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Volume 8

John - Romans

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Contents

[7]	John	3
	1. A Disciple's Eyewitness Testimony	3
	2. The Old Testament Background of John's "Gospel"	4
	3. The Uniqueness of John's "Gospel"	5
	4. What Does John Mean by "the World"?	7
	5. John's Prologue	8
	6. What is Truth?.....	9
	7. Early Responses to Jesus (1:19-2:12)	9
	8. Cleansing and New Life (2:13 3:21)	10
	9. Preaching to Jews and Samaritans (3:22-5:47)	11
	10. Revelation through Sacramental Symbols (6:1-71)	12
	11. Jesus Teaches in Jerusalem (7:1-10:42).....	13
	12. Five Signals That Easter Is Near (11:1-12:50).....	15
	13. Saying Farewell in Deed, Word and Prayer (13:1-17:26)	15
	14. The Elevation and Glorification of Jesus (18:1-21:25).....	16
[42]	Acts	18
	1. A Book about Jesus.....	18
	2. A Chronicle of the Way Chosen by the New Israel	19
	3. Pentecost and the Appeal to the Covenant People.....	20
	4. Christian Communism?.....	23
	5. Seeds Scattered Far and Wide (8:1 12:25)	24
	6. First the Jew and Then the Greek (13:1-14:28).....	26
	7. No Needless Burdens for Gentile Christians (15:1-35)	28
	8. Carrying the Gospel to the Greek Cities (15:36-19:41).....	29
	9. From Pentecost to Pentecost (20:1-21:16)	32
	10. The Gospel under Fire (21:17-26:32)	32
	11. Paul Preaches Openly and Unhindered (27:1-28:31)	34
[81]	Romans	36
	1. Arming the Church in Rome for the Struggle	36
	2. The Lord Our Righteousness (1:1 17).....	37
	3. Neither Gentile Nor Jew Righteous before God (1:18-3:20).....	38
	4. The Gospel of Forgiveness in the Old Testament (3:21-5:21)	38
	5. Life Renewed by Grace (6:1-8:8).....	39
	6. Living by the Spirit (8:9-39)	40
	^[93] 7. God Remembers His Promises and Threats (9:1-11:36).....	41
	8. Transformation Rooted in Salvation (12:1-13:14).....	42
	9. Weak and Strong United in Service and Love (14:1-16:27).....	43
[103]	Index	46

[7] John

1. A Disciple's Eyewitness Testimony

The disciple Jesus loved. Anyone who reads the fourth gospel carefully can see for himself that it was written by a Palestinian Jew who was an apostle and an eyewitness of the events he describes. The inescapable conclusion is that the author must be John. The writer appears to be very familiar with Palestine (4:6, 11, 20, 35), for he gives us some surprising details, for example, in connection with time (1:39) and distances (6:19; 21:8). Such details could only have come from an eyewitness.

In 21:20 the author refers to himself as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." Now, Jesus was especially close to three disciples—Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, i.e. James and John. Peter could not be the disciple referred to in 21:20, for he is clearly distinguished from him in this verse: Peter points to the disciple in question and asks Jesus about him. Thus it must be James or John. Now, James had died in the year 44, as a victim of Jewish hatred. Thus the eyewitness and writer had to be John, the other "son of thunder" (literally: noisemaker).

[8] In the other three "gospels," we find occasional references to John as one of the disciples. In the fourth "gospel," however, his name is never mentioned. Wherever there is a reference to "John," John the Baptist is meant—although he is not called "the Baptist." The author of the fourth "gospel" simply hides behind the description "the disciple whom Jesus loved."

When he refers to himself in these words, it is not because he wants to exalt himself but because the story *requires* some sort of reference to him. We read about this mysterious apostle at the Passover supper, which was Jesus' last supper with His disciples: "The disciple Jesus loved was reclining next to Jesus" (13:23 JB), so that he could converse with Him easily and quietly. This disciple was also at the foot of the cross (19:26) and followed Jesus after the resurrection (21:20). Furthermore, we may take it that he was the disciple who was with Peter in the yard of the high priest (18:15ff) and accompanied Peter to the grave of Jesus on the first Easter morning (20:3ff).

In the context of such testimony, the apostle could not avoid referring to himself. For the rest, John speaks of himself with the greatest reserve. Because of the nature of the testimony he presented, it was important to let the reader know that he was an *apostle* and an *eyewitness*. The author of the fourth "gospel" could well have joined his namesake John the Baptist in saying, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (3:30).

The cup of suffering. According to an old ecclesiastical tradition, John wrote his "gospel" in Ephesus, where he is alleged to have lived at the end of the first century. There is another tradition to the effect that the author of the book is not the apostle John but another John, known as *John the Elder*.

One argument advanced in favor of the latter view is that Jesus prophesied that the apostle John and his brother [9] James would undergo His baptism and drink His cup. According to the proponents of this view, this means that both were destined to die as martyrs. Hence John, like James, must have died relatively early (see Matt. 20:20ff; Acts 12:2).

As we consider this argument, we should take note of something John says elsewhere: in Jesus he shared in the *tribulation* and *kingdom* and *patient endurance* (Rev. 1:9). This is a beautiful text: the exile on Patmos goes back to Jesus' own words here. John is eager to sit on the throne next to Jesus in the coming Kingdom (Rev. 3:21; 5:10; 20:6; 22:5), but he must first drink from the cup of suffering and be baptized with Jesus, to complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions (Col. 1:24; Rev. 1:9).

The point to remember here is that a Christian does not only drink from the cup of suffering when he pays for his faith with his life. We must not elevate martyrdom to a status that makes us lose sight of the many different forms of crossbearing that result

from following the Lamb.

John 21:11, which gave some people the idea that John was immortal and even led to the later legend that he was still breathing in his grave, does not exclude the possibility of *suffering*. John had to live longer than his brother James and longer than Peter—for the sake of his task in the church and his task as a writer. He was to be the outlet of the thundering Voice of the Word (Revelation).

2. The Old Testament Background of John's "Gospel"

The "evolution" of the gospel. The theory of evolution has all sorts of interesting uses, for it is a dogma that can be applied to almost anything, including the Bible. The foundation of this dogma is the view that there is always a ^[10] development going on, a development headed upwards. According to the evolutionary conception, Israel's religion grew out of a very primitive form of religion. At the outset there was no new knowledge of God. The New Testament, in turn, presents many more stages of development; it shows us people striving for a "higher" religion.

The fourth book of the New Testament is then accorded the honor of serving as an example of a higher level of development. John's "gospel," according to such scholars, stands head and shoulders above the other three and is much more "spiritual" than the letters of Paul. John is presented as a highly "modern" writer; he comes last, surveys everything, and strips away the *Jewish* dress in which the gospel had previously been clothed, wrapping it instead in a *Hellenistic* and *mystical* garment much better suited to it. That's why this "gospel" is so different, so much more elevated and beautiful and satisfying than the other books of the Bible, which are more earthy, less serene, less elevated, less intense.

There is *evolution* at work here, we are told: the fourth "gospel" is a much later book. It is a book that will appeal to the people of India, for it speaks to them in their own language. This "gospel" with its mystical trappings and flavor will not offend them. The elements in the other "gospels" that would definitely offend them are absent in John.

John, we are assured, speaks a language akin to the language of our own existentialist era. He "demythologizes" the gospel, taking out the offensive myths and confronting his readers with higher realities that are really the central issue. In the final analysis, John's message is indistinguishable from that of the other great religions; they all point to one and the same *higher* religion!

The reason I take up this approach here is that you may well run into the evolutionist outlook on Scripture yourself in something you read or in someone you talk to. It is used ^[11] by a great many interpreters of the Bible, with the result that numerous students of the Bible fall under its spell bit by bit. The fourth "gospel," we are told, is so strange, so "different"!

Arguments against the "evolutionist" approach. We may not stick our heads in the sand in the face of this outlook on the Gospel according to John. Here, as

elsewhere, we must be on guard against the evolutionist dogma. Therefore I must ask you to keep the following five points in mind.

- (1) It is far from certain that John wrote near the end of the first century. It's likely that he wrote his account of the gospel much earlier. He may even have made some notes during the time that Jesus was still on earth. The material he offers his readers provides a very vivid picture of what was going on. (Think, for example, of the disputes recorded in chapters 6-9.) His account of Jesus' doings is simply not the sort of thing that one could write 60 years later. After all, the Bible was not inspired by the Holy Spirit through any mechanical or automatic process.
- (2) The argument that John was not concerned with history but threw his material together rather carelessly because he was really interested in *ideas* must be rejected radically. It is not true that when John became an old man, he took up a position

above the historical process. The fact of the matter is that *redemptive history* is the foundation for his presentation of the words of the Lord.

- (3) Nor is it true that John broke with everything Jewish. He does refer to his countrymen as "the Jews," but Paul did the same thing (I Thess. 2:14-15). What John opposes so strongly is the *apostate church*. Yet, this does not mean that he denies God's covenantal way of dealing with His people.

[12] Because of the Qumran discoveries, a number of scholars who once branded the fourth "gospel" as a philosophical—and even mystical—Greek gospel have been forced to change their position somewhat. There are Qumran scrolls that contain terms and expressions that look very much as though they came from the Gospel according to John. The ground under the thesis that the fourth "gospel" is a "modernized" gospel adapted to Greek thinking has always been shifting sand. Now this has finally become apparent to virtually all scholars.

- (4) John's entire "gospel" is anchored in the Old Testament and cannot be understood apart from it. Unfortunately, many believers have been misled by John's use of such words as *truth, life, light, and Word*; they go wrong because they fail to bear the Old Testament in mind as they ponder the meaning of these words. An example of this tendency to lose our exegetical moorings is the talk of Christ as the "true vine," a phrase found in various English translations of the Bible—as though a certain vine in your garden might turn out to be a mere illusion. Christ's point is that He is the genuine vine that does not die but brings forth fruit (see Is. 5:1ff). Hence we could better translate this phrase as "real vine," as the New English Bible and Today's English Version do.

- (5) Andrew addresses Jesus by His *Jewish* title of *Messiah* (1:41), and Nathanael calls Him the *King of Israel* (vs. 49). This is the portrait of Jesus that John wishes to draw in his book. Jesus is the Christ of the Scriptures (1:45; 5:46; 12:37ff; 13:18; 19:28). John, like Pascal, points to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—not to the God of the philosophers and scholars. The God of the patriarchs is also the God of Jesus Christ.

Jesus was not a rabbi teaching a universal human religion. What He taught was the Word we also find in the Old Testament, a Word with a definite Jewish flavor. Although there is something to be said for characterizing [13] John as an eagle, he does not take wing and soar high above the one covenant and the one church of the Lord. He does not preach a gospel of existential choice but calls us to believe. Nor does he proclaim a mystical universal atonement; he testifies that deliverance is only through God's Son.

3. The Uniqueness of John's "Gospel"

Fostering faith in Christ. John does not hide his purpose in writing. Out of the mass of material available, he chose certain events and sayings. These he wrote down—or had a secretary write them down in Greek—so that "you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (20:31). He wants his readers to be fully convinced, then, that Jesus is *the Christ*, the Messiah, the Son of God. Thus he wants to arm his readers against attacks from the side of the synagogue, from those who deny Jesus these titles. The first readers probably included Jews as well as "God-fearing" Gentiles who moved in Jewish circles.

In keeping with his purpose in writing, namely, to strengthen faith in Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God, John chose his material carefully. Therefore he recorded many confessions about Jesus: Andrew (1:40-1), Nathanael (vs. 49), John the Baptist (vs. 27ff), the Samaritan woman and the Samaritans (4:28-9, 42), Peter (6:69), the man born blind whom Jesus healed (9:38), Martha (11:27), and Thomas (20:28). "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (vs. 29).

To foster faith in Christ, the Son of God, John also recorded seven miracles as signs pointing to Jesus' identity: changing water into wine (2:1ff), healing the official's son

[14] (4:46ff), healing the lame man on the sabbath (5:1ff), Feeding the five thousand (6:1ff), walking on the water (6:16ff), healing the man born blind (9:1ff), and awakening Lazarus from the dead (11:43-4).

Sermons and debates. The miracle performed as a sign is often misunderstood and becomes the occasion for a discussion of an address by Jesus. Thus John gives us a number of Jesus' sermons and debates. This is what makes his book so unique. These addresses and disputes deal with the *rejection* of Jesus by the Jews, among other things. They show us how Jesus responded to the growing opposition.

After 12:1 we also find addresses given only to the disciples, as part of Jesus' preparation for His departure. Jesus was training them for their task after His ascension into heaven. Thus this section of John focuses heavily on equipping the apostles for the battles ahead. Christ, as their Advocate (Paraclete) promised to send them another, a second Advocate, to assist them in the great (legal) battle that the church would have to fight.

John's chronology. It is significant that John includes a number of dates in his narrative and that he repeatedly specifies the time of year by referring to the Jewish calendar of feasts. When he speaks of "a feast" in 5:1—the text should really read "*the* feast"—he probably means the final feast of the year, i.e. the Feast of Tabernacles.

If we look at all the temporal references together, we get the following chronological structure. In Year I of Jesus' ministry, the time of the Passover is dealt with in 2:13-3:21. There appears to be a reference to the Feast of Tabernacles covering 5:1-46. In Year II, the time of the Passover is covered in 6:4-71. The Feast of Tabernacles is the temporal setting for 7:1-10:21. The Feast of Temple Dedication begins at 10:22. Finally, in Year III, we again [15] have the Passover, starting at 12:1.

The Lamb of God. We find the Passover at the beginning, at the end, and in between. Look once more at the beginning. Twice John the Baptist refers to Jesus by a name also found in the book of Revelation, i.e. *Lamb of God* (1:29, 36). Does the use of this name have something to do with the fact that the Passover feast of three successive years is mentioned by John in his "gospel"?

Here we see again that John composed his book carefully. We also see what a rich message it contains. John writes about the Messiah and Son of God as the *Lamb of God!* (see Rev. 5:6ff). His "gospel" is not a different gospel; it is the old gospel, the same gospel.

To present his material in an appealing way, John brings to the fore the temporal framework within which Jesus was working—by referring to the feast to indicate what time of year it was. This would show the Jews who came into contact with the gospel that the Savior not only had to oppose the synagogue and the temple but also fulfilled the Passover in His work—by becoming the slaughtered Lamb. This Savior has inaugurated the final feast, the new age's Feast of Tabernacles. (Think of Revelation 7:9, with its white robes and palm branches, and Zechariah 14:16ff.)

In harmony with the synoptic "gospels" While the three synoptic "gospels" present us with sayings of Jesus and only later sketch His journey to Jerusalem, John gives us an account of Jesus' deeds and words in the context of regular contact with the holy city and the major feasts. John's purpose in writing is to awaken faith in Jesus as the *Son of God*. That's why he includes so many of the Lord's revelations about Himself as the Son.

Moreover, we must bear in mind that our Lord speaks through John in his book just as though John were a stenographer recording what He said. John seemed to have [16] a special antenna for receiving Jesus' words: the beloved disciple reproduced them very accurately in his testimony. It's almost as though the style of the Lord Jesus became John's own style.

From a few examples we can easily see that the Jesus who speaks in John's book is the same Jesus we encountered earlier in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

John

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God (3:3).

He who does not honor the one who does not honor the Father who sent him (5:23). He who rejects me and does not receive my sayings has a judge (12:48). He who hates me hates my Father also (15:23).

He who receives any one whom I send receives me; and he who receives me receives him who sent me (13:20).

Synoptic "Gospels"

Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:3).

Whoever denies me before men, I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven (Matt. 10:33). He who rejects me rejects him who sent me (Luke 10:16).

He who receives you receives me, and he who receives me receives him who sent me (Matt. 10:40).

4. What Does John Mean by "the World"?

Not a geographical entity. We live in a global age, an age in which our interest and attention spans the entire world. We think in terms of continents and even speak of interplanetary travel. When we read about "the world" in John's "gospel," therefore we are inclined to think of "this earth"—a geographical entity.

[17] As we take up the question what John means when he speaks of "the world," we should ponder the meaning of a certain Hebrew word for *world* used among the Jews, i.e. *olam*. This Hebrew word means *world in the sense of age*. Thus, when John speaks of "this world," part of what he means is "this age."

This "world" or "kosmos" was created by God. But sin caused a great upheaval. As a result, Satan has become the "ruler of this world" (12:31; 14:30; 16:11). He has established himself especially in the Jewish nation, which has thereby become "this world."

Note how John uses the word *world* in key passages. "*The world* was made through him, yet *the world* knew him not" (1:10). Speaking to His disciples, Jesus said: "If *the world* hates you, you know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were *of the world*, *the world* would love its own; but because you are not *of the world*, but I chose you *out of the world*, therefore *the world* hates you. They **will put you out of the synagogues**" (15:18-19; 16:2). In His prayer for His disciples, Jesus said: "I have given them thy word; and *the world* has hated them because they are not *of the world*, even as I am not *of the world*" (17:14).

The covenant people. From these texts it is clear that when Jesus speaks of "the world," he does not mean the earth or humanity in general, for the disciples restricted their preaching to Palestine long after Pentecost, coming into contact with their own people only. When He said He had been chosen "out of the world," He meant *out of the Jewish people*. The disciples, like their Lord, came into conflict with *the Jews*. In John's "gospel," then, the term *world* points in the direction of the (Jewish) covenant people!

You must keep this special use of the word *world* in mind, or you may well fail to see the significance of the [18] famous words of John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." This text receives a deepened meaning when we apply the term *world* to the *apostate covenant people*, to whom the exalted Son of man had been sent.

Life in the new age. The "eternal life" Jesus speaks of in this famous text is not an endless existence but the life of the coming era, the Messianic age. The "world" cannot receive the Spirit of truth (14:17). Therefore, despite all the declarations of enmity and hostility, it is a conquered world, a world overcome by Christ (16:33). Anyone from "the world" who believes in Jesus Christ ;hares in the joy of the life of the new age and has

passed from death to life (5:24). And this, after all, is the purpose of John's book—that people believe and so receive life, the genuine, full, rich life bestowed in the name of the Messiah (20:31). The "world" and the "life of the Messianic age" form a sharp contrast for John.

5. John's Prologue

Another beginning. The Bible opens with the words "In the beginning." Matthew's account of the gospel starts with the *genesis* of Jesus Christ. Mark speaks at the outset of the "*beginning* of the gospel of Jesus Christ." Luke talks of those "who from the *beginning* were eyewitnesses." In Acts Luke says that he wrote his first book about what "Jesus *began* to do and teach." John opens his book by picking up the same theme: "In the *beginning*.... "

We should not let the remarkable style in which this prologue was written escape our attention. There is a fair ^[19] amount of repetition, but new ideas are also introduced sentence by sentence. John's thoughts are developed in spiral fashion.

A poetic passage. As in some of the poetry of the Old Testament, we find sentences arranged in pairs, with the second filling out and echoing the first. In the Jerusalem Bible, John's prologue is printed in verse form. If the second line in each pair is indented, the parallel with the Old Testament style quickly becomes apparent:

In the beginning was the Word:
the Word was with God
and the Word was God.
He was with God in the beginning.
Through him all things came to be,
not one thing had its being but through him.
All that came to be had life in him
and that life was the light of men,
a light that shines in the dark,
a light that darkness could not overpower.

This remarkable style, in which thoughts are linked together neatly, reminds us not only of some of the Psalms but also of the letters of John. We find this style in the sayings of Jesus as well, which should not surprise us. After all, wasn't John the beloved disciple?

Creation and re-creation. Also remarkable is the content of this prologue. The "Word" (*logos*) mentioned by John at the beginning has been identified with all sorts of foreign theories and doctrines, on the assumption that John freely made use of Greek concepts and filled them with a "Christian" content. But if the first three words of his prologue already refer to Genesis, don't you think the rest of it might also have something to do with Genesis, ^[20] where we read that God said, "Let there be light"? "*You spoke and they were made,*" declared Augustine. "In your word alone you created them."

The re-creation is just like the creation. Again darkness covers the earth. But God speaks through His Son, and once more there is light and life, just as on the morning of creation (see II Cor. 4:6). Jesus Christ is *the Word*.

This is the theme that dominates the rest of John's book. That's why we find so many addresses recorded in it. Jesus is portrayed as the *speaker of the Word*. The shining glory and life-giving power of the Word become visible in signs.

The narrative is governed by the tension of one basic question: Do you believe in the Word that became flesh in Jesus and brought everything to completion, as at the time of creation? (17:4; 19:30; Gen. 2:1). The Word is the beginning but also the culmination, the Alpha and also the Omega, the First and also the Last (Is. 44:2, 6; 48:12; Rev. 1:17; 2:8; 22:13). Try reading the rest of the book of John from this perspective!

6. What is Truth?

A fulfillment of the Old Testament. At the end of John's prologue we read: "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (1:17). Here the question of "truth" is raised. What does John mean by *truth*?

In this prologue, as in the Old Testament, truth is God's covenant faithfulness, which has come to light in Jesus, the Messiah. We should not read 1:17 as positing an *opposition* between Moses and Christ, which is exactly how it is read by those who like to emphasize the difference between the Old and New Testaments. Instead we should [21] regard the law of Moses as the shadow and foundation of the salvation to come. The provisions about the Passover lamb give us an example. The fulfillment of the types came through Jesus Christ; this is what John means when he says that grace and *truth* came through Christ. Thus "truth" is the redemptive historical *realization* of the Old Testament blueprint in Jesus Christ.

When we read in 4:24 that "God is Spirit, and those who worship him must worship in Spirit and truth," we are not to assume that John was criticizing Old Testament worship. He does not mean that the worship forms of the Old Testament are low and earthy, while the New Testament preaches a "spiritual" worship not bound to forms. All John means to say is that the new worship brought by Christ proceeds from the fulfillment of what was foreshadowed in the Old Testament. The Holy Spirit is the "Spirit of truth" (14:17), the one who showed the apostles the path that leads to the whole truth (16:13), that is, the complete realization of the plan made long ago.

No temple needed. In the discussions between the Jews and the Samaritans regarding the lawfulness of the temple in Jerusalem, the Jews were right, for "salvation is from the Jews" (4:22). By fulfilling the Old Testament types, Christ rendered the rivalry between the temples at Jerusalem and Shechem superfluous. Now that the "truth" has come in the person of Jesus Christ, there is no longer a task for the temple in Jerusalem. There is something greater than the temple here.

The "truth" that came in Christ Jesus, therefore, is not a higher supratemporal reality leaving room for an inward worship only but a fulfillment of the prefigurations. The Belgic Confession rightly points out in Article 25 that "the ceremonies and symbols of the law ceased at the coming of Christ... yet the *truth and substance* of them remain with us in Jesus Christ" (italics mine).

[22] Through the Spirit of truth, Jesus led the apostles to the truth and fulfillment of all the promises (16:13). Thus we wed not pray that God will guide us into all truth. Through their preaching, the apostles have handed on their testimony about the realization of all the Old Testament types; the New Testament has been fashioned out of this preaching and testimony. What we must pray for instead is that we will be able to understand this "truth."

*We saw his glory, the glory that is his
as the only Son of the Father
(1:14 JB).*

7. Early Responses to Jesus (1:19-2:12)

Early testimony about Jesus. John, the author of the fourth "gospel," was a former disciple of John the Baptist, therefore he emphasizes the testimony of his original teacher, showing that John the Baptist's disciples had no right to stay on the sidelines and merely watch the battle waged by the church. No, John the Baptist himself had testified about Jesus (1:15, 23ff, 36; 3:27-36). He had clearly indicated that he was only the forerunner and that Jesus was the *Lord*, the *Lamb of God*, the *Bridegroom*.

Thus the disciples who followed Jesus were familiar with the teachings of John the Baptist. When the apostle John later received his revelation on the island of Patmos, the titles of Jesus revealed to him were familiar: the *Lord* with feet of burnished bronze, the *Lamb*, and the *Bridegroom* (Rev. 1:15; 5:6; 19:7).

The teaching of John the Baptist was *confirmed* rather than superseded by the revelation of Jesus. John testified that Jesus was the Son of God (1:34). Because he had seen [23] the Spirit descend and had heard the voice from heaven, he could speak on the basis of experience.

When the author of the fourth "gospel" repeatedly emphasized that Jesus was the Son of God, he was proclaiming what he had been told by his original teacher at the Jordan. The followers of John the Baptist had no right to put John on the same level as Jesus.

In addition to the testimony of John the Baptist, we have the testimony of the first disciples to follow Jesus, including the apostle John. Jesus was recognized as the Messiah, indeed, as the Son of God.

A limited conception of the Messiah. Does the picture of John the Baptist as a convinced believer in Jesus and of the first disciples as believers as well agree with the realities as sketched in the other "gospels"? Earlier we saw that John the Baptist had some doubts about Jesus when he was in prison (Matt. 11). Moreover, it was not until almost the end of Jesus' ministry that the disciples first confessed Him as the Messiah. Even then they still thought of Him in earthly, nationalistic terms. Did John perhaps tamper with the story when he looked back over it from a standpoint much later in history, a standpoint governed by his awareness of how things actually turned out?

Matthew did not record John the Baptist's doubts only: he also writes that John realized that *he* was much more in need of baptism than Jesus. This recognition on John's part was ultimately a confession that Jesus was the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, forgiving the sin of the apostate covenant people (1:29). John's statement that he was unworthy to even undo the strap of Jesus' sandal is to be found in Luke 3:16 as well as in John 1:26-7. Thus the other gospel writers also record John the Baptist's testimony about Jesus.

[24] *John's own testimony.* What about John? His account of the gospel is the one that tells us that the disciples, despite their recognition of Jesus (6:68-9), were full of mistaken notions. Their confusion is clear from the questions they asked when it came time to part with Jesus (13:36; 14:5, 8, 23).

John does not idealize the disciples by remaining silent about Judas's betrayal and Peter's denial. Therefore we should not speak of a *contrast* with the other "gospels," as though the account John offers contradicts the other three. Yet John does sketch Jesus' early activities and the impression He made in different terms than Matthew, Mark and Luke. We have seen His (shining) glory, His *doxa!* John the Baptist was not the light; Jesus was the light. That truth was firm and unshaken for the disciples.

Jesus' glory was manifest at Cana in Galilee when He saved a marriage feast by turning "holy water" into wine. The public, open approach favored by Mary was rejected out of hand because His "hour" had not yet come, that is, His hour as the Lamb of God.

Here we have a theme that could almost be used as a title for the whole book—"the hour" (7:6; 12:23; 13:1; 17:1). Mary did not yet understand much about the Messianic hour. And the disciples? They saw Jesus' glory, and they believed (2:11).

8. Cleansing and New Life (2:13 3:21)

The cleansing of the temple. When a certain Italian painter depicted Christ cleansing the temple, he put the halo not around His head but around the broom He used to sweep the temple clean. In this deed, of all deeds, Jesus revealed His glory.

[25] The cleansing of the temple also reveals something about Christ's suffering. In one of the Messianic psalms we read: "Zeal for thy house has consumed me, and the insults of those who insult thee have fallen on me" (Ps. 69:9). This psalm must have occurred to the disciples: because of Jesus' zeal for the Lord's house, His enemies would consume Him.

Jesus gave the people a mysterious saying as a sign of the extent of His power: "Destroy this temple [i.e. the body of Jesus], and in three days I will raise it up" (2:19). Two years later, when Jesus was again in Jerusalem for the Passover feast and once more put an end to the buying and selling in the temple, this statement was remembered and quoted against Him. In a twisted form, it was used as evidence against Jesus at His trial (Matt. 26:61). It was at a *Passover feast*, then, that Jesus made a hidden announcement of the "hour" the decisive events of a future Passover.

The necessity of rebirth. During that same Passover feast, Jesus used some interesting images as He gave instruction to one of Israel's well-known teachers, the rabbi Nicodemus. He told Nicodemus of the necessity of conversion or rebirth as a condition for seeing the Kingdom of God and entering it. "How can a man be born when he is old?" asked Nicodemus. "Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" (3:4). The teachers of the law had put so much emphasis on gaining salvation by doing the works of the law that the prophetic call for conversion had slipped completely into the background. Hence the perplexity of Nicodemus.

How is this rebirth possible? Jesus answered by pointing to the Son of man, who was to be lifted up. He would be crucified and would then ascend to heaven. Listen to the voice of the regenerating Spirit. All who believe in the Son will be saved, just as all who looked to the bronze serpent ^[26] in Moses' day were saved.

There has been a great deal of argument and dispute about "regeneration." As you ponder this issue, remember that John 3:16, a famous and beloved text, is an answer to Nicodemus's question how a second birth is possible. Those who believe enjoy the life of the Messianic age—regeneration!

9. Preaching to Jews and Samaritans (3:22-5:47)

Harvest in Samaria. John shows us how people who believed came to Jesus. First there was the Samaritan woman, who did not enjoy the best reputation. She met Jesus by Jacob's well in the vicinity of Shechem and Gerizim, where He addressed His famous words about the water of life to her.

From Acts 8:14 and 25 we gather that John himself later visited this area and saw to it that the fields in the land of the despised Samaritans, where "apostate Israel" (Jer. 3:6ff) lived on, were harvested. The revealing words Jesus spoke to a woman—and a Samaritan at that, which was contrary to the prevailing customs—led to faith in Him as the Savior of the "world."

In connection with the prologue (1:17), we already talked about worshiping in Spirit—not spirit—and truth. It is important to note as well that John the Baptist baptized people at Aenon, near Salim (3:23), and testified about Jesus there (vs. 25-36). This material comes just before the story of the Samaritan woman. Since Aenon must have been somewhere in the vicinity of Shechem, we get an idea of what Jesus meant when He said, "I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor; others have labored, and you have entered into their labor" (4:38).

^[27] The activities of John the Baptist, then, were partly

responsible for the harvest in Samaria. The apostles would not be working in a vacuum. Preparatory work had been done, and they could make use of it and draw on it. (Think of Paul, whose preaching constantly appealed to what the synagogue had already taught on the basis of the Old Testament Scriptures.)

Harvest in Galilee. John 4:46-54 tells us what was harvested when Jesus visited Cana in Galilee for the second time. Again faith led to deliverance. An official in the king's service in Capernaum came up to Cana to see Jesus. (Capernaum was some 200 meters below sea level, while Cana was in the hills.) He asked Jesus to heal his feverish son, who was on the brink of death.

Faith was the uppermost factor in the course of action followed by this servant of Herod.

Even though Jesus did not go along with him, his son was healed. The result was that the large family of this high official came to recognize Jesus.

Jesus in Jerusalem. At a feast in Jerusalem (perhaps the Feast of Tabernacles), it also became apparent that following a command of Jesus in faith leads to deliverance. This time a lame man was the one who benefited (5:8; see also 4:50). Come, look what the Lord is doing!

On the other hand, we see that the attitude in the holy city is not as guileless and receptive as in Samaria. The Jews take it ill of Jesus that He heals on the sabbath, and they force Him to say some words in His own defense. As He does so, He stresses cooperation between the Father and the Son.

The call to believe. Jesus' work at the health resort known as Bethesda was minor compared to what He was to accomplish later. Judgment and resurrection were to be [28] entrusted to the Son, the one who possessed full authority. The healing of a chronically ill man who had waited 38 years for a cure (roughly as long as Israel's period of wandering in the wilderness, which was commemorated in the Feast of Tabernacles) can be viewed as an appeal to Jerusalem to believe.

In three different ways, Israel was called to recognize Jesus as the Son of man and Son of God. First, *John the Baptist* had testified about Him (5:33-5). Second, *Jesus' works* testified in His own favor. The Father had allowed Him to do these works (vs. 36). Third, *the Father's words* testified about Jesus: Moses, on whom the people fixed their hopes, was their accuser (vs. 37ff). Not believing in Jesus meant believing in another, who would plunge Israel into misery (5:43).

Now the Passover, the feast of the Jews, was at hand (6:4).

10. Revelation through Sacramental Symbols (6:1-71)

The Lamb of God revealed. Jesus fed a great multitude during the Passover season. Soon Messianic passions were aflame: people wanted to crown Him king of the freedom fighters. Jesus withdrew, later walked across the water to the disciples in the boat, and then made an appearance in the synagogue at Capernaum (6:59).

Chapter 6 can be regarded as a pyramid, with the Passover Lamb of God alone at the top. The chapter begins with a great crowd of about 5000 people. Then there was a crowd on the shore at Capernaum (vs. 22). Part of this crowd must have been in the synagogue when Jesus spoke there (vs. 59). After He spoke, many of His disciples [29] went away (vs. 60ff). This left the twelve, one of whom was to betray Jesus (vs. 70-1). And we know what Peter did later, despite his confession.

A greater sign demanded. In His preaching, Jesus touched on the miracle of the bread, the Passover, and surely also the passages of Scripture about the manna (Ex. 16) and the Israelites' complaints about the manna (Num. 11), passages that would be read during that part of the "church year." Just as the Jews despised the manna God gave them in the wilderness, so they now despised Jesus.

The Jews wanted to see a greater sign than the miracle of feeding a large crowd with a small amount of bread; they wanted bread from heaven. In response Jesus gave them one of His famous "I am" statements: "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst" (6:35). Later He explained what it means to come to Him: "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (vs. 44).

There are some interpreters who take this text to mean that salvation must be "given," just as we "draw lots" or pick a number at random in a lottery. Yet Jesus goes on to make it clear that everyone "who has *heard* and *learned* from the Father comes to me" (vs. 45; see also Is. 54:13). This rules out the idea that salvation is purely a passive matter on our part. When the gospel is preached, the Father is *already* busy drawing us.

The bread of life. The worst thing of all about this encounter between Jesus and the hostile Jews was that they simply refused to accept what He said about Himself as the living heavenly bread. They were not interested in an exodus under His leadership; He was not impressive enough to fill the role of Son of man. When Jesus said, "My flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed" (vs. 55), He pointed to the food through which no one will ^[30] ever die—thanks to His person and work as the one who is greater than Moses.

Jesus' statement, then, is a *mashal*; it is one of those mysterious utterances or comparisons that convinced those who were truly interested to investigate the matter further but the hearts of those who did not believe. In this Passover season, the Lamb of God announced His identity.

Looking back at this scene in the bright light of all that happened later, we see a connection between the Lord's ;upper and Jesus' words about the bread of life. Yet, we must steer clear of any inclination to assume that John has somehow put a communion sermon into the mouth of Jesus. Peter understood the significance of this Passover sermon very well: "You have the words of eternal life," he said to Jesus, "and we have believed" (vs. 68-9).

Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb. And night shall be no more ... for the Lord God will be their light (Rev. 22:1, 5).

For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd (Rev. 7:17).

11. Jesus Teaches in Jerusalem (7:1-10:42)

Jesus at the Feast of Tabernacles. The beginning of chapter 7 strikes us as somewhat strange: Jesus' brothers wanted Him to go to the Feast of Tabernacles to make propaganda before His disciples, that is, the broader circle of disciples, many of whom had turned away from Him. Jesus refused, explaining that His "time" had not yet ^[31] come. At a *Passover* feast He would suffer as the Lamb of God and reveal Himself.

But once the Feast of Tabernacles was underway, Jesus went anyway. Isn't there a contradiction here? Not at all, for He went there incognito. Furthermore, He stepped into the middle of a crowd discussing the Messianic office (7:10-13, 25-36, 40-3) and the growing opposition of the leaders (7:19, 30, 32, 45ff). Jesus appeared in that crowd as a *teacher*, as one who comes to the temple of God to defend His teaching with divine authority (7:14ff).

At an earlier feast, people had wanted to persecute Jesus because He had healed the lame man at Bethesda on the Sabbath (5:16). Apparently His behavior during that feast, which may have been the Feast of Tabernacles, had not been forgotten (7:19ff, 25, 30, 45ff; 18:20).

This time Jesus concentrated completely on teaching. His "time" had not yet come; it was not the third Passover (7:30; 8:20; 12:23; 13:1). But the battle lines were getting clearer, especially in connection with His "teaching."

Living water. Jesus revealed Himself at the last Feast of Tabernacles before His crucifixion as the one *who fulfills* this final great feast of the "church year" and *gives it meaning*. Each time the Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated, a priest would pour some water from the Pool of Siloam—the water got into this pool from the spring of Gihon via a tunnel cut through the rock—on the west side of the altar of burnt offering. The water

would be transported in a golden pitcher and poured into two silver basins next to the altar. That water symbolized the journey through the wilderness, when water flowed from the rock. At the same time, it symbolized longing for the Messianic future, a future that involved a number of promises having to do with water (Is. 12:3; 35:6-7; 44:3; Ezek. 47:1ff; Joel 3:18; Zech. 14:8; Rev. 22:1, 17). In the Court of the ^[32] Women, giant torches were lighted in memory of the pillar of fire.¹

On this great feast day, Jesus revealed Himself as the one who pours living water. He cried out: "If anyone is thirsty let him come to me; whoever believes in me, let him drink" (7:37 NEB).

The Light of the world. Jesus is the rock from which living water flows (see I Cor. 10:4). He is also the Light of the world (8:12). After a sharp debate in which Jesus called His unbelieving opponents the seed of the serpent and denied them the right to call themselves the Spiritual children of Abraham, Jesus healed a blind man and thereby demonstrated that He is the Light of the world, the Messianic light sent to the apostate Jewish community bound by satan (9:5ff).

Note that this man, who had been born blind, was sent by Jesus to the Pool of Siloam, the pool that played a role in the Feast of Tabernacles. This sabbath miracle casts further light on Jesus' claim that He fulfilled the Feast of Tabernacles. At the same time, the antithesis comes through sharply here. We also develop an eye for the *hardening* effect of the words and works of Jesus on some people: "It is for judgment that I have come into this world—to give sight to the sightless and to make blind those who see" (9:39 NEB).

^[33] *The Good Shepherd.* The discourse on the "Good Shepherd," which comes next, should not be viewed in isolation as a beautiful passage of Scripture; it is tied in with the question of the Pharisees. What about those Pharisees? Are they completely blind?

In 10:1-21, we find three comparisons in which Jesus, as the lawful (= beautiful) Shepherd is contrasted with Israel's foolish shepherds. (1) In verses 1-5 we are assured that Jesus enters by the King's way with good intentions. (2) In verses 7-10 we are told that Jesus is the door of the sheep. (3) In verses 11-18 we read that He is a legitimate shepherd, putting His life on the line for the sheep when the wolf comes along. He does not scatter the sheep but truly gathers them, also in the continuing work of the gathering of the church throughout the wide world (7:36; 10:11; 11:52; 12:20ff).

Those who know the truth must live by Scripture and heed His voice. Here Jesus is not thinking first of all of utter pagans but of Gentiles and Jews in the Diaspora— people who lived by the Old Testament promises. This is another indication of the audience for which John intended his book.

Jesus then attended the Feast of the Temple Dedication.² Once more He picked up the theme of the ^[34] sheep who heed the voice of the Shepherd. Because of what He said, another attempt was made to kill Him. But Jesus would not die at the festival of Hanukkah and thereby link His name with the Maccabees, the Jewish freedom fighters.

¹ The festivities led to exuberant behavior. What we read in 7:53-8:11 about the woman caught committing adultery was probably not so unusual. This passage is not present in many of the older manuscripts. Yet, even if it was added later by someone other than John, we need not reject it as apocryphal. It was already known around the year 150 as part of the apostolic tradition.

² The Feast of Dedication or Hanukkah is also called the Feast of Lights. It lasted eight days. In later ages it became customary to light one of the lamps on an eight-armed lamp-stand each day of the feast. The lampstand was to remind the Jews of the temple that was desecrated by the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes in 168 B.C. and then used for the worship of an idol instead. Under Judas Maccabaeus, the temple was dedicated anew on December 25, 165 B.C. Whereas the Feast of Tabernacles is celebrated in October, the celebration of the temple renewal (Hanukkah) occurs in December, around the same time as Christmas.

12. Five Signals That Easter Is Near (11:1-12:50)

Lazarus raised from the dead. At the end, Jesus is back where He started: He withdraws to the Jordan, where His career had begun. Then follows the resurrection of Lazarus, His friend who lived in Bethany, near Jerusalem.

This event was a signal; it was a revelation of Jesus' glory and a foreshadowing of His own resurrection from the dead. At the same time, we must take note of the confession of Lazarus's sister Martha: "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world" (11:27).

This miracle is the occasion for the Sanhedrin to put its plans for Jesus' death into operation. It is better to let one man die for the sake of the covenant people than to let the whole nation perish (11:50).

Honors for Jesus. After Jesus withdrew for a short time, He appeared in Bethany again, to spend His last weekend with His friends. Once the sabbath ended at sunset, the evening was given over to festivities, as is customary among the Jews. Mary, Martha's sister, seized the occasion to honor Jesus anointing Him with a costly ointment. Jesus understood this gesture. It was the second signal, a preparation for His burial (12:7).

The triumphant entry into Jerusalem, when Jesus was hailed with shouts of "Hosanna!" in the style of ^[35] Zechariah 9:9, was a signal which Christ did nothing to stifle. Jesus saw a fourth sign when some Greeks wanted to pay their respects to Him (12:20ff). He could already envision the eventual harvest among the nations.

This is not to say that these Greeks were pure pagans. They may well have been "God-fearing" Gentiles who had attached themselves to the synagogue—or even foreign Jews. Yet, their interest in Jesus was an indication that the wall separating the Jews and the Gentiles was about to be torn down. However, it could still be said regarding the Jews: "Lord, who has believed our report?" (12:38; Is. 53:1; Rom. 10:16).

A voice from heaven gave the last signal—in the form of heavenly acclaim! Jesus prayed, "Father, glorify thy name," and the voice responded, "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again" (12:28). The Lamb of Isaiah 53 is without form or comeliness, but whoever sees Him sees the One who sent Him (vs. 45).

13. Saying Farewell in Deed, Word and Prayer (13:1-17:26)

Parting words. The "hour" had finally come. If we hope to understand the next section of John properly, we will have to bear in mind that chapters 13 and 14 form a whole and deal with what happened *during* the Passover meal. The three chapters that follow are closely connected with chapters 13 and 14; they give us an account of what Jesus said *after* the Passover meal (14:31).

Remember that these words of Jesus were addressed first of all to the apostles. When Jesus promises to lead them into all truth, we must not assume that this promise is intended for us as well. The New Testament shows us the ^[36] establishment of the full truth, that is, the fulfillment of what was proclaimed. The apostles are branches of the vine; the fruit of those branches ripens in the church that accepts the Word.

A manifestation of love. First Jesus shows how He loves His chosen disciples to the very end: He wraps a towel around Himself (see II Sam. 6:14, 20ff) and washes the feet of His disciples. Whoever wishes to be first must be everyone's slave.

Jesus founded the love commandment in Himself through this symbolic deed, which we are not to turn into a sacrament or a public display, as the Roman Catholics do each year on Good Friday when the Pope washes the feet of twelve beggars. In the discourse following these events, in which Judas's betrayal and Peter's denial are mentioned, Jesus comes back to this. "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another" (13:34).

The Spirit as Counselor. What Jesus says leads to four questions or requests. Simon

Peter asks: "Lord, where are you going?" (13:36). Thomas asks: "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" (14:5). Philip says: "Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied" (vs. 8). Judas—not Judas Iscariot—wants to know: "Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us, and not to the world?" (vs. 22).

In the answers Jesus gives, it comes out clearly that He goes to the Father to serve as quartermaster for His church. Indeed, He Himself is the "Way" to the Father. Moreover, He will return to His own by sending them His Spirit.

The Spirit is called the "Counselor" (*Paraclete*). The King James Version speaks here of the "Comforter." In I John 2:1, the same Greek word is used in reference to Christ, but there it is translated as *advocate*.

[37] The Spirit is the legal counsel, the solicitor, the advocate of the church. Through the Spirit, Jesus will reveal Himself to His own (14:21). This will not happen by way of some secret teaching that automatically excludes "the world" (i.e. apostate Jewry). No, the way to Jesus, to the Father, to the Spirit as our advocate is open to all who keep Jesus' words (vs. 23).

Persecution by the "world." After the Passover meal, Jesus had more to say. The discourses that begin at 15:1 represent an elaboration of motifs that were heard earlier. Love comes to expression in the command given to the disciples to abide as branches in the vine that is Christ.

Particular emphasis is put on persecution by the "world." In the face of this persecution, Christ promises the support of the Paraclete, who will convince the "world," the synagogue, of the following: (1) its *sin* in rejecting the Messiah, (2) God's *righteousness* in elevating the Messiah, and (3) the *judgment* in the punishment of satan, who is expelled from heaven (16:8ff; see also 12:31; 14:30; Rev. 12). When Jesus says that the Spirit will "convince" the world, He is not speaking of conversion but of persuasion in a judicial sense; the Spirit will convince the world of its *guilt* by providing some compelling proof that cannot be refuted.

When we read Peter's Pentecost sermon in Acts 2, we see that Jesus already took up the Pentecost theme in John 16. There was no need for the apostles to be disturbed or thrown off stride by what was about to happen. They are promised that if they abide in Jesus' words, they will receive rich grace to discharge their office. Only through the power of the Word and Spirit will the apostles be able to appear as witnesses when the great case against the synagogue is made.

[38] *Jesus' prayer.* These discourses end with a prayer generally referred to as a high priest's prayer. Yet this

prayer also includes prophetic and kingly elements. It consists of three parts. (1) Jesus gives an account of His completed work and prays for the promised glorification. (2) He intercedes for the apostles. He prays that they will not be "of the world," even though they are "in the world," and He asks that they may remain one by clinging to the Word. Here we already have the unity motif that is founded in the high and holy unity between the Father and the Son. In 17:22 Jesus prays that "they may be one even as *we are one*." (3) Jesus prays for those who will come to believe in Him through the apostolic Word. He prays that they 'will be one with the apostles—a unity anchored in the unity of the Father and the Son.

Jesus isn't talking about a vague unity not grounded in the Word, like the false unity of the "ecumenical" movement! There must be no concessions to the "world." In the face of this unified confession, the "world" (i.e. the apostate church) will be forced to choose and will hear an appeal to believe. The final verses in this prayer (vs. 22-6) are again focused on the apostles, who are the foundation of the church.

14. The Elevation and Glorification of Jesus (18:1-21:25)

An eyewitness account. Because the author of the fourth "gospel" was an eyewitness, he was not completely dependent on written sources for his material. This is apparent from

his description of Jesus' arrest (where Jesus makes one of His "I am" statements) as well as his account of the hearing before Pilate (where there is another "I am" statement: "I am a King").

[39] This does not mean that John was implicitly criticizing the other gospel writers or correcting their work. Remember his purpose in writing: "that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (20:31). This purpose required that certain things be reported. Thus we are told the name of the high priest's slave whose ear was cut off by Peter. But it is Luke, the physician, who informs us that Jesus took the trouble to heal the wounded slave. We read about the hearing before the former high priest Annas, but nothing about the hearing before Caiaphas.

Pilate's role. We read a great deal about Pilate's conduct that night. As we consider Pilate's role we must bear in mind that Jews who wanted to remain undefiled had to stand on the steps outside the Gentile place of judgment. Therefore Pilate repeatedly came outside to talk to the Jews, although he was inside the building when he questioned Jesus. (In 18:29, 38 and 19:4 and 12, we read about Pilate coming outside because of the Jews faithful to the law.) Each time Pilate came outside, he opened a new phase in the process. We read about him going inside in 18:33 (19:1) and 19:9.

Pilate first tried to extricate himself from the question of Jesus by having the Jews try Him themselves (18:31). Then he paired Jesus with Barabbas as candidates to be released, even though he could find no guilt in Him (vs. 39). When that didn't work—the people chose to have Barabbas released—he tried to arouse some sympathy for Jesus by mocking Him with the crown of thorns and the purple robe (19:4ff). Only when the Jews threatened to bring accusations of disloyalty against Pilate himself did he give in and pronounce judgment on Jesus (vs. 13ff).

Details reported by John. When you read the story of Jesus' execution, you will be struck by all sorts of details [40] not found in the other "gospels," e.g. the seamless tunic,³ the presence of Mary at the cross, and the piercing of Jesus' side. (The water and the blood were not an indication that there are to be two sacraments but only a proof that Jesus was really dead.) John, the disciple Jesus Loved, stood at the foot of the cross as a witness! He saw Scripture fulfilled: Jesus' bones were not broken, and He was not given the burial of an ass (19:24, 28, 36-7). The Passover Lamb would be "with a rich man in his death" (Is. 53:9). The ointment used by Nicodemus to anoint Jesus was worth about 100 times as much as the ointment used earlier by Mary!

As for the facts of Easter Sunday, John reports that he went with Peter to the grave and that Jesus appeared to Mary Magdalene in the garden as the last Adam. Mary wanted to hold on to Jesus for herself. John also tells us of the Easter confession of Thomas: "My Lord and my God!"

The end and a new beginning. After what appears to be the conclusion to the book (where John reveals his purpose in writing), we find an epilogue or appendix, in which we read how Jesus appeared to six of the disciples (including the "sons of Zebedee," i.e. James and John) on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias. The "fishers of man" were fishing for fish. Peter, who denied Christ three times, was commissioned three times to care for the sheep. This opened up [41] the future for Peter and for the author of the fourth "gospel."

Thus the connection between Jesus' redemptive deeds and later church history is clear. All of this is recorded for a practical purpose: so that others would believe John's witness. Those who had followed Jesus said of John: "We know that his testimony is true" (21:24).

³ The seamless tunic has been used as a symbol of the unity that the church is obligated to maintain. The Roman cardinal and bishop Sadoletto mentioned this seamless tunic when he wrote to the citizens of Geneva in 1539 (during Calvin's absence) in an effort to persuade them to break with the Reformation and return to Rome. It is clear that Sadoletto's use of this text is not an instance of true exegesis; it represents pure spiritualization or allegory.

[42] Acts

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever (Heb. 13:8).

1. A Book about Jesus

A sequel to Volume I. Volume II of Luke's book about Jesus is also dedicated to Theophilus, whose name means *Friend of God*, although he is not addressed in Acts as 'most excellent' Theophilus. Volume I dealt with what Jesus *began* to do and teach. Luke now turns to the *continuation* of Christ's work as the risen and ascended Lord, who gave clear commands to His chosen ones through His Holy Spirit.

Luke shows Theophilus clearly that the Lord continued to stretch out His arms to His contrary people. Just as he gave examples of the discourses of Jesus in Volume I, in Volume II he records discourses of the apostles, discourses that form links in the chain of the Lord's lawsuit against the people born out of Abraham. The repeated use of the [43] word *witness* points to the existing "legal battle" with "Jerusalem" and its devotees.

Emphasis on Jerusalem. Various motifs from Luke's first volume are present in the second as well. At the outset great emphasis is put on the place where the activity starts— *Jerusalem!* It was in Jerusalem that the apostles were to "wait for the promise of the Father" (1:4; see also Luke 24:49), that is, the outpouring of the Spirit. They were to be witnesses of Jesus' resurrection—in Jerusalem and throughout all of Judea and Samaria (1:8), for they had seen the risen Lord with their own eyes and had heard Him with their own ears.

It was from Jerusalem that Jesus ascended into heaven (vs. 11). The events of Pentecost also took place in that city, which Luke not only refers to by way of its usual Greek name (vs. 4) but also by way of a Hebraic spelling (vs. 8, 12, 19), to emphasize that Jerusalem was the holy city of the covenant. Jerusalem was where the apostles later testified, where they were arrested, where a congregation arose, where Peter was imprisoned and freed, and where James was put to death (ch. 12).

After chapter 12 begins a new section in which Paul and Barnabas go out into the world. But even then "Jerusalem" is not forgotten. The "missionaries" always begin by preaching in the *synagogues*; they do not let go of the covenant people. There is regular contact with the church in Jerusalem, the new Israel there (15:1 ff; 21:15ff).

Temple and kingship. We also find the temple motif in Acts. The gospel is preached in the temple after the lame man is healed as a sign of the Messianic era. Then comes the story of the resistance of the temple authorities (starting at ch. 3). The portico of Solomon, where Jesus Himself had preached (John 10:23), is now used for worship (3:11; 5:12). It is Stephen who announces the destruction [44] of the temple (6:13; 7:48). Just as in Luke, the temple is emphasized not only at the beginning but also at the end. Paul is arrested in the temple and holds his public address to Israel there (21:27ff). He winds up in chains for not respecting the temple.

The kingship motif is also prominent in Acts. After the resurrection, Jesus, who occupies the throne of His father David (Luke 1:32-3), speaks to His disciples about the Kingdom of God (1:3). When Paul arrives in Rome, the first thing he does is to organize a meeting with the Jewish leaders. The theme he takes up with them—and not in the manner of a contemporary dialogue in which everything is made relative—is the Kingdom of God.

He did not mean to speak to them about some abstract article of faith that they would be likely to agree with but about the rule of God brought about *in Jesus*. "He expounded the matter to them from morning till evening, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus both from the law of Moses and from the prophets" (28:23).

The ascended Lord at work. This is the exciting thing about the book of Acts. The same Savior acts in Volume II as in Volume I—but now He operates by means of His church!

The title of the book is *Acts of the Apostles*, but it could just as well be *Acts of the Ascended Savior*, that is, through His Word and Spirit. Time and again it is emphasized that Jesus Christ Himself is the one who reveals the majesty of His rule in signs and wonders, in the Word and in testimony.

At the beginning of the book, the disciples on the Mount of Olives ask Jesus: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (1:6). This question is answered at length in the rest of the book. The ascended Lord pours out the Spirit (2:33), heals those who are in need of healing (3:6, 16; 4:10; 9:34; 14:3), opens heaven to Stephen [45] (7:55ff), opens the prison doors to Peter (12:11), and opens the heart of Lydia (16:14). It is the Spirit of Jesus Christ that sends Philip to the Ethiopian eunuch and Peter to Cornelius (8:29; 10:19ff), that calls Paul and Silas (13:2), that lays out the route for the journey (16:6ff; 20:22ff) and appoints overseers (20:28). The Jesus Christ of Volume I, who journeyed from Bethlehem through Nazareth and Capernaum to Jerusalem, is also the Jesus Christ of Volume II of Luke's chronicle.

2. A Chronicle of the Way Chosen by the New Israel

A new path to follow. In the Old Testament we find countless references to the "ways of the Lord." "Make me to know thy ways, O LORD: teach me thy paths" (Ps. 25:4). The book of Proverbs is full of admonitions to follow the proper way. Israel's calling was to continue to walk the Lord's way, turning neither to the right nor to the left by listening to false prophets (Deut. 5:32-3; 9:16; 13:5; 28:14; I Kings 3:14).

In Acts we also find the service of the Lord Jesus referred to as "the way" (9:2; 19:9; 22:4; 24:14, 22). Anyone who tampers with the way of the Lord is a son of the devil full of trickery and deceit, an enemy of all righteousness, one against whom the Lord will turn His hand (13:10-11). Thus the way chosen by the new Israel is in harmony with the confession about Jesus Christ given by John the Baptist, Jesus' forerunner (13:24-5).

Clinging to this "way" would lead to suffering. "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (14:22). For Paul, who used to persecute those who followed "the way," faithfulness to God's calling meant doing a lot of traveling. The Spirit pressed him; it was a matter of divine necessity (9:15; 13:2; 16:6ff; 19:21; 23:11).

[46] *A strategy for spreading the gospel.* Luke describes how the preaching of "the way" spread, thanks to the faithful labors of those whom God called to this task. A fixed plan was followed—a plan devised by God Himself. The guiding star was not any human mission strategy but God's own plan of salvation, which was to present the glad tidings first to the Jew and then to the "Greek."

In those days there were many people attending the synagogues who were originally Gentiles. Luke and Theophilus probably came from such circles themselves. In many instances, the "God-fearing," i.e. the Gentile learners in the synagogues, were inclined to listen to the gospel even though the Jews in the synagogues turned a deaf ear. Paul saw it as a divine calling to address the gospel to these "God-fearing" Gentiles. "For so the Lord has commanded us, saying, 'I have set you to be a light for the Gentiles [the nations], that you may bring salvation to the uttermost parts of the earth.'" (13:47; Is. 49:6; Luke 2:32).

Jesus is the Servant of the Lord of whom Isaiah spoke. From heaven He uses human instruments to continue His work as the "Way" and the "Light of the nations." When Paul was called, he was given a Messianic task: he was to "open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light *and* from the power of Satan to God" (26:18; Is. 35:5; 42:7, 16; 61:1).

What is written about the servant of the Lord in Isaiah 4, 49 and 61 is *fulfilled* in Christ, but in such a way that He makes use of the church to carry out His task. This involves suffering for the church. The church cannot carry out its mission without doing a lot of traveling. Repeated disappointments are inevitable, for the "temple," the "synagogue," the unfaithful church refuses to listen.

This is the way chosen by the new Israel—in Jerusalem ch. 1-7), in all of Judea and Samaria (ch. 8-12), and farther on as far as Rome (ch. 13-28).

[47] *The LORD has a case against his people, and will argue it with Israel (Mic. 6:2 NEB).*

3. Pentecost and the Appeal to the Covenant People

A different kind of restoration. "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (1:6). The disciples, then, were still expecting a restoration of the old kingdom. There would indeed be a restoration—but not in any nationalistic sense such as the Jews had in mind. The kingdom would be restored in a Messianic, theocratic sense, through the mobilization of the church.

Luke's chronicle in Acts shows us the disciples whom Christ had instructed returning from Jerusalem to await the fulfillment of the great promise of the Spirit. Hadn't the prophets already spoken of special gifts which the church with the Spirit would enjoy in the Messianic era? (Is. 32:15; 44:3; Ezek. 11:19; 36:27; 39:29; Joel 2:28f0. Hadn't Jesus promised that the disciples would be purified with the Holy Spirit before long? (1:5; 11:16; Luke 3:16). Through the outpouring of the Spirit, they would be all the more capable of making their testimony heard in Israel.

A replacement for Judas. To prepare themselves for their task, the disciples filled out their ranks by replacing Judas Iscariot, who had betrayed Jesus and killed himself. Two candidates were proposed, and Matthias was chosen by lot.

Some interpreters have viewed this step as arbitrary willfulness on the part of Peter, who proposed it. They argue that Paul was really the twelfth apostle. Now, apart from the fact that Paul did not appear on the scene as an apostle until after the death of James, the brother of John, [48] we must respect Peter's *Scriptural* reasons for insisting that there be twelve apostles.

The curse of the Messianic sufferer of Psalm 69 had been carried out (Ps. 69:26). Wasn't Jesus' thirst a fulfillment of this psalm? If so, isn't the judgment of His opponents (e.g. Judas) to be viewed as a fulfillment of this psalm as well? The restoration of the kingdom required the fulfillment of the Davidic psalms (Ps. 109:8; see also 41:10-11; Luke 22:21; Mark 14:18; John 13:18) with regard to the suffering of the Righteous One as well as the punishment of His enemies. Judas's replacement was therefore a frightening example, a warning to Israel! If you don't repent, Judah, you'll suffer the fate of Judas! You'll be replaced.

Understanding Pentecost. Pentecost morning is introduced as follows in the Revised Standard Version: "When the day of Pentecost had *come*" What Luke is really talking about, however, is a *fulfillment* rather than a mere *coming*, just as he later speaks of the house being "filled" with the rush of a mighty wind and people being "filled" with the Holy Spirit (2:1-2, 4).

Because of all the misunderstandings in connection with the Pentecost events, I will take up some of the questions that most often arise.

(1) What is the meaning of the Pentecost signs? In 2:6 we read about a *voice*. The sound, the fiery tongues, the speaking in tongues, and the understanding of the words of Peter by each person in his native language—all of this points to the power of the Word. These phenomena illustrate the power of the gospel, which began its offensive that day. It appears that the Spirit announced Himself as the one who operates regularly through the *voice*, the *Word*.

(2) Who were the people who heard Peter's Pentecost sermon? In Jerusalem there were many Jews who had lived [49] their lives in other countries but wanted to spend their

last years in Jerusalem and be buried there. Some of these Jews had been so completely assimilated in the lands where they had lived that they even took over the language as their own and did not know Hebrew. Therefore they had to establish their own synagogues in Jerusalem. All the same, they remained Jews. And the converts or proselytes who associated themselves with the Jews also counted as Jews. Thus the people who heard Peter's Pentecost message were not pagans but members of the covenant people.

- (3) Was Peter's sermon and what happened afterward so unusual? The sermon was based on a text taken from the prophet Joel. It was followed by baptism, the registration of members, the celebration of the Lord's supper, and diaconal work. Thus "unusual" Pentecost signs served to introduce "ordinary" church life. There were no strange manifestations of ecstasy, no "testimonials from the heart." The main part of the service was a very ordinary—and therefore very special— sermon on a Bible text.
- (4) How did Peter interpret his text from Joel? He did not use the text as a motto or a widely accepted proverb or a takeoff point for some ideas of his own that he wanted to express. Instead he showed that the signs pointed to a fulfillment of Joel's prophecy. Joel, after all, had spoken of an outpouring of the Spirit and of fire! Just as the beginning of Luke tells us about Jesus' proclamation in the synagogue at Nazareth that Isaiah 61 had been fulfilled in the hearing of His audience that day, the beginning of Acts tells us about a fulfillment of Joel 2:28ff *before the very eyes of the assembled people and in their hearing.*

This fulfillment shows that the Messiah had indeed come! Peter announced that Jesus, who had recently been crucified, was the Messiah, and that the Pentecost events were God's mighty sign that Jesus was seated at His right hand (Ps. 110) and "has poured out this which you see and ^[50] hear" (2:33). Peter concluded with a proclamation and an appeal: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (vs. 36).

- (5) What was the reaction to Peter's sermon? Great fear. If Jesus was indeed the Messiah, then He would come again to vent His *covenant wrath* on Jerusalem and Israel.

The signs of Pentecost were understood as premonitions of the Messianic wrath to come, of blood and fire and a pillar of smoke.

- (6) How does Peter apply his text to his audience? Anyone who calls on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ will be saved. He will also receive the promised gift of the spirit, for Joel's promise applies to Peter's hearers. "The promise is to you and to your *children* and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our [covenant] God *calls* to him," Peter declared (2:39), again quoting from Joel 2.

Next time you hear this text, which is often used in baptism liturgies, remember that the "promise" given to us and to our children is not first of all the promise of "heaven." Those who are called and anointed are promised the gifts of the covenant, that is the gifts of the Spirit by which we become capable of all sorts of things.

- (7) How did Peter sum up his message at the end? "Save yourselves from this crooked generation" (2:40). Here he goes back to Joel once more: "And it shall come to pass that all who call upon the name of the LORD shall be delivered" (Joel 2:32; see also Rom. 10:13). At the same time he points to the last song of Moses, which must have resounded in the temple not long before:

They have dealt corruptly with him,
they are no longer his children because of their blemish;
they are a perverse and crooked generation
(Deut. 32:5; see also vs. 20; Ps. 12:2, 8).

[51] *The choice facing Israel.* As you read further in the book of Acts, remember that Luke is showing us how Israel was confronted with a choice. Israel was on the way up or on the way down. Either she would seek deliverance and forgiveness from the Savior, or she would be consumed by the wrath of the covenant.

The gospel is never a sentimental story aimed at stirring our tender emotions. The New Testament Scriptures show us how God was carrying on His dispute with His people.

A continuing appeal. The formation of the New Testament church represented a testimony to Israel (2:41-7). The actions of Peter and John when they healed the lame man must be viewed in the same light.

It should not surprise us that the apostles visited the temple to join in the evening prayers. As long as there was no clear sign of the "desolating sacrilege," the new Israel remained inside the Jewish orbit, even though Christ had fulfilled all the ceremonial laws. The fall of Jerusalem was indeed an important point in the history of the church as it moved toward its own unique development.

As long as the gospel had not yet called Jews everywhere to conversion and recognition of the Messiah, the temple had to remain standing. It was in the temple that God would continue His dispute with His people by way of the apostles. Peter and John spoke freely to the worshipers in the temple and to the demythologizing, progressive, left-wing Sadducees about the identity of the crucified One, the One behind the healing of the lame man.

Note Peter's emphasis on the covenant motif in his sermon in the temple (3:25). He addresses his audience as "men of Israel" (2:22). Not only does he offer them the prospect of blessings in the name of the Servant of the Lord (3:26), he also declares that there will be better times ahead for them *if* they accept the prophet Jesus (vs. 19ff).

[52] In the distance we catch sight of judgment. If the gospel is rejected, the measure will be full.

Growing opposition. Before long, all twelve apostles were arrested in the temple. The conflict grew more intense. Gamaliel's apparent neutrality does not impress, even though it assisted in getting the apostles released. The apostles were beaten and forbidden to speak in public. Was this neutrality? No!, the Sanhedrin chose *against* Jesus. There is no "third way" possible, it is either for or against.

In its prayer, the church rightly drew on Psalm 2, which speaks of universal revolution while the Messianic King is seating Himself on His throne. Israel's leaders had sided with Pilate and Herod. The way to oppose them was to testify boldly about the Servant of the Lord.

The opposition between the two sides became even more acute. Before long it led to the stoning of Stephen, whose lame means *crown*. He was accused of the same offense as his Savior, namely, violation of the temple. And at the time of his execution, he spoke words reminiscent of Jesus (7:59-60; see also Luke 23:34, 46; Ps. 31:6). The servant is not greater than his Master.

Uncircumcised ears. In his speech before the Sanhedrin, Stephen also followed in his Master's footsteps. He showed how deliverers like Joseph and Moses had been denied by their own people. Israel, the nation that killed the prophets, was worse than the uncircumcised pagans: Israel was "uncircumcised in heart and ears" (7:51). This may strike us as a strange expression, but we also find the prophet Jeremiah speaking of uncircumcised ears, just before a sermon directed against the temple! (Jer. 7:1ff).

Plainly their ears are uncircumcised,
they cannot listen.
Plainly the word of Yahweh is for them something
[53] contemptible,
they have no taste for it.

But I am full of the wrath of Yahweh,
I am weary of holding it in
(Jer. 6:10-11 JB; see also 9:26).

The Holy Spirit showed Stephen the continuing line of the dispute: both Jeremiah and Christ were denouncing a superficial, purely formal temple service (Jer. 7:11; Luke 19:46). The servant speaks the same language as his

Master.

4. Christian Communism?

The spirit of stewardship. In his first book, Luke manifested a special interest in the words of Jesus dealing with "unrighteous mammon." In his second book he also devoted a fair amount of attention to financial questions.

The congregation in Jerusalem was made up in part of foreign Jews who had come to the holy city to live because they wanted to be buried there. Many of them must have owned plots in which they planned to be buried. But once they accepted the gospel of the Messiah who had come, the situation changed for them. The rich then attached less importance to their property and the poor had a harder time of it than before, for the "diaconate" of the synagogue, which helped support poor people, would no longer help them once they went over to the "other synagogue," the "Nazarene" sect, the followers of "the way."

This meant that the church had to take special measures. Those measures have often been misunderstood. It was not the case that all property became communal in the sense that private property was suddenly abolished, with the ^[54] result that no one had more than anyone else since all the property was in the hands of the church and was owned jointly or communally. No, the members of the church in Jerusalem, driven by the one Spirit, formed a community in which private property was not deified or regarded as an absolute but was managed in the spirit of good stewardship and used freely to meet the needs of the community's poor. Is ever was personal property abolished in the first Christian community. Luke tells us, for instance, that Mary, the mother of John Mark, owned a house in Jerusalem (12:12).

Ananias and Sapphira. To Ananias and Sapphira, who claimed that they were giving the church the full amount of money they had received from the sale of a piece of land, but secretly kept half of it back, Peter said: "While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal?" (5:4). Thus such texts as 2:44-5 and 4:32ff can never be used to support the view that the early Christians in Jerusalem practiced a compulsory universal Communism under the motto "What's mine is thine, and what's thine is mine!" What Luke shows us in connection with these financial arrangements is how seriously the early church took Jesus' words about money and property: "Whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:33).

Luke also shows us how carefully Satan watched this situation developing, in hopes of being able to destroy the church from within, as in the case of the behavior of Ananias and Sapphira. The disciplinary measures taken in their case made a tremendous impression on observers (5:5ff, 13). Once more the Lord demonstrated the purifying power of His judgment—just as He had done when two of Aaron's sons sinned at the initial dedication of the priests, when Achan ^[55] sinned during the capture of Jericho, and when a group of boys mocked the prophet Elisha, who had just taken over from Elijah (Lev. 10; Josh. 7; II Kings 2).

The appointment of deacons. Luke also shows us how the church appointed special servants called "deacons" to look after the poor when it became apparent that they were not being adequately cared for by way of spontaneous acts of mercy. Stephen, the man who was stoned, was one of the deacons, as was Philip (who is not to be confused with the apostle Philip).

Some interpreters maintain that Acts 6 does not deal with the institution of the office of deacon at all. On the other hand, there is a tendency today to turn the diaconate into an independent institution devoted to social needs and problems. Whereas in Acts we see deacons appointed to give close attention to the needs of the *local congregation*, people today speak of a *world diaconate*.

5. Seeds Scattered Far and Wide (8:1 12:25)

A new "*diaspora*," A certain Saul, whom we later encounter under the Latin name *Paul* (which means *little one*— "*Shorty* "), had been in favor of the execution of Stephen and was prepared to persecute other members of the church as well. Now, we must not regard Stephen's stoning as an extreme case, a highly unusual exception. Numerous members of the church had to suffer for their beliefs, with the result that many of them left Jerusalem and took up residence elsewhere.

This "*diaspora*" or dispersion led to the gathering of a larger flock, for the Christians driven out of Jerusalem preached the gospel of Jesus as the Messiah wherever they ^[56] went. Luke gives us some examples of their preaching. At the same time he shows how God Himself intervened to get these preachers going (8:26; 9:1ff; 10:1ff). Yes, Luke shows us how God allowed the wall separating Israel from the nations to wobble.

Preaching in Samaria. The first area outside Jerusalem that we hear about is Samaria (1:8), the home of the heretical Samaritans with their temple at Shechem. The deacon Philip, who was among those who had left Jerusalem preached there and baptized a magician named Simon. When Peter and John arrived from Jerusalem as church visitors, this Samaritan Faust offered them money if they would bestow the power of the Holy Spirit on him through the laying on of hands. (To this day, the word *simony* is used to refer to the buying and selling of ecclesiastical offices and pardons.)

Peter pronounced judgment on his namesake by pointing to the fifth book of Moses. He said to Simon: "I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity" (8:23; see also Deut. 29:18; Heb. 12:15). As you consider Peter's course of action, remember that the Samaritans, like the Sadducees, recognized only the five books of Moses as authoritative.

The apostles were not in the business of trying to win popularity; their task was rather to *oppose* any sort of compromise with heathendom or Gnosticism. Luke knew perfectly well that there were many heretics trying to infiltrate the church.

Preaching to an Ethiopian. A second example of the preaching of the dispersed believers is the story of Philip and the "God-fearing" Ethiopian eunuch who was busy reading Isaiah 53 without understanding it. As a eunuch, this black minister of finance was not allowed in the court of Israel's temple (Deut. 23:1). Yet, the Bible contained ^[57] some glorious promises for him and for his people. (Think of Isaiah 56:3-5 and Psalm 68:31: "Let Ethiopia hasten to stretch out her hands to God.") When Philip explained to this man that Jesus is the Lamb of God, his reaction was: "What is to prevent my being baptized?" (8:36; see also 10:47). Thus, a baptized Ethiopian traveled to his own land through the ancient Philistine territory of Gaza and Ashdod. Luke's joy motif comes to the fore again: we read that the eunuch "went on his way *rejoicing*" (8:39).

A "*ravenous wolf from Benjamin*. A third example of the preaching of the dispersed believers is the "ravenous wolf from the tribe of Benjamin (Gen. 49:27), namely, Saul of Tarsus, who was called by Jesus when he was on his way to Damascus to persecute defenseless Christians there. Now, Paul's *conversion* is a favorite topic of conversation when we get together to discuss our faith. In our enthusiasm, we often overlook the majesty of what Luke describes for us; we tend to assume that his purpose in writing was simply to tell us some conversion stories. Those who regard the transformation of Saul into Paul as an example of the desired method of conversion to faith in Jesus Christ have overlooked the main point of the story of Saul on the road to Damascus.

Why does Luke tell us just how the Lord harnessed this ravenous wolf as part of His plan

for proclaiming the gospel throughout the world? Paul was to be a *witness* of Jesus Christ, someone who had *seen Him* and *heard Him speak* (22:15; 23:11). That's why he was called to his redemptive historical task in such a special way. Paul would be the one to enter the Hellenistic world with the gospel. That's why he was given his own Easter vision of the risen Lord. You and I have not been given the same assignment as Paul, and therefore we need not wait for a special conversion experience in which the risen Lord appears to us to call us to our task.

[58] *Instruction in the faith.* We should note that after the Son of David appeared to this ravenous wolf, the newly converted Paul received instruction in the faith in a *normal manner*: in Damascus he was taught by a Christian named Ananias. In Paul's case, too, the Lord used the service of the Word to equip His servant for his task. Those who love to talk at length about a Pauline conversion should talk instead of childlike obedience to the revealed Word, as the great apostle who preached to the pagans did.

The Lord's message to Ananias, who was to instruct Paul in the faith, can be regarded as a "theme" for the rest of the book of Acts, just as 1:8 can be read as a theme. Ananias, who knew Saul by reputation and was reluctant to have anything to do with him, was told: "Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (9:15-16).

The blinding of Saul⁴ and his subsequent healing was a symbolic guarantee of the promise that he would reveal the Servant of the Lord to many as a light (see 13:47; 26:18; Is. 35:5; 42:7, 16; Luke 18:35ff; John 8:12; 9:5). Paul [59] immediately started to preach the gospel in Damascus. It wasn't long before the former apostle of the Sanhedrin found out what it means to suffer for Christ. He also appeared in Jerusalem. Barnabas, whom we will encounter later, introduced him to the apostles there.

Breaking through Jewish taboos. Luke gives us another example of the activities of the church outside Jerusalem when he tells us about Peter's work in Lydda and Joppa (9:32ff). Joppa, the place where Jonah once chose to go to sea rather than obey the command to preach to the heathen Assyrians, now became the place where Peter had a vision that prepared him to make a successful visit to a "God-fearing" Roman officer. Peter was to preach to this Roman and his family.

Still steeped in Jewish taboos, Peter had not yet reached the point where he would enter a heathen home where the Jewish laws about purity were not observed. But the Lord forced him to do so, giving Luke an opportunity to record a proclamation of the gospel to Cornelius, a Roman official who was one of the "God-fearing" Gentiles of the synagogue.

When Luke told this story, of course, he had his primary reader in mind, i.e. Theophilus, who knew about Cornelius's problem from his own experience. Hence Luke went into the story at considerable length. He also devoted a good deal of attention to Peter's report on this matter at Jerusalem, for it would be important to Theophilus to know how the church reacted.

No partiality in God. Luke was not one to sweep anything under the carpet, for he was well aware that those whom the church seeks to evangelize will not be won over properly if the church is idealized and its shortcomings are concealed. Yet he did make it clear that those who opposed Peter's action came around in the end. Like the Ethiopian

⁴ In 9:7 we read that those who were with Paul *heard the*, vice but *saw* no one. In 22:9 Paul declared that those who were with him *saw* the light but *did not hear* the voice speaking to him. In the face of this apparent discrepancy, it had been argued that Luke, as an ancient historian, faithfully recorded ... (some text is missing here) ... would devote a footnote to a conflicting version of an event or an alternate reading of a text based on some other manuscript. Now, there is no need to speak of conflicts or contradictions here, although there is undeniably some variation. What 9:7 tells us is that those who were with Paul heard a sound but did not see *anyone*. In 22:9 we are told that they did see a light, which is not the same as seeing a person, but did not hear any articulated words.

[60] eunuch, they saw nothing to prevent them—from following Peter's lead (8:36; 10:47; 11:17).

There is no partiality in God; He does not recognize any "master race." As Peter put it: "God does not show Favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. This is the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all" (10:34-6 NIV).

This section of the book of Acts concludes by telling us about the death of James, who was baptized with Jesus' baptism and forced to drink from the same cup of suffering from which Jesus drank (Mark 10:39; Col. 1:24). Peter was arrested during the time of the Passover, but the Lord freed him from Herod's power by way of an angel. James, the brother of Jesus, took his place in Jerusalem. Peter then went elsewhere since it was getting too hot for him in Jerusalem. The Lord was using this situation to spread the gospel further.

Antioch of Syria. In the Syrian city of Antioch (where Luke was born, according to tradition), there was already a church. Barnabas (who was originally from Cyprus) was sent to this church. This gave him an opportunity to pick up Paul, who was spending some time in his native city of Tarsus, which was nearby in Cilicia.

Thus we see that when it came to sending out evangelists to preach the gospel, the church considered the question who would be most suitable for a certain area. Barnabas, as a Jew of the Diaspora, knew how to get along with Greeks. Therefore he was sent to Antioch, where there were already Greeks in the church. Here the wall separating Jews and Gentiles had been broken through (11:20-1).

It was in this mighty city situated on the Orontes River that the followers of Jesus were first called *Christians*, i.e. partisans of Christ (11:26). Antioch was a living church [61] that not only felt keenly the necessity of *evangelistic work*, as we shall see later, but was also very sensitive to its responsibilities in *caring for the poor and needy*. It is Luke, again, who reports that the church in Antioch sent Paul and Barnabas to Jerusalem with gifts when it was prophesied that there would be a great famine there (11:27ff).

The church was not only established in Antioch but also in Phoenicia (Tyre and Sidon—see 21:1-5 and Luke 10:13-14) and Cyprus. The seed was scattered far and wide, just as plants use people, animals and even the wind to transport their seeds from one place to another.

6. First the Jew and Then the Greek (13:1-14:28)

Paul as a "missionary." The journey described for us in Acts 13 and 14 is usually called "Paul's first *missionary* journey." This name is not entirely accurate. First of all, Barnabas also played a very important role in what was accomplished on this tour. Moreover, was it Paul's very first undertaking as an evangelist? After his calling, he went to work in Damascus and Jerusalem (9:19ff). From there he went on to his native city of Tarsus and preached the gospel (Gal. 1:21, 23). The Letter to the Galatians reveals that Paul also proclaimed the gospel in Arabia, Syria and Cilicia. Thus, the man who left Antioch with Barnabas to preach the gospel to the wide world was not an unschooled worker but a man already trained and experienced in bringing the gospel. Finally, when we speak of a "*missionary* journey," we are inclined to think of someone who intends to "win souls" among the pagans. But that was not Paul's primary purpose.

When we talk about "missionary work," we think of [62] someone who goes into "virgin territory," preferably a primitive area covered with dense jungle. If we measure the tour of Paul and Barnabas by these criteria, we are greatly disappointed; we conclude that it wasn't a "missionary journey" after all. In 13:5, for example, we read that the two men preached the Word of God in the *Jewish synagogues* when they came to Cyprus. They did the same in Antioch of Pisidia (not to be confused with the other Antioch, in Syria) and again in Iconium (13:14; 14:1).

Using the Jewish base. First the choice was put to the covenant people: the existing "church" was called to reform itself. If the Jews refused to listen, then the evangelists would turn to the "Greeks." Moreover, in many cases these Greeks were not "virgin territory" either. Many of them were among the "God-fearing" Gentiles who came to the synagogues. Therefore they were acquainted with the Messianic promises of the Old Testament Scriptures!

In the time after Alexander the Great, the authorities encouraged many of the Jews to emigrate to the cities of Asia Minor. The idea was that the Jews, who were faithful to the state, would form a loyal counterpart to the freedom-loving Greek colonists already living in Asia Minor. (The native population, apparently, was not considered important.)

The growth of the church followed the path of Jewish emigration and made regular use of the contacts between the "synagogue" and the "Greeks," contacts that had grown up in all sorts of ways. The point to bear in mind is that a responsible program for spreading the gospel and making the church grow involved *beginning with Jerusalem* and then following the path where the Word had *already* been at work. From that Jewish base the gospel would reach ever wider circles of people. The Word was to be proclaimed first to the Jews and then to the ^[63] "Greeks." The "barbarians" (the name the Greeks used for non-Greeks) would get their turn in time.

Paul and Barnabas did not raise millions of dollars to assist "underdeveloped countries," nor did they preach revolution and resistance to any and all colonial and imperial powers. Instead they recognized the social patterns created by the Jewish, Greek and Roman emigration and colonization; they proceeded on the basis of the patterns that had been developed through the Word in the Mediterranean coastal areas. It was much later that "missionary work" was separated from "reforming the church" and turned into a special kind of adventure, thereby encouraging the stubborn misunderstanding that what the "missionary" does in some faraway land is entirely different from what the evangelist working in our own neighborhood does.

Paul and Barnabas sent out. In Antioch (Syria), the international opium den of sin where children and adults were still offered to the goddess Astarte, a flourishing church arose. There famous prophets and teachers from various areas (including someone who had been a friend of Herod Antipas in his youth) went about their work. Thus it was an unusual place and an unusual church. In a service (the same word is used in the Greek text as is used for the regular temple service in Luke 1:23), the Spirit gave a command: "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (13:2). Thus the initiative was taken by the Spirit of Jesus Christ!

Luke, in his gentle manner, now relates some of the events of this "missionary journey" that Paul and Barnabas undertook with John Mark. To get a good idea of the route followed by this team sent out by the church, you should keep a map at hand.

Opposition from the Jews. The shadow of Jewish ^[64] opposition was always present. We see this in the Jewish false prophet Bar-Jesus, whose name means *son of Joshua*. Like the Egyptian magicians who opposed Moses at the court of Pharaoh, Bar-Jesus opposed Barnabas and Paul at the court of the proconsul Sergius Paulus. As a result, he was struck temporarily with Egyptian darkness. The shadow of the Jewish presence was present in Antioch (Pisidia) as well, where Paul delivered a truly redemptive historical sermon in the synagogue, as well as in Iconium, Lystra and Derbe.

In his last letter to Timothy, written in Lystra, Paul thanks Timothy for his sympathetic support during his suffering in Antioch, Iconium and Lystra and during "all the persecutions I endured." He goes on: "Yet the Lord rescued me from all of them. In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted" (II Tim. 3:11-12 NIV; see also I Thess. 2:15-16).

The Jews did not give any evidence of a willingness to accept Jesus as the Messiah. Moreover, they were highly offended when Paul accepted Gentiles as full members of his sect. Again and again we see the Jews putting obstacles in the way of those who

preached the "new doctrine." Paul was even stoned after an incident at Lystra, but he survived (14:19; see also II Cor. 11:25).

A sermon in a synagogue. Paul's sermon in the synagogue at Antioch has been recorded for us by Luke as a specimen of Paul's preaching. Notice how he addresses his audience: "Men of Israel, and you that fear God, listen." Thus Theophilus could regard Paul's words as addressed to him too.

The content of this sermon is also striking. There is no sensationalism here, and no trace of a simplified gospel. All Paul does is *open the Scriptures* for his hearers.

Notice also the effect of his preaching. Not only the Jews but especially the God-fearing Gentiles want to hear ^[65] his gospel again. The following sabbath, when this traveling servant of the Word preaches once more, the synagogue is packed with Gentiles. This shows us that watered-down sermons do not make the church's membership grow: only an explanation of the law and the prophets in the light of Christ will bring light to the Gentiles.

A sermon in Lystra. Luke gives us a second sample of Paul's preaching. Because of the circumstances in which this second sermon was delivered—while they were in Lystra, Barnabas and Paul were mistaken for Zeus and Hermes making an inspection tour⁵—it has given rise to some serious misunderstandings.

It has been noted that the sermon Paul preached on this ^[66] occasion was much different from the one he delivered in the synagogue at Antioch. It is sometimes argued that it was a true "missionary sermon," for he began rhetorically with what the pagans already knew and did not include a single quotation from the Old Testament.

That may be, but what could we expect Paul to do in such circumstances? In Lystra he happened to be addressing a thoroughly heathen audience acquainted with certain sagas, but not with the Bible. Thus he couldn't very well preach as he had preached in Antioch. Yet, if you compare 14:15 and 17 with Psalm 146:6-7 and Jeremiah 5:24, you will see that even in this critical situation, Paul managed to work in a few echoes of Scripture. Thus Luke shows us how Paul, with the Old Testament in hand, appealed to his audience to turn away from the vanity of heathen life.

7. No Needless Burdens for Gentile Christians (15:1-35)

The debate about circumcision. Finally Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch. Some men from Judea arrived there as well, teaching that circumcision was required for Gentile Christians. Hence Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem to consult the leaders of the church.

In Jerusalem they encountered strong opposition from some former Pharisees. Peter rejected the arguments for circumcising Gentile Christians, and James (the brother of

⁵ According to an ancient story recorded by Ovid (*Metamorphoses*, VIII, 610-714), the gods Jupiter and Mercury (who were called *Zeus* and *Hermes* in Greek) went out to visit human beings incognito but were welcomed only by a man named Philemon (a name we know from a certain Bible book) and his wife Baucis. (These people even wanted to kill their goose, which was at the same time their "watchdog," for their guests.) The land of their inhospitable neighbors was turned into a marsh, but their house remained standing and became a temple. Philemon and Baucis were spared for each other and eventually became holy trees on the temple grounds (an oak and a linden).

It's highly probable that such a myth influenced the attitudes of the people in Lystra, who had not yet been Hellenized to any significant extent. (They still preferred to speak the Lycaonian language within their own circles.)

That Paul was taken for Hermes, a messenger of the gods, and that Barnabas, who performed no miracles, was hailed as Zeus, the highest of the gods, is entirely understandable when we bear in mind that a bearer of authority in that part of the world always spoke through a mediator. This naturally carried over into the realm of the gods.

Jesus) spoke of the conversion of the Gentiles as a fulfillment of God's promise to restore David's fallen house (Amos 9:11).

It was decided not to impose the yoke of the law on believers from other nations. In order not to make contact ^[67] with Jewish Christians difficult, however, they would be required to abstain from certain things, namely, eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols and had not been slaughtered in accordance with the Jewish ritual, consuming blood (Lev. 17), and engaging in unchaste acts. (This may have included marriage to people in the forbidden categories outlined in Leviticus 18.) But the Gentile Christians did *not* have to be circumcised, and they were not to be discriminated against in case they were not.

No needless offense. The main point in resolving the conflict was that "weaker" members of the church were not to be offended in any way. This was to be achieved by having everyone stay away from unchastity, blood, and improperly prepared meat. The church was to avoid giving the impression of being a revolutionary or undisciplined institution. In this way, Christian Jews and Christian Gentiles could sit at the same table to eat. The Jews did not have to be troubled in conscience at the thought of Gentile Christians living just as the "God-fearing" Gentiles who attached themselves to the synagogues lived. And the Christians drawn from the various nations were freed of the needless burden of circumcision. In this the church upheld its catholic character—starting in Jerusalem!

The bond between the churches. Judas and Silas, together with Paul and Barnabas, were instructed to go to the various churches with a letter in which this decision was recorded and explained. Here we see the ecclesiastical machinery at work. Yet, we would not be justified in characterizing the gathering described in Acts 15 as a "synod." It was actually no more than a meeting of the elders and apostles of the mother church, with a couple of representatives from Antioch present for advisory purposes. But this story does make it clear that some sort of connection was maintained between the churches. The ^[68] individual congregation made a point of staying in contact and showing their concern for each other.

Through this gathering, the work of Paul was officially recognized. Moreover, the incident involving Cornelius, through which Peter's attitude about the ceremonial law was changed, now became the basis for a principle accepted by the church. The decision made would be applied to further work among the Jews and "God-fearing" Gentiles of the Diaspora. Led by James, whose devotion to the law was well known, Jerusalem saw the fruits of the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles as a realization of the Messianic glory foretold by the prophets.

Listen to me, O coastlands (Is. 49:1).

8. Carrying the Gospel to the Greek Cities (15:36-19:41)

On to Macedonia. On various occasions Isaiah speaks of the "coastlands." (Some translations speak of "islands" instead.) By this he means the lands colonized by the sons of Javan (i.e. the Ionians or Greeks).

It is significant that this term comes up a number of times in connection with the servant of the Lord, who is called to proclaim the Word of the Lord, His torah, to the Diaspora (Is. 24:15; 51:5; 60:9-10). Now, Jesus Christ is *the* servant of the Lord. Should it surprise us, then, that Paul, who was commissioned by Christ to carry out the program of Isaiah 42:1-9 and 49:1-7, was sent by the Spirit to the western part of Asia Minor and to Greece? After all, the prophecies had to be fulfilled!

Because of a difference of opinion with Mark, who had ^[69] deserted him on an earlier trip, Paul takes Silas along when he leaves Antioch on his new expedition. (Silas, a Roman citizen, appears in I Peter 5:12 under his Latin name, *Silvanus*.) At Lystra Timothy joins them. The Spirit drives them through the interior of what is now called

Turkey all the way to the coast. At Troas⁶ Paul sees a vision of a Macedonian crying out: "Come over to Macedonia and help us" (16:9). After all, the coastlands are waiting for instruction in the law! (Is. 42:4).

Paul in Philippi. The first city where they went to work was Philippi. Like Lystra and Antioch (Pisidia), it was a Roman colony where veterans of the imperial army lived. The evangelists sought to build on the work of the synagogues. Again, the heart of a *woman* (i.e. Lydia) was opened to the preaching, and she in turn opened her home to the missionaries. Luke lodged there as well. When he reported on the events at Philippi, then, Luke was speaking as an eyewitness. Philippi was a congregation where Paul, who did not readily accept anything from anyone, allowed the people to provide for his support.

Thus there was the beginning of a church in Philippi. But Satan was also on the scene. No doubt you've heard of the Python, which is a kind of snake. The name is borrowed from Greek mythology, where a dragon named Python is said to have defeated Apollo.

In Delphi there was an oracle that spoke through a priestess called the Pythia. Now then, there was a slave girl in Philippi in whom the ancient Pythian spirit was alleged ^[70] to dwell. Whatever the source of her power, she was able to predict the future. This slave girl followed Paul and his associates crying out: "These men are servants of the Supreme God, and are declaring to you a way of salvation!" (16:17 NEB). Luke points out how Satan was trying to turn *the* way of salvation into one of a number of ways of salvation.

Because Paul did not want such satanic advertising, he drove the evil spirit out of the girl. As a result, her Macedonian owners were no longer able to make money from her abilities in fortune-telling. Hence Paul and Silas soon found themselves in jail, after receiving a beating. During the night they sang psalms (perhaps Psalms 18 and 99). There followed an earthquake, which led to the jailer's accepting the gospel. The next morning the Roman authority itself corrected the misdeed against Paul and Silas (who were Roman citizens) and personally escorted the two men out of the city.

In this incident Paul insisted on his rights—for the sake of the church in Philippi. The whole city took note of his strange departure in the company of Roman magistrates and officers. For a while the congregation in Philippi had nothing to fear from the Roman authorities.

If Paul had followed the letter of the Sermon on the Mount in this situation, he would have acted contrary to its spirit! This incident gives us an example of Paul's forceful sense of humor and his desire to protect the congregation.

Thessalonica and Athens. The next stop was Thessalonica. Paul later wrote two letters to the congregation there. To understand those letters properly, we must bear in mind that the Jews were very hostile to him when he first arrived (see I Thess. 1:6ff; 2:14; II Thess. 1:4ff; 2:1ff) and even caused trouble for him when he was in other cities.

In Athens Paul gave an example of how to preach to the ^[71] intelligentsia of Greece. He was summoned to appear before the Areopagus, which was probably not the hill of that name by the Pantheon but a council that met at the marketplace (the *Agora*). That council would determine whether Paul would be allowed to preach in Athens.

Many strange views and attitudes have been attributed to Paul because of what he said on this occasion. It is argued that he accommodated himself to his distinguished audience by simplifying the gospel and working in some ideas borrowed from pagan philosophers. It is not to be denied, of course, that this sermon differs from the sermon in the synagogue in Antioch (ch. 13). Paul did not play the role of the bull in the china

⁶ It is clear from the ruins that this city, which occupied a strategic position on the coast not far from the Dardanelles and ancient Troy, was enormous. Julius Caesar and Constantine the Great both gave consideration to making Troas the capital city of the empire. Could it be that Luke once served there as physician?

shop. Yet, if you read his sermon carefully, you can't help but notice that it is full of Old Testament expressions.⁷

[72] The *wise* men of Athens are accused of sinful *ignorance*. They worship an unknown God (17:23), an undefined something. Here Paul alludes to the Greek nihilism of the Epicureans, who believed that God is "unknowable," and of the Stoics, who did nothing to block all the foolishness of the temples and the images of the gods.

Paul proclaimed to them a God who reveals Himself; he appealed to them to repent and seek forgiveness, explaining that God "has fixed a day on which he will *judge* the world (*oikoumené*) in *righteousness* by a man whom he has appointed." Of this God has "given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead" (17:31).

To these pagans who had "arrived," Paul brought the true Biblical gospel in a flamboyant way! Dionysius was probably the reporter who filled Luke in on what Paul said in Athens (17:34).

Paul in Corinth. Paul's contact with the synagogue in the great port of Corinth led to a conflict that became even more intense when a "church" sprang up next to the "synagogue." In a vision Paul received the Immanuel promise: "I have many [covenant] people in this city" (18:10).

Here Luke, who was writing for Theophilus, points out that the proconsul Gallio, who was a brother of the Stoic philosopher Seneca, did not permit the Jews to discriminate against "Christianity" and rob it of its status as a tolerated religion. Sosthenes, who succeeded Crispus as leader of the synagogue when the latter became a Christian, even received a beating as a result of his opposition to the gospel. "But Gallio paid no attention to this," Luke reports (18:17), making it clear to Theophilus that the church's primary enemy was not the state but the apostate church.

To gain a proper understanding of Paul's letters to the Corinthians, we must remember that the church there was [73] not entirely made up of Gentiles but actually arose when a group *seceded* from the synagogue. Thus the church at Corinth existed in perpetual antithesis to the synagogue.

Paul in Ephesus. Via Ephesus Paul traveled back to Antioch, returning to this metropolis in Asia Minor by land. In Ephesus, too, the church was born of a *secession* from the synagogue.

Paul worked in this city for a long time. For two years he taught in the school of a man named Tyrannus, who may have been a teacher of rhetoric. According to an ancient manuscript, Paul made himself available to those who sought instruction from 11 A.M. to 6 P.M. (These would not be the wisest hours to choose, for the "siesta" fell within this period.)

⁷ Compare the following expressions drawn from this sermon with the Old Testament passages indicated: "made the world" in vs. 24 with Gen. 1; Ex. 20:11; Ps. 146:6; Is. 42:5; 66:2;

"does not live in shrines made by man" in vs. 24 with I Kings 8:27; Is. 66:1;

"nor is he served by human hands" in vs. 25 with Ps. 50:8-12; "gives ... breath" in vs. 25 with Gen. 2:7; Ps. 104:29; Is. 42:5; Dan. 5:23; "made from one" in vs. 26 with Gen. 1:27; 2:21-2; Mal. 2:10;

"determined ___ the boundaries of their habitation" in vs. 26 with Deut. 32:8; Ps. 74:17;

"seek God ... feel after him and find him" in vs. 27 with Deut. 4:7, 29; Ps. 145:18; Is. 55:6;

"In him we live" in vs. 28 with Dan. 5:23; Ps. 104:27; 145:16; Job 12:10;

"the Deity is [not] like gold, or silver, or stone" in vs. 29 with Deut. 4:28; Ps. 115:4; 135:15; Is. 40:18ff; 44:9-20; 46:5ff; Jer. 10:3ff;

"judge the world in righteousness" in vs. 31 with Ps. 9:9; 96:13; 98:9;

"he has fixed a day" in vs. 31 with Amos 5:18, 20; Joel 2:1ff.

The Word of the Lord grew and prevailed (19:20). The books of the magicians were burned. The uproar caused by the silversmith's guild is an indication of how much progress the gospel had made. The service of Artemis (the ancient goddess Astarte) was on the decline.

*Your gates shall be open continually;
day and night they shall not be shut;
that men may bring to you the wealth
of the nations (Is. 60:11).*

9. From Pentecost to Pentecost (20:1-21:16)

The harvest among the pagans. At the beginning of his second volume, Luke tells us about Pentecost. Near the end of this book we hear about Pentecost again: we are told that Paul was traveling to Jerusalem in the hope of arriving in time to celebrate Pentecost (20:16).

[74] This is a case of the end being better than the beginning, 1 or at the first Pentecost the harvest was made up of the Jews and their followers only. At the end of Acts, however, Paul was traveling to Jerusalem with a group of *converted pagans* who were bringing offerings that had been gathered for the "saints," i.e. the church in *Jerusalem* (24:17; see also I Cor. 16:1ff; II Cor. 8-9).

Paul was accompanied by a deputation from the newly established congregations in the "coastlands". Isaiah 60 was being fulfilled: the nations traveled to the mountain of the house of the Lord (Is. 2:2ff; Micah 4:1ff). When Pagans obey the voice of the Servant of the Lord, will the Jews become jealous?

Paul's travel companions represent the harvest among the pagans, as a survey of their origin shows. With him Nere Sopater (from Beroea, in Macedonia), Aristarchus and Secundus (from Thessalonica, also in Macedonia), Gaius (from Derbe, in eastern Asia Minor), Timothy, from Lystra, also in eastern Asia Minor), and Tychicus and Trophimus (from the Ephesus area of western Asia Minor).

Another fateful journey to Jerusalem. Luke's second book, like his first, devotes a great deal of space to a journey to Jerusalem, the city that kills and persecutes the prophets. Just as Luke reports three occasions on which Christ referred to the suffering awaiting Him, he reports three references by Paul to his coming suffering (20:22-3; 21:4, 11).

A dark shadow falls over the harvest feast (Pentecost). Paul knows that he must take the path laid out for him (20:24). The dangers are not just external—from the Jews—but also internal: heresy rears its ugly head (vs. 29). In the face of these dangers, Paul sets an example by declaring: "For myself, I set no store by life; I only want to finish the race, and complete the task which the Lord Jesus [75] assigned to me, of bearing my testimony to the gospel of God's grace" (20:24 NEB).

Paul and his companions (including Luke) live by the third petition of the Lord's Prayer: "The will of the Lord be done" (21:14). In the strength of that will, the deputation from the coastland churches travels on to Zion.

*Woe to her that is rebellious and
defiled, the oppressing city!
(Zeph. 3:1).*

10. The Gospel under Fire (21:17-26:32)

Jewish extremists. When Paul arrived in Jerusalem, the Christians there praised God when they heard his story about the fruit of the work among the heathens. Because some people were saying that Paul was advising the Jews not to live by the torah any

longer, the leaders in Jerusalem asked him to take a Nazirite vow together with four other Jewish Christians, in order to refute these rumors publicly. Paul yielded to this request—without thereby sacrificing any of his principles.

There was already mention of such a vow in 18:18. And Timothy, who was Jewish on his mother's side, agreed to be circumcised for the sake of the Jews (16:3). Thus there was no difference of opinion between Paul and the elders in Jerusalem. As Calvin points out, Paul was not acting hypocritically in this situation: he yielded for the sake of the Jewish extremists. All he did was to free himself from an unfair accusation.

Rejection in Jerusalem. This safety precaution led to Paul's arrest. He was seen in Jerusalem in the company of Trophimus of Ephesus. When Jews from that area of Asia [76] Minor later saw Paul in the temple, they assumed that Trophimus must have been with him. Now, Gentiles were strictly forbidden to enter the part of the temple known as the Court of Israel, for their presence there or anywhere beyond would profane the temple.

The Jews who assumed that Trophimus had indeed been with Paul in the temple regarded this desecration as the natural outcome of Paul's "revolutionary rejection" of the law of Moses. This led to a great uproar. Soldiers from the nearby Roman Antonia barracks appeared on the scene, believing that some terrorist leader was on the loose. After they rescued Paul from the mob, he was arrested.

Before he was taken away, Paul was allowed to address the people in the temple in their own language. "Brethren and

lathers, hear the defense which I now make before you" (22:1). The Sanhedrin's former grand inquisitor talked about the reversal in his own life and revealed that it was *in the temple* that the Lord had told him to preach to the Gentiles (vs. 17ff). Again Jerusalem refused to listen. "Rid the earth of the man! He is not fit to live!" (vs. 22 JB).

Within the Sanhedrin, the Pharisees took Paul's side. Jesus appeared to Paul during the night and said: "Take courage, for as you have testified about me at Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also at Rome" (23:11). Because Jerusalem refused to listen, Paul would have to appeal to the emperor.

A plot was hatched against Paul. The Sadducees in the highest levels of the priesthood were involved. Luke was in Jerusalem when these things happened and reported once more—as he had done so often before—that Jerusalem had not yet renounced the habit of killing the prophets sent to her.

An appeal to Roman officials. Under heavy guard Paul was transferred to Caesarea, a city on the seacoast where [77] the Roman procurator (Felix) had his residence. He defended his actions before this procurator or governor, who knew a good deal about "the way" (24:1). The case dragged on for two years, for Felix was not above taking bribes.

When Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, the Jews tried to arrange for Paul to be transferred to Jerusalem so that they could attack him on the way. Apparently the conspirators had temporarily suspended their oath not to eat or drink until they had killed Paul (23:12).

Paul's strategy was to appeal to the emperor. A special meeting was arranged to give him an opportunity to present his case before a number of local dignitaries. Festus, of course, would have to have some idea what to write about Paul to his master, the emperor Nero (25:26). The vassal king Herod Agrippa, who had come to greet the new procurator, was also present at the meeting, accompanied by his sister Bernice.

Paul's "apologia." It is even possible that Luke himself heard Paul's "apologia." The magnanimity of the Roman official, which was described at length by the expert reporter Luke, who seemed to miss nothing of the proceedings, contrasts sharply with the plotting and malevolence of the Jews. Theophilus would no doubt be interested in what

other "most excellent" highly placed officials would do in such a case.

In his speech Paul first addressed Herod Agrippa, the "king of the Jews," who at that time ruled over part of Galilee and had the right to appoint the high priest in Jerusalem. We should not regard the content of Acts 26 as a needless repetition of what Acts 9 and 22 already tell us, even though all three chapters deal with Paul's "conversion story." What Luke describes for us here is a final witness being raised to the risen Lord in the land of Israel. For ^[78] the last time, the authorities heard an appeal to listen to the voice of God as it comes through in the Scriptures:

It is because of my hope in what God has promised our fathers that I am on trial today. This is the promise our twelve tribes are hoping to see fulfilled as they earnestly serve God day and night. Your Majesty, it is because of this hope that the Jews are accusing me. But I have had God's help to this very day, and so I stand here and testify to small and great alike [i.e. to both common people and prominent people]. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles (26:6-7, 22-3 NIV; see also Is. 42:6; 49:6).

No one in Paul's audience wanted to take the step of becoming a "Christian." But the general opinion, which may have been communicated to the emperor, was that Paul was innocent. (Here we can't help but think of Pilate's opinion of the charges against Jesus.) Festus refused to favor the Jews by turning Paul over to them (25:16). For Theophilus the conclusion was obvious: it was Jewish resistance to the gospel that drove Paul to Rome. Soon the measure of their sins would be full.

11. Paul Preaches Openly and Unhindered (27:1-28:31)

Preserved for the sake of the gospel. Luke must have kept a detailed log during the sea journey to Rome, for he gives us a vivid description of the trip and the shipwreck on the way. Scholars have checked his use of nautical terms and have concluded that he knew what he was talking ^[79] about, just as when he described the precise ranks and positions of the various Roman officials.

It is apparent from Luke's account of the trip that Paul had some good advice to give about traveling during that particular season (27:9ff). The gospel is not blind to practical knowledge. On this journey, indeed, "the world" (i.e. unbelievers on the ship) is spared for the sake of "the church."

From the mouth of an angel, Paul had heard: "Do not be afraid, Paul. You are destined to appear before Caesar, and for this reason God grants you the safety of all who are sailing with you" (27:24 JB). When the ship ran aground, it turned out that "the world" was not an ark for "the church" but "the church" for "the world." For the sake of the gospel, the earth is preserved.

Rejected by the Jews in Rome. After many adventures Paul arrived in Rome, where he pressed the leaders of the Jews to commit themselves on the question whether to declare their solidarity with the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem. On the basis of Scripture, he expounded to them the Kingdom of God as it had come in Christ. The Word of the Lord spoken to Isaiah at the time of his calling seemed to apply to most of these Jews: although they saw and heard, they neither perceived nor understood (Is. 6:9-10; Matt. 13:14-15; Luke 10:23-4; John 9:40-1; 12:40).

When you read about the calling of Isaiah, bear in mind that he was ordered to preach so that hearts would be hardened—"until cities *lie waste*" (Is. 6:11). Because the synagogues from Jerusalem to Rome refused to accept the Jews as the Messiah, the judgment on the city and the holy place was set. Bear this in mind, Theophilus!

Christ's gospel unleashed. On the other hand, the preaching of the gospel of the Kingdom of God continued to advance. In fact, it advanced *unhindered!* This is the ^[80] note on which Luke ends: he describes Paul in Rome "preaching the kingdom of God

and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ quite openly and unhindered" (28:31).

Luke could stop here because there is nothing more we need to know. Some scholars have expressed the opinion that he actually intended to write a trilogy, with the third volume to be devoted to the rest of Paul's life (about which we are naturally curious). But was it ever Luke's intention to write a biography of *Paul*? Didn't he write his chronicle instead to describe the progress of *Christ's* work?

Luke describes how Peter and Paul, as two witnesses of the risen Lord, went about their work as apostles. He shows us how similar they were (when we disregard some personal idiosyncrasies), just as Elijah and Elisha were similar—and even Moses and Elijah, for that matter. That similarity was rooted in fundamental agreement. Peter was not preaching a special gospel of his own to be distinguished from Paul's gospel or theology. Both apostles preached the same good news.

No power in the world could hold them back; they did what they had to do, despite the opposition of various rulers, the nation of Israel, the temple, and the synagogues. Jesus' prophecy was indeed fulfilled: "But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake. This will be a time for you to bear testimony" (Luke 21:12-13). How amazing that the testimony could go on *unhindered!*

[81] Romans

1. Arming the Church in Rome for the Struggle

The longest letter. The Letter to the Romans is the longest of the letters in the New Testament. It contains about 7100 words. When you bear in mind that Cicero's longest letter is about 4500 words, you can well see that the writing of this lengthy epistle was an unusual event in those days.

That the Letter to the Romans is placed before any of Paul's other letters in the canon is due to its length and has nothing to do with the time when it was written. I Corinthians comes next with 6800 words. Then follow II Corinthians (4600 words), Galatians (2300 words), Ephesians (2400 words), Philippians (1700 words), Colossians (1750 words), I Thessalonians (1550 words), II Thessalonians (850 words), and finally the letters addressed to individuals.

Concern for Jerusalem. Paul wrote this extensive letter when he was about to leave Corinth to go to Jerusalem as part of the delegation sent by the churches of Greece and [82] Asia Minor to present a collection for the relief of the mother church in Jerusalem. He was well aware that going to Jerusalem was a dangerous thing to do. He asked the church in Rome to pray for him, so that "I may be delivered from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my service for Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints" (15:31).

Between the lines we read Paul's plea to the congregation in Rome to maintain close ties with the original congregation in Jerusalem.

As you read the Letter to the Romans, remember that Paul was facing *Jerusalem*. He did not want to break the bend with the "navel of the earth," the place from which salvation had spread across the globe, for this bond had grown and developed throughout redemptive history. He also hoped that his fellow Jews would become jealous in a healthy sense when they saw how many Gentiles had been led to faith in Jesus as the Messiah.

Looking west. On the other hand, Paul was also thinking about Rome, the capital city of the Roman empire, when he wrote this letter. Not only must the bond with Jerusalem be maintained, the gospel must be spread throughout the world *before* Jerusalem is judged (Matt. 24:14).

Paul's work of establishing churches in the *east* had been brought to a certain completion (15:28). Now he wanted to move on the *west*, to Spain. He hoped he would receive support and encouragement from the Christian church that already existed in Rome, a church well known for its faithfulness to the confession. Paul hoped that this church would serve as a springboard for him on his way to Spain (15:24). Therefore, to strengthen his ties with the Christians in Rome, he wrote them a letter.

The Jews in Rome. If you bear in mind that Paul was "en route" to Jerusalem, it will not strike you as strange [83] that he should devote so much attention in this letter to the relation between the church and gospel, on the one hand, and the teachings of the Jews, on the other. Instruction on this point was just what the church in Rome needed.

In the year 50, the emperor Claudius had decreed that all Jews were to leave Rome (Acts 18:2). But when Nero took over as emperor in the year 54, the Jews were again free to live in Rome. Paul wrote his letter about three or four years after that, when Jewish emigration to Rome was already underway. This meant that the Christian church was being confronted with the question of how to judge the synagogue, for the synagogue claimed to be the "true church." What was the church to say to those who maintained that Gentile Christians had to be circumcised?

The Jews must have represented a powerful force in Rome. (Extensive Jewish catacombs, still in existence today, are an indication of this!) Their presence in Rome called for some balanced reflection. On the one hand, the church in Rome must not be overwhelmed by the legalistic spirit of the Jews. On the other hand, it must not forget

that "salvation is from *the Jews*" (John 4:22).

The continuing debate with the Jews. The Letter to the Romans, like the book of Acts, does not have "*from Jerusalem to Rome*" as its theme, contrary to what some writers have argued. To the very end, Jerusalem has a strong grip on Paul as well as Rome.

In this calm letter to a church he does not know personally, Paul reports on his continuing debates with the Jews and those Christians who taught false doctrines under the influence of the Jews. Thus he arms the church in Rome—and other Gentile congregations as well—to fight for the gospel and not surrender it in the midst of all the Jews of the Diaspora. Paul hands out weapons, using solid exegesis to respond to twisted uses of Scripture. He makes it clear what the real issue in redemptive history is.

[84] Paul could not be in Rome himself since God's appointed time had not yet come (see Acts 19:21; 23:11; Rom. 1:13). Therefore he worked out his thoughts in this long letter, which he wrote at Corinth (halfway between Rome and Jerusalem), in the hope that it would be helpful to those who were fighting the same old battle.

2. The Lord Our Righteousness (1:1-17)

The major themes. In ancient times a letter would begin with an identification of the author. Then came the name of the person addressed, followed by a greeting. Each of Paul's letters begins with these elements, although he does not follow this scheme in a formalistic way. The way he starts a given letter depends on his purpose in writing.

The opening of Romans is in harmony with the content of the entire letter. Paul identifies himself as an apostle and declares that his gospel is in agreement with the Scriptures. Moreover, he points out that Christ has already brought about obedience of faith among all the nations through Paul's preaching. Thus the letter's major themes are mentioned at the very outset.

The heart of the letter. Paul declares that he longs to come to Rome to preach the gospel there, for the gospel is "the power of God for salvation to every one who *has faith*, to the Jew first and also to the *Greek*. For in it the *righteousness* of God is revealed *through faith for faith* " (1:16-17). This sums up the heart of the letter. The first question that arises is: What does Paul mean by the "righteousness of God"?

When we read the Old Testament, we are struck by how often we come across the term *righteousness*. David prays: [85] "In thy righteousness deliver me" (Ps. 31:1). Jeremiah gives the Messiah the following name: "The LORD is our righteousness" (Jer. 23:6). Elsewhere we read that when the Lord intervened to save His people, He "put on righteousness as a breastplate" (Is. 59:17).

It is apparent from these passages that God's "righteousness" is not some virtue in the sense of giving "to each his own." When the Bible speaks of God's righteousness, it means His redemptive deeds on behalf of His people. When God acts righteously, He acts out of *grace*. Yahweh avenges the blood of His servants. He stands up for His people, who are called to believe in Him. God justifies His people and pronounces them "not guilty."

"*Through faith for faith.* " The "righteous" man is not the one who deserves to be acquitted because of his own merits but the poor man or sinner who seeks refuge in the Lord. During the dark night of judgment, Habakkuk had declared that the righteous shall live by faith, but the Jews distorted this statement as they made it fit into their own system of thought. A Qumran commentary explains that it applies to all those in Judah who keep the law (the torah), for on the basis of their *works* and their faith in the one who explains the law, God will preserve them from judgment.

Paul's work was much like the work of people who restore paintings. He removed all the paint and preservatives added later to expose God's gracious deliverance in Christ to the clear light of day. Over against the teaching of the Jews (salvation on the basis of works-righteousness), he placed his "through faith for faith."

For Paul, *faith* is what really counts. By emphasizing this point, he revealed the saving power of the gospel for all ages.

[86] *The Reformation discovery.* In the days when Luther was still a monk, he asked himself anxiously: Does God's righteousness mean that He will punish *all* sins? How could It, Luther, possibly love the righteous God who punishes sinners? He couldn't. Instead he grew to hate Him—not to the point of falling into outright blasphemy but enough to murmur against Him.

Luther viewed the situation roughly as follows. First of all, the poor sinner is struck by all sorts of misfortunes because of original sin and because of his inability to keep the ten commandments. Then, to make matters even worse, God uses the *gospel* to threaten him with His righteousness and wrath.

Against this background, we can understand what a relief it was for Luther when he finally understood what Paul was getting at in Romans, when he came to see that God's righteousness is not bad news at all but the good news of His redemptive acts on behalf of believing sinners. The entire Reformation followed Luther on this point.

3. Neither Gentile Nor Jew Righteous before God (1:18-3:20)

The law trampled underfoot. Paul saw it every day in Corinth with his own eyes: the pagans suppressed the knowledge they once had and gave themselves over to idolatry. This aroused the Lord's wrath. Because they closed their eyes to His revelation in "nature," He let them loose in the realm of the "unnatural."

This was especially apparent in their sexual perversion, but in fact all the commandments of the "second table" of the law were trampled underfoot by those who ignored the [87] commandments of the "first table." They sinned openly and eagerly, applauding anyone who joined in (1:18-32).

But were the *Jews* any better? Many of them were materialistic immigrants. They had no excuse for their wickedness, for they possessed the covenant law, which was written for their benefit and was intended to be a light in the darkness (2:19). Moreover, they were proud of being circumcised as a token of their inclusion in the covenant. Yet, all this did not keep them from breaking every last commandment.

Under the power of sin. God is not a respecter of persons; He does not play favorites. Won't the *Jews*, then, be even more subject to wrath than the *Gentiles*, who do not have God's law? (2:9-10). "First the Jew and then the Greek" also means that the *Jews* are first in line for *covenant wrath*. They know the way so well.

Paul's conclusion is that "all men, both *Jews* and *Greeks*, are under the power of sin" (3:9). Paul gives us each a calling card on which we find various statements from the psalms and prophets. "If thou, O LORD, shouldst mark iniquities"

4. The Gospel of Forgiveness in the Old Testament (3:21-5:21)

Pure grace. Up to this point Paul has sketched a hopeless situation. At 3:21, however, comes a great turn: in God there is forgiveness, he announces. God's righteousness, which redeems us and pronounces us not guilty, has become manifest in Jesus Christ. Anyone who believes is acquitted and declared righteous—freely, as a matter of pure grace.

[88] Hasn't the believer earned God's wrath? Of course he has! Yet, God allowed Jesus to sacrifice Himself as an offering of atonement. Jesus bore the punishment for us. Therefore God can justify all who cling to Jesus in faith.

There is no room for glorying in human achievements, Clem Those who wish to boast should boast about the Lord, who justifies believing *Jews* and *Gentiles* alike.

Abraham justified by faith. The *Jews* believed that their salvation was founded in Abraham's achievements, and they regarded circumcision as a seal on their

righteousness through works. But Paul shows from Scripture that Abraham was justified by his *faith*. We read that when Abraham was still uncircumcised, his faith was "reckoned to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). Not until Genesis 17 was circumcision instituted.

Circumcision, then, is not a seal on righteousness achieved through works but a seal of "the righteousness which he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised" (14:11). In the process, Abram became Ab-raham, that is, he father of many nations, the father of all believers. Humanly speaking Abraham was dead, but he possessed an Easter faith in the One who gives life to the dead (Is. 26:19; Deut. 32:39) and "calls into existence the things that do not exist" (4:17).

Easter faith and righteousness. Anyone who possesses this Easter faith shares in the same righteousness. Christ was "put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (vs. 25).

Thus Paul has reason to sing. Through one man (Adam), sin came into the world—and, with it, the curse on all men, the kingly dominion of death. But through *the* Man (Jesus Christ), a wealth of grace has been made manifest. Through His obedience, many will be justified (5:17-21).

[89] If only the later church of Rome had clung to this gospel instead of allowing itself to be led astray by a faith in human achievements! How important it is for newly established churches on the mission fields to take Paul's words to heart, so that they will not make the mistake of trading in the true gospel for a Humanistic or "social" gospel! And how dangerous it is when the first Adam is used as a "lesson" for us and is so presented in preaching! Adam's sin—and our sin with him—is no fable or symbol. It is a reality, just as our justification through the last Adam is a reality—and not the form in which a mere moral lesson or example is presented to us.

5. Life Renewed by Grace (6:1-8:8)

No license to live in sin. During the Reformation era, there were people who feared that the "new teachings" about grace would give rise to a generation of carefree and ultimately godless people. The Jews who opposed Paul's teaching raised the same question. If God's grace is manifested in our sin, doesn't this give us a license to live in sin? Since we are no longer under the law, shall we sin so that grace may abound?

With all his strength Paul rejects the accusation that Christ's teachings amount to a "comfortable" faith that will succeed only in turning swine into pigs. Anyone who is baptized is placed in communion with Christ, who died and rose from the grave. This means that sin (the old nature) is crucified and buried with Christ, but also that we are *resurrected* with Christ. Those who are baptized are called to *live a new life* through the power of Christ.

Hence those who wish to live by grace will not cut corners but will do all they can to place their bodies—indeed, [90] their entire lives—in the service of obedience. Chapter 6 of Romans could well be entitled "I Serve the One to Whom I Belong ?!"

Sin and the law. Meanwhile, Paul also declared: "You are not under law but under grace" (6:14). Before we draw any hasty conclusions, we should note that Paul introduces this statement by saying: "Sin will have no dominion over you." Is the law to be *rejected*, then? We must be careful not to attribute to Paul views that he never held!

Paul does not mean to denigrate the law: "The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good" (7:12). It is through the law that we know our sins (vs. 7). At the same time, we must recognize that sin makes use of the law in a certain way, just as it did in Paradise—to activate our evil desires, to mislead us, to kill us. Why does a child always want to do just what is forbidden?

Paul's experience is that the law of sin defeats him constantly, even though he knows better (7:13ff). "Wretched man that I am!" he cries out, using a phrase that also occurs in Revelation 3:17. He then asks: "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (vs.

24). What he means, of course, is that the body is still under the influence of sin and is therefore subject to death.

Yet, Paul's meditation reaches the same climax that we find in 3:21. In triumph he cries out: "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death" (7:25; 8:1-2). It's not without reason that the Heidelberg Catechism (1563) borrows its threefold division into misery, redemption and gratitude from this passage of Scripture.

Paul does not deny, then, that sin continues to exercise its influence. He speaks of sin as "the flesh." Although he does not despise the body or look down on it, he does ^[91] maintain that we have sin "in the blood," as it were. Sin is the queen dominating the man of flesh and blood— and ultimately killing him.

A rule of gratitude. For this very reason, Christ became a man of flesh and blood—to fulfill the demands of the law and to condemn sin "in the flesh." That's the significance of Advent: Christ became one of us and gave us the Spirit to help us in our struggle against "the flesh."

No longer need we fear the condemnation of the law, for we have been freed from the law. But this does not mean that it is not important to obey the law. In Christ we get the law back—as a rule of gratitude for living according to the Spirit.

6. Living by the Spirit (8:9-39)

Heirs of the new creation. There are some who make a distinction between two grades of Christians: those who merely "believe" and those who have "received the Spirit." The latter, of course, are regarded as superior Christians. This is a false contrast, for Paul says: "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ (8:9 NIV).

This statement can be inverted and formulated in positive terms: anyone who belongs to Christ has the Spirit of Christ. This Spirit sees to it that we live obediently, struggling against "the flesh." The Spirit also ensures that we are resurrected daily and will one day arise bodily from our graves. There is a new creation ahead!

All who allow themselves to be led by the Spirit in their day-to-day lives are sons of God. This means that they are heirs—heirs with Christ, heirs of the new creation.

^[92] *Hope for the whole creation.* All around us we hear the groaning of the creation, which has been subject to the curse of sin since the time of Paradise—because of us and against its own will. But this "sighing" of the creation is not a hopeless sighing. Together with God's children, the creation looks forward to the day when it will be freed from the oppressive curse.

The creation is not a ruin or a chaos: it is like a woman suffering labor pains. Anxiously it awaits the rebirth of heaven and earth. Bear this in mind next time you're involved in a discussion of pollution and the runaway technology of the megalopolis gobbling up the countryside.

God has promised that He will not give up His creation. The creation lives in *hope!* The children of God also sigh in joyful expectation, and they are joined in their sighing by still another, i.e. the Holy Spirit, who, as a pledge of the coming deliverance, pleads for them.

More than conquerors. The exalted Savior pleads in heaven and stands up for the believers in the great case being made against Satan. Salvation is more than a mere possibility or a matter of good luck. God will carry out His plans. Those whom He has chosen He will surely call.

In the gospel we hear the voice of the God who chooses and redeems us. Through faith we see our *rights* firmly established in heaven. After all, could persecution or peril

possibly separate us from the love of God? Of course not! Through faith we are more than conquerors (8:37).

[93] 7. God Remembers His Promises and Threats (9:1-11:36)

Not an inheritance. It's just as though Paul hears someone raising an objection after his doxology. Although he is writing to the Romans, whom he does not know, in his mind's eye he sees the Jews with whom he often debates. He also hears the voices of church members who have questions to raise. If God's calling is so powerful, why does most of Israel refuse to believe?

The apostle begins his response by declaring that he would gladly give up his share in Christ for the sake of his brothers in the flesh. (Moses once made a similar offer.) How painful it was to him that the covenant people formed an "anti-church"!

Yet, their refusal to believe should not lead anyone to assume that God's promises are not reliable, that they fall away one by one like leaves falling from a tree. The fact is that many who claim the beautiful name *Israel* are *not* part of the new Israel being gathered by Christ. Being a descendant of Abraham does not guarantee anyone a share in the Messianic glory. Grace is not something we inherit from our fathers.

God's sovereignty. At the beginning of Israel's redemptive history, the Lord already showed that He does not bind Himself to blood or descent. Look at Abraham's children, for example. Think of all the nations that trace their descent to Abraham. Yet, in His sovereign grace the Lord chose *Isaac* to be the bearer of the Messianic promise. In Isaac's tents we see God's free sovereignty in operation again: Esau, the older son, is made subservient to Jacob, the younger son. "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" (9:13; Mal. 1:2-3).

God carries out His promises, but He does so for His own sake—because He *chooses* to do so. He leaves no ^[94] room for glorying in "blood and the soil". The conclusion Paul draws for his readers is that the Lord's will must also triumph in the case of the Jews. He remains the God of el action, the God for whom physical descent is not the decisive factor.

Objection: Isn't this unfair? Answer: Did Israel object when God hardened Pharaoh's heart? Not at all! All Israel still remembers the exodus gratefully, for God's righteousness and mercy were manifest in it. Well then, Israel has no right to complain when the sovereign God uses the same method and chooses to harden Israel, which has become an anti-Messianic "Egypt."

Objection: Why complain about Israel, then? If God's purpose is unshakable, why does He still admonish Israel? Answer: The potter can do as he pleases with the clay. The Lord has the right to select certain objects of wrath and certain objects of mercy.

Gentiles engrafted. Objects of mercy! That's what we are, Paul exclaims jubilantly. We are the ones "whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles" (9:24). God has preserved a "remnant" for Himself. The Jews fall because of the stumbling block, but the Gentiles become sons of the living God.

God has not left Himself without witnesses. There have been preachers of the gospel among Jews the world over. These preachers made known the testimony that the people of the covenant had a right to hear (10:18; Ps. 19:4). But most of the Jews refused to listen.

Did God reject His people, then? Not at all. God keeps His promises. Isn't Paul himself an obedient son of Abraham? And he's not the only one. It's just as in Elijah's day, when God in His grace chose to preserve a "remnant," the "seven thousand." Covenant wrath will strike Israel (11:8ff—Ps. 69:23-4). But at the same time, this serves God's purposes. A part of Israel does believe, ^[95] and believers drawn from the Gentiles are engrafted into the stem. It may even be that the Jews become jealous when they see pagans bowing down before the Deliverer from Zion.

A transition period. Paul finally writes: "And so all Israel will be saved" (11:26). As you read this text, remember that the phrase *all Israel* is often used in the Old Testament to refer to the representatives of Israel or the remnant. Therefore this text should not be interpreted as meaning that the Jews will eventually be converted one by one in a millennial kingdom. For the sake of the "full number of the Gentiles" (11:25), a partial hardening came over Israel. Despite this, the full number of Israel (i.e. "all Israel") will enter the Kingdom—that is to say, those who are converted in Paul's time.

When Paul goes on to speak of his brothers in the flesh as "beloved for the sake of their forefathers" (vs. 28), we should think in terms of the situation in *his* time: the synagogues had only recently been confronted with the question whether or not to accept Jesus as the Messiah. Before that, all the Jews had belonged to "one church." Paul's time was still a period of transition; it was the day of grace. Before long, however, Christ's judgment would strike Jerusalem.

The later disobedient Jews *could not* and *cannot* be regarded as members of the covenant people. They are descended from the earlier covenant people "after the flesh," but they themselves are not within the covenant.

Therefore 11:26 does not give us any reason to expect a future conversion of all the Jews. This is not to say, of course, that we need not preach the gospel to them. The point is that we must not say that the Jews today are "beloved for the sake of their forefathers." Such a statement undermines the covenant.

[96] *Severity and kindness.* As you ponder these difficult chapters of Romans, remember that Paul was on his way to Jerusalem and was writing to the church at Rome, where people tended to take a dim view of the "Jewish question." Paul wanted the Roman Christians to realize that he felt called to do as much as possible for his own people. He didn't want the believers he was addressing to become proud and assume that they would never make such a mistake (11:20). "Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off (vs. 22).

In the new covenant as well as the old, we must reckon with both covenant wrath and covenant promises. In the final analysis, God's grace in His dealings with the Jews and the Gentiles is unfathomable!

How can I repay the LORD for all His gifts to me? (Ps. 116:12 NEB).

8. Transformation Rooted in Salvation (12:1-13:14)

Consequences for daily life. A sermon "application" should not be completely separate from its explanation of the text. God's gripping message should bear an implicit "application" within itself. Yet, certain things have to be worked out further and made more concrete if the consequences for daily life are to be obvious to all. That's just what Paul does from chapter 12 on.

Note that this "application" is intimately connected with what comes before. Paul does not give moral lessons but appeals for faithful obedience on the basis of the [97] salvation described in the earlier chapters. Just as in other letters (e.g. Ephesians and Colossians), he first shows what Christ does for us and gives us. On that basis he goes on to tell his readers what the priestly task of believers is, now that they may bring their offerings of thanksgiving in "all areas of life."

Salvation and calling. As Paul weaves together "exegesis" and concretization in the Letter to the Romans, the bond between salvation and calling comes out clearly. He opens this "practical" section by declaring:

I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship [KJV:

reasonable service]. Do not be conformed to this world [i.e. do not follow the same pattern as this wicked age] but be transformed [literally: undergo a metamorphosis, i.e. a complete reformation] by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect [to Him].

Paul's concern, then, is not just with offerings or the avoidance of any appearance of "conforming to the world." There is much more than *form* or *appearance* at stake. What he asks for is a renewal and redirection of our entire existence on the basis of the salvation brought by Jesus Christ and the "new age" He has ushered in.

Obedience to government and law. As Paul spells out what this reformation entails, he begins with conditions *within* the church. The members of the one body must work together as they use the gifts bestowed on them. It must be completely clear that the church's attitude toward its opponents is part of its "own way." Christians can put up with a great deal, for they sing Moses' song about the God who reserves vengeance for Himself (Deut. 32:35).

[98] Here we should think especially of the hostility that the Christians in Rome encountered from the synagogue. The church must not turn into a gang of ruffians hitting back at the Jews. Instead the Christians should show the Jews what Christ meant when He talked about being kind to one's enemies.

The church must also stay away from any and all Jewish rebelliousness toward the authorities. Although the sons of Abraham who were banished from Rome under Claudius were allowed to return a few years later under Nero, there seem to have been strong feelings of hatred and a desire for revenge in these world citizens.

No doubt the Jews also engaged in tax-dodging. Paul therefore reminded the Christians in Rome that Caesar must be given his due. Those who bear the power of the sword are servants of God (13:4). A Christian is indeed someone who has been freed by Christ, but this does not mean that he should become an undisciplined person or a revolutionary.

This message is highly relevant for Christians all over the world today, for there are many who fail to realize that Paul was appealing for obedience to government *on the basis of Christ's redemptive work*. We must obey the authorities not out of a fear of punishment but "for the sake of conscience" (13:5). How can a theology of revolution ever come to terms with Romans 13:1-7?

9. Weak and Strong United in Service and Love (14:1-16:27)

Mutual tolerance. Paul now speaks further of the calling to walk as children of the light and to live by the commandment of love. He works this out especially with regard to [99] certain practical problems that the church in Rome encountered because of its mixed composition of Jews and Gentiles.

There seem to have been differences of opinion on the question whether to observe the Jewish feast days (14:5). There were also disagreements about the consumption of meat that came from sacrifices in heathen temples (vs. 2, 15ff). On the one hand there were the "strong," who permitted themselves to ignore all the ceremonial regulations, and on the other hand there were the "weak," who were greatly offended by this—to the point that they might well leave the church over it. No doubt there were others caught in between who were thrown off balance by this dispute within the church.

In the face of these difficulties, Paul did not have any direct solution to offer, but he did plead for mutual tolerance: "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak" (15:1). The "strong" must not cause the "weak" to stumble into sin by taking the attitude that they can permit themselves virtually anything! "For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (14:17). The Christ was not out to please Himself but became the servant of the circumcised to show God's faithfulness to Israel, thereby letting the Gentiles share in salvation as well (15:7ff; see also vs. 16).

A common confession. In 15:7, as in so many other passages, the Revised Standard Version omits the word *the*, which we find before *Christ* in the Greek text (see 14:9; 15:3, 19). In such texts Paul is speaking of *the* Christ, i.e. *the* Messiah (as office-bearer), thereby appealing to a confession held in common by Jewish and Gentile Christians. Hence he speaks repeatedly of the gospel of *the* Christ or Messiah or Anointed One (15:19; I Cor. 9:12; II Cor. 2:12; 4:4; 9:13; Gal. 1:7; Phil. 1:27; I Thess. 3:2).

[100] On this point the church was united in the face of opposition of the synagogue. By the words "the Christ," then, he is appealing for unity. The word *Christ* is not just a name; it stands for an *office*. The very existence of the church at Rome depended on the existence of that office (Acts 28:23, 31). The life of the church at Rome was governed by the confession that Jesus is the anointed Lord. The apostle puts small differences within a larger context: Jesus Christ is the servant of *both* the circumcised and the uncircumcised. Should the church at Rome then allow itself to be split by a refusal of its members to accept each other, a refusal that would keep them from reflecting the image of the great Servant?

Don't forget that Paul was on his way to Jerusalem, where he was to give a concrete demonstration of the unity of the Christian church by presenting the Jewish mother church with offerings gathered by the believing Gentiles in the Diaspora. The song of Moses was being fulfilled: "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his [covenant] people" (15:10; Deut. 32:43).

Priestly service. Rome should regard itself as a continuation of the work of Christ. Paul was allowed to perform a rich priestly service, and the Gentiles presented themselves as an offering acceptable to God (15:16). This awareness should put an end to the squabbling in the immigrant congregation at Rome.

With a grand flourish Paul shows his readers the royal high road ("the way") and the post on the front line that unites him with them: he has preached the gospel from Jerusalem to Illyricum, and now he is heading back to Jerusalem. Eventually he hopes to go all the way to Spain, by way of Rome (15:20-8).

Christ's forward march. The Letter to the Romans closes with some greetings. All the names in the final [101] chapter are bound together by the one gospel, which calls for opposition to teachers of false doctrines (16:17). Righteousness is a matter of faith alone.

Now, when we consider the subsequent development of the church, especially from Rome as a base, we cannot help wondering at times whether Paul may have written in vain. But we are also forced to recognize that Christ's triumphant forward march cannot be halted. The text that is often used as a benediction at the close of a worship service goes with the church of all ages: "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you" (16:20).

The problem of chapter 16. Because the Letter to the Romans appears to end at 15:33, it has sometimes been maintained that chapter 16 is part of a letter sent to another congregation, namely, Ephesus. In verse 3 Paul mentions Prisca and Aquila, who had been driven out of Rome. They went to live in Corinth (where Paul wrote Romans) and later moved on to Ephesus (Acts 18:2, 18, 26; I Cor. 16:19; II Tim. 4:19). The mention of Prisca and Aquila is not conclusive, however, for Aquila could well have gone to Rome for a while "on business."

My own view is that we must reject the thesis that Romans 16 represents a completely separate document that was meant for the church in Ephesus but was later—for some unexplained reason—attached to the end of the Letter to the Romans. It may be, however, that Romans 16 was an addition made by Tertius when he made a *copy* of Romans for the church at Ephesus. In such accompanying letters, greetings were normally sent by both the apostle and members of the congregation (see Acts 15:22ff; Rom. 16:17ff). This hypothesis is at least worthy of further consideration.

If this is indeed how Romans 16 came to be written, we can well understand that the church at Corinth would keep ^[102] a copy of Romans for its own use—including chapter 16. We must not forget that Paul's letters were regularly

passed on from church to church (see Col. 4:16), for they were not purely personal in character but could be read as divinely inspired explications of the gospel of Christ.

[103] Index

"All Israel", 95
Allegorical interpretation, 40
Antioch (Syria), 60-1
Antithesis, 32
Ascension of Christ, 43-4, 49-50
Astarte, 63, 73
Athens, 70-2
Baptism, 50
Barnabas, 59ff
Belgic Confession, 21
Capernaum, 27
Ceremonial laws, 99
Church as God's people, 33,36
Circumcision, 52, 66-7, 75, 87-8
Cleanliness and purification, 59, 67, 99
"Coastlands", 68-9, 74-5
Communism, 53-4
Corinth, 72-3, 81,84, 86, 101
Covenant between God and His people, 96
Covenant blessing, 96
Covenant wrath, 50, 52, 87, 94-6
Crossbearing, 9
Curse resting on creation, 92
Deacon, office of, 55
Dead Sea Scrolls, 12
Demythologizing, 10
Destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, 33, 43-4
Discipline in the church, 54-5
Ecumenical movement, 38
Ephesus, 8, 73, 101
Eternal life, 18
Evolutionism, 9ff
Exodus command, 29, 55-6
Feast of Tabernacles, 14-15, 27-8, 30ff
Feast of Temple Dedication (Feast of Lights, Hanukkah), 14, 33-4
Flesh, 90-1
Galilee, 27
Gnosticism, 56
"God-fearing" Gentiles, 13, 35, 46, 49, 56, 59, 62, 64-5, 67-8

Good Shepherd, 33-4
 Government and revolution, 63, 70, 98
 Hardening, 32, 79, 94-5
 Heidelberg Catechism, 90
 Holy Spirit, 14, 21, 25, 36-7, 44-5, 47-50, 63, 91-2
 Immanuel promise, 72
 Inspiration of Scripture, 11, 15-16
 James (brother of Jesus), 60, 66, 68
 James (brother of John), 7, 60
 Jerusalem and the temple, 21, 42-4, 46, 51-3, 74-6, 81-3
 Jerusalem Bible, 19
 Jewish nationalism, 23, 47, 98
 Jewish question, 11, 14, 17-18, 51, 62-4, 70, 72-6, 93-6
 John (disciple of Jesus), 7ff, 24, 40
 John the Baptist, 8, 13, 22-3, 26-7, 45
 Judas Maccabaeus, 33-4
 Justification by faith, 85-6, 88
 Kingdom of God, 44
 Lamb of God, 15, 22-4, 28, 30, 35, 40, 57
 Lampstand, 33
 Light of the world, 32
 Living water, 31-2
 Luke, 42, 46, 59-61, 63, 69, 72, 75-80
 Luther, Martin, 86
 Mark, 68-9
 Martyrdom, 9
 Mary (mother of Jesus), 40
 Mashal, 30
 Miracles, 13-14, 24, 32, 44
 "Missionary work", 61-3
 Money and property, 53-5
 Nazirites, 75
 New English Bible, 12
 New Israel, 43, 45-6, 51, 93
 Order in the church, 67-8
 Passover, 14-15, 21, 25, 28ff
 Paul, 27, 45-7, 55, 57ff
 Pentecost, 37, 43-4, 48-50, 73-4
 Peter, 7-8, 13, 40-1, 47ff, 59-60, 66, 68, 80
 Pharisees and scribes, 33, 76

Philippi, 69-70
Pilate, 38-9
Poetry, Hebrew, 19
Purification (see Cleanliness and purification)
Rebirth and regeneration, 25-6
Redemption and atonement, 13
Redemptive history, 11, 41, 82-3
Reformation, the, 86, 89
"Remnant", 94-5
Revised Standard Version, 99
Righteousness, 37, 72, 84-6, 88,101
Roman Catholicism, 36, 40,89
Rome, 79-80, 82-4, 96, 98-101
Sabbath day, 27, 31, 34
Sadducees, 51, 56, 76
Samaritans, 26-7, 56
Sanhedrin, 34, 52, 76
Satan and demons, 37
Seed of the serpent, 32
Sermon on the Mount, 70
Servant of the Lord, 46, 51-2, 58, 68, 74
Shechem, 26, 56
Silas (Silvanus), 69-70
Son of man, 25, 29
Song of Moses (Deut. 32), 50, 97,100
Sovereignty of God, 93-5
Temple, cleansing of, 24-5
Theophilus, 42, 46, 59, 64, 72, 77-9
Thessalonica, 70
Timothy, 69, 74-5
Today's English Version, 12
Torah, 68
Truth, 20-2, 35-6
Unity of the Bible, 20-2, 71
Word (*logos*), 19-20
World, 16-18, 37-8, 79