earner? Paul answers the question in chap 9. Vs 6: "He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows abundantly will also reap abundantly." That's something we can all relate to. He who sows three bean seeds in a garden will not harvest a big crop. So it is with money. Treat it as mine (because I worked for it!), and so give grudgingly, miserly, will mean –says God!– that we shall harvest little, and that's to say that He will bless little! Here Paul works with the material of the Old Testament; Ps 37: "the wicked borrows and does not repay, But the righteous shows mercy and gives" (vs 21) and "I have been young, and now am old; Yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken, Nor his descendants begging bread. He is ever merciful and lends; And his descendants are blessed" (vs 25f).

This is the concept the church on Pentecost Day understood so well. The apostle Peter proclaimed the gospel of Jesus' resurrection and ascension, how God had exalted Jesus to His right hand as Lord of lords (vs 33, 36), Owner and Master and Sovereign of all so that this Jesus now poured out His Holy Spirit. How the believers worked with this information? Like this: "Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need" (Acts 2:44f; cf 4:34f). You see: here was a happy, cheerful sharing! And why? Because these believers understood that their possessions were not private property (nor state property!), but all belonged to Jesus Christ and He had entrusted parts of His creation to their care so that they might be good stewards of God's possessions, using their property *in God's kingdom for God's glory*.

It's precisely this point that the church draws out in Question & Answer 111 of our Lord's Day. "What does God require of you in this commandment?" The answer is this: "I must promote my neighbor's good where I can and may." You see: the fine point of the eighth commandment is ultimately not *property*; the fine point is the *neighbor himself*, and I'm to look after him by using my property for his benefit. I'm not to be an island to myself, and so use my possessions for my pleasure. Whatever God has entrusted to me He has given so that I can reach out to my neighbor *even as my Savior has reached out to me*. Though He was rich He made Himself poor so that I might be made rich. That's the example the Corinthian Christians of long ago were to follow, and it is the example modern

Christians today are to follow. Share, give, to benefit the other!

The Catechism drives the point home. To the duty to "promote my neighbor's good wherever I can and may," the Catechism adds this obligation: God requires that I "deal with him [that's my neighbor] as I would like others to deal with me." How that would be? That requires little imagination on our side. We're in need of some help in some way? Totally impoverished while another has an abundance? Surely, we'd like the other to share of his wealth.... That, says the Lord, is what we are to do with our wealth. And let it be known: 10% of the world's population owns 90% of the world's wealth, and Australians are among the wealthy 10%. Might there be multitudes in our global village who could benefit from our wealth? If we lived in middle Africa, how would we like those affluent Australians to deal with us? God's word is plain: our wealth is not ours, but His. He has entrusted it to us, not so that we might hog it for ourselves, but –we confess in our Lord's Day- so that we might use it to promote our neighbor's good.

Once more, the Catechism drives the point home more starkly still. The third requirement mentions in A 111 is this: I am to "work faithfully so that I may be able to..." – yes, brothers and sisters, do what? Go on the holiday I'd like? Buy that play station I don't really need but would like to have? That's human, so human. But the Catechism says: I am to "work faithfully so that I may be able to give to those in need." And the Catechism got that straight from the Bible, Eph 4:28: one is labor "that he may have something to give him who has need." The Catechism mentions this point in relation to the eighth commandment so that we might know that spending our money without regards to the neighbor is *theft*.

We realize: this material is so different from what our society teaches! Ours is a highly materialistic age, and we are children of our times, very comfortable with wealth and luxury and spending money on ourselves. But remember, brothers and sisters, this fundamental point: our society ignores the existence of God, and therefore has no place for the notion that *God owns all things*. And that in turn is why our society can insist that what you have is *yours*; you worked for it, you can do with it what you want. But you are different, you say that God is real. Well, if He is real, is the Creator and the Redeemer, give Him the credit that is His due and recognize that everything you possess is ultimately *His*. And exactly because it is His is it our duty to keep asking Him: Lord, what do you want me to do with this pay cheque? Lord, how can I use my possessions to promote my neighbor's good – be it a neighbor close by or a neighbor far off? Lord, do *You* want me to spend my money on this computer game, this extra outfit, this perm?

These are questions, brothers and sisters, that need to keep our minds busy. Due to political developments throughout the world in the last number of years, society around us realizes that something isn't right about the distribution of wealth in our world, something isn't right when 10% of the world's population has 90% of the world's wealth. Christians especially need to be pricked in their conscience at the wrong of that, and Christians need to be in the forefront of trying to overcome that injustice. How it's to be done? That's not for me to spell out here. But that we need to look for ways and means to share our wealth –God's property!- with others less privileged than we is distinctly true. Here is work for us to do. And yes, it begins in our own homes, being more cautious with spending our money on ourselves and more eager to follow the example of the Macedonians: share eagerly for the benefit of others.

All is God's. And God is our Father in Jesus Christ. As He supplied for His people's material needs in the desert, He will supply our material needs today. After all, He gave His only Son so that we might be children of God. Will *He* really fail us? In the words of Ps 37:

"Wait for the Lord and keep His way with fervour;
He will exalt you to possess the land."

But:

"The wicked you will see cut off for ever
Because their sure destruction is at hand" (stanza 13).

Amen.



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Sermon on Lord's Day 43 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 10 August 2003.

" THE GOD OF PEACE TEACHES US TO PRESERVE OUR NEIGHBOR'S REPUTATION ."

Text:

Lord's Day 43

112. Q. What is required in the ninth commandment?

A. I must not give false testimony against anyone, twist no one's words, not gossip or slander, nor condemn or join in condemning anyone rashly and unheard.[1] Rather, I must avoid all lying and deceit as the devil's own works, under penalty of God's heavy wrath.[2] In court and everywhere else, I must love the truth,[3] speak and confess it honestly, and do what I can to defend and promote my neighbour's honour and reputation.[4]

[1] Ps. 15; Prov. 19:5, 9; 21:28; Matt. 7:1; Luke 6:37; Rom. 1:28-32. [2] Lev. 19:11, 12; Prov. 12:22; 13:5; John 8:44; Rev. 21:8. [3] I Cor. 13:6; Eph. 4:25. [4] I Pet. 3:8, 9; 4:8.

Scripture Reading:

Deuteronomy 19:15-21

James 3

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 120:1,2

Psalm 34:5,6

Psalm 141:2,4

Psalm 140:1,2,8,10

Psalm 119:11,17

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

As we speak today about the ninth commandment, we need to bear in mind Paul's words to the Romans in chap 3. All men, this Jew writes to the Gentile Christians of Rome, "are all under sin" (vs 10). As evidence of that statement the apostle quotes a string of Old Testament texts, vss 10-18. The first quote (from Ps 14) speaks of depravity in general; "There is none righteous..., There is none who does good, no, not one." His second quote addresses the material of the ninth commandment: "Their throat is an open tomb; With their tongues they have practiced deceit" (Ps 5:9). His third quote also revolves around the ninth commandment: "The poison of asps is under their lips" (Ps 140:3), and so does the fourth: "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness" (Ps 10:7). An asp, by the way, is a poisonous snake, deadly in its bite. Paul's point with quoting these texts? This: every person has an asp in his mouth, every person –whether Jew or Greek, Dutchman or Australian- has a tongue much practiced with deceit.

So, brothers and sisters, when we speak today about the ninth commandment, we are speaking about *me*, and about *you*. Please, let nobody think today of somebody else; let each of us, as we listen to God's word about the ninth commandment, think about himself. For we all have "the poison of asps" under our lips – I first of all (cf James 3:2).

For the sake of *such* people the Lord God has sent His only Son into the world, and so with *such* people God established His covenant of grace and declared us *His*. To people given to poisoning the other with their tongues, the Lord has given His Holy Spirit so that we learn to love the other – and therefore guard what we say about the other.

We don't do it perfectly yet –that's why the ninth commandment remains so relevant- but the beginning is there.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE GOD OF PEACE TEACHES US TO PRESERVE OUR NEIGHBOR'S REPUTATION.

1. The daily setting of false witness.
2. The devilish origin of false witness.
3. The Lord's triumph over false witness.

1. The daily setting of false witness.

The ninth commandment has a striking formulation. The sixth commandment is short and to the point: "you shall not murder." So is the seventh: "you shall not commit adultery." The eighth is too: "you shall not steal." We would expect the ninth commandment to follow suit: "you shall not lie." But that's not the command the Lord gives here. Why not? Why does the Lord instead speak here about being a "false witness"?

The notion of 'witness', of course, comes from a court setting. It happened with Israel as it happens today: someone accused of wrongdoing had to appear before the judge. In Israel's days, however, the judge could not use fingerprinting or DNA samples to determine innocence or guilt; the only mechanism the judge could use was the testimony of *witnesses* (cf Dt 19:15ff). On the basis of what witnesses said, the accused was declared innocent or guilty – and if guilty he could possibly (depending on his crime) be sentenced to death. The point: so very much depended on what the witnesses said. The life of the accused, the reputation of the accused, the freedom of the accused, the family of the accused: all depended on the testimony of the witnesses.

But what kind of a person was the witness? I quoted already from Rom 3, and therefore from the various Psalms of the Old Testament from which Paul draws his quotes. Those Psalms are emphatic: the witness –like anybody else in Israel- has the poison of asps under his tongue, his throat too is an open tomb. A witness was quite able to falsify his testimony in order to damage the accused – and so earn him a heavier sentence. The witness could do so deliberately, as happened in the case of Naboth when Ahab wanted his inheritance for a garden; the false testimony of the witnesses resulted in Naboth's death (1 Kings 21). We can imagine that witnesses could also falsify their testimony through carelessness – and the neighbor would suffer the consequences.

In that context, the Lord addresses specifically the witness. In the ninth commandment the Lord tells His people at the foot of Mt Sinai that they are never to "bear false witness against the neighbor" in such a court setting. Actually, the word that is translated for us as 'bear' is in Hebrew the word 'answer'. That is: the judge asks you a question, and then you are not to *answer* with false testimony. Always one's testimony was to be true, factual.

The point is important. Somebody is accused of wrongdoing. God's command to you was then not that you were to volunteer all sorts of evidence that the accusation was true. God's command was that you were to answer the judge. You see, there's a reticence here, an unwillingness to pass on information damaging to your neighbor – though you know it's true. It's to be pulled out of you; when the judge asks, you *answer* – and answer truthfully.

In putting it that way, we're getting closer to the fine point of the command. The fine point of the Hebrew does not revolve around the *words* coming out of the witness's mouth, but instead around the *attitude* the witness has. Literally, the command is this: Do not answer against your neighbor as *a false witness*. How you answer is determined by the *kind* of witness you are, that is, what thoughts live in your heart about the accused. The fine point of this command is not simply that cold, naked truth be voiced (as opposed to lies); the fine point of this command is that *your neighbor's reputation is safe with you*. So in court, when the judge in Israel (and he was authorized by God to be judge!) asked for your testimony in relation to an accused, you not only had to speak the truth (and not falsehood), but you also had to speak the truth *in a certain way* – that is, with an *attitude of deep care* for your neighbor. Out of *concern* for him you had to speak the truth in love. That was the point of the ninth commandment.

That being the case, we can bring this commandment directly into our day and age. As we say in our Lord's Day: "in court ... I must love the truth, speak and confess it honestly, and do what I can to defend and promote my neighbor's

honor and reputation."

Yet it's not just in the Court of Petty Sessions or in the Supreme Court that I am to love the truth, and speak and confess it honestly. So few of us ever get called upon to testify in court. Far more common is the chatter we have with each other about other people, be it out on the car park or over a cup of coffee. I speak about another, and my hearers weigh what I say, and they form a judgment about him. You see: though God has not called my hearers to make a judgment on the neighbor we're talking about, the fact of the matter is that *they function as judges*. The material I've just told them influences what they now think about the person we were speaking about. When I've related positive material, there's not much damage done. But if I've told some negative stories, I've hurt my neighbor's image in the minds of my hearers. Then what I've said may be factual to the last word, but I've transgressed the ninth commandment! How so? The fine point of the ninth commandment is not that I speak no false testimony (so: pass on only facts), but that *my neighbor's reputation is safe with me*, that I in no way *downsize* my neighbor through what I say or how I say it. Remember Jesus' summary of the law of God: you shall *love* your neighbor as yourself. Do you see, congregation, how close to home this commandment comes?

Talking about another happens so often, and so we repeatedly influence another's perception of a given neighbor. So we do well to explore the point further. Just *how* can you downsize your neighbor through the things you say? In our Lord's Day the catechism mentions a list of ways this can happen.

The first is straightforward: "I must not give false testimony against anyone." That is, I may not pass on a known falsehood. That's simple.

The second is that I must "twist no one's words." That's a bit more subtle, but the meaning is straightforward enough. I may not alter someone's words so that I present him as saying something a bit different from what he actually said. For that matter, I must not quote him out of context; that too can amount to twisting his words.

Nor, continues the Catechism, may I "gossip or slander." The two are not identical. One speaks slander when one makes up stories about another that damage the other's reputation; you make up and spread lies. That's slander. Gossip is closer to the truth. One gossips when you pass on facts to another, but those facts are damaging to someone's reputation.

You see: here again we're at the kernel of the ninth commandment. The ninth commandment is not just about cold, hard facts (as opposed to lies); the ninth commandment is about the attitude you have toward your neighbor, and consequently about how you speak about him. The neighbor's *reputation* is to *be safe* with you. And when you through your words damage his reputation—even if what you say is facts- you transgress the ninth commandment. That's gossip.

The Catechism mentions one more transgression. Says our Lord's Day: I am not to "condemn or join in condemning anyone rashly and unheard." With this sentence, the Lord's Day asks attention not for the person who *says* negative things about another, but for the person who *hears* negative things about another. That hearer, says the Catechism, is not allowed to make a judgment on the neighbor concerned simply on the basis on what he's just heard. You know how it goes. Somebody passes on some negative information about another, maybe gossip (so, basically fact) or slander (so, basically fiction). You can't help but hear it. But now that you've heard it, what does God require of you? This: that your neighbor's reputation is safe with you! And that's to say that you deliberately refuse to let your perception of the neighbor be determined by the juicy tidbit you just heard. You either lay that material to one side as unreliable (as sin against the ninth commandment and you tell the speaker so) *or* you make it your business to verify it (of course, in a brotherly manner). But if you simply swallow what your friend has said about the neighbor, you are yourself—says Lord's Day 43- guilty of sin against the ninth commandment. You're guilty, for your neighbor's reputation is not safe with you; you buy a negative story about him without bothering to hear two sides. And that's not love.

What, then, is the daily setting of false witness? While this command has its origin in the setting of Israel's legal system as per Dt 19, it addresses so many of our daily conversations. In those daily conversations, we *damage* each other's reputation so easily, and so often—even with words that are factual. So we transgress God's ninth commandment. That brings us to our second point:

2. The devilish origin of false witness.

Where does 'false witness' come from? What, at bottom, moves us to be a false witness concerning a neighbor?

All sin, of course, has roots in the devil (cf Lord's Day 3). Yet the Lord tells us that lying has roots in the devil in a particular way. Jesus was one day in conversation with the Jews, and spoke to them these words:

"You are of your father the devil, and the desires of your father you want to do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own resources, for he is a liar and the father of it" (Jn 8:44).

Note those last words. The devil, says Jesus, "is a liar and the father of [lies]." It's something we know from elsewhere in Scripture too. Right in the beginning, when Adam and Eve lived peacefully in the Garden of Eden, the devil came to them in a serpent. "Has God said that you may not eat of all the trees of the Garden, and if you do you will die? Not true! God knows that if you eat of that tree you will be like Him, knowing good and evil." What that was? A lie! Here was both twisting God's words and giving false testimony, slander. Here was a lie in Paradise. In truth, the devil is the father of lies.

And Eve fell for it, and Adam did too! Adam's very first word after the fall into sin involved transgression of the ninth commandment. Said he to God: "The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate." Yes, it was fact: God had given the woman to Adam. And yes, she had given him of the tree, and yes, Adam had then eaten. All facts. And yet a lie! By listing these facts as he did in the context in which he did, Adam implied that God was somehow to blame for his eating from the tree; had God not given the woman, he wouldn't have eaten what she gave him....

And that's become the habit of all Adam's descendents. We left God and His peace, and joined ourselves with Satan and his deceit. As children of the devil, we took on the characteristics of our father – including that we became liars. I remind you again of the texts Paul quotes in Romans 3: of Jews and Greeks alike (and the reference here is to all people) it must be said that "the poison of asps is under their lips." That's to say: by nature our words are *devil-driven*. And what does the devil want? He wants to pull people away from God, as he did in Paradise. He wants to separate person from person, wants to sow discord, distrust, unrest, pit brother against brother.

James makes exactly this point. James 3:6: "the tongue is a fire," he says, "a world of iniquity." But what sets the tongue off? What makes the tongue say those damaging things? Vs 6: the tongue "is set on fire by hell." What makes a person give false testimony? What makes a person twist another's words, or gossip over a coffee, or slander another? Is that the work of the Holy Spirit? No, says the Scripture, No! It's not something neutral either, just something of this life, just 'one of those things'. It's rather that such a tongue is dominated by hell! In the words of our Lord's Day: "all lying and deceit" is "the devil's own work" (cf Gal 5:19ff). And exactly because it's the devil's own work does such lying and deceit attract the judgment of God. "Lying lips," says Solomon, "are an abomination to the Lord" (Prov 12:22), and so the Lord will bring him to shame (Prov 13:5). Indeed, the New Testament emphasizes *how much* lying is an abomination to the Lord, for the Holy Spirit says emphatically that "all liars shall have their place in the lake which burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (Rev 21:8). Liars, you see, belong with the father of lies.... Every tongue that speaks evil of his neighbor is driven by hell. He who condemns the neighbor or joins in condemning him plays with fire from hell....

Who, my brothers and sisters, is free of iniquity here? "Do not take to heart everything people say," said the Preacher in Eccl 7, "Lest you hear your servant cursing you." Why not take their negative words to heart? Says the Preacher: "For many times, also, your own heart has known that even you have cursed others" (Eccl 7:21f). Yes, that's the hard reality. We all repeatedly curse another in our words. And that's because we have negative thoughts about the other in our heart; the neighbor's reputation is not safe with us.... That in turn should make us cautious about accusing others of sin against the ninth commandment; it's better to begin with ourselves.... Sin lies so close at hand, Satan's evil influence so near to us all....

But that, beloved, is not the end of the story! For the Lord our God has triumphed over the destruction hell would

wreak between neighbors, between brothers! It's our last point:

3. *The Lord's triumph over false witness.*

It pleased the Lord God to rescue a people from their bondage in Egypt, bring them to Mt Sinai, and tell them that they were *His* people. That bondage to Egypt: that was a picture of their bondage to sin and Satan! But from that bondage the Lord delivered them through Jesus' blood, so that they might be children of the devil no longer. And *for that reason* the Lord told the people of Israel that they were no longer to answer as false witnesses against a neighbor; instead of downsizing the neighbor, his reputation was to be safe with you, you were to protect and promote his reputation. *That's* what God did. Though He knew that the poison of asps remained under the tongues of His children, He did not keep saying that they were liars or inclined to lie (and hence point up their link to the devil); He instead called them His children, and kept drawing attention to His bond of love with this unworthy people. You see: *God Himself promoted their well being, talked up their reputation.* And that's the example God's children are to follow!

And that's why in turn the Lord has poured out His Holy Spirit. James is emphatic: "no man can tame the tongue. It is an unruly evil, full of deadly poison" (3:8). But what no man can tame *the Spirit of God can tame!* The ascended Christ –He who defeated sin and Satan, and received a throne from God over all- has poured out His Holy Spirit to change and renew the hearts of sinners – *our* hearts included. The fruit of the Spirit includes love and peace and kindness and gentleness (Gal 5). Love, says Solomon to his children, "covers all sins" (Prov 10:12). More: "He who covers a transgression seeks love, But he who repeats a matter separates friends" (Prov 17:9). And is separating friends not precisely what Satan wants? But the Spirit wants the opposite, the Spirit wants unity, communion of saints, mutual acceptance, trust and love. Why then speak to each other about the neighbor's abiding weaknesses? Why downsize his reputation? That *separates* friends, and *that's devilish*, and it's *not according to the triumph of Jesus Christ on the cross*. The ascended Christ does not keep reminding the Father in heaven of our sins, but intercedes before Him on our behalf so that the Father sees us as righteous, our sins covered in Jesus' blood. And see: *that is precisely what we on earth are to do with each other's sins and weaknesses also.*

Solomon had said that "love covers all sins" (Prov 10:12). Peter quotes that text from Solomon in his first letter, quotes it in the context of Christ's imminent return. 1 Peter 4: "the end of all things is at hand; therefore be serious and watchful in your prayers. And above all things have fervent love for one another, for *"love will cover a multitude of sins"* (vss 7f). You hear it: we await Christ from heaven, the triumphant Savior who restores Paradise fully. As we await this Savior and the perfect peace of the New Jerusalem, what shall we do? Pit brother against brother? Sow distrust, tension? Not at all! What we'll do instead, in love for each other and the Lord who saved us, is "cover a multitude of sins." We won't talk about the other person's wrongs, we'll instead bury them. To avoid misunderstanding: Peter is not declaring Jesus' words in Mt 18 to be null and void. We are to address *the sinner* on his sins, of course. But talk to others about those sins? Most definitely not! In the company of the other we'll cover the neighbor's sins – lest we end up separating friends. Those friends shall sit together at the table of the Lord in the New Jerusalem; shall we speak words today that will pit brother against brother in this life??

Just how and when to speak facts can require much Biblical wisdom, a wisdom that the Lord has promised through the Holy Spirit. But this much is clear: never may the devil with his divisiveness be behind our words and stories about others. James 3: "The wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits..." (vs 17). That wisdom has the neighbor's well being at heart, his reputation included. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 44 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 17 August 2003.

" OUR REDEEMER INSISTS THAT OUR EVERY THOUGHT AND DESIRE CONFORM TO HIS WILL ."

Text:

Lord's Day 44

113. Q. What does the tenth commandment require of us?

A. That not even the slightest thought or desire contrary to any of God's commandments should ever arise in our heart. Rather, we should always hate all sin with all our heart, and delight in all righteousness.[1]

[1] Ps. 19:7-14; 139:23, 24; Rom. 7:7, 8.

114. Q. But can those converted to God keep these commandments perfectly?

A. No. In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience.[1] Nevertheless, with earnest purpose they do begin to live not only according to some but to all the commandments of God.[2]

[1] Eccles. 7:20; Rom. 7:14, 15; I Cor. 13:9; I John 1:8. [2] Ps. 1:1, 2; Rom. 7:22-25; Phil. 3:12-16.

115. Q. If in this life no one can keep the ten commandments perfectly, why does God have them preached so strictly?

A. First, that throughout our life we may more and more become aware of our sinful nature, and therefore seek more eagerly the forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ.[1] Second, that we may be zealous for good deeds and constantly pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, that He may more and more renew us after God's image, until after this life we reach the goal of perfection.[2]

[1] Ps. 32:5; Rom. 3:19-26; 7:7, 24, 25; I John 1:9. [2] I Cor. 9:24; Phil. 3:12-14; I John 3:1-3.

Scripture Reading:

Romans 7:7-25

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalms 139:1,2

Psalms 139:13

Psalms 143:1,5,6

Psalms 19:3,4,5,6

Psalms 119:39,50

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The tenth commandment is somewhat different from the first nine. With each commandment so far the Lord had addressed a new subject, be it about idolatry or blasphemy or murder or stealing, etc. With the tenth, however, the Lord does not so much address a *new* matter (coveting) as address the *root system* under all the commandments. The first nine all address outward acts; adultery with the neighbor's wife (seventh commandment) is a *deed*, stealing the neighbor's donkey (eighth commandment) is a physical *deed*. With the tenth commandment the Lord reaches down to the *root* of these outward deeds, and tells us that even our thoughts and desires lie under the sway of His dominion. And we understand: if God forbids the *desires* that produce those outward sins against the seventh and eighth commandments, it's clear that He equally forbids the desires that produce outwards sins against the first commandment

and the second and the third.... As the Catechism puts it: in the tenth commandment God insists that "not even the slightest thought or desire contrary to any of God's commandments should ever arise in our heart."

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

OUR REDEEMER INSISTS THAT OUR EVERY THOUGHT AND DESIRE CONFORM TO HIS WILL.

1. The comprehensive extent of this command.
2. Our tiny obedience to any command.
3. The strict preaching of every command.

1. The comprehensive extent of this command.

Desiring something can be both good and bad. In the tenth commandment the Lord addresses the negative; coveting is desiring something that isn't yours.

Coveting is something of the heart, and therefore not necessarily something anybody else knows about. You notice the neighbor's new coat and want it, you go window-shopping and would love to have that bracelet, that shawl, that ring. For our feeling, that's not coveting, for there's nothing wrong with *wanting*.... And that's the more so when you keep you 'wants' to yourself....

But it does raise a question. When does 'wanting' become sin? One wants a coat like the neighbor's. Does sin enter the picture when you *want* it, or when you *really want* it, or when you *lay plans to steal* it, or when you *actually steal* it? That last, actually stealing it, is of course transgression against the eighth commandment; that's sin. But when do we have to speak about sin against the tenth commandment? When you *want* it, or when you *really want* it?

In truth, brothers and sisters, *wanting* something does not at all strike us as sin. It happens to us day after day that we *want* something. And surely, that's not wrong?!

The Lord Jesus Christ was once asked which commandment of God was the greatest. His answer: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Mt 22:37). With that answer the Lord made clear that God demanded not just that one's outward conduct agreed with God's will, but that also the thoughts and desires of one's heart conform to His will. *So: the desires hidden deep inside my heart need to agree with God's desires*. He is Lord not just over the actions of my hands or the words of my mouth, but insists on being Lord also over the thoughts of my mind. My thoughts may not follow a different path than He has stipulated in His word. So too: my desires, my wants, may not be different than what God has commanded.

A very clear example here relates to the seventh commandment. We are not to commit adultery, says God, and so we know that we are to keep our hands off the neighbor's wife. But may I let my imagination go concerning another woman? (Or secretly send her text messages on my mobile?) We know the answer. Said Jesus in Mt 5: "I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (vs 28). Sin is not just an outward act, says the Lord, but begins in the heart.

One can refer also to Genesis 3. The serpent told Eve that eating from the forbidden tree was OK. Then we read this verse: "so when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree desirable to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate" (vs 6). Question: when did sin enter the world? When she saw that the tree was good for food? When she saw that it was pleasant to the eyes, desirable? When she coveted it as a source of wisdom? When she walked to the tree? When she actually picked a fruit off? When she sank her teeth into it? When did sin enter the world? We realize: she sinned before she ate; the taking was sin. More: she sinned before she took; the desiring was sin! That's where it started, with the tenth commandment, with her heart not being loyal to her Lord and Maker. The very desiring, the very wanting of something God has forbidden is sin! That's why David pleaded with God in Ps 19 like this: "Let the words of my mouth *and the meditation of my heart* be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my strength and my Redeemer" (vs 14).

So: somebody does you the dirty. Instantly, automatically, a couple of choice swear words arise in your mind. You

don't say them, because you know that's blasphemy and the Lord doesn't want it. But was it sin that these swear words arose in your mind? Or does it become sin only when you speak them? Or enjoy their taste for a while? God wants the heart, completely, and so it's not enough that our *words* contain no blasphemy; God wants that our *thoughts* never disagree with His thoughts – and that's to say that a swear word should never even arise in our minds.... Lord, "let the words of my mouth *and the meditation of my heart* be acceptable in Your sight!"

We find it troubling.... Desires, wants: they arise in our minds all the time. The desire to spit out a blasphemous word in the face of wrong: it's just *there*. Must we call the very appearing of the word *sin*, even when we swallow it, don't say it, replace it with something decent? The thought of another woman arises in our hearts, we don't want it, we fight it and replace our thoughts with something holy, but have we sinned when the *wanting* already appeared in our thoughts? To *us* it seems overdone....

But what shall we say then, brothers and sisters, of the apostle's words in Romans 7? He says in vs 7 that he would not have known what sin was if it were not for the law. He mentions an example. He would not have known that covetousness was wrong, he says, if it were not for the fact that the law stipulated that. To Paul's sinful mind, desiring something was OK, as long as you didn't actually go and steal it. Having thoughts about another woman was OK, as long as you didn't actually *do* anything with her. It's the attitude of our society; your thoughts are your own, and you can think what you want..., as long as you don't carry out your evil....

But God's instruction in the tenth commandment, brothers and sisters, goes deeper. God wants the heart, not just outward obedience. God wants the heart, so much so that even the desires of our minds and the thoughts of our hearts agree with God's will for us. Anything else is sin. That's Question & Answer 113: in the tenth commandment God requires that "not even the slightest thought or desire contrary to any of God's commands should ever arise in our hearts." In this commandment our God summons us to look deep into our hearts and ensure that that we agree with God perfectly in every one of His commands. Our God does not want us to obey Him outwardly only, while inside we drag our heels. With this command God instructs us to make sure that our hearts agree with Him completely, without a whiff of a protest every arising in us against any of His commandments.

If that's the case, what is the Christian to do? Is he to spend all his time trying desperately to rid his mind of thoughts and desires that disagree with God's will? We realize: that's a vain exercise. Consider here, then, a gardener. He wants a crop, and so turns the weeds. But what does he do next? Return every week and keep pulling weeds as they appear? We know: that way he'll never get a crop. Rather, after he's spaded his garden he needs to plant it, water it, fertilize it. Then certainly, he needs to keep pulling weeds as they appear, but the more his good plants grow the less weeds he will find – simply because the good plants leave less room and less light for the weeds.

So it is also with the Christian and his thoughts and desires. The more he is busy with the will and word of God, the more he deliberately speaks and acts in agreement with the instructions of His Lord, the less opportunity there is for sinful thoughts and desires to have a place in his heart. Think of that passage from Eph 5 to which we listened last week. The apostle says, for example, in vs 3f: "But fornication and all uncleanness or covetousness, let it not even be named among you, as is fitting for saints; neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks." Point: where you with your tongue give thanks to God, you haven't time or opportunity to speak of unclean things. Similarly, when you busy your mind with the things of God, meditating on His Word, singing His praises, you're not giving wants and desires an opportunity. When your mind is filled with how much God gave you in Jesus Christ – forgiveness of sins, being children of God, having a home and clothes and plenty to eat, while elsewhere thousands live in poverty and nakedness, in physical hunger and spiritual hunger- when your mind is filled with how much God in Christ has given you, there isn't time for *wanting* this shirt or that soccer ball....

And it's precisely this God-centered focus that God wants. Listen to the Introduction to the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage." With such a Redeemer to look at, to delight in, to talk about, has my mind got time to cultivate sinful thoughts, time to spend on *desiring* things of this world? It's exactly because of *Who* God is that He adds the tenth commandment to the nine: I am the Lord your God, your Redeemer, and *therefore* "you shall not covet."

How much more so is this true for us! Our God has delivered us not from a physical Egypt, but from bondage to *sin*!

Indeed, He gave us His only Son to accomplish that redemption! More: "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? (Rom 8:32). The more I focus on His redemption, His grace, His promises, the less time I have to covet, to desire. Lord's Day 44: "we should always hate sin with all our heart, and delight in all righteousness."

I come to our second point:

2. *Our tiny obedience to any command.*

That I should love my God so much that every thought and every desire should conform to His will – who can do it? We hear how comprehensive this tenth commandment is, hear how deeply it penetrates into our secret thoughts, and we realize: we fall so far short of God's standard. By the grace of God we don't serve idols, we don't blaspheme, we don't murder, we don't steal...; we do love God, want to serve Him, delight to do His will. But to control those thoughts, to ensure that no desire ever arises in our hearts that protests against any of God's commands... - no, we fall so far short.... It makes us feel hopelessly inadequate, and we wonder whether we're children of God after all....

Of great importance to us then, congregation, is the struggle of the apostle Paul as he records it in Romans 7. He puts it like this in vs 15: "what I am doing, I do not understand. For what I will to do, that I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do." And again in vs 19: "the good I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice." We can relate to it so well. We get up in the morning fully determined that today we shall not talk past our mouth, shall say only upbuilding things. But the next thing we know, we've spoken in a spiteful way, have downsized somebody.... We hate it, we fight it, but: "the good I will to do, I do not do; but the evil I will not to do, that I practice." Paul tells us he had the same struggle.

Question. Is Paul saying this of himself *before* he became a Christian on the road to Damascus? Or is he speaking of himself *after* he became a Christian? The question is so very important. If he's describing the struggles he had *before* he became a Christian, how come we have the same struggles today; might all those failings we see in ourselves be proof that we're not really Christians yet after all?? Conversely, if he's describing the struggles he had *after* his conversion, we'd be much encouraged for then we'd be in good company and even conclude that such struggles *characterize* the Christian.

The answer to the question, brothers and sisters, is not so difficult. Paul says in vs 22 that he "delights in the law of God according to the inward man." Can an unregenerate person delight in the law of God? Certainly not! That Paul can delight in God's law is only because he has been born again. Conclusion: Paul is *not* describing the struggle he had *before* he became a Christian; in Romans 7 Paul is describing the struggle he had *after* his conversion. I remind you again of David's prayer in Ps 19. If the believer could produce only holy thoughts and desires, how could this man after God's heart ask God to cause "the meditation of my heart" to be acceptable in God's sight? No, beloved, that struggle with wrong thoughts and desires *characterizes each Christian*.

So, dear brothers and sisters, we are not to get despondent with our failures! Failures remain, says the Scripture, and so the church repeats that tragic truth after God in Question & Answer 114: "In this life even the holiest have only a small beginning of this obedience." Must we conclude from our failures, then, that we are not children of God after all, that God must not really love us? No, beloved, no! God's standards are high, very high, and we simply can't meet those standards - fact. *But that does not mean that we are not children of God!* God sent His Son into the world to save *sinners*, and despite the renewing work of the Holy Spirit we *remain miserable sinners* (cf 1 Tim 1:15). Paul in Romans 7 goes so far as to say that there are effectively two Pauls in the one person. Vs 22f: "I delight in the law of God according to the inward man. But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members." It's that tension, with the resulting repeated falling into sin, that makes Paul cry out his despair in vs 24: "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" He's a Christian, renewed by the Holy Spirit, and yet he says that he's a "wretched man", a miserable sinner who needs deliverance so very much. And at the same time he can exclaim that he has this deliverance. Vs 25: "I thank God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!" Daily there is forgiveness, daily there is deliverance from the weaknesses that continue to cling to us.

What do we do then: resign ourselves to our inability to keep God's commands? Or strive to keep them on an outward

level, but let sinful thoughts continue to fill our hearts? Neither! Paul hates the sins he keeps committing, and so does every child of God. So we fight, keep striving to obey all God's commands. In the words of our Lord's Day: though we can't keep those commandments perfectly, "nevertheless, with earnest purpose, [we] do begin to live not only according to some but to all the commandments of God."

That brings us to our last point:

3. The strict preaching of every command.

We can't keep the commandments of God. That reality makes listening to the Ten Commandments rather unattractive. Why rub our noses in our limitations?! So it's human nature to take it ill of the preacher that he keeps emphasizing the commandments – and so making us feel bad. And we say that he ought instead to proclaim the gospel, deliverance in Christ; that's his task in the New Testament dispensation, is it not? The Catechism captures our thoughts: "If in this life no one can keep the Ten Commandments perfectly, why does God have them preached so strictly?" Notice the implication of the question: it is God Himself who insists that preachers preach the Ten Commandments strictly. Please do not, then, fault the preacher for laying out in plain terms what God requires in the commandments. He's simply doing what his Sender requires of him.

Still, why does the Lord want these commandments preached so strictly? I refer again to Romans 7. Paul answers the question in vs 13. There he writes: "sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful." That is: it is the commandment that *exposes sin for what it is*. Fallen human nature does not know what conduct is sinful, what words are sinful, what thoughts are sinful. So the Lord our God tells us, and does that through the commandments. If we, then, set aside the commandments, or become slack in our reading of the commandments, we shall no longer be sensitive to what in our environment is actually sin. Conversely: the more we hear the commandments, the more strictly we hear them proclaimed, and the more carefully we reflect on them, the more we'll realize how much sin there is around us and how much we fall short.

An example: some of us watch movies with scenes of adultery. We get used to it and eventually see nothing wrong with it. But the Lord comes with His law, has that law strictly proclaimed, and so we're made to think..., and conclude that we have sinned against the seventh commandment in watching adultery, and sinned against the tenth commandment also, for the watching raised certain ungodly thoughts and desires within us.

Again, we hear the commandments Sunday by Sunday but –it's human nature- sometimes we let the reading of the law go past us. Then we don't reflect on what implications the law may have for us. Take the sixth commandment: "You shall not murder." Might that have implications for some of our computer games? Is the Lord pleased that I kill to my heart's content on the computer screen – as long as I don't do it in reality? You see: the strict preaching of the law makes us realize that I may not murder, neither in reality nor in play – no more than I may commit adultery neither in reality nor in play. It's the proclamation of the law that compels us to recognize what conduct in our society is actually sin in God's eyes. And that in turn makes us see how terribly sinful we remain....

And is that so bad? True, we don't like it. But our sinful hearts can never be the measure of what is OK. God has sent His only Son into the world to save sinful people. *But how shall people see need for the Savior and marvel at God's mercy if they do not see the depths of their sin and misery?* Recall Lord's Day 1: in order to live and die in the joy of the comfort of belonging to Jesus Christ you need to know three things, and the first is this: "First, how great my sins and misery are." And, congregation, it's precisely the strict proclamation of the law that compels me to see "how great my sins and misery are!" A strict proclamation of the law makes me say with Paul: "O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" In other words: a strict preaching of the law compels me to look away from myself, compels me to seek –again- the Savior God in mercy has given. Question & Answer 115: a strict proclamation of the law is necessary so that "throughout our life we may more and more become aware of our sinful nature, and therefore seek more eagerly the forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ."

That's not the only reason why God wants that law proclaimed so strictly. We need to seek forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ, yes. But Christ did not give only His blood to forgive our sins and make us righteous before

God; He also gave His Holy Spirit to renew us. And that renewal we need to pursue. We won't reach the goal of perfection in this life, true, but we do need, in the strength of the Lord, to *keep trying* to live as God's children ought to live – holy in deeds, words, thoughts, desires. A deep awareness of our abiding sinfulness drives us to *constant prayer*, prayer to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit to make progress in the fight against sin.

And again: if we think we're pretty good, think that we keep the commandments of God pretty reasonably, we shall not pray too earnestly for the Holy Spirit..., nor struggle too hard against our abiding weaknesses.... But if we see our continuing weaknesses starkly, and they bother us greatly, we shall join with Paul in his cry for mercy: "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me...?" And with him we'll keep praying for strength and doing our best to do what is right before the Lord.

We have but a small beginning of the obedience God requires. If any commandment makes that terrible point plain, it's the tenth commandment. But God hears our sighs and frustrations on the point, beloved, and He answers our pleas for strength to keep His law. The beginning of obedience *is there!* And that beginning is in turn a promise, a guarantee, that we'll reach the goal of perfection. For the God who saved us is faithful!

Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 45 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 24 August 2003.

***" THE CHRISTIAN FREELY ASKS HIS HEAVENLY FATHER FOR ALL HIS NEEDS
."***

Text:

Lord's Day 45

116. Q. Why is prayer necessary for Christians?

A. Because prayer is the most important part of the thankfulness which God requires of us.[1] Moreover, God will give His grace and the Holy Spirit only to those who constantly and with heartfelt longing ask Him for these gifts and thank Him for them.[2]

[1] Ps. 50:14, 15; 116:12-19; I Thess. 5:16-18. [2] Matt. 7:7, 8; Luke 11:9-13.

117. Q. What belongs to a prayer which pleases God and is heard by Him?

A. First, we must from the heart call upon the one true God only, who has revealed Himself in His Word, for all that He has commanded us to pray.[1] Second, we must thoroughly know our need and misery, so that we may humble ourselves before God.[2] Third, we must rest on this firm foundation that, although we do not deserve it, God will certainly hear our prayer for the sake of Christ our Lord, as He has promised us in His Word.[3]

[1] Ps. 145:18-20; John 4:22-24; Rom. 8:26, 27; James 1:5; I John 5:14, 15; Rev. 19:10. [2] II Chron. 7:14; 20:12; Ps. 2:11; 34:18; 62:8; Is. 66:2; Rev. 4. [3] Dan. 9:17-19; Matt. 7:8; John 14:13, 14; 16:23; Rom. 10:13; James 1:6.

118. Q. What has God commanded us to ask of Him?

A. All the things we need for body and soul,[1] as included in the prayer which Christ our Lord Himself taught us.

[1] Matt. 6:33; James 1:17.

119. Q. What is the Lord's prayer?

A. Our Father who art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, On earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, As we also have forgiven our debtors; And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from the evil one. For Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.[1]

[1] Matt. 6:9-13; Luke 11:2-4.

Scripture Reading:

Luke 11:1-13

Romans 8:18-27

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalm 70:1,2

Psalm 86:1,2

Psalm 143:1,4,5,6

Psalm 66:7,8

Psalm 50:7 & Hymn 38:3

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Prayer is talking with God. We all talk to people day after day, and generally do not have a great deal of trouble communicating – even if the person we’re talking to is far away and connected to us only with a mobile phone. We say what’s on our minds, and the other responds, and maybe we have a reply in turn. Talking to people is not so difficult.

But we experience that talking with God is something else. We don’t see Him face to face. Talking with God isn’t even like to talking with another on the phone, for there’s no reply. That makes it difficult for us to be open with God, to find words to say to Him. Result: we experience prayer to be a chore. More often than not, prayer is not something we *want* to do, but something we *have* to do.

Then we read in our Lord’s Day that prayer is "necessary for Christians" because "prayer is the most important part of the thankfulness which God requires of us." We look at the way we pray, and conclude that we must not be all that thankful...; else we wouldn’t experience prayer as a chore.... And that in turn makes us feel inadequate....

The Lord, brothers and sisters, knows our weaknesses with respect to prayer. In His Word He encourages us in the face of those weaknesses. It’s to that encouragement that we may listen this afternoon.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE CHRISTIAN FREELY ASKS HIS HEAVENLY FATHER FOR ALL HIS NEEDS.

1. The reason for prayer.
2. The struggles of prayer.
3. The content of prayer.

1. The reason for prayer.

The God to whom we speak in prayer is none less than the Creator of heaven and earth. This is the God, brothers and sisters, before whom the angels cover their faces as they cry out their Holy, Holy, Holy (cf Is 6). This is the God who came to Israel at Mt Sinai, and there were thunderings and lightings and a thick cloud of smoke, and the sound of a trumpet so loud that the people in the camp trembled with fear (Ex 19:16; 20:18ff). This is the God before whom the angels and elders of John’s Revelation fall on their faces and worship (cf Rev 7:11; 11:16). *And we would speak to such a God?!* We, who are created from the dust of the earth and shall one day return to dust? We, under whose lips is the poison of asps and whose hearts by nature speak deceit? Shall we talk to *God?!?*

A keen awareness, congregation, of God’s holiness and of our sinfulness makes us very aware that we *cannot* and we *may not* expect to speak to God. An awareness of Who God is and what we are leaves room only for humility and shame; as Adam and Eve after the fall in Paradise fled from the presence of such a God when He came to them (Gen 3:8), so we can only flee from such a God (Rev 6:15ff).

Precisely here, beloved in the Lord, is the glorious and profound *gospel of God’s grace*. For the Lord in mercy has *come to us* when we trembling fled from Him (Art 17, *Belgic Confession*). He sent His only Son to earth to pay for sin and reconcile sinners to God. On the basis of this work of the Savior, the Lord God has come to each of us and established with us His covenant of grace. Most of us were yet so little, and could understand nothing of what God was doing and saying to us when we were baptized, but *He came to us in Christ* and established with us His covenant of grace. That is: *He spoke to us first*. And His speaking to us was not restricted to the words of baptism, but He has given us His Word – His personal letter-of-love to all His children-in-Christ. He gives us a copy of the Bible, and speaks to us as often as we open that Bible to read it. More, in His love for us He brings us to church Sunday by Sunday because –again- He wishes to speak to us, address us in our specific circumstances, instruct, comfort and encourage us in the nitty-gritty of daily living. My point: this holy, awesome God *spoke to us first!* It is not we who first sought His ear; it is *He* who first sought *our ear!*

What shall we do now: respond to His Words to us, or be silent? Speak to Him in return, or not? You see: *we* say that we don’t know what to say to God. *But it’s not we who open the conversation!* God has already spoken to us, told us

that for Jesus' sake we are His children and He our Father, told us that for Jesus' sake there is forgiveness of sins and grace unlimited, told us that for Jesus' sake the Holy Spirit will impart to us all the treasures Christ obtained for us on the cross. That's what God has first said to us, and this is what He keeps saying to us through His Word and the preaching in all the changing circumstances of our daily lives. Shall we reply to God with silence? Shall we say that we don't know what to say to God? Shall we say that we haven't time to speak with Him? Shall we say that we find it too awkward to speak to a God we can't see? Shall we say that He's too awesome to bother with puny me? All those objections, brothers and sisters, are valid *only if we see prayer as beginning with us*. If we have to open the conversation with God, then yes, how dare we! And what could we sinners then say to a God of such glory?! But given that God has spoken first to us, and even laid His claim upon us to be His children (and He our Father!), it is *obviously necessary* that we *reply* to God! Silence is crass unthankfulness!

This is the point of the Catechism in Lord's Day 45. "Why is prayer necessary for Christians?" Prayer is necessary, says the Catechism, "because prayer is the most important part of the thankfulness which God requires of us." Thankfulness for what? Obviously first of all for His saving work in Jesus Christ – as confessed so extensively in the earlier Lord's Days of the Catechism. He gave His Son for our sins, and in Christ adopted us to be His children, and now as a faithful Father supplies all our needs. *Of course* we shall talk to Him in reply; talking to Him is the most essential expression of our thankfulness for His mercies!

There's the reason, brothers and sisters, why a person who does not pray cannot rightly be called a Christian. Think it through: if God has spoken to us in Christ, and we say nothing to God in return, do we show evidence that we love the Lord? Is silence-to-God proof that the Holy Spirit has renewed us? Is it not rather evidence that we are still dead in sin? Let it be fixed in our minds: a churchgoer who does not pray *is not a Christian*. Prayer is *necessary* for Christians, because our talking to God demonstrates our thankfulness for His saving grace in Jesus Christ. Those who do not bother to pray, or speak to God so very infrequently, need to repent of their sins, and learn to be thankful to God for seeking us out in the first place.

There is a second reason why prayer is so very necessary for Christians. The fall into sin resulted in our being exiled from Paradise, driven out of a garden of plenty into a wilderness of want. The Lord sent His Son to reconcile sinners to God again. His triumph on Calvary means in essence that sinners are reconciled with God; the abundance of Paradise is ours again! So Israel in the desert lacked nothing; God supplied their daily bread and drink, gave protection from enemies, made sure their clothes did not wear out, etc. The point is true today too. Through His work on the cross, Jesus Christ has obtained for us *more* than strictly forgiveness of sins; we may again be children of God to whom God gives abundantly. Recall the promises in the Form for Baptism: when we are baptized into the Name of the Father, God the Father adopts us for His children and heirs, "and promises to provide us with all good." That "good" includes the bits and pieces we need day by day, things like food and clothing, work and housing, wisdom to raise children and interact with the people of our community, etc. These are gifts Christ obtained for us, and which, as it were, are now laid aside for us in heaven, stored in heaven for the day we need them. The Son promises forgiveness of our sins, and that too is a gift prepared for us in heaven for the day we need it. So too, the Holy Spirit promises to impart to us "what we have in Christ, namely, the cleansing from our sins and the daily renewal of our lives." That daily renewal includes those fruits of the Spirit known as love and joy and peace and patience, etc. And we all know: in the rough and tumble of this broken life, we need those heavenly gifts so very much!

Now: how do these gifts become ours? Does the Lord simply shower them upon us, and that's it? No, congregation, no! It is the emphatic instruction of our Lord Jesus Christ that we *ask*. Luke 11: "Ask, and it will be given to you" (vs 9). And again in vs 10: "for everyone who *asks* receives." It's the point of the parable of the Friend at Midnight: "because of his persistence he will rise and give him as many [loaves] as he needs" (vss 5ff). So: *ask*! Our Savior has obtained gifts for us, and these gifts are *available for the asking*. And asking is prayer! It is the will of God that we tell the Lord of our circumstance and need, and then ask Him to give us the heavenly gifts Christ has obtained for us – as we need them in our circumstance. Prayer, then, is like a *key* that opens for us the storehouse of God's gifts. Prayer is like a *hook* that we cast into heaven to reel God's gifts to earth. That's prayer: by asking we bring God's promised gifts from heaven to earth. In the words of Lord's Day 45: "God will give His grace and the Holy Spirit only to those who constantly and with heartfelt longing ask Him for these gifts." "His grace and the Holy Spirit": those two terms capture all the gifts Christ obtained for us on the cross. Forgiveness of sins, wisdom to speak sensitively, food and work, strength to persevere in loneliness: whatever we may need is captured in those two terms "grace" and "the Holy

Spirit". And the Lord wants us to *ask* for those gifts Christ obtained for us on the cross.

So I say it again: the person who doesn't pray is not a Christian. He who believes in Christ acknowledges not only that Christ died for his sins on Calvary, but acknowledges also that Christ has reconciled us to the Father, and as a result so many good gifts are laid aside for us. We do not have to obtain food and drink, work and house, wisdom and patience, strength and health on our own steam; we may ask and shall receive. That's faith in practice. And in as much as we need food and drink, work and house, wisdom and patience, strength and health in circumstances that change moment by moment, it is not sufficient to pray once a day or at meal times only; it is instead necessary –as Paul says to the Thessalonians- to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thes 5:17). He who "walks with God" along the road of life also talks with God, regularly. After all, you can't walk with somebody without talking with him; walking together means talking together.

I come to our second point:

2. *The struggle of prayer.*

The fact that prayer is so necessary puts into sharp focus the inadequacies we feel in relation to prayer. We accept that we ought to pray. But: it's *hard*! How do I know that God actually hears me? I have such difficulty getting my words together! And I feel so unworthy to knock on *heaven's* door....

On the point of the *struggles* we have with prayer, brothers and sisters, we need to realize first that God sets *high standards* for our prayers. Though our Father in Jesus Christ, He remains holy God – and so will not listen to arrogant demands on our part. The Catechism catches that reality in Q 117: "What belongs to a prayer which *pleases* God and is heard by Him?"

Yet the fact, congregation, that the Lord sets high standards for prayer does not mean that prayer is now beyond our reach. I refer here to the words of Paul in Romans 8. The passage addresses the suffering of this life, and says that this suffering is nothing compared to the glory that will be revealed. Then the apostle mentions that creation itself longs for the day of Christ (vss 19-22), and so do we ourselves who have been renewed by the Holy Spirit (vss 23-25).

In the context of the groaning of creation and of the saints of God, the apostle mentions also the groaning of the Spirit. Says Paul: we long for Paradise Restored, but we can't even express that longing adequately. That's our weakness, says the apostle in vs 26; "we do not know what we should pray for as we ought." Through His death on the cross Christ in principle has restored Paradise, already there are rich gifts stored up in heaven for us. But to ask properly for that Glorious Day, or even to ask properly for those heavenly gifts to come our way today – we don't know how to do that. And in truth, congregation, it's a sad reality we experience day by day! Prayer is *hard*, hard because we are weak.

In that context the apostle works with the word of the prophet Zechariah, where the prophet said that the Holy Spirit was "the Spirit of grace and supplication" (12:10). The Spirit of supplication: just what does that mean? Says Paul in Romans 8: that means that "the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us." That is: the Spirit appears before God to intercede for us, appears before God with our broken prayers and recasts them in a form acceptable to God. What we can't get into words, what we can't get into *adequate* words, the frustrations we can't even understand ourselves, the Spirit who dwells in our hearts lays before God in words pleasing to God – groanings unutterable for us. And God, of course, both understands the Spirit as well as answers the Spirit – for the Spirit is Himself true God!

We realize: what enormous encouragement this is to pray! We find prayer difficult, we struggle to put our needs into adequate words. We have to talk to *God*, and His standards are so high! How comforting that the Lord Himself has supplied the means to overcome this difficulty; He has given us His Holy Spirit to perfect our prayers! With His help we can –as our Lord's Day has it- "call upon the one true God only," and so be sure we'll be both heard and understood!

There's a second problem we have with prayer. It's this: what do I *really* need? Is my bottom need a new car? A spouse? A better boss? It will be beneficial to look at one of David's prayers. Take Ps 143, for example. David's situation? From vs 3 it's clear that enemies have cornered David, possibly in a cave where it's dark and the bones of dead animals are scattered. He turns to God in prayer, vs 7: "Answer me speedily, O Lord." But what does he ask?

Simply deliverance from his enemies? Sure, he asks for that (vs 9), but that's not the root of his prayer. David knows: he deserves every affliction that ever comes on his path, for he's a sinner. Vs 2: "Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no one living is righteous." That is why he asks God in vs 8 to let him hear of God's *lovingkindness*; that, at bottom, is what David needs! Not deliverance from a human enemy, but the *grace* of God as it comes through the atoning work of Jesus Christ. He repeats it in vs 12: "in Your *mercy* cut off my enemies...." That's the bottom need: God's mercy, God's grace in Christ.

It's instructive for us. In moments of crisis we cry out to God to help us, and that's good. But once the crisis is past, the pressure is off and so often we suddenly pray less.... *As if our deepest need was help in that crisis.* But the Lord would have us know that our deepest need lies much deeper than a crisis; our deepest need is our *sinfulness*, how we provoke God time and again through our wrongs. And we keep doing those wrongs hour after hour, moment after moment, and so we need to keep coming to God in our changing circumstances *in humility*, deeply aware that we have *earned* the newest problem, and deeply aware that we need *God's grace in Christ.*

What belongs to a prayer and pleases God? A 117: "Second, we must thoroughly know our need and misery, so that we may humble ourselves before God." If we are to speak to *God* we need to be well aware of that *deepest* need, and so come to Him with an attitude of humility – recognizing that we *deserve* the troubles we have. And we can receive deliverance from those troubles only because Christ has taken the curse we deserve upon Himself. Then Yes, He obtained rich gifts for us, and we may ask for those gifts in our troubles, but we need to approach God in humility, fully aware of our deepest need.

A third problem arises with our prayers. Does God indeed hear and answer? Jesus assures us in Luke 11 that he who asks receives. Over the years we have asked so many things, but our experience is that we do not necessarily receive all we request. And that's true, we're sure, also of very reasonable requests....

An instructive passage here, brothers and sisters, is the portion we read from 2 Corinthians 12. The apostle had "a thorn in the flesh." It bothered Paul so much that he pleaded with the Lord three times to remove it from him. The Lord didn't. He said instead: "My grace is sufficient for you." We read that, and understand that the problem stayed with Paul but God gave sufficient grace to counter-balance the handicap of the thorn. So we see the handicap as a continuing negative, be it that God gave Paul strength to carry the negative.

But that's not, congregation, how the apostle pictures his situation. It's true: the apostle asked that the Lord would remove the thorn because Paul experienced it as a negative. God's reply was that the reason for the request (the thorn is a negative) was wrong to begin with; He assured Paul that the thorn was a positive. For the Lord adds: "My strength is made perfect in weakness." Once Paul understood that point, he could –as he says in vs 9- "boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me." He realized: his infirmities were not negatives after all; God's grace for him was such that those negatives, that thorn, were in fact positives! That Paul was persecuted, was imprisoned, was whipped, was beaten, was shipwrecked: all were devilish efforts to silence the preacher of Christ's gospel to the Gentiles. When he was persecuted, when he was imprisoned, when he was whipped, Paul certainly did not look strong, and his message certainly wasn't attractive either. But precisely that weakness in the apostle gave opening for the power of Christ to manifest itself; that Paul could persevere in preaching despite Satan's attacks was itself glorious display of the power and triumph of Jesus Christ!

Was Paul's prayer about the thorn answered then? No, not if you understand from Paul's request that his highest goal in his prayer was that *his own* will was done, that Paul pursued only his *own* comfort. But the apostle had learned from the Lord's Prayer that all prayer is to be *God-centered*; was it not for *God's glory* that we were created? So he prayed for his daily needs –the removal of the thorn, the removal of Satan's attacks through persecution and shipwrecks and sleeplessness and whippings- so that He might be able the better to do God's will, preach the gospel, hallow God's name. Lord's Day 45: Paul asked for the things he needed for body and soul "as included in the prayer which Christ our Lord Himself taught us." And that prayer is *God-centered*.

And see: *that* prayer God answered – be it differently than Paul himself thought was best. God determined that Paul would carry out His task in God's kingdom better precisely *with* the handicap of the thorn! His preaching was more effective exactly because all Satan's punches could not get the apostle down – because He who was *for* Paul was

greater than he was *against* Paul!

3. *The Content of prayer.*

That, then, was our third point: the content of prayer. The point of our prayers is not that we move God to do things *our* way; the point of our prayers is that we ask God to grant us strength and grace to do *His* will, make *His* kingdom come, hallow *His* name. Then we may ask this so imperfectly, and it may all come so crooked out of our mouths, but we may be assured that "although we do not deserve it, God will certainly hear our prayers for the sake of Christ our Lord."

Praying is hard work. What makes it so hard is that our thoughts *need to travel along the same lines as God's thoughts*. And that means we need to listen well to what God has first said to us. One cannot pray in a manner pleasing to God when one's Bible is closed! Prayer is speaking with God; first we listen to Him, then we reply from out of our circumstances. As long as we see prayer as a means to achieve *our* goals, we shall find prayer frustrating, disappointing. But when our thoughts travel along the same path as God's thoughts, when we use prayer as a means to draw to ourselves the gifts Christ has obtained for us on the cross *so that in turn we use them to glorify God*, we may be confident that we do not pray in vain. For the Spirit of God helps us in our prayers, and intercedes before the Father together with the Son. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 46 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 31 August 2003.

"WE MAY FREELY APPROACH OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN."

Text:

Lord's Day 46

120. Q. Why has Christ commanded us to address God as Our Father?

A. To awaken in us at the very beginning of our prayer that childlike reverence and trust toward God which should be basic to our prayer: God has become our Father through Christ and will much less deny us what we ask of Him in faith than our fathers would refuse us earthly things.[1] [1] Matt. 7:9-11; Luke 11:11-13. 121. Q. Why is there added, Who art in heaven? A. These words teach us not to think of God's heavenly majesty in an earthly manner,[1] and to expect from His almighty power all things we need for body and soul.[2]

[1] Jer. 23:23, 24; Acts 17:24, 25. [2] Matt. 6:25-34; Rom. 8:31, 32.

Scripture Reading:

Hosea 11:1-9

Matthew 6:5-15

Singing: (*Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter*)

Psalms 42:1,5

Psalms 43:3,4

Psalms 103:4,5

Hymn 8:2,3,14

Psalms 68:3 & Hymn 47:1,10

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We are allowed to pray, to speak to God. More, we *must* pray. Lord's Day 45: prayer is *necessary* for Christians, indeed, God will give His grace and the Holy Spirit only to those who ask Him....

But: prayer can be so difficult. The Lord tells us that He is *God*, so holy that the angels Isaiah saw covered their faces with their wings in His presence. *God*, the almighty who spoke and this world came to be, and who still upholds it by His counsel and providence. Over against Him we are but dust, sinful, unworthy.... He's too great for us, so far off.... That makes speaking to God awkward, difficult....

It's precisely this point, brothers and sisters, that the Lord Jesus Christ addressed in His opening instruction about prayer. In the face of the *distance* sinners feel between themselves and God, the Lord Jesus told His people to address God as *Father*. With this title the Lord reassures us that God is *approachable*.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

WE MAY FREELY APPROACH OUR FATHER IN HEAVEN.

1. The content of the title Father,
2. The reason for the title Father,

3. The encouragement of the title Father.

1. *The content of the title Father.*

In our society today we have different distances between ourselves and persons in authority over us, and we express those different distances by the titles we give particular people. The judge in court is addressed as "Your Worship", and we dare not be disrespectful in his presence. We dress up in the best we have, speak only in answer to questions asked, and always reply with "Yes, your worship" or "No, your worship". It's clear to us: there is *distance* between us and the judge.

The policeman who stops us on the road, or even the teacher at school, evokes in us a somewhat different response. We may call him "Sir", a title that also suggests distance, but we'll not be quite so formal and stiff in our replies to the policeman or the teacher than we would be to the judge.

A family friend is closer to us. That closeness may receive expression in children calling him "Uncle" – whether he's related or not. You go camping together, eat marshmallows at the campfire, talk about anything and everything, relax together. "Uncle": the term reflects familiarity, a relaxed atmosphere, even while you retain a measure of respect.

The closest relation we have with another in authority is caught in the word 'father'. Many strangers can be "your worship" or "sir", and various family friends can be "Uncle", but there's only one man in the world that you call "Father", "Dad". He's the one who may tuck you in at night, the one who cuddles you, listens to you, comforts you. "Dad": the term describes *closeness*, describes love, care, interest.

Jesus gave His disciples instruction about prayer. How ought *sinners* to address *God*? Should they use a term that reflects *distance*, a term like "Your worship"? Or a bit less distance and call God "Sir"? Or "Uncle"? None of that. "Father," said Jesus, "Father": that's what you need to call God. That title you use day by day for that one person closest to you, the person you can work with and laugh with, the person who guides you and in whom you can confide: the title you use for *that* person is the term you need to use when you speak to God! "Father".

"Father." We all have particular thoughts about 'fathers', thoughts based largely on our experiences with our own fathers. Some of us have a father who is (or was) very approachable, very interested in us, very caring. Others of us have (or had) a father who was distant, remote, uninterested in us. When Jesus instructs us to address God as 'Father', would He have us load the term with the baggage of our youth? Was Jesus thinking of His own relation with His earthly father Joseph? Were James and John to think of their relation with Zebedee?

Thankfully, the answer is No. For our fathers, just like Jesus' father Joseph, are sinful men who need the blood of the Savior so very much for the forgiveness of their sins. The Lord Jesus does not instruct us to see God as a Father in the image of our earthly fathers. Thankfully not!

What then? Jesus, brothers and sisters, tells the disciples to address God as "Father", and loads the word "Father" with *God's revelation in the Old Testament*. It's to that revelation we need to turn if we are to appreciate the gospel of Jesus' instruction to call God 'Father'.

We need to turn first to Ex 4. When His people groaned under their bondage in Egypt, the Lord instructed Moses to go to Pharaoh and say: "Thus says the Lord: 'Israel is My son, My firstborn. So I say to you, let My son go that he may serve Me'" (Ex 4:22f). Notice: if Israel is God's son, God is obviously Israel's Father. By sending Moses to Pharaoh, the Lord shows something of His feelings, His care for that nation of slaves. The depth of His feelings for His son Israel comes out in the next words Moses must speak: "if you refuse to let [My son] go, indeed I will kill your son, your firstborn" (vs 23). Clearly, here's some depth of feeling for Israel!

In the course of the years that followed, the Lord God demonstrated more of His feelings for Israel. He brought that nation of slaves out of Egypt, fed them in the desert, led them to Mt Sinai, established His covenant of grace with this people, and so on. When Israel stood at the borders of the Promised Land, Moses taught God's people a song. Dt 32: God "is the Rock, His work is perfect" (vs 4). But the people? "They have corrupted themselves; They are not His children, Because of their blemish; A perverse and crooked generation" (vs 5). The reference, of course, is to their sins

in the desert, their complaining about the food, their harlotry with the Moabites, etc. Then Moses asks this question: "Do you thus deal with the Lord, O foolish and unwise people? Is He not your Father, who bought you? Has He not made you and established you?" (vs 6). "Is He not your Father," says Moses, and then goes on in the following verses to explain what kind of a Father the Lord has been for Israel. Vs 10: "He found [Israel] in a desert land, And in the wasteland, a howling wilderness; He encircled him, He instructed him, He kept him as the apple of His eye." It's the language of protection, of care, of interest, of love! The manna and the water, the protection from the Amalekites and from Balaam, the covenant God made and the gospel of the tabernacle in their midst: those 40 years in the wilderness spoke of love, of compassion, of care, of interest – despite Israel's persistent rebellions! And *that*, says Moses, is what God's *Fatherhood* is all about! "Father": the point is not: what does my child *deserve*; the point is rather: what does my child *need*?

So, when David so many years later prayed the words of Ps 103, he felt free to compare God to a father. He was familiar with the material of Ex 4 and Dt 32, knew that Israel was God's son and God was Israel's Father, and so He could sing those glorious words of God's merciful fatherliness.

"For as the heavens are high above the earth,
So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him;
As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.
As a father pities his children,
So the Lord pities those who fear Him.
For He knows our frame;
He remembers that we are dust" (vss 11ff).

Was David wrong to compare God to a father? Was it wrong to picture God as a father who has pity on his wounded and disobedient son? Not at all; this was precisely the picture Moses drew in Dt 32. A father gives his toddler strict instructions not to play in the mud with his Sunday shoes. But the child does anyway, falls in the puddle, and comes wailing to the house. Who of us, brothers, will then act like a stern judge or a callous policeman? Will our heart not be touched with compassion so that we comfort little Johnny and clean up his nose? Then there may be need for words of admonition, but they shall come in a context of fatherly love. So, says David, is the Lord God! "As a father pities his children, So the Lord pities those who fear Him."

In the years that followed David, the people of Israel stumbled from one bad king to the next, gave themselves from one transgression against God to the next. According to the promises of His covenant, the Lord was about to send the Assyrians to destroy Samaria. In that context the Lord sent the prophet Hosea to speak to His people. Says God to stubborn Israel in Hosea 11: "When Israel was a child, I loved him, And out of Egypt I called My son" (vs 1). We recognize the reference; that's the Exodus. God continues: "They sacrificed to the Baals, And burned incense to carved images" (vs 2). Here the Lord describes Israel's apostasy in the desert, in the days of the Judges and the Kings; God's own people turned from God to serve idols. How God feels about that? Hurt, so deeply hurt! Why? Vs 3: "I taught Ephraim to walk, Taking them by their arms; But they did not know that I healed them." Here God pictures Himself as doing what every father in our midst has done; letting our little boy, little girl hold our fingers and teaching our little darling to walk – step, step, step. Though Israel didn't deserve it, though Israel was an obstinate child from the beginning, the Lord stayed with His covenant, and so –vs 4- "I drew them with gentle cords, With bands of love, And I was to them as those who take the yoke from their neck. I stooped and fed them."

Do you see, brothers and sisters, something of what it means that God is Father? Look at the gentleness, look at the care, look at the compassion God displayed for His child! That care comes out also in the *discipline* God administers to Israel. Vs 5ff: "He shall not return to the land of Egypt; But the Assyrian shall be his king, Because they refused to repent. And the sword shall slash in his cities, Devour his districts, And consume them, Because of their own counsels." Yet the Lord has no pleasure at all in needing to discipline His people. Look at the fatherly emotion described in vs 8:

"How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I set you like Zeboiim? My heart churns within Me; My sympathy is stirred.

I will not execute the fierceness of My anger; I will not again destroy Ephraim. For I am God, and not man, The Holy One in your midst; And I will not come with terror."

"My heart churns within Me, My sympathy is stirred": see there, beloved, something of the depth of God's feelings as a father! Who can read this and not be touched by God's tender feelings toward His son Israel? The passage is so plain: that something is wrong with His children, that there is disobedience or pain or affliction with His children, *touches God* to the pit of His stomach!

One more text: according to the prophet Isaiah, the people of Israel in exile would take precisely this message to heart. Is 64: "But now, O Lord, You are our Father; We are the clay, and You are our potter; And all we are the work of Your hand. Do not be furious, O Lord, Nor remember iniquity forever; Indeed, please look – we all are Your people!" (vss 8f). "We are the clay, and You are our potter": the imagery is that of distance, creature vs Creator. Yet the prophet describes Israel-in-exile as confessing that God is "Father" –and Ex 4, Dt 32, Hos 11 have shown what compassion is caught in the word 'Father' - and so pleading with God to forgive and restore them – to *be Father!*

This is the material, brothers and sisters, which Jesus lays before the disciples in Mt 6. We read a number of verses from that chapter, and it will have struck you how often Jesus refers to God as "Father". What this Father is like? 6:3f: when you do a charitable deed, do it in secret, don't announce it, "and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly." Point? He sees you all the time, even in secret; such is His care. And He is so gracious as to reward you, and will even do so openly. So too with prayer. Vs 6: close the door of your room and pray in secret. God is so interested in you that He hears you even then – for He's Father. Nor do you have to use some sort of mantra you keep repeating to get His attention (vs 7). He's Father, and so knows your needs even before you ask. Instead, go straight to Him –He's interested, compassionate, has heart-felt feelings for you- and address Him as "Father" and ask Him whatever you need. He'll even forgive you –for He's a Father to the core of His being- He'll forgive you if you forgive sinners around you (vss 14f).

How should sinners speak to God? Should they emphasize His holiness and majesty, and so feel great distance between themselves and God – such distance that they scarcely dare to tell God their needs and ask for this or that? Should they imagine God as a Judge and so address Him as "Your worship"? Should they imagine God as a policeman, and so address Him as "Sir"? Jesus' instruction is emphatic: No! The disciples should remember the *covenant* God established with them in their childhood, how God promised to be *Father* for them. The disciples should remember what the Lord God had revealed in the Old Testament about His being a Father, how God involved Himself emotionally with His people, how He *felt* for them, how He was *interested* in them, cared for them, loved them. And that knowledge from the Old Testament *should give the disciples courage to pray*; they were to know that God was *even more approachable than one's earthly Father!*

We come to ours second point:

2. The reason for the title Father.

Given the rich content of the title Father, the question comes back to us with greater urgency: *on what grounds* may we use this title when we address God? God is *in heaven*; must there not be *distance* in the way we address Him?

Congregation, the reason why we are to address God as "Father" –and then have in mind all the rich data of Old Testament chapters as Ex 4, Dt 32, Ps 103, Hos 11, Is 64- is because *Jesus told us to!* Mt 6: "In this manner, therefore, pray: 'Our Father in heaven....'" If Jesus *told* us to address God as "Father", we *dare* not do otherwise!

As to *why* Jesus told us to address God as "Father", there are two comments we need to make. In the first place, Jesus is our Chief Prophet and Teacher, who has fully revealed to us the secret counsel and will of God (Lord's Day 12). That is: if *Jesus* tells us to address God with the word we use only with the closest man in our life, then it's obviously *the will of holy God Himself* that we sinners see Him as Father, see Him as close to us as a father, as approachable.

In the second place, God Himself sent His Son to earth *for the specific reason of paying for our sins*. Christ accomplished His mission, and so obtained reconciliation for sinners with God. Reconciliation: that means there is peace with God, harmony. What does a relation of peace look like? A *father-child* relation depicts that peace as good

as any other relationship we might find on earth. What's between a father and his toddler? I know: in the brokenness of life there are strained relations even at that age. But, thankfully, that's not common. Even in unbelieving homes the relation of a father to his toddler is one of love and care, and the relation of a toddler to his father one of trust and dependence. In a moment of need and danger, the youngster cries out for his Dad (it's an expression of trust and dependence), and his Dad is there is a flash – an expression of love and care. Christ has paid for sin, and so restored us to God. The reconciliation Christ obtained, that harmony and peace, has *color* to it, and a father-child relation describes that color well – says God. That is why He is pleased to call sinners His children, and commands sinful covenant children to call Him Father.

So it's clear, beloved, that behind the word 'Father' lies the whole gospel of Jesus' work on the cross! Indeed, when we take the word 'Father' on our lips, we are *confessing* His work! He can be Father only for Jesus' sake, He will hear our prayer only for Jesus' sake, He is eager to hear us only for Jesus' sake, He is compassionate to us only for Jesus' sake. *Father*: the word has the whole gospel of salvation tied up within it!

That leaves yet our last point:

3. *The encouragement of the title Father.*

What, brothers and sisters, does all this mean for our prayers? The first obvious implication is that the Lord would have us speak to Him *as readily as we would speak to an earthly father*. Yes, God is in heaven and we are on earth, and Yes, God is holy and we are sinful. But the Lord God does not want that reality to hinder our speaking to Him; He gave His Son to pay for sin, to overcome the distance, so that the relation of Paradise –where God and man spoke together freely- might be restored. Here our conviction that Christ triumphed on Calvary needs to translate into concrete action, the activity of *speaking readily and freely to God* as a child to his father, telling Him our circumstances, asking Him for our needs.

To be clear: this does not mean that God becomes a friend, a buddy, with whom we can engage in social banter. We are to feel free to speak to Him freely, readily, indeed. But the honor and respect that belongs to His being *Father* must most certainly affect the *manner* of our talk to God. He is Father "in heaven", and so we need to combine a freedom to speak to Him with speaking to Him respectfully. God is our Father, and our Father is God!

The second implication flowing from the title 'Father' is that we should dare to ask Him for all we need. There is no topic, no need, in which He's not interested. As children grow up there may be topics they'd rather not discuss with their parents, for whatever embarrassing or not so embarrassing reason. But the Lord God is a Father of deep compassion, His heart goes out to His children in whatever need they may find themselves, and so He wants to hear from us on *any topic* that concerns us.

There's a third encouragement here. Exactly because He's *Father* as described in Ex 4, Dt 32, Ps 103, Hos 11, He most certainly *will supply* the needs of His children. I refer here to Jesus' words in Mt 7:

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" (vss 7ff).

That's your Father in heaven, beloved: He will give you what you need far, far more thoroughly than your own father ever could! Romans 8: "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things?" (vss 31f).

See there the glories of the gospel, beloved! Whatever you need, speak to your Father in heaven about it, and He will certainly hear and give you what He in wisdom knows you need.

Hesitate to pray? God too holy, too remote, too busy to approach? We too sinful, too earthly to speak to God? No, beloved, No! Jesus Christ has triumphed on the cross so that we might be children of God once more and God be our

Father. And since He's our Father, we may speak to Him freely, openly, repeatedly, and ask Him for all we need.
Father: *He's approachable*. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 47 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 7 September 2003.

" THE PRIMARY TOPIC OF PRAYER IS TO BE THE SAME AS THE PURPOSE OF LIFE: GOD'S GLORY."

Text:

Lord's Day 47

122. Q. What is the first petition?

A. Hallowed be Thy Name. That is: Grant us first of all that we may rightly know Thee,[1] and sanctify, glorify, and praise Thee in all Thy works, in which shine forth Thy almighty power, wisdom, goodness, righteousness, mercy, and truth.[2] Grant us also that we may so direct our whole life-- our thoughts, words, and actions-- that Thy Name is not blasphemed because of us but always honoured and praised.[3]

[1] Jer. 9:23, 24; 31: 33, 34; Matt. 16:17; John 17:3. [2] Ex. 34:5-8; Ps. 145; Jer. 32:16-20; Luke 1:46-55, 68-75; Rom. 11: 33-36. [3] Ps. 115:1; Matt. 5:16.

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 5:1-16

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 68:1,2

Psalm 96:1,4

Psalm 115:1,5

Psalm 148:1,2,3,4

Psalm 135:1,2 & Hymn 47:2

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

What are we to speak to God about in our prayers? In Lord's Day 45 we answered the question like this: "all the things we need for body and soul" (A 118). "All the things we need," and our thoughts go to the needs of the day: wisdom to be good parents, strength to do our daily work, wherewithal in loneliness.

Jesus teaches us to pray. He tells us to address God as "Father", assures us that the almighty Creator of heaven and earth is approachable, is interested, cares for us. On the strength of that instruction, it seems natural that we indeed give priority in prayer to those very basic and real needs of daily living: wisdom to be good parents, strength to do our daily work, wherewithal in loneliness, etc.

So we're somewhat disappointed at the petition Jesus instructs us to pray first. What we are to pray first? "Hallowed be Your Name," says Jesus. This petition, it seems to us, is so far removed from the nuts and bolts of real life! Yet back in Lord's Day 45 we'd confessed that God wants us to ask of him "all the things *we* need for body and soul." Is there here not a contradiction?

No, brothers and sisters, there is not a contradiction. What do I need for body and soul? The answer to that question depends on how you answer *a more fundamental* question, and that's this: why do you exist? If you exist for your own sake, if you exist so that *you* enjoy life, your needs are quite different than if you exist for God. If you exist for self, your needs are self-centered; if you exist for God, your needs are God-centered.

Why *do* you exist? Why did God create the world, why did God create you, me? The Bible is empathic: the Lord made us *for the praise of His glory*. Indeed, the Holy Spirit has so renewed us that we say in Lord's Day 1 that He "makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for *Him*" again.

Well, congregation, in the first petition Jesus teaches us to speak to God first of all *from out of the purpose of our existence*. What we need for body and soul is first of all grace and strength to glorify God, to hallow His name. Hence Jesus' instruction: when you pray, the primary topic you speak about with God needs to be *His praise*. That's the first petition: "Hallowed be Your name."

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE PRIMARY TOPIC OF PRAYER IS TO BE THE SAME AS THE PURPOSE OF LIFE: GOD'S GLORY.

1. We pray that God is praised by us.
2. We pray that God is praised because of us.

1. We pray that God is praised by us.

"Hallowed be Your name," Jesus taught His disciples to pray. What are we to understand by the term 'name'? Our thoughts, congregation, are not to go to one of the names of God (be it 'God' or 'Father' or 'Yahweh'), but to His *reputation*, Who He is.

How can we know what God is like? How can we get to know His real name, His real reputation? In Article 2 of the *Belgic Confession* we echo God's revelation on the point like this: "We know Him by two means: First, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe." This creation, the Article continues, "is before our eyes as a most beautiful book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many letters leading us to perceive clearly the invisible things of God, namely, His eternal power and deity, as the apostle Paul says in Rom 1:20."

That's to say: God in heaven reveals to us on earth what He is like *by His works*, the things He does. What works? There is first His work of creation. Nothing existed except for Himself. He spoke, and this world came to be. Creation was a majestic display of His almighty power! The angels who were there when God fashioned the world burst forth into songs of praise for this God of such awesome power – says God in Job 38:7.

We were not there when God made the world. But ever since He made the world in the beginning, God continues to work. For, says Article 2 of the *Belgic Confession*, God preserves and governs the world He once made. And that's something we see, day by day. The sun rose this morning –how come?- because the Lord God kept the world turning through the night. We ate breakfast this morning –how come?- because the Lord in His goodness gave us food to eat. The birds are singing and building nests outside –how come?- because the Lord has filled their stomachs and worked in them the urge to reproduce. Ps 104:

"He sends the springs into the valleys; They flow among the hills.
They give drink to every beast of the field; The wild donkeys quench their thirst.
By them the birds of the heavens have their home; They sing among the branches.
He waters the hills from His upper chambers; The earth is satisfied with the fruit of Your works.
He causes the grass to grow for the cattle, And vegetation for the service of man" (10ff).

The psalmist continues to list the works of God as he saw them day by day, and sums up these works in vs 24 like this: "O Lord, how manifold are Your works! In wisdom You have made them all." God hasn't changed; His works abound around us today too, and they all point up for our benefit what God is like; they demonstrate His almighty power, His wisdom, His goodness, and so many other wonderful characteristics of the God whom Jesus tells us to address as "Father".

The works of God, though, are not limited to His preserving work of the creation He once made. The church confesses in Article 2 of the *Belgic Confession* that "we know Him by two means," and the second is this: "He makes Himself

more clearly and fully known to us by His holy and divine Word." And this Word tells us not only of God creating and upholding this world, but also that we ruined it through our fall into sin, *and God set to work to redeem it*. He gave His only Son, sent Christ to earth (Christmas), poured out His just judgment on Him (Good Friday), took Him into heaven and exalted Him to His right hand to be Lord of all (Ascension Day). Just before He went to the cross Jesus says that during the time He did His work on earth He "manifested [God's] name" (Jn 17:6), and that's to say: through His preaching and His miracles and His way of life He demonstrated to people what God was really like, showed them His righteousness, His mercy, His truth. When Jesus triumphed over the devil and paid for sin, the angels in heaven and the elders in heaven burst out in praise for God; His *works of redemption* prompted adoration (cf Rev 11:15ff; 12:12).

Again, we did not see God's work of redemption in Bethlehem, nor His work on Calvary, nor Christ's exaltation to God's right hand; we did not yet exist when those things happened 2000 years ago. But the Christ who triumphed continues His work today. How come we are in church today? That, brothers and sisters, is because the exalted Christ *gathers* a church, takes us from our various homes and brings us here. How come there is faith in our hearts? That's *God's work* in Jesus Christ. How come the atmosphere in our homes is different from the atmosphere of the homes of unbelievers? Brothers and sisters, it's because *God is at work*, and through His works He shows us what He is like. In our Lord's Day we mention six characteristics; in God's works "shine forth [God's] almighty power, wisdom, goodness, righteousness, mercy, and truth." In Article 1 of the *Belgic Confession* the church mentions 14 characteristics. The number is not important; one can use so many different words to describe what God is like. The point is this: *through His works God displays Who He is*, reveals His reputation, His name. *And those works continue today*, both around us and in us.

But the thing is: *are we in fact seeing these works as God's works?* Do we actually read the book of nature –and that's to say: of God's acts in the creation around us- so that we come to know *God's reputation* better? Think about it, brothers and sisters: when you opened the curtains this morning and saw the light of day outside, did you recognize that *God had been at work overnight* – and now you see evidence of His mighty power in keeping the world turning and His goodness in waking you up? As you heard the birds singing and saw the flowers blooming, did you see these birds and flowers as evidence that *God was at work*? More, did you recognize in the new daylight and the songs of the birds and the colors of the flowers something of *what God is like*, something of His almighty power, His wisdom, and His goodness? That you are in church today, that there is faith in your heart, that your home has a Christian atmosphere: we take it for granted – but do you recognize that you are in church and there is faith in your heart and your home has its atmosphere *because the ascended Savior is at work today*? This, brothers and sisters, is the hard reality of this broken life: *we get so used to the way things go on this earth that we don't pause to recognize God's revelation of Himself in the things He does in our lives!* And because we don't see Him in the birds and flowers, in the atmosphere of the home and the safety of travel on the road, we don't praise Him the way we ought to either. Yet it was for His praise that He created us, and it is for His praise that He continues to do His works in our lives and in nature around us. We do not sufficiently see it, and *therefore* Jesus instructs us to ask God –in the words of Lord's Day 47- to "grant us first of all that we may rightly *know* You, and [so] sanctify, glorify and praise You in all Your works" which you continue to do before our eyes day by day. Make us to know You, to appreciate Who You are, what kind of a God –Your almighty power, Your wisdom, Your goodness, Your righteousness, Your mercy, Your truth- so that in turn we praise you the more. *That*, says Jesus, is first of all to be the topic of our talking with God.

Here I draw to your attention the phrase 'hallowed be' in this petition. The term 'hallow' means 'to make holy', and 'to make holy' means 'to set apart'. When you set something apart from sin, you make it pure, and so in that context 'holy' comes to mean something similar to 'pure'. But God's name, God's reputation has nothing of sin in it, and so to 'make it holy' does not mean to 'make it pure', but means instead 'to set apart', to 'make unique.' The point is this: there are many people around us who have well known reputations. David Beckham has a huge reputation in the world of sport, Nicole Kidman is a big name in Hollywood (at least she's well known in Australia), George Bush has an international reputation in the world of politics. Well-known names all, with well-known reputations – for better or for worse. What are we asking now for God? This: *set your name apart* from all other big names of this world! Your mighty power, Your wisdom, Your goodness, Your righteousness, Your mercy, Your truth and whatever other characteristic one might mention are so vastly superior to whatever power or mercy or beauty Beckham might have or Kidman might have or Bush might have that you can't be praised the way they are; Father, set Your name *apart*, make it increasingly *unique*, cause one and all to recognize, and to extol You far above whatever praise anybody else would

ever receive. That, beloved, is the first petition: because You are so great, grant me grace to praise You far and far above whatever praise I would give to a George Bush or a David Beckham or a Jana Pittman or any other name that might be mentioned. Open my eyes that I delight in Your work far, far more than I could ever delight in the works of any man, however great.

In fact, in the Greek of the Bible a form of the verb 'hallow' is used that conveys a sense of *urgency*. Jesus wants His disciples –and therefore us- to ask God to cause His name to be hallowed not in the far distant future (for example, when Christ comes back on the clouds of heaven), but to urge God to make sure that His name is hallowed *now*. God's reputation is so wonderful that there's a holy impatience in this petition! On this earth today God's glorious name is ignored, or it's degraded, or it's blasphemed. But that name, God's reputation, is too great, too wonderful, too holy for that! So Jesus instructs God's people to *urge* God to do something to cause His name to be praised on earth, and do it *now*. Let God arise and defend His name *today*, let God arise and demonstrate to all the world *in September of 2003* how mighty He is, how wise, how good, how righteous, how merciful, how true, how holy, how jealous and whatever characteristic one could mention. Let God arise and cause one and all to see Who He is, so that in turn one and all bow their knees before this glorious God whose name is above every name, and praise Him. And of course: it's first of all *we*, who may call Him *Father*, who want to praise this wonderful God. Father, open our eyes to see your works in our lives, and praise You because of them! For, we confess, we exist for God's glory.

I come to our second point:

2. We pray that God is praised because of us.

Lord's Day 47 is divided into two parts. The first section focused on us, that *we* mighty rightly know God so that we might sanctify, glorify and praise Him. Praising God, after all, is the reason for our existence to begin with.

As it is, though, there are many, many more people on this earth than the Christians. We for our part have need for grace to praise God, but what about the unbelievers? Is God's name not so great and wonderful that they ought also to praise Him? That is the focus of the second part of the answer of our Lord's Day.

Those unbelievers. They deny that God exists, put their head in the sand and ignore Him. The Lord will execute His judgment upon them for that transgression. After all –I quote again from Article 2 of the *Belgic Confession*- the world around us is "as a most beautiful book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many letters leading us to *perceive clearly the invisible qualities of God*, namely, *His eternal power and deity*, as the apostle Paul says in Rom 1:20." His eternal power and deity are so visible out there, the confession continues, that "these things are sufficient to convict men and leave them without excuse." All men out there ought to see God's works in giving rain and causing the sun to shine, in feeding the birds and gathering His church, etc. That people refuse to see it is their own problem, and they will be judged for that refusal.

Here, though, is displayed again the goodness of God. These unbelievers refuse to see God's works in the world around them, and so praise Him; that birds build nests in springtime, they say, is simply Evolution, the way of Nature. So the Lord God sets before these unbelievers *other evidence of His work*. That other evidence is *His children*. Unbelievers should see that these children of God are *different*, have something about them that's not of this earth. People by nature are selfish, harbor resentment, get bitter in trouble, etc. Paul puts it this way: "the works of the flesh ... are adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions," etc (Gal 5:19f). But God the Holy Spirit works in Christians so that they are different, are changed. Says Paul: "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal 5:22f). This work of the Spirit in the heart of the sinner *changes* the sinner, and the unbelieving world cannot but notice the change. Our community is very well aware that Free Reformed people – Dutchies, as they call us- are different. They may not recognize where the difference comes from, but they do recognize the fact that we're different. And that is to say that they see something of God-at-work! And that bit of recognition already brings praise to God.

For that reason, brothers and sisters, it is imperative that we act in a fashion consistent with the change God the Spirit worked in our hearts. Where we develop a name for ourselves as Christians, or even Free Reformed Christians (Dutchies, so called), and then in a particular instance act in a distinctly unchristian fashion, the unbelieving neighbor

who sees it will respond with: those Dutchies are hypocrites! If that's religion, you can have it! That's called serving God? Forget that God!

You are aware of David's sin with Bathsheba, how this man of God committed adultery with his neighbor's wife. When he found out she was pregnant, he turned around and killed her husband, then married the widow. In the course of the months, Nathan the prophet confronted David with his sin, and David repented. Then we read these words from Nathan to David: "The Lord also has put away your sin; you shall not die. However, because by this deed you have given great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme, the child also who is born to you shall surely die" (2 Sam 12:13f). You see the point, beloved? The neighbor is the silent bystander, and he sees what David, the child of God, did. Then the neighbor, that unbeliever, that enemy of God, responded by blaspheming God's name – what kind of a God is that, that He lets His people steal somebody else's wife and then kill the husband too!

Our Lord Jesus Christ underlines the importance of our public conduct on exactly this point. Says Jesus in the passage we read from Mt 5: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." Jesus gives this instruction to people who had just heard the Beatitudes. "Blessed are the poor in spirit," Jesus had said, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven." The "poor in spirit" are the spiritual beggars, those who acknowledge their bankruptcy before God and depend on His mercy. Such people are blessed, are happy, because –Jesus promises– "theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

"Blessed are those who mourn," Jesus had continued, "for they shall be comforted." These people mourn not because of the death of a loved one, but mourn instead because they sorrow over their sins. Their sins bother them, and so they can be happy, blessed, because they are comforted in the gospel of Jesus' sacrifice.

"Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth." The meek are those who do not stand up for their rights, but turn the other cheek. These are they who follow the example of the Lord Jesus; when He was reviled, He did not revile in return. It may appear that the meek become the downtrodden, get the worst of life, but Jesus promises a bright future; "they shall inherit the earth."

The list continues, and we understand: Jesus is describing here people who have no hope in themselves, but who cast themselves completely on the Lord God for all their needs. These people know: God almighty *works*, is busy in the bits and pieces of this life, and He will certainly protect His children and supply their needs. So I can concentrate on being merciful to others as God is merciful to me, can concentrate on showing peace as God in Christ has given me peace. Then yes, people may well revile and persecute and speak evil of you because of that attitude (vs 11), but, says Jesus in vs 12, don't let that bother you for your reward is great in heaven. You, Jesus continues in vs 13, are to be *that* kind of person, and then you are "the salt of the earth." Or, different analogy, vs 14, you are to be that kind of person, and then "you are the light of the world." Well now, let others see your light, let others see that you take God for real in your life and so mourn your sins, take God for real and so let God defend you, take God for real and so show mercy to the unworthy. That kind of conduct is *different*, is not normal for sinful humans, and so the people around you will notice that you are different, have been changed, and they will puzzle, and may conclude that maybe God is real after all. In any case, when unbelievers speak positively of you, they indirectly give praise to God for they see His work in your life. That's the second part of Lord's Day 47: "Grant us also that we may so direct our whole life –our thoughts, our words, and actions– that Your Name is not blasphemed because of us but always honored and praised."

What shall we pray for first of all? Food and drink, a car, good marks, a promotion? We do not exist for ourselves, and so our talk with God may not revolve around *me*. We exist for God, and so all our lives need to be directed to seeing God's greatness and praising Him for it. We're by nature blind to God's works, and even as renewed people we remain so shortsighted. So we pray for grace to see God's works clearly in the bits and pieces of our daily lives, so that we in turn praise Him the more. And we pray also that our own conduct may prompt those around us to see something of God's greatness too – to the greater praise of the God of glory before whom the angels constantly sing their songs of praise. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 48 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 14 September 2003.

" IN PRAYER WE ADDRESS THE WORLD'S KING ABOUT THE WORLD'S PROBLEMS ."

Text:

Lord's Day 48

123. Q. What is the second petition?

A. Thy kingdom come. That is: So rule us by Thy Word and Spirit that more and more we submit to Thee.[1] Preserve and increase Thy church.[2] Destroy the works of the devil, every power that raises itself against Thee, and every conspiracy against Thy holy Word.[3] Do all this until the fulness of Thy kingdom comes, wherein Thou shalt be all in all.[4]

[1] Ps. 119:5, 105; 143:10; Matt. 6:33. [2] Ps. 51:18; 122:6-9; Matt. 16:18; Acts 2:42-47. [3] Rom. 16:20; I John 3:8. [4] Rom. 8:22, 23; I Cor. 15:28; Rev. 22: 17, 20.

Scripture Reading:

Psalm 47

Matthew 28:16-20

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 99:1,2

Psalm 93:1

Psalm 47:1,2,3

Psalm 96:5,6,7,8

Psalm 24:1,2 & Hymn 47:3

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The world paused this past week to remember the horrid events of September 11 two years ago. So much has been done to counter terrorism, but it's painfully clear –witness binLaden's latest tape- that there's still so very much to do. Everybody knows: the world has changed because of September 11; a mantle of uncertainty and fear envelops the globe. And what, we wonder, can we do about it? We're sure: there's nothing we, in our little corner in Kelmscott, can do to help overcome these enormous problems.

The problems of the world, though, are not just with terrorists and suicide bombers. Our own local community knows its unrest. So many of us can tell stories of burglary, so many of us know neighborhood children who grow up in a one-parent home. Alcohol abuse, drug abuse: it's all around us. And again the question arises: what can we do about it? We try a bit here and do a bit there, but we recognize: it's just a scratching at the surface. There's so very little we can do; we feel so helpless. What are *we* in the face of the mega-problems of our time!

Jesus gave His disciples instruction on prayer. To go into your inner room and speak with God seems so weak, so ineffective. But Jesus assures His disciples: you're speaking to *the King*! The prayer of a righteous man is effective because the King to whom you're praying is King of the world, He hears and answers – and makes His kingdom come in 2003.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

IN PRAYER WE ADDRESS THE WORLD'S KING ABOUT THE WORLD'S PROBLEMS.

1. The confession of the petition,
2. The content of the petition.

1. The Confession of the Petition.

"Your kingdom come," Jesus instructs the disciples –and hence His church- to pray. There's an implicit confession in this petition, and that is that God already is King, already has a kingdom. But it's not here, it's somewhere else, and we're asking God to make it come here. What is this kingdom? What holds it back? Here I need to sketch some background.

Adam and Eve lived in a Paradise that knew no suicide bombers, or terrorists that hijacked airplanes to fly into towers. They knew no danger of alcohol abuse on their street, or of drug abuse, or of child abuse. Their Visitor was God Himself, who came to them in the cool of the day. Their Visitor, their God, was *King* over all, and Adam and Eve knew well that they needed to submit to Him, listen; more, they knew well that as long as they submitted and obeyed they would live in peace and safety – and they would have no problems.

In an event we cannot comprehend, some of the creatures of God's realm one day rebelled against God the King. Certain angels "did not keep their proper domain, but left their own abode" (Jude 6). Here was *rebellion* within God's kingdom! God remained King over the world, but some of His subjects –He'd recently created them!- refused any longer to acknowledge Him as King, and began an effort to overthrow the King, their Maker. The effort of the rebels was successful inasmuch as Adam and Eve –though created in the image of God- caved in to their attacks and ate of the forbidden fruit. Rebellion *spread* from the realm of the angels (and angels are *servants*) to the realm of *God's own children* – people. God had elevated His children, people, Adam and Eve, to the high status of having dominion over God's world, God's kingdom. But we fell – and with us we took the whole world into rebellion. The consequence was drastic: God sent us out of the Garden, out of the environment of peace and safety we had before. The wilderness outside the Garden was a place of hunger and toil, was a place of parental grief over depraved children, of suffering and pain and anguish. That's because life outside the Garden is characterized by *rebellion*, disobedience to the King who made us and knew how to maintain law and order. The water shortages and pollution of our society are the consequence of our rebellion in Paradise, and so are the high-speed chases on our roads. The broken homes of our town are the consequence of our rebellion in Paradise, and so is the alcohol and drug abuse of our community. The suicide bombers of the Middle East and the threats of binLaden are the consequence of our rebellion in Paradise, and so are the terrorist attacks in Bali and the Marriot Hotel in Jakarta. The tensions of living with a rogue state as North Korea are the consequence of our rebellion in Paradise, and so is the assassination of the Shiite leader in Najaf. Make no mistake: the problems of today's world all have their roots in the fall into sin, in our rebellion against the God who made us, the King of the world. *These kinds of things could not happen if we still lived in Paradise.*

What, then, is the answer to the problems of the world? The Biblical answer, brothers and sisters, is easy: *people need to turn again to acknowledge God as King!* Obedience to His commands is the way of life, as sure as rebellion is the way of death.

Is God then King? Or has the rebellion resulted in His being dethroned? *Satan* would dearly love us to think that God has indeed been dethroned. But the Lord is emphatic in His Word: He remains King Supreme, even though many in His kingdom refuse to acknowledge Him. In His revelation from heaven on high, the Lord assures us –Ps 47- that "the Lord Most High is awesome; He is a great King over all the earth" (vs 2). He gives us the same message in Ps 93: "The Lord reigns, He is clothed with majesty" (vs 1). I remind you too of the visions Daniel saw and the dreams he interpreted; all point up the reality of God's continuing sovereignty over the world.

This sovereign King sent His Son to earth to defeat the devil and pay for the transgressions of the rebels. Christ triumphed on the cross, and so it pleased the Lord God to exalt Him to heaven, to the throne of the world. Just before He ascended, Jesus spoke those mighty words of Matthew 28: "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (vs 18). Notice what He says about His Kingship: "*all authority* has been given to Me." As John saw in the

Revelation shown to Him: the triumphant Christ could open the scroll in which God had written all the things that were to happen in the course of New Testament world history. He can open the scroll, can make history happen, because He is *King of kings*. The Book of Revelation underlines the point: earthquakes and hunger and floods and wars and biochemical attacks and terrorism come not by chance but because the King of kings opens the seals of the book of history. Let it be fixed in your minds, brothers and sisters: your Savior controls the events of the world sovereignly. It was He who destroyed Hitler's *Reich* 50-odd years ago – be it that He used the allies. And it was *He* who destroyed Saddam Hussein's reign of terror – be it that He used the American army.

Let the point be fixed in our minds: what you saw on the news last week and read in the paper may describe so very much *rebellion* against the King of the world, but Christ *remains* King nevertheless. He is *King*, and the entire world is His kingdom!

But: so many millions of our world *do not acknowledge* Christ as King! They live in rebellion, and therefore have so much misery in their lives. What we can do about it? Says Jesus: pray! Pray what? "Your kingdom come." That prayer is *a confession*, a confession on our part that Yes, Christ is king, has a kingdom. In fact, His kingdom is this world. That prayer is *a confession* that so many citizens of Christ's kingdom live in rebellion against the King. That prayer is *a confession* that the King of glory ought to be recognized as King throughout the whole world. And *that's why* we ask the Lord to make His kingdom "come". That is: in our world of misery and rebellion, we ask God to make people acknowledge more and more that Christ actually *is* King.

That brings us to our second point:

2. The Content of the Petition.

Our Lord's Day describes the content of this second petition in four points. The first is this: "so rule us by Your Word and Spirit that more and more we submit to You."

Given what we've said in the first point of this sermon, this first aspect is rather surprising. We'd expect the Catechism to explain the petition in relation to the rebels, ie, make the rebels in Your kingdom to acknowledge that You are King. But look: the Catechism does not first of all speak about the rebels; the Catechism speaks first of all about 'us'. That, we understand, includes you and me, people who do acknowledge that Christ is King of the world today, people who also delight in God's law to do it. Then we wonder: is it so fitting that we should ask God that *we submit*? Don't we already do that?

The point, of course, is that we have but a small beginning of the obedience God requires. We acknowledge the Lord is King, and so we want to obey. But time and again we catch ourselves having *disobeyed* God's commands, done our own thing. We know what the Lord says about how to keep the Sunday, about how to obey the traffic laws of our land, about the need to be merciful as God is merciful, about honoring our parents, etc, etc. But we fall so short of God's standard, *and that disobedience on our part is rebellion too!* We say that Christ is King, and so we submit, but our submission leaves so much to be desired, and so –upon Jesus' command- we *pray*, we ask God to make His kingdom come, and ask it first of all with respect to our own hearts. Father, we pray, we know that You are King, and so we ask: make Your kingdom come first of all in our own hearts; make us to submit to You more and more!

Our King, though, is not a dictator. He doesn't compel obedience through torment, terror, murder; He's not like Hussein was. That's why we ask Him to "rule us by" ... not a heavy hand or a gun, but "rule us by Your Word and Spirit." For the Spirit through the Word works in sinners' *hearts*, works faith, works conversion, regeneration; through the Word He *changes* hearts so that hearts inclined to rebellion learn to love God and serve Him eagerly. That's what we ask: work mightily in us through Your Holy Spirit that more and more we eagerly do what You instruct us to do – no matter what the consequence to us.

We realize: we need to do more than pray; those who pray also need to work. That means specifically: *we do what we can* to submit more and more to the instructions of our King and Lord in the dust and dirt of this daily life. We *strive* to obey the Lord more and more.

In the second place, says the Catechism, we ask God in this petition to "preserve and increase Your church." With this

aspect we're moving closer to the need amongst the rebels of God's kingdom. You see: Christ's kingdom includes the entire world; everybody on our planet is a citizen of Christ's kingdom. Most, it is true, refuse to admit that, live in rebellion against the King. But the Lord through His Word and Spirit has changed the hearts of many, and He gathers these regenerated people into His church. The church: that's *the gathering of the obedient citizens of Christ's kingdom*. But that gathering is made up of imperfect people. So these *obedient citizens* ask the Lord to make them submit more and more to His kingship, make that kingdom come more and more in their hearts. But if that's true in their hearts, it's true also in the church; that gathering of obedient citizens is so weak.... Hence the prayer: "preserve Your church!"

But the prayer is not only that God preserve the church; the prayer is also that God *increase* the church. With that request, the church hooks on to what Jesus said on the day of His ascension. "All authority," He said before He went to heaven, "has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Mt 28:18); Christ is exalted King over all. Then Jesus drew out the *implication* of His position as King; said He: "Go *therefore* and make disciples of all nations" (vs 19). That was an instruction to the disciples, and in them to the church. Mission, the church's task to spread the gospel over all the earth, is the *direct consequence* of Jesus' exaltation as King! In our Lord's Day the church takes this mandate seriously, and so goes to God in prayer with the request to "increase Your church." That is to say: Lord, make thousands of rebels on this earth into obedient citizens of Your kingdom. Cause the gospel to go out, work mightily through Your Holy Spirit so that hearts are changed, made alive, turned to faith in Jesus Christ. Change rebels, Lord, into obedient citizens!

Here, congregation, is a recognition too, then, that only the *gospel* can supply the answers to the problems of the world. The problems came upon the earth with the fall into sin. Christ came to earth to pay for sin, and so in principle to restore Paradise. He rules the world, and it's those who acknowledge His kingship who can enjoy peace again. It's that awareness that compels the church here to beseech God to increase His church, to work in such a way that the gospel spreads over the earth and the hearts of many be changed. It's the underlying premise: only the gospel can bring peace on earth, only the gospel can heal the hearts of New Yorkers broken by the attack of two years ago, only the gospel can give peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, only the gospel can bring happiness in Iraq, in Indonesia, in Afghanistan. Only through faith in Jesus Christ can people escape the misery of the fall into sin and return to the peace of Paradise. The church realizes that, and therefore prays: increase Your church, make people to acknowledge that Christ is King!

Again, to pray this petition means also that *we work* to carry it out ourselves. The gospel is to be spread? That takes preachers of the gospel, ministers and missionaries. Only the gospel can give peace in the Middle East and in the streets of Kelmscott? Then it's for us to do more than pray for preachers; it's also for us to consider what we ourselves can do to make sure there are preachers. This past week the Year 10 and 11 students focused on career decisions; what should I become? In the process of answering that question, there are so many aspects to consider, so many questions to explore. But the first question, brothers and sisters, older and younger, is this: Lord, how can I best serve You in Your kingdom? The first question is *not*: what work do I think I'm going to enjoy? Nor is it: where can I make the most money? Nor: where will life be easiest? Christ is *King*, and so we are *servants*, and therefore the first question is: how, Lord, can I best be of service in Your kingdom? And what does this world, Christ's kingdom, need? All the misery and grief you read about in the Comment News and in the West comes from *rebellion against God*, and Christ has come to conquer Satan and pay for sin, Yes, *is today King of kings*. **There's** the answer to the problems of the world: acknowledge that Christ is King, and so submit to Him! That's the answer, and so what this world needs is not more soldiers in Iraq or a greater spirit of tolerance amongst religions; what this world needs is the *gospel*, and therefore *preachers of the gospel*! What you can do to make this world a better place? Whatever is in your power to spread the gospel! This second petition, "Your kingdom come", includes in it the prayer to God asking Him how you can best be of service in His kingdom. You, Lord, are King: use Me as You will; I'm not here for me but for You, tell me what to do!

The third aspect the Catechism mentions is this: "destroy the works of the devil, every power that raises itself against You, and every conspiracy against Your holy Word." Through His triumph on the cross the Lord Jesus Christ has defeated the devil. But the devil refuses to roll over, refuses to admit defeat. Rev 12: "Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time" (vs 12). Today the devil is, says Paul, "the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience" (Eph 2:2). He's "in the air", and full of wrath, doing whatever he can to foment more and more

disobedience on the earth against the King of kings. Terrorists have been tracked and tried as a result of the Bali bombings, and fathers who refuse to take responsibility for the children they conceive can be compelled to supply some sort of support. But behind all this evil lies the instigation of the devil, and he will never be charged and tried in an earthly court; he's beyond what we people can handle. Yet he remains Enemy Number One on this earth! Are we helpless in the face of such a foe? Not at all! Our Lord told us to *pray*, to beseech God to make His kingdom come, and that means too that God's great enemy be destroyed, and every effort of his to foment more rebellion on the earth be destroyed also. Yes, the devil deceives the nations, but –remember the gospel- Christ has triumphed and He has bound the devil. So we may boldly ask the King of the world to destroy every work of the devil in the realm of politics and terror, in the realm of drugs and abuse, in the realm of marriage breakdown and adultery, in the realm of false preaching and unbelief. The devil too great a foe? His conspiracies too much for us so that we ought to live in anguish and terror? Not so, beloved, not so! He is defeated! So we confidently join with the church of all ages and beseech the Lord to make His kingdom come!

The last aspect the church mentions in our Lord's Day is the plea that God please continue to "do all this until the fullness of Your kingdom comes, wherein You shall be all in all." The Lord has not promised to remove problems from this earth; the miseries resulting from the fall into sin will continue on earth until the day of Christ's return. On that day every angel and person in heaven above and on the earth beneath and in the waters under the earth will bow the knee to the King of kings; yes, even the devil and his demons will need to acknowledge that Christ is king after all. When that happens, the Lord will wipe every rebel off the earth. After that day this earth will be inhabited only by those who acknowledge Christ as King, only by those who obey Him. And because they obey Him perfectly –eagerly so!- will this earth be Paradise Restored – no more tears, no more pain, no more suffering, no more terror, no more brokenness! For that day we long: the fullness of God's Kingdom!

Today we live in this world of so much misery. Ours is a global village, so that we know of so much suffering, so much evil happening anywhere in the world. In the face of all that evil we feel so helpless, and because we can't make any positive contribution we tend to isolate ourselves from this world and write it off as lost.... But isolate ourselves is not God's will for us, and think we can't do anything is not God's revelation either. What we can do? Pray! Remember: the prayer of a righteous man has great power in its effects (cf James 5:16). Pray: Your kingdom come! And join the prayer with work: use me, Lord, in Your kingdom, for Your glory! Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 49 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 21 September 2003.

" IN CONSTANT PRAYER WE ASK GOD FOR GRACE TO DO AND ACCEPT HIS WILL FOR US."

Text:

Lord's Day 49

124. Q. What is the third petition?

A. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. That is: Grant that we and all men may deny our own will, and without any murmuring obey Thy will, for it alone is good.[1] Grant also that everyone may carry out the duties of his office and calling[2] as willingly and faithfully as the angels in heaven.[3]

[1] Matt. 7:21; 16:24-26; Luke 22:42; Rom. 12:1, 2; Tit. 2:11, 12. [2] I Cor. 7:17-24; Eph. 6:5-9. [3] Ps. 103:20, 21.

Scripture Reading:

Revelation 22:6-17

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 34:1,3

Psalms 103:8

Psalms 89:3,4

Psalms 25:4,5

Psalms 143:6,7 & Hymn 47:4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

On this earth today countless tears are shed day by day, because so many people are frustrated, angry, bitter. What about heaven? How many tears, do you think, do the angels of heaven shed?

I ask the question because the Scriptures hold the behavior of the angels of heaven before us as an example for our behavior. That is: to overcome tears, we need to respond to God's will as the angels do. So Jesus teaches us to pray, to beseech God that His will be done on earth as the angels do it in heaven. Jesus wants us to pray this wherever we get our hands dirty with the real troubles and trials of daily life. For the tears of this life will not disappear unless things on earth become as they today are in heaven.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

IN CONSTANT PRAYER WE ASK GOD FOR GRACE TO DO AND ACCEPT HIS WILL FOR US.

1. The background to the petition,
2. The example of heaven,
3. The implication for each of us.

1. The Background to the Petition.

The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. They did that in the dirt and dust of real life, made their request in the

midst of the tears and frustrations that characterize life on earth since the fall into sin. In His reply the Lord told them how to address God - "Father"- told them also what to say: "Hallowed be Your Name, Your kingdom come." Then He continued: say also: "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

The first question that needs to be considered is this: what is meant by the word 'will'? You will know that the word 'will' in Scripture has two distinct meanings. One can speak of God's "revealed will", and then the reference is to God's law, God's commands as they are spelled out in Holy Writ. We are to do God's will, obey His commands.

The word 'will' can also refer to God's "secret will", His plan for the world as He has determined it before He created it. That secret counsel, that secret plan is the will of God that is unfolded as the history of the world moves along. So the events of September 11 in America and of October 12 in Bali were recorded in God's counsel, His secret will, and they occurred at God's time. So too the bits and pieces of our personal lives.

Jesus instructs us to pray that God's "will be done." Which of those two meanings of 'will' are we to think of?

It's obvious that the first meaning certainly belongs to this petition. "Your will be done," and we're asking God for the grace needed to do the will of God as He has revealed it to us in His commandments. In the words of our Lord's Day: "Grant that we and all men may deny our own will, and ... obey Your will." Here's a prayer that we receive grace to obey the law of God.

But we should not, brothers and sisters, exclude the second understanding of the word 'will'. The Lord God has a plan for each one of us, a plan that includes whether we get married or not, that includes whether we get cancer or not, that includes whether our lives will be easy or not. We do not know today what is written in God's plan for us next year. But we do know today what God had written in His plan for us last year. After all, last year has come and gone – exactly as God ordained it for us. Now the thing is: how do *we evaluate* what the Lord God let happen in our lives last year – or this past decade? We can respond to God's secret will, God's plan for us as it has unfolded in our lives, in one of two ways. We can respond *with criticism*, with the conviction that the way God has dealt with us is not good *or* we can respond with *acceptance*. The first, criticism, leads to becoming *bitter* at life's circumstances, makes one angry at God for letting it happen, or angry at people for hurting us. And bitterness, anger at the raw deal we've been dealt in life, can lead to feelings of resentment.... We know the consequence: where anger and bitterness dominate in our hearts, prayer becomes so difficult, tears abound, frustration triumphs, relations with some people collapses – there's so much misery.... On the other hand, when we respond to what God gives with a humble heart, when we *accept* His will for us, contentment and peace fills our hearts.

What we pray for with the third petition? Yes, we pray for grace and strength to *obey* God's will, God's commands. But more: we pray also for grace and strength to *accept* God's will, God's plan in our lives. For: *accepting* the way God leads our lives is part of God's *command* to us; God does not want us to protest His actions, His leadership, in our lives. That is faith; He is our Father, we His children, and so He wants us to acknowledge in the rough and tumble of real life what we confess in Lord's Day 1: "without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head, indeed, all things must work together for my salvation."

But: to *criticize* God lies so close at hand for us! We don't like our circumstances and so criticize God for the way He has led our lives. Or: we don't like His commands, we feel that in our circumstances His commands are too harsh..., and so we feel free to disobey. Either way, we protest God's will for us. And in criticizing God's will for us we shed so many tears, experience so much frustration, end up with so much heartache. It's true for us who know God; it's equally true for so many who do not know God. On this earth *so many tears are shed* because *we don't like the circumstances in which God has led our lives*.

The disciples were real-life people, like you and me, with the same struggles to accept that God's commands were good commands in their circumstances, with the same struggles also to accept that the things God let happen in their lives were good; they were by nature *as critical of God's commands and guidance* as we are, and they shed as many tears of frustrations at God's commands and at God's leading as we do. They sought from Jesus instruction about prayer, and Jesus told them to pray this: "Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

That brings us to our second point:

2. *The Example of Heaven.*

Heaven. The Lord has not told us a great deal about heaven. Yes, He is Lord of heaven, and His will is done there, His secret counsel carried out in heaven just as it is on earth and His revealed will obeyed. What the big difference is between heaven and earth? This: in heaven there is *never any protest against what God does*. On earth there is rebellion, on earth there is criticism of God. *But not in heaven, not anymore!*

Scriptures tell us that heaven is God's dwelling; there triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit have their home. Scriptures add that with God in heaven are the angels and the saints who have died. Both angels and saints *do* God's will in heaven perfectly, and *accept* God's will perfectly too. The Lord has not told us much about the saints in heaven, has told us more about the angels. So when our Lord's Day discusses the third petition, it refers not to the saints but to the angels.

The angels. We look up to them, venerate them because they live *in heaven*, with God. But from Revelation 22 we learn that that is emphatically not correct. John fell at the feet of the angel to worship him, but the angel was insistent: "See that you do not do that!" Why not? "For I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren the prophets, and of those who keep the words of this book" (vss 8f). Notice the angel's self-description: "I am your fellow servant." And that's true not just of John, but also of all who keep the words of God; the angels and we are "*fellow servants*". That is: angels are to *obey God* just as we are, yes, angels are to *accept* what God puts on their path just as we need to accept it. Servants: *they have no right of reply*.

From our perspective on earth, we expect the angels to obey God perfectly, never criticize God or protest His commands or His actions. After all, we say, the angels are in heaven where it's perfect, and so obeying God and accepting what He gives should not be a problem.... Yet, congregation, there are data in Scripture that indicate that submitting to the will of God in heaven is not as simple as it sounds. Consider the following.

"In the beginning," says Genesis 1, "God created the heavens and the earth," and that includes the angels. He created countless multitudes of angels, and gave them a twofold task: they were to praise and glorify God as well as function as His servants. So, when God laid the foundations of the earth, the angels (says God to Job) burst forth into songs of praise to God for His wonderful works (38:7).

But not so long after God created the angels and they sang God's praise for His creating work, a number of these angels rebelled against God (Jude 6). We do not know how many of the angels rebelled, but many did. That is: not all the angels of heaven obeyed God's will anymore! And yes, they were still allowed free access into heaven. Think of Job 1: the angels of God presented themselves before God and Satan appeared also (vs 6) – and spoke up in heaven against Job, criticized God's care for Job (vs 9). Think also of the vision Zechariah saw, where Satan stood before the Lord to oppose Joshua the high priest in God's own presence (Zech 3). You see: ever since the fall of the angels God's will was not automatically done in heaven!

Many good angels continued to obey God. But: did they have an easy time accepting what God let happen in their lives? Remember: all the angels used to stand shoulder-to-shoulder singing God's praise. On the day of Satan's rebellion the ranks of the angels were thinned drastically. Did the good angels protest that God let this rebellion happen? Shortly after the rebellion amongst the angels in heaven, the good angels saw from heaven above what was happening in the Garden of Eden, how Satan tempted the woman – and she ate! Nothing comes by chance, but all from the almighty hand of the God they ceaselessly praised. Did they criticize God for letting that fall into sin happen on earth? Shortly after that fall into sin God sent some angels from heaven to earth to guard the entrance to the Garden, the way to the tree of life; did the angels criticize God for locking man out of Paradise?

So I can go on. God sent angels to Sodom and Gomorrah, to turn the cities upside down. Did they protest on behalf of the children in the city? God sent an angel to kill the first born of Egypt. Did he protest his commission? The book of Revelation makes clear that the plagues God pours upon earth today come by means of angels; they blow the trumpets and pour out the vials that begin the plagues. Do they protest? Here now is the point, beloved: *nowhere in Scripture do we read of a single word of protest on the part of the angels!* The picture the Scriptures give of the good angels is that *they are willing servants*, readily and eagerly doing whatever the Lord gives them to do. Ps 103: the angels of heaven

"do His word," they "do His pleasure" (vss 20f). Never a protest, never a complaint, never criticism against God; always instant, perfect, complete obedience. They do what God tells them to do, they accept whatever God in wisdom puts on their path.

This, says Jesus, is the *example* we need to follow on earth. This is the third petition: Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven. In heaven the holy angels do God's will perfectly, accept God's will perfectly; on earth it must be also. Lord's Day 49: "Grant that we and all men may deny our own will, and *without any murmuring obey Your will*, for it alone is good." God's will, be it His revealed will (His commands) or His secret will (His plans for us), is *good*, and therefore not open to any criticism, any protest, any murmuring. As the angels of heaven *take* what God gives, *accept it without protest*, so we on earth are to *take* what God gives, *accept it without protest*. Heaven is an *example* for us.

But we are so weak, protest and complaining lie so close at hand.... That brings us to our third point:

3. *The Implication for each of us.*

Time and again we experience that the circumstances God puts on our path are so *troubling*, His commands for us we find so hard to fulfill. So we complain, complain to each other about the rough deal we've been dealt, cry ourselves to sleep, take our frustrations out on each other. And maybe, maybe we'll even raise a fist to God and protest to Him of the way He's led things in our lives.

In *such* circumstances our Lord Jesus Christ comes with His heavenly instruction. How we are to respond to God's will as it manifests itself in our lives? What we are to do with the tears and the frustration that wells up in us at the awkward hand we've been dealt, at the impossible command we're to obey? Says our chief Prophet and Teacher: *pray!* Pray what? "Your will be done, through us on earth as it is through your fellow servants in heaven." Pray!

We are to understand also, brothers and sisters, that the words Jesus lays on our lips here have *urgency* in them. Jesus instructs us to petition God to grant us His grace *today* to do His will and to accept His will. We're not to ask here that God cause His will to be done on earth in thirty years time; we're to beseech God here to cause His will to be done *now*. To show you the significance of that, I need to take you back for a moment to the angels of heaven.

I mentioned already: Satan was allowed in the Old Testament dispensation to enter heaven and even criticize God's works. But then came the day when Jesus Christ died on the cross of Calvary, satisfied the justice of God, battled the devil and his demons and triumphed. Then we read this word in Revelation 12: "And war broke out in heaven: Michael and his angels fought with the dragon; and the dragon and his angels fought, but they did not prevail, nor was a place found for them in heaven any longer" (12:7f). Point: there is *progress* in heaven, things have *changed* in heaven! No longer may Satan or any demon enter heaven, God's dwelling! So: Satan, with all his disobedience and his criticism of God, no longer has a place in heaven, and that in turn means that there is *not a scrap of disobedience in heaven anymore, not a dot of criticism* – thanks to Christ's work on the cross. In heaven is a part of God's kingdom where His will is perfectly done, where His will is perfectly accepted – without a protest of any sort.

Well now, here's the urgency of the prayer: the Lord instructs us to beseech God that *this same degree of perfect obedience and acceptance characterize earth!* On this earth God should be fully acknowledged as Lord and Master, and so there should be no complaining, no disobedience, no protest against anything that God commands or does. And that begins, of course, with *ourselves*.

Where does it begin with ourselves? Where do we begin this perfect obedience and perfect acceptance of God's will? *There*, of course, where we cry the most, where we struggle the most. Where is that? Is that, congregation, not in our daily circumstances, that which we're busy with day by day? What we're busy with day by day: that's what the Catechism calls our "office and calling". That can be our daily work, and can also describe our obligations in marriage, our obligations as parents and children, our duties in the church, etc. Our "office and calling": that's the tasks God puts on our path day by day at home, at school, in the factory, in the congregation. That's where we get our hands dirty with the mud of this broken life, and that's where we are to obey God's commands and where we are to accept what God in wisdom puts on our path. And it's exactly there, in the nuts and bolts of real life, that we hurt the most, that we struggle with God's will. So *precisely there we need to pray*. What's the way out of the tears and frustrations of this life? The way out is *prayer*: Father, give me grace to obey Your will *today*, as I'm dealing with this

obstinate customer. Father, give me grace to accept *today* that You put this brokenness on my path. Take away my tears, take away my struggles, *not* by putting me into a Paradise-of-perfection, but by giving me grace to *trust You*, to trust You that Your commands are good no matter how silly they seem to me, to trust You that Your plan for my life is good no matter how unfair it seems to me. Grant me grace to deny my own will –for my sinful will protests Your commands, protests Your actions- and grant me grace to obey Your will without a trace of a murmur, and grant me that grace *now*, in *today's* circumstances.

And this isn't something we're to pray for ourselves alone. We live in this world, and our lives are inseparably intertwined with thousands of people around us. These people have so many tears, the town of Kelmscott has so many tears, the city of Perth has so many tears, our country has so many tears and so does the whole world. God has a heart for all people, makes His sun to shine and His rain to fall on the just and the unjust, and so Jesus tells us to beseech God to make His will be done *not just in our homes* as it is in heaven, but to beseech God to make His will be done *on earth* as it is in heaven – in the factory and in our town, in the city and in our country and throughout the whole world. We ask God to make *all men* content with His commands, and to make *everybody* content with the way God leads their lives. As God had no pleasure in the disobedience and complaints of the devil and his demons, so God has no pleasure in the bitter frustrations and tears of anger of the ungodly of the earth; *He wants their repentance*, wants all men to acknowledge that His plan for world history is good, is praiseworthy. And as *God* has no pleasure in the anguished cries of the unbelieving, so we have pity on them too and *pray*: Father, grant that not only we but *all men* in their frustrations with the way their lives go may deny their own will, set aside their own dreams for what makes a happy life, and obey Your will, accept what You in wisdom give. Lord, reach into *today's world*, hear the anguished cries of the millions who hunger, the cries of the homeless and the ravaged, the tears of the orphans and the oppressed, the pain of those in unhappy marriages and those who are unhappy in their being single, and work in them by Your Holy Spirit so that they learn to trust in You, to accept that Your commands for them are good, to accept that Your guidance in their lives is good. Lord, grant grace that on this earth there come today as much eager obedience to Your commands and as much calm acceptance of Your will as there is today in heaven!

The Lord promises to hear our prayers. It's what Jesus said: "ask, and it will be given to you." That includes this petition to have God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. In the midst of our own tears and struggles, what's the way forward? The way forward is not first of all a counselor, and it's not first of all a new house or a new job or a better spouse or a different personality. The way forward is first of all *prayer*, prayer for grace to obey God's commands, prayer for grace to accept God's ways, prayer *never to mutter or complain*. That's where it starts in our personal lives.

That's equally where it starts for this world! How to improve the atmosphere in the office? How to help the destitute of the world? *It all begins with prayer!* "Grant that we and all men may deny our own will, and without any murmuring obey Your will, for it alone is good." Father, grant us and all men grace to follow the example of the angels of heaven day by day, in all our circumstances.

And yes, He hears! Jesus told us to pray this, and He intercedes before the Father on our behalf also. He hears, and answers.

And the answer will come in its fullness when Jesus Himself returns on the clouds of heaven. When He returns every urge to complain will be washed out of our hearts, and every one who refused to accept God's commands and God's plan will be swept off this earth. Then, finally, every tear on earth will be wiped away, and crying and tears will be confined to the bottomless pit where men will weep and gnash their teeth.... On that great day, heaven will come to earth, and the obedience of heaven today will prevail on earth also.

Lord, come quickly, come *now!* *Amen.*

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Sermon on Lord's Day 10 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 1 February 2004.

"WITH INFINITE WISDOM ALMIGHTY FATHER UPHOLDS AND GOVERNS HIS CREATION FOR GOOD."

Text:

Lord's Day 10

27. Q. What do you understand by the providence of God?

A. God's providence is His almighty and ever present power,[1] whereby, as with His hand, He still upholds heaven and earth and all creatures,[2] and so governs them that leaf and blade, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, food and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty,[3] indeed, all things, come not by chance[4] but by His fatherly hand.[5] [1] Jer. 23:23,24; Acts 17:24-28. [2] Heb. 1:3. [3] Jer. 5:24; Acts 14:15-17; John 9:3; Prov. 22:2. [4] Prov. 16:33. [5] Matt. 10:29.

28. Q. What does it benefit us to know that God has created all things and still upholds them by His providence?

A. We can be patient in adversity,[1] thankful in prosperity,[2] 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;[3] for all creatures are so completely in His hand that without His will they cannot so much as move.[4]

[1] Job. 1:21, 22; Ps. 39:10; James 1:3. [2] Deut. 8:10; I Thess. 5:18. [3] Ps. 55:22; Rom. 8:38, 39. [4] Job 1:12; 2:6; Prov. 21:1; Acts 17:24-28.

Scripture Reading:

Job 36:22-29

John 11:1-4;17-27

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 84:3,4

Psalm 23:2

Psalm 102:7,8

Psalm 37:2,12,16

Hymn 48:1,2,3,4

Beloved Congregation of our Lord!

After working six days, God finished creating the world. What did God do then?

Scripture reveals that God did not simply sit back –if I may use that phrase here- to enjoy His handiwork. As Jesus said it: "My Father is working still" (Jn 5:17).

But what does God do now that He is no longer creating? We confess the answer to that question in Lord's Day 9: He "still upholds and governs" His creation "by His eternal counsel and providence." Lord's Day 10 picks up that thought of providence as mentioned in Lord's Day 9, and it asks in Question & Answer 27 what we are to understand by this providence of God. I might state right away, for the sake of clarity, that providence does not mean 'providing', much as the two words might sound the same. But providence simply captures in one word those two thoughts mentioned in the Catechism, those thoughts of 'upholding' and 'governing',

Providence implies then that God ‘upholds’ all things. That term ‘upholding’ means that God sees to it that creation continues to exist. It means that if God should withdraw His supportive hand from creation, the whole cosmos would disintegrate. That’s what we read in Scripture; Paul tells the Athenians that even the heathen live and move and have their being in God (Acts 17:28). Take God away from the heathen, and even they cannot continue to exist. God not only gives life; God also sustains life.

It’s true also after the fall into sin. God continued still to uphold His creation, to keep it existing, to prevent it from disintegrating, but did it now ‘in Christ’. That is: it’s because of Christ’s coming sacrifice that God continued to uphold the world, for Christ would redeem it from the power of Satan. That’s why Scripture says: "in Him –that’s Christ- all things hold together" (Col 1:17). And: Christ "upholds the universe by His word of power" (Heb 1:3).

That means, brothers and sisters, that each person on this globe is absolutely dependent on Jesus Christ. Were it not for His work in redeeming the world from the power of Satan, were it not for His continual upholding of this creation, this world could not exist. And then one may deny as much as he wills that God exists, but that does not do away with the fact that if God did not uphold, nobody would BE. And that implies nothing else than that one does well to reckon with this God.

But providence is more than ‘upholding’. According to our Lord’s Day, it includes also ‘governing’. That term ‘governing’ captures the notion that nothing happens apart from God permitting it, causing it. Men can throw the dice, but God determines the numbers that roll up (Prov 16:33). Of the millions of sparrows in the world, or of the thousands of hairs on your head, not one of them will fall to the ground without the Father’s will (Mt 10:29ff). It’s the same with the bigger things in life. Spring doesn’t come unless God sends forth His Spirit and renews the ground (Ps 104:30). Even kings and rulers are no more than puppets in the hand of God; they may think they make their own plans, but ultimately even their thoughts are governed, are controlled by God (Prov 21:1). So it is that the Catechism can say: "all things come not by chance but by His fatherly hand." That gives comfort.

Still, brothers and sisters, I don’t think I misrepresent the reality when I say that we have problems with the idea that the doctrine of God’s providence gives comfort. I say that because of that question that one repeatedly hears: WHY? Things don’t go the way we would like them to go, and we invariably end up asking WHY? Sure, we want to believe that nothing happens apart from the will of our heavenly Father, but where is God when a loved one dies suddenly? Or we can’t find work? Or the house burns down? And we end up confused because we conclude that either God is not as almighty as we had thought (otherwise He would have prevented this calamity), *or* we conclude that God is not the good and loving Father we had hoped He was - for if He were, surely He would not allow such a thing to happen to us. Confusion. Questions.

Against that background, we may listen this afternoon to what God has to say about Providence, particularly as it is confessed in Lord’s Day 10 of the Catechism. And we’ll find that this doctrine is indeed comforting, for God upholds and controls all for our good.

So I use this theme:

WITH INFINITE WISDOM ALMIGHTY FATHER UPHOLDS AND GOVERNS HIS CREATION FOR GOOD.

1. The wisdom of God
2. The wisdom of God’s people.

1. The wisdom of God

Lord’s Day 10 continues with the confession about God the Father and our Creation. As we confess with Lord’s Day 9, that thought of God as Creator implies the *power* of God. A look at the creation around us spells out how great this power of God is; it’s infinite. He spoke, and the Darling Range was there. But if God has that kind of power, then surely it will not do to suggest that somehow God was *unable* to prevent a certain disaster from befalling us. Unless one is going to say that God has lost His power, is no longer the almighty.... Yet if one says that, then there is no

longer any guarantee that we have indeed been rescued from Satan; then Christ can die on the cross but if Satan is possibly stronger than God then God can still not wrestle us out of Satan's hand. Deny the almighty power of God, beloved, and your salvation is at stake! No, Scripture makes it clear that God remains almighty. The fact that He sent His Son and that this Son could triumph is itself the proof.

But what about the hardships that befall us? If God remains almighty, if He has triumphed over Satan and so can prevent evil, *why does He let troubles happen?* Where is then His goodness, His love, His kindness? Is it swallowed up by His power?

That disturbing question, beloved, can be answered only if we understand that God is *wise*. And by 'wise' Scripture does not mean that God knows everything (although in itself that's true; He does), 'wise' in Scripture means that one *knows the purpose of things and how best to achieve that purpose*. The reason why God created all things was for the purpose of glorifying Himself. The reason why God upholds the world after He finished creating was equally so that He might continue to be glorified. So also after the fall. God continued to hold onto this world so that He might be glorified by His creation. That same purpose counts also with regards to the way God governs this world. God controls, God governs, with that one purpose, that one goal in mind: His greater glory. Everything that He does with and in this world revolves around that purpose. And because God's glory is the purpose of all things is our salvation also tied up with all that God does; for He is glorified by the fact that His chosen are brought to the goal of perfection.

I would draw your attention to the death and resurrection of Lazarus as an example. Martha and Mary are both convinced that Jesus Christ, as Son of God Almighty, has the power to heal Lazarus, to prevent his death. And they're right, He has the power. Yet Christ sovereignly chooses not to exercise His power; He lets His friend die. Why? Because He was too busy beyond the Jordan? Because He did not really love the sisters? Not at all. Listen to the Lord's reason; this "is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it" (John 11:4).

Why was Joseph sold to Egypt? Face it, it was no pleasant experience for the young man. But in the long run, Joseph does come to understand the reason why. Says he to his brothers; "God sent me before you to preserve life" (Gen 45:5,7). We read that and know that ultimately more is meant than that his father and brothers should be spared a cruel death by famine. Ultimately, Joseph speaks here of the preservation of Jesus Christ. For if Jacob's family had perished in the famine, Christ would not be able to come. Joseph was sold into Egypt ultimately for the sake of salvation for all whom God has chosen! And that makes it dear that Joseph's horrifying experiences serve to glorify God. That's the purpose of all God does, also in sending Joseph to Egypt as a youth.

But men do not always get to understand everything God does. Why did Job have to loose everything that he had? Job and his friends discussed that question for days, and they couldn't come out of it; the friends thought that it must be divine punishment on Job's hidden sins, a reasoning that Job disagreed with totally. But neither he nor his three friends came to grips with the fact that this world is here for God's glory, and that God sovereignly and wisely directs all things to that goal. It's finally that youngest friend who lays a finger on the answer to the *why* of Job's sufferings: "Behold, God is great and we know Him not" (Job 36:26). We can't understand why God does all that He does. God Himself challenges Job to understand the wisdom of God. Says He: "is it by your wisdom that the hawk soars?" (39:26)? And the message of what God says to Job is clear; the Almighty is incomprehensible in His ways exactly because of His infinite wisdom; all He does revolves around His glory.

Could the disciples understand why Jesus was put to death? We're familiar with their disappointment. Their whole world collapsed around them. Yet we know that the road to Christ's throne lay via Calvary; Christ had to die in order to that He and His Father might receive glory.

We ask all kinds of *whys*. And we protest God's actions here and question it there. But the examples to the saints of Scripture, the example of Jesus Christ, must convince us that even the evil has that one purpose: the glory of God Almighty. And, as with Job, that ought to silence our protests. We are not on this earth for ourselves; God created us precisely for His greater glory.

But another question then. If God directs all that He does to His greater glory, is a clash possible between God's glory and our good? Can it happen that something that glorifies God in fact hurts God's people? Yet that cannot be, beloved! It cannot be simply because God has tied His glory and our good together! Consider this: why did God send His only

Son to die on the cross? Sure, it was that we might have forgiveness and life. But we're not granted life simply for our eternal enjoyment. We were not created for our pleasure either. But God sent Christ so that His holy Name might receive glory, and that holy Name receives glory *precisely through our being saved*. That glory is the purpose of our salvation. If God can *love* sinners as we so much that He sends a Mediator, think not that afterwards God is going to seek our harm! *And that's to say that every last thing that happens to us is, in God's judgment, for our benefit!*

Is that something that we can understand? Categorically, NO. But the question is too: is it necessary for me to understand it? And the answer is again NO. Did Joseph understand why God let him be sold to Egypt, why he spent years in prison? It was not until years later, when his brothers came to Egypt, that God gave him answer to his questions.

Did Job ever come to understand why God caused him to suffer as he did? Not in this life he didn't; not until after he was with the Lord did Job understand all the whys and the wherefores,

And that counts for us too. God does so much with us, things that we consider to be both good and bad. As the Catechism says: He sends "rain and drought, fruitful and barren years..., health and sickness, riches and poverty, indeed, all things come not by chance but by His Fatherly hand." In this life we shall never understand all the ins and outs of what God permits in our lives. But the broad lines of what God does with us we do know already; He works all things to His glory, and therefore all that happens to us is also good for us His children. Recall Scripture's declaration that God's ways are higher than our ways; God is wiser than we. He knows how to reach the goal of His greater glory. He knows how best to bring us to the goal of perfection. His identity as God, and the way He operates, is something, He tells us, that we are to *believe* – not seek to understand. It is enough for us to know that He works all things for good for those who love Him, both when He sends them prosperity and when He sends them adversity. He worked for good, both when Joseph was sold into Egypt and when his brothers came to visit. He worked for good both when Christ was crucified and when Christ was exalted at God's right hand. He works all things for good, for His glory and our salvation, because He is always *all-wise*.

That gives to us the obligation to *trust* in Him, blindly. Consider again the words of Jesus in Mt 10: "are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will.... Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows" (vss 29ff). Then God may lead us through the valley of the shadow of death –to quote Ps 23- but even there we shall fear no evil because it's *God* who leads us, and He knows best the way to His glory and so to our salvation. Again: understand it? No. But *believe* that God is wise in the way He upholds and governs this world we must.

And that's the reason why we are to be thankful in prosperity. Note well, we are to be thankful not because we prosper as such and live comfortably; prosperity and comfort can in themselves be a curse – and that's something we see around us with so many people caught up in the rat race of this life. But we are to be thankful for prosperity because we believe that Father is wisely working for His glory through the prosperity He gives us. So is that prosperity also for my advantage and my salvation. That's why we give thanks.

And for the same reason we are to be patient in adversity. We do well to notice that the Catechism does not say that we are to be *unthankful* in adversity (something we so easily are); we are instead to be *patient*. In fact, Scripture goes so far as to instruct us to "give thanks in all circumstances" (I Thes 5:18). And if we think about it, it's so understandable. For God in wisdom controls all for good, works unfailingly to that goal of His glory and our salvation. If God determines in His wisdom that the road to glory for any of us lies through a dark valley, who are we to suggest that God is not correct? Honestly, we are not wiser than God. We shouldn't act it either.

Granted, the Catechism does not speak of the same thankfulness for adversity as there is to be in prosperity. Scripture knows full well that human emotions remain. There *is* that grief at the loss of a loved one, and one cannot smile that grief away. But at the same time we *are* to see the hand of a wise Father behind all that happens, be it good or bad. And that means that there may not be room for complaint among the people of God, there may not be dissatisfaction, protests against the direction that God leads us on. We are to *believe* that God is wise, to *trust* His leading, follow gladly wherever He would take us.

And that means too that, hard as it may be, we are to reach over our grief, our unhappiness, and patiently give thanks even in adversity. Father *is* leading us down that road that leads to the New Jerusalem and therefore, as Paul says, we "rejoice always, pray constantly, and give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (I Thess 5:16ff). Believe it, beloved: *Father knows best*. He's wise, and powerful to carry out exactly what is good. And it's not for us creatures to question God's ways!

And that's our second point:

2. *The wisdom of God's people.*

You see: that trusting, that child-like conviction that Father knows best is what Christian wisdom is all about. God would have His people reflect what He is like; very well, if God then is wise, it follows that His people are to be wise also. Yet as creatures we cannot be wise in the same way that God is wise; His wisdom means that He knows the goal and the best way to get to that goal. For our part, we too may know the goal –God's glory- but the way to that goal we cannot grasp with our finite minds. But this then is *wisdom* for the child of God: *that he admit that Father's ways are wise and good*. To be wise is to confess that God always does well. It is to trust upon this God to lead us faithfully to the goal He has in mind. Conversely, it is folly, it is the fool, who does not trust this God, who relies instead on his own insights to reach a goal.

That means, beloved, that it is a matter of wisdom to accept what Father gives. It's a matter of Christian wisdom to believe that Father still upholds and governs all things for good. And it's a matter of wisdom to be convinced that the way Father leads me is the right way, the best way to the desired goal. So it's a matter of wisdom that we do not complain about the way God leads us. And it's a matter of Christian wisdom that we do not pity ourselves for the calamity that has overtaken us, that we do not rebel against God's guidance and suggest that this or that is no good. That's being wise unto salvation.

That Christian wisdom applies not only to accepting what God gives. It applies also to recognizing that God's commandments are wise and just and good. God would lead us on the road to salvation. But how does He do so? Not only by bringing this and that upon us; He does it also by instructing us to do this and that. His commandments are given to us to keep us on the road to that goal of Life. To disobey a command is to take a side road off the road to life. That's why disobedience is not just a matter of disregarding one of God's commands for a while; disobedience is instead a matter of suggesting that for the situation wherein I am now, God gave an unwise command by forbidding me to do a certain thing and instructing me to do something else.

Did it make human sense for Abraham to admit to Pharaoh that Sarah was his wife? Was it not simply a matter of prudence for him to claim that Sarah was instead his sister? Face it: Abraham was right; Sarah was his half-sister, and if he admitted that beautiful Sarah was his wife, his life would have been in danger. But God had given a command not to lie. And God makes no mistakes in giving such a command; He is wise and knows what is best, both in giving the command *and* in leading Abraham into this situation. So it's for Abraham a matter of believing the wisdom of God, believing also that God's commandments are right and wise. It's for Abraham to believe that God is able and willing to deliver from Pharaoh if need be. Christian wisdom means that Abraham *close his eyes to the circumstances* and *simply obey* the commands of his wise God. And leave the rest to God. Men are not wiser than God.

Does it make sense for you in your circumstances to spend time daily in studying God's word and praying? Does it mean that you wouldn't have sufficient time anymore for your work, your family, your recreation? But God gave a command. He told us to be busy with His Word, and He told us to pray. You feel you can't afford the time? But what kind of a God have you?! Is He wise? Or has He made a mistake in telling you to take time from your busy schedule for Bible study? If you consider God to have lost His wisdom, OK, then take matters in your own hands. But then be so consistent also as to say that there is no wisdom in the cross either!

But Christian wisdom says: God gave the command, and God has placed many commitments on my plate where humanly speaking I can't really afford the time for Bible study and prayer. But I *believe* that He knows what He is doing, and what He does is well done, and so I *trust* and *obey*. I take time to be busy with Scripture, take time for prayer, because God asks it. *That's wisdom*. It's not looking to the left, it's not looking to the right; it's simply reckoning with the fact that Father governs all things supremely for good. Trust and obey, whether it makes sense or

not. For I believe God to be wiser than I.

There's an increasing lawlessness in our land. Society in general isn't too fussy about obeying God too scrupulously. That gives to us and our children a strong temptation to take some liberties ourselves with God's commands. And that in turn makes the question so urgent: what do *you* think of God? Do you believe Him to be a God of providence, a God who did not leave His creation alone after the sixth day but still upholds and governs all things completely? And do you believe that He's wise, knows how to reach that goal of His glory, knows how to bring each child of His to that goal of perfection, makes no mistakes? Do you believe that also His commandments were given for our good, silly though they might appear to be? That, beloved, is what believing in God the Father almighty Creator of heaven and earth means. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 12 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 15 February 2004.

" JESUS' ANOINTING SPELLED OUT THAT HE FULFILLED HIS OFFICE WITH HEAVEN'S APPROVAL."

Text:

Lord's Day 12

Q. Why is He called Christ, that is, Anointed?

A. Because He has been ordained by God the Father, and anointed with the Holy Spirit,[1] to be our chief Prophet and Teacher,[2] who has fully revealed to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption;[3] our only High Priest,[4] who by the one sacrifice of His body has redeemed us,[5] and who continually intercedes for us before the Father;[6] and our eternal King,[7] who governs us by His Word and Spirit, and who defends and preserves us in the redemption obtained for us.[8]

[1] Ps. 45:7 (Heb. 1:9); Is. 61:1 (Luke 4:18; Luke 3:21, 22. [2] Deut. 18:15 (Acts 3:22). [3] John 1:18; 15:15. [4] Ps. 110:4 (Heb. 7:17). [5] Heb. 9:12; 10:11-14. [6] Rom. 8:34; Heb. 9:24; I John 2:1. [7] Zach. 9:9 (Matt. 21:5); Luke 1:33. [8] Matt. 28:18-20; John 10:28; Rev. 12:10, 11.

Q. Why are you called a Christian?

A. Because I am a member of Christ by faith[1] and thus share in His anointing,[2] so that I may as prophet confess His Name,[3] as priest present myself a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him,[4] and as king fight with a free and good conscience against sin and the devil in this life,[5] and hereafter reign with Him eternally over all creatures.[6] [1] I Cor. 12:12-27. [2] Joel 2:28 (Acts 2:17); I John 2:27. [3] Matt. 10:32; Rom 10:9, 10; Heb. 13:15. [4] Rom. 12:1; I Pet. 2:5, 9. [5] Gal. 5:16, 17; Eph. 6:11; I Tim. 1:18, 19. [6] Matt. 25:34; II Tim. 2:12.

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 26:62-67

Exodus 30:22-33

Luke 3:21,22

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 132:5,10

Hymn 22

Psalms 2:1,4

Psalms 20:3,4

Psalms 92:4,5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

In the streets of Nazareth many years ago a little boy answered to the name 'Jesus'. Nobody took offense at that name, even though in the Hebrew language that name meant 'savior'; in fact, there were more boys with that same name (cf Acts 13:6).

But once this Jesus accepted for Himself the title 'Christ', people were greatly offended. Matthew records the Jews' response to Jesus' admission that He was 'Christ'. It was, they said, sufficient reason to crucify Him (cf Mt 26:63ff). The term offended them!

Why? What was offensive about the use of the term?

We need to know, brothers and sisters, that the word 'Christ' is not a name, but a title. Take the phrase 'Prince Charles'. The word 'Charles' is obviously a name, and it's quite a common one too. But the term 'Prince' is not a name; it's rather a *title*, and it describes the task, the position, the office this particular Charles has.

So it is too with Christ Jesus. 'Jesus' is the name; 'Christ' is the title describing His task, His position, His office. It's that title, and the task, the position caught in the title, that offended the Jews.

Why? We know what a prince is, and what's expected of a prince. But what is a Christ? As it is, the word 'Christ' is not English, but Greek; it's the Greek word for the English term 'anointed'. (The Hebrew equivalent is Messiah.) To say, then, that Jesus is 'the Christ' is to say that Jesus is 'the Anointed One'. That Jesus accepted that title, that task for Himself –Anointed One- *that* upset the Jews so terribly! Why? Should we be upset with this title also? Or might there be gospel here?

Yes, beloved, there is much gospel here. The title 'Christ' spells out that Jesus of Nazareth received His office from God, indeed, carried out His task with God's approval.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

JESUS' ANOINTING SPELLED OUT THAT HE FULFILLED HIS OFFICE WITH HEAVEN'S APPROVAL.

1. The background to Jesus' anointing in the Old Testament,
2. The fruit of Jesus' anointing while on earth,
3. The consequence of Jesus' anointing today.

1. The background of Jesus' anointing.

Anointing was a relatively common practice amongst the people of Israel. Anointing was used for purposes of purification, hygiene and beautification, as well as for treatment of wounds and curing of diseases.

There was, however, also an anointing different from the mundane anointing that people did to themselves or each other. I refer here to the passage we read from Ex 30. The Lord gave Moses a particular recipe ("500 shekels of liquid myrrh, half as much sweet-smelling cinnamon, 250 shekels of sweet-smelling cane", etc – vss 23f), and from that recipe Moses was to make "a holy anointing oil." With that special oil Moses was to anoint the tabernacle, the ark, and numerous other furniture of the tabernacle. Moses was also to "anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, that they may minister to Me as priests" (vs 30). Notice the further instruction of vs 32: this oil "shall not be poured on man's flesh; nor shall you make any other like it..." Point: this oil "is holy." Whoever plays around with this oil shall be cut off from his people, excommunicated.

What was the purpose of this "holy anointing oil"? This: through this oil God Himself *designated* a particular person to a specific task. More, through this oil God *equipped* the designated person to the task to which God assigned him. The oil, we need to know, represented the Holy Spirit. When God, then, had someone anointed with this holy oil, God indicated that the Holy Spirit would strengthen this person for his task.

Throughout the Old Testament we read of various people who were anointed. I read in 1 Samuel 10 these words: "Then Samuel took a flask of oil and poured it on [Saul's] head, and kissed him and said: 'Is it not because the Lord has anointed you commander over His inheritance?'" (vss 1ff). Notice: through the anointing the Lord Himself designated Saul to the office of commander, of king, over His people. Again, in 1 Sam 16:13 I read: "Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed [David] in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the Lord came upon David from that day forward." It is important to notice here what the effect of the anointing was on David: straightaway the Holy Spirit came upon him. For the oil represents the Holy Spirit!

These two men were anointed to the office of king in Israel. We also read of persons being ordained to the office of priest. I think of Aaron, in Lev 8:30: "Then Moses took some of the anointing oil ..., and sprinkled it on Aaron, on his garments, on his sons, and on the garments of his sons with him; and he consecrated Aaron, his garments, his sons, and the garments of his sons with him." And to the office of prophet: God gave to Elijah this command: "Elisha the son of Shaphat ... you shall anoint as prophet in your place."

But nowhere do we read of anyone being anointed to the position of baker or sandal maker! Why, congregation, might that be? Why only to the offices of prophet or priest or king? The reason is this: the quality of sandal made by a sandal maker did not depend on whether the sandal maker was a believer or not. That's to say: you as a buyer did not need assurance from God that the work of this sandal maker was guided by God's Holy Spirit. But exactly on *that* point Israel *did* need assurance from God about the work of Aaron the priest. The tabernacle had just been built, and was now to come into operation. Fundamental to the message and purpose of the tabernacle was the sacrifices made on the altar of burnt offering. But what guarantee was there that God would accept those sacrifices? More, what guarantee was there that the man who explained the significance of these sacrifices actually spoke words of truth? And when this man afterwards stretched out his hands to bless the people, what assurance did the people have that this blessing actually *came from God*? In that context Aaron's anointing receives meaning. God Himself, before the eyes of all the people, designated Aaron to the office of priest – and that's to say that the Lord would respect His work, would equip him to be the high priest Israel needed. The anointing, then, provided great encouragement and comfort to the people!

The same is true when the people wanted a king. Their motives for wanting a king were wrong, but the Lord was not about to reject His people on account of their sin. So God Himself gave them a king, God Himself designated Saul to that high office, and God Himself equipped him with His Spirit to carry out that office. Here was assurance for the people: *our God* has given us this king, *our God* is ruling over us through this man. And exactly because *God* was behind Saul-the-king, David refused years later to kill Saul – even though Saul was carrying out His God-given office so very wrongly (1 Sam 24:6; cf 1 Sam 26:16). David knew: since *God* had anointed Saul, David had to *respect* King Saul – difficult though it was.

It's exactly because of Saul's wickedness that there's such gospel in the fact that God anointed David. In David's anointing, God assured the people that *He* was providing a better man; *He had not given up on His own*.

The same message comes through in relation to Elisha the prophet. Godlessness dominated the people of Israel, and that made the task of being a prophet so terribly, terribly difficult; recall how despondent Elijah became.... How shall he ever obtain a successor, a man to carry on with the work after him? And why should the people pay any attention to Elisha? God tells Elijah to anoint a successor – and so Elisha is assured that God Himself has called him to this work of prophet and therefore *will equip*. Equally, the people of Israel were assured that Elisha did not speak on his own authority, but spoke with God's approval – and therefore the people had better listen!

Why, then, was no sandal maker anointed? That's because the sandal maker did not have a specific function in the relation between God and His people. But the priest did, and so did the king and so did the prophet. As evidence that these persons labored with heaven's approval, certain persons were anointed in the Old Testament, were made 'christs', anointed ones, messiahs.

But: *none of the anointed ones of the Old Testament, none of these christs, carried out their office with any measure of perfection*. So there was need for the better Christ, the real Christ. That brings us to our second point:

2. The significance of Jesus' anointing.

Was Jesus in fact anointed? We nowhere read that the oil of Ex 30 was poured on Jesus' head. But remember: the oil of Ex 30 symbolized, we said earlier, the Holy Spirit. And we read from Luke 3 that Yes, the Holy Spirit came upon Jesus – at His baptism. That is to say: directly after His baptism the Lord God publicly *designated* Jesus to a particular office in Israel, and with the designation *equipped* Him to carry out that office. *Now* He became the Christ, the anointed One. It is because He was now *Christ*, designated by God to a specific task in Israel in the relation between God and His people – it is because He was now *Christ* that the Holy Spirit immediately led Jesus in the wilderness to be tempted 40 days by the devil (Luke 4:1ff). And see: He could withstand Satan's strongest attacks! He labored with heaven's approval, labored with heaven's power, and so could triumph! And equally: directly after the temptation by

the devil, the Spirit who anointed Jesus drove Him into Galilee to begin His public ministry. According to Luke, Jesus straightaway opened the Scriptures to Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor...", and Jesus declared that this Scripture was fulfilled in Him. He was the Lord's anointed, and so worked with heaven's approval; His preaching and His teaching, His miracles and signs were done because *God was at work in Him*. Precisely for *that* reason the people *had to receive Him, accept Him, listen to Him*.

I must draw that out further. Jesus of Nazareth was anointed by the Spirit of God to preach. So Jesus spoke words from God. That is: He explained to the people of Israel what their God-by-covenant was like (cf John 1:18). It's a message repeated over and over again in the gospel of John: "My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me" (7:16); "I speak what I have seen from My Father" (8:37), "all the things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you" (15:15). He spoke words from God, and therein was Israel's "chief Prophet and Teacher, who has fully revealed to [them] the secret counsel and will of God concerning [their] redemption." Exactly because He spoke words from God –He was anointed, He was the Christ!- was it incumbent upon the people to *listen*, to accept His words. *His identity as Christ demanded it*. But exactly *that* is what the Jews refused to do! So when Jesus said He was the Christ, said He was anointed, they were greatly offended, and demanded His death....

By the same token, Jesus' anointing by God the Father, Jesus being *Christ*, meant that He was designated by God in heaven to be the only High Priest. That's to say: He had to make sacrifices on behalf of the people in order to reconcile sinners to God. As John the Baptist put it: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). "Lamb of God": God Himself had designated Him to be the Lamb. But if *God* has designated and equipped Him to be the Lamb who takes away the world's sin, again, *all must accept Him*, must accept that He is the only sacrifice that can save us; *His identity as Christ demands it*. But exactly *that* is what the Jews refused to do!

Again, Jesus' anointing by God the Father meant that God had appointed Him to the office and task of King. In the course of His earthly ministry, Jesus repeatedly demonstrated His kingship. The theme of His preaching was this: "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Mt 5:17). Specifically, *He* was the King heaven had designated, and so all were to listen to Him, submit to Him. He demonstrated His kingship by telling the winds and waves to be still (Mk 4:35ff), instructing the demons to leave the demonic and enter the pigs (Mk 5:1ff), healing the hemorrhaging woman (Mk 5:25ff) and raising the dead girl (Mk 5:40ff). But the Jews were offended. By whose authority, they challenged, do you do these things? (Mt 21:23). You see: accepting that Jesus acted from heaven hinged on whether the Jews would accept that Jesus was anointed! If He were anointed, He would be acting with God's approval, and that had implications for men! *That's* what they rejected, and so demanded His death.

Do you see, beloved, how central Jesus' anointing is to His work? Either Jesus did His work with God's approval, or He did not. If He did, He must be accepted, believed, embraced. If He did not, He must be rejected, condemned. The Jews rejected the fact of His anointing, rejected that He was the Christ, condemned Him.

And we? Sunday by Sunday we confess that we believe in Jesus *Christ*. That is: Sunday by Sunday we confess that God the Father designated Jesus of Nazareth to be *Christ*, and so the Holy Spirit came upon this Jesus of Nazareth powerfully and equipped Him to carry out His God-given office of prophet, priest and king. And it is exactly because we confess that He was anointed, congregation, that we receive His words as *God's words*, that we accept His sacrifice on the cross as *sufficient to reconcile us to God*, and that we embrace His authority over our lives still. *His identity as Christ demands it!*

So we come to our last point:

3. The consequence of Jesus' anointing today.

Much has happened since Jesus was anointed 2000 years ago. Is He still anointed today? Yes, beloved, He is. Never has the Lord God relieved Him of His office of prophet or priest or king.

In what way, then, is He prophet today? He sits in heaven, at God's right hand; how does He speak the words of God on earth today? In this way: through His Spirit He has caused the Word of God to be put to writing – and so we have the Bible. Further, the anointed Savior causes God's word of salvation to be heard all over this world through the preaching. It is *He* –anointed to be prophet- who takes particular men and directs them to preach the Word – ministers,

missionaries. Preachers do not preach on their own authority; preachers preach because the ascended Christ compels them. *That* is why congregations must submit to the preaching – not because the preacher happens to be persuasive or likeable, but because *behind* the preacher is our Chief Prophet and Teacher. Christ causes *His* word to be opened, and therefore people are obliged to receive the preaching.

Equally, the ascended Jesus is Priest today still. No, He does not today sacrifice Himself anymore; He completed that work on Calvary. Today He intercedes on our behalf before the Father, reminds the Father time and again of the work He accomplished on the cross for our benefit. And we on earth may be assured that Yes, the Father hears the intercession of the Son *on the grounds that God the Father has Himself designated Him to the task of Priest*. How very comforting for us; here's catalyst to pray!

Once more: the ascended Jesus is King today also. God the Father has not withdrawn His anointing, and so Jesus in heaven continues to exercise His kingly dominion over the world. He governs *with God's approval*. We realize: there's so very much comfort for us in that reality! Jesus does not rule at cross-purposes with the Father; no, He carries out precisely what God wants – for He's equipped through God's Spirit to carry out the will of God. So the way history unfolds today –on the international stage as well as in our personal lives- is as God wants it.

Do you see, beloved, how relevant and close to home the matter of Jesus' anointing is? Jesus was anointed long ago, and therefore equipped to tell us about God and reconcile us to Him – how fundamentally important to our salvation His anointing was! But equally *today*: Jesus is anointed still, is still the Christ, and therefore labors still with heaven's approval for our benefit. It's because He is anointed still that we have God's Word, and can be sure that the word we have and hear is God's word. It's because He is anointed still that our prayers come into heaven, and we can be assured that God actually hears us and accepts us. It is because He is anointed still that world history goes as it goes, more, that we can be at peace with the developments around us – Christ governs and directs all according to heaven's plans. How comforting, how comforting the reality of Jesus' anointing!!

And we? We belong to *this* Jesus! As He was anointed, so we are anointed! So: as *He* was designated to be prophet, priest and king, so *we* are designated to be prophet, priest and king. More, as He was *equipped* to be prophet, priest and king, so *we are equipped* to speak of God on this earth, to empty ourselves for God's glory, and to fight against sin within and around us. To be sure, when we hear of the need to be prophet, priest and king, we cringe a bit under the weight of the mandate; few of us really feel adequate to the task of being prophet or priest or king as described in our Lord's Day. For that reason I want to stress: anointing involves not just a task, a designation; anointing involves *being equipped* to carry out the task! That's the assurance of the Scriptures: ask and it will be given to you. Ask for strength to be the prophet, priest and king God anointed you to be, *and you shall receive*. What is the guarantee that you shall receive? This: *the Chief Prophet and Teacher said so* – and He spoke with God's approval! More: *the only High Priest continues to intercede* for us before the Father – a task He carries out with God's approval and therefore is effective. So: ask boldly for strength to fulfill your God-given office! More still: *our eternal King governs the events of our lives*, puts us in situations where we can confess God's Name, where we can present ourselves a living sacrifice of thankfulness to Him, and where we can fight against sin and the devil – and He puts us in those situations with God's approval. *Can it ever then be too much for us?*

You see: our office as Christians –prophets, priests and kings- is rooted in Christ's continuing office as Prophet, Priest and King. Since He continues to carry it out faithfully, with the approval of God Most High, we can be greatly encouraged in our offices. It's not for us to stare at our weaknesses; it's for us to focus on Jesus' identity as *the Christ!* Then we're strengthened, greatly strengthened.

The Jews were greatly offended with Jesus' statement that He was the Christ, anointed. They could not stomach the thought that Jesus labored with heaven's approval. And we? We're either offended by this gospel or greatly encouraged. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 14 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 29 February 2004.

" TO PAY FOR OUR SINS JESUS HAD TO BE TRUE MAN WHILE HE REMAINED TRUE GOD."

Text:

Lord's Day 14

35. Q. What do you confess when you say: He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary?

A. The eternal Son of God, who is and remains true and eternal God,[1] took upon Himself true human nature from the flesh and blood of the virgin Mary,[2] through the working of the Holy Spirit.[3] Thus He is also the true seed of David,[4] and like His brothers in every respect,[5] yet without sin.[6]

[1] John 1:1; 10:30-36; Rom. 1:3; 9:5; Col. 1:15-17; 1 John 5:20. [2] Matt. 1:18-23; John 1:14; Gal. 4:4; Heb. 2:14.

[3] Luke 1:35. [4] II Sam. 7:12-16; Ps. 132:11; Matt. 1:1; Luke 1:32; Rom. 1:3. [5] Phil. 2:7; Heb. 2:17. [6] Heb. 4:15; 7:26, 27.

36. Q. What benefit do you receive from the holy conception and birth of Christ?

A. He is our Mediator,[1] and with His innocence and perfect holiness covers, in the sight of God, my sin, in which I was conceived and born.[2]

[1] I Tim. 2:5, 6; Heb. 9:13-15. [2] Rom. 8:3, 4; II Cor. 5:21; Gal. 4:4, 5; I Pet. 1:18, 19.

Scripture Reading:

Philippians 2:5-11

Matthew 1:18-25

2 John 7-11

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Hymn 4:1,2

Psalm 51:3

Hymn 16:1,2,3,4

Hymn 19:1,2,3,4

Psalm 150:1,3

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

This past week Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* could be viewed in the cinemas of Australia. You'll be familiar: Gibson's film portrays in most graphic detail the last 12 hours of Jesus' earthly life. From the kit the Australian Bible Society sent me, plus my reading of the newspaper, I learn that the film covers Jesus' agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, His arrest and trial before Pilate and Herod, the scourging by the Roman soldiers, His crucifixion and death.

Reviews are mixed. All agree that Gibson has stayed close to the Biblical text. Some tell us it's a masterpiece of Christian cinema, tell us that the movie confronts the viewer with how much Jesus had to suffer on account of our sins. Others are condemning; they consider the blood and pain and gore to be so very overdone.

Let us leave the sufferings of Jesus as portrayed in this film to one side for today. The Lord willing, we can look at

that in more detail when we get to Lord's Day 15 next week and so must deal directly with Jesus' suffering and crucifixion.

Today, as we deal with Lord's Day 14 and the birth of our Lord, we need to consider another aspect of this film. A certain Jim Caviezel plays our Lord Jesus Christ in this film. There's the question: is Jim Caviezel able to portray Jesus accurately? To put the question differently: would the resurrected and ascended Christ be pleased with what a viewer would learn about Him through Jim Caviezel's work as actor?

The answer, congregation, must be negative. Jim Caviezel is not able to play the role of Jesus properly. No one is able, for people are but people, sinful. Jesus, though, was more than true man; He was also righteous, without sin. More, even in His suffering He remained true God. It's what the church confesses in Lord's Day 14.

I summarize the sermon using this theme:

TO PAY FOR OUR SINS JESUS HAD TO BE TRUE MAN WHILE HE REMAINED TRUE GOD.

1. Where Jesus came from.
2. What Jesus became.
3. Why Jesus became this.

1. Where Jesus came from.

The gospel of Lord's Day 14 can be caught in one word: *incarnation*. Like so many other words found in the confessions of the church (words like justification, sanctification, imputation, propitiation), the single word 'incarnation' catches a wealth of gospel material. The word itself comes from a Latin word that means 'flesh'; think of the English word 'carnal', fleshly. The term 'incarnation', then, captures the notion that the Son of God has *come in the flesh*, the Son of God has *become* flesh.

I need to draw out the marvels of this event. I read in John 1 that "the Word was with God", yes, and "the Word was God." So much was the Word *God* that "all things were made through Him." That is: Genesis 1 describes the work of the Word! *God* He is, fully *God*, Creator. Yet of this Word John writes: "And the Word became flesh."

Flesh. The passage doesn't say that the Word, God, became man – though that's true. The Holy Spirit uses here the term 'flesh', and that's deliberate for the term 'flesh' describes man-after-the-fall-into-sin. I think of Is 40, where 'flesh' is described as grass that withers. Flesh is mortal, flesh is weak, flesh is *fallen*. That's the incarnation: *God* has become *fallen man*!

The thought is mind-boggling. God has been from eternity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In the beginning He created the heavens and the earth, and that's to say that He formed the heavens as a dwelling place for Himself – complete with angels who praise and extol holy God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – day by day. Such is God's holiness and majesty that these angels cover their faces and their feet as the unceasingly sing their Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty (cf Is 6). In this glory the Son of God was completely at home (John 17:5).

But: there came the moment when God the Father instructed His only Son to *leave* the glory and pleasures of heaven, to *leave* the realm of angel worship and adoration. Paul tells the Galatians that "God *sent forth* His Son..." (4:4). And where was the Son to go? What was the Son to do, to become? Says Paul: "God sent forth His Son" to be "*born* of a woman...." The Son of God, brothers and sisters, was to leave the glory and splendor of heaven in exchange for the poverty of a crib, more, for the brokenness of fallen earth! The Son of God would leave the pleasures of His Father's company to become *flesh*, man.

It's something, congregation, we do not sufficiently pause to think about. But try, brothers and sisters, to form a sense of the *contrast* between the glory of heaven and the trials of this broken life. The Son of God left the realm where angels served Him and sang His praise, in order to enter a world of sweat and tears where the Son of God – the eternal Word! – would eat His bread in the sweat of His face! This is the point of Paul's words in Philippians 2. Christ was "in the form of God," says Paul, and that's to say that Jesus was with God, equal in glory with God, indistinguishable

from God – true *God*. But, Paul continues, Jesus "did not consider it robbery to be equal with God." Or, as we'd better translate: did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, something to be held onto. Instead, He "made Himself of no reputation," He emptied Himself, was content to become a man. Here's the *radical contrast* between the position of the Son of God before Christmas and His position after Christmas.

Then it's true: while the Son of God was on earth He did not openly display His Godhead. But that takes nothing away from the fact that He *was and remained true God*, every moment of His sojourn on earth. Anyone who saw in Jesus of Nazareth just a human being like there are twelve in a dozen *missed the point of His identity* – and therefore of His work and purpose. To see in Him only a man like anybody else (be it a good man) is to misunderstand Jesus. He is *from heaven*. Because He is from heaven was He able to show us who the Father really was. Because He is from heaven was He able to do His mighty works of healing and even forgive people's sins. Because He is from heaven was He able to reconcile sinners to God. Forget the fact of His incarnation, forget that He was with the Father in heaven from all eternity and then came to earth to be one of us, and you miss the whole point of His existence, miss the heart of the gospel! He walked on this earth for 33 years, and *always remained true God*. Were it not so, we'd have no salvation!

We move on to our second point:

2. What Jesus became.

True God Jesus was from all eternity. When the time had fully come (as Paul writes it to the Galatians), He left the glory of heaven to become a man. How that happened? Matthew gives us particular details. "The birth of Jesus Christ," he writes, "was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit" (1:18). Notice those last few words. Mary was pregnant before she had come together with any man. The point is that no *man* begot Jesus. Instead, His conception was the work of the Holy Spirit. That point is important because that work of the Holy Spirit forms the link between Jesus' existence in heaven and His existence on earth. The One who grew in Mary's womb is the *very same* Son of God who was with the Father in heaven from all eternity. That is the reason why Matthew could say later in this passage that "all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, 'Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,' which is translated, 'God with us'" (vss 22f). "God with us": *that* is Jesus – *God* living in our midst, *God* in the flesh.

At the same time Jesus was born to *Mary*, a true, real person like any of us. From His mother the Son of God incarnate received His true human nature; He was as human as the rest of us. He had a mind to think as we have, and so had to learn to read and to write and to do 'rithmetic like we do. He had to eat His bread in the sweat of His face, and so went to bed tired each night as we do. He had to cope with pain and tears like anybody else; He too could develop bruises on His shins when He fell, could get slivers in His fingers when He carried timber for His father the carpenter, could be hurt by the biting remarks people can make about others. In no way was He different from any of us; He suffered the consequences of the fall into sin just as we do. True God He was and remained, and at the same time He *became* true man – just like we. That's the consequence of His birth to a real person, Mary.

Yet there's this difference with us: though true man, He was without sin. True: I can't imagine how He could grow up with sinful parents, sinful brothers and sisters, sinful playmates on the street, and never sin. But the Word of God is empathic on the point: He never sinned, no matter how great the temptation (cf Heb 4:15). God in heaven, His Father from eternity, looked upon His Son-become-man, and saw never a transgression, saw only righteousness, perfect righteousness. For, though the true Son of the sinful Mary, He was also the true Son of holy God – and therefore perfect.

That, congregation, is the confession of the church in Lord's Day 14. Sunday by Sunday we confess with the Apostles' Creed that Jesus "was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary." What we really say with that confession? This: "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." True God became true man – yet remained true God. True God became true man – though knew no sin. *That* is the incarnation, *that's* the gospel caught in that single

term *incarnation*.

So we come to our third point:

3. *Why Jesus became this.*

Question & Answer 36 puts the question like this: "What benefit do you receive from the holy conception and birth of Christ?" What's the benefit of the incarnation? The answer is this: "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." Says the catechism: Jesus identity as true man, righteous man and true God is essential for salvation; take away any of those three and you have undermined, yes, lost your salvation!

Why can the Catechism make this connection between the holy conception and birth of Christ on the one hand and our salvation on the other? Here I draw your attention to Lord's Day 6. "Why," asks Q 16, "why must He be a true ... man?" The answer is this: "He must be a true man because the justice of God requires that the same human nature which has sinned should pay for sin." We can understand that: an animal cannot pay for man's transgression and neither can an angel; God is too righteous for that.

"Why," Q 16 asks further, "why must He be a ... righteous man?" "He must be a righteous man because one who himself is a sinner cannot pay for others." We can understand that too: when you're impossibly in debt yourself, how in the world can you pay off somebody else's debts! To be a Mediator before God on our behalf, Jesus of necessity had to be innocent of sin and perfectly holy – unlike any of us.

Q 17 wants to know why the Savior also had to be true God – at the same time as He had to be a true and righteous man. Says the Lord's Day: "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 righteous and life." Such is the infinite weight of the wrath of holy God against our sins that any creature would perish under that burden. Only one who was also true God could carry that weight! And this, says the Catechism, is the gospel of Christmas: that baby born in Bethlehem –true man of His mother Mary- *was also true God!* That combination –true man and at the same time true God- makes Him able to be our Savior! Take away His divinity, and you have no Savior; there's nothing in Bethlehem for us to be excited about. Take away His humanity, and you have no Savior either; there's nothing in Bethlehem for us to be excited about. He who was born of the virgin Mary, and walked this earth for 33 years, was *man and God, God and man* – incarnation. And *that's* our salvation!!

Satan understands the link between Jesus' identity and His work. That is why the devil sought to destroy the Son of God on earth before He could pay for sin. Think of the massacre of the children of Bethlehem under Herod (Mt 2:16ff). Think of Satan's temptations of Jesus in the wilderness (Mt 4). Think too of the effort of the people of Nazareth to push Jesus off the cliff (Luke 4:29), kill Him. Think of the determination of the Jews to stone Jesus (John 10:31). Satan knew: that Jesus was true man *and true God* made Jesus dangerous to Satan; His identity made Him able to pay for sin! But Satan was not able to succeed in his efforts to destroy Jesus – precisely because Jesus was also true God. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died – *triumphed* over sin and Satan and so reconciled sinners to God (2 Cor 5:21).

But Satan does not leave it at that, beloved! No longer can He try to prevent Jesus –true God and true man- from satisfying the justice of God on our behalf. But He can continue to prevent people from believing in the Savior. That started very early in church history. John had to address people who believed that Jesus was indeed the Son of God, true God, but not true man. John is emphatic: "every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist..." (1 John 4:2f). Antichrist: he denies the truth of Lord's Day 14, denies that Jesus is *both* true God *and* true man. John warns his readers against such people, for they deceive (2 John 7), and such a deceiver may receive no welcome in Christian homes (vs 10).

Despite John's warning the church continued to struggle with deception on the point of Jesus' identity. To protect the truth the church formulated the Athanasian Creed (*Book of Praise*, pg 439). I refer specifically to that section beginning with Sentence 29: "Furthermore, it is necessary to everlasting salvation that [one] also believe rightly the

incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the son of God, is God and man. God of the substance of His Father, begotten before the worlds; and man of the substance of His mother, born in the world. Perfect God and perfect man...." And, this Confession continues, *this* is the One "who suffered for our salvation" (Sentence 38). "This is the catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved." This, we appreciate, is categorical language. To deny either Jesus' manhood (as in the days of John) or to deny His Godhead (as in the days behind the Athanasian Creed), is to loose one's salvation!

Over the centuries the church has had to continue to insist that Jesus was both true man and true God. At the time of the Great Reformation in the sixteenth century, the Anabaptists denied that Jesus was true man. Hence the *Belgic Confession* makes a point of repeating after God what the believer finds in Scripture (Articles 18f): God "sent His one and only eternal Son into the world.... He truly assumed a real human nature with all its infirmities, without sin...." All the while He lived on earth Jesus remained true God also. Though "each nature retained its own distinct properties...", these two natures are so closely united in one person that they were not even separated by His death." That is to say: *always*, all the time He was on earth, Jesus was true man *and* true God. Never was He only divine, never was He only human.

But what do we see in Mel Gibson's film? Jim Caviezel, a true man like any of us, sinful, plays the Lord Jesus Christ. Can this actor, be he so accomplished, ever portray Jesus as *righteous, without sin*? Can this actor ever portray Jesus as *true God*? The answer is evident: of course he can't. And that is to say that he presents Jesus falsely! The best he can do is present a caricature of Jesus, as if He were only human. Such a portrayal can never proclaim the gospel simply because no *man* can pay for sin. If Jesus were man alone –and that's the best Caviezel can portray Him- then all His suffering and agony are futile, and we are still in our sins.

There, brothers and sisters, you also have the reason why so many modern church leaders who've seen *The Passion* encourage their congregations to go and see this film. It portrays Jesus as they preach Him: a true man, a good man, a man who laid down His life for others, a good example to follow, *but certainly not true God facing the holy wrath of God*. That Jesus can be portrayed as true man alone, and society accept this presentation, speaks volumes about what today's Christian world actually believes. The depth of Lord's Day 14 is not understood. The language of the Athanasian Creed is too sharp, too condemning. Those two –Gibson's film and the Athanasian Creed- are mutually exclusive.

"I believe ... in Jesus Christ ..., conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary." What a gospel: the eternal Son of God left the glory of heaven to share our world. True God He was and *remained*, and true man He *became* – that He might cover my sin in the sight of God. How glorious the redemption God has prepared!! Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 15 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 7 March 2004.

" CHRIST'S UNIQUE SUFFERING TAKES THE CURSE OUT OF OUR SUFFERING."

Text:

Lord's Day 15

37. Q. What do you confess when you say that He suffered?

A. 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.[1] Thus, by His suffering, as the only atoning sacrifice,[2] He has redeemed our body and soul from everlasting damnation,[3] and obtained for us the grace of God, righteousness, and eternal life.[4]

[1] Is. 53; I Tim. 2:6; I Pet. 2:24; 3:18. [2] Rom. 3:25; I Cor. 5:7; Eph. 5:2; Heb. 10:14; I John 2:2; 4:10. [3] Rom. 8:1-4; Gal. 3:13; Col. 1:13; Heb. 9:12; I Pet 1:18, 19. [4] John 3:16; Rom. 3:24-26; II Cor. 5:21; Heb. 9:15.

38. Q. Why did He suffer under Pontius Pilate as judge?

A. Though innocent, Christ was condemned by an earthly judge,[1] and so He freed us from the severe judgment of God that was to fall on us.[2] [1] Luke 23:13-24; John 19:4, 12-16. [2] Is. 53:4, 5; II Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13.

39. Q. Does it have a special meaning that Christ was crucified and did not die in a different way?

A. Yes. Thereby I am assured that He took upon Himself the curse which lay on me, for a crucified one was cursed by God.[1]

[1] Deut. 21:23; Gal. 3:13.

Scripture Reading:

Nahum 1:1-11

Isaiah 53

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalms 9:7,10

Psalms 66:5

Psalms 94:6,7

Psalms 27:3,6

Hymn 21:1,3

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The suffering of Jesus Christ has recently come again to the attention of the world. At least, that was the intention of Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*. And I understand that some youth who saw this film were indeed so touched, so subdued, by Gibson's portrayal of Jesus' passion that they had no words left, and no appetite for jesting and jostling. Perhaps that's a good thing.

Yet I want to ask this question: can anybody comprehend what Jesus' suffering really was? To put the question differently: was Jesus' suffering somehow in the same category as the sort of suffering people experience in this broken world? Can Gibson even *begin* to do justice to Jesus' passion?

The question is important. We all suffer in some way. How can Jesus' suffering help us in our suffering? If His suffering was at bottom no different than anybody else's, then, at the end of the day, His suffering is of no more benefit to us than, say, Nelson Mandela's sufferings were. Yet the Bible is emphatic: Christ's suffering can benefit us only if He through His suffering has taken away the *cause* of our suffering, has –in the words of the Lord's Supper Form- taken away "the *cause* of our eternal hunger and misery, which is sin."

So there is the question for today. What was so special of Christ's passion, Christ's suffering that He through His suffering could take away the cause of our misery? It turns out to be this: His suffering was "the only atoning sacrifice", and so "He has redeemed our body and soul from everlasting damnation, and obtained for us the grace of God, righteousness, and eternal life." That puts Christ's suffering very much in a league of its own.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

CHRIST'S UNIQUE SUFFERING TAKES THE CURSE OUT OF OUR SUFFERING.

1. The extent of Christ's suffering,
2. The uniqueness of Christ's suffering,
3. The benefit of Christ's suffering.

1. The extent of Christ's suffering.

The Apostles' Creed, it appears, skips some 33 years of Jesus' life. The Creed mentions that the Savior was "conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary" – a reference to Christmas. We covered that material last week with Lord's Day 14. Hard on the heels of that confession, the Apostles' Creed mentions that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate." That's obviously a reference to the events preceding His crucifixion and death, at the end of His life at age 33. No mention is made of anything that happened in the intervening years.

Yet it needs to be clear to us, brothers and sisters, that the 33 years of Jesus' earthly life certainly had its purpose – also for our redemption. Recall: the Son of God left the glory of heaven to take upon Himself the form of a servant. That is: He entered our broken, sin-filled world with the specific purpose of obtaining our redemption. By so doing, the Lord exposed Himself to all the suffering that characterizes life on this side of the Fall into sin. So, though He was true God and born of the lineage of David, His cradle was a feeding trough, and His blankets were swaddling clothes, rag. Though He was true God and born of royal stock, He had to flee in the face of Herod's rage; He had to go to Egypt, that land of bitter memories for God's covenant people. In childhood already He experienced what John later wrote: "He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him" (1:11). Straightaway, at birth already, there was *rejection*. And, when Jesus came to know of these events, this involved for Him *suffering*.

I can mention too the events that took place when Jesus was an adolescent. At age 12 He engaged the temple leaders in a discussion. His parents did not understand that He had to be about His Father's business, had a place and an interest in the temple. Point: He wasn't understood, even by His parents, those nearest to Him. And we all know: to be misunderstood involves suffering.

I can tell you of the suffering that characterized our Lord's work in His public ministry. He preached and He taught – and the crowds disappeared (John 6); they were turned off by His frank and unflattering preaching. He spoke the truth – and the crowds thought to push Him off the cliff (Luke 4). On another occasion He identified Himself with the Father, and the Jews responded by seeking to stone Him (John 10:31). The hardness of His hearers' hearts grieved Him (John 11:35). All in all, there was so much suffering throughout His life; yes, His life was *characterized* by suffering. *And that while He was without sin, true God.*

And what shall we say of His suffering after His arrest, the scourging and the mocking and the spitting He endured – to say nothing of the crucifixion itself? I need not draw it out, for we realize it well: here was suffering, terrible suffering. In the words of our Lord's Day: "during all the time He lived on earth, but especially at the end," He *suffered*.

But: *so many people in the course of history have suffered!* Some of us have visited the remains of the penal colony in Port Arthur, in Tasmania. How those people suffered! And not just for three hours or twelve hours, but years on end! Jesus' adult life surely wasn't like that. Pictures in the media show us children in Third World countries who are no more than skin over bones, except for a big swollen stomach. Talk about suffering! Jesus' youth surely wasn't like that. I read some time ago a book about Brother Yun, a Chinese pastor who spent years in China's prison system. He doesn't hesitate to describe some of the tortures with which he was afflicted, tortures that make your blood cold. His suffering went on, and on, and on....

In comparison to such suffering, brothers and sisters, we are left with the conclusion that Jesus' suffering was not as bad as the suffering of others.... Then the question comes at us again: of what value is all His suffering? If the sufferings of those Australians in Port Arthur years ago doesn't help us (except perhaps that they contributed in some way to building Australia), in what way does Jesus' suffering benefit us? That brings us to our second point:

2. *The uniqueness of Christ's suffering.*

On the one hand, congregation, we need to be aware that Christ suffered as we do. The apostle to the Hebrews writes that Jesus partook of our flesh and blood (2:14) with all the consequences thereof, and so has suffered as we do that in turn He might be able to aid those who are tempted (vs 18). Here's encouragement for us to approach our only High Priest in prayer in the midst of our sufferings. *He understands.*

Yet that's definitely not the whole picture of Scripture. He suffered as we do, *and much worse*. In that *added* element, Jesus' suffering was unique.

To appreciate that added element, we need to have fixed in our minds *Who our God is*. This almighty Creator is holy, infinitely, perfectly holy. Concerning this God the prophet Habakkuk says He is "of purer eyes than to behold evil, And cannot look on wickedness" (1:13). Yet the wonderful world God created was dragged, by man's obedience, into sin, evil. God from heaven above looks down upon this world, and is deeply upset by what He sees. *His* world – evil! That man –created in God's image!- should ruin it so: it provokes His holy anger! Lord's Day 4: God "is terribly displeased with our original sin as well as our actual sins" and "will punish them with a just judgment." In the words of Nahum: "God is jealous, and the Lord avenges; The Lord avenges and is furious. The Lord will take vengeance on His adversaries, And He reserves wrath for His enemies" (1:2).

But what's His wrath like? Says Nahum in vs 6: "Who can stand before His indignation? And who can endure the fierceness of His anger? His fury is poured out like fire, and the rocks are thrown down by Him." Imagine it, beloved: a wrath so holy, so fierce, that having it poured over you is like having fire poured out over you. We have heard enough about the horrors of Bali to have some idea of what it's like to have fire poured out over you. Well do the kings and princes, the big men and little on the earth cry out in the face of God's anger for the mountains to fall on them and the hills to cover them! How terrible, how devastating is His anger!

And let this be fixed in our minds, congregation: *this anger ought to fall upon us*. The worst suffering imaginable, hot fire pouring over us and yet we do not loose consciousness – *we deserve it!* Suffering beyond what we have ever experienced before!

Marvel, then, beloved, at who your God is! "The Lord," says the Spirit through Nahum, "is slow to anger and great in power" (Nahum 1:3). What does He do? He sent His only Son into this world –why?- to take a place *between* holy, righteous God and us, wretched sinners. The eternal fury of God ought to pour upon us like fire (Nahum 1:6), but Jesus Christ takes a place between holy God and us so that the wrath God pours out falls upon Him. This is *propitiation*: Christ receives the wrath we deserve – so that we need not experience that terrible wrath of God! See there His life work, see there the purpose of His coming into the world. Mt 20: "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but [He came] to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many" (vs 28).

But taking that wrath upon Himself: what was that like for the Savior? *That was suffering*. It began early in life, and continued throughout His earthly sojourn. The intensity of that suffering grew to its climax at the end of His life; in the final hours *The Passion of the Christ* was the worst.

The Catechism points to two instances in the final hours of Jesus' life to draw out the intensity of His suffering under the hot fires of God's fury. Question & Answer 38 asks why He suffered "under Pontius Pilate as judge". Pilate: He was the local arm of the legitimate Roman authority. What Paul later wrote was true of Pilate: "there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God." More: the authority "is God's minister to you for good" (Romans 13:1,4). *This* authority –God's servant- heard Jesus' case, and pronounced his verdict: this man is innocent, undeserving of death. *But this same man handed Jesus over to his soldiers for torment and crucifixion!* Here was gross miscarriage of justice: a declaration of innocence and at the same time a sentence of death. *We* may shake our heads at this perversion and wonder how it's possible, but Jesus, beloved, Jesus knew that *His Father was behind it!* That is: by the hand of the governing authority, "God's minister", His Father was rejecting Him, His Father was pouring His wrath out on Him like an endless bucket of fire. And how could He stand under *that?! Yet He had to!* Behind every blow from the soldiers' whips, behind every mocking word, behind every mouthful of spittle, was the wrath and fury of holy God upon sin – and Jesus knew it! Here was suffering in a manner we cannot begin to comprehend!

The second example the Catechism mentions relates to His crucifixion. Why, the Catechism asks, was Jesus crucified? "Does it have a special meaning that Christ was crucified and did not die in a different way?" Let's face it: almighty God could have had His Son die through an accident, or sickness, or even stoning. *Why crucifixion?* The answer is *not*: this is the worst form of suffering possible. Yes, crucifixion is a terrible way to die, perhaps the worst people could imagine. But in that case the robbers crucified with Jesus suffered more on account of crucifixion than Jesus did. After all, when the soldier came to break their legs, Jesus was already dead, while the two were not. So he took his hammer to their legs.... *They* suffered an agony Jesus did not suffer....

But crucifixion, brothers and sisters, has an element in it far worse than the agony of getting your legs smashed. Back in Deuteronomy the Lord God Himself spoke a word about hanging. I refer to Dt 21:22f:

"If a man has committed a sin deserving of death, and he is put to death, and you hang him on a tree, his body shall not remain overnight on the tree, but you shall surely bury him that day, so that you do not defile the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance; for he who is hanged is accursed of God."

A man of Israel could commit a sin deserving of death, and the people put him to death, on God's command. But the evil he committed could be so heinous that a sentence of death was not sufficient. Then the people could hand the evildoer over to the Lord for His punishment. That was symbolized by hanging the dead man's body on a tree. And God assured the people: "he who is hanged is accursed of God." Cursed. That's banned, excommunicated from God's favor in any way, subject only to the judgment of God, subject to hell.

The Lord in His providence led things in such a way that the Roman practice of crucifixion was the norm in Jerusalem for run away slaves and for rebels against the Roman Empire. Jesus was numbered with such transgressors, and sentenced –alive!- to such hanging between earth and heaven. Point: *God His Father let Jesus know that He was cursed*, rejected not just by men but *also by God* in heaven! Cursed He was, banned, excommunicated, and so the full load of God's fury was poured out over Him on the cross like fire.

How deep, then, the suffering of the Lord Jesus Christ! He suffered not just the agony of the crucifixion – something Mel Gibson can perhaps draw out for us in his film. But He suffered so much deeper, so much more intensely, in that the cross spelled out that He was rejected by His God and Father! More: He suffered so much more deeply and so much more intensely than anybody on earth can comprehend because *He experienced what it was like to have God's fury poured out on Him like a bucket of unending fire* – and He could not pass into unconsciousness to take the edge off the pain! Make no mistake, beloved: here was a suffering the human heart can never understand, a suffering that film can never convey. Despite all the lashing and all the blood on Gibson's film, he cannot do justice to the depths of the sufferings Christ Jesus experienced. It was unique because He alone of all people on the face of the earth felt the fury of God's wrath poured out like fire, and He did not perish, did not pass out, but endured it consciously and continued to endure it – until He had taken away the *cause* of that terrible expression of God's wrath – our sins.

So we come to our third point:

3. *The benefit of Christ's suffering.*

For there, beloved, is the glorious gospel of it all. God's legal representative, Pilate the judge, had declared that Jesus was innocent, and so He was. Exactly as an *innocent* man holy God placed Jesus Christ *between* Himself and us, so that wrath we earned through our sins might fall onto Jesus Christ. That load of heavenly anger fell on Jesus –He *suffered!*– but He was not consumed by it! *He bore the wrath of God, and did not perish; He survived.* By that perseverance on His part He atoned for our sins, satisfied the justice of God. So was fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: "He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities" (53:5). And: "the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (vs 6). More: "The chastisement for our peace was upon Him, And by His stripes we are healed" (vs 5). There's the gospel! What did it take for God to be at peace with us? Chastisement we earned through out sin, heavenly fury we deserved. But that chastisement was laid on Him – so that we might be reconciled to God, might receive *peace* from God instead of strife! In truth: here is the gospel! The infinite buckets of God's fiery wrath were poured out on Jesus Christ so that those buckets are now empty – there is no wrath left for us! Free, free we are of the curse of sin, reconciled to God, at peace with God! How glorious the gospel! In the words of A 37: "by His suffering as the only atoning sacrifice, [Christ] has redeemed our body and soul from everlasting damnation, and obtained for us the grace of God, righteousness and eternal life." And A 38: "He freed us from the severe judgment of God that was to fall on us." And A 39: "He took upon Himself the curse which lay on me." He received what I deserved, and so I'm free, free of the judgment of God! Grace instead of damnation, righteousness instead of judgment, eternal life instead of curse! How rich, how rich!

Question. What does this gospel look like in real life? No curse, only grace.... Yet we all suffer, each of us in our own way.... Is that not the heavy hand of God, a taste of His fury?

The Catechism speaks of Christ having borne "the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race." Yet with that statement the Catechism does not wish to say that all men receive now only God's grace. Back in Lord's Day 7 already the Catechism had said that not all men are saved by Christ as they perished through Adam, but only those are benefit from His work who "by a true faith are grafted into Christ." When our Lord's Day says that Christ bore "the wrath of God against the sin of the whole human race," the Catechism confesses that Christ's suffering was *sufficient* for all, yes, that people of every tribe and tongue and race can benefit from His work.

At the same time we need to notice that the Catechism is *personal*. A 37 speaks about Christ having redeemed "*our* body and soul," and about Christ having "obtained *for us* the grace of God, righteousness, and eternal life." That's to say: here *the believer* is speaking, the one who confesses with Lord's Day 1 that "I belong with body and soul to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ." The *believer* says that Christ has freed "us" –that's the believer- from the judgment we deserved.

So, back to our question. What does this gospel look like in real life – given that daily life is so full of suffering? For unbelievers, congregation, suffering is indeed the wrath of God on sin. Paul says in Romans 1 that "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men," and even gives some examples of what this wrath looks like. He speaks of idolatry and its hopelessness as evidence of God's wrath. He mentions also the lusts of the heart, having one's mind absorbed with the body. He mentions sexual diseases, etc. It's the wrath of God on sin, a wrath people can taste, feel.

But what about Christians, believers, those whose sins bother them and they find their comfort in the blood of Jesus Christ? Such people still suffer, suffer even the consequences of their sins. Is it God's wrath that they feel??

No, beloved, it is not! Christ suffered the penalty we deserve, bore the wrath of God against our sins. *So there is no wrath left for us!* Why, then, do we suffer? We suffer for *different reasons*. Jesus puts it this way in John 15: "every branch that bears fruit [the Father] prunes, that it may bear more fruit" (vs 2). The apostle Paul repeats the point with different words: "we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope" (Romans 5:3f). And Hebrews 12: "whom the Lord loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives" (vs 6). In a word: the suffering which the child of God experiences in this life is expression not of God's fury but of God's care.

True, we do not experience it that way, certainly not in the midst of our sufferings. But faith embraces the gospel of

Christ's suffering, accepts that Christ suffered *for us* so that we might escape the fury of God. Faith embraces that Christ reconciled us to God –though our sins abound- and so there is for us only grace, righteousness, life – and the sufferings of this life are *evidence* of grace, mercy, love, care.

Our Savior suffered, suffered far worse than any man can suffer, far worse than any man can imagine, far worse than any film can portray. I *believe* it: the full load of God's eternal fury –I deserved it!- fell upon Him, and He was not consumed; He instead bore it, and so atoned for sin, my sins. Now God is my Father, who in this vale of tears "averts all evil or turns it to my benefit." So I'm comforted in my tears. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day Lord's Day 16 Q&A 40-43 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 14 March 2004.

" CHRIST DIED TO TAKE THE STING OUT OF OUR DEATH ."

Text:

Lord's Day 16 Q&A 40-43

40. Q. Why was it necessary for Christ to humble Himself even unto death?

A. Because of the justice and truth of God[1] satisfaction for our sins could be made in no other way than by the death of the Son of God.[2]

[1] Gen. 2:17. [2] Rom. 8:3; Phil. 2:8; Heb. 2:9, 14, 15.

41. Q. Why was he buried?

A. His burial testified that He had really died.[1]

[1] Is. 53:9; John 19:38-42; Acts 13:29; I Cor. 15:3,4.

42. Q. Since Christ has died for us, why do we still have to die?

A. Our death is not a payment for our sins, but it puts an end to sin and is an entrance into eternal life.[1]

[1] John 5:24; Phil. 1:21-23; I Thess. 5:9, 10.

43. Q. What further benefit do we receive from Christ's sacrifice and death on the cross?

A. Through Christ's death our old nature is crucified, put to death, and buried with Him,[1] so that the evil desires of the flesh may no longer reign in us,[2] but that we may offer ourselves to Him as a sacrifice of thankfulness.[3]

[1] Rom. 6:5-11; Col. 2:11, 12. [2] Rom. 6:12-14. [3] Rom. 12:1; Eph. 5:1, 2.

Scripture Reading:

John 19:28-42

Romans 6:1-14

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalms 23:1,2

Hymn 7:9

Psalms 116:1,8,9

Psalms 30:1,2,3

Hymn 56:1,2,3,4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The evangelist John tells us that Jesus at a given moment cried out, "It is finished." Thereafter Jesus bowed His head and gave up His spirit – He died (19:30).

Why, congregation, did Jesus die? I mean: He'd just declared that "it is finished," and that's to say that He'd atoned for sin, satisfied the justice of God. If all was finished, why did the Lord Jesus not ascend directly from the cross into heaven? Or why did the Lord God not send a heavenly chariot to collect Jesus (as He once collected Elijah) and transport Him to glory? That would have been most impressive!! Why, after Jesus could declare that all was finished, did He still die?!

The question is so very important, congregation, simply because we all must die – unless our Lord returns from heaven before. All must die; in fact, this week some of us stood around an open grave again. We all must die – yet death is not the enemy it once was *precisely because Jesus died*.

So I preach to you today the gospel of Jesus' death, and use this theme:

CHRIST DIED TO TAKE THE STING OUT OF OUR DEATH.

1. The need for Christ's death,
2. The purpose of our death,
3. The blessing of past death.

1. The need for Christ's death.

People do not look forward to death. Certainly, the child of God longs for what is *beyond* death, the life of glory with God in Paradise Restored. But the road to that glory takes us through the valley of the shadow of death, and that's a place we'd rather not be. Death is *unknown*, death is somewhat frightening, death is –as Bildad describes it to Job- "the king of terrors" (18:14). We much agree with Paul when he characterizes death as an *enemy* (1 Cor 15:26).

Death, brothers and sisters, did not exist in the creation God made in the beginning. When God finished His creating work He examined all that He had made and declared it "very good" (Gen 1:31), and death was not part of that work. Death is a foreign entity, a stranger in God's world. Death entered this world as a result of our fall into sin. I refer to God's promise in Gen 2:17. God put Adam in the Garden, and told him he could eat of every tree of the Garden. But, God added, not of that tree in the middle, "for in the day you eat of it you shall surely die." You see: God placed a link between death and sin; from the beginning God declared that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23). Or, as Ezekiel has it, "the soul that sins shall die" (18:14). That is why, when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden tree and transgressed God's command, the Lord told them emphatically that they were dust "and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19). Every person on the face of this earth since that fall into sin has experienced the faithfulness of God, for all have died (with the exception of Enoch and Elijah) – and all in our present day shall die also (unless the Lord returns first).

What, then, congregation, is death? Death, beloved, is *God's judgment on sin*. Death is God's punishment, death is God's curse on our disobedience. Death is 'the king of terrors' precisely because in death one meets God, in death one comes face to face with the holy Judge of all whom we offended with our sin in Paradise and our sins day by day. To meet this God: as sinners we can't stand before Him! Yet at death we are called before Him, and that's why death is so terrible, an enemy.

Precisely for that reason, brothers and sisters, it was so necessary that the Lord Jesus Christ *die*. Yes, He cried out that all was finished, and that's to say that He had atoned for sin. But there remained some follow-up work, and that includes taking the sting out of death for us. So, instead of ascending directly from the cross to heaven, the Savior committed His spirit to His Father, and He died. He died, and for Jesus death was not a terrible thing. He died, and went directly to His Father in heaven, where He was welcomed. Did He not say to the man beside Him on the cross: "Today you will be with Me in Paradise"? Jesus knew: upon His death He would go directly to Paradise, to His Father in glory. (I know: the thought is out there that after Jesus death Jesus descended into hell. But that's not true, as I hope to show next week.)

So He died, and went to the Father. And yes, the Father received Him. His death did not put Him before a God angry at His sins, for Jesus had just atoned for sin; "it is finished," He had cried out. He could walk through the valley of the shadow of death, and fear no evil because the sin that demanded death was gone, was paid for! You see: the curse was out of death! Then yes, He had to die because God had said in the beginning that sin is the wages of death, and Jesus had been made all sin. But because of His triumph over sin on the cross was death for Jesus no longer a terror; He could peaceably commit His spirit to His Father, and be received in heaven.

Here, beloved, is enormous gospel for us. Yes, we need to die, for God is faithful to His promise of the beginning: if you sin, you must die. But since Christ died for us, Christ has taken the curse out of death, has taken the bite out of death. 1 Cor 15: "O death, where is your sting?" Christ has died, Christ has triumphed, and so the sting of death is

gone, gone because the *punishment* is taken out of death.

Given that wealth (and I need to draw it out further in our second point), we need, congregation, to be fully persuaded that Jesus in fact did die. Consider, then, this evidence.

John makes a point of relating that the soldiers came to break the legs of the crucified so that they would die before the Sabbath. But, writes John, "when they came to Jesus and saw that He was already dead, they did not break His legs" (19:33). Notice: these unbelieving Roman soldiers were convinced that Jesus was really dead. More, "one of the soldiers pierced His side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out" (vs 34). The separation of the blood into plasma and water occurs as a result of death. Point: Jesus was truly dead.

John tells us also of the labors of Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus, two disciples of the Lord. These two men took Jesus' body off the cross, carried it from here to there, wrapped it in many meters of linen strips packed with a hundred pounds of spice. They *handled* Jesus' body, not for a moment, but for a period. They felt for themselves that the body was cold, was dead. So they buried the body – evidence that they were fully convinced that Jesus was dead. Let's be honest: had Joseph and Nicodemus found evidence of lingering life, they certainly would *not* have buried Jesus; they would instead have nursed Him, sought out a doctor, or something in that line. But they buried Him, and that's because they were convinced Jesus was dead. It's the point of the Catechism: "His burial testified that He had really died." He wasn't buried by a landslide, He wasn't buried by enemies willing to bury despite evidence of lingering life. No, Jesus' friends buried Him, buried Him after they handled His body repeatedly. They buried Him because they were absolutely certain that Jesus was dead.

The Lord God tells us of the actions of the soldiers and the actions of the disciples so that we might be persuaded too that Jesus had *really* died. There was no pretense of Jesus' death, and we may be thankful for that, for pretense does not help us when we have to face Death. He did not faint, and we can be thankful for that, for a fainting Jesus does not help us in the face of Death. No, congregation, Jesus *died*, as per God's promise in the beginning. Like we are, so also He was dust and had to return to dust. He died *for us*, and thereby took the curse out of our death, emptied death of the penalty and the punishment that follows from the fall into sin.

That is why we can join Paul in his song of praise: "O death, where is your sting?", and we can exalt with Paul also: "thanks be to God in Jesus Christ our Lord!" (1 Cor 15:55ff).

That brings us to our second point:

2. The purpose of our death.

If Christ has taken the sting out of death for us, if Christ has taken away the penalty from death, why must we still die? It's Q 42 of our Lord's Day.

Notice first this, congregation. Q 42 does not ask why *people* still need to die. Q 42 asks why "*we* still have to die." The pronoun 'we' refers to believers, refers to those who confess with Lord's Day 1 that they belong in life and death to the Savior Jesus Christ who redeemed them with His blood. These are the people who confessed in Lord's Day 15 that Christ by His suffering has freed us from the severe judgment of God that was to fall upon us. That unbelievers need to die on account of their sins, yes, we realize that's fully consistent with God's promise in Gen 2, for the wages of sin remains death. But if Christ died for believers, and if Christ has taken our curse upon Himself, "why do we still have to die?" Does God demand payment for our sins twice, first through Christ's suffering and death, and then through ours?

No, congregation, God does not. Rather, with His work on the cross the Lord Jesus Christ has *changed the purpose of death*. By God's ordinance in the beginning, the purpose of death was *penalty*, the purpose of death was to *pay* for sin. But that penalty, that payment, Christ took on Himself, and He made the payment on our behalf. So God no longer asks of us to pay for sin. No longer is our death the penalty, the payment for sin!

Why, then, do we still have to die? The Catechism puts it this way: death "puts an end to sin." The point is this. As young people we struggled against so many temptations, so much sin. As we get older, do we get better? That is: does

a parent of teenagers have fewer struggles against sin than a teenager? Does a person of 70 need less forgiveness of sins than a person of 47 or of 17? The answer is simple: the struggle remains as great as ever. That's true not just of unbelievers but also for believers. The apostle Paul was renewed by the Holy Spirit, but he cries out his despair in the face of his abiding sinfulness: "O wretched man that I am!" "I can will what is right, but I can't do it!" (Rom 7). That's why Lord's Day 23 says that even persons made righteous through Jesus Christ "are still inclined to all evil," and Lord's Day 44 adds that "even the holiest have only a small beginning of the obedience God requires." You see: as long as we remain in this life, we cannot outgrow sin, cannot get past sin.

What, then, is the only way to get rid of sin, to get past sin? There is but one way, and that is *death*. Romans 6: "he who has died has been freed from sin" (vs 7). 1 Cor 15: "flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does corruption inherit incorruption" (vs 50). Flesh: that's fallen, sinful human nature. As long as one is 'in sin', one cannot enter eternal life. As long as one is corrupt, one cannot inherit incorruption. How can one get past sin, become guilty of no more sins? Only death provides escape from sin.

There, beloved, is the new purpose of death. The old purpose of death was penalty for sin, payment for sin, facing the judgment of God. Christ has taken that purpose upon Himself, and so for the child of God death is no longer our payment for sin. Now there's a new purpose for death. That's this: death puts an end to sin, death frees us from this body of sin. Death is the entrance into eternal life, is the door through which we must pass to move from *this* room, *this* life (with it's sin and brokenness) into the *next* room, the *next* life – where there is no sin, no brokenness, no tears, no pain. Through His death the Lord Jesus Christ *has changed the purpose of death!* Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the psalmist foresaw this changed purpose, and therefore said in Ps 116: "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints" (vs 15). Precious, for death is no longer judgment but entrance to glory! Equally, that's why Paul could tell the Philippians that for him to die was gain (1:21). When Paul wrote those words he languished in prison, and despite the discomforts of prison death would *not* be gain if death remained God's penalty, judgment, curse on sin. But Paul can confidently say that death is gain because he knows that the curse is out of death, death's bite is gone, because the purpose of death has been changed; it's now the entrance into the next room, life with God in glory!

This gospel gives great comfort as we face death. This past week some of us had to bury a loved mother and grandmother, sister in the Lord. With her death there's an empty place, and we don't like that. But she confessed with Lord's Day 1 that she belonged, in life and death, to her faithful Savior Jesus Christ. That's to say, beloved, that as she traveled through that valley of the shadow of death, her Lord and Savior was with her, so that she did not need to fear any evil – not the evil of death either. For her, death was gain because it put an end to sin. Today she lives on in the next room, so to speak, in heaven where sin is no problem to her anymore, where the temptation to sin is gone for her now, where the tyranny of sin over her is broken. She has died, and death has done for her what 92 years of effort could not do, and that is overcome sin, get past sin. Because of Christ's death, her death put an end to sin. Truly, how precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints!

So it is, congregation, for all who believe in Jesus Christ, who know themselves redeemed through His blood. In life *and in death* we belong to Jesus Christ, and so death has lost its bite. That glorious gospel has implications for us all. Shall we –who by God's grace may belong to Him, may know ourselves washed through Jesus' blood - shall we look up against death? Shall we *resist* death, pull out all stops to live a week longer, a month longer, five years longer? In our world of progressive scientific technology, we can do much to prolong life, and in many cases that is good, a blessing of the Lord. I think especially of persons upon whom others are dependent, who have a task yet in this life. But the Lord, congregation, has said that the life of man is three-score and ten, and by reason of strength four-score. 70 years, 80 years: that, by God's ordinance, is the life of man in this fallen world, and we fly away. Shall we resist that reality, fight it, and strive at great costs to keep our loved ones with us? Does our Lord's Day, brothers and sisters, not have something to say about the extent we should go to prolong life? If death is now gain, thanks to Jesus' death, shall we begrudge this gain to an ailing parent or grandparent? If death puts an end to sin, shall we begrudge that a loved one who has fought sin so many years is finally relieved of the struggle and instead crowned with glory?

Here me well. Suicide is sin against God, and so is euthanasia, for God told us not to kill – neither ourselves nor another. But there is something between killing a frail and dying person *and* bringing in all technology to prolong his life somewhat. We all must die, and realism accepts that, let's death take us. We all must die, and the child of God will work with the confession of our Lord's Day and so *let* death take a loved father, mother, brother, sister in the Lord.

The child of God knows: such a death is gain. Then the resulting empty place is painful, yes, but we do not grieve as those who have no hope; we believe that Christ's death has taken the bite, the sting, the curse out of death for God's people.

I come to our last point:

3. The blessing of past death.

Q 43 asks about a "further benefit ... we receive from Christ's sacrifice and death on the cross." We've discussed at length the first benefit; through His death Christ has taken the sting, the curse out of our death, so that for us death is gain. What "further benefit" might there be?

Says the Catechism: "through Christ's death our old nature is crucified, put to death, and buried with Him." That is: when Christ was crucified some 2000 years ago, He was not the only one crucified; we were crucified with Him. When Christ died some 2000 years ago, we died also, and when He was buried we were buried also. I don't know how to understand that, no more than I know how to understand that I fell into sin with Adam some 6 or 7000 years ago. But this is what God says, and so I believe it.

We died with Christ when He died. That's what Paul writes in Romans 6. Vs 5: "For if we have been united together in the likeness of His death, certainly we also shall be in the likeness of His resurrection, knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with Him..." (vss 5-8).

It's hard to wrap our minds around this concept of dying with Christ. Why, then, does Paul mention it? What's he mean? He mentions it because of the thought that readily lives in the minds of sinners, this thought: if Christ has paid for our sins so that we are saved by His grace alone (and that's what we confessed in Lord's Day 15), hey, let's just continue to sin for we'll be forgiven anyway. The more we sin, the more grace we'll receive. It's the question of vs 1: "shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?" In that context Paul writes about the 'further benefit' we receive from Christ's death. It's this: we died with Christ 2000 years ago already! The implication of that? Recall what we said before about the *change* Christ has worked in the purpose of death. Death used to be punishment on sin, God's penalty, curse on sin (as it still is for the unbeliever). But Christ changed that for the believer; because of Christ's death our death "puts an end to sin." Those who die do not sin anymore, do not languish any longer under the tyranny of sin.

Well, says Paul, that is true not just in relation to physical death. True, at physical death one leaves this broken body and goes to be with the Lord in perfection, where there is no more sin at all. But, says Paul, we have already died – with Christ. When He died, we died, died to sin. And *death puts an end to sin!* We died with Christ, and *so it will not do live in sin*. That's Paul's argument here. Vs 11: "Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord." And vs 12: "Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body, that you should obey it in its lusts." Death puts an end to sin, you have died with Christ, and so sin may not be your boss. Be consistent, be what you are – redeemed, alive to God!

"What further benefit do we receive from Christ's sacrifice and death on the cross?" We died with Him in the past, *and that is why we may no longer give ourselves to sin*. Christ's death *touches us today*, affects our lifestyle today, makes us today put sin in the past. No, we shall not achieve perfection on that point, no more than Paul did when he despaired at his continuing brokenness. But we *believe* we've died with Christ, and so today already we strive to live as persons who have been freed from sin.

"It is finished," Christ declared on the cross after He had suffered for sin. But He did not immediately ascend into heaven. First He died, and for that I'm so thankful. First He died, and so took the curse out of death for our benefit. He died, and so I can be sure that I belong to Him not just in life *but also in death*. He died, and so my death can only be gain – for at my death sin shall no longer have dominion over me. In fact, He died, and I died with Him so that *today* sin is not my boss. What glorious incentive to live for Him, to present myself a sacrifice of thankfulness every day anew as long as I live – be it in this room or in the next! Amen.



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Sermon on Lord's Day 16 Q&A 44 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday Morning, 21 March 2004.

Sermon held prior to the the Lord's Supper

Text:

Lord's Day 16 Q&A 44

44. Q. Why is there added: He descended into hell?

A. 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[1] but especially on the cross, has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell.[2]

[1] Ps. 18:5, 6; 116:3; Matt. 26:36-46; 27:45, 46; Heb. 5:7-10. [2] Is. 53.

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Votum

Sing: Psalm 9:6,7

Law

Sing: Psalm 88:1,2

Prayer

Scripture reading: Matthew 27:45-50

Reading of Catechism: Lord's Day 16 Q&A 44

Sermon

Sing: Psalm 37:16

Lord's Supper Form

Sing: Hymn 1A

To table: sing: Psalm 4:3

At table: Romans 8:31-35a - Hymn 27:1

Romans 8:35b-37 - Hymn 27:3

Romans 8:38,39 - Hymn 27:4

Prayer

Announcements/Collections

Sing: Psalm 27:1,6

Benediction

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Sunday-by-Sunday we confess with the Apostles' Creed that our Lord Jesus Christ "descended into hell." The statement appears in the Creed *after* references to His suffering, crucifixion, death and burial, and so we automatically conclude that Jesus "descended into hell" after His death.

This conclusion, however, is wrong. Jesus told one of the criminals crucified with Him that "today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). The point is clear: Jesus expects both the criminal and Himself to be in Paradise, heaven, "today", ie, when they die. Similarly, just before Jesus died He prayed this: "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit" (vs 46). Surely that does not mean that Jesus expected to go to hell when He died! No, congregation, when Jesus died His spirit was "immediately" taken up to God in heaven (cf Lord's Day 22).

When, then, did Jesus ‘descend into hell’? To understand the phrase we need to come to grips with the Bible’s presentation of ‘hell’. The Bible uses some graphic adjectives to describe what ‘hell’ is like. I think of words like fire, torment, gnashing of teeth, weeping, anguish. Hell, obviously, is a *terrible* place. But what makes hell so terrible? It is this: hell is where *God’s favor is gone*. Hell: that’s where *God’s judgment is poured out* over you in full measure. And it’s a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God, for there is no escape from His fury. It’s that fury that causes the torment, the gnashing of teeth, the weeping and the anguish that characterize hell.

Now the question is: when did Jesus experience such hell? When did the judgment of God fall upon Him so that He tasted the anguish and torment of hell? This, brothers and sisters, was specifically in the darkest moments of the cross. I refer to Mt 27:45f: "Now from the sixth hour until the ninth hour there was darkness over all the land. And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is, ‘My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?’" God is light, but when darkness settled over the land from high noon till 3 PM, God was gone – or, better said, God’s favor was gone from Jesus and His wrath poured out on Him instead. After three hours of deepest night, after three hours of being rejected by God, after three hours of experiencing the eternal judgment of God, Jesus cried out the depths of His anguish: "My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?" He was rejected, cast off, with no favor left for Him but judgment alone, and *that is hell*.

The big question is now: *so what?* How does the fact that Christ experienced this hell on the cross benefit you and me? The answer is this: *we don’t have to go to hell*. Everyone who repents of sin, who is united to Christ by faith, escapes the eternal judgment of God, escapes hell. Given the terrible words the Bible uses to describe hell, this benefit is relief indeed.

But when, congregation, may we expect to escape hell? Must our thoughts now travel to the day when we shall die – in the assurance that on that day we shall go to heaven and not to hell? Is that the extent of the benefit of Christ’s time in hell?

No, beloved, it is not. Christ’s hellish suffering benefits us *now!* For: what is life like? We all now: life is not a straight line, where every day we feel just the same. Life has moments of great happiness and pleasure, and life equally has moments of great despair and grief. Those moments of despair and grief can be so dark that, to our feeling, God’s favor is gone, He doesn’t care about us, doesn’t hear our prayer, leaves us all alone. I’m sure we can all relate that those kinds of days, can relate to the anguish and the inner pain and the torment and the crying of such days. They *hurt*. We can relate to Heman’s prayer in Ps 88: "But to You I have cried out, O Lord, And in the morning my prayer comes before You. Lord, why do You cast off my soul? Why do You hide Your face from me?" (vss 13f). We find it so terrible: God’s favor is gone, we experience only His wrath....

Here now, congregation, is the benefit of Christ’s suffering the anguish of hell. He suffered the wrath of God, He experienced the absence of God’s favor, *so that we might never suffer that agony*. Left alone and forsaken: *never!* Certainly, we’ll have moments that we *feel* God has rejected us, *feel* all alone, forsaken. But our feelings are warped with the fall into sin, and so can never be the measure of reality. It’s specifically when we *feel* so rejected that the gospel of Christ’s hellish agony comforts us greatly: He was rejected so that we may never be rejected! That is the point of Question & Answer 44: "In my greatest sorrows and temptations I may be assured and comforted that my Lord Jesus Christ ... has delivered me from the anguish and torment of hell." *Today* God will not leave me nor forsake me! *Today* His face will shine on me always – whether I feel it to be that way or not. Precisely in those moments of deepest anguish and trouble, this is the gospel to which I may cling! Christ tasted hell for me, so that I need never taste hell, neither in this life nor the life to come.

Now we go to the table of the Lord. What does the Lord teach us at His table? This: Christ’s suffering, including His hellish agony, was *for us*. That is: Christ assures us that in our moments of "greatest sorrows and temptations" *God will never forsake us* – no matter how we feel. That’s gospel! Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 17 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 4 April 2004.

"CHRIST'S RESURRECTION BENEFITS US GREATLY TODAY."

Text:

Lord's Day 17

45. Q. How does Christ's resurrection benefit us?

A. 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.[1] Second, by His power we too are raised up to a new life.[2] Third, Christ's resurrection is to us a sure pledge of our glorious resurrection.[3]

[1] Rom. 4:25; 1 Cor. 15:16-20; 1 Pet. 1:3-5. [2] Rom. 6:5-11; Eph. 2:4-6; Col. 3:1-4. [3] Rom. 8:11; 1 Cor. 15:12-23; Phil. 3:20, 21.

Scripture Reading:

1 Corinthians 15:1-19

Romans 6:1-14

Singing: (*Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter*)

Psalm 30:2,7

Psalm 116:1,2,4

Hymn 57:4

Psalm 16:4,5

Psalm 17:5 & Hymn 51:4,7,8

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Jesus came to earth to deliver God's people from their sins. He accomplished that through His sufferings and death on the cross. Lord's Day 15: through His suffering He bore the wrath of God for us, and so obtained for us the grace of God, righteousness and eternal life. Lord's Day 16: He died because the justice and truth of God demanded that satisfaction for our sins could be made in no other way than through Jesus' death. With His suffering and death, then, Jesus accomplished His task.

That being so, beloved, why did Jesus arise from the dead? To put the question differently: would it make any difference to our salvation if Jesus were still in His grave outside Jerusalem?

The answer is distinctly Yes. Says Paul to the Corinthians: if Christ has not been raised, you are still in your sins. This resurrection is *essential* for our salvation.

But why is it essential, brothers and sisters? That is the material of our Lord's Day. In Lord's Day 17 the Christian confesses that we *benefit* from Christ's resurrection. How? The Catechism outlines three ways. In the tears and brokenness of this life-after-Paradise, I proclaim these three ways in which we benefit. I summarize the sermon with this theme:

CHRIST'S RESURRECTION BENEFITS US GREATLY TODAY.

1. His resurrection proves He paid for sin,
2. His resurrection raises us to new life today,
3. His resurrection pledges our glorious resurrection in time to come.

1. His resurrection proves He paid for sin.

Resurrection. What, congregation, is that? We understand: the term 'resurrection' catches the notion of dead people coming alive again. Fundamental to 'resurrection' is the concept of *death* – and then specifically *escaping* death.

Death. It is an enemy that had not come into the world yet when God declared on the sixth day that all was "very good". This enemy entered the world by God's ordinance in response to our fall into sin. That's what God had said to Adam: in the day you eat [of that tree], you shall surely die (Gen 2:17). Adam ate, and Eve did too, and so God pronounced His curse: "dust you are and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19). Death, then, came in response to sin, came with a specific task. Death's task was to extract payment for sin. There is an inseparable link between sin and death, death and sin. As long as sin remains, death invariably remains also for 'the soul that sins shall die'.

Well now, on the cross of Calvary the sins of all God's people were piled onto Jesus Christ. As a result, He became *the* sinner. If ever there was a task for Death to extract payment for sin, surely, it was from Jesus Christ! The Grim Reaper should certainly come to claim Him!

But what happened? Jesus experienced the curse of God during the three hours of darkness –He descended into hell-and *survived* God's rejection, God's anger, God's curse. After those three hours of darkness He cried out His triumph: "It is finished!" He'd paid for sin, satisfied the curse of God. What, congregation, happened next? What did Jesus do? John tells us: "And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit" (19:30). Significance? Death is the Grim Reaper who comes to take whom he wills, and you have no say in the matter; when it's your time, you go, you peter out, you expire – you're passive, death happens to you. But not so with Jesus! Very deliberately, very sovereignly, He bowed His head; very deliberately, very sovereignly "He gave up His spirit." Death did not come to *take* Him; He instead sovereignly *gave* Himself to death. Death was not His master and He death's victim; He was instead death's Master. See there the result of His sacrifice for sin! He's paid for sin, satisfied God's justice, and so Death had no claim over Him, no hold.

And that, congregation, is why on the third day Jesus could arise from the dead! Death never was Jesus' master; He was Death's Master – because He'd paid for sin! So, at the time of His choosing, Jesus could give Himself to death, and equally at the time of His choosing Jesus could escape death's clutches again.

What, then, is the significance of Jesus' resurrection? It is this: resurrection is the *proof* that He paid for sin. Sin leads to death, said God in Gen 2. Jesus paid for sin, washed sin away, and therefore deprived death of its task. That is why death had no claim on Him, why death could not take. He paid for sin, and therefore could give Himself to death – and in due time arise from the dead. His resurrection is the *evidence* that He paid for sin – including your sins and mine. In the words of the Catechism: "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." We are righteous before God, not guilty of our trespasses, because Jesus paid for sin, and the proof of His payment lies in the fact that death could not hold Him; He arose!

We read together a portion from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. From the apostle's word in vs 12 it is clear that some of the Christians of Corinth believed there was no resurrection of the dead. That Christ suffered on the cross for sin, satisfied God's justice and then died, was, they said, sufficient. But Paul is emphatic: Christ has definitely risen. In fact, look at his summary of the gospel in vss 3 & 4. The gospel is "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures." Notice: Paul includes Jesus' resurrection as part of the fundamentals of the gospel. In fact, Paul then goes out of his way to impress on the Corinthians the reality of the resurrection. Vs 5: the risen Jesus "was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. After that He was seen by over 500 brethren at once.... After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. Then last of all He was seen by me also," on the road to Damascus. Paul's point? Paul sets out a long row of *witnesses*, persons who have seen the risen Christ, and he does so in order to convince the Corinthian saints that Christ has really, truly arisen; they can even go and interview some of those witnesses! There may be no doubt in their minds: Christ really arose from the dead!

And why is it so important that Christ arose? Vs 14: "if Christ is not risen, then our preaching is empty and your faith is also empty." He explains further in vs 17: "if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!"

There you have it, congregation. If Christ is not risen, you are still in your sins. If Christ is not risen, then Death still has claim over Him, and given the link God placed between sin and death, death can have a claim only over sinners! As death demonstrates the presence of sin, so resurrection demonstrates the destruction of sin. Christ arose, and there's the proof that He paid for sin. Christ arise, *and there's the proof that we are in our sins no longer!*

There, congregation, is also the glorious gospel of the various resurrections recorded in the Bible. Whether we speak of Elisha raising the son of the Shunammite widow or of Jesus raising His friend Lazarus or of Paul raising the boy that fell out the window in Troas, the message is all the same: the power of death is broken *because there is atonement for sin*. A resurrection spells out not only that God is almighty, has the power to raise the dead; a resurrection spells out specifically that God in Christ has overcome sin. That is why the raising of the Shunammite widow's son not only benefited *her*, but was good news for all Israel in her day – our God has power over sin, our God conquers sin. Equally, that is why Lazarus' resurrection not only benefited his sisters, but was exciting news for all Israel in Jesus' day – our God has conquered sin. Death came into the world because of sin, but behold a resurrection: the power of death is broken, and that can only be because God has organized redemption from sin!

That's what was fulfilled in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and that's why His resurrection is such glorious news for all God's own. Sin is atoned for! There's redemption from sin, escape from the just judgment of God! How rich the gospel – for Israel and for us!

Question: is there any benefit in this gospel for us today? How, concretely, does this gospel touch our lives *now*? It's our second point:

2. His resurrection raises us to new life today.

I mentioned before that death entered the world as a result of the fall into sin; death came to extract payment for our sins. That's why God told Adam and Eve after the fall that they were dust, and would return to dust.

As it is, the penalty resulting from our fall into sin did not touch only the *conclusion* of our lives, that moment at the end when death takes us. The life of fallen man is a *constant death*. When God exiled Adam and Eve from the Garden, He told the woman that He would "greatly multiply your sorrow and your conception; In pain you shall bring forth children" (Gen 3:16). That's a reference not only to the pain of childbearing itself; it's a reference also the pain of raising children. The point here is that parents are sinful and children are sinful also, and two sinners together is a recipe for dynamite. The same is true in marriage. Said God to Eve: "your desire shall be for your husband, And he shall rule over you" (Gen 3:16). The harmony and intimacy of their relation before the fall would now be replaced by the battle of the sexes, including Eve's desire to rule Adam, and Adam's insistence on ruling over his wife. The point is the same: two sinners together is a recipe for disaster. Just how broken life had become as a result of the fall into sin is amply illustrated on the pages of Scripture; one need but think of Cain and Abel together, of the selfishness of the generation before the flood that took to wife whomever they pleased, of the tension between Sarai and Hagar, of the strife between Abraham and Lot, etc. The fallout of the fall into sin extended so much farther than to death. Or, better said, as a result of the fall we immediately died spiritually, and therefore our ability to interact together in a Godly manner died.

Exactly for that reason, brothers and sisters, does Christ's triumph over sin also extend much farther than to physical death! It is the point of the second part of A 45. "By His power," says the Catechism, "we too are raised up to a new life." The reference here is not to what happens on the day of Christ's return, when the dead are raised; that's the point of the third benefit mentioned in our Lord's Day. The point of the second benefit concerns very much the *here and now*. Today already, says the Catechism, we are raised up to a new life.

How we are to understand that? When the Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross, we died with Him – in a way I can't understand. When He was buried, we entered the grave with Him. And equally, when He arose on Easter Sunday, we arose with Him. That is the apostle's point in Romans 6. The earlier chapters of Romans had laid out the gospel of

justification by God's grace, through faith. That is: sinners are righteous before God without cost to themselves, are righteous because of God's work in Jesus Christ. A gospel-of-such-free-grace raises a question: shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? (6:1). To that question Paul gives the emphatic answer, "Certainly not!", and explains that answer in terms of Christians having died with Christ on Calvary, being buried with Him, and being raised with Him. Vs 4: "we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life." In the verses that follow Paul works out further the implications of dying with Christ and being raised with Him. We are new creatures, he says, alive in Christ, and that in turn cannot but affect the way you live. Vs 11: "Likewise you also, reckon yourselves to be dead indeed to sin, but alive to God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The consequence? Vs 12: if you are dead with respect to sin, then sin cannot tell you what to do anymore – for dead people don't listen to instructions. So: "do not let sin reign in your mortal body." And vs 13: "do not present your members as instruments of unrighteousness to sin." Instead: you have been raised to new life, raised with Christ when He arose. So, vs 13b: "present yourselves to God as being alive from the dead," and that means that you give yourself to obedience to God's commands.

What this sort of life looks like? Back to Gen 3: two sinners together is dynamite. A marriage of two persons controlled by sin is by nature (unless God restrain it) characterized by selfishness. So you get things like: I want your body because I want it, never mind how you feel. I expect you to make the dinner because that's your job; I don't care that you're tired. I'm not going to clean up your mess, because it doesn't suit me. Etc. Such a marriage cannot be happy, simply because sin is permitted to reign in the hearts of both parties.

But what if the parties of that marriage are raised with Christ to a new life? What if the Holy Spirit has applied to them the gifts Christ obtained for them on the cross? We realize: then attitudes change, and selfishness gives way to self-denial. Not the works of the flesh characterize that relationship, but the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, self control. Such a relation can be filled again with happiness, and with growth in the Lord. Then yes, the two are sinners still, but the bite of the curse is gone, and something of the harmony of Paradise is restored.

How such a happy development is possible? It's possible, beloved, *only because* Christ paid for the sin that caused our exile from Paradise to begin with. He paid, and the evidence that He paid lies in His resurrection from the dead. He paid, and so in principle the consequences of our fall into sin are taken away *in this life already*. So it pleases the Lord today already to raise His children from their spiritual deadness, raise them to new life. So His children *in this life already* receive something back of Paradise we lost; now already the friction resulting from two sinners living together is in principle taken away. You see: today already we benefit from Christ's resurrection, simply because His resurrection spells out His triumph over sin.

What incentive that is, beloved, to live as God wants us to live! He arose to demonstrate for us that He paid for sin. He raised us up with Him, to take away in principle the bitterness, the sharpness of the pain of our fall. What shall we do then: let the lusts of the flesh dominate us? Shall we readily listen to the instructions of that old king called Sin? Shall we in our marriages and in our families live purely for ourselves, without regard to other? No, beloved, no! Exactly because we believe that we are raised up by Christ's power to a new life shall we make it our business today to live as renewed people, today to live as people belonging to Paradise restored instead of to Paradise lost. Christ's resurrection *drives* us to a new lifestyle, to a life of obedience to Him.

By the grace of God we do live as His children. But, we notice, so very much sin remains. Try as we might to live as people of Paradise restored, we find ourselves repeatedly acting more like people of Paradise lost. So much pain remains, so much brokenness.... And that gets so discouraging.... That brings us to our last point:

3. His resurrection pledges our glorious resurrection in time to come.

Our thoughts need to go back again to Gen 3. God had declared before the fall that sin would lead to death. God confirmed that directly after the fall, for He reminded Adam that he was dust, and to dust he would return – because he'd sinned.

But, brothers and sisters, if Christ has overcome sin, and therefore broken the power of death, yes, arose from the dead, *why shall those who believe in Christ remain dead?* Already the believers are raised with Christ to a new life spiritually; that was our second point, Paul's instruction in Romans 6. Must not the physical resurrection follow, the undoing of that part of the curse of Gen 3? Indeed, the saints of the Old Testament understood that, and that's why Job could declare his conviction that after his skin is destroyed (he dies), yet "in my flesh I shall see God" (19:25). David could say something similar in Ps 16: "You will not leave my soul in Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption" (vs 10). The apostle Paul works out this promise in his letter to the Corinthians when he says that Christ is the "firstfruits" of those who arise (15:23). That is: Christ's resurrection is the promise that many will arise after Him; He's the first of a whole harvest of resurrected people. Specifically, when Christ returns on the clouds of heaven, the cemeteries will bustle with activity, for the graves will be opened. Those who have returned to dust, those who are returning to dust, will come alive again! Then God's word of Gen 3 will end; no longer will man return to dust, but dust will give up its dead! It *must* be so, for *all* the horrible consequences of our fall into sin will be taken away – including death itself. And the promise of God is that we shall live with God in the New Jerusalem eternally – Paradise restored! In the New Jerusalem there is no death (Rev 21:4), for Christ arose.

Similarly, with what sort of a body shall we enter the New Jerusalem? On the new earth, beloved, do the saints of God keep the bodies we have now? Or shall God make a brand new body for us? The word of God is this: we shall keep the bodies we have now. You may like your body or not like your body, but this is the body that we shall take with us into eternity. Still, this body shall first be completely repaired. Paul says to the Corinthians that this body shall be glorified, shall put on immortality. That is: every scar resulting from the fall into sin shall be taken away. Do you suffer in this life from headaches, allergies, muscle spasms? In the life to come these handicaps and so many more will all be taken away. Do you struggle today with weakness of character, short temper, impulsive speech, selfishness? In the New Jerusalem all such results of the fall into sin will be taken away. This body we'll keep, beloved, it shall rise from the grave. But it will be completely fixed up, restored to the perfection of Paradise. What's corruptible now will put on incorruption, what is mortal now will put on immortality. What today suffers the penalty of Paradise lost, and so is wracked by pain and burdened with sickness will be perfected completely. In the New Jerusalem "God will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (Rev 21:4). How rich the promise for those who feel so painfully the fact that we live on *this* side of the fall into sin! All those consequences shall go!

Christ has risen, and therein given us proof that He paid for sin. Today we may see in our lives the beginnings of Paradise restored; no longer are we dead in sin, but raised to new life. And the brokenness that remains serves only to increase our longing for the day of Christ's return, the day of the Great Resurrection. Then, then every trace of death will be swept off the earth – for there shall be no sin!

Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 18 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 18 April 2004.

" CHRIST'S ASCENSION INTO HEAVEN IMPLIES A BROAD WORLDVIEW FOR US ON EARTH "

Text:

Lord's Day 18

46. Q. What do you confess when you say, He ascended into heaven?

A. That Christ, before the eyes of His disciples, was taken up from the earth into heaven,[1] and that He is there for our benefit[2] until He comes again to judge the living and the dead.[3] [1] Mark 16:19; Luke 24:50, 51; Acts 1:9-11. [2] Rom. 8:34; Heb. 4:14; 7:23-25; 9:24. [3] Matt. 24:30; Acts 1:11. 47. Q. Is Christ, then, not with us until the end of the world, as He has promised us?[1] A. Christ is true man and true God. With respect to His human nature He is no longer on earth,[2] but with respect to His divinity, majesty, grace, and Spirit He is never absent from us.[3] [1] Matt. 28:20. [2] Matt. 26:11; John 16:28; 17:11; Acts 3:19-21; Heb. 8:4. [3] Matt. 28:18-20; John 14:16-19; 16:13.

48. Q. But are the two natures in Christ not separated from each other if His human nature is not present wherever His divinity is?

A. Not at all, for His divinity has no limits and is present everywhere.[1] 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.[2]

[1] Jer. 23:23, 24; Acts 7:48, 49. [2] John 1:14; 3:13; Col. 2:9.

49. Q. How does Christ's ascension into heaven benefit us?

A. First, He is our Advocate in heaven before His Father.[1] Second, we have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that He, our Head, will also take us, His members, up to Himself.[2] Third, He sends us His Spirit as a counter-pledge,[3] 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.[4]

[1] Rom. 8:34; I John 2:1. [2] John 14:2; 17:24; Eph. 2:4-6. [3] John 14:16; Acts 2:33; II Cor. 1:21, 22; 5:5. [4] Col. 3:1-4.

Scripture Reading:

Hebrews 9:1-15

Colossians 3:1-17

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Hymn 32:1,2,3

Psalm 84:1

Psalm 42:4,5

Hymn 33:1,2,3,4,5,6

Hymn 31:1,2,3,4,5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

How big is your world? From our position on this earth we see things only of this earth. The Scriptures tell us that

Jesus left this earth to ascend into heaven, and that suggests that the world is bigger than simply this earth.

But: is it? Our young people learn early about the solar system, how the earth revolves, together with numerous other planets, around the sun – and the moon revolves around the earth. More, they learn that our solar system is one of countless more solar systems, in fact, that some stars are millions of light years away.... They learn too that it has taken days for man to travel to the moon, and a proposed trip to Mars will literally take months of space flight to get there.

And now speak of a man leaving planet earth to rise through the skies into heaven? The scientific mind has major problems with that! Where is heaven? How could Jesus even get off planet earth without the assistance of rocket propulsion? How could he travel through space without a space suit? So many questions.... They conspire together to persuade us that the ascension could not take place, could not be real. For (say the scientists) there's no heaven to ascend to..., and no way for a man without today's technology to travel through space.

How big, beloved, is your world? Who do you think Jesus Christ is? Matthew tells us that He spoke to His disciples on the mountain in Galilee, and said that "all authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth" (Mt 28:18). How much authority is that? "All": that includes the authority the Father displayed when He created the world. There was no light, and God said, "Let there be light," and lo, there was light; by His word of command God called into being what did not exist. Talk about authority! Well now: even *that* authority, says Jesus, is given to Him! Could He then command an instant transference from earth to heaven? Of course He could.

It all comes down to this: will you believe the word of scientists or the word of God? That's a choice, beloved, that you have to make. Either choice has profound implications. If you will believe the word of scientists, you will have to conclude that there is no heaven and therefore no ascension – and then your world can be no bigger than this earth and the cold stars around it. Then what's important can only be the things of this world, eating, drinking, pleasure, comfort, fulfillment. But if you believe the word of God, you must accept also that Jesus Christ has departed from Planet Earth and traveled to Heaven – and so your worldview must include also the existence of heaven, and Jesus' current presence in heaven for your benefit. Such a worldview dictates that you can't consider the things of this earth all that important after all; more important are the things of heaven.

Those things of heaven: that's what I may draw out with you this afternoon. I summarize the sermon with this theme:

CHRIST'S ASCENSION INTO HEAVEN IMPLIES A BROAD WORLDVIEW FOR US ON EARTH.

1. The cause of Jesus' ascension,
2. The benefit of Jesus' ascension.

1. The cause of Jesus' ascension.

Forty days after He arose from the dead, Jesus ascended into heaven. He left His disciples behind on earth while He returned to the presence of God from whence He'd come. Why did He ascend? Would it not have been better if Jesus had stayed with the disciples, indeed, gone out Himself to preach the gospel? We look at the world of today, the unimaginable poverty and misery in some of the mega-cities of third world countries, the unrest the Middle East, etc. Would it not be better if the Lord could visit those places, perhaps do some miracles and break the bondage of poverty and unrest? That would be O so helpful! Why did He leave this earth?

To understand the answer we need to go back to Genesis 3. The Lord God created a world of much variety, and as crown of His creation He fashioned two people in His own image and likeness – man. With this human race the Lord God established His covenant; there was a bond of love between God in heaven and man on earth. Consistent with that bond of love is what we read in Gen 3:8: Adam and Eve "heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden." How, brothers and sisters, did Adam and Eve know that the sound they heard was that of God coming? We realize: that's simply familiarity – just as we can interpret certain sounds without having to look. Here's the point: the Lord God came habitually from heaven above to the earth beneath to visit Adam and Eve in Paradise, and talk with them.

But this time Adam and Eve did not welcome God's arrival. Vs 8b: they "hid themselves from the presence of the

Lord God." Why? That's because of what had just happened; they had fallen into sin. You see: *sin puts distance between God and man*. And it's not just fallen man who felt uncomfortable in the presence of holy God; God also could not stand sinful man in His presence any more. As the Holy Spirit records in vs 23f: "therefore the Lord God sent [man] out of the garden of Eden.... So He drove out the man...." *God* was in the Garden, and in the Garden people could enjoy the privileges of God's presence. But they could not stay in God's presence because they had sinned, and so God "sent them out", yes, "drove them out" of the Garden, out of His presence. And what did God place at the gate of the Garden? Vs 24: at His command a contingent of cherubim, angels, took their stand to prevent that man return to the Garden where God had visited them. No longer would God travel from heaven to earth to visit with His covenant people in the cool of the day, and the reason is *sin*. Sin drives God and man apart; sin produces *distance*.

This material from Gen 3 comes back in the revelation of God at Mt Sinai. Holy God appeared on the mountain to the people congregated at the foot, and established with this nation of sinners His covenant of grace. In the framework of that covenant the Lord commanded the people to build a tabernacle where He could live in their midst. That is: God was making moves to *overcome* the distance sin had generated between Himself and man. The tabernacle was to include a section in the back called the Most Holy Place, or the Holy of Holies, separated from the front part of the tabernacle (the Holy Place) by a curtain, a veil. In the Holy of Holies was the ark with its mercy seat (God's throne), and on the ark two cherubim (Ex 25:18f). But what, brothers and sisters, was on the veil, on that curtain? Ex 26:31: the veil (said God) "shall be woven with an artistic design of cherubim." Now why did God command that cherubim be embroidered on that veil? Here, beloved, is the material of Gen 3! Because of the fall into sin sinful man cannot come into God's presence – angels bar the way, are God's guards. The tabernacle was rich inasmuch as God lived in the midst of His people. But it was also poor, inasmuch as God was hidden in the back of the tabernacle, out of reach to the people. Here was the terrible message of *distance*, and therefore the terrible message of *sin*.

Still, the Lord allowed one exception, allowed one person to pass through the angelic guard on the veil and enter the Holy of Holies. That was the High Priest, once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:2,12). First, though, the High Priest had to offer a sacrifice for himself, had to slaughter a bull to pay for his own sins, and *only then* could he come with blood for the people. The message was clear: sin dictated distance, but the sacrifice of the animal proclaimed forgiveness – and therefore ability to enter God's holy presence.

There, brothers and sisters, is the reason why Jesus ascended into heaven. Because of sin the Lord God no longer traveled the route from heaven to earth, for sin decreed distance. Christ Jesus paid for sin on the cross, and so –as the High Priest foreshadowed in the Old Testament- He could enter the Holy of Holies, the presence of God in heaven itself. He could, and so He *did!* Though on the cross of Calvary He had been *the Sinner*, He approached God's dwelling in heaven *and the angels did not draw their swords to bar His way*; He was permitted to enter God's presence! Indeed, God Himself received Him, welcomed Him, gave Him a place in His presence better than the place Gabriel has, better than the place Elijah has, better than the place Abraham and Moses and the prophets received. God received Him, and did not seat Him in the far corner the room, away, away.... God received Him, and gave Him a seat at His right hand, right beside Him. Sin meant distance, but Christ's triumph over sin on the cross meant *closeness again*. Christ, true man, traveled to heaven to receive a place there, and so the distance of Gen 3 is undone! See there the wealth of Jesus' ascension!

This, congregation, is the glorious gospel the author of the letter to the Hebrews works out in the passage we read from chap 9. There's two parts to the tabernacle, says vs 2f, but "the priests always went [only] into the first part" (vs 6). "Into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people's sins..." (vs 7). The Holy Spirit, says the apostle, taught through this structure of things that "the way into the Holiest of All" –God's presence behind the veil- "was not yet made manifest," was not yet opened – distance remained! But see: "Christ came," says vs 11, "Christ came as High Priest of the good things to come," and "He entered the Most Holy Place once for all" –how come?- because He "obtained eternal redemption" through His own blood shed on the cross. What is "the Most Holy Place" Jesus entered once for all? No, He never entered the physical Holy of Holies in the back of Jerusalem's temple-of-stone, but at His ascension He entered heaven itself, the courts of God, the Most Holy Place! The ascension: Hebrews 9 insists that *that* is the fulfillment of the Old Testament laws about no priest coming into the Holy of Holies except the High Priest once a year. Vs 24: "Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us."

How rich that ascension is then: contact between God and man is restored, the communication of Paradise restored! We understand: this is much richer than if Jesus were still with us on earth today!

Still, we live on this earth, in this life. How does Jesus' ascension concretely help us? To put the question sharper: what benefit is there for us in the fact that Jesus through His ascension has overcome the distance generated by our fall into sin?

That's our second point:

2. The benefits of Jesus' ascension.

In Question & Answer 49 the Catechism mentions three benefits. The first is this: "He is our Advocate in heaven before His Father." Advocate: that's an old word for a lawyer, that's someone who pleads, intercedes, on behalf of another.

Now: why would one need an advocate, an Intercessor? That, congregation, is only because there was somewhere a communication breakdown! When the Lord God came to visit Adam and Eve in Paradise there was no place and no need for an Intercessor; God spoke freely to man and man spoke freely to God. Problems in communication arose with the fall into sin. Specifically, sinful man had forfeited his right to speak to holy God! Why should God listen to man anymore?! Distance!

In the fullness of time Jesus Christ –true man- paid for sin in His sacrifice on the cross of Calvary. Consistent with that victory He also bridged the distance between man and God; He ascended into God's holy presence and was welcomed there. But *for whose sins* had Jesus paid? His own? No. He'd paid for your sins and mine, had paid for the sins of all who believe in Him. Why then should *He alone* have access to God in heaven? Why should *we* not have access with Him into heaven, to the presence of God and the ear of God? Here's the point: because of Jesus' victory on the cross *we have access to God again!* We can speak to God again, as in Paradise, can tell Him of the ups and downs of our day, lay before Him our praise and our questions. We can *pray*, since our sins have been taken away in Jesus' blood! That's why Jesus told His disciples to pray, even taught them what to say. *For Jesus' sake contact with God is restored!*

But we remain sinful, and God holy. We cannot come before Him on our own steam. That is why we need an intercessor, an advocate. And see: that is what Jesus in heaven is busy doing! 1 John 2:1: "if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." Romans 8:34: "Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us." The church sums up this good news of Scripture in the *Belgic Confession*, Article 26: "We believe that we have no access to God except through the only Mediator and Advocate Jesus Christ the righteous. For this purpose He became man, uniting together the divine and human nature, that we men might not be barred from but have access to the divine majesty."

What, then, is the first benefit of Jesus' ascension? This: *we can pray!* We, who in the beginning fled from God, hid from God, were driven away from God, may again *speak to Him* openly and freely! Communication with God about all the things of this life and our service to Him: what glorious fruit the ascension has wrought!

Here's my question from the beginning. How big is your world? Daily life confronts us with so many questions.... If there is no heaven, and therefore no God in heaven, you're left to your own resources to solve the problems of your life. But the fact of Jesus' ascension implies that the world is much bigger than the eye sees, implies that there is a heaven most interested in the affairs of this earth – your affairs included. Jesus' ascension means that you can speak again to God, and Jesus Himself will plead before God on your behalf; Father, I died for him, I washed his sins away, so *hear him*, listen and answer! And, beloved, God *does listen to this plea!* Recall Jesus' words to His disciples: John 14:13f: "And whatever you ask in My name, that I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask anything in My name, I will do it." What encouragement to pray! "In prayer transcending distance" we may boldly "seek the God of my existence"! (Ps 42:5).

The Catechism mentions a second benefit. "We have our flesh in heaven as a sure pledge that He, our Head, will also

take us, His members, up to Himself." Recall Jesus' prayer before He went to the cross. "Father," He said in His prayer of John 17, "I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me" (vs 24). Consistent with that prayer, Jesus dared to say to the criminal with Him on the cross: "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 23:43). You heard that beloved? Sinners shall again be in Paradise, where God visited His people! In the fallen Paradise of Genesis 3 the Lord placed cherubim to guard the way back in. But the criminal on the cross was assured that when he died no angel would bar his way into God's holy presence, and that is true for all God's own. In fact, in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus our chief Prophet and Teacher relates that the angels carried the dead beggar into Abraham's bosom (Lu 16:22). You see: those who die in the Lord *are welcome in the courts of holy God!*

What delightful comfort that supplies to us as we face death. Over the years many of us have had to bury loved ones. Some of us have lost a child through miscarriage. Where they are who have died in the Lord? God's word is clear: they go immediately to be with the Lord, there to delight in the glory God has given to the Son. In the face of death we see the vacant body, but we believe the reality of life forever *in the presence of God*. And the Scriptures assure us: all God's people will be "with God" in the New Jerusalem. Paradise Restored, people welcome in the presence of God, God even making His home with people: what wonderful fruits of Christ's ascension!

And there's a third benefit mentioned in the Catechism: "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." Christ Himself has departed from this earth, is not physically, bodily present (A 47). But a mere ten days after His departure He poured out His Holy Spirit –Pentecost- and through that Spirit He is with us still, always and everywhere. What He does through His Spirit? We'll talk more about the Holy Spirit, the Lord willing, with Lord's Day 20, but suffice it to say for now that the Holy Spirit directs our attention *to Christ*. One may think of a floodlight; the purpose of a floodlight is not to draw attention to itself but to the building it's lighting up. So too the Holy Spirit. This is the Spirit *of Christ*, and He has come to draw attention to *Christ*. And where is Christ? In heaven, seated in glory right beside the Father.

We live on earth, and so our inclination is to stare ourselves blind on the things of this earth – comfort, pleasure, reputation, our problems at work, etc. But that's too small a vision, beloved, and much to discouraging; this earth knows only vanity, Solomon said. So the Holy Spirit lifts our gaze to heaven above, encourages us to *look up*. More important than the things of this earth are the bigger realities of heaven, where God (whom we rejected in Paradise) is enthroned in indescribable majesty and at His hand is our brother in the flesh –true man- who laid down His life to reconcile us to this holy God – and succeeded! This God is again our Father, and we for Jesus' sake again His children, recreated to image what He is like.

This perspective, this vision Paul works out in his letter to the Colossians. You have been raised with Christ, he asks in vs 1? Then "seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God," he says. Christ is in heaven, and so your focus cannot be on earth, nor can your attitudes be from this earth. Earthly attitudes produce earthly conduct, things like "fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness," things like "anger, malice, blasphemy, filthy language...." But, says Paul, since your focus is in heaven, since your vision is bigger than simply this earth, make sure you display the attitudes of heaven. What did God do to overcome the bitter effects of our fall into sin? What did He do to restore communication between heaven and earth? He sent His only Son – and that involved mercy, kindness, patience, forgiving. So, says Paul, you need to do too. Your vision includes heaven where Christ is? Then be consistent: on this earth reflect heavenly attitudes. Vs 12: "put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do." We understand: this produces a whole new lifestyle, a style of living and thinking that comes not from this fallen world, but from heaven above. It's the fruit of Christ's ascension, Christ's opening the way again between heaven and earth!

The human eye can see only things of this world, can find no heaven, can understand no ascension. In a scientific age, this is the challenge for the church: will you believe that Christ actually departed this earth to travel to heaven? That is: will you believe that the effects of the fall into sin are undone, communication with God restored? That gospel is rich, and has such glorious consequences for this life. Talk with God today, enter God's presence when we die, by the strength of the Spirit display heavenly attitudes in life: what privileges we have! The ascension: how rich the gospel!

Amen.

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**Sermon on Lord's Day 19 Q&A 50-51 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held
on Sunday afternoon, 2 May 2004.**

"CHRIST IS KING AND THEREFORE THE FUTURE IS SECURE"

Text:

Lord's Day 19 Q&A 50-51

50. Q. Why is it added, And sits at the right hand of God?

A. Christ ascended into heaven to manifest Himself there as Head of His Church,[1] through whom the Father governs all things.[2]

[1] Eph. 1:20-23; Col. 1:18. [2] Matt. 28:18; John 5:22, 23.

51. Q. How does the glory of Christ, our Head, benefit us? A. First, by His Holy Spirit He pours out heavenly gifts upon us, His members.[1] Second, by His power He defends and preserves us against all enemies.[2]

[1] Acts 2:33; Eph. 4:7-12. [2] Ps. 2:9; 110:1, 2; John 10:27-30; Rev. 19:11-16.

Scripture Reading:

Revelation 5

Acts 16:6-34

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 93:1,2

Psalm 99:1,2

Psalm 2:3,4

Psalm 47:1,2,3

Hymn 31:1,4,5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

It is, I think, common in our midst to look into the future with a measure of apprehension and pessimism. The Scriptures tell us that we live in the latter days, and we understand that to mean that the place of the Christian in this world becomes increasingly difficult. We remind each other that wickedness will increase, and we see it happening in our own land. Abortion on demand is long accepted, euthanasia has raised its ugly head already, forces are pushing to make homosexuality a legally recognized alternative lifestyle. All the while, respect for authority deteriorates, as does appreciation for the morals and standards of previous generations. What life will be like for God's people in Australia in 20/30 years time?? Who can say? "It doesn't look good," we tell each other.

In the face of such developments, I can understand that there's some apprehension about the future. Yet, brothers and sisters, there is no place for pessimism! On the contrary, the material of our Lord's Day this afternoon gives us encouragement to be distinctly *optimistic* about the future! After all, our Savior is *King*! And do you really think that He who laid down His life for His own will permit events in this world to unfold in such a way that His people no longer have a life?!

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

CHRIST IS KING AND THEREFORE THE FUTURE IS SECURE.

1. The nature of Christ's kingship,
2. The purpose of Christ's kingship,
3. The response to Christ's kingship.

1. The nature of Christ's kingship.

When our Savior entered heaven's courts at His ascension, congregation, the Lord God did not give Jesus –may I say it this way- a spot in a distance corner of heaven. Instead, the Lord God gave the Son a place at His right hand. That's Mark 16, where the Holy Spirit tells us of the ascension like this: "So then, after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God" (vs 19).

Why? What is the significance of Jesus' sitting at the right hand of God? The Bible describes the right hand as the position of honor and power. To sit at the right hand *of God* is to receive a place of heavenly honor and divine power. Jesus knew that He would receive this place in heaven, and so He explained its significance to His disciples before He ascended. Mt 28: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me" (vs 18). We understand: that is *very great* authority, this is *absolute* authority over all things. On the day of Pentecost the apostle Peter draws out clearly that link between the seat at God's right hand and Jesus' almighty authority. Says Peter in Acts 2:

"Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He poured out this which you now see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: 'The Lord said to my Lord, "*Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.*"' Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (vss 33ff).

Of significance for our Lord's Day today is Peter's use of the word 'Lord'. That Jesus may sit at the right hand of God, says Peter, spells out that God made this Jesus 'Lord' – and the term 'Lord' means Master, Owner and therefore Ruler.

Paul develops the same concept in Ephesians 1. God, he says, has "seated [Jesus] at His right hand in the heavenly places," and that means, he explains, that Jesus has a place "far above all principality and power and might and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come" (vss 20f). So exalted is the place God gave to Jesus Christ that John in the Revelation he received could describe Jesus like this: Jesus Christ is "the ruler over the kings of the earth" (1:5).

As I lay out these data about the sovereignty and authority of the ascended Christ, congregation, it all strikes us as so true and Scriptural – and yet stays a bit remote from the world we see on the news and read about in the papers. Let us try then, beloved, to taste something of the climate in which the apostle John spoke the words I just alluded to, where he says that Jesus is "the ruler over the kings of the earth." When John wrote those words, he was (according to Rev 1:9) on the island of Patmos because he was persecuted on account of his work in the churches. Probably the one authorizing the persecution was none less than Nero, emperor of the Roman Empire. Everybody knew it: you just didn't mess with Nero. To cross his paths was to ask for trouble. This man was *king*. And by his wish the church was persecuted, the preachers silenced. Talk about demoralizing! Jesus had said before His ascension that all authority in heaven and on earth was given to Him, and Yes, the early conversions at Pentecost pointed up that reality. But so many years later, in John's day, the evidence was distinctly to the contrary; John, the preacher of Christ's triumph and sovereignty, was silenced on Patmos by the will of the world's most powerful man! Jesus Lord of all?? Jesus seated at the right hand of God?? The hard facts spoke so differently!

Yet John, congregation, is emphatic: Jesus Christ is "the ruler over the kings of the earth." John thinks of Nero and his government, thinks of all the Neros of the past and the future, and he puts them all in a row, one a bit stronger and the other a bit weaker, the one a bit kinder and the other a bit more cruel, and he from his prison on Patmos declares that the ascended Savior is *Ruler over them all*. We understand: that's quite a claim! Nero has a place *under* Jesus Christ? In today's language: Saddam Hussein had a place *under* King Jesus, was subject to Him? Kim il Jung has a place *under* King Jesus, must do Jesus' will? President Bush, Kofi Annan, Mr Howard, Prime Minister Sharon: all have a place *under* Jesus Christ my Savior?? Really? On what grounds can John be so convinced that Jesus Christ is Ruler

over them all?!

The grounds, brothers and sisters, are given us in chap 5. John saw God sitting on His throne (cf Rev 4), holding in His right hand a scroll. That scroll has written in it God's plan for the history of the world. A strong angel invited anyone to come forward to open that scroll, and that's to say: to make its contents come to pass, to make history happen. But no one stepped forward.... Vs 3: no one in heaven, not even Michael the archangel, could open it. No one on earth, not even Nero the emperor, could make God's plan come to pass. And no one under the earth, neither the devil himself nor any deceased tyrant, could do it either. Yet John wasn't to despair, for (said one of the elders), "Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll..." (vs 5). That, we understand, is the Christ who lived on earth but ascended into heaven! "He came," says vs 7, "and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne."

The reaction was instant! The creatures around God's throne, angels and elders, realized the significance of Jesus taking that scroll. He controls history, Jesus is King over every ruler on earth! Hence their song: "You are worthy to take the scroll, and to open its seals..." (vs 9). That burst of praise attracted more praise in turn. Vs 11: an innumerable multitude of angels, ten thousand times ten thousand, sing out their praise: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom, and strength and honor and glory and blessing!" And in turn every creature in heaven above and on the earth beneath and in hell under the earth joined in exalting this King of kings, this Ruler over the kings: "Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him to sits on the throne...." Your Savior, beloved: He's King over all and therefore all in heaven and on earth and in hell beneath praise Him!

That is why the church in Lord's Day 19 makes bold to confess the significance of Jesus' ascension. He did not ascend into heaven (as Calvin so pointedly put it) to sit down and count the stars, but to *rule over all the world, to direct all history*. All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Him, and that's what's caught in the phrase "sits at the right hand of God." Sunday by Sunday we confess with the Apostle's Creed that Jesus Christ ascended and "sits at the right hand of God", and that confession is not a dream or a hope, but it expresses the conviction that God the Holy Spirit has worked in our hearts, the conviction that our Savior is *Lord* in today's world, sovereign. So: that two trains should collide in North Korea and hundreds be killed occurred under Jesus' watch and in His control. That Ian Thorpe fell off his starting block and yet ends up going to Athens for the 400 m swim occurs under Jesus' control. That the UN and so many other world leaders allowed themselves to be bribed by Saddam Hussein occurred because the ascended Savior permitted. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me," Jesus declared, and we have to keep that fact in mind as we read the newspapers of today.

We come to our second point:

2. The purpose of Christ's kingship.

Why is it, brothers and sisters, that the Father has given so much authority to the Son? Why did He seat Him at His right hand? With this question I'm not asking how Jesus earned this authority. That, of course, is through His work on the cross, when He triumphed over sin and Satan. Rather, I'm asking now about the purpose of Christ's authority. For what purpose, for what goal, has the Father given Him so much power? To put the question differently: how does Jesus use the absolute authority the Father has given Him?

To answer that question, I draw your attention to John 17. Already Jesus had told His disciples that He would go away, would go to Him who sent Him (16:5). After He'd comforted the disciples with the promise of the Holy Spirit, Jesus turned to His Father in prayer. John 17:1: "Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: 'Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him.'" Here Jesus acknowledges in prayer to the Father what He later told His disciples before His ascension: the Father has given all authority to Jesus. All flesh, big and small, kings and peasants, have a place *under* Jesus. But now listen: in His prayer Jesus relates also *the reason why* the Father has given Him all authority. Jesus puts it this way: "that [Jesus] should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him." That is the purpose for Jesus' authority; Jesus should use His authority to bring to salvation all those whom the Father has given Him.

Those whom the Father has given Him: that's a reference to election. Because of the fall into sin all men are by nature

on Satan's side. From the entire human race on Satan's side God has chosen some to eternal life, and passed others by. Those whom the Father has chosen He has given to the Son. The Son in turn went to the cross to pay for the sins of these elect persons. On the cross He satisfied the Father's justice, paid for sins, reconciled sinners to God. But, my brothers and sisters, *that work of Jesus on the cross does not automatically bring you to heaven!* I mean: Christ's triumph on Good Friday is not a ticket in your hand that gives you a guaranteed entry pass into heaven. God created people in the beginning with *responsibility*, and God holds us to that; we are not sticks and stones. What responsibility do we have? This: we must *believe* in Christ crucified! Without faith, says the Bible, no one will see God. Whoever believes, says the Bible, will be saved, but he who does not believe is condemned already. That is why I say: Christ's work on Calvary does not automatically bring you to heaven. On the cross Christ has *obtained* salvation for the elect, and now that salvation needs to *be applied* to these elect.

Well now, *there is the purpose* for Jesus' almighty power. God has given Him a seat at His right hand, God has given Him all authority in heaven and on earth, *so that Jesus might apply to the elect the salvation He obtained for them.*

How does Jesus do that? To be saved, one needs faith. And where does faith come from? The Christ who ascended into heaven is pleased to work faith in the elect *through His Holy Spirit*. And the Holy Spirit does not just pour this faith into a person when he's walking on the beach. The means the Holy Spirit is pleased to use is *the preaching of the gospel*. That preaching in turn comes not from the birds, but through the labors of men called to that task (cf *Canons of Dort*, I, 3).

So: amongst the elect which the Father had given to the Son were a lady living in the city of Thyatira on the western shores of present day Turkey, and a man employed as a jailor in the Macedonian city of Philippi in present day Greece. On Good Friday Jesus Christ laid down His life to pay for the sins of these two persons. But, though they were both living on the day Jesus died, His sacrifice did not save them, for they did not yet believe in Jesus Christ, let alone know of Him. It was for the ascended Christ to use the authority and power God gave Him to bring these elect persons to faith and preserve them in the faith over the years of their continuing sojourn on earth.

To accomplish that goal, the Ruler over the kings of the earth did a number of things. He organized a preacher to the Gentiles in the person of the church's First Persecutor, Saul of Tarsus. While Saul was breathing threats and murder against the elect of God, Jesus Christ from heaven on high grabbed Saul by the scruff of his neck on the road to Damascus, made him see the folly of what he was doing, brought him to faith, and equipped him to preach the gospel.

But to have a preacher isn't enough; that preacher must also meet up with that elect lady from Thyatira and that elect jailor of Philippi. So the ascended Christ, Ruler over the kings of the earth, used the emperor of Rome to build roads that link Jerusalem with Philippi some many hundreds of miles away, roads that are safe for travel. More, the Ruler over the kings of the earth used the emperor of Rome to establish a single international language that most people of the time could understand – Greek. More still, the Ruler over the kings of the earth arranged economic circumstances in such a way that this lady from Thyatira should migrate to Philippi and there set up shop as a merchant of purple. More still: the Ruler over the kings of the earth led Paul to preach the gospel throughout Phrygia and Galatia, and when Paul thought to preach in Asia the ascended Christ through His Holy Spirit forbade him and instead directed the apostle's path to Troas. In Troas the ascended Christ gave His servant a vision to go across the Aegean Sea to Philippi. And in Philippi the Lord caused the path of His servant the preacher to cross the path of that lady of Thyatira whom the Father had earlier given to Him. And see: she came to faith, believed in Christ crucified, and so could be saved.

Do you see, beloved, how the ascended Christ uses His almighty power to give eternal life to those whom the Father had given to Him? The hard heart of the persecutor Saul was no obstacle for the King of kings. The enormous distance between the bearer of the gospel in Jerusalem and the elect lady in Philippi was no obstacle for the King of kings. The hostility of tribes and highwaymen along the road were no obstacle for the King of kings. The difference in language between Jews and Greeks was no obstacle either. Peace and security, infrastructures as transportation and communication, even the economy is all under the control of the King of kings. "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me." So the ascended Christ arranges kings and economies, roads and languages, so that the gospel comes to those whom the Father has given to Him – and these elect of God receive salvation!

Let me tell you also of the Philippian jailor. That Paul was in the city didn't help the Philippian jailor, because they're

paths didn't meet. But the ascended Christ organized that; that, after all, was the reason why He received this power from the Father. Christ used the testimony of a slave girl to bring about the imprisonment of His preachers – and so put the preacher in the proximity of the elect jailor. Then the King of kings organized an earthquake – and you know what happened next, how the jailor came to faith and was baptized, together with his family. Again, beloved, do you see how the ascended Savior uses His authority and power to bring about the salvation of His chosen? This is the import of what the apostle writes to the Ephesians: God "has put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church" (vs 22). "To the church," says our translation, and the point is that the church *benefits* from the position God has given to Christ as King of kings.

This is also the point of the Catechism. Q 51: the glory of Christ our Head benefits "us" –that's the church- how? Like this: "by His Holy Spirit He pours out heavenly gifts upon us, His members." The heavenly gifts the Catechism refers to are first of all the preaching of the gospel and the labors of the elders and deacons (cf Eph 4:7ff). And as a result of the preaching, the Lord gives faith. And with the gift of faith the Lord gives regeneration, changes sinners' hearts so that these sinners produce fruits of the Spirit. People like Paul, haters and persecutors, become men of love and joy and peace. People like me and you, by nature selfish and spiteful, become people of patience and kindness and gentleness. Radical changes these are, and they speak of the great power God has given to Christ. But the picture is bigger still: the ascended Christ uses the kings of the world and the economies of the nations to bring together the preacher and the elect, so that those whom the Father has given to Him may inherit eternal life.

This is how we need to read the papers today. What is behind the events of September 11, 2001? Why does the ascended Christ permit a war in Iraq? Why that massive explosion in North Korea? Make no mistake, beloved: the Ruler over the kings of the earth is hard at work causing the gospel to cross the paths of those whom the Father has given to Him. He's hard at work preserving the elect in the faith He through the Spirit has worked in their hearts. I know: the newspapers don't report this angle, don't even consider that this is behind it all. But what do you think: did the newspapers of Philippi explain the earthquake of Acts 16 in light of Christ's sovereignty, and in light of His words in John 17:2?!! As such an analysis was foolishness to the people of those days, so a parallel analysis is foolishness to the unbelieving of our day. But that doesn't change the accuracy of that analysis!

Equally, to suggest that Christ is behind the events of North Korea and Iraq and New York and whatever else happens in this world, and is pulling the strings with a view to gathering the church, is ludicrous to the world – and that's why you won't hear a word of it in the newspapers. But that doesn't change the facts any!! Your Savior, beloved, is hard at work, using His God-given authority to give eternal life to all whom the Father has given to Him. To achieve that goal, *He* determines the events that happen in our day – whether big or small, whether horrible (we say) or not. Revelation 6 speaks of the opening of the seals, and the things that happen –plagues and calamities included- when Christ opens those seals. He is Ruler over the kings of the earth, Ruler over big men and small, rich and poor, and He exercises His authority in such a way that all whom the Father has given Him come to faith and persevere through thick and thin.

Here is enormous comfort for the church of all ages, ourselves included. It's our last point:

3. The response to Christ's kingship.

Given all we've said, beloved, is there place for us to be anxious about what the future may hold? Shall we be pessimistic about the environment in which our children will become parents? Shall we fear for the church?

O yes, it may very well be that in 20/30 years time the people of God in Australia will be persecuted as their brethren in China are persecuted today. It may well be that we loose the freedom to teach God's children-by-covenant in the way of the Lord – be it at school or at church or even at home. And to be honest, no, I don't look forward to that kind of a future. But be anxious about it? See the future as dark? Avoid marriage or have small families or hide ourselves securely in our little corner because the world is too dangerous and threatening? No, beloved, no! The One who died for us on the cross *loves* His own, and He'll preserve His own always. More, the One who died for us on the cross is exalted, is at the right hand of God, has all authority in heaven and on earth, is Ruler over the kings of the earth. If He in wisdom determines that the gathering of the elect requires a stint of persecution, shall we despair at the persecution? If He determines that the road to bringing to faith all whom the Father has given Him includes that the homosexual agenda receive a measure of success in Australia, shall we despair? Beloved, your Savior *is using His almighty power*

for the good of the church! (cf Phil 1:12f). That gives peace, that gives reason to be optimistic about the future. Christ is King!

No, brothers and sisters, we don't know what the future brings, and we don't have to know. Christ could come back tonight, and He could delay another ten centuries. The world could see a new Great Reformation as in the days of Luther and Calvin, and even a Christian emperor over all the world again as Constantine. Equally, the world could revert to global paganism and the church be so oppressed as to become invisible. Either way is OK, for Jesus Christ has full authority, and He uses it –I don't understand the details- He uses it to give eternal life to all whom the Father has given to Him. That is enough. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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**Sermon on Lord's Day 19 Q&A 52 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on
Sunday afternoon, 9 May 2004.**

" THAT CHRIST COMES AS JUDGE GIVES THE CHRISTIAN GREAT COMFORT ."

Text:

Lord's Day 19 Q&A 52

52. Q. What comfort is it to you that Christ will come to judge the living and the dead?

A. 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.[1] 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.[2]

[1] Luke 21:28; Rom. 8:22-25; Phil. 3:20,21; Tit. 2:13, 14. [2] Matt. 25:31-46; I Thess. 4:16, 17; II Thess. 1:6-10.

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 25:31-46

1 Corinthians 4:1-5

Singing: (*Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter*)

Psalms 98:4

Psalms 43:1,3

Psalms 55:12,13

Psalms 59:1,8

Hymn 8:13,14

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The Question & Answer of our Catechism we deal with today revolves around the return of our Lord Jesus Christ. Return. The point is that the Lord has been in our midst, used to walk this earth, but He left. That was the material of Lord's Day 18; Christ has ascended into heaven. But, our Question & Answer says now, Christ has not left us *for good*. Rather, He will *return*.

We welcome the idea of Christ's return, find it comforting. To be with Christ, that He would live with us: yes, that's encouraging, especially in the midst of the struggles and strife of this mortal life.

But see: the Apostle's Creed –and therefore the Catechism- does not simply confess that the Lord Jesus Christ is *coming back*; the Creeds mention that He's coming back *as Judge*. That's fully Scriptural; Peter in his talk with Cornelius proclaimed that God has ordained Jesus to be "Judge of the living and the dead" (Acts 10:42) – in other words, of *all* people, without exception. Judge: people of every tribe and race, rich and poor, good and evil, *you and me*, will appear before Christ's *judgment* seat, and the Judge will separate the sheep from the goats, He will send some this way and some that way.

Judge. We feel there's something negative, something threatening in the notion of judgment. We hear in the term a warning to be prepared, to live a holy life. And it's good we hear that notion, congregation, as I hope to draw out in a moment. But Lord's Day 19 does not lay a finger on this warning element; Lord's Day 19 puts the matter of Christ's return as Judge in the context of *comfort*. That's Q 52: "What *comfort* is it to you that Christ will come to *judge* the

living and the dead?" The Catechism does not ask: what *warning* is implicit in the fact that Christ will come to judge? It does not ask: how must you *prepare* for Christ's return? But the focus of the Catechism lies on the *comfort*, and there's a very good reason for that. It's this: the fact that Christ comes as Judge means that we can leave the injustices of life to Christ, and we can get on with doing our tasks.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THAT CHRIST COMES AS JUDGE GIVES THE CHRISTIAN GREAT COMFORT.

1. The need for this comfort,
2. The nature of this comfort,
3. The outcome of this comfort.

1. The need for this comfort.

From the moment of the fall into sin in the beginning, human life has been characterized by strife and struggle. God announced to the serpent back in Genesis 3 that He would place "enmity" between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman. Enmity: that's hatred, war, strife. The *devil* against the children of God. Antithesis.

The last book of the Bible repeats that theme. The devil was not able to destroy the Seed of the woman, was, in fact, defeated. Hence the words of Rev 12:12: "Therefore rejoice, O heavens, and you who dwell in them! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth and the sea! For the devil has come down to you, having great wrath, because he knows that he has a short time." Vss 13-17 describe the devil's angry effort to destroy the church and the hellish frustration that results. It's summed up in vs 17: "And the dragon was enraged with the woman, and he went to make war with the rest of her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." Whether the Christian sees the anger of the devil is one thing; *God Himself* has told us of the fact that the devil is enraged and God's people are the target of his hellish fury. The devil can express that wrath in very subtle forms or in very blatant forms, but it's real either way.

In our Lord's Day the Catechism gives expression to this reality with the opening words of A 52. The Catechism speaks there of "all my sorrows and persecution." We read the word 'persecution', and our thoughts go to what the brethren in, say, China experience; they are imprisoned on account of the faith, beaten and abused, and perhaps killed for the testimony of Jesus. We compare that to our circumstances, and feel that this term in our Catechism is somewhat too strong with regards to ourselves.

Now, brothers and sisters, it is certainly true that we in Australia today do not face the persecution so many brothers and sisters in the faith face elsewhere. But that takes nothing away from the intensity of the devil's hatred of the church in Kelmscott, hatred of you and me. He's just crafty enough to package his hatred in less open, more subtle forms. As an illustration of what I mean, I refer to the life of David as described in the book of Samuel.

Everybody knows how David killed Goliath with his slingshot, and so delivered Israel from the oppression of the Philistines. But that victory on David's part over the enemy outside earned him an enemy from *within God's own people*. "Saul has slain his thousands," sang the women of Israel after Israel's victory over the Philistines, "And David his ten thousands" (1 Sam 18:7). Saul's response: "Then Saul was very angry, and the saying displeased him.... So Saul eyed David from that forward" (vs 8f). Driven by jealousy Saul sought to kill David. Chap 18 relates how Saul twice cast his spear at David to pin him to the wall, relates how he tried to get David killed in battle with other Philistines. Chap 19 continues the theme, records how Saul again sought to pin David to the wall with his spear (vs 10). He even sent men to surround David's house so that they might kill him in the morning (vs 11). Talk about persecution! And note: Saul and David were brothers in one faith, children of one God by covenant, instructed to offer sacrifices at the same altar, eat the Passover together! Within the household of faith in Israel were not love and respect, but jealousy and hatred. My point: the devil's hatred against the people of God does not express itself only through the language and actions of people like Goliath – who mocked the living God and oppressed the people of God. The devil expresses his hatred also by *pitting brother against brother*.

The devil hasn't changed. That is why David's response to this persecution from Saul's hand is instructive for us. 1

Samuel 19 describes how Saul's men surrounded David's house to kill him. What David did in return? O yes, he fled to save his life. But what could David do in the face of Saul's jealousy? What could David do about the injustice he was experiencing from the hand of his brother-by-covenant? David *prayed*. David laid the matter before God, asked God to deliver him from his tormentors. It's Ps 59. The heading reads: "A Michtam of David when Saul sent men, and they watched the house in order to kill him" – 1 Samuel 19:11. "Deliver me from my enemies, O my God," David prays. "Defend me from those who rise up against me. Deliver me from the workers of iniquity, And save me from bloodthirsty men." Those enemies, those who rise up against him, those workers of iniquity, those bloodthirsty men: those are David's *brothers in the faith*. Who can resolve the dispute between David on the one hand, and Saul with his men on the other? David casts the problem before the Lord, because David realizes well that the Lord is the Judge of all the earth! And he knows also: the Lord *will* execute judgment and justice in due time. When? How? That's not David's concern. For David it is enough to know that God is the righteous Judge, and so David lays the problem before the Lord and asks *Him* for deliverance. God, after all, knows the hearts. Then David can be confident that God will give him reason so sing of God's power and delight in God's mercy (vs 16). Justice will prevail, deliverance will come, at God's good time.

And we know: it did come. Sure, it took many years of further hounding and persecution before King Saul died in battle, and that was God's judgment on this ungodly child of His. More, when Saul died, he appeared before the throne of God to receive the just sentence of God on all he had done.

So it is, brothers and sisters, with all who offend, hurt, persecute the children of God. Paul writes to the Thessalonian Christians, about the persecution and suffering they are enduring. Says Paul: "it is a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, and to give you who are troubled rest with us" (2 Thessalonians 1:6f). When, though, would God repay those persecutors? When would God give rest to the persecuted Christians of Thessalonica? Says Paul: "when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes, in that Day, to be glorified in His saints and to be admired among all those who believe, because our testimony among you was believed" (vss 7-10). Here's the same thought with which David worked: vengeance belongs to God, God will execute judgment upon those who hurt His people. But it happens at God's time – and Paul is content (and tells the Thessalonians to be content) to leave the matter for the future, even for the day when Christ returns on the clouds of heaven.

We are not physically persecuted today on account of the faith. But the devil's hatred comes at us in more subtle ways. Perhaps we experience hurt from brothers of one faith. Perhaps we feel no care from the communion of saints. Perhaps loved ones have shunned us and we're alone, all alone, and no one seems to understand. Perhaps we find ourselves repeatedly teased at school (Christian school!), or even regularly insulted by our classmates. Perhaps (to say it with Jesus' words in His parable in Mt 25: we're hungry or thirsty and nobody gives us food or a drink; we feel like a stranger, lonely, and nobody takes us in; we feel naked and exposed, and nobody clothes or protects us; we're sick or imprisoned, and nobody visits us. What should be an environment of peace and love (church, home, school) can be so very disappointing. Life knows so many sorrows, persecutions....

Then what? We need comfort, we need encouragement, we need perspective. What comfort there is? Instant justice, instant relief? David knew better. He laid his troubles before the Lord, and left them there for God to sort out in His time. Paul knew better too, and told the Thessalonians that God will repay at His time those who hurt His children now – when Christ comes back.

There's the instruction of our Lord's Day, beloved. Ever since the fall into sin this life knows so much sorrow and persecution. In the midst of that sorrow and persecution, with its accompanying injustice and victimization, what do I do? The Catechism catches the instruction of Scripture with these words: "in all my sorrow and persecution I lift up my head and eagerly await [the] judge from heaven." Get despondent, heart-broken and weary in the face of the troubles and wrongs of this life? Take matters in my own hand and insist on righting all the wrongs (to my satisfaction)? No, says the Catechism: lift up your head! Look up, for *there* you find hope and justice! God, *God* will send the Judge at His time, and that Judge will judge the living and the dead, will judge all people, will judge also between you and your neighbor.

This, congregation, is how the fathers years ago worked with the doctrine of Christ's return. I refer to the *Belgic Confession*, Article 37. I read at the end of the second paragraph these words about the Last Judgment: "it is a great joy and comfort to the righteous and elect. For then their full redemption will be completed and they will receive the fruits of their labor and of the trouble they have suffered. Their innocence will be known to all and they will see the terrible vengeance that God will bring upon the wicked who persecuted, oppressed, and tormented them in this world." Finally, here is justice! *That's* why the Catechism asks in Q 52 what *comfort* it is to you that Christ will come to *judge*. In the midst of life's sorrows and persecutions, it's a comfort we *need*.

Let's move on now to our second point,

2. *The nature of this comfort.*

That the Lord Jesus Christ comes again to judge the living and the dead is indeed a great comfort for those children God who are afflicted in this world. But, brothers and sisters, there is a troubling aspect here that honesty compels us to address. It's this: when Christ comes to judge the living and the dead, He will judge not just my neighbor who hurt me, but He also will judge *me*. Now, that He will judge my neighbor who hurt me, yes, that's sits OK with me; that will mean justice, redemption. But that He will also judge *me*, well, that doesn't sit so well.... After all, I can recall times when I've insulted the little fellow at school who couldn't stand up for himself. And I can recall times when my brother was hungry and I didn't feed him, thirsty and I didn't give him a drink. I can recall times when my sister was vulnerable and I didn't defend her, when my brother was sick or in prison and I did nothing to encourage him.... I easily see the sins of another toward me, but honesty drives me to acknowledge that I've failed the other so very, very much also....

Then I read in the Bible that on the Day of Judgment the books will be opened (Rev 20:12) and God will bring up everything I've ever done. 2 Corinthians 5:10: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive the things done in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad." My evil works, things I've kept secret all these years, those sins of youth I'm so ashamed of, will be exposed! And it's not just things I remember that will be exposed, but also those sins I've long forgotten. More, it's not just those things I recognize as sin that will be exposed, but also activities that I didn't even pick up as sin!

So too my words: "But I say to you," said Jesus in Mt 12, "that for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment" (vs 36). Idle words: that's a reference to carelessly spoken words, things like lies or gossip or even insulting another. The Bible is as condemning of lies and gossip and insults as it is of adultery and murder. Jesus is emphatic: I must give account. And that's to say that all those idle words –whether I've forgotten them or not, even whether I realized they were idle or not!- will be brought up again, none forgotten by God, none overlooked! And I must give account....

More, even my thoughts will be laid on the table, as well as the motives behind my thoughts - and hence behind my words and deeds. 1 Corinthians 4: "Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts" (vs 5). "The counsels of the hearts": that's a reference to what happens deep inside me, what I think and why I think it. Whether my thoughts (and hence words and deeds) are driven by love and compassion or by jealousy or greed is well known to God, and at the time of Christ's return the patterns and motives of my thoughts will all be revealed.... And that's true of motivations and patterns of thought I'm aware of as well as those I'm not conscious of – let alone recognize as evil....

Christ comes "to judge the living and the dead." That He judges my enemy and exposes *his* warped motives and evil words and corrupt deeds suits me fine (says my sinful heart); that's justice, he's getting what he deserves. But that He judges me – that's a different matter, and I'm uncomfortable with that. I realize: *I can't stand before His judgment seat any more than the next person* – including those who have caused me sorrow in some way.

With all of that in mind, beloved, the comfort we needed so much according to our first point falls in a huge hole. Yes, it's so comforting in the midst of the sorrows and persecutions of life that Christ comes to judge the living and the dead; here's promise for justice! But I'm a sinner as much as my neighbor, and if *I'm* to be on the receiving end of that same judgment, woe is me!

That is why we need to notice carefully, brothers and sisters, how the Catechism describes the Judge. A 52: who is that I so eagerly await from heaven? Says the Catechism: "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." "The very same person who before has submitted Himself to the judgment of God": that's a reference to the work Christ accomplished on Good Friday! Christ went to the cross, and there He submitted Himself to the judgment of God for my sake! He took on Himself all of my sins – including the evil deeds that will be exposed on the Last Day, and all those idle words I spoke, and even my sinful thoughts and the motives of those thoughts! All those sins earned for me the eternal curse of God under which I must invariably perish everlastingly, but Christ Jesus took them on Himself and *paid for them*! So the curse that lay on me is gone, gone! Calvary: it speaks so loudly of Christ's *mercy* to the unworthy, to me; Calvary spells out what compassion is, what love is, what grace is.

That same Christ who died in my place, who satisfied the justice of God on my account, has ascended into heaven – where He intercedes before God on my behalf today; more mercy, compassion, grace! In heaven He controls this world for the sake of the church – my sake included; more mercy, compassion, grace! *This* is the One who will return on the clouds of heaven to judge me. Will He come as an angry Judge, ready to throw the book at me? Will He send me with the goats to His left hand because He has found me guilty of insulting one of the least of His little ones? True, I deserve it! But *the promise is NO!*

Why not? Because He *took my curse upon Himself on the cross*, and so "removed all the curse from me." I know that because He has established with me His covenant of grace, and in that covenant promised me forgiveness of sins and eternal life! More, He has given to me the gift of faith so that I respond to His covenant promises, and I may see evidence of that faith in the fruits I may bear – love to my neighbor, joy even in trials, peace in my heart even in persecution, patience in adversity, kindness towards those who hurt me, goodness to those who are insensitive to me. *Perfect* love? *Perfect* joy, *perfect* peace, *perfect* kindness and gentleness and compassion and mercy? No, my love to the other is no more perfect than my brother's love toward me. My compassion to the other is no more perfect than his compassion toward me. I have such a small beginning of the obedience God requires, I don't see all my brother's needs, and I don't realize either how much my words and deeds can hurt him. It bothers me that I don't see my brokenness more clearly, I'm sorry that I hurt my sister, I acknowledge my sins and sinfulness before God. And in repentance I strive to do better, to help the other in his needs.... I try: I see my brother hungry and I feed him, see him thirsty and give him a drink, see him ill clothed and provide his needs, see him in pain and minister to him. So I see the work of God in my heart, and so I'm sure that the work He has begun He'll bring to completion on the day of Christ's judgment. Even my remaining weaknesses, which I perhaps don't see while another sees them so clearly, will not prevent me from hearing those blessed words of the Judge of all flesh: "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Mt 25:34).

What, then, is the nature of my comfort? Is it this, that my enemy will receive his just reward while I am vindicated? No, no, that's not the fine point of my comfort – simply because I'm too aware of my own abiding sinfulness. The nature of my comfort is rather *the identity of the Judge*. That Judge has laid down His life for me, He *loves* me, has shown great *compassion* for me, and *He won't change*! So, if *the merciful Savior of Good Friday* is to judge me, *then* I can look forward eagerly to that Great Day – for He will not condemn me. Yes, all my evil deeds will come up, and I will have to give account of every idle word I've spoken, and I'll have to justify all my thoughts and their motives – and I know well that I *can't*. But I believe that I can plead with the Judge on the basis of *His own sacrifice on Calvary for me*, and remind Him that He took on Himself the curse which I deserved. *The identity of the Judge: that's* my comfort.

Now yet our last point,

3. The outcome of this comfort.

This life has so much sorrow and persecution, not only from unbelievers but also from members of the household of faith. I understand now: it's not up to me to set straight the wrongs I experience, and make sure each receives his just reward; that's God's department, and the Day of Judgment is coming. And I admit: it's just as well that pursuing justice is not man's department. If it were up to me to set straight the wrongs I experience and ensure my weak brother received his just reward, *he* would be equally entitled to set straight the wrongs *he* experiences and ensure that *I*

receive my just reward.... How rich, then, that God has appointed not me as judge over my brother, nor my brother as judge over me, but *Christ* as judge over us both. And this Judge has paid for the sins *both* of my brother *and* of me – for we *both* confess our individual depravity, and we *both* embrace in faith the redeeming work of Christ on Good Friday, and we *both* confess the renewing work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and we *both* confess that Christ is the righteous Judge.

If that is so, beloved, a consequence follows. It's this: since Christ is the righteous Judge, it's not for us to keep insisting on righting the wrongs of the other! Listen to Paul: "with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord comes, who will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the counsels of the hearts. Then each one's praise will come from God" (1 Cor 4:3ff). Is Paul saying that he's above criticism? Certainly not; he knows he's a sinner still. But, says Paul, *people's* opinion of him doesn't count for much – whether those people be the saints of Corinth or the courts of Caesar. *Critical is what the Lord says*. And Paul knows that he's justified in God's eyes through Jesus' blood. So: let the Corinthians refrain from judging him; judging is *Christ's* work.

Does Paul with a command like this undermine the whole matter of church discipline, pointing out each other's sins? In the very next chapter the apostle reprimands the church of Corinth for being lax in their admonitions and discipline; they let a brother of the congregation live in blatant immorality. And immoral people, he adds in chap 6, will not inherit the kingdom of God. That's to say: "fornicators and idolaters and adulterers and homosexuals and sodomites and thieves and covetous [persons] and drunkards and revilers and extortioners" simply will not survive on the Day of Judgment, but will be congregated on Jesus' left and shown the way to the everlasting fires of hell. Paul was adamant: the Corinthian brethren may leave no such sinner in the delusion that he will be saved. There is every need for discipline, admonishing each other in the face of sin.

But admonishing a brother of his sin is a different matter than setting oneself up as judge over another, and finding him wanting. Here Jesus' admonition holds true: "with the judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you" (Mt 7:2). Show the other *compassion*, as Christ has shown you compassion – and as you want compassion yourself! Shower the other with mercy and love, as Christ has showered you with mercy and love – and as you want others to shower you with mercy and love. Those who treat the other with those attitudes, says Jesus in the parable of Mt 25, will hear the blessed invitation to enter the kingdom of the Father – for they produce, however weakly, the fruits of the Spirit, the evidence that Christ has died for them and renewed them. But those driven by jealousy or anger, or those who ignore the other in his hurt and need, who readily pass judgment on the shortcomings of others, Christ will measure with the severity they use to measure the neighbor.

Christ comes again, soon, to judge the living and the dead. There's a wonderful comfort in that confession, for it means that we can leave judgments to Him who judges righteously – and therefore leave a lot for Christ to sort out. At the same time there's a great responsibility here, and that is to make sure that *I* am ready to meet this Judge. Specifically, how does *Christ* evaluate my attitude and words and conduct with respect to my neighbor? Does He see love and compassion and mercy – I feed him when he's hungry, I clothe him when he's exposed, I minister to him in prison or in illness? He's the righteous Judge, and so I need to be right before *Him* – and so repent of all my sins and produce the fruit of the Spirit as abundantly as I can. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 20 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 16 May 2004.

" GOD THE SPIRIT MAKES ME HIS TEMPLE ."

Text:

Lord's Day 20

53. Q. What do you believe concerning the Holy Spirit?

A. First, He is, together with the Father and the Son, true and eternal God.[1] Second, He is also given to me,[2] to make me by true faith share in Christ and all His benefits,[3] to comfort me,[4] and to remain with me forever.[5]

[1] Gen. 1:1, 2; Matt. 28:19; Acts 5:3, 4; I Cor. 3:16. [2] I Cor. 6:19; II Cor. 1:21, 22; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 1:13. [3] Gal. 3:14; I Pet. 1:2. [4] John 15:26; Acts 9:31. [5] John 14:16, 17; I Pet. 4:14.

Scripture Reading:

1 Corinthians 12:1-11; 27-13:13

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalm 25:2

Psalm 143:6

Psalm 37:9,12

Hymn 38:1,2

Psalm 133:1,2 & Hymn 37:3

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

We've spent the last number of Lord's Days making confession of what the Lord has told us about the second Person of the Holy Trinity – how the Son of God became man, suffered on the cross, died and was buried, arose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Concerning the ascension of the Lord, we repeated after God that Christ from heaven "sends us His Spirit" (Lord's Day 18.49) and "by His Holy Spirit He pours out heavenly gifts upon us, His members" (Lord's Day 19.51). Who, though, is this Holy Spirit the ascended Christ has sent us? And what are the heavenly gifts He pours out upon us through His Spirit? This is the material of Lord's Day 20.

Who the Spirit is whom Christ has sent us? He's none less, says the Catechism, than "true and eternal God." And the gifts He's given? That's faith, and with that gift the "fruits of the Spirit" mentioned in Scripture. It's so marvelous: I, a man, become *temple of the Spirit of God* – and so am equipped to do heavenly things!

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

GOD THE SPIRIT MAKES ME HIS TEMPLE.

1. The marvel of His coming,
2. The consequence of His coming,
3. The proof of His coming.

1. The marvel of His coming.

With our first point this afternoon, congregation, I need to highlight the *contrast* between the Holy Spirit and ourselves. The Holy Spirit, says our Lord's Day, is "true and eternal God", with the Father and the Son. I may refer to a passage of Scripture as Acts 5 to demonstrate the accuracy of this confession. Said Peter in vss 3f: "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." Notice how Peter in his opening line says that Ananias has lied to the Holy Spirit, while in his closing line says that he lied not to men but to God. That is: the Holy Spirit *is* God.

This Holy Spirit, true and eternal God (says the church in Lord's Day 20) "is also given to me." The word 'me' in Lord's Day 20 refers not simply to the authors of the Catechism, but to all who take the words of this Catechism on their lips sincerely. In fact, I would draw your attention here to the Form for Holy Baptism. When one is baptized into the name of the Holy Spirit –and we all were!- "God the Holy Spirit assures us by this sacrament that He will dwell in us and make us living members of Christ, imparting to us what we have in Christ, namely, the cleansing from our sins and the daily renewal of our lives, till we shall finally be presented without blemish among the assembly of God's elect in life eternal." That, congregation, is the promise: God the Spirit will dwell in us. In who? *In you and me!* God has made His covenant with us, claimed us for Himself, and God's covenant is not empty. Because of His covenant, He has sent His Holy Spirit to dwell in *our* hearts, older and younger of the congregation! Then certainly we need to *respond* to the covenant, and if we respond with unbelief the Lord God withdraws His Spirit from us. Here is our obligation: respond to God's covenant with faith! Meanwhile, my point now is this: the Holy Spirit has been given *to each of us*. That is the promise of the covenant God established with all believers and the children He has given to believers. Each of us may by covenant be *temples of the Holy Spirit* – and therefore need to *be* temples of the Holy Spirit.

But –and here's the question that needs our attention today- *what are we?* Temples of the Spirit, yes, but *what sort of temples?* The Scriptures are emphatic: we are sinners, are "conceived and born in sin" (as the Form for Baptism has it), are "desperately wicked" (Jer 17:9). God Himself says of the human heart (and that includes yours and mine) "that the wickedness of man [is] great..., and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen 6:5). The Catechism summarizes it like this in Lord's Day 2: we are "inclined by nature to hate God and [the] neighbor." It's not flattering.

Here, now, beloved, is the marvel of the Spirit's coming: God the Holy Spirit is given to me, is given *to a hater*, is given to one dead in sin! The Holy Spirit takes what is dead, what is unclean, what is defiled with sin, *and makes that His temple!* How incredibly, wonderfully marvelous!

We realize, of course, why He has done it. Christ has paid for sin, and so the unclean and defiled are cleansed; our sins are washed away. Through the blood of Christ sinners are redeemed, and that's why the Spirit of Christ is pleased to make His home in the redeemed. The material of Lord's Day 20 follows on the material of Lord's Days 11-19. But none of that takes anything away from the *marvel* of the Spirit's coming. True and holy God makes His home in sinful people: how marvelous! Haters of God are made into homes for God the Spirit: who could have imaged such a thing! But that's what we confess in Lord's Day 20: the Holy Spirit is true and eternal God with the Father and the Son, and *this Spirit is also given to me* – who am by nature a hater of both my Maker and my neighbor. From hater to temple: that's the marvel of the Spirit's coming!

That brings us to our second point:

2. The consequence of His coming.

Will the Spirit –holy God as He is!- actually dwell in the hearts of haters? Is the Spirit content to live with people dead in sin? As it is, He is not. Yes, He makes haters into temples; sinners who hate God and neighbor become homes for the Holy Spirit. But when He comes, He makes a *change* to these sinners-become-temples. What kind of change? To draw this out, I need to lay out for you what the Lord God has told us about the work of the Spirit.

We read of the Holy Spirit in the opening verses of the Bible. Genesis 1:2: "and the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." Yet we're not to understand that the Spirit did nothing more than hover over the waters without any purpose. In the very next verse we read God's command: "Let there be light." And see, "there was light"! How

come? There was light because the Holy Spirit caused God's word of command to produce results. You see, the Holy Spirit was involved in creating the world. See there something of the power of His work; He does *mighty* works, works that produce great *change*.

In the same vein is the psalmist's word in Ps 104. "You send forth Your Spirit, they are created; And You renew the face of the earth" (vs 30). The reference here is to the marvel that occurred in the paddocks around us this past week. A week ago we received the first good rain of the season. I walked through the paddock some days ago, and the ground is covered with sprouting seedlings. Seeds that had lain dormant in the paddock for months have germinated and given birth to little plants – there's the work of the Holy Spirit! It happens each year anew in creation all around us: dead and dusty paddocks come alive. See there something of the power of the Spirit's work; He does *mighty* works, works that produce great *change*.

But His work is not limited to creation, be it in making God's world or renewing it. Judges 3 tells us of how the children of Israel forgot the Lord their God and so God sold His people into the hand of the king of Mesopotamia. When the people cried out to the Lord for deliverance, God supplied them with a deliverer. How? Says the passage: "the Spirit of the Lord came upon [Othniel], and he judged Israel. He went out to war, and the Lord delivered" the enemy into his hand (vs 10). But who was Othniel? He was nobody special, just an Israelite like there were so many. But the Spirit came upon him, and so this man Othniel was changed, was equipped to do mighty works.

Gideon was a nobody, "the least of [his] father's house" (6:15). But "the Spirit of the Lord came upon Gideon" (6: 34), and so he was changed, equipped to lead the people against the enemy and deliver Israel.

Samson was a strong man, it's true. But there came the day that a young lion came roaring against him, caught him by surprise. What happened? "The Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him, and he tore the lion apart as one would have torn apart a young goat, though he had nothing in his hand" (14:5f). Samson was bound with ropes and the Philistines came shouting to arrest him. "Then the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him; and the ropes that were on his arms became like flax that is burned with fire, and his bounds broke loose from his hands. He found a fresh jawbone of a donkey, reached out his hand and took it, and killed a thousand men" – with only that little jawbone as a tool (15:14f). Talk about a *mighty work*, about being *changed* to do it!

I could tell you of Saul, a farmer by trade. But the Spirit came upon him, and he was enabled to be king over God's people (cf 1 Sam 10:10). I could tell you of David, a shepherd boy. The Spirit of the Lord came upon him too, and he also was enabled to be king in Israel (1 Sam 16:13). And so I can continue to show you mighty works people did because the Holy Spirit came upon them. For this is what happens when the Spirit comes: He *changes* people, makes them able to do supernatural things, thing they could not do before.

Consider further the life and work of the Savior, Jesus Christ. The Spirit came upon the virgin Mary, and she conceived without the aid of a man (Luke 1:35) – how marvelous, how awesome! Some years later Jesus was baptized, and when that happened "the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon Him" (3:22). Straightaway (Mk 1:12) this Spirit drove Jesus into the desert to be tempted by Satan (4:1ff). The temptations of the devil were acute, but in the strength of the Spirit Jesus could resist the devil. Once the temptations were ended, the same Spirit drove Jesus to Galilee where He began His public preaching. What He said in His preaching? His text was Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He has anointed Me To preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, To proclaim liberty to the captives And recovery of sight to the blind, To set at liberty those who are oppressed; To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:18f). We recognize it: this is Jesus' program for His ministry. So Jesus, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, preached the gospel of redemption throughout Israel, and He accompanied that gospel with mighty miracles; the blind received their sight, the deaf could hear, lepers were cleansed, the dead were raised, storms were stilled, etc, etc. Mighty works He did, in the strength of the Spirit who came upon Him.

So it is also at Pentecost. "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit," says Acts 2, "and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance" (vs 4). "They": that's the disciples, common fishermen, uneducated people from the outback. They spoke with other tongues, had no problem with Latin and Arabic and Egyptian and the languages of Parthians and Medes and Elamites! How that was possible? Here's the mighty work of the Holy Spirit;

He empowered these simple Galileans to do what they otherwise could not do.

Do you see, brothers and sisters, how *mighty* the Holy Spirit is? True God He is, and so He does mighty, *almighty*, works on earth. He *changes* people so that these people can do what they could not do before. Talk about pouring out heavenly gifts!

But truth be said: this leaves us with great questions. For we confess in our Lord's Day that this Holy Spirit is given also to us, to you and to me. Gideon through the Spirit could do mighty works, and so could Samson. But we? What mighty works do you do? I'm not aware than any of us have killed a lion, let alone kill a lion with our bare hands. We confess that the Spirit has made His home in us, but none of us has become king in Australia. We say the Spirit is given also to us, but we can't speak in tongues like the disciples could do.... Change in us? Mighty works of God in us? The Spirit worked mightily in so many in Scripture, but we don't see these mighty deeds in us.... So we wonder: has the Spirit *really* been given to us? Or are we kidding ourselves?

That's our third point:

3. *The proof of His coming.*

Yes, brothers and sisters, what mighty works do you do? What evidence can you find that the Spirit has indeed made you His temple? The question is so important simply because human nature delights in the exotic, in the extraordinary. If you could cast out a demon: now *that* would be proof that you had the Spirit! Or if you could speak in tongues, or heal the sick! That kind of thing really speaks to the emotions; it's sensational. And that's why it's no surprise that Pentecostal churches are attractive and Pentecostal theology popular. The proof that you really have the Spirit, they say, lies in the spectacular things you can do, and if you can't speak in tongues or heal the sick you need to pray more and try harder to obtain the extra of the Holy Spirit.... And only when you can do such mighty works as speak in tongues and heal the sick and cast out demons can you be sure you have the Spirit....

Consider, then, congregation, what the apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth. Concerning spiritual things, he writes, he does not want the Corinthian saints to be ignorant (vs 1). Then Paul proceeds to draw out the amazing work of the Holy Spirit. Vs 2: "you know that you were Gentiles, carried away to these dumb idols...." In other words: they were unbelievers, heathens, to whom Jesus Christ was nothing, empty. But look what happens: these same people now say 'Jesus is Lord'! How come? Says Paul in vs 3: that's the work of the Holy Spirit! The Spirit has taken these Corinthians, dead in sin as they were, and haters of God and man alike, and worked in them so mightily that the spiritually dead have been made alive –they're reborn, regenerated- and therefore made to confess Jesus' true identity: He is Lord! And think about it, congregation: is the fact that a sinner is made able to confess Jesus' lordship not more marvelous than a sinner killing a lion with bare hands? But we're so used to that, we don't see it as exotic, as marvelous.... But remarkable it is!

The apostle continues. "There are diversities of gifts," he says, "but the same Spirit." The one –vs 8- has the gift of being able to give a word of godly wisdom – and that's from the Spirit. Another has the gift of being able to give a word of knowledge – and that's from the same Spirit. Another has the gift of faith, another can do healings, another can do miracles, another can prophesy, etc – and these are all gifts from the same Spirit. This Spirit makes earthly, limited, humans do marvelous, heavenly things! And all these different heavenly things the Spirit makes earthlings do is meant for the benefit of others. Vss 12ff: a body has many members, with each part working together for the benefit of other parts. So is the church: the one has this gift and the other has that gift from the Holy Spirit, and each is meant to use his gift for the benefit of the other.

But how marvelous that is, beloved! What, we said, were we by nature? Have we not learned from Scripture that by nature we are haters of God and neighbor alike? Now see: haters are made sharers! Haters receive gifts, the one this and the other that, the one the gift of prophecy (says Paul to the Corinthians) and the other gift of healing. What for? For yourself? To satisfy your own ego? Not at all! These gifts are given "for the profit of all" (vs 7). And that sharing, that giving of self for the other: that, says Paul, is the greatest gift of all! Vs 29: are all apostles? Are all prophets? Do all have gifts of healings? Do all speak with tongues? Those gifts aren't so important, says Paul; in fact, those gifts all pass away. Chap 13:8: "where there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease...." But there is a gift of the Spirit, says Paul, that will never cease, and it's the greatest gift of all (12:31). What that gift is?

That's *love*. Tongues without love is as irritating as a clanging cymbal; prophecy without love is nothing, faith to remove mountains is useless unless one have love.... Love: *that's* the greatest gift of all. Love: that the Holy Spirit changes *haters into lovers* – that's a mighty work no man can do, that's a work so great only the Creator can do it, that's a work so wonderful that Satan can't even copy it! Love: *that* is what God displayed when He sent His only begotten Son into the world (John 3:16). Love: *that* is what drove Christ to go to the cross (John 13:1). Love: that is emptying the self for the benefit of the unworthy, emptying the self for the benefit of those who distinctly deserve the opposite of love. But that's what God displayed in sending His Son, and that's what the Son displayed in going willingly to the cross. "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that God sent His only Son to be a propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:9f). And that love is what sinners are allowed to reflect, to display to the world!! How it is possible for sinners to image God's love? How it is possible that haters become lovers? That's the work of the Holy Spirit! The Spirit of mighty God *changes* people, makes people able to do works they could not do before!

What mighty works can you do? What proof do you have that the Spirit has made His home in you? You, beloved, can *love*! No, the newspapers won't get excited about this gift, as they would get excited if you killed a lion with your bare hands. But loving the other, loving your enemies, loving those who hate you, loving those who persecute you, *that* is distinctly a mighty work that comes directly from God the Holy Spirit.

What does such love look like? No, this love is not something erotic, and this love is not something sentimental either. Paul explains the qualities of this characteristic work of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of those sinners in whom He lives. Love, says Paul in vs 4, "love suffers long and is kind." Love, he says, doesn't get impatient in the face of another's failings, doesn't get agro or mean. Love, he continues, "does not envy," does not desire for self what the Lord has given to another, but rather rejoices in what God has given the neighbor. "Love does not parade itself, is not puffed up." Love does not have big thoughts of self, nor seek to draw attention to one's deeds of love. Love "does not behave rudely," says Paul in vs 5, "does not seek its own, is not provoked." Love will take a lot of hurt, a lot of verbal abuse –why?– because that's the kind of love God demonstrated to sinners when He gave His only Son. Israel wasn't nice to God when they rejected the Lord of glory and crucified Him. Yet Christ's sacrifice was also for those who demanded His death (cf Acts 2,4). Love "thinks no evil," does not assume the neighbor has done as the rumor mill alleges – unless the evidence is there thick and clear. Even then, love "does not rejoice in iniquity," has no pleasure in hearing evil of the other – whoever he may be. Instead, love "rejoices in the truth". Love "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." No matter what the other does, no matter the evil he throws at you, love continues to love even one's enemy. That, says Paul, is love, and we well to know that such love is totally foreign to human hearts. Well has the Catechism said that by nature we hate God and neighbor alike, but this is the renewing work of the Spirit in the sinners where He pleases to dwell: these sinners are *changed*, made able to do mighty, heavenly works, made able to *love*.

Does the Holy Spirit, brothers and sisters, dwell in your hearts? The proof is His coming is in the fruits you produce. The first fruit of the Spirit, the characteristic fruit of the Spirit, the abiding fruit of the Spirit, is *love* (Gal 5:22). Do you see *that* love in your conduct toward your neighbor (whoever he may be, whatever he may have done)? Do you see *that* love in your words about another – never mind to whom you speak? Do you see *that* kind of love in your attitude to the man across the road, irrespective of how he treats you? The world can't fathom that kind of love, and all that's happening in the world today –the selfishness of divorce and abortion, the revenge and hatred of the Middle East– simply demonstrates how foreign this love is to the world. But that's the love you're made to produce, congregation, through the mighty work of the Holy Spirit in hearts by nature filled with sin, filled with hate. How comforting, how wonderfully comforting: sinners are made temples, haters are made lovers, *the Spirit dwells in me!*

Delight in that love, congregation, rejoice and be comforted by this evidence of the Spirit's coming to you. And because you can love, continue to cultivate that gift, to practice it, to abound in it. In a world of lovelessness, *love abundantly* – as God loved you abundantly. Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 21 Q&A 54-55 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 30 May 2004.

" THE CHURCH IS THE WORK OF THE ASCENDED CHRIST ."

Text:

Lord's Day 21 Q&A 54-55

54. Q. What do you believe concerning the holy catholic Christian church?

A. I believe that the Son of God,[1] out of the whole human race,[2] from the beginning of the world to its end,[3] gathers, defends, and preserves for Himself, [4] by His Spirit and Word,[5] in the unity of the true faith,[6] a church chosen to everlasting life.[7] And I believe that I am[8] and forever shall remain a living member of it.[9]

[1] John 10:11; Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11-13; Col. 1:18. [2] Gen. 26:4; Rev. 5:9. [3] Is. 59:21; I Cor. 11:26. [4] Ps. 129:1-5; Matt. 16:18; John 10:28-30. [5] Rom. 1:16; 10:14-17; Eph. 5:26. [6] Acts 2:42-47; Eph. 4:1-6. [7] Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:3-14. [8] I John 3:14, 19-21. [9] Ps. 23:6; John 10:27, 28; I Cor. 1:4-9; I Pet. 1:3-5.

55. Q. What do you understand by the communion of saints?

A. First, that believers, all and everyone, as members of Christ have communion with Him and share in all His treasures and gifts.[1] Second, that everyone is duty-bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members.[2]

[1] Rom. 8:32; I Cor. 6:17; 12:4-7, 12, 13; I John 1:3. [2] Rom. 12:4-8; I Cor. 12:20-27; 13:1-7; Phil. 2:4-8.

Scripture Reading:

John 17

Philippians 4:1-7

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 16:1

Psalm 115:6

Psalm 122:1,2,3

Psalm 133:1,2

Hymn 40:1,2

Beloved congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The two Q & A before us this afternoon both concern themselves with the church. The church. When you think of 'church', what, beloved, do you see in the eye of your mind?

What we *see* is people coming together. We *see* them congregating at a particular address, 320 Lake Road. We *see* them coming at specific times, Sunday by Sunday, 9:00 & 2:30. By and large, we see the same people coming together Sunday by Sunday; there's fam ..., fam ..., fam ... – father, mother, children. Church: that's *us*; that's what we see. And what do we do as church? We can see what happens; we sit and listen while one person speaks, we sing and we pray and we give our offerings, and we participate in the sacraments. *That* is church; we see it with our own eyes!

If that's so, congregation, what makes this gathering here today different from a meeting of the Labor Party faithful in Cecil Andrews Highschool tomorrow evening where (let's say) Mr Latham will have a speech? There too people come together, and perhaps it's the same people attending every Labor Party rally, and they'll sit and listen while one person

speaks. Is the difference that in church here this afternoon we have an assembly of Christian believers, while the crowd that would congregate to hear Mr Latham would not necessarily be Christian believers? If the difference lies in the faith of the people, what's the difference between the crowd that assembles here this afternoon and the crowd that assembled at the soccer oval on River Road yesterday? What makes this gathering this afternoon a *church*?

Essential, brothers and sisters, to 'church' is *the work of Christ*. And that work of Christ you cannot see. Yes, you can see the *result* of Christ's work, and that's what we see around us right now. But the work itself you cannot see. That is why our Lord's Day does not ask what you *see* about the holy, catholic church, but asks instead what you *believe* about the church. And it gives this answer: the Son of God gathers, defends, preserves a church – of which I am a member! Note those verbs: the Son of God gathers, defends, preserves. The church is *His work*. That's what I need to draw out with you this afternoon. *How* is it His work? And *so what*?

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE CHURCH IS THE WORK OF THE ASCENDED CHRIST.

1. The nature of Christ's work,
2. The effect of Christ's work.

1. *The nature of Christ's work.*

The church gathering work of our Lord Jesus Christ begins with the work of our God. From the entirety of the whole human race, the Lord God has chosen certain persons to life eternal. These persons the Father has given to the Son, and for the salvation of these people the Son laid down His life on the cross. This is what Jesus refers to in the prayer He prayed just before He was arrested and crucified. John 17:2: "Father, the hour has come. Glorify your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him." To "give eternal life": that's the purpose of Jesus' coming suffering. Not everybody would benefit from His suffering on the cross, but only "as many as You have given Him" – the elect, a specific number.

Christ did His required work on the cross. He paid for the sins of those whom the Father had given Him, died, was buried, arose, and ascended into heaven. But what now of those elect people the Father had given Him? Christ had obtained forgiveness for their sins, but the vast majority of these elect people for whom Christ died *knew yet nothing of the Lord*; most were not yet born. Well now, here specifically is the work described in Lord's Day 21 of the Catechism. The people whom the Father had given to the Son had particular names. There was a man named Saul, a most devote Jew, and very capable student of Gamaliel. On the list of those whom the Father had given to the Son was also an Ethiopian, a black man of central Africa who served in the government of Candace the queen of the Ethiopians. On the list were also the Roman centurion Cornelius, and a lady from Asia Minor named Lydia. Among those the Father gave to the Son (and for whom the Son died) was also the jailor of Philippi, etc, etc. That list had names not just of Jews, nor of descendents of Shem alone. Rather, peoples of any tribe and race and language were on the list of those whom the Father had given to the Son, people who would live in any century of history, and in any corner of the globe.

What now was the exalted Son of God in heaven to do? He had laid down His life to pay for the sins of that devote student of Gamaliel and of that official of the Ethiopian government and of that lady of Thyatira. *So these people had to come into contact with the gospel, had to come to faith*. That, brothers and sisters, is the notion caught in our Catechism when it says that "the Son of God ... gathers ... a church." Gathers: the Son of God had to cause the gospel to enter the lives of specific elect persons, break their hearts of unbelief, and work faith.

How the Son did that? He did it in a variety of ways, but always with one constant. The ascended Lord instructed His servant Philip to meet the Ethiopian eunuch on the road, and explain to him the gospel he was reading (Acts 8). The ascended Lord hit that zealous Pharisee on the road to Damascus with a bright light and the words of the living Savior, so that Saul had to recognize that Christ arose from the dead and lived still (Acts 9). The ascended Lord sent Peter to Joppa to speak with Cornelius of the work of Jesus Christ. Some years later the ascended Lord sent the converted Paul to Philippi and caused his path to cross the path of that lady from Asia Minor so that Paul could preach to her the

gospel of Jesus Christ crucified (Acts 16). Shortly thereafter, the ascended Christ brought Paul into contact with the elect jailor of Philippi, and the jailor heard the gospel also. In each instance, *Christ was at work*. The common denominator in it all? This: Christ always used the same tools to achieve His purpose. He wished to work faith in the hearts of those whom the Father had given Him – Saul the Jew, the Ethiopian eunuch, the Roman centurion, the Greek jailor of Philippi, the lady of Asia Minor- and to achieve that purpose He labored *through His Spirit and Word*. That *word* had to come to the chosen, and when the chosen heard that word the Spirit of Christ worked faith. *The Son of God at work!*

But this, congregation, is not the full extent of Christ's church gathering work. It is not so that the Son of God simply works faith in those whom the Father gave to Him, and that's it – *as if now He had completed His church-gathering work*. For the church of God is not all-the-elect-believers-as-they-live-scattered throughout a given town or district or country or even the world. The English word 'church' translates a Greek word that means literally 'the called out', and so 'the gathered together.' The Hebrew word equally describes a gathering. And a gathering is not something mystical, something invisible, but is something you can *see*.

The Father had given particular persons to the Son. The Son caused the gospel to enter their lives, worked faith. Yet that does not complete the Son's work; instead, He *continues* His church gathering work. Consider Philippi. In that city in Greece were a number of persons whom the Father had given to the Son. I've mentioned already Lydia from Thyatira and the jailor. From Paul's letter to the Philippians we learn the names of other persons the Father had given to the Son. I mention Euodia and Syntyche (4:2), as well as Epaphroditus (2:25). I'm not sure how big the city of Philippi was at the time, but it certainly was no country town; the people living on this side of the city will not have known the people living on the other side. But over here was one elect person, Lydia, and yonder by the jail lived another, the jailor. On the far north of town, behind the hill, lived Epaphroditus, and down by the harbor lived Syntyche. What does the Lord do now: let these individual elect persons exist in town as so many islands to themselves? Can He say that His church-gathering work is complete now that He has worked faith in the hearts of these elect persons; all that remains is to preserve them from the attacks of the devil? No, beloved: the Son of God takes these separate individuals, of diverse social, ethnic and religious backgrounds, and *brings them together*. I don't know where, whether in a clearing along the riverbank or in a shed by the harbor or in one of their homes; it doesn't matter. Christ *brings them together*, and *that* is His church. That He worked faith in these people is only *Step One* of His church-gathering work; *Step Two* was that He brought them together. And He didn't do that once only, but the saints of Philippi, those whom the Father had given to the Son, came together Sunday by Sunday, repeatedly at a set time and place, and they didn't come together to play soccer or discuss the latest in politics or fashion, but they came together to hear God's Word, to use the sacraments, to call publicly on the Lord, and to give Christian offerings for the poor. *That* is Christ's church gathering work. The result of His work is very visible, even though you can't see that Christ is doing it.

This work of the ascended Savior, brothers and sisters, was not limited to Philippi. What He did in that city with the elect the Father had given Him He was doing also in neighboring Thessalonica with the elect there. But also in Rome, different country, different language, different culture, different people, were persons the Father had given to the Son, and so the Son was busy there also, both working faith and bringing these believers together. You could see the result: on a particular street, at a particular time, Christ brought together persons of diverse social, economic, ethnic & cultural backgrounds. That was the church of Jesus Christ in Rome. So too in Jerusalem and in Alexandria and in Baghdad and in India – wherever there were people whom the Father had given to the Son, of any tribe or tongue or race. The church is *catholic*. Christ is busy *anywhere*....

Again, this church-gathering work of the Son was not limited to the first three decades after His ascension. The Father had given to the Son persons from every generation, sometimes in this city, sometimes in that, sometimes from this people, sometimes from that. So the Son had work to do in every generation, causing the gospel to go to this town and that, working faith in the hearts of each elect person, gathering these elect individuals together into His body-in-that-place. Over the centuries Christ was busy in Rome and in Constantinople, in Carthage and in Geneva, in Amsterdam and in Djakarta. This work continues even today, and we see it with our eyes right here in Kelmscott; we *believe* that what we see in this building today is the work of Jesus Christ the Lord. He has taken br & sr ..., br & sr ..., br & sr ..., with their diverse backgrounds and histories, and brought them to church. More, He has entrusted children to their care, covenant children, and brings them to church too – because they also belong. I know: we're so used to coming

together each Sunday, and always we see the same faces, and so we consider what we see this afternoon so normal, but, congregation, here is the *work of Jesus Christ*. He does it Sunday by Sunday, takes us from our various homes, brings us together to speak to us, encourage us in His way. How marvelous, how wonderful, that we may see it, yes, *may be part of it!*

Exactly because the church is Christ's work can we also confess each other's identity. I refer here to Art 27 of the *Belgic Confession*. What is the church, according to this confession? This: "we believe" –note, not necessarily see!- "we believe and profess one catholic or universal Church, which is a holy congregation and assembly of the true Christian believers, who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ, are washed by His blood, and are sanctified and sealed by His Holy Spirit." That's the church: the gathering, the assembly of the true Christian believers. What characterizes the people Christ brings together? Is it that they like each other so much? Is it that they share a common background? Or share a common religious taste? Or send their children to a common school? No, brothers and sisters, no! That's not what *characterizes* those whom Christ gathers together. What characterizes them is the fact that they all –through the mighty working of Jesus Christ through His Word and Spirit- they all *expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ*, are *washed by His blood* and are *sanctified through one Spirit*. That's to say, congregation: you believe of the person in the next pew that he is washed in Jesus' blood, that she is sanctified through Jesus' Spirit! Those whom Christ gathers together are the ones the Father has given Him, are those for whom Jesus has laid down His life, are those whom He has regenerated through His Spirit. That, beloved, is how we have to see each other in this congregation: by God's infinite mercy we are washed by His blood and sanctified through His Spirit. *That's* what characterizes the church, and *that's* what ties the members together. They share one faith in one Savior! So let us say that of each other, and let us look at each other and appreciate each other *that way* – as persons whom the Father has given to the Son and therefore persons whom the Son has redeemed and whom the Spirit has renewed.

Then I know well what we confess in Art 29 of the *Belgic Confession*, that in the church are also hypocrites, persons "who are mixed in the Church along with the good and yet are not part of the Church, although they are outwardly in it." Always there is need for repentance from sin, sorrow for sin, turning from sin; else there is no forgiveness, no belonging to Jesus Christ. I hope to come back to that next time. But what characterizes the church, says Art 27, is that those whom Christ gathers together are "true Christian believers," persons who expect their entire salvation in Jesus Christ alone and are washed by His blood, sanctified by His Spirit. *That* is what we confess of each other.

I come to our second point,

2. The effect of Christ's work.

The ascended Savior gathers together those whom the Father has given to Him. But what happens now: can Lydia, go-getting businesswoman from Asia Minor, stomach the company of a Greek jailor? Can Euodia from this side of town click with Epaphroditus – who, let's say, has a vastly different social position, much better education, very different temperament? Or are these people whom Christ gathers together just so many individuals who sit together for an hour as strangers-who-know-each-other's-faces and then each go their own separate way again? Is that the nature of the church Christ gathers?

No, congregation, it is not. For the church Christ gathers is made up of sinners who all share one faith, sinners who are all washed in one blood, sinners who are all renewed by one Holy Spirit. So these sinners all have *an identical bond with Jesus Christ their Head*. And exactly because they all have communion with Christ do they all share in His treasures and gifts – to say it with the words of Question & Answer 55. Those gifts include the material of last week, the renewing work of the Holy Spirit, who makes haters into lovers. See there, beloved, the effect of the Savior's church-gathering work; those whom He gathers He also *changes* into new creatures, persons who *love* each other. Can Lydia the businesswoman get on with a jailor? Both are elect of God who will spend eternity together, and so both are gathered through the work of Jesus Christ – and therefore also made to love each other in the Lord. They are incorporated into the body of Christ in Philippi, with the jailor, let us say, serving as a hand in the body and Lydia as an eye. And the two need each other as members of one body; more, the two, as members of one body, want to use their respective gifts for the benefit of the other. And that's true not just of these two members, but also of Epaphroditus and Euodia and Syntyche and whoever else was elect in Philippi in those days.

Here, brothers and sisters, is the material of Jesus' prayer in John 17. After the opening of His prayer in vss 2-5, Jesus prayed for the disciples in the vss 6-19. Then in vss 20-26 Jesus prays for the church. What He says? Vs 20: "I do not pray for these [disciples] alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word." For Peter will go out and preach, and Cornelius will come to faith; Phillip will go and preach, and the Ethiopian eunuch will come to faith, etc, and Jesus prays now also for the eunuchs and the centurions who will believe – as well as for Lydia and the jailor of Philippi and Epaphroditus and Euodia, and for every Christian over the centuries, including you and for me. What He asks the Father? Vs 21: "that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us." That's His petition: that Lydia and the jailor and Euodia, etc, may be united in true brotherly/sisterly love, may –despite their differences in social, educational or cultural backgrounds- be united, be one. Vs 26: He petitions the Father that the love the Father has for the Son may also be in those elect persons of Philippi.

And why does He want that kind of love among these believers of Philippi? Why does He bring them together into one body? Jesus gives the reason for His prayer-for-unity in vs 21. He asks "that they all may be one" –why?- "that the world may believe that You sent Me." For people by nature are individuals, selfish, separate, islands to themselves looking after themselves. But *God* was not like that when He decided to give His Son to save sinners, and *Jesus* was not like that when He laid down His life for the unworthy, and *that is why* God's elect may not be like that either; the world must see in their unity, in their oneness, in their love-for-each-other something of the love of God! So Jesus brings His own together, gathers His church Sunday by Sunday, and makes these sinners –haters-by-nature!- into lovers. One body He makes them, each member being a part with different gifts – for the benefit of the rest of the body. The world sees that communion of saints, sees what Christ is all about, and must praise God for it - or reject Him again.

This, congregation, is the content of Question & Answer 55. "Everyone," says the second part of that answer, "everyone is duty-bound to use his gifts readily and cheerfully for the benefit and well-being of the other members." Equally, this is the material of Art 28 of the *Belgic Confession*. "Everyone's duty," the title of the article says, is "to join the church." And 'join' is not simply a once-off thing that you do when you get your name on the membership role. No, 'join' is something you do Sunday by Sunday, whenever the Lord gathers His people together. Sunday by Sunday the Lord gathers, and so Sunday by Sunday we need to make it our business to answer His gathering work, to work along with Him and not resist; Sunday by Sunday we need to come together, join His church at the particular address He's gathering it. The article doesn't mince its words on the point: "no one ought to withdraw from it, content to be by himself, no matter what his state or quality may be." OK for Euodia one day to decide no longer to attend church with the saints of Philippi because she has a disagreement with Syntyche? OK for her to decide to stay at home by herself – because she can serve the Lord at home too? No, says Paul in his letter to the Philippians, no, that's not OK. Chap 4:2: "I implore Euodia and I implore Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord." This is Jesus' will according to His prayer in John 17: they need to be one, as the Father and the Son are one! That is why Paul can also tell the minister of the church in Philippi (vs 3) to "help these women". There must be unity so that the rest of the town of Philippi may know that God sent Jesus into the world, may taste the love of God. Absent herself because of disagreement? No! "All and everyone are obliged to join it and unite with" the church, Sunday by Sunday by Sunday, "maintaining the unity" which Christ has worked between the various members in their common bond of faith with one Savior. Those who come together must submit to the instruction the Lord gives in church through the work of the office bearers, bend their necks under the yoke of Christ, and serve the edification of the brothers and sisters. Isolate oneself one may not, fail to join Sunday by Sunday one may not, no longer contribute of one's first fruits because of disagreement one may not. Christ emptied Himself for the unworthy, and so showed what love was; those whom the Father has given to the Son are renewed so that they can show that kind of self-emptying love!

That was the duty of the Philippians. And see: there *was* great love among them. Paul from his prison wrote a letter to the church of Jesus Christ in Philippi, and what does he write? Chap 1:3: "I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now." Point? The Philippians so *loved* that they supported Paul's ministry for years already! Was their love perfect already? O no. Vs 9: "this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more...." Part of the imperfection was the disagreement between Euodia and Syntyche (4;2). Still, love for God and for each other was real in Philippi – never mind the differences in characters. Here was reason for deep gratitude, and at the same time need for continued growth in sharing one's gifts with one another.

So it is in every church of the Lord around the globe, in every age. Christ gathers together those whom the Father has given to the Son. Through faith we today in Kelmscott see Christ's work in our town. As gathered saints of God we accept of each other that we are washed by Jesus' blood, sanctified by Jesus' Spirit, and so we treat each other with love and respect. No, that love and respect is not perfect; so we strive to abound more and more in that love. We know it, we believe it: the world sees *in the church Christ gathers* what love really is, sees a reflection there of the love the Father displayed for the fallen world in sending His Son for the lost. So the world is made to see that the Father has sent the Son – and respond. Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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**Sermon on Lord's Day 21 Q&A 56 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on
Sunday afternoon, 6 June 2004.**

" THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS IS GOD'S GRACIOUS GIFT TO HIS CHURCH ."

Text:

Lord's Day 21 Q&A 56

56. Q. What do you believe concerning the forgiveness of sins?

A. I believe that God, because of Christ's satisfaction, will no more remember my sins,[1] nor my sinful nature, against which I have to struggle all my life,[2] but He will graciously grant me the righteousness of Christ, that I may never come into condemnation.[3]

[1] Ps. 103:3, 4, 10, 12; Mic. 7:18, 19; II Cor. 5:18-21; I John 1:7; 2:2. [2] Rom. 7:21-25. [3] John 3:17, 18; 5:24; Rom. 8:1, 2.

Scripture Reading:

Isaiah 53

1 Timothy 1:12-17

Singing: (*Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter*)

Psalms 25:4,5

Psalms 65:2,3

Psalms 103:4

Psalms 130:2,4

Psalms 32:1,2

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The first two Questions & Answers of our Lord's Day this afternoon concerned themselves with the church. Hard on the heels of the church's confession about the church comes three Questions & Answers detailing particular *gifts* the Lord Jesus Christ has given to the church. The first of these is the forgiveness of sins, the second the resurrection of the body, and the third is life everlasting. These three form the concrete and specific treasures the Lord has given to His church, given to each of His children.

Today we may speak of the forgiveness of sins. Yet it will not do to speak of the forgiveness of sins *in general*, as a rich doctrine that may be true for others but not for me. As we speak about the forgiveness of sins we need to keep in mind that God's gifts are *personal*, are given to *specific individuals*. The Catechism reflects that by asking what *you* believe concerning the forgiveness of sins, and then laying a personal answer on our lips: "*I believe that God ... will no longer remember my sins.*" The gift confessed in our Question & Answer is a gift given *to the church* – and we by God's grace are members of that church. As we talk about forgiveness this afternoon, we are talking about something given *to us*.

That is also why there are two questions we need to consider this afternoon. What *God* thinks of us gets to the heart of what forgiveness of sins is all about, and so that becomes our first point. But the application of that gospel compels us to consider what *we* think of ourselves, and so that becomes our second point.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS IS GOD'S GRACIOUS GIFT TO HIS CHURCH.

1. What God thinks of us,
2. What we think of us.

1. What God thinks of us.

What, congregation, is forgiveness of sins? We know what 'sins' are. That word captures whatever we do or say or think that contravenes God's commands. In the Garden of Eden we committed no sins, for we were perfect. As a result of the fall into sin our hearts have become "desperately corrupt" (as Jeremiah says it, 17:9), so much so that sin covers whatever we do; even our best works, says Isaiah, are as "filthy rags" before God (64:6).

God's reaction to our sins is *revulsion*. The Holy Spirit says through Habakkuk that God is of purer eyes than to behold evil (1:13). So, when the people of Israel built their golden calf in blatant transgression of God's expressed command, God was ready to destroy the people, and begin a new nation with Moses. That is holy God: He cannot stomach sin.

From eternity God has chosen certain persons to life eternal. These are the ones whom the Father has given to the Son (John 17:2). And those whom the Father has given to Him, the Son gathers into His church – persons of any tribe and tongue and race, of any culture and behavior pattern. The church Christ gathered in Corinth consisted of persons who used to be fornicators and idolaters, adulterers and homosexuals and sodomites, thieves and drunks and extortioners (1 Cor 6:9ff). The members of the church of Ephesus used to conduct themselves "in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and the mind," and so were "by nature children of wrath" (Eph 2:1ff). Peter says to the saints whom he addresses that "we have spent enough of our past lifetime in doing the will of the Gentiles – when we walked in lewdness, lusts, drunkenness, revelries, drinking parties, and abominable idolatries" (1 Pet 4:3). These, though, are the sorts of people God has given to Christ, and so these are sorts of people Christ gathers into His church, yes, these are the sorts of people who receive the gift of the forgiveness of sins.

What, now, is 'forgiveness'? The Bible uses a variety of images to convey the notion of forgiveness. There is, for example, the word 'lift up'. Then sin is pictured as a burden, a weight lying on one's shoulder. The sin is 'forgiven', and that's to say that the sin is lifted off the person and put to one side – so that the person can walk straight up again. Another word used for 'forgiveness' is the word 'let go'. The same word is used of a stone in a slingshot. The stone is 'let go' from the slingshot and flies away. So too sin; it is 'let go', and that's to say that it may fly away and so be gone from the life of the transgressor.

Besides its choice of words to describe forgiveness, the Bible also draws pictures of what forgiveness actually is. Ps 103 gives us this well-known passage: "As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us" (vs 12). In our day of rapid transportation and communication, east and west are not all that far apart, and so what is moved as far west as you can go can be retrieved. But that was not the case in David's day. East and west were the farthest extremes of the world, and it took you a lifetime to travel as far east as you could go, let alone as far west. And then you certainly had no opportunity to retrieve what you'd hidden on your travels to the farthest east. The point: when God removes transgressions from us "as far as east is from the west", those transgressions are *gone*, completely gone.

Micah uses different imagery to describe what forgiveness is. He first describes what God is like: "Who is a God like You, Pardoning iniquity And passing over the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He does not retain His anger forever, Because He delights in mercy. He will again have compassion on us, And will subdue our iniquities" (7:18f). That, he says, is God: pardoning iniquity, forgiving, merciful and compassionate. Then the prophet draws a specific picture of what forgiveness actually is, what God actually does with our sins. He adds: "You will cast all our sins Into the depths of the sea" (vs 19b). In the eye of our mind we may picture the Lord piling Israel's sins into a boat, rowing that boat into the middle of the sea, and tipping its load overboard. In today's technology one can retrieve what falls into the depths of the sea; they've been down to pick up pieces of the Titanic, and that's more than 3 kilometers down. Israel did not have that kind of technology. Anything buried in more than 3 meters of water was irretrievable. That's the point of Micah's comparison: when God pardons iniquity and passes over transgression, the point is that those sins are *gone*, completely gone.

What, then, beloved, is forgiveness? It is this: our sins are *gone*. They're lifted from our shoulders, they're let go, they're removed from us as far as east is from west, they're dropped into the depths of the sea: all those terms and pictures describe the glorious wealth of forgiveness – our sins are *gone*! So: that which kindles God's anger against me – my iniquities – is no longer there to infuriate Him! So His thoughts and His words and His deeds to me are not driven by anger anymore; His thoughts and His words and His deeds to me are instead driven by His mercy and compassion. In the words of our Lord's Day: "God ... will no more remember my sins." Instead, He "will graciously grant me the righteousness of Christ, that I may never come into condemnation." Or in the words of Lord's Day 23.60: Forgiveness means that God instead sees me as righteous, "as if I have never had nor committed any sin."

Yet, says the Catechism, there's more to it still. It's not just that *my sins themselves* are gone, that God will no more remember my sins. The Catechism adds the remarkable line that God also will no more remember "*my sinful nature* against which I have to struggle all my life." Our Lord's Day works here with Paul's struggle in Romans 7. He could, he says, "will what is right," but he could not do it (vs 15, 19), and so he sins day by day, and so needs forgiveness day by day. The reason for those sins, he says, is because of the evil that is present within him (vs 21). He doesn't *become* a thief when he actually reaches out his hand to steal; no, he is a thief by nature, and the act of stealing shows what's actually in the heart. One doesn't become a slanderer when one actually gossips; no, says Paul, one is an slanderer at heart, and the act of gossiping is simply the fruit of what is actually in the heart already. This is what God said already of the human race in Noah's day: "the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually" (Gen 6:5). But if holy God can stand no evil, then it's not just evil *deeds* He cannot stand but also evil *thoughts*, yes, and evil tucked away inside the heart where you and I cannot see it. He sees through the walls of the heart, and is *repulsed* by the evil He sees. And that's enough for the Lord's holy fury to break out upon us!

But, says the Catechism, God's forgiveness extends not just to the actual sins we commit (be they of deed or of word or even of thought); God's forgiveness extends also *to our sinful nature*. That nature also God wants to forgive! And we can be most thankful for that, beloved, for we'd otherwise perish – despite our best efforts. For whose heart is totally free of transgression?

God no more remembers my sins, nor my sinful nature against which I struggle all my life long. On what grounds, now, does God forgive? On what grounds does He lift our sins off our shoulders, remove them as far as east is from west, dump them overboard? The answer of the Scripture is emphatic: this is simply and only because of Christ's work on the cross. The people of Israel had to bring sacrifices to the temple time and time again, and always their sin offerings had to be accompanied by laying the hand upon the head of the sacrifice (Lev 4). The point was that sin was transferred from the sinner to the animal, and the animal – now with sin on board – died in place of the sinner – and so the sinner could go home free. Isaiah refers to that ordinance when he says of the coming Christ that "He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities" (vs 5) and "the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all" (53:6). 'For', says the prophet, and the point is that Christ suffered and died *for* us, in our place; our sins were piled onto Him so that we might go free (cf Rom 5:6ff). Result: God "has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 5:18). That's the gospel Paul and all preachers may proclaim: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them" (vs 19). In the words of our Lord's Day: "I believe that God, *because of Christ's satisfaction*, will no more remember my sins...." Or in the words of the Lord's Supper Form: Christ is the only ground of our salvation.

That statement has implications. If our sins are forgiven "because of Christ's satisfaction," it follows that there are *no other grounds* for our forgiveness. We do not, brothers and sisters, have forgiveness of our sins because we go to church. We do not have forgiveness of sins because we help the poor in the community. Nothing we do earns us forgiveness; forgiveness of sins is totally and only *God's grace through Jesus Christ*.

It's something for which we may be so very thankful. Martin Luther was taught that forgiveness could be his if he did the right thing – and you can fill in the blank as to what that right thing might be, whether paying enough indulgences or crawling up a hundred stone steps on your bare knees or even repenting, feeling guilty and rotten about your sins. But Luther learned that such a doctrine never gives peace, for the devil will always have you doubt whether you have done enough, whether you have gone to church often enough or sincerely enough, whether you have paid enough or feel rotten enough or repented truly enough or made sufficient restitution for your sins, etc. The gospel of redemption

drives us to look to *Christ alone*; only His work on the cross obtains forgiveness for our sins. And that work is so perfect, so complete, that the Christian need never doubt whether his sins are *really forgiven*. That's the gift Christ gives to His church, to those whom the Father has given to Him.

Can one and all automatically claim this gift? Can even every person who comes to church claim this gift? Says the Holy Spirit through John: "He who *believes* in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him" (3:36). Faith: that is the means by which we draw God's gracious gifts to ourselves and make them ours (cf Lord's Day 7, 23). That is why the speaker in our Lord's Day says emphatically that he *believes* that God for Christ's sake no more remembers his sins. Only *by faith* is this gift of God ours. So that is the question: do you *believe* this gospel? And do not say right away that of course you believe it, for Jesus tells us that you know the tree by its fruits (Mt 7:15ff), and James adds us that "faith without works is dead" (James 2:26). The good news of forgiveness is for those who believe, but faith is always accompanied by fruits. And those fruits, those evidences of faith includes turning from sin, fighting against sin, heartfelt sorrow for sin. That is why the Scriptures insist that there is no forgiveness without repentance. The evidence of faith must be present – repentance, sorrow for sin, seeking to make good the damage done- before one can repeat sincerely the words of Lord's Day 21.

How, then, brothers and sisters, does God see you? You *do* believe the gospel, do you not, and you *are* sorry for your countless misdeeds and transgressions, isn't it? Well now, does God see you as *all sin*, wicked so that His anger is directed against you? Does He see you as *a little bit sinful*, somewhat forgivable because you have shown your remorse but the remorse isn't quite deep enough and so a bit of His anger remains? Beloved, if God were to grant us forgiveness on the basis of what He sees in us, we'd have no forgiveness! Who can claim to be without sin? Who can claim to see all his sins and confess them all, be repentant of them all? Who can claim that his repentance is complete, and his remorse perfectly sincere? No, beloved, the Lord tells us that when He looks at us He does not look at our accomplishments, whether good or bad, but He looks at the cross of Calvary. He assures His own that He, because of Christ's satisfaction, will no more remember their sins. So the Christian embraces God's promise in faith, and he repeats it after God, and says with the words of A 56: "I believe that God, because of Christ's satisfaction, will no more remember *my sins*." And go ahead, beloved, fill in your name there and the details of your iniquities. And then say it again: I believe that God, because of Christ's satisfaction, will no more remember *that particular sin of mine* that keeps coming back to haunt me. I believe the forgiveness of sins, believe that *that* sin is gone, *gone!* When God sees me, He sees no trace of that sin – because Christ paid for it!

We come to our second point:

2. *What we think of us.*

If God, then, sees us as righteous, our sins gone, how should we now look at ourselves? If God for Christ's sake no more remembers my sins, should I keep on remembering them?

In actual fact, brothers and sisters, we would dearly love to forget the wrongs of which we're guilty. We realize that we can't wind the clock back and undo the past, but the shame we feel on account of what we've done can be so strong that we'd give much to forget it. And yes, there are various tricks available to help forget our sins. You can dull your memories through drug or alcohol abuse. There are counselors who will give you shock treatment to help you forget, and there are churches that will try to exorcise a demon from you to get you to forget what you've done. The common denominator in all these is the effort to erase your memory, and so get you to see yourself in a better light. At the end of the day, it's a form of denial, an effort to escape the reality of our sins.

In the face of this inclination, beloved, Paul's words to Timothy are so instructive. Paul wrote this letter towards the end of his life, as a relatively old man. And behold now what he does: without any prodding he speaks openly about the sins of his youth! Try to hide them? Try to belittle them? Try to forget them? None of it! His sins were in the open, common knowledge, and now Paul doesn't skirt around his iniquities but mentions them by name. Vs 13: "I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man." Notice the footnote beside the word 'insolent'; you could also translate the term as 'violently arrogant'. We recognize Paul's allusion; he's describing the material of Acts 8, how he consented to Stephen's death (vs 1) and "made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off

men and women, committing them to prison" (vs 3). Or, in the words of Acts 9:1: he breathed threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord (vs 1). But the Lord had mercy on him, met him on the road to Damascus, confronted him with the risen Christ, and compelled him to repent and believe. As a result Paul's lifestyle changed, changed radically; no longer did he do the things he used to do (cf Eph 2:3). More, because of his conversion he recognized how horribly evil his behavior had been. In the passage before us the apostle calls a spade a spade: he acknowledges that he "was formerly a blasphemer" – and there was no sin to a Jew more evil than blasphemy; recall that Jesus was condemned on the grounds of alleged blasphemy. Paul goes further, and dares to say that he was a "persecutor" – and to a Christian what can be worse than hounding Christ's church, and therefore Christ Himself? He adds that he was "an insolent man", "violently arrogant", and that too is anything but flattering. He paints no gentle picture of himself, but describes his sins in terms of the evils they were.

Now, why, congregation, does he do that? And this is not the only time he recalls his sins; he does it more often. Is he some sort of sadomasochist, a person who enjoys the pain that recollection of sin may bring? No, congregation, the point is totally different. The reason for bringing it up is the material of vs 12. "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord who has enabled me, because He counted me faithful, putting me into the ministry." Putting who into the ministry? *Me* – who was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, an insolent man! Talk about grace on Christ's part! Vs 14: "the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant!" What a God this is, to take such an unworthy man as Paul, and give *him* –with his repugnant track record- such a central place in His New Testament church! Truly, salvation is not by works, lest any man should boast, but by grace alone (cf Eph 2).

There, brothers and sisters, you have the reason why Paul mentions his past. He wants Timothy (and you and me) not to tut, tut over Paul's evils, but he wants one and all to *delight at the mercies of God!* And the first to delight in those mercies, of course, is Paul himself. He knows what he was, and he won't downsize his evils, but he'll describe the evils as they were *in order to spell out the more clearly how great God's grace to him was in Jesus Christ!* White is never so white as against a background of black, and so Paul is happy to paint his background truly black so that the whiteness of the gospel might stand out the sharper.

How, brothers and sisters, do you see yourself? Will you try to forget your sins of youth, or perhaps downplay them, take the edges off? It is O so tempting, because we do not appreciate the look of ugly sin in ourselves. But we shall never repent of our sins if we do not dare to acknowledge that our wrongs were *sins*, evil. More, we shall not praise God as we ought if we fail to recognize what sort of sinners we used to be. Recall Jesus' words to Simon the Pharisee: the more one is forgiven, the more thankful one is (Luke 7:42,47b). The more sharply we see our sins, the more we'll join Paul in thanking Him that He had mercy –not on sinners in general- but on *me*.

Notice now also, congregation, how Paul speaks about himself in the present. Vs 13: "I was *formerly* a blasphemer...." But what is Paul now? Still a blasphemer? Still an arrogant persecutor? Does he think of his past as still haunting him today? Not at all! He looks at himself through the same lens as God does. God looks at him through the blood of Christ's sacrifice, and so sees Paul as righteous before Him for Christ's sake; Paul looks at himself also through the blood of Jesus Christ, and so also sees himself as righteous-before-God for Christ's sake. That is why he can confidently put his sins into the past, and he can describe the present in terms of God's mercy and grace. See himself as a sinner still? Walk around with the weight of his past sins still on his shoulders? No, no! God has forgiven him for Jesus' sake, and so sees himself as righteous, and therefore Paul *knows himself forgiven* and does not walk around with guilt feelings, puzzling as to whether or not God is happy with him. To say it in the words of the Catechism: Paul knows he has "the righteousness of Christ" so that he "may never come into condemnation" – not in this life or in the life to come.

How does God look at you, brothers and sisters? He has worked faith in your hearts, has joined you to His church, even instructs you to come to His table. Point: *you may believe that God sees you not as a sinner, but as righteous – forgiven!* True, the devil wants you to doubt that God has really forgiven your sins. So the devil would have you keep staring at your sins instead of at the cross of Christ. Or the devil would have you forget your sins, belittle them – so that you don't really need Christ's cross so much after all. But the Lord would have us delight in the cross, delight in His mercy. So we'll look our sins in the face, acknowledge them with shame. And for every *one* look at our sins in all their horror we'll look *ten* times at the cross of Christ – and so thank God the more for His marvelous mercy! Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 22 Q&A 57 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 13 June 2004.

" EVEN IN DEATH CHRIST DOES NOT DESERT HIS OWN ."

Text:

Lord's Day 22 Q&A 57

57. Q. What comfort does the resurrection of the body offer you?

A. Not only shall my soul after this life immediately be taken up to Christ, my Head,[1] but also this my flesh, raised by the power of Christ, shall be reunited with my soul and made like Christ's glorious body.[2]

[1] Luke 16:22; 23:43; Phil. 1:21-23. [2] Job 19:25, 26; 1 Cor. 15:20, 42-46, 54; Phil. 3:21; 1 John 3:2.

Scripture Reading:

Luke 16:19-31

1 Corinthians 15:35-58

Singing: (Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)

Psalm 30:2,3

Psalm 17:2,6

Psalm 16:4,5

Psalm 139:4,10

Hymn 51:1,2,3,4

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

The Lord God has given a certain number of persons to the Son (John 17:2). These persons the Son gathers into His church, and there bestows on them specific gifts – gifts He obtained on the cross. We discussed the one last week, the glorious gift of forgiveness of sins. Today we discuss a second, the resurrection of the body.

The resurrection. Obviously, one cannot be raised from the dead unless one has first died. Death was not part of the world God had created in the beginning; death came into the world as a result of our fall into sin. Through His atoning work on the cross, Christ has paid for sin – and so taken away the *cause* of death. Still, we said in Lord's Day 16, we all need to die, not to pay for our sins but –says the Catechism- death "puts an end to sin and is an entrance into eternal life." So, despite the gift of forgiveness of sins, you and I (like all people) shall one day die (unless the Lord returns first). But, says the Lord, we shall also one day *arise*. So: death is not the end! That is the gift of which we may make confession today.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

EVEN IN DEATH CHRIST DOES NOT DESERT HIS OWN.

1. What happens to the soul?
2. What happens to the body?

1. What happens to the soul?

Death comes to all people. There are today some 6 billions individuals on the face of the earth. In the next 100 or so years, every last one of them will die. That's an awful lot of deaths! And it's not just strangers who will die, but each and every one of us in this church building today will die also, with no exception.

What happens, brothers and sisters, when one dies? One breathes one's last, gives up the spirit, and what happens next? If I were to close my Bible, I could not answer that question. As we on this side of death try to peer through that wall called Death to discern what's on the other side, we find we can't see through that wall; it's impenetrable and does not give up the secrets of the other side. Over the years, millions upon millions have died before us, including persons we have dearly loved, but not one has come back to report what it was like on the other side. Even Near Death Experiences, persons who stood at the door of death, were even declared clinically dead but were revived, cannot tell us what there is on the other side of that Great Divide. Death, the other side: it is hidden from us, obscure.

Yet all must die, and human nature is curious to find out what is on the other side. So people have come up with particular theories. Yes, in our culture there are vestiges of the Christian faith, and so many people believe there is an after life, where the soul goes to be with God a heaven. There are also numerous in our society who insist that after death there is *nothing*; they see no difference between the death of a dog and the death of a person – and in truth that's the logical consequence of evolutionary thinking. If man is no more than a glorified frog or ape, why should death be different for a man than for a frog? The frog dies, and that's the stone end of it; so also man dies, and that's the stone end of man – after death there's nothing. In that line of thinking there's plenty of room for euthanasia and abortion, for death is simply the end anyway and so why frown upon it.... It's a way of looking at death that is growing in our secularized society. And let us face it: it's so difficult to argue against it this perception, for this is exactly what the eye of man sees. As Solomon put it: "all go to one place: all are from the dust, and all return to dust" (Ecclesiastes 3:20).

The last number of years has also seen the emergence of a belief called reincarnation. This belief holds that the soul is immortal, is locked for some years in a particular body, and at death is set free from that body in order to start again in other body – be it this time perhaps a horse or a rat. This is typical Hinduism, and (like yoga and transcendental meditation) has made ground in our culture in the last three or four decades. This line of thought produces the phrase 'in my previous life' – a reference to the time when you were married to a prince, or were a horse running the race at the Melbourne Cup, or something like that. There are those who say they can remember bits and pieces of their earlier lives.... And who can argue against this perception? You can't disprove it, no more than you can prove it – for the human eye and the human mind can find is no evidence one way or the other.... For we can't peer through that wall called Death to determine what happens on the other side. The only way to find out is for one to go and come back, and relate.... But even that doesn't happen. Even Lazarus, a man who was dead for four days, provides us with no account of what the other side was like.

There is, then, but one way alone to find out what happens when we die, and that is to ask Him whose eye oversees everything that happens on *this* side of that Great Divide as well as everything on *that* side of that wall – Him, whose hand controls all things on both sides of that Great Divide. And see, He has been pleased to tell us in the pages of His Word what happens at death, to tell us too what happens in the days and years following death (cf Luke 16:29ff). The question is whether one will believe His Word....

What happens on the other side of Death? The Lord is emphatic: people do *not* sink into a big nothingness, as if there is *nothing* on the other side. He is equally empathic: people do *not* at the finish line of life go back to the start and come back as another creature. Instead, as soon as one dies, you appear before the judgment seat of God, and on the basis of whether there was faith in Christ crucified or no faith in Christ crucified, one goes to one's eternal home in heaven or in hell. I say this on the authority of such passages of Scripture as Luke 16. Jesus speaks of two people who both died, with the one being "carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom" (vs 22 – an obvious reference to heaven) and the other (vs 23) waking up in hell. The Bible in more places speaks about the believers going to heaven immediately after death (I'll come back to that in a moment), while it says very little about the unbelievers going to hell directly after death. Even so, we have in Luke 16 one instance, and that is enough to lay the link between death and hell for all those who do not acknowledge the Lord in faith (cf 2 Peter 2:9).

Luke 16, then, confronts us with a challenge, a responsibility. Hell is a place of torment (vs 24) of anguish, of weeping

and gnashing of teeth. That is what it is after the final judgment on the Last Day; that is equally what it is directly after a sinner dies. So it needs to be fixed in our minds, brothers and sisters: sinners are but *one heart beat from torment*, from hell with its flame and its suffering! That is why one needs *today* to heed the voice of the Lord, repent of sins and believe in the only Savior. One heartbeat is a small thing and a small moment; death can take us at any time, and for the unbeliever the other side of that wall is *horrible*. The decision needs to be made today; do not delay!

The Lord tells us much more about what the believer experiences after death? To put the question differently: what is the gift that the Lord has prepared for His church? In what circumstance are we to imagine our loved ones who died in the Lord? What may *we* expect to experience when we die?

The criminal beside Jesus on the cross asked the Lord to remember him when He came into His kingdom. Jesus replied with these words: "Assuredly, I say to you, today you shall be with me in Paradise" (Luke 23:42f). Jesus' words reveal a number of points that bear on our subject this afternoon.

The criminal would be *with Jesus*. Just where would Jesus be? In His prayer before He was arrested (John 17) Jesus had asked the Father to glorify Him "with the glory which I had with You before the world was" (vs 5). More, Jesus said in that prayer that He was leaving this world and coming to the Father (vs 11). That glory to which Jesus is returning is the world of Ezekiel 1, where God is enthroned in majesty with countless angels doing His bidding. It is the world of Isaiah 6, where seraphim sing unceasingly their "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God almighty." That is the environment in which Jesus lived "before the world was," and that's environment to which He will return after His triumph on the cross. Now He says to this criminal: "Today you shall be *with me* in Paradise." What shall happen to this criminal, then, after he succumbs to the murderous intent of crucifixion, crosses the Great Divide known as death? This: *he, with Jesus, shall enter into the glory of the Father, where also the angels live!*

In the second place, note that Jesus describes this heaven, this glory, with the word 'Paradise'. The term comes from the Garden of Eden, that time in the beginning when God visited man and man was not afraid of God at all. It was a time of peace, of closeness between God and man. There was no anger from God, no judgment; there was only blessing and favor. Jesus describes the environment into which this criminal would come as 'Paradise', and that's to say that this criminal would experience God's nearness as a blessing, as favor; even in God's presence there would be no place for any fear for him – despite his earlier criminal activity! Here is the blessed fruit of forgiveness.

In the third place, Jesus says that this criminal would enter Paradise with Jesus "today". That is, both Jesus and the criminal would today cross that Great Divide and enter the realm on the other side – die. More: as Jesus and that criminal entered the realm on the other side of that wall called Death, both would go to the same place, *straightaway*. It's not so that a period of days or months or years or centuries would lie between the moment of entry into the realm of the dead and the moment of entering the presence of God; no, both Jesus and the criminal would enter Paradise 'today'.

Jesus' words to the criminal on the cross, congregation, were not for the ears of the criminal alone – as if that criminal received special treatment. The apostle Paul writes to the Philippians these words: "I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better" (1:23). "To depart": that's a reference to dying. He wants to cross that divide because, he says, to be on the other side is to "be with Christ." You notice: Paul states that what Jesus promised to the criminal would be true for Paul also! To die would mean for Paul too that he would "be with Christ" – and that's to say that Paul would enter the glory of Christ in heaven, that world around God's holy throne where the angels sing God's praise and do His bidding. Such a world, Paul adds, would be "far better", and that addition catches what Jesus said to the criminal when He used the word 'Paradise'. To be with Christ is "far better" because there would be no judgment from God upon Paul, but there would be only grace and peace and favor and blessing – without a trace of pain or tears or brokenness. *That* is what Paul expects to experience on the other side of the Great Divide!

And again, beloved, this promise is not limited to the criminal and to Paul. This is standard fare for all God's people; why would God make an exception for those two?! In fact, the criminal and the apostle would both go immediately

into the glory of God's presence precisely because of the work of Jesus Christ on the cross! He paid for *their* sin, more, He reconciled to God *all whom the Father had given to Him*, obtained for God's people the favor of God, and so *all God's own* are heartily welcome in the presence of holy God Himself! *Every* saint experiences at death the same thing as Jesus promised to the criminal and as Paul claimed for himself; all are –in the words of the Catechism- immediately taken up to Christ the Head. No wonder the voice from heaven declared blessed those who die in the Lord! (Rev 14:13).

This gospel, congregation, tells us so much about our God. Is He our God only for the short period we live on this earth – be it a couple of years, 30 years, 70 years, perhaps 90 years? Is Death able to separate us from the love of this God? That is: can Death, that King of Terrors (Job 18:14) that takes our life away, stop God from loving us? See here, beloved, how great and how mighty your God is! People can do so much –just look at the technology around us- but against Death we're ultimately powerless; every one must die, none comes back, we all have to concede defeat in our battle against this enemy. But God is mightier than Death! What happens to God's own once they've passed that Great Divide? Why, they enter God's very presence! Such is the love of God for His own, and such is His power; even Death cannot snatch us from God's hands, even Death cannot prevent God's love from reaching us! Here is the wealth of Lord's Day 1: I belong, with body and soul, both in life *and in death*, to my faithful Savior. Death is ultimately no enemy!

We move on to our second point:

2. *What happens to the body?*

The soul, then, is at death immediately taken up to Christ the Head. That's a most glorious future! But what about the body?

The body. We see with our own eyes what happens to the body at death. A few long days after death, the body of the loved one is buried. Then we see no more of the loved one, but we know very well what happens to that body; it decomposes, it returns to the dust from which it was taken. In the words of Job: "the worm feeds sweetly on him" (24:20). We find it so humiliating.... God has created us in His image, redeemed us in Jesus Christ, renewed us through His Spirit – and our bodies are left to decompose...? We find that there's such an enormous *contrast* between what happens to our soul and what happens to our body.

That is why, brothers and sisters, we do well to note how the apostle speaks about death and burial in 1 Corinthians 15. Our Savior does not forget our souls when we die, but takes us up immediately to Himself into heavenly glory. But, beloved, He does not forget our bodies either! For the Savior shed His blood not just for the soul, but also for the body. So the body is as precious to Him as the soul. Then Yes, the body is laid to rest in a grave and there it decomposes so that it returns to dust. But the apostle knows that God has a program not just for the soul but also for the body. So, when he writes about death and burial in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul casts the whole matter of burial into *a most positive light*. For he speaks about burial in the context of *gardening*. Notice the references here to sowing, to seed, and therefore to a crop. The gardener puts a wrinkled, dried out bean seed into the ground, and he knows that this exercise of sowing the seed contains within itself, under the blessing of the Lord, the promise of a crop. Sowing is a *positive* thing, hopeful, full of expectation. No gardener plants his seeds in the expectation that nothing more will happen.

That, now, is the vocabulary the apostle uses to describe a funeral. He doesn't deny that burying a loved one is difficult, and he doesn't deny either that burial has something distinctly dishonoring about it; it is shameful that people created in God's image need to be buried. But we fell into sin, and every time we bury a loved one we are confronted –to our shame- with that fall. But, says Paul, though "the body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption" (vs 42). And: "it is sown in dishonor, [but] it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body" (vss 43f). Notice the repetition of the word 'sown'; that's what the cemetery is, the grave of the saints: it's a garden, a garden sown, and it's only a question of time before the seed sprouts and the crop appears. When Christ returns, "in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet," the dead will be raised (vs 52). Then instantly the crop will be ripe, and this corruption will put on incorruption and this mortal will put on immortality (vs 53). The point? Even in the grave we are not forgotten! As the bean seeds buried in the garden

remain under the watchful and caring eye of the God of all life who ensures that the seed germinates, develops, grows so that a plant appears above the soil and continues to grow, so the human seed buried in the grave –that body of the child of God now returning to dust- remains under the watchful and caring eye of his faithful Father in heaven till the day of Christ's return in glory. Forgotten we're not; in life *and in death* we remain the precious property of our faithful Savior! Christ gave His blood also to redeem our bodies, and that is why even something so humiliating as burial is cast in Scripture in a positive light. The dead body is *seed*, and therefore to be buried in the expectation of growth, a crop, a harvest!

That reality, brothers and sisters, casts its own particular light on cremation – that practice now growing on our society. Every gardener knows that if he wants a crop he must not *burn* his seeds, but must *sow* his seeds. The child of God has heard his Lord speak of the dead body as a seed, and so in faith he sows the seed – and does not burn it. No, with this I do not say that there is never place for cremation. I can envisage in times of plague that it is necessary to destroy corpses in order to contain a plague. But a child of God who has understood the word of the apostle in 1 Corinthians 15 will avoid cremation, and will insist instead on burial. For burial expresses confidence in the Lord's promise, the promise of a harvest, the promise of a resurrection.

For yes, that is the promise. At death soul and body go their separate ways, one to heaven to enjoy the glory of the Father's holy presence together with the Son, the other into the ground as a seed to await the last trumpet. And once that trumpet sounds, the seed shall be instantly mature, shall arise from the dead a glorified body, to be united once more with the soul – God's child glorified! Then that body –today, in this life, I need to fight against my sinful nature, for my flesh lusts against my spirit to make me do what I should not do- then that body will be completely and perfectly under the dominion of the Holy Spirit –does the Bible not call it a "spiritual body"? (1 Cor 15:44)- so that we do only what pleases our God and Maker.

Death: it entered the world as a result of our fall into sin. The human eye cannot peer through that wall called Death to discern what it's like on the other side. But the Lord our God has told us of the triumph of Jesus Christ on the cross, how He paid for sin and so reconciled sinners to God. Through His sacrifice He has taken away the *cause* of death, and that's to say that the body now buried in the dust of the earth will one day *arise* – and be transformed into something fully under the dominion of the Holy Spirit! Body and soul united and perfected, to the greater glory of the God who deserts us never (not before death, not in death, not even after death!) – for that day we earnestly long! Come, Lord Jesus! Amen.

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**Sermon on Lord's Day 22 Q&A 58 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on
Sunday afternoon, 20 June 2004.**

" CHRIST HAS OBTAINED EVERLASTING LIFE FOR HIS PEOPLE ."

Text:

Lord's Day 22 Q&A 58

58. Q. What comfort do you receive from the article about the life everlasting?

A. Since I now already feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy, [1] 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.[2]

[1] John 17:3; Rom. 14:17; II Cor. 5:2, 3. [2] John 17:24; I Cor. 2:9.

Scripture Reading:

John 3:31-36

Isaiah 65:17-25

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 98:3,4

Psalm 30:2,3

Psalm 84:5,6

Hymn 53:1,2

Hymn 55:1,2,3,4,5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Our age of prosperity makes life today pretty comfortable. In the midst of the comforts of this prosperity we confess Sunday by Sunday that we believe "the life everlasting". We hear that phrase, and our thoughts go to the distant future, to the time after death or the time after Christ's return. In the comforts of today's prosperity we reach forward to the distant future, confess its bliss – and somehow that confession feels remote, detached from our daily lives. Only when there's trouble –sickness, war, persecution, strife- does the article about the life everlasting touch us, for it promises *relieve* from the tribulations of the day. But other than that, this article doesn't seem to touch the here and now.

Are we so right, beloved, in projecting the article about the life everlasting into the distant future? As it turns out, the future, the New Jerusalem, is but a small part of the life everlasting. The Bible is emphatic: life everlasting is something God gives His children *now already*. More, this gift God gives His children is *today* more desirable than winning lotto! The Christian does not live simply for tomorrow and the comforts of the future; the Christian treasures *today* the riches the Lord has prepared for him!

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

CHRIST HAS OBTAINED EVERLASTING LIFE FOR HIS PEOPLE.

1. The nature of everlasting life,
2. The feel of everlasting life,
3. The fulfillment of everlasting life.

1. *The nature of everlasting life.*

As I mentioned a moment ago, the phrase ‘everlasting life’ prompts us to think of the future, of heaven, the New Jerusalem, living with God. Everlasting life: we think of no pain, no tears, no frustrations – Paradise Restored. It’s the material of Rev 21. So: it’s something for the *future*. Today it’s promised to us, we look forward to receiving it, are sure we’ll get it, but it doesn’t help us in the nuts and bolts of today. A bit, if you will, like a certified cheque from some rich uncle that’s dated for 2014. You can dream about what you’ll do with the money, but it doesn’t help you a dot today; it’s nothing more than a wonderful promise for the future.

Notice, then, brothers and sisters, the word of our God in John 3:36: "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life." That passage does *not* say that the believer ‘will have’ eternal life; no, it says that the believer ‘has’ everlasting life. That is: the Holy Spirit describes this gift as a *present reality*, not a promise-for-the-future.

How are we to understand, congregation, that we have eternal life today already? The answer lies in what one means with the word ‘life’. What is ‘life’? And no, we do not need now a biological answer to that question; in the Bible ‘life’ is much more than that the heart ticks. According to the Bible one has ‘life’ when there is a wholesome and healthy relation with the Lord God. ‘Life’ captures the notion of *communion with God*.

I refer to the opening chapters of Scripture. God told Adam directly after He made him that he was not to eat from that one tree in the garden. God added: "in the day you eat of it you shall surely die" (Gen 2:17). Not so long afterwards Adam and Eve did eat from the forbidden tree. Did they die that very day? No, physically they did not; Adam lived another nine centuries after the fall into sin (Gen 5:5). Did God, then, not keep His promise?? We know: that cannot be either! Rather, congregation, when Adam fell into sin, he died immediately – according to the Word of the Lord. But ‘death’ is not first of all that the heart stops; ‘death’ in Scripture is first of all that *communion with God* is broken. That’s what’s described in Gen 3:8. When Adam and Eve after their fall heard the sound of God coming to them in the cool of the day, they "hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God." Why they did that? They did that because they were *afraid* of God (vs 10). The communion they had with God was broken, the relation of peace and favor was gone, and in its place was fear, anxiety. With the fall into sin they had died, for the life they initially had was at bottom *communion with God*. They lost that communion with God, they were dead, and that’s why the Lord drove Adam and Eve out of His presence, out of the Garden and into that world of thorns and thistles; they were now dead, spiritually dead, and that’s to say that they did not have communion with God anymore. They, and the whole human race with them, had deserted God in favor of joining Satan. That is death, that is the absence of life.

Then it may well be true, brothers and sisters, that on the world today some six billion hearts are thumping away, and doctors may call that life, and that’s fine. But the Christian realizes that life is much more, is much deeper than something biological. So many millions of earth’s present inhabitants are dead even while they live, are the walking dead, the living dead. Think of the words the father of the prodigal son used when his son returned. "This my son," he said, "was dead and is alive again" (Luke 15:24). Was the son really dead? No, not at all; biologically he was very much alive all along, and by worldly standards the lad had quite a life at that – he lived from party to party! But his father understood what ‘life’ really was, that life is ‘communion with God’, and that is why he dares to say that his prodigal son was *dead*.

And we, congregation, need to dare to say the same. Life without God is no life! We’re told to ‘get a life’, and the phrase is understood to mean that you need to enjoy yourself, you need to get in there and *do* the fun things life has to offer. But that’s all a delusion, it’s what Solomon calls vanity and striving after wind; a life without God, despite all the partying you could ever do, is at bottom a living death. Or, in the words of the Form for Holy Baptism, it’s a "constant death" (pg 586).

There you have also, beloved, the reason why our Savior came into the world. The Lord God desired to restore communion between Himself and sinners, and for that reason He sent His Son. The Savior died on the cross, paid for sin, reconciled sinners to God –it’s the message of the Lord’s Supper celebration of today- and so ‘got a life’ for us. His work makes us *live*. John 3:16: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting *life*." And vs 36: "He who believes in the Son has everlasting *life*; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." What is this ‘life’

that Jesus obtained for God's own? Simply that the heart ticks? No, no! It is that we have communion with God again! John 17:3: "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." *That*, brothers and sisters, is the nature of the life that Christ has obtained for us: *life* is to know God, is to have communion with this God, is to have the favor of God instead of to be burdened with fear of God.

That is why 'life' is not something for the distant future alone. 'Life' is something that the believer has *now already*. I remind you again that Jesus uses the present tense when He says that who believes in Him "*has* eternal life" (John 3:16,36).

That is equally why this life is 'everlasting'. Christ has reconciled sinners to God so that we have communion with God, and who or what can put an end to that? Is that communion with God, that life-in-its-deepest-sense something short term? It's Paul's emphatic argument in Rom 8: "if God is for us, who can be against us?" (vs 31). And: "who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (vs 35). Paul is convinced: nothing, nothing in all the world can separate God's own from God, nothing can stop God from loving His own, can tear God's people from God's hand – even death cannot do that! God holds on to His own, those redeemed by Jesus' blood, and that is why this communion with God, this life in the deepest sense of the word, knows no end; it's unending, it's eternal, it's everlasting. The child of God has this life today, and he will have this life to all eternity – for God doesn't change!

It's what the Form for Holy Baptism says. God the Father establishes His covenant of grace with us, promises to be our Father – and how long will that last? Says the Form: God establishes an *eternal* covenant with us. The God of the *living* gives me life today-and-forever; life everlasting is His promise in the covenant. God the Son promises to unite us with Him in His death *and in His resurrection* – and the point is that we have life, are righteous before God, have communion with Him *today and forever*. God the Holy Spirit assures us that He will dwell in us and make us living members of Christ – and the point is again that we have communion with holy God. And how long shall that all last? That begins today, in this life, and continues to all eternity.

The same message comes to us through the Form for the Celebration of the Holy Supper. We state it emphatically in the Form (pg 596): "we acknowledged that we are dead in ourselves." But the Lord God sent His Son specifically for *dead* people, sinners as we, and this Son suffered on the cross and died –to do what?- to restore us to God, reconcile us to God, establish again communion between us and God. He is the bread of life (John 6:35), through Him we are made alive again, and the result is that we may sit at table with God once more – and today's celebration, today's communion with God at His table, foreshadows the Great Supper of the Lord on the day of Christ's return, when He and we shall drink the wine together in the kingdom of His Father. Communion with God, true life in the Biblical sense of the word: it's something we have today already, and something we'll keep –by God's grace- into all eternity.

That is why, congregation, when the Catechism speaks about the comfort of the life everlasting, that Catechism does not ask you to forget this life with its trials and to peer into the distant future for the day when all tears shall be gone. No, when the Catechism speaks about 'life everlasting', the Catechism directs us first to the *here and now*, to what we have today in Jesus Christ. A 58: "I now already feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy." It's a *present reality*! We who have seen this morning the sacrament of Holy Baptism and sat today at the Table of the Lord may know something of how real this life is today. *Now already* we have life with God, communion with Him (we could even sit with Him at table!) - and this life will never end!

I come to our second point:

2. *The feel of everlasting life.*

So we have everlasting life already. Tell me now, congregation, what does this gift *feel* like? I'm not asking you to tell me what it *should* feel like. The Catechism gives the answer to that: it's "the beginning of eternal joy," and so we should be feeling happy, joyful. The Lord's Supper Form uses similar words: it speaks of the need to "rejoice" and give Him the glory. So that's how it *should* be. My question, though, is this: so you confess that you have everlasting life, and you have it today already. *How does that feel to you?*

I'm thinking now of the question that invariably gets put to the person who wins Lotto in a big way. Channel 7 will be on top of him straightaway with this question: *how do you feel?* In other words: what's it like to win a million dollars?

Well, congregation, how would you answer *that* question? I asked that very question of a Catechism student the other night, and his answer was "Great!" And somewhere, congregation, we can all relate to that answer. For money is something of everyday value, and somehow we've always dreamed of getting that Statesman, and a bigger house, and going out for a good holiday on a yacht. A million dollars tax-free: that sparkles, feels great!

Over against that, everlasting life sounds right down dull, doesn't really touch us in the grind of daily life.... And now you ask how it *feels* to have eternal life? Somehow it doesn't give near the *buzz* that winning a million bucks would give....

Why is that? The first reason, brothers and sisters, is undoubtedly that our broken sinful selves are inclined to this earth, to the things we can see, taste, feel. We know: money gives us power, money gives us opportunity, money even buys us fun. Our sinful hearts treasure those things. So the thought of receiving a million dollars gives us a buzz.

But there's a second reason why getting a million gives us a bigger buzz than getting life, and it's this: we don't appreciate the *taste* of eternal life. And why don't we appreciate its taste? That's because we haven't really tasted it! Everlasting life: that's communion with God, communion without end. Life: that's to possess the favor of God, it's to be on the receiving end of the forgiveness of all your sins, it's the fact that God sees you as completely righteous for Jesus' sake, without sin. Life: that's to have God *smiling at you* day by day, hour by hour, moment by moment. Life: it's what the priests of the Old Testament impressed upon the people when they laid the blessing on them. The people had come to the tabernacle, offered their sacrifice for their sins and so acknowledged their sin and misery as well as their conviction that the Son of God would one day die to atone for their sins, reconcile them to God. As they left the priest would stretch out his hands over the people and on behalf of God Himself would voice these words over the people: "The Lord blesses you and keeps you; The Lord makes His face shine upon you, And is gracious to you; The Lord lifts up His countenance upon you, And gives you peace" (Num 6:22ff). Makes His face to shine upon you: what is that? Draw me a picture, beloved, of a face that shines – and guaranteed you'll draw me a big smile. That's the point: holy God *smiles* upon His people! His favor is upon them, His pleasure – and therefore His blessing.

What now, congregation, would you rather have: a million dollar cheque or God's smile? Let me put that a bit sharper. You either have the cheque or you do not; you have something or nothing. *But that's not the way it is with God's smile, God's favor*; this time it's not a matter of *something* or *nothing*. On the topic of God's smile, you either have God's smile *or* God's frown. And we realize that having God's frown is as terrible as having God's smile is pleasurable. So now the question again: would you rather have a million dollar cheque or God's smile? That is: would you rather have the million dollar cheque *with God's frown*, God's displeasure upon you, or simply His smile alone?

Do not, now, pretend that God is not there, that He's but a figment of the imagination. Take God seriously, as seriously as Adam and Eve after the fall, when they heard His footsteps in the garden. *What do you want: His smile or His frown?* His blessing or His curse? His words of forgiveness or His words of damnation? For anyone who takes God seriously, that is not a choice; His frown is so terrible, and His smile so desirable. Well now, you have not won Lotto, but by God's grace in Jesus Christ you have freely received His smile – life, communion with God. Tell me again: *how does that feel?* Anybody who takes God seriously cannot but be ecstatic at that gift! This is better, much better, than Lotto! And that's what the Catechism is getting at when it says in our Lord's Day that "now already I feel in my heart the beginning of eternal joy." That's the reason why the Psalmist could sing his songs of jubilation, and that's equally why the apostle Paul could exalt at the wonders of God's mercy (Rom 11:33ff). To live under the smile of God: *that's life!*

Is that joy yours, my brothers and sisters? Despite the sinfulness that remains in your heart, what gives you the bigger buzz: the thought of winning lotto or the gospel of the Lord's Supper table? To have life in a worldly fashion (as did the prodigal son) or to life in that deep Scriptural sense of communion with God? Our feelings are sinful and so are much inclined to the earthly – as if that's real life. But we shall need to train our feelings, discipline our feelings, so that we put to death feelings of excitement at thoughts of winning lotto and making alive feelings of excitement at thoughts of having communion with God, of having God's smile, God's favor. And yes, that takes work, takes effort. And it begins with having right priorities deep inside the recesses of the heart – where only you can know what you're really all about and only God can see what makes you tick.

I come to our third point:

3. The fulfillment of everlasting life.

We have life already, communion with God, His peace, His favor. That life, that peace, that favor, that divine smile was something that filled David and Isaiah and Paul and so many saints of old with joy profound. The child of God today shares that joy, and that's why we say in our Lord's Day that today already we feel in our hearts the beginning of the joy that does not end.

But that beginning, congregation, is only a beginning! Today our antennae, our receptors are so dulled by sin that we pick up so very much interference, so much static from the glitter of the world around us. But the day is coming that we shall experience the full riches of life-with-God with all our senses. Listen to the prophet Isaiah: "For behold, I create new heavens and a new earth; And the former shall not be remembered or come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I create; For behold, I create Jerusalem as a rejoicing, And her people a joy" (65:17f). The passage continues to relate the marvels of God's renewing work, but the long and short is caught in the fact that joy will be perfect. It's the answer to Jesus' prayer before He went to the cross: "Father," He said, "I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me" (John 17:24). Glory: that's life with God, His smile forever! In the midst of the tears and brokenness of this life, *this* is what Paul longed for: "I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better" (Phil 1:23). God commanded Old Testament Israel to come three times in a year to the tabernacle, to God's presence, and each time they came was to be a time of feasting, of rejoicing. "You shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant, the Levite who is within your gates, the stranger and the fatherless and the widow, who are among you" (Dt 16:11; cf vs 14). That rejoicing was to express the feeling that lived in the hearts of God's people at being in the presence of the Lord, and at the same time it foreshadowed the great rejoicing that will characterize all God's people on the Day of days. Rev 21: "And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people" (vs 3). *That's life*, beloved! Then "God Himself will be with them and be their God." And what will characterize that perfect life-with-God? Says the voice from heaven to John: "And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away" (vs 4). Can you imagine: never a tear again? Never a dot of pain again – neither physically so, say from arthritis or cramp or migraine or even just bumping your leg? Never a dot of pain again – neither psychologically either, say from people saying something unpleasant about you and throwing a verbal dart at you? No pain, no crying, for the former things have passed away; *every effect of the fall into sin gone!*

Instead of the pain and tears of this life there shall be only the smile of God, His favor and His peace and His blessing. And our antennae shall be so sharp that we pick up this smile perfectly and enjoy it perfectly too. No wonder the church longs for that day! "Come, Lord Jesus!"

But do not forget this, beloved: in principle we have that joy today. Today we already live with God, have communion with Him, enjoy His smile. For Christ's sake we're rich, so very rich. And it's going to get better still! Amen.

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Sermon on Lord's Day 23 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 11 July 2004.

"BELIEVERS ARE RIGHTEOUS BEFORE GOD FOR CHRIST'S SAKE."

Text:

Lord's Day 23

59. Q. But what does it help you now that you believe all this?

A. In Christ I am righteous before God and heir to life everlasting.[1]

[1] *Hab. 2:4; John 3:36; Rom. 1:17; 5:1, 2.*

60. Q. How are you righteous before God?

A. Only by true faith in Jesus Christ.[1] Although my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all God's commandments, have never kept any of them,[2] and am still inclined to all evil,[3] yet God, without any merit of my own,[4] out of mere grace,[5] imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ.[6] He grants these to me as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and as if I myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me,[7] if only I accept this gift with a believing heart.[8]

[1] *Rom. 3:21-28; Gal. 2:16; Eph. 2:8, 9; Phil. 3:8-11.* [2] *Rom. 3:9, 10.* [3] *Rom. 7:23.* [4] *Deut. 9:6; Ezek. 36:22; Tit. 3:4, 5.* [5] *Rom. 3:24; Eph. 2:8.* [6] *Rom. 4:3-5; II Cor. 5:17-19; I John 2:1, 2.* [7] *Rom. 4:24, 25; II Cor. 5:21.* [8] *John 3:18; Acts 16:30, 31; Rom. 3:22.*

61. Q. Why do you say that you are righteous only by faith?

A. Not that I am acceptable to God on account of the worthiness of my faith, for only the satisfaction, righteousness, and holiness of Christ is my righteousness before God.[1] I can receive this righteousness and make it mine my own by faith only.[2]

[1] *I Cor. 1:30, 31; 2:2.* [2] *Rom. 10:10; I John 5:10-12.*

Scripture Reading:

Romans 3:9-26

Habakkuk 1:1-2:4

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalm 103:1

Psalm 25:7,8

Hymn 24:1,5,7

Psalm 103:4,5,6

Psalm 145:2,3

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Question & Answer 59 queries what it help you "now that you believe all this?" "All this": what do those last two words refer to? As it turns out, they are a reference to the entirety of the Apostles' Creed. Back in Question & Answer 22 we had wondered what a Christian must believe in order to be saved, and answered that we must believe "all that is promised us in the gospel, which the articles of our catholic and undoubted Christian faith teach us in a summary." The subsequent Lord's Days explained the various articles of this Apostles' Creed –about the Father creating the world and upholding, about His sending His Son and the Son suffering for us, dying, rising from the dead, ascending into

heaven, about the gift of the Holy Spirit, forgiveness of sins, life everlasting- and now the Catechism ties it altogether: so you believe all this; what's the benefit? How does believing all this help you in the nuts and bolts of daily living?

The answer is this: in Christ I am righteous before God and heir to life everlasting. Those are the benefits, say the Catechism: righteousness before God and life everlasting. Last week, with Lord's Day 22.58, we spoke of "life everlasting". Today, with Lord's Day 23, we focus on that other benefit, being "righteous before God".

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

BELIEVERS ARE RIGHTEOUS BEFORE GOD FOR CHRIST'S SAKE.

1. What we think of us,
2. What God thinks of us,
3. How God's grace becomes ours.

1. What we think of us.

To lesser or greater degree, we are all somewhat sensitive to what others think of us – especially our peer group. The question sits on our minds: do they like my shoes, my hairstyle, my sense of humor, etc. *We want approval.*

At end of day, congregation, what others think of us is not so important. When others don't like us, there are options open to us. We could, for example, move away. Or we could opt to ignore the other's dislike, stand above another's negative opinion. And as to ourselves, we must –as Paul writes to the Romans- live at peace with all, as much as it depends on us (Rom 12:18). In the process of time frictions and dislikes may dissipate. Certainly, in due time critics all die, as do we.... In a word: what other people think of us is *never eternal*.

But what God thinks of us is a different matter. After all, He is the Judge of all the earth, and we –like all men- are to appear before Him. Then His thoughts concerning us will not have short-term consequences, but eternal consequences; His thoughts about us determine whether we spend eternity in the pleasures of heaven or in the agonies of hell. You see, what God thinks of us is vitally important!

Well now, in Lord's Day 23.60 believers make confession of what God has revealed in His Word about His thoughts concerning these believers – you and me. Yet before we make that confession, we first speak candidly about ourselves. That is, we confess God's thoughts about us *in a context*. What we say about ourselves? This: "my conscience accuses me that 1. I have grievously sinned against all God's commands, 2. never kept any of them, and 3. am still inclined to all evil."

Question. Do you agree with this self-condemnation in our Lord's Day? Ie, does your conscience accuse you of these three things? I'm sure we'll all agree that we've sinned. But what do you think of the word "grievously"? And the statement that you've sinned "against *all* God's commands"? Isn't that over the top...? And what do you think about the second statement, that we've "never kept any of them"? *Never? Any?* We list the commandments in mind, and while we acknowledge that we've sinned, we feel that this type of self-accusation is overdone; we'd prefer to be more muted. And as to no. 3: "still inclined to all evil": yes, we'd agree that there's evil inclinations in us, but "inclined to *all* evil"? Is it in me to hijack an aircraft and use it as a missile to kill thousands? Is it in me to murder a pregnant wife & child – as happened recently in the Eastern States? My mind and conscience agree: this is over stated....

Yet, brothers and sisters, we need to set aside our feelings, and listen carefully to what the Lord has told us in His Word. The believer humbly *accepts* God's instruction. The person who speaks the words of Lord's Day 23 is not an unregenerate heathen. Rather, the conscience that speaks here is that of believer, the one who knows and loves Lord. The person who says these condemning things about himself is the same person who first said with Lord's Day 1 that I belong with body and soul, in life and death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. Over the years the conscience of *such* a person has been *taught* by godly parents, by the preaching, in the school, has been taught by the Holy Spirit to accept with humility God's holy assessment of himself. The conscience of the believer knows the commandments of Lord, has learned to look into mirror of God's law, and to describe not what the eye of flesh sees but describe and accept what the Lord God says a sinner is like. The believer will echo with humility the words of Paul in Rom 3:9ff: "both

Jews and Greeks ... are all under sin. As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none who understand; There is none who seeks after God. They have all turned aside...." Because that is God's assessment of human nature, the believer says with humility that yes, "I have grievously sinned against all God's commandments, and have never kept any of them." And the believer echoes with equal humility the struggle of the apostle in Rom 7, how the apostle loathes the battle within himself, how he can will what is right but cannot do it, and so cries out his despair: "Wretched man that I am!", and so the believer will repeat Paul's frustration in his own words and say with our Lord's Day: "I am still inclined to all evil." The believer, taught by the Spirit of holy God, shows nothing of the spirit of the Pharisee of Luke 18:9ff – that man who came to the temple to boast before God of how good he was, certainly better than yonder tax collector. No, the believer taught by the Spirit of God reflect the attitude of the tax collector, has small thoughts about himself, knows very well that he's sinned against all God's commandments, has never kept any of them, and tomorrow will continue to sin. That attitude is the fruit of being taught by God's Word.

So the question, congregation, is this: how do you see yourself? Do you find the language of Question & Answer 60 over the top? Or is this language you humbly adopt for yourself? I realize: our sinful nature protests this sort of language. We need to *learn* to think and feel in these terms – just as with Question & Answer 58 we had to *learn* to experience joy in our hearts. But this is the way the Lord speaks about sinners, and so we humbly echo it, indeed, we *train our consciences* to feel the way the Lord describes us.

And this is nothing new. This is exactly how we speak in the Lord's Supper Form. Pg 596: "we are dead in ourselves. We also are aware of our many sins and shortcomings. We do not have perfect faith and we do not serve God with such zeal as He requires. Daily we have to contend with the weakness of our faith and with the evil desires of our flesh...." I mention also the first prayer listed in the *Book of Praise*, pg 641: "O eternal and merciful God and Father, we humble ourselves before Your great majesty, for we have frequently and grievously sinned against You. We acknowledge that if You should enter into judgment with us, we would deserve nothing but temporal and eternal death. We are deeply conscious of the fact that we are conceived and born in sin, and that all manner of evil desires against You and our neighbor fill our hearts. We continually transgress Your commandments, failing to do what You have commanded us, and doing that which You have expressly forbidden...." In fact, Question & Answer 60 simply repeats what we say about ourselves in the first Lord's Days of the Catechism. No, there is nothing new here. The attitude does not sit well with us, but it is a self-assessment we need to learn more and more to adopt and echo.

That brings us to our second point:

2. What God thinks of us.

The Lord God, then, has taught us in His Word not to have high thoughts of self; He wishes us to confess with humility that we are condemnable before Him. Now, why does the Lord tell us that? To put the question better: why do we make confession of our depravity in the first part of Question & Answer 60? The reason, beloved, is this: *white is never so white as against a background of black!* We describe what God tells us about ourselves so that we may *marvel the more on how God sees us!* Notice how A 60 is put together; the confession of our depravity is a sub-clause in the big sentence describing God's thoughts about us. The sub-clause begins with the word 'although' (and describes our depravity), and then the main part of sentence is this: "yet God, without any merit of my own, out of mere grace, imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ." More: "He grants these to me as if I had never had nor committed any sin....!" Do you see the contrast, beloved? I am black, black as black can be. But *God accepts me anyway for Jesus' sake – how glorious!* What my contribution is to His accepting me? What I have done to impress God, make Him happy with me? Nothing, nothing! On the contrary, I have sinned against all His commandments, I have never kept any of them, and I am still inclined to all evil. "*Yet God*" accepts me! There's no merit on my part, it's all grace alone, but here's how God sees me: He takes Christ's righteous and imputes that to me, writes Christ's righteous onto my account! So when God from heaven looks down to earth upon me, He does not see me as the sinner I am, but He sees me instead as righteous, holy! *This is so undeserved! This is such a surprise!!*

Try, beloved, to wrap your mind around it. Holy God, says Habakkuk, can stand to look upon evil. Holy God knows very well how evil I am – He made a point of describing it to me in His word, and that's why I confess it in Lord's Day 23. Yet when this God from heaven on high looks upon me, He does not see the black sinner I am, but He sees me as righteous in Christ! Think about it: He takes Christ's work and lays it over me, ie, He covers me with Christ's

righteousness as with a blanket. So God sees me as perfect! God sees me as without sin. God sees me as one who paid for my past sins. That's the language of A 60: "He grants these to me as if I had never had nor committed any sin, and as if I myself had accomplished all the obedience which Christ has rendered for me."

That's language, we need to know, that the church has learned to speak on the authority of God Himself. 2 Cor 5: "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation." John says the same: "if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins" (vss 1f). And again: "In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (4:9f). In a word: though God knows how broken and miserable we are, He yet looks upon us as completely righteous, not guilty of the sins we committed! For Jesus' sake the Judge of all the world *declares* us innocent!

How awesome, beloved, this gospel is! What makes it so remarkable is that God does not ignore my sins or my sinfulness, does not belittle my sins or my sinfulness, but He makes work to cover those sins, and He grants righteousness *precisely to sinners*. That's the point of Question & Answer 60: "although" I am so evil, "yet God ... imputes." My mind cannot comprehend it, and it's certainly not how I am inclined to act towards sinners, but this is the gospel: Christ took my iniquities on Himself – including those I'm not even aware of. Christ satisfied God's justice and His wrath. So God *sees* me as blameless, righteous, not guilty of my transgressions.

That, of course, is why His smile rests upon us (cf last week). This is life!! I know I'm guilty, but I hear God declare that I'm innocent – and that's 100% grace, undeserved. How awesome!!

In truth, what God thinks of me is so important. I might not like me, but I can't essentially change me or my circumstances. People may not like me, but people can't essentially change me either – and after my death they certainly can't touch me. But God is the Judge of all the earth, and He has power to cast into hell (Mt 10:28). And this God makes a declaration today concerning a sinner as I am; He says I'm not guilty! It's a verdict that colors His approach to me today and forever! How rich, how incredibly rich! So I need not fear His judgment - ever. Cf Rom 8:1.

We come to our last point:

3. *How God's grace becomes ours.*

We appreciate: this gospel is so very rich. That raises the question: is this wealth true for all people? The answer of the Catechism is a loud No. In fact, this gospel is not even true for all and everyone who attends church! Q 59 insists that one needs to *believe* all this. A 60c says the same thing: this wealth is mine "if only I accept this gift with a believing heart." So too A 61: "I can receive this righteousness and make it my own *by faith only*." Faith: its presence or absence determines whether you can claim righteousness for yourself, its presence or absence determines whether God sees you as a sinner still (and therefore to be judged to hell) or as righteous in Jesus' blood – and therefore an heir to eternal life.

If faith, then, is so decisive, what is this faith? What role does faith precisely play in one's being righteous before God? The function of faith, brothers and sisters, is drawn out in Rom 1:17. You know how Luther struggled to understand this text, to come to grips with Paul's words: "the just shall live by faith." And we need equally to understand the apostle's point here.

To help us understand the apostle, congregation, I mention that the verse in question is a quote from Hab 2:4. Habakkuk was a prophet in Jerusalem, after northern tribes had gone into exile on account of their wickedness. Despite the example of the northern tribes, however, sin continued to abound in the city of Jerusalem. That disturbed the prophet greatly, and so he uttered the complaint of chap 1:2-4. How long would God allow Jerusalem's iniquity to go unpunished? Had God not, way back at Mt Sinai, promised punishment on sin (Lev 26)? So why were things going well for the wicked of the city?

God's answer is contained in 1:5-11: God will send Babylonians to Jerusalem, to punish God's erring people. Those Babylonians: "they are terrible and dreadful" (vs 7). So: punishment will come, for God is faithful; Habakkuk just needs to be patient.

Habakkuk replies in turn in 1:12-2:1. His reaction: Lord, isn't this over the top?! Those Babylonians are so much worse than your people in Jerusalem; they will destroy your people!

To that complaint the Lord responds in turn in 2:2ff. God tells Habakkuk to prepare sign in big letters, and on the sign must be the words of vs 4, with the warning ("Behold the proud, His soul is not upright in him") and the promise ("But the just shall live by his faith"). It's the promise that needs our attention. It's point is this: the just shall *survive the conflagration*. How shall they survive the onslaught of the evil Babylonians? Shall they survive on account of their personal justice? Or on account of their obedience? Not at all! Rather, they shall survive because they *accept what the Lord says*. And what does the Lord say? This: that they *will survive*. The just do not challenge God's words, but *accept them for truth*. I draw your attention to Abram. God spoke a word to Abram about receiving as many descendants as there were stars in the heavens (Gen 15:6), and Abram *accepted* what God said, accepted God's word, and *therefore* God accounted him as righteous. So also the just in Habakkuk's time. Those who *accept* what God says will see for themselves that God's word comes to pass, ie, they will survive the Babylonian nightmare.

That's the text Paul quotes in the context of being righteous before God. His point is the same as Habakkuk's: those sinners shall escape God's judgment *who accept what God says*. Particular inhabitants of Jerusalem, those who *accepted what God said*, would survive the judgment of the Babylonians. And equally, particular sinners can stand before God, be declared Not Guilty –who?– those sinners who *accept what God says*. For *that* is faith. Faith is *the action of accepting God's word*. Faith is embracing as true whatever God declares.

And what is it, brothers and sisters, that God has declared concerning you? Back in your baptism already, when you were still so small, God declared that He saw you as Innocent, told you that He covered your sins with Jesus' blood. Certainly, He knew at the time what you actually were: a sinner inclined to all evil. But God claimed you as His, despite your blackness, told you in baptism that He washed your sins away in Jesus' blood so that you were white before Him. So: how you respond to what God said to you? Do you scoff at God's words? Or do you accept it? Note: scoffing at it is unbelief, accepting it is faith!

That is what the Lord meant with Hab 2:4. "The just shall live by faith," ie, those shall survive who accept God's judgment on the city and trust His compassion. That's to say: they lay their lot in His hands. So it is here: those shall survive God's judgment over sin who *accept* that He gave Son to pay for such depraved folk as we are. Such persons have no condemnation today or forever. *That* is the role of faith.

Does faith then save? That is, does my doing something (believing) save me from God's judgment? No, certainly not! I remind you again of the first part of A 60: I am corrupt, too corrupt to be able to contribute something to God for my salvation. I remind you of the second part of A 60: God imputes Christ's righteous to us out of grace alone. This is the gospel: God in mercy spares the unworthy, saves the damnable from the damnation they deserve. That's God's grace, and it's give for free, without price to the sinner. That's God's word, God's promise to you. Who actually receive that wealth? Only those who accept this word as true. *That* is 'by faith'.

So that's the question: what do you think of God's promises to you?? Amen.

Free Reformed Church of Kelmscott

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Sermon on Lord's Day 24 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 18 July 2004.

"BECAUSE OF GOD'S GRACE IN CHRIST, WE NEED NOT SEEK TO IMPRESS GOD."

Text:

Lord's Day 24

62. Q. But why can our good works not be our righteousness before God, or at least a part of it?

A. Because the righteousness which can stand before God's judgment must be absolutely perfect and in complete agreement with the law of God,[1] whereas even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin.[2]

[1] *Deut. 27:26; Gal. 3:10.* [2] *Is. 64:6.*

63. Q. But do our good works earn nothing, even though God promises to reward them in this life and the next?[1]

A. This reward is not earned; it is a gift of grace.[2]

[1] *Matt. 5:12; Heb. 11:6.* [2] *Luke 17:10; II Tim. 4:7, 8.*

Q. Does this teaching not make people careless and wicked?

A. No. It is impossible that those grafted into Christ by true faith should not bring forth fruits of thankfulness.[1]

[1] *Matt. 7:18; Luke 6:43-45; John 15:5.*

Scripture Reading:

Matthew 19:16-20:16

Singing: (*Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter*)

Psalm 19:4,5

Psalm 56:4

Psalm 18:6,7

Psalm 130:2,3,4

Hymn 24:1,2,3,4,5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

Idolatry: *others* do that, not we in our sophisticated western world. Idolatry: we think of the sacrifices on the footpaths of Bali. We think of the Roman Catholic infatuation with the mass. We think of the Buddhas of South East Asia.....

Idolatry. Lord's Day 34 defines idolatry as having or inventing something in which to place our trust instead of or in addition to the only true God. Idolatry: it has to do with *trust*.

We have before us today Lord's Day 24, about the role our good works play in our relation with God. That is: can we *trust* our good works to form a positive contribution in our relation with God, so that God is happier with us on account of the things we've done?

In theory we know the answer. It's negative: our good works help nothing to impress God. But in practice our minds travel along different routes. The thought sits deep within us: God is not pleased with me because ... - and you can fill in the blank. I don't pray enough, I don't read my Bible enough, I don't do enough visits in the congregation, I don't

spend enough time with my children.... So we pray more, read the Bible more, visit more – because we want God to think well of us, be pleased with us....

But, congregation, trying to impress God, trying to win His approval or to keep His approval, is idolatry. Sinners *cannot* impress God, no matter how hard we try! This is the point the church confesses in Lord's Day 24. In fact, sinners do not *need to seek* to win God's approval – for God has already given His approval through Jesus Christ. That was the good news of Lord's Day 23.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

BECAUSE OF GOD'S GRACE IN CHRIST, WE NEED NOT SEEK TO IMPRESS GOD.

1. The value of good works,
2. The link between good works and reward,
3. The inevitability of good works.

1. The value of good works.

Lord's Day 24 presents us with a surprise. For the focus of Lord's Day 24 is on ourselves, our efforts, our possible good works. In other words, Lord's Day 24 directs our attention to *earth*, to the creature. I say that's surprising, for Lord's Day 23 had directed our attention to *heaven*, to the Creator, and had been empathic that salvation comes from God alone. That is: though we creatures had fallen into sin and so offended God, God did not wait for us to make good what we had broken. Says the church in Lord's Day 23: we have nothing to contribute to God, nothing with which to impress God. Question & Answer 60: "I have grievously sinned against all God's commandments, have never kept any of them, and am still inclined to all evil." That's a very dismal and condemning picture of myself! Me offer something to God? Me succeed in impressing God? Not with that sort of a track record!

Exactly because of that condemning description of personal bankruptcy, Lord's Day 23 was so glorious in spelling out the gospel. For, continued that Lord's Day, "God, without any merit of my own, out of mere grace, imputes to me the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ!" To be righteous before God, to have His favor, His smile, is not something *we* bring about; to be righteous before God, to have His favor, is instead *God's gracious gift* given to *the unworthy*! Lord's Day 23 was emphatic: salvation comes from heaven to earth. Sinners do not reach out to God to impress Him; rather, holy God in mercy washes sinners' transgressions away and makes these evildoers righteous through Christ. That's the gospel: *salvation travels from heaven to earth*.

But if that's the glorious gospel of Lord's Day 23, beloved, surely there is no need to ask the questions of Lord's Day 24! If salvation is God's grace to the unworthy, to people who have grievously sinned against all God's commands and never kept any of them and are still inclined to all evil, what is the sense of speaking in Lord's Day 24 about our possible good works! In the light of Lord's Day 23, surely, it makes no sense anymore to ask Question 62: "why can our good works not be our righteousness before God, or at least a part of it?" Salvation travels from heaven to earth; why then discuss what contribution there is from earth to heaven?!

Yet the question is there. Historically, that's quite explainable. The Catechism was written directly after the Great Reformation, while the Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation-through-works was still heavily on the minds of the Reformed. After all, many of those who joined the Reformation had grown up in Roman Catholic homes, had been taught from childhood that your actions make or break your relation with God. Many of the Reformed still had family members embracing and pushing this idea. So, in that context, to put a Lord's Day in the Catechism on the point makes good sense. But that's years ago! Do we today really need a catechism that puts Lord's Day 24 directly after Lord's Day 23? Do we today really need a Lord's Day that discusses *earth's contribution to heaven's pleasure*?

I put it to you, brothers and sisters, that Lord's Day 24 cuts closer to the bone for each one of us than we think. That's because the heresy embraced by our Roman Catholic fathers so many generations ago and rejected in the Great Reformation *sits close to the heart of each one of us*. To live *by grace alone* runs so contrary to our natures; we want to contribute something to God, we want to do something to ensure that God is happy with us. We wake up in the morning and recall to our dismay that we fell asleep last night before we prayed. So what do we do? We pray a bit

extra in the morning –why?- because we don't want God's dissatisfaction upon us today. Or: we conclude at a given moment that we don't do enough in the communion of saints, and so we make a point of inviting another around or making an extra visit, and when we do so we feel better in ourselves, feel that God is happier with us, now His favor is upon us again. You see: we feel there's a connection between the things we do and God's disposition toward us. As if in some way our actions determine God's thoughts concerning us.

And with that thought in mind, we open our Bibles and lo, there's plenty of supporting evidence! The Bible is full of it: there is a link between what we do and what we get! Ps 18:20: "The Lord rewarded me according to my righteousness; According to the cleanness of my hands He has recompensed me." David is righteous, David makes sure His hands are clean, and God rewards him. Prov 13:13: "He who despises the word will be destroyed, But he who fears the commandment will be rewarded." Prov 25:21f: "If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; And if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; For so you will heap coals of fire on his head, And the Lord will reward you." You find the same link in Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount, Mt 5:11f. "Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you." The angel says the same in the Revelation shown to John on Patmos: "And behold, I am coming quickly, and My reward is with Me, to give to every one according to his work." I can give you so many more texts, but the point is clear: the Bible lays a clear link between our obedience to God and the reward we get. To our minds the conclusion is obvious: do what God wants, obey His commands, and He will bless you. Flip side: disobey God's commands, and He will withdraw any blessing, will curse. That is: your conduct determines God's thoughts toward you! What you do determines what you get. So the onus is on you to make sure that God has reason to be happy with you.... And that feeling deep inside, that our actions and contributions determine God's thoughts about us, speaks louder and louder so that we are sure that Yes, our works in some way influence God's thoughts about us. To say it in the words of Q 62: our good works form our righteousness before God, or at least a part of it....

In reply, there are two things we need to have straight in our minds. The first is this: what does God actually think of our deeds? The Lord is very clear about our sins and transgressions: He hates them. We understand that, and I don't have to spend time this afternoon drawing that out. But what does God think about our *obedient* deeds? We came to church this afternoon – surely, that pleases God, makes Him smile upon us? We strive to live as godly husbands and wives in our marriages, deny ourselves for the sake of the other. Surely, that impresses God? We give our contributions liberally, we spend time with Bible reading and Bible study: surely, that has a positive impact on God's thoughts about us?

The answer, beloved, is No. God is too holy, says Habakkuk, to look upon sin (1:13). And every thing we do is covered with sin. True, *our* sin-filled eyes may not see how much our best actions are still plagued with sin, but holy God sees it! The prophet Isaiah explains it this way: "we are all like an unclean thing, And all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags" (64:6). With the phrase "filthy rags" we are not to think of something that fell in the mud, but we're to think of garments stained by menstruation. As such bits of cloth are repulsive to us, so our *best works* are repulsive to God. If we come to Him with a bloody rag, will He reward us with His smile? That is Isaiah's point: "even our best works ... are all imperfect and defiled with sin" – as A 62 has it. So we need to do away with the thought that our efforts impress God, impact positively on God's thoughts about us. *They don't*.

There's a second element we need to bear in mind here. The Bible is clear on the fact that there is a link between our works and God's reward, between what we do and what we get. The question, though, is this: *just what is the nature of the link?* It's our second point:

2. The link between good works and reward.

From our experience in daily life, we automatically explain the link in terms of *what you deserve, what you earn*. After all, in our capitalist society you don't get anything for nothing. You want a reward; you have to *earn* it. You want money; you need to work. You want good marks on your exams; you have to study hard. There's a link between what you do and what you get, we all understand that, and the link is caught in the word 'earn'.

Yet exactly on that point, congregation, the Bible disagrees with us emphatically. Before God, the link between what

we do and what we get cannot be described with the word 'earn' simply because what we do is offensive to God; "all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags" before Him.

What, then, is the nature of that link? Jesus answers that question in the passage we read from Mt 19. The rich young ruler desired eternal life, and he knew from his Old Testament that there was a link between doing and getting. Hence his question: "Good Teacher, what good things shall I do that I may have eternal life?" Jesus didn't dispute the fact that there was a link. Instead, He told the young man to keep the commandments. And when the young man said that he'd kept these commandments since his childhood, Jesus urged him to sell what he had and give it to the poor. Then, said Jesus, "you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." In truth, there's a link between what you do and what you get.

But to give everything away in order to gain eternal life: that's so very hard. If fact, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.... Peter pursued this element of a link between what you do and what you get. Vs 27: "See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?" It's true, Peter's fishing boat lay idle. He was a married man (had a mother-in-law), but seems to have left his wife and children. James and John were fishermen too, but left their father's business to follow Jesus. Matthew ran a tax office, but he boarded it up to follow the Lord. Yes, they'd sacrificed..., and what would they receive in return? Says Jesus: "Assuredly I say to you, that in the regeneration, when the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory, you who have followed Me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel." You see, beloved: there's the reward for the twelve, a clear link between what they did (left all to follow the Lord) and what they'd receive. Then Jesus broadens His instruction to include also you and me. Vs 29: "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life." That's the promise for all God's own: leave your boat, leave your business, leave your bike, leave your family for the sake of God and His kingdom, and you will receive a rich reward in this life and the life to come....

But what, now, is *the nature of that link*? Is the hundredfold one receives in this life, and the eternity one receives in the life to come, the *wages* you *earn* on your sacrifice? That's the question Jesus answers in the parable that follows. You know the parable, of the landowner who went out early in the day to look for workers for his vineyard. He found some men and hired them for a denarius a day – which was the normal daily wage at the time. At nine o'clock he found more men, and again more at 12 and at 3 and at 5. At six o'clock he lined up his workers, from newest to oldest, to pay them out. And see: *each received one denarius*. Was that equitable? Was that their fair *earning*? We tend to agree with the workers of vs 11, and complain that there's something unfair about paying the workers who labored one hour the same amount as those who worked 12 hours. And again, from our capitalist point of view, it *is* unfair. But this is now Jesus' point: the link between what we do and what we get *cannot be described in terms of earnings*. Vs 15: "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with my own things? Or is your eye evil because I am good?" The Lord God is free to hand out His rewards as He wishes. If He wishes to give good things to unworthy sinners, does any sinner have the right to complain? This is God's *goodness*, this is God's *grace*. Here's the point: *the link between our works and God's reward is to be described in terms of grace, not in terms of earning*.

What, congregation, is the implication? This: *you do not have to do good works in order to earn God's reward!* That's true on two counts, true because your best works are repulsive to God and therefore cannot earn a thing, true also because the link God placed between what you do and what you get is not caught in words like 'earn'. So, brothers and sisters, *do not try to earn anything from God!* It is futile. Do not think in terms of there being something attractive in yourself, some little something that could catch God's eye favorably, that could win His favor. Such an attractive thing in yourself *simply does not exist*. I refer back to Lord's Day 23: "my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all God's commands, have never kept any of them, and am still inclined to all evil." That's me: depraved to the core of my being, and therefore repulsive to God. I may forget to pray last night, but prayer extra this morning is not going to regain God's approval. Even my best works, yes, even that extra praying this morning, are like stinking, bloodied rags to Him. I need to be *humble* before God, with no pretensions within myself that I can impress God.

That sort of self-awareness in turn compels me to cast myself fully on the Lord. Yes, there is a link between what I do and what I get, but that link is not caught in terms like 'earning'; it is caught in terms like 'mercy', 'grace'. Seek to impress God? Think in terms of God being happy with me because I prayed four times yesterday for 20 minutes each

time? Think in terms of God being happy with me because I gave my tithes so liberally? No, beloved, let me not stand beside the Pharisee in the temple and assume that my deeds have impressed God. Let me stand beside the tax collector, acknowledge my brokenness, and plead on God's mercy: "Father, have mercy on me a sinner!"

And yes, God *is* merciful! That was the material of Lord's Day 23: we are righteous before God despite all our sins, because God in mercy imputes to us, though we don't deserve it, the perfect satisfaction, righteousness and holiness of Christ. What have I to offer God? How shall I impress Him? (Micah 6). I can't! *And I don't need to!* I am righteous before God not *because* I do good works, but I am righteous before God *before* I do good works! That's a glorious gospel preciously because my good works are offensive to God, my good works earn me nothing! So I can get my eyes off myself, and fix them fully on the God who saves in mercy for Jesus' sake!

Now a new question arises. For if my works don't help a dot in winning God's favor, why shall I bother to do the right thing? If my going to church does not keep God happy with me, if my praying doesn't keep God happy with me, if my obeying God's commands does not make God happy with me, if my being sorry for sin and repenting doesn't keep God happy with me, why shall I bother going to church, praying, obeying, repenting? It's our last point:

3. *The inevitability of good works.*

Here I can be brief, for we shall talk more about it when we get to Lord's Day 33. The point is this: with our fall into sin we became totally corrupt, able only to do what is evil in the sight of the Lord. So, in the words of Lord's Day 23, "I have grievously sinned against all God's commandments, never kept any of them, and am still inclined to all evil." Yet God, in boundless mercy, has taken such sinners and washed away their sins in the blood of Jesus Christ. These persons, then, are righteous before Him, righteous without any merit of their own, righteous by God's grace alone.

But what happens now? Are these sinners-made-righteous still dead in sin, totally depraved? No, says the Scripture, No! These persons who are made righteous through Jesus' blood are also *changed through Jesus' Spirit*. The church in Corinth was made up of persons who once gave themselves to sins of adultery, drunkenness, theft, homosexuality, etc. But, as a result of the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, these members were *changed*. Says Paul of these former adulterers, drunkards, thieves, homosexuals: "such *were* some of you" (1 Cor 6:11). His point: those who are *justified* through the blood of Christ are *also sanctified through the Spirit of Christ*.

This change, this sanctification, cannot be hidden, cannot remain secret. Recall Jesus' words: "do men gather grapes from thorn bushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit" (Mt 7:16ff). Exactly because the Lord God has chosen particular unworthy sinners to righteous in Jesus Christ are these sinners *changed* so that they invariably bear good fruit. This is the point of Question & Answer 64: "it is impossible that those grafted into Christ by true faith should fail to bring forth fruits of thankfulness.

Need we do good works in order to impress God? Do we find encouragement for ourselves in the works we do, on the understanding that our works earn us God's approval? Let no one, beloved, let no one be so conceited as to think that his deeds will earn him anything with God! To trust that one's deeds will impress God is idolatry. So too: let no one, let no one seek through his works to win points with God! Such efforts are futile, idolatry in His holy eyes.

At the same time, let each of us *examine* ourselves. Good works are inevitable for those renewed by the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ. So then: is your life characterized by good works? Including sorrow for the sins you still commit against your will? Or do you find it OK to sin, aren't much bothered by sin, as long as you do an equal amount of good to compensate for the evil?

Let it be clear: salvation is from heaven alone. And so complete is God's saving work in Jesus Christ that His people on earth invariably do good works. So the Christian can be recognized by the marks of the Christian: "they believe in Jesus Christ the only Savior, flee from sin and pursue righteousness, love the true God and their neighbor without turning to the right or left, and crucify their flesh and its works. Although great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their life. They appeal constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of Jesus Christ, in whom they forgiveness of their sins through faith in Him" (*Belgic Confession*, Art 29). Amen.



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Sermon on Lord's Day 25 of the Heidelberg Catechism by Rev C Bouwman held on Sunday afternoon, 1 August 2004.

" THE HOLY SPIRIT ALONE WORKS FAITH ."

Text:

Lord's Day 25

65. Q. Since then faith alone makes us share in Christ and all His benefits, where does this faith come from?

A. From the Holy Spirit,[1] who works it in our hearts by the preaching of the gospel,[2] and strengthens it by the use of the sacraments.[3]

[1] John 3:5; I Cor. 2:10-14; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29. [2] Rom. 10:17; I Pet. 1:23-25. [3] Matt. 28:19, 20; I Cor. 10:16.

66. Q. What are the sacraments?

A. The sacraments are holy, visible signs and seals. They were instituted by God so that by their use He might the more fully declare and seal to us the promise of the gospel.[1] And this is the promise: that God graciously grants us forgiveness of sins and everlasting life because of the one sacrifice of Christ accomplished on the cross.[2]

[1] Gen. 17:11; Deut. 30:6; Rom. 4:11 [2] Matt. 26:27, 28; Acts 2:38; Heb. 10:10.

67. Q. Are both the Word and the sacraments then intended to focus our faith on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation?

A. Yes, indeed. The Holy Spirit teaches us in the gospel and assures us by the sacraments that our entire salvation rests on Christ's one sacrifice for us on the cross.[1]

[1] Rom. 6:3; I Cor. 11:26; Gal. 3:27.

68. Q. How many sacraments has Christ instituted in the new covenant?

A. Two: holy baptism and the holy supper.[1]

[1] Matt. 28:19, 20; I Cor. 11:23-26.

Scripture Reading:

Romans 10:9-17

Acts 16:11-15

Singing: *(Psalms and Hymns are from the "[Book of Praise](#)" Anglo Genevan Psalter)*

Psalms 19:1,2

Psalms 19:3,4

Psalms 84:1,5

Hymns 37:1,2

Hymns 36:4,5

Beloved Congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ!

A couple of Lord's Day's back, the Catechism had been most emphatic: to be righteous before God, to escape God's eternal wrath and be justified before the Creator of heaven and earth, one must have faith. That fact makes the question imperative: where does faith come from? That's the question addressed in our Lord's Day for this afternoon.

The answer is clear. Faith, says Lord's Day 25, comes from the Holy Spirit. That excludes any other source; faith does

not come from parents, does not come from ministers, does not come from church itself; faith comes from the Holy Spirit alone. So it is to the Holy Spirit that LD 25 draws our attention, to the Spirit and how He works faith in the hearts of sinners.

The Spirit: He's *in* today; to speak of the Spirit is fashionable. And the role of the Spirit in working faith, yes, that's acknowledged too. But the big question is: *how* does the Spirit work faith? The answer to that question depends on *who* the Spirit actually is – and on who we are.

I summarize the sermon with this theme:

THE HOLY SPIRIT ALONE WORKS FAITH.

1. Who is the Holy Spirit.
2. How does the Holy Spirit work faith.
3. What responsibilities follow.

1. Who is the Holy Spirit?

Faith comes from the Holy Spirit. That fact, I said, means that any other possible source of faith is ruled out; faith is not inherited from one's parents, does not come from the minister or from teachers. Faith comes from the Spirit alone, comes from nowhere else.

It raises a question: why does faith come from the Holy Spirit alone? Why can I not receive faith from, say, my parents?

The answer to that, brothers and sisters, older and younger, lies in what we people are. The Scriptures make clear that we are sinners, more, that we are spiritually dead. From experience we know that the dead do not do anything; dead is dead. So, a person spiritually dead is not able to work faith in himself. From experience we know too that no creature can resurrect anything dead from the dead; it is simply beyond our ability to give new life to any creature.

Yet of God we read that He can give new life. It pleased God in the beginning to utter a *decree* calling birds and bees, fish and trees into existence. He spoke, and there they were. It pleased Him too to fashion a man from the dust of the earth, and then to blow into his nostrils the breath of life, with as result that "man became a living being." In the course of the history of the world, the Lord has time and again given new life to the dead; there was the son of the widow of Zarephath, the son of the Shunamite couple, the raising of Lazarus, the boy who fell out the window after listening to Paul, and so many more examples. *The* example, of course, is Jesus Christ who arose from the dead after three days in the grave. In a word, God alone has the power to give life where there is no life. God alone has the power to raise from the dead. And that reality is not only comforting in the face of death; that reality is also instructive on the matter of where faith comes from. For faith implies a resurrection from spiritual death, and for that reason one is totally dependent on God alone for faith; He alone is the Giver of life.

Faith comes from God. Yet we can be more specific: faith comes from the Holy Spirit. It is specifically the work of the third Person of the Trinity to resurrect to life those dead sinners who are chosen by God to be His special possession.

The Holy Spirit. He, it is said, is the forgotten Person of the Holy Trinity. What God the Father does is well known; He created and now upholds the world, including us His children. Similarly, we know what the task of the Son is; Christ reconciles sinners to God. But what is the task of the Holy Spirit? What specifically does He do?

One could mention a number of activities of the Spirit, could mention too the one highlighted in our Lord's Day. He works faith in the hearts of sinners. That, however, is not the central task of the Holy Spirit. His central task is to draw attention to Jesus Christ; the Spirit is *Christ-centered*. By way of illustration, one can refer to the task of a floodlight placed in front of a building; the task of the floodlight is not to draw attention to itself, but rather to the building. So also the Spirit: never in the Bible does the Spirit draw attention to Himself; always He directs the attention of Bible readers to Jesus Christ. That task remains central for the Spirit even today; today too He directs the attention of people to Jesus Christ, today too He causes people to behold the Christ and appreciate the Christ for what He is.

That means this. It was God whom we offended in Paradise with our fall into sin, God whom we daily offend by our repeated transgressions. It is necessary, then, that we be reconciled to this God; if we are not reconciled to Him we shall suffer the consequences of His intense wrath - hell. Yet from LD 23 we know that there is only one way to be reconciled to God, and that is through Jesus Christ. There must, said that Lord's Day, be a mediator between us and God.

Yet it is not just that there must be a Mediator between us and God; one is also to *see* Christ as the Mediator He is. And that can be done only by faith; by faith alone can one see Jesus Christ as the Mediator, who reconciles men to God. But no person dead in sin can behold the Christ; to see Christ one must receive the gift of spiritual *vision*, the gift of faith. *And that is the task of the Spirit*. His central task is to draw the attention of people to Jesus Christ. To do that, He opens the eyes of the spiritually blind. In the words of LD 25: the Holy Spirit works faith.

So the situation is this: to be reconciled to God, one needs Jesus Christ; without Christ there is no salvation. But to believe in Jesus Christ, to appreciate Christ for the Savior He is, one needs the Holy Spirit. In other words, *there is no salvation without the Holy Spirit*. Take away the Holy Spirit, ignore the Holy Spirit, and salvation itself is lost.

That's why Lord's Day 25 is not at all flattering when it tells us where faith comes from. Without the work of the Holy Spirit one cannot be saved, and that is simply and only because we are ourselves dead in sin, are totally depraved. It is that *hopeless depravity within ourselves* that lies behind this LD.

The reality of that total depravity ought also to mean, beloved, that we do well to make a point of *listening humbly* to LD 25. We may find it disagreeable that we cannot work faith in ourselves, may also find it disagreeable that the Spirit works faith in one specific way. But we're not asked whether we find God's word about the work of the Holy Spirit agreeable to our depraved natures or not. What we are asked to do is humbly accept the fact that *there is no salvation without the Holy Spirit*, no salvation because we cannot see Christ unless the Spirit work faith in us. So we do well to listen humbly tonight and accept what the Lord tells us about the origin of faith. And its consequences.

That brings us to our second point: how does the Holy Spirit work faith.

2. How the Holy Spirit works faith.

All the world is God's handiwork, and so displays His glory. The rocks and trees, the birds and seas once did not exist; God spoke, and there they were – and so they all join in declaring the glory of God. So the Bible can also say that all men everywhere are responsible to acknowledge God: "what can be known about God is plain to [men], because God has shown it to them. Ever since the creation of the world His invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse" (Rom 1:19f).

But we are to recall, beloved, that what reconciles the sinner to God is not knowledge of God or faith in some Creator. The Scriptures are emphatic, and we echo it in LD 23: a sinner can be reconciled to God only by faith *in Jesus Christ*. And from what one sees in creation one cannot learn anything about Jesus Christ or about the cross of Calvary. Yes, the Holy Spirit works faith in Christ. But He does not do that by means of creation.

How does the Holy Spirit work the faith needed for salvation? It has pleased God, brothers and sisters, that the Holy Spirit moves *people* in such a way that they would speak the words of God to other people. So writes Peter: "no prophecy every came by the impulse of man, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God" (II Pet 1:21). And why was it that the Spirit caused men to speak to others the words of God? The reason for that was because the Spirit wished to direct the attention of the hearers to God and specifically to His saving work in Jesus Christ. He caused men of old to speak His words to others either so that these others would be forced to make up their minds about whether to believe in Jesus Christ or not, or to comfort and encourage those who already embraced the Savior in faith. In a word: the Spirit caused men to speak the words of God long ago in order that those addressed by their preaching might be moved to faith in Jesus Christ.

But it wasn't just that the Spirit caused men long ago to speak the words of God so that long ago faith might be worked. It is also so that He caused a written record of God's Word and works to be prepared and preserved. For we

all know that the spoken word changes in the process of being passed on from mouth to mouth. So, in order to give stability, in order to preserve a true record of what men had to hear in any given generation, the Spirit used human writers as Moses, David, and Jeremiah, to put on paper what God said to Israel 3000 years ago. Similarly, what Jesus Christ said in the course of His earthly sojourn the Spirit recorded by the hand of evangelists as Matthew. For the sake of the church of all ages, the Spirit caused Paul to think through the implications of Christ's sacrifice and then write a letter to the Romans, a letter preserved for the church till today. In the words of the *Belgic Confession*: "God commanded His servants, the prophets and apostles, to commit His revealed Word to writing" (Art 3). The reason? It was –continues the *Belgic Confession*- because of "His special care for us and our salvation." The Spirit caused the Word of God to be written and to be preserved so that God's people may have that Word, and so have their attention directed to Jesus Christ.

Yet it is not so that it is simply through having and reading the Bible that the Spirit is pleased to work faith. For the Bible is given to the church (cf I Tim 3:15). And to the church the Lord has given gifts. "His gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers" (Eph 4). What was the task of these apostles and prophets and evangelists and pastors and teachers? Their task was to teach, to preach. For the Spirit is pleased to work faith *specifically through the preaching*. That's what Paul writes to the Romans: "faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ" (10:17). In the words of the Cat: the Holy Spirit works faith in our hearts "by the preaching of the gospel."

The truth that the Holy Spirit works faith through the preaching is abundantly illustrated by what we read about the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts. On Pentecost day He was poured out, but did not work faith in the hearts of any just like that; no, the Spirit moved Peter to preach. And once Peter began to preach, *then things happened*. For what was the result of his preaching? "When they heard this they were cut to the heart." And further: "those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about 3000 souls" (Acts 2:37ff). That faith is worked through the preaching is pointed up further by the example of Lydia. Paul and Luke came to Philippi and there spoke to certain women. Then we read this: "one who heard us was a woman named Lydia.... The Lord opened her heart to give heed to what was said by Paul" (Act 16:13f). It is that same truth –the Spirit works faith through the preaching- that prompted Peter to write to the Christians of the Dispersion: "You have been born anew ... through the living and abiding word of God," a word that was "preached to you" (I Pet 1:23ff).

So it is, beloved, that the Spirit has been pleased to bind Himself to *one particular means* for working faith. Just as the Lord is pleased to keep our bodies alive day by day *by means of* physical food (God gives us bread, drink, etc), so God is pleased to use a specific means to work and strengthen faith. That means is the preaching of the gospel (cf C of D, III/IV.17). God does not plant faith in the heart just like that, does not cause one to believe in Christ in some mysterious, hocus-pocus, fashion; no, God the Holy Spirit is sovereignly pleased to work faith, and repeatedly strengthen that faith, *by the preaching of the Gospel*.

And it's not just the audible preaching God is pleased to use. Our LD makes reference also to sacraments. And what are sacraments? Sacraments are simply pictures that illustrate the content of the spoken word. So, the content of the sacraments is identical to the contents of the preaching; both draw attention to Jesus Christ. The audible preaching as it comes to us Sunday by Sunday from the pulpit shows us Jesus Christ, shows us how He shed His blood to pay for the sins of many; the visible preaching in the sacraments spells out the same thing. From time to time we witness the sacrament of baptism; in the sight of all water was poured over the infants head, in order to make clear to all of us that sins are washed away by the blood of Christ in the same way as dirt is washed away by water: baptism is preaching. From time to time we witness the sacrament of Lord's Supper; the bread is broken and given to each individual in order to illustrate how Christ's body is broken for each: Lord's Supper is preaching. LD 25: "both the Word and the sacraments are intended to focus our faith on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the only ground of our salvation; the content of the spoken and of the visible preaching is identical. And the purpose of both is the same too; both the audible preaching and the visible preaching are spiritual food needed to nurture and sustain a life of faith in Jesus Christ, a life that looks to Christ for reconciliation with God.

We come to our last point:

3. What responsibilities follow.

We understand that certain implications necessarily follow from this truth – third point. In our day of visual entertainment, the sermon is considered to be the duller part of the worship service – and one hears sounds arguing that churches should move to more modern means of communication to bring across the gospel.

Throughout the ages, Biblically faithful churches have been characterized by their heavy emphasis on preaching, characterized even by the fact that the pulpit is the central attraction in the church building. And why is this so? This is so simply and only because Scriptures tell us that it pleases the Lord to work and strengthen faith specifically through the preaching. Remove the emphasis in church from the preaching, and you've weakened *the* means used by the Spirit to work faith in those chosen to life. The preaching is not just "one of those things"; the preaching is very much a "spiritual event" (Wells, 60), an event in which the Holy Spirit is at work. In the preaching, it pleases the Spirit to take hold of certain men, and use their tongues to re-speak to the congregations in 2004 the words of God given originally some 20 centuries ago and more. In the preaching of the word, it is the Holy Spirit who is very much at work. That fact implies that we cannot make light of the preaching; the preaching is the means used by the Spirit to open the kingdom of heaven.

So: would you wish to be saved? LD 23 says you can be justified before God only by faith in Jesus Christ. LD 25 adds that faith is worked by the Holy Spirit alone, and the means the Spirit is pleased to use is the preaching, a preaching that's heard in church. You would wish to be saved? According to LD 25, *it is to church that you must come*, to church, for outside of it there is no salvation; it is in church that salvation is available (cf *Belgic Confession*, Art 28).

The preaching of the gospel in church is at bottom, then, a *miracle*. In the words of Calvin: God is pleased to make His voice heard through the stammering tongue of the preacher. Or as Luther said it: God lives in the preacher's mouth (Wells, 61). That is a marvel indeed; God takes men, sinners, mortals, and is pleased to use men who have their own strengths and weaknesses to re-speak in today's setting the words He recorded so long ago (cf pg 60).

Yes, it's a marvel. And because God is pleased to use men to bring His Word to His people today is it the responsibility of preachers to study that Scripture well, and apply that Scripture in an urgent, decisive and contemporary manner. Because of the nature of the preaching may the preacher never cease studying the Word of God, and never become out of touch with the society in which both he and his hearers live.

But the fact that the Spirit is pleased to work and strengthen faith through the preaching means also that the congregation is to make a point of *being in church*. That's where salvation is available; very well, then it is the obligation of one and all to join the church, join it not just in the sense that one's name is included in the membership register, but also in the sense that one faithfully attend and so make use of the means the Spirit is pleased to use. To miss out on church, to absent oneself without a reason justifiable before God, is acting in a fashion inconsistent with LD 25. Because of what the Spirit is pleased to do in church, it is for every one to be here as often as is humanly possible.

Yet it's not just being physically present in church that is required in LD 25. The Spirit does not pour faith into those who sit in church; He works faith in those who soak in the preaching, who digest it, work with it. That implies that in church one is to be awake, is to be alert. Which in turn means that we do well to get ourselves a good night's rest before the Sunday; that's common sense.

Given that it is through the preaching that the Holy Spirit is pleased to speak to those who are to be saved, it follows that it ought not to be of great importance to the congregation who the preacher is. It is true that the one preacher is easier to listen to than another. But if it pleases the Spirit to take one particular preacher and place that preacher on some pulpit for any given Sunday, it is for the congregation not to respond with: "It's only him", or "him again"; it is for the congregation to accept the person whom the Lord directs to the congregation for their instruction and edification. As Paul writes to the Romans: "how beautiful are the feet of those who preach good news" (10:15). We do well to be careful that we do not become too critical of those whom God sends to us to preach His Word of salvation. And if it be that a given preacher is difficult to listen to, it is for us to work all the harder in church; the Spirit speaks through the mouth of sinful, finite men. Let us beware that we do not become lazy, expecting the Word of salvation and the strength that comes from it to be poured into us with no effort on our part. After all, it is quite possible to starve oneself spiritually,

Another consequence flows out of LD 25. If it is true that one can be saved by faith in Jesus Christ alone, and if it is also true that faith comes only from the Holy Spirit who in turn is pleased to work it through the preaching of the gospel, then the consequence surely follows that there must be preachers of the gospel. We know that today there is a shortage of preachers, in our own bond as well as overseas. Preachers are needed, today and in the future, and so it becomes a matter of consistency with the truth of LD 25 that we look around in our midst for young men who have the gifts needed to be preachers of the gospel, and then encourage these brothers to prepare themselves for the ministry.

Similarly, there are in this world countless thousands who do not know Christ, who have never heard of Christ. They shall not come to faith either unless the gospel be preached to them. That's why missionaries are so necessary, why we in Australia ought to do all we can to send out more missionaries. For God, we'll not forget, desires all men to be saved.

There is but one way to be saved, and that is by faith in Jesus Christ. We know now where faith comes from: the Holy Spirit works it by means of the preaching. So what do we do? We make a point of submitting to the means the Spirit is pleased to do. More, we do our utmost to ensure that the Gospel be preached to those who don't know Christ. Amen.
