



GOD  
with us

by  
Josef Imberg

# GOD with us

*Six brief chapters on Christian  
faith*

by

Josef Imberg

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# I

## WHO IS GOD?

Sometimes people ask questions of this kind: "Who am I after all?" "From where do I come?" To answer such questions we have to answer another question, which is greater and much more important: WHO IS GOD?

Is it, then, possible to know anything about God, who He is, what He has done, and what He wants to do with us? We can answer this question with a definite yes, since *God has revealed Himself to us*. He has definitely shown us that *He wants to be with us*.

There is a kind of revelation which is known to all peoples in the world. It is called *the general revelation*. By this is meant God's revelation in Creation, in the history of the peoples, and in the conscience. But God has also revealed Himself *in His Word* and *in Jesus Christ*. The latter two ways are called *the particular (special) revelation*.

## 1. *The general revelation*

This revelation started with Creation. What we can see round us in the world shows us God's greatness and power.<sup>1</sup> Nothing has created itself. Only fools can say: "There is no God."<sup>2</sup>

In other religions or philosophies we sometimes find thoughts about the creation of the world and about "a Supreme Being". This thought, therefore, is not totally restricted to the Christian religion. But the similarities between such beliefs and the Christian faith are either very small or do not exist at all. If we look at the doctrine of the Creation as a whole, there is no religion or philosophical system that teaches what we find in the Christian religion, namely a creating God that is at the same time a saving God, who saves by Himself becoming man, by suffering and dying for the sins of the world. And this salvation is given by grace only, without any merit or worthiness on the part of those who become saved. Thus it is evident that the Christian teaching about creation must always be understood in the light of the particular revelation.

### Creation

When God reveals Himself in Creation it is not done in such a way that we can see Himself there. "No one has ever seen God."<sup>3</sup> He is inaccessible to our outward senses, because He is Spirit.<sup>4</sup> But we can see His work, His hand and His footprints. When we look at the created world we can see where God has passed by. This is to see "God's back".<sup>5</sup>

But when we speak about these things we have to observe a certain danger. As we have already seen, creation and nature can reveal something about God by pointing to Him as "the fountain of life".<sup>6</sup> But *creation and nature are not God*. If we believe that

God is the same as the vault of heaven, the beautiful flowers and trees, the mighty snowy mountains or the swelling waters of the sea, then we become guilty of that kind of false teaching that is called *pantheism*, which means that God is the same as the universe, and the universe is God.

## History

The doctrine of creation tells us that God has created not only the earth and the world, but also man and the peoples of the world. He is also continuing this creation work, since new men and new peoples are still being created. Because of this we may say that *there is a kind of revelation in history, i.e. in the life of the peoples*. God is the Keeper of the world. As such He has allowed people to settle down and to live in different areas of the world. Even if they believe that they make all decisions by themselves, God governs everything, "having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation".<sup>7</sup>

This can also be proved in another way. There are *certain laws* for all human existence. Thus there are limits to suppression, crime and iniquity. These limits may not be seen for some time, but they become visible when God so decides. Even harsh rulers will be stopped one day. These facts can be seen by almost anybody who studies the history of the world: up to a certain point God may allow a bad development and harsh rulers, but at last He puts a definite stop to them. This happens, "... when the transgressors have reached their full measure".<sup>8</sup>

This "revelation in history" is only part of the revelation in the created world. Just as God looks after created things and human beings He also leads the fates of the world. But we must also remember that we cannot learn to know God or the way of salvation by examining the fates of the world. We may find that

there is a God, but not more than that. But when we read or hear the Word of God, this Word will strongly confirm what has already been revealed to us through creation and history. But only by studying the Word of God will it be possible for us to understand *how* God performs His ruling of the world.

## Conscience

The third kind of general revelation comes by *man's conscience*. When God created the world, the individuals and the peoples, He also showed them that *there is a difference between right and wrong, between light and darkness*. The instrument that enables man to see this difference is called "conscience". This instrument can be found among all men, also the Gentiles. Although they do not have the written law from the Old Testament, they "do by nature what the law requires". Thus "they show that what the law requires is written on their hearts".<sup>9</sup>

Every conscience is limited in two ways. It has become darkened in the great fall.<sup>10</sup> Because of this it always has to be renewed and enlightened. Further it can deal only with matters of right or wrong. In other fields of knowledge it cannot provide any knowledge, nor can it reveal any secrets about God. If man is to obtain any knowledge in these fields, such knowledge has to be obtained in other ways. In matters pertaining to God those other ways are called *the particular revelation*.

## 2. *The particular revelation*

Even if we have seen something of God's majesty and work in the created world, in the history of mankind and in the testimony of conscience, this will not be sufficient for a true knowledge about God. There is a definite limit to our knowledge about God, if the knowledge has come only through the created world and our conscience. Even our conscience is an unreliable guide. Nor can our own ideas or thoughts lead us to God. At the utmost they are a "seeking" or "feeling".<sup>11</sup> God Himself has drawn up this line of limitation by revealing Himself in a clearer way: He has overlooked the times of ignorance, "but now He commands all men everywhere to repent".<sup>12</sup> Therefore the message is: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel."<sup>13</sup> Thus it is clear what the particular revelation is: The Word of Salvation, and Jesus Christ, Saviour and Lord.

This particular revelation is *a complete revelation about God*, because it gives us all the knowledge, guidance and help we need in order to be saved. In the Word we obtain a fuller understanding of God than we can obtain through Creation, history or our conscience. In the Word we meet Jesus Christ. This is the full and true knowledge about God.<sup>14</sup> "There is salvation in no one else."<sup>15</sup>

1 Ps 19:1-6

2 Ps 14:1

3 Jn 1:18

4 Jn 4:24

5 Ex 33:23

6 Ps 36:9

7 Acts 17:26-28

8 Dan 8:23

9 Rom 2:14-15

10 Gen 3

11 Acts 17:27

12 Acts 17:30

13 Mk 1:15

14 Jn 1:18

15 Acts 4:12

## II

# GOD IS WITH US IN HIS HOLY WORD

It is clear that we cannot know God or the way of salvation by studying the greatness or beauty of creation. Nor can we know Him by studying the history of the world or by listening to the voice of our conscience. It must be *revealed* to us who God is and what He has done for the salvation of man. This has been accomplished *in the words God has spoken to us*. We call these words THE WORD OF GOD, THE BIBLE, OR HOLY SCRIPTURE.

Since the clearest and most complete revelation about God is found in His Word, this Word is the key to all knowledge about God. What nature, history and our own conscience tell us must be examined, understood and explained in the light of the Word.

## *1. In His Word God has made Himself known over a very long time*

God revealed Himself to Adam and Eve before they had fallen in sin. He wanted them to know something about Himself and to know His holy will. Therefore He spoke to them.<sup>1</sup> This means that revelation came through the spoken word, the word of God. But later on, after the fall, men needed a special revelation, if they were not to be lost. And such a revelation was given to them in God's words. Before the sun set on the day of the fall, God spoke to the fallen people about their situation and about the way of salvation open to them. The evil power that had caused their fall would be crushed by "the Seed of the woman".<sup>2</sup> This word, "the Seed", points forward to Christ. He is that Seed. He is IMMANUEL, "GOD WITH US".<sup>3</sup>

With regard to THE WRITTEN WORD the first line was drawn at the time of Moses. He received from God written words in the shape of the commandments of the Law.<sup>4</sup> He was also ordered to make a complete set of God's commandments.<sup>5</sup> What the prophets wrote after that was a continued explanation of the law and of the promises, given by God.

There is a second line drawn at the time of Jesus Christ: "For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."<sup>6</sup> This confirms that the words, spoken by Moses and the prophets, were true. Jesus repeatedly states that God had spoken through Moses and the prophets.<sup>7</sup> It is a key word in the New Testament that God "in many and various ways spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets", but this is also followed up by the corresponding statement that "in these last days He has spoken to us by a Son".<sup>8</sup> Therefore it is often and strongly stated that the Church, the people of God, is "built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone".<sup>9</sup>

## 2. *This revelation has a human side*

It is obvious that *God has used people* when giving us His Word. The human side also appears in such *things* that are created by men, e.g. *paper and ink*. Because of this outward, human side the Word of God is often considered to be a small thing, unimportant, something that may even be despised. But when doing so people show that they have not understood what it means that God's Word has come to us. On this point we must remember that Jesus Christ Himself is the Word that "became flesh and dwelt among us".<sup>10</sup> From eternity He was the Son of God, but He entered this world and became man. This He did as a little child, who was wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger. In spite of this appearance in humility *He was the Son of God*. It is in a similar way with the Word of God. *It does not become the Word of God*, when people have examined it, tested it and approved of it. *Instead it is the Word of God right from the time it was spoken*. Thus it was the Word of God, when it was spoken by the prophets and by Christ, and also when it was written down by the prophets, the apostles and the evangelists.<sup>11</sup> But in spite of this it comes to us in an outward way which is simple and lowly, just as the Lord Jesus Christ Himself came to us. It is the Word of God, although it has come in lowliness.

## 3. *To understand and not to understand*

There is a certain word, describing God's work in creation: "He spoke, and it came to be."<sup>12</sup> That is also an explanation of how God speaks in His Word: something always happens. God's words always accomplish something.<sup>13</sup>

Generally the Word of God is expressed in clear words that we can understand. Thus ordinary languages and words are instruments in God's hands to make Himself known to us.

On the other hand there are some things in the Word of God which are difficult to understand, yes, even "unsearchable".<sup>14</sup> These words must be understood in the light of what is open and clear in the Word or, if that cannot be done, left to become disclosed in the eternal light, when we "shall understand fully".<sup>15</sup>

#### 4. *What the Bible contains is from God*

Although people have written all the words of the Bible, every word in it comes from God. He reveals Himself to us in His Word. *He is with us there.* How this is possible we do not understand in full. But the Bible testifies about this fact: "Men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."<sup>16</sup> The definite guarantee of the truthfulness of Holy Scripture is given by our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, e.g. when He says: "I and the Father are one."<sup>17</sup> "He who has seen me has seen the Father... The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does His works."<sup>18</sup> "Sanctify them in the truth; thy word is truth."<sup>19</sup>

*In His holy Word God is with us.* This is so, because in the Word we meet Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God. But this is only one side of the matter. God's Word is also *a means of grace, which creates faith in us.* The Word was given for this purpose also.<sup>20</sup> But when this work is accomplished by the Word, it is at the same time a work performed by the Holy Spirit.<sup>21</sup> When Jesus promised His disciples to send them His Holy Spirit, it was for this purpose: "When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth."<sup>22</sup>

Our reason cannot judge of the Word of God in a correct or true way. Reason is, of course, a good gift from God, but it has to be used in the proper way, such as it was meant by God. If our reason is not satisfied to be a servant, but instead the master of the Word, it will undertake judging the Word of God, namely what it can approve of in Holy Scripture and what it wishes to reject. Such a reason is rejected by the Word of God.<sup>23</sup>

Finally it must be made clear that no private "revelations", "visions" or "dreams", and no other thing whatever, can add anything to the Word of God or draw anything away from it. For the Church of Christ it is of the greatest importance how she stands and how she behaves with regard to the revelation received in the Word of God. It is her weapon for the fight she has been called to endure. *Without* the sword of the Word we cannot prevail in this fight. But *with* the Word of God she can destroy the strongholds of the enemy of God, yes, not even "the powers of death" shall prevail against her.<sup>24</sup>

- |                              |                 |                 |
|------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1 Gen 1:28; 2:16-17          | 9 Eph 2:20      | 18 Jn 14:9-10   |
| 2 Gen 3:15                   | 10 Jn 1:14      | 19 Jn 17:6-19   |
| 3 Isa 7:14                   | 11 1 Thess 2:13 | 20 Rom 10:14-17 |
| 4 Ex 24:12; 31:18            | 12 Ps 33:9      | 21 Jn 6:63      |
| 5 Deut 27:1-3                | 13 Isa 55:10-11 | 22 Jn 16:13     |
| 6 Jn 1:17                    | 14 Rom 11:33-36 | 23 2 Cor 10:5   |
| 7 Jn 5:46-47;<br>Lk 24:25-27 | 15 1 Cor 13:12  | 24 Mt 16:18     |
| 8 Heb 1:1-2                  | 16 2 Pet 1:21   |                 |
|                              | 17 Jn 10:30     |                 |

### III

## GOD HAS MADE HIMSELF KNOWN IN JESUS CHRIST

#### *1. In Jesus Christ God is with us*

Jesus Christ is the central theme of the holy Scriptures. What they explain and convey concerns Him more than anything else. He has a position with regard to the Word that nobody else can claim, neither Moses or the prophets, nor the apostles or the evangelists. All these people are, of course, very important to the Bible and our faith, since they are the authors of the books of the Bible; but Jesus Christ is of a greater importance than all of them together. He is the "WORD". This means that the Word of God speaks about Him and deals with Him in all respects. Jesus Christ is the main reason for the existence of the Bible. When God spoke to the first people, He promised them the Messiah and the salvation through Him. This promise was fulfilled in such a way that *people could see the thought of God with their own eyes*: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld His glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father."<sup>1</sup>

The clearest revelation of God thus has been given in Holy Scripture *and* in Jesus Christ, not in the one *or* the other of these

two ways, but *in both*. If we make use of these ways we may understand what God is, what His mind is towards us, what He has done for us, and what He wants to do. This is the clearest revelation that exists about God, but these two ways must go together. We know Christ only through the Bible, not through visions or thoughts of our own. Christ wants to be known to us through His witnesses in Holy Scripture. He has also promised that their words will have truth and power through His Holy Spirit. Through this Word His work will be accomplished.<sup>2</sup>

When our Lord Jesus Christ appeared in this world, this happened in a certain people chosen for this purpose. The sending of the Saviour happened "in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy".<sup>3</sup> The promises cover the time from the fall of man up to the time of the last book by a prophet.<sup>4</sup> These promises are impossible to count. During the time they were given, the chosen people was prepared for the coming of the Saviour, the Messiah. During this time some people were expecting Him, some were not; but by His teaching and His guidance God wanted to find "a people prepared".<sup>5</sup>

The prophets of the Old Testament have indicated the main lines of the life of the Messiah. They have described Him as a prophet, a high priest and a king. They have also told about His fore-runners, about His healing of the sick, and about those who would betray Him. They have written about His suffering and death, how He would rest in a rich man's tomb and how He would rise on the third day.

All this can be studied from another point of view: the fulfilment. When we read what the gospels tell us about Jesus Christ, the promised Messiah, we find how the promises were fulfilled. Christ came to the world at a time most suitable to the people and the situation in that part of the world. Still it was the time, decided upon by God for that very purpose: "When the time had

fully come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman."<sup>6</sup> "This was according to the eternal purpose which He has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord."<sup>7</sup> In this way God has definitely shown us that HE IS WITH US.

## 2. *What has Jesus Christ revealed about God?*

*God is Truth.* As an eternal and perfect Being, God is Truth. One of His names, "I AM", means that He possesses all perfect qualities.<sup>8</sup> This is also shown by the fact that He is the Truth. Therefore He is steadfast, also by keeping His promises to man and to the world. But this truth appears in all the words He has spoken to us, and in His Word generally: "The sum of thy word is truth; and every one of thy righteous ordinances endures for ever."<sup>9</sup>

Jesus Christ, being the eternal Son of God, is the Truth of God. By learning to know Jesus Christ we can also know the eternal God. Jesus Christ claims to be the True one in all respects: The Way, the Truth, and the Life.<sup>10</sup> He is the true Vine, the true Shepherd, and the Door of the sheep. In Him is true salvation through His flesh and His blood.<sup>11</sup> His Church is called to be "the pillar and bulwark of the truth",<sup>12</sup> because these things definitely belong together: belief in the truth, sanctification by the Spirit, and salvation.<sup>13</sup>

*God is mighty.* God alone has supreme power.<sup>14</sup> The difference between God and man with regard to the power of creation is that God has this power by Himself, whereas with man this power is just a loan from God, although on a very small scale.

Only God can command, and the commanded thing stands forth.<sup>15</sup>

When our Lord Jesus appeared, He showed such a power that is never found with man. He performed things which only God Himself can do. Either they are called "signs" or "miracles", there is one thing that must be considered to be the greatest: "the sign of the prophet Jonah",<sup>16</sup> which means Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Jesus had that power, thus not only to raise people from the dead, but also to rise from the dead. About this He says: "I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again."<sup>17</sup> The rising from the dead is the greatest single deed after creation, but it is also the strongest evidence of the divine power of Jesus Christ. It is also the strongest foundation of our hope of salvation.<sup>18</sup>

*God is righteous.* To be righteous means two things: not to have broken any commandment, *and* to have fulfilled all the commandments of the law. Such a righteousness is not found in any man whomsoever.<sup>19</sup> Because of this the world needed a real revelation and demonstration of righteousness, "until all is accomplished".<sup>20</sup> That is what happened in this world, when the full righteousness of God was revealed through His eternal Son. This righteousness also works "that every one who has faith may be justified".<sup>21</sup>

*God is merciful and gracious.* Nobody in this world has ever shown love or mercy or grace as much as Jesus Christ did. He had mercy upon all kinds of people, simple, poor, and sick, yes, even dead people. The mercy of Jesus is real grace, because it is totally undeserved.<sup>22</sup>

The grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ never excludes *holiness* on His side, not even on one point. By this He has shown in the clearest way *what God is*. However, with us all this is different. We show our qualities, sometimes more, sometimes

less. Only God can show all His qualities fully and at the same time, and still make them all prevail. This is exactly what Jesus has done. Thereby He has made God known to us. Jesus Christ, therefore, is the clearest revelation of the holy, and righteous, and loving God. In this way it is extremely clear: IN JESUS CHRIST GOD IS HERE. IN JESUS CHRIST GOD IS WITH US.

1 Jn 1:14; 1 Jn 1:1-4

2 Jn 16:13-15

3 Rom 15:8-9

4 Mal 3:1-4

5 Lk 1:17

6 Gal 4:4

7 Eph 3:11; 1:9-10

8 Ex 3:13-14

9 Ps 119:160;

Isa 45:19

10 Jn 14:6

11 Jn 6:55-58

12 1 Tim 3:15

13 1 Thess 2:13

14 1 Chron 29:10-11

15 Ps 33:9

16 Mt 12:39

17 Jn 10:17-18

18 1 Cor 15:12-28

19 Rom 3:10

20 Mt 5:18

21 Rom 10:4

22 Rom 11:6;

Lk 5:32

# IV

## GOD IS WITH US IN HIS HOLY CHRISTIAN CHURCH

### *1. This is where God is continually revealing Himself to us*

In the Christian religion there are many things which make it different from other religions, e.g. the Word of God, the sacraments, Christ's death and resurrection, the reconciliation, the last judgment, and the eternal life. But there is another important, decisive difference between the Christian religion and other religions, and this difference is found in the doctrine about the Trinity of God. This doctrine means that God is one and, at the same time, Father, and Son, and Holy Spirit. Christianity has always taught that there is only one God and that in God there are three persons, three ways of revealing Himself to us.

Our capabilities fail us if we want to understand these deep things in full. The Deity and what is in it are "unsearchable".<sup>1</sup> This fact will stand out even more, if we consider one particular point: It has always been a secret that nobody has ever managed to explain, why only the Son became man, not the Father, nor the Spirit. Scripture only tells us that the eternal Son of God

became man, that "the Word became flesh".<sup>2</sup> Why it pleased God to accomplish the salvation in exactly that way we have never been told. We just have to bow before this unsearchable fact and this testimony from Holy Scripture.

## *2. The salvation work of the tri-une God is brought to us in the holy Christian Church*

The Church is *one*, only one in the whole world. Since God is the only true God<sup>3</sup> and Jesus Christ the only Saviour,<sup>4</sup> there can be only one Church. Holy Scripture says very clearly about our Lord Jesus Christ that "He is the head of the body, the Church; He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything He might be pre-eminent."<sup>5</sup> Scripture also explains how this unity works: "One body and one Spirit..., one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all."<sup>6</sup>

Further the Church is *holy*. This doctrine does not say that Christians have a holiness of their own. Nor does it mean that at first sight we can distinguish Christians from other people. First of all this doctrine speaks about Christ. He is the only one who has a holiness and righteousness of His own, complete and perfect. By faith all true Christians are united with Him, and through the grace of God they have a share in Christ's holiness and righteousness. By faith in Christ they have been declared righteous before God.<sup>7</sup> After that the Spirit of God works in them, so that their outward life, their words and deeds may be sanctified, i. e. be brought to correspond with the law of Christ and with the new life which they have been called to lead in His Kingdom. On this ground, and this ground only, Christians can

be called "the holy", "those sanctified in Christ Jesus", or "holy brethren".<sup>8</sup>

Further the Church is called *Catholic*. "Catholic" is a Greek word meaning "common", "comprising the whole", "intended for the whole world". In this sense the Church is Catholic, because the reconciliation and salvation, brought about by the work of Christ, are intended for the whole world. Therefore there is only one way of salvation: "He is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world."<sup>9</sup>

The Church is also *apostolic*. God has given us His Word through His apostles. Only this Word can create faith in us through the Holy Spirit. Only through this Word and this Spirit is it possible to remain in the Church and in a true Christian faith.

### *3. In the Church we find the means of grace, which are the Word of God and the Sacraments*

The uppermost of these means is the Word, since it works both by itself and through the other means of grace. Which are, then, the means of grace besides the Word of God? "If we call Sacraments *rites which have the command of God, and to which the promise of grace has been added*, it is easy to decide what are properly Sacraments. For rites instituted by men will not in this way be Sacraments properly so called. For it does not belong to human authority to promise grace. Therefore signs instituted without God's command are not sure signs of grace...

Therefore *Baptism*, the *Lord's Supper*, and *Absolution*, which is the Sacrament of Repentance, are truly Sacraments. For these rites have God's command and the promise of grace, which is peculiar to the New Testament." (Apology of the Augsburg Confession)

#### 4. *What do we receive in the Sacraments?*

In the New Testament the gifts in Baptism are described in many ways. It is said: "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ."<sup>10</sup> By this it is meant that the one being baptized puts off his old, sinful man as a worn and dirty piece of garment and instead puts on Christ and His righteousness. This can be done only because of what Christ has suffered and achieved.<sup>11</sup> Baptism regenerates, i.e. it gives new life. It also gives the Holy Spirit: "Be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit."<sup>12</sup> Thus the giving of the Holy Spirit is closely connected with Holy baptism. There are not two kinds of Baptism, only one. And in this Baptism our Lord Jesus gives us His Spirit in order that we may walk in Spirit throughout our life.

In Holy Scripture the second sacrament is called "the Lord's Supper" or "the Table of the Lord".<sup>13</sup> The name "the Lord's Supper" refers to the fact that this sacrament was instituted at an evening meal, before the suffering and death of Jesus. By this name we are reminded about the time and place of the institution. This connection should never be forgotten.

When we celebrate Holy Communion we receive, together with bread and wine, the body and blood of Jesus Christ. This doctrine, which is often and strongly repeated and stressed in

our confession, is called "the real presence" of Christ. It is a doctrine that should be very dear to us and defended under all circumstances.

To the means of grace, often also to the Sacraments, is referred "Confession", also called "Absolution". In Confession the Word of God and the promise of forgiveness can be applied to a sinner in a more direct and personal way than it can be done in a sermon or an ordinary Church service. Any Christian can ask for this opportunity to see a pastor and to open his heart and confess his sins before him. When the person has confessed his sins and says that he wishes to obtain the forgiveness, the pastor should ask: "Do you believe that my forgiveness is God's forgiveness?"<sup>14</sup> After the answer "yes" the pastor goes on: "As you believe, so it be done to you. And by the command of our Lord Jesus Christ I forgive you your sins, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Go in peace." (Small Catechism)

In these ways God has definitely shown us that He wants to be with us in His holy Christian Church.

1 Rom 11:33-36  
2 Jn 1:14;  
1 Tim 2:3-6  
3 Jn 17:3  
4 Acts 4:12  
5 Col 1:18

6 Eph 4:4-6  
7 Rom 3:21-26;  
5:12-19  
8 Phil 1:1; 1  
Cor 1:2; Heb 3:1  
9 1 Jn 2:2

10 Gal 3:27  
11 Rom 6:3-4  
12 Acts 2:38-39  
13 1 Cor 10:21  
14 Jn 20:22-23

# V

## GOD IS WITH US IN FAITH AND LIFE

### *1. How faith is created*

It is God who acts through the means of grace. He acts by His Holy Spirit, by His Word, and through the outward visible means. God's work is something real, objectively real. Therefore faith does not consist in thoughts, ideas, or feelings only. This teaching about what is objectively real is a barrier against a belief, which is based on sensational "happenings" or "spiritual experience".

When we deal with God's work of this kind, there are two sides of it we have to examine further. One side is the importance of *the Word*, the other is *faith*. What gives Baptism, Holy Communion or Absolution their contents and power? It is not the outward action in itself, nor the outward, visible things, but the word of God.

Thus both the Word of God and faith are stressed at the same time. We must guard ourselves against the thought that the outward action, or mere partaking in the sacrament, gives us a kind of merit or standing. On the other hand it must be very clear: *the*

*grace of God does not rest on our faith.* Grace is not given to us because of our faith, nor is it our faith that gives power to the means of grace. The grace of God is the same as *forgiveness of sins, peace, and eternal life.* These things are given to us only for Christ's sake. Faith is of importance in these matters only as an empty hand stretched out to receive the gifts, which are totally undeserved.<sup>1</sup>

## 2. *The order of grace*

When God gives His grace and creates faith in the forgiveness of sins for Jesus' sake, it is possible to speak about a certain order, *the order of grace.* In this order we may include: the calling, the enlightening, conversion, faith, justification, regeneration, sanctification, preservation, and glorification.

*God's calling* always comes through the Word of God, strictly speaking only *through that part of the Word which is called the Gospel.* When God calls people, He wishes to make them His children and members of His Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> He "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth".<sup>3</sup>

*The enlightening of man's heart* is done by the Law and by the Gospel. By the holy Law the Spirit of God sends His light into the heart of man. Man then in a fearful way becomes conscious of God's holiness and his own unholiness. It becomes necessary to confess that the judgment of the Law is true. If the words of the Law were the final ones, then man would be lost. – The enlightening through the Gospel is of a different kind. It points to Christ, His work, His grace, and His glory. Furthermore it is a continued call, because in cases of falls the Spirit invites man to come back to Christ for help.

*The conversion of man* consists in *turning away* from his old, evil life and *turning to* God and Christ's righteousness and grace, which is thereby received. Such a conversion is never done without faith, although this faith may be in its earliest and weakest stage. Conversion has two main parts: *repentance* (which is the same as contrition) *and faith*. Repentance is directed towards sin itself, not towards the possible punishment that may be expected because of the sin. The sinner regrets the very fact that he has thought and done such things that are bad and evil and thereby offended the holy God. The Spirit of God wishes to create in man's heart such a "godly grief" that "produces a repentance that leads to salvation".<sup>4</sup>

*The saving faith* is God's own work in the heart of man. But at the same time we must observe that the saving faith is not separated from man as a work totally foreign to him. It is not God or God's Spirit who believes, it is man who believes. Nobody else can do it for him. But this work in him is done by the Spirit of God.

*Justification* is so closely connected with the faith and with the regeneration, that these terms are often used alternately. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession says: "*By faith alone in Christ, not through love, not because of love or works, do we acquire the remission of sins, although love follows faith: Therefore by faith alone we are justified, understanding justification as the making of a righteous man out of an unrighteous, or that he be regenerated.*" But in spite of this rather frequent interchange of words it is necessary that we know the meaning of each word. Then "faith" is the instrument by which we receive God's gifts, whereas "justification" describes the new standing before God, attained by those who believe. In the same way there is a difference between justification and *regeneration*. "Regeneration", i.e. the birth of a new man, is the new beginning in the converted man's heart and life, the kindling of the new

life, after the death of the old man. "Justification", on the other hand, does not describe anything in the heart of man, nor in his life. It describes what happens in heaven, before God's heavenly court. "Justification" is God's work right through, but it occurs only when man receives God's grace in Christ by believing in Christ. This justification occurs, both in Baptism and when a sinner repents later in life and turns to God in a true conversion and faith.

Faith needs a continuation. All this also belongs to the order of grace. The first part of this continuation is *sanctification*. Sanctification is the application of God's holiness and love upon man's daily life, both before God and among people in the world. For such an application man needs *daily conversion*. Sanctification is also needed *if man is to be kept in faith*. This is called *preservation*. Finally, when faith reaches its goal, man is *glorified*.<sup>5</sup>

### *3. The continued life in faith*

With regard to the life of a Christian in this world two sides of it may be pointed out particularly. One side is *the vocation*, the other side is *faithfulness*. If a Christian serves God in his worldly work of calling, it is a good work. It does not matter if it is a work of great honour among men or not, nor does it matter if it gives great influence. What matters is faithfulness, endurance, and true love and stewardship.<sup>6</sup>

The faith of Christians expresses itself both in words and deeds, the latter both in the work of the calling and in love for fellowmen. In order to understand this fact more fully we have to remember the calling of the Church in those fields that are called *mission and diaconal work*. First, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation",<sup>7</sup> secondly, every

single Christian is a member of the body of Christ.<sup>8</sup> Up to the time when Christ will come back in glory<sup>9</sup> it is the task of the Christian Church to spread the Gospel, "the good news", and to make people share the salvation that has been accomplished. This is the mission work. But besides this the Church has to carry out the work of love in another sense, the diaconal work. Both these works have to be done.

In these matters everything depends upon our relation to God, and on His Word, and on the kind of faith we have. Faith, confession, prayers, offerings, and sacrifices are essential things for the work of the Church and for a Christian's fight and work for the Kingdom of God.<sup>10</sup>

1 Eph 2:8-9

2 Mt 28:18-20;

Jn 3:16

3 1 Tim 2:4

4 2 Cor 7:10

5 Heb 12:14;

2 Tim 2:10

6 Lk 16:10-12;

1 Cor 4:1-5

7 Mk 16:15

8 Rom 12:5

9 Mt 25:31

10 2 Tim 2:3-7

# VI

## GOD IS WITH US IN OUR ETERNAL HOPE

### *1. God is the Lord of all times*

According to Christian doctrine time is part of Creation. Time is one of the conditions for our life in this world. All events and all human activities have their particular time.<sup>1</sup> Therefore all times are different with regard to their contents. Some times are "times of trouble"<sup>2</sup> or accidents, of vengeance or visitation. Other times are "times of refreshing", "fruitful seasons", "the acceptable time" or "the day of salvation".<sup>3</sup>

Time is also important in the service of grace. With regard to an individual it means that in his lifetime he can receive the grace of God, provided he has not wasted his last opportunity by hardening his heart. If and when judgment comes upon him, the reason is that he did not accept the opportunity when he was visited by God.<sup>4</sup>

But salvation of man is also connected with the *eternal things*. The words "eternal" and "eternity" in their strictest sense can be applied only to God. Since He "was", before the world and man existed, He is eternal in the strictest sense of the word: He is the One existing before all times, and the one that will

exist after the end of all times.<sup>5</sup> Therefore He is also called "the beginning and the end".<sup>6</sup>

The word "eternal" is also used about such things that express God's being and His deeds. From eternity it was His decision to save mankind, because in His omniscience He knew that man would fall. His decision and plan of salvation can therefore be called "eternal".<sup>7</sup> In this way even men, created "in time" and during their life in this world limited in so many ways, may be drawn into the relation of eternity. This participation of eternal life commences already here in this life. This shows us that "time" and "eternity" should not be understood as totally opposed to each other, so that all connection must be excluded. Instead it is a Christian doctrine that "he who believes in the Son has eternal life"<sup>8</sup> already in this present time. This, of course, does not exclude that what the believer receives is only a beginning. The continuation of it will occur when time in this world has fulfilled its purposes and is changed into eternity.<sup>9</sup>

## *2. God wants to be with us even in death*

Holy Scripture tells us that in the physical death body and soul become separated, but they are not annihilated. We may die in very different ways, and we may be buried differently. But in all cases the body "returns to the ground, for out of it you were taken".<sup>10</sup>

It must be admitted that death is a dreadful thing. It is a terrible interference in the unity and integrity of man. But this interference is temporary. The dead body is put to rest in one way or another. The soul proceeds to its "room" of rest, where it will remain waiting for the resurrection of the body and the re-

union with it. Death, therefore, does not put a definite stop to the unity of man. That unity will be established again in the resurrection.<sup>11</sup>

With regard to death the question of "how" is much more important than the question of "when". This means that it is of minor importance if we die sooner or later, after sickness or without being sick, etc. The most important question is *if death finds us prepared, when it comes*. Often we ought to say to ourselves: "I may die at any time." If we then make the right conclusion from this fact, we will also become and remain prepared to die. The most important thing is to leave nothing whatsoever unsettled with God or man.<sup>12</sup> If all quarrels with other people are settled when they are still fresh, and if forgiveness is received and given, "if possible, so far as it depends upon you",<sup>13</sup> then death may come at any time. If it comes earlier or later, it does not change our eternal relationship to God in any way. Sooner or later, according to God's will, we may then "depart in peace".<sup>14</sup>

### *3. The return of Christ to be with us*

The return of Christ is often and clearly explained in Holy Scripture. This is done for many reasons. One reason is the scorn and ridicule of the opponents of faith.<sup>15</sup> Another reason is the rather common tendency among Christians to slacken in their watching, so as to become halfhearted or cool and finally lose their faith.<sup>16</sup> But the knowledge about the time for Christ's return has been withheld from us, according to His own words: "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour."<sup>17</sup> This circumstance may seem astonishing and unbelievable to us. But when Christians have begun to think more thoroughly over

these matters, they have been struck by the wisdom and grace God has shown us by keeping secret to us the time of Christ's return. Thus a Christian has to be prepared to be with Christ, either Christ will return soon, or his own death comes first and he will have to stand before the Lord without having first seen the Lord's coming.

#### *4. Both in the judgment and in the eternal bliss Jesus Christ wants to be GOD WITH US*

The last judgment, as the word itself says, will be the last one in a long chain of prior judgments.<sup>18</sup> When the Lord pronounces His judgment it means that the final word is said about good and evil, righteousness and unrighteousness, godliness and godlessness. Then mankind will reach its final destination. Nobody will have anything to object against the decisions of the Judge.<sup>19</sup> Complete justice will prevail. Therefore the final Judgment will lead to the praise and glory of the righteous and eternal God. He is the Supreme Judge. But He is also the tri-une God, and it has pleased Him in His eternal Majesty to let the final judgment be executed in the name of the Trinity by the Second Person, who is both Saviour and Judge.<sup>20</sup>

Holy Scripture tells us that the Judgment will "begin with the household of God".<sup>21</sup> This may seem to be in conflict with many other words in Holy Scripture, where it is said that those who believe in Christ will not be submitted to any judgment. But if we examine the total teaching of Holy Scripture in this matter we find that everything fits very well together.<sup>22</sup> The explanation is that we have to distinguish between the individual, secret judgment and the official, open judgment. The latter is an open,

formal and solemn confirmation of the former. In one way the judgment of a true, believing Christian was pronounced already when he received Christ as his Saviour and for Christ's sake was declared righteous.<sup>23</sup> This is a verdict of acquittal from the heavenly court, and this verdict solemnly becomes confirmed in the final judgment on the last day. This is the final action taken by our Saviour to prove that He is IMMANUEL, "GOD WITH US".

In the eternal bliss the highest and greatest will be *to see God*. In one way this is the same as to see our Saviour, Jesus Christ. The Son of man, the eternal Son of God, has made God known to us. This is also confirmed in heaven: to see God is the same as to see the Lamb. In heaven our Lord Jesus Christ is the Lamb, standing on Mount Zion, where He accepts homage from all the saved: "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb! ... Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen."<sup>24</sup>

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|----------------------|--------------------|------------------|
| 1 Eccl 3:1-8         | 8 Jn 3:36          | 17 Mt 25:13      |
| 2 Ps 37:39           | 9 Phil 3:12;       | 18 Rom 9:28      |
| 3 Acts 3:19; 14:17;  | 1 Cor 13:8-12      | 19 Rev 19:1-2    |
| 2 Cor 6:2            | 10 Gen 3:19        | 20 Jn 5:26-27;   |
| 4 Lk 19:41-44;       | 11 1 Cor 15:35-38; | Acts 17:31       |
| Mt 23:37-39          | 1 Thess 5:23       | 21 1 Pet 4:17-19 |
| 5 Ps 90:2; Isa 40:28 | 12 Mt 5:21-26      | 22 Jn 5:24;      |
| 6 Rev 22:13;         | 13 Rom 12:18       | 2 Cor 5:10       |
| Isa 43:10            | 14 Lk 2:29         | 23 Rom 3:22      |
| 7 Eph 1:9; 3:9;      | 15 2 Pet 3:3-4     | 24 Rev 7:9-12;   |
| Col 1:26;            | 16 Mk 13:37;       | 14:1-5           |
| Ez 37:26             | Lk 18:8            |                  |