

Lesson 15

- The world of the New Testament
- The Saviour is born
- The church: living with baptism and communion

Lesson 15a

The world of the New Testament

In the past lessons we have discussed the Old Testament. In the six following lessons we will look at the New Testament. In this lesson we will give an introduction to the New Testament.

In between the Old Testament and the New Testament

Between the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, and the first book of the New Testament, Matthew, is a period of about 400 years. In that period a lot of things happened in Israel and in the world around Israel. In the book of Daniel some of these events had been predicted. He prophesies about the rise and fall of several great empires.

To come to a good understanding of the New Testament it is important to know something about what happened in the time between the Old and the New Testament. We will first look at what happened in the world surrounding Israel and the consequences for Israel. Then we will discuss the religious tendencies in Israel in the time of the New Testament.

- *The Persian Empire (559-331 BC)*

In the time of Israel's captivity the Babylonian Empire was defeated by the Persian Empire. The Persian king Cyrus gave the Jews permission to return to Israel but their country remained part of the Persian Empire.

- *The Macedonian Empire (331-323 BC)*

The Persian Empire was in power for about 200 years until it was defeated by Alexander the Great, the young king of Macedonia and Greece. He did everything to assimilate the entire empire to Greek culture. The mixture between Greek and eastern culture became Hellenism (Hellas = Greece). For centuries, Hellenism was the culture of the countries around the Mediterranean Sea.

Because of Alexander the Great Greek became a world language. It was spoken throughout the entire empire. For that reason the New Testament was also written in Greek.

- *The Egyptian and Syrian oppression (about 300-164 BC)*

Alexander the Great died suddenly when he was 33 years old. After his death the enormous empire fell into four different parts. Two of these parts were Egypt and Syria, the countries to the south and the north of Israel. Both of these countries have played a major part in the history of Israel.

Israel was first ruled by Egypt and later by Syria. The Syrian rule was a difficult time for Israel. The Syrian king Antiochus the Fourth wanted the Jews to convert to Hellenistic religions. He destroyed a part of Jerusalem and made the temple into a sanctuary for the Greek god Zeus. He forced the Jews to bring sacrifices to this idol and if they refused they would be persecuted and tortured.

- *The liberation movement (164-104 BC)*

In this time a movement arose that fought for liberation for Israel. A group of men who called themselves Maccabees, started a guerrilla war against the Syrian oppression. They managed to defeat a number of Syrian armies and to liberate Jerusalem. The temple was cleaned of everything that had to do with the worship of Greek idols and newly consecrated to God.

In the course of the years the rest of the land was also regained. After centuries of oppression Israel was a free land again. Even Samaria and Galilee, areas where other nations had been living for about 600 years, belonged to Israel once more. The inhabitants of these parts were in some cases forced to convert to Judaism. Also Idumea, the area to the south of Judea was made part of Israel. The Edomites who lived in that area were forced to convert to the Jewish religion. In this time Israel was more or less the same size as it had been during the reign of David and Solomon.

- *Israel under Roman rule (from 63 BC)*

Israel's independence does not last long. In the year 63 BC the land is defeated by the Romans and becomes part of the Roman Empire. They have their own king but he rules under the authority of the Roman emperor. At the time of Jesus' birth Herod the Great is king over Israel.

Herod the Great is not very popular with the Jews. First of all he is not popular because he is an Edomite, a distant descendant of Esau. Besides, he is very cruel. He is suspicious of everyone and even has his sons killed because he fears they might rebel against him. He also kills several of his wives. He raises very hefty taxes, punishes every form of resistance in a very bloody way and builds temples for idols in foreign cities. He tries to maintain a good relationship with the Jews by renewing the temple in Jerusalem and building extensions to it. However, he cannot gain the favour of the Jews. They continue to regard him as a foreigner and a friend of the Roman oppressors.

After Herod's death the country is divided into three parts that are ruled by his three sons. Archelaus becomes king over Judea and Samaria, Herod Antipas becomes king over Galilee and Perea, and Philip becomes king over the territory to the northeast of the Sea of Galilee.

King Archelaus does not rule for very long. He is so cruel that his citizens ask the Roman emperor to put an end to his reign. The emperor banishes him to Gallia. From that time Judea and Samaria are under direct Roman rule. A Roman governor is appointed over them. One of these governors is Pontius Pilate who later condemns Jesus to death. In Jesus' time on earth Israel consists of three parts and is governed by three different rulers.

Religious groups

In the time of the New Testament Israel is very different from the way it was before the captivity. There are a number of different religious groups that strongly influence the Jewish life.

- *The Pharisees*

One group that is highly respected by the Jews is that of the Pharisees. They form a group of very pious, serious people from all parts of society, priests, farmers, traders and craftsmen. They are characterised by their fervour in keeping God's commands. Besides they keep to oral traditions which include rules and regulations that have been invented in the course of the centuries and that have been handed down from father to son.

We will give some examples. God commands the Israelites in his law to give Him a tenth of all their income. Most Jews do not strictly keep this command. However, the Pharisees want to keep the law so strictly that they even give away a tenth of the herbs they grow in their garden. The Pharisees also want to keep God's commandment of not working on the Sabbath. To make sure they really do not do any work, they have made a detailed description of what counts as work and what does not count as work. They allow a man to kill a louse but not to kill a flea. The reasoning is that a flea moves and to kill it would be like hunting it. The Pharisees have more than five hundred of these rules. Cooking, lighting an oil lamp, walking further than a thousand yards, writing more than one letter, carrying something from one place to another: the Pharisees have banned all these things from their Sabbath.

- *The Sadducees*

The Sadducees come from more established backgrounds than the Pharisees. They strictly keep God's commands. However, they do not recognise the oral traditions of the Pharisees. They only keep to Moses' laws. Unlike the Pharisees they do not believe in the existence of devils and angels and neither do they believe in the resurrection from the death.

- *The teachers of the law*

Another important group is that of the teachers of the law. They are people with a great knowledge of the Old Testament

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and who would explain it to the people. They would also be involved in speaking justice. If someone would want to become a teacher of the law he would have to study for years with a certain rabbi, a teacher. A rabbi would teach his students through endless conversations based on the laws of God. Teachers of the laws would normally not be paid. Many of them belonged to the group of the Pharisees.

Religious life

In the time of Jesus' birth religious life in Israel is very well organised.

- *The temple*

The temple in Jerusalem is the religious centre of the country. Jews come from far and wide to Jerusalem to bring sacrifices and attend the religious festivals. Tradesmen make the most of it. On the square in front of the temple they sell animals so that people do not need to bring their animals all the way from home on their long journey by foot.

Many people serve in the temple. First of all there is the high priest. His position is important not only in the temple but also in justice. Under him there are the chief priests who like the high priest would be from the well-off Sadducee families. Like the high priest they play a part in the system of justice.

Then there are the priests: thousands of them in this time.

Most of them do not live in Jerusalem. They are spread over 24 departments. Every department takes turns in serving in the temple for a week at a time. Besides the priests there are also Levites who do service in the temple from time to time. They are assistants and take care of the music and singing.

- *The synagogue*

Synagogues can be found all over Israel. A synagogue can be compared to a church building. Once a week the Jews meet and have a service. In the service someone reads from the books of the Old Testament. Most people do not have a bible at home and for them this is the only way to hear what God

has to say. The passage that is read is explained by usually one of the teachers of the law. Besides, people pray and sing psalms.

- *The celebrations*

The Israelites have four major annual celebrations. First of all, there is the Passover, remembering Israel's liberation from Egypt. Every year thousands of Israelites go to Jerusalem to celebrate this festival. Every family sacrifices a lamb in the temple. In the evening they eat the meat of the lamb. Besides they eat bitter herbs to remember their bitter time in Egypt and bread made without yeast. The bread is to remind the Israelites of the night they had to flee from Egypt when they did not have time to let the bread rise. During the meal the family sings psalms.

Fifty days after the Passover the Israelites celebrate Pentecost or the Feast of Weeks. It is a celebration of the harvest. The Israelites all bring the first part of their harvests to the temple. They give these 'firstfruits' to God to thank Him for the harvest. At Pentecost the Israelites remember the time when God gave them the Ten Commandments.

In the autumn there is the Day of Atonement when all the sins of the people are symbolically brought over onto a goat and the goat is sent out into desert. This is a sign of God's forgiveness of the sins of his people. When God has forgiven his people there is nothing that stands in between Him and them.

A few days after the Day of Atonement the Israelites celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. For a week all people live in little tents made out of branches and leaves to remember their journey through the desert. During the celebration there is a grand parade to thank God for the wine harvest.

In the next lessons we will continue to look at the contents of the book of the New Testament.

Questions

1. Who governs over Israel at the time of Jesus' birth? And who at the time of his death?
2. Which religious groups are there in Israel in the time of the Old Testament? Tell something about them.
3. Explain what Jesus accuses the teachers of the law and the Pharisees of in Matthew 23:23-28.

Lesson 15b

The Saviour is born

At the beginning of history God promised that someone would come who would conquer Satan. God keeps his promise. Just over 500 years after the Jews returned from their captivity Jesus, the Saviour, is born. We still celebrate it every year at Christmas. The books of Matthew and Luke elaborately describe the events surrounding Jesus' birth. In this lesson we will first look at what Luke's account and then at Matthew's.

Zechariah and Elizabeth

Luke starts his book with the description of an old couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth. They have no children; Elizabeth is barren.

One day Zechariah, who is a priest, needs to go to Jerusalem to do his time of service in the temple. As usual the priests cast a lot to decide who can go inside to bring the incense sacrifice to God. The lot is cast on Zechariah. He can enter the Holy Place to light the incense.

When Zechariah is in the Holy Place bringing the sacrifice, all of a sudden an angel appears next to the altar. Zechariah is terrified, but the angel assures him he does not need to be afraid. He tells Zechariah: 'God has heard your prayer. Your wife Elizabeth will have a son. You should call him John. Many people will be delighted about his birth. God has a special task for him, from the moment of his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. Your son will bring the people of Israel back to the LORD, their God. He will prepare the way for the LORD'.

Zechariah finds it difficult to believe this promise. He and his wife are too old to have children. 'How can I know it is true?' he asks the angel. The angel answers: 'I am Gabriel, one of God's highest servants. God sent me to you to bring you this news and you do not believe me. I will give you a sign that will convince you. You will not be able to speak until everything I told you has happened'. When Zechariah leaves the temple he is mute. He cannot say a word as the angel announced.

When Zechariah has finished his service in the temple, he returns home. What the angel has said comes true; Elizabeth gets pregnant.

An angel visits Mary

Read: Luke 1:26-28

1:26 *in the sixth month*: of Elizabeth's pregnancy

1:28 *you who are highly favoured*: you will experience God's favour

1:31 *Jesus*: Jahweh saves

1:32 *the Most High*: God

1:33 *the house of Jacob*: the people of Israel

A few months later the angel Gabriel also appears to Mary, a relative of Elizabeth. Gabriel tells Mary that she will become pregnant and give birth to a son. The child will be called the Son of God. God will make him king like his forefather David. He will reign over Israel forever.

Mary asks how she can possibly get pregnant, as she has never had intercourse with a man. She is not married. Gabriel explains that the Holy Spirit will cause her to become pregnant. Mary then accepts the task God gives her. She gives herself totally to God who wants to use her to have his Son born into the world.

Although Mary does not ask for it, God gives her a sign to confirm the truth of Gabriel's words. The sign is that someone else in her family is also pregnant, someone of whom no one would expect it, Elizabeth, who is not only too old to have a child but of whom everyone knows that she is barren. It is a clear proof that God is working. If God can cause a very old and barren woman to get pregnant, He can also cause Mary to get pregnant.

Mary goes to see Elizabeth

Very soon, Mary is on her way to Zechariah and Elizabeth's city. She wants to see the sign God has given her with her own eyes. When she enters their house and greets the pregnant

Elizabeth, something special happens. The child that Elizabeth is expecting starts kicking and Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. She calls out: 'You are the most blessed of all women and blessed is the child that you carry! I do not deserve to receive the mother of my Lord!'

Mary answers by singing praise to God who has wanted to use her in such a special way. She sings how God brings powerful people down and rises up the humble and how He has shown mercy on Israel as He promised long ago.

Mary stays with Zechariah and Elizabeth for three months, probably until Elizabeth has given birth to her son. Then she returns home.

The birth of John

Elizabeth gives birth to a son. She calls him John: Jahweh is merciful, as the angel had told her husband. The neighbours and relatives protest when they hear that name. They think she should call her son Zechariah, after his father. No one in the family is called John. They ask Zechariah what he thinks. Because he can still not speak, he takes a writing slate and writes down: 'His name is John'. From that very moment his speech returns. He thanks and praises God. The Holy Spirit causes him to prophesy about the future: 'Praise be to God! He has come to save his people. He brings salvation as He promised to Abraham. You, my child, will be called a prophet. You will be a prophet of the Most High; you will go before the Lord. You will prepare the way for Him by showing his people that they will be saved. You will show people that God wants to forgive their sins'.

From the words of Zechariah we know that John will have a special task. In the next lesson we will continue to look at what that task is.

The birth of Jesus

Read: Luke 2:1-20

2:4 *the town of David*: the town where David was from

2:11 *Christ*: the anointed one, see also lesson 5c

2:12 *this will be a sign to you*: this is how you will recognise the child

2:14 *the highest*: heaven

peace: a good relationship between God and man

The promised Saviour was to be born in Bethlehem. That is what the prophet Micah had foretold. However, it seems that Mary's baby is going to be born in Nazareth, where she and her fiancé, Joseph live.

Then Joseph and Mary are forced to travel to Bethlehem because the Roman emperor Augustus decides to take a census. All the inhabitants of his empire have to go to the town where they are originally from. Joseph is a descendant of David and therefore has to go to Bethlehem. Mary, who is well into her pregnancy by now, goes with him. And so Jesus is born in Bethlehem as Micah had prophesied.

Mary gives birth to her son in a stable. There is no place in Bethlehem's inn. It must have been very busy with all those people coming to register for the census. Mary wraps the newborn baby in cloths, as was the usual thing to do in those days and places him in a manger.

The angels and the shepherds

The first people to hear about Jesus' birth are shepherds. Somewhere in the vicinity of Bethlehem they are keeping watch over their flocks when in the middle of the night all of a sudden an angel appears to them. A bright light indicating God's presence surrounds them. The shepherds are terrified but the angel comforts them. He tells them that he has great news that will make the whole nation happy. The promised Saviour has just been born! That means an end to the long period of waiting. God has fulfilled his promise.

All of a sudden the angel is joined by a large group of more angels. They praise God because He has caused this child, the Saviour of men, to be born:

Luke 2:14

'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.'

The angels' song is a call to all people to praise God for what He has done. They also sing of the fact that there will be peace now between God and the people who have found favour in the eyes of God. Because of the child that has been born these people will be able to live in a good relationship with God.

Then all of a sudden the angels disappear again and the field is dark. The shepherds go immediately to look for the child. When they get to Bethlehem, they find Joseph, Mary and Jesus: a baby in a manger. They are convinced that the words of the angel are true, that this apparently lowly child is the long-awaited Saviour of man. When they return to their flocks they praise and thank God for what He has done.

Jesus' ancestors

Not only Luke, but also Matthew relates the story of the birth of Jesus. Matthew starts his account with a genealogy. He shows his readers who the ancestors are of the Saviour that God has given. Matthew mainly aimed his writing at the Jews, who knew all the names and the stories related to them. The genealogy shows how God has directed the history of Israel so that Jesus could be born.

One of the things that Matthew shows with his genealogy is that Jesus was a descendant of Abraham. Abraham and his wife were not able to have children. Only because of God could they eventually have a son. Only because of God the nation that Jesus was to be born into, came into existence. If it had been up to people, the family would never have grown into a nation.

Another thing the genealogy shows is that Jesus is a descendant of David. He is of royal descent. From the rest of Matthew's account we clearly tell that Jesus was a king himself. He came to save his people, not from the Roman oppression but rather from the power of Satan.

Jesus' genealogy is not made up of pristine people. We are reminded of this by names as Tamar, Rahab and David. Tamar was a woman who disguised as a prostitute seduces her father-in-law Judah. Rahab was a Canaanite prostitute. David committed adultery with a married woman and then killed the woman's husband. They are no names to be proud of in a genealogy. Nevertheless God wants to use these people. They have been part of the line that led to Jesus, the Saviour.

Herod tries to kill Jesus

After this genealogy Matthew gives an account of the events surrounding the birth of Jesus. One thing he relates is how Jesus only barely escaped death as a baby.

Read: Matthew 2

2:11 *incense and myrrh*: expensive substances that are used for their pleasant smell when they are burned.

A number of wise men, astrologers from a land to the east of Israel, arrive in Jerusalem. They have seen a star that indicates that the king that all the Jews have been waiting for has been born. Naturally they go to Jerusalem. That is where the king of the Jews belongs.

However, when they ask people in Jerusalem about it, no one seems to know anything. King Herod is shocked when he hears about the king of the Jews. He understands that it has to be the long awaited Christ. He immediately makes sure to find out where this king was to be born. The teachers of the law and chief priests tell him that the Christ is to be born in Bethlehem.

Herod immediately devises a plan to get rid of this competitor. He asks the wise men when they have seen the star for the first time so that he knows how old the king is by now. He asks them to come and see him on their way back to tell him where the king is so that he can also pay his respects.

The astrologers go to Bethlehem. It is surprising that the inhabitants of Jerusalem all stay at home. The birth of the

Christ should be great news to the Jews. However, while the foreign men thought it was such important news that it was worth a long journey, the Jews do not take it seriously at all. Even the priests and the teachers of the law do not make a move.

After they have found Jesus, the astrologers take a different route to go back home. God had warned them to do so. When Herod hears what they have done he is furious. He gives an order to kill all boys in Bethlehem who are under three years old. This way he thinks he will get rid of his future competitor. However, his plan does not work. God has told Joseph and Mary to flee to Egypt where they stay until Herod dies. Only then they return to Israel and settle in Nazareth.

Questions

1. The angel Gabriel announces the birth of a child to both Zechariah and Mary.
 - a. Can you see a parallel between what happens to Zechariah and Elizabeth and what happens to Mary?
 - b. What is the difference?
2. The birth of Jesus causes all sorts of different responses.
 - a. How do the shepherds respond (Luke 2:15-20)? How do the foreign astrologers respond (Matthew 2:1-2, 11)? How do the Jews respond (Matthew 2:3-5)? How does king Herod respond (Matthew 2:3-8, 16)?
 - b. What respond do you find most touching? Why?
3. How is Genesis 3:15 related to what happens in Matthew 2?
4. What do you think of the way Christmas is celebrated in our time? How do you think it could be done differently?

The church: living with baptism and communion

Lesson 15c

The church: living with baptism and communion

The church of Christ can be recognised by three characteristics, it uses the bible, the sacraments and discipline in the right way. We discussed the first characteristic in the last lesson. In this lesson we will look at the two other characteristics.

The right way to use the sacraments

One characteristic of the church of Jesus Christ is that it obeys the rules that God has given in the bible about what we call the sacraments. Sacraments are visual aids that God has given to make our faith stronger. A sacrament has two functions:

- It is a sign. You could compare a sacrament with an illustration that clarifies something in a book. It is an illustration of the good news of our salvation.
- It is a guarantee. Through the sacraments God wants to give us visible and tangible proofs of the fact that He really wants to forgive our sins and give us eternal life.

When He was on earth Jesus has given us two sacraments, baptism and communion. We will first look at the basis for and the meaning of baptism and then at the basis for and the meaning of communion.

The institution of baptism

Just before Jesus went to heaven He told his disciples to make disciples of all nations and to baptise the people who would believe in Him in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. He promised: '*whoever believes and is baptised will be saved*' (Mark 16:16).

Whoever believes in Jesus has to be baptised in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. That means that from that moment that person belongs to the Father, the Son and

the Holy Spirit. God binds Himself to that person. Whoever is baptised receives the promise:

- that God the Father will regard him as his child and will always take care of him.
- that the Son of God will pay for all his sins.
- that the Holy Spirit will live in him and make him into a different person.

Baptism is a life-changing event in someone's life. When someone is baptised he receives the assurance that the triune God has made an everlasting covenant with him.

Baptism: sign and guarantee

We said that a sacrament has two functions. It is a sign to clarify God's promise and a guarantee that gives certainty. How is that true for baptism?

- Baptism is a sign. When someone is baptised he is either submerged in water or water is poured out over him. Just like water cleanses us from dirt God wants to wash our sins away through the blood of Jesus. Baptism is therefore a clear sign, a picture, of what God wants to do for us.
- Baptism is a guarantee. Through baptism God gives us certainty about his promises. As certain as the person who is baptised can feel the water, so can he be certain that God will keep his promises. Whoever has been baptised will never have to doubt that God will forgive his sins and give him eternal life.

Baptism and children

The church of Jesus Christ can be recognised from the way baptism is used. Does the church use baptism in the way the bible tells us to? Do people think about baptism the way the bible does?

These questions are important. Christians from different churches show remarkable differences in the way they think about baptism. One difference is whether they think children ought to be baptised. We will briefly consider this issue.

According to some Christians baptism is only for adults. They think it is wrong to baptise young children. Jesus has said: 'whoever believes and is baptised will be saved'. They argue that infants cannot believe and therefore should not be baptised.

Nowhere in the bible does it actually say that infants should be baptised. However that does not mean we should automatically reject infant baptism. When you take the whole of the bible into account it is very clear that it must be God's intention for the children of believers to be baptised. God does not want to save individuals but rather families. We can see the same in the Old Testament when God says to Abraham:

Genesis 17:7

'I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you.'

God established his covenant with Abraham and with his descendants. This does not change in the time of the New Testament. God still wants to have a relationship with believers and their children.

Obviously, people who only come to faith in Jesus Christ at a later age are baptised once they have confessed their faith. That is what Jesus told his disciples to do and what happened throughout the New Testament.

However, when people come to faith in Jesus not only they themselves are baptised but rather, they are baptised with their households or in other words with their families, their children. God does not ignore the children of believers. He wants to save them as well as their parents and for that reason they can be baptised. It is a sign of the fact that God has chosen them and a guarantee of the fact that God wants to forgive their sins and save them.

The institution of communion

In the night before God was to liberate Israel from Egypt all Israelites had to celebrate the Passover. They had to kill a lamb and put its blood on their doorposts. If they did that, they would be saved from death. Then they had to eat with their family to celebrate in advance that God would liberate them from Egypt.

From that night the Passover was celebrated every year even until the time of Jesus. In the night that Jesus would be arrested He celebrated for the last time the Passover with his disciples. That night Jesus initiated communion instead of the Passover. No lamb would have to be killed anymore because Jesus Himself would be killed as a Passover lamb. His death would mean salvation for those who would believe in Him. Jesus told his disciples to celebrate communion in remembrance of Him. They would have to eat bread and drink wine. The bread would be a sign of Jesus' body that was crucified and the wine would be a sign of Jesus' blood. In other words it would be a sign of Jesus' suffering and death. Jesus did not only want his disciples at the time to celebrate communion but everyone who would believe in Him. That is why we still celebrate communion in the church. Everyone who has been baptised and wants to belong to Jesus Christ and acts that way, can take part in communion. He can eat the bread and drink the wine and be assured that Jesus' sacrifice also counts for him.

Communion: sign and guarantee

Like baptism, communion is a sacrament. What does that mean?

- Communion is a sign of the fact that Jesus has sacrificed Himself for our sakes. When someone celebrates communion he can see with his own eyes how the bread is broken and given out to people. It is an illustration of the fact that Jesus gives Himself to us.
- Communion is also a guarantee. The believer touches the bread and tastes it; he swallows the wine. He can be as

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certain as he touches the bread and the wine that Jesus has died for his sins and that God wants to forgive him and give him eternal life.

Communion: a sacrifice to God?

The church of Jesus Christ can be recognised from the way it uses communion. Does it happen the way Jesus told us in the bible?

As with baptism, there are unbiblical ideas about communion. We will discuss a few.

According to the Roman Catholic Church, communion is a sacrifice of the church to God. The sacrifice is not just bread and wine but Jesus Christ Himself. When the church sacrifices the bread and the wine, it sacrifices Jesus Christ. They believe that Jesus is physically present in the bread and the wine. According to the Roman Catholic Church it is important that Jesus is sacrificed again and again because Christians sin again and again. The relationship with God needs to be continually renewed.

When we read what the bible has to say about this, we realise this interpretation of communion is incorrect. Communion is not a sacrifice of the church to God. It is a gift from Jesus Christ to the church. Through communion He wants to remind and assure believers of the fact that He has really died for them.

Neither is it true that Jesus is sacrificed during communion. Jesus has sacrificed Himself already and that sacrifice was sufficient. Nothing can be added to what Jesus has done on the cross. Nothing needs to be added; Jesus' sacrifice was enough to pay for all sin. The believer's relationship with God can be restored again and again through that one sacrifice. Every time when we regret our sins and call on Jesus' sacrifice, God forgives us for what we have done.

The idea that Jesus would be physically present in the bread and the wine is also incorrect. Jesus is no longer physically

present on earth. He has ascended into heaven. Jesus' presence during communion is spiritual rather than physical.

A good use of discipline

There is a third characteristic of the church of Jesus Christ. It is the way it disciplines believers.

To come to a good understanding of discipline it is helpful to think once more of a flock of sheep. Discipline is like calling back the sheep that is about to wander from the path. When a member of the church is wandering from the path, the other members and the elders try to call him back by warning and confronting him. When someone absolutely refuses to turn back to God, he can no longer celebrate communion. This should be seen as a measure of discipline and warning rather than a cruel measure. The person should be reminded that he is losing his relationship with Jesus because only with Jesus there is life.

Discipline is not a popular subject. No one enjoys punishing. For that reason many churches have stopped using discipline. The result is that in such churches a Christian can do whatever pleases him even if it is not according to the bible. The bible encourages us to use discipline. Jesus Himself tells the church to use discipline because He loves the church. He does not want the people whom He saved from death to get lost after all. Discipline should be regarded as a measure to save people from eternal death.

The church of Jesus Christ

From the way a church uses the bible, the sacraments and discipline we should be able to see if that church is a church of Jesus Christ or if that church is going the wrong way. Especially when it comes to baptism and communion it is not always easy to determine if a church follows the bible. However, it is good to look into these issues and to study the bible about them for it is important to find the church of Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd.

Questions

- 1a. What does baptism signify?
- 1b. What does baptism guarantee?
2. According to the Roman Catholic Church the bread and wine of communion change into the physical body and blood of Jesus Christ. This teaching is based on Matthew 26:26 '*While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "take and eat this is my body".*' Is it valid to conclude from the words 'this is my body' that the bread at communion changes into Jesus' body? What do you conclude from John 6:35, John 8:12a, John 10:7 and John 15:1?