

# A Gift From Heaven

*The Bible Alone*

*The Church*

*Bethlehem*

## Lesson 19

REFORMED  
EVANGELISM  
TASKFORCE

# The Bible Alone

God only asks one thing from us, and that is obedience to His Word. Only the Bible is the absolute norm for our lives and tells us how God wishes to be served by us. We are not free to decide ourselves on the manner in which we should serve God. We may not choose or decide how and to what extent we should obey God.

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## Obedience Instead of Self-Esteem

Saul, the first king in Israel, owed his royal position to the God of Israel who had chosen him for that office (*1 Sam. 10*). This meant that Saul had to live and act in subjection to God's law. This law is partly revealed in the book of Deuteronomy (*Deut. 17:14-20*). The kings of other nations decided for themselves how they and their people would serve their gods, but in Israel it was exactly the other way around. In Israel God dictated how the people and the king ought to serve Him.

All during his life Saul had great problems with this. The story of the battle against Amalek is a prime example (*1 Sam. 15*). The Amalekites were the first nation that had tried to annihilate the people of Israel after their exodus from Egypt. Therefore, the Lord had declared that He "would utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek from under heaven" (*Ex. 17:8-16*). Centuries later, Saul had to execute this sentence of God, but the king did not keep the command God gave him. He let the king of Amalek live and used him as a trophy to show off the spoils of his victory. Instead of destroying the spoils they were distributed to the soldiers.

The prophet Samuel promptly condemned Saul for his disobedient action, but Saul had a pious excuse and said that the spoils were saved to sacrifice to God (*1 Sam. 15:15*). Saul may have meant well, but Samuel makes it clear to him that the Lord takes no delight in good intentions when they go straight against God's express orders.

"To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams." (*1 Sam. 15:22*)

Most people are of the opinion that every person is free to decide how and in what manner he wishes to serve God. They think that it does not matter whether you put the emphasis on prayer or sacrifices. There are people who want to serve the Lord by doing all kinds of merciful acts towards their neighbours. There are people who keep many strict rules and regulations all their life. In the final analysis, we hear it said that we should leave it up to the individual to determine how he can serve God best. However, that old story of Saul shows very clearly that such tolerance is intolerable to God. God asks us to be obedient to His Word, the Bible alone. That is the absolute norm for our life because only the Bible tells us how God wants to be served.

## The Bible Itself

The Bible itself does not leave any room for misunderstanding there. As Saul, on God's orders is reprimanded by Samuel for his disobedience, so also Jesus rebukes the Pharisees. The Pharisees accepted both the laws of Moses and historical legends and traditions as a norm for their religious actions. With the logical, human result that tradition was valued over the Bible. Jesus says to the Pharisees, "So, for the sake of your tradition, you have made void the word of God." (*Matt. 15:1-9*)

When people start to recommend the products of their own thinking without subjecting their thoughts to what the Bible says, the danger of "false doctrine" and self-willed religion lurks nearby. The apostle Paul says that even if an angel from heaven would come with another message, you should test his message with the Word. "If any one is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed." (*Gal. 1:8,9*).

## The Whole Bible

God Himself has protected His Word against the power and pleasure of men. We can notice that from the way in which the Bible came about and from the contents of the Bible itself. We are expressly forbidden to add new words or thoughts, neither are we allowed to delete any part. We find this stated very clearly at the end of the Bible:

" I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if any one adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if any one takes away from the words of his book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book." (*Rev. 22:18,19*)

Of course this warning concerns the book, or the scroll in which the text is included first of all, but the same goes for all the books of the Bible. This command is already proclaimed with the same emphasis by Moses (*Deut. 12:32; 4:2*). Why does the Bible play such a unique role in our lives? Because God uses this book to make Himself known as the God who delivers the lives of people from sin through His son Jesus. Faith in Jesus Christ can only be worked in the human heart through the Word of God. The complete Bible is a tool which the Holy Spirit uses to work faith in our lives.

## Alone...

During the Reformation of the 16th century there were three well-known proverbs.

**Sola Fide** - through Faith alone (*Rom. 1:16,17*)

**Sola Gratia** - by Grace alone (*Rom. 3:22,28*)

**Sola Scriptura** - the Scripture alone (*Rom. 3:24*)

In all three of these proverbs one and the same thing is at stake: salvation through Jesus as a gift which man cannot earn or imagine. Man only receives redemption by grace. By means of listening to the Word of God, the Bible, with a believing ear you can learn everything you need to know in order to be saved. The Bible expresses God's will perfectly. Therefore, nobody is permitted to write or say anything that deviates from what the Bible says. That's what makes the Bible more than just another book. No human writing from whatever author may be put on the same line with the Bible. Everything that is not in accordance with the infallible norm, the Bible, should be rejected. The apostle John says, "Test the spirits to see whether they are of God." "If any one comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house." (*1 John 4:1; 2 John 10*).

## The Bible: You Can Count On It

What God has said and has written down is perfectly trustworthy. In contrast to that we are liars (*Ps. 62:9*). Of course that does not mean that people lie and deceive on purpose. It means that the heart of man was damaged by sin and has become unsound, so everything that comes forth from the heart is unsound. Paul makes some very forceful statements about this. Just read *Rom. 3:9-18*. Everything people maintain as true will have to be compared to what God says about it in His Word. That is what the people of Berea did. After they came to know Jesus through the preaching of Paul, they carefully compared the Scripture (the Old Testament) to find out "if these things were so" (*Acts 17:10,12*). That is the only way you can distinguish between good and bad. Whoever carefully searches everything that is presented as spiritual truth with the Bible in hand, can recognize the lies for himself. The Bible urges you time and again to search for the truth (*Jude 3,4*). God is trustworthy and so is His Word.

# The Church

## *Article 9*

If you are busy with God and His work in this world things such as the latest trends and popular theories should be of little significance. The only trustworthy thing is the Bible, God's own Word. This principle also applies to church life. You do not go to church because that is what your friends are doing. In the original text of the Bible the term "congregation" means a meeting of those who have been called together. Somebody is calling the church to meet, and He is no one less than Christ Himself. This is why we should go to church-in response to Christ's call.

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## **Believing Without the Church**

From public opinion polls it appears that many people, even if they do not belong to a church, consider themselves believers. They have a vague feeling or suspicion that there might be "something" out there, something more than our tangible and tough world. Instead of these vague feelings, however, God gives complete clarity to whoever accepts His Word. So why do so few people join the church? To many people church is associated with Sunday duties, cold doctrines and personal dissension. Upon hearing the word "church", they are inclined to think of certain church people who live disappointing lifestyles and who often act contrary to their beliefs. Believing is all right, but can this not be done better without the church?

## **God's People**

The Bible does not know of any believers "at large". In the Old Testament the believers are members of one people, children of one ancestor, Abraham. They form the nation of Israel. Still, national unity was not the most important thing at that time. Unity of faith was the essential issue. Abraham received God's promise that he would become the father of many nations. You can read in the New Testament how this promise became reality (*Gen. 15:5,6; Gen. 17:4-7; Rom. 4:11,16,17; Gal. 3:7-9*). After Jesus' ascension, the Spirit of God called people from all nations to faith. It is the same faith that Abraham had. The Bible calls the believers from all nations to be children of Abraham. The unity of faith makes all those people into one nation, God's nation.

## **One Flock, One Shepherd**

Most people have heard the expression, "The Lord is my Shepherd" (*Ps. 23*). That is how God deals with His people, like a shepherd with his sheep (*Ps. 77:20, 78:52; Is. 40:11*). This symbolism expresses loving care. If sheep wander away from the flock, they lack the shepherd's guidance, protection, and care (*Jer. 31:10, Ezek. 34:11*). They will perish if the shepherd does not make them return to the flock. God has given Jesus as a Shepherd. Jesus Himself told us about this. Just read, for instance, the beautiful parable of the Good Shepherd (*John 10:1-18*). When you read this story, it becomes immediately clear what it means to belong to the church. It means being led by the Good Shepherd Jesus Christ. It means listening to His voice and following Him obediently. There is one flock and one Shepherd.

## **The Voice of the Shepherd**

Jesus, our Shepherd, is in heaven now at His Father's right hand. The sheep here on earth however, can still hear His voice. God's Word is proclaimed by people all over the world. Yet, the real speaker is Jesus, through the Holy Spirit (*Heb. 1: 1,2*). The voice of

the Shepherd is the preaching of God's Word. When you read the book of Acts, you will see that listening to this voice leads to faith and that this voice also gathers believers into congregations (*Acts 11:21*). The people who came to faith and returned to God are called "the congregation". The letters to the Corinthians, the Galatians, and the Thessalonians are, therefore, like Jesus' letters in *Revelation 2* and *3*, addressed to the congregations, the churches. These congregations are addressed in many ways. They are called "the saints", "the faithful brethren" or "the church", but they are all the same thing (*Phil. 1:1, Col. 1:2*).

## People as Shepherds

God has called certain people to convey the voice of the Good Shepherd Jesus Christ. These people are also called *shepherds* (*John 21:15-17; Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-4*). They are the deputy shepherds under the chief shepherd, Jesus. The first shepherds were the Apostles. They were the leaders in the first Christian churches. "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to breaking of bread and the prayers" (*Acts 2:42*). The teaching, the unity of the believers, the breaking of the bread at the Lord's Supper, and communal prayer took place, much as they do today. Also in charity work the apostles took the leadership whenever this was required (*Acts 4:36,37*). However, as the church grew the apostles could no longer do everything. They appointed others to help them teach and preach (*2 Tim. 2:2, 4:2; Acts 14:23*). They appointed elders in the churches and announced that all churches should maintain this office (*Tit. 1:5*). Once a church was established it was up to her to select officebearers with the guidelines Paul had given them (*1 Tim. 3*). The requirements for these officebearers were announced in detail. Among the deputy shepherds, a certain division of labour eventually came into being. There were ministers, elders and deacons. Together they led the congregation and protected the flock. The elders who taught and preached are more commonly known as ministers or pastors (*1 Tim. 5:17*). There were also the regular elders who helped the minister in ruling and guiding the flock, and the office of deacon was instituted to help the poor, the sick, and people with all kinds of *need* (*1 Tim. 3:8; Phil. 1:1*).

Jesus' office of Shepherd must be exercised through these three offices: minister, elder, and deacon. The Good Shepherd bought His flock for a very high price, namely, His own blood. He also ensures that it will be preserved.

## The Body of Christ

"You are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (*1 Cor. 12:27*). The "body of Christ" is one of the most beautiful names which a congregation of Jesus may have. The Bible uses the image of "a body" for Christ and His people. Just as in a person all parts of his body form a unity, so Christ and His believers form one living body together.

This close unity is especially evident when the church gathers around the Lord's Supper table (*1 Cor. 10:16,17*). Through Jesus' work and service new life has begun for His people. His sacrifice on the cross meant reconciliation with God for the believers. Like a person nourishes his body with food, so Jesus nourishes His body, the church, with the preaching of the Word and the celebration of the Lord's Supper. God gives the church members a new life, a reconciled life. This gift is extended to the believers if they listen to His Word. The Lord's Supper adds certainty to the believer's faith. As certainly as he eats the bread at the Lord's Supper and drinks the wine, so certainly he receives forgiveness of sins through His body, the bread, and His blood, the wine, and enter into eternal life.

If you believe in Christ, if you accept Him as Redeemer, you cannot escape from joining the church. Out of love for Him you must take your place in His body, the congregation. In that place, in the church, you receive all His gifts of grace. Every sheep needs a Shepherd and the Shepherd is only found with His flock.

# Bethlehem

## *Matthew 1-2*

What does the name Bethlehem mean to you? Most people associate its name with Christmas, wise men, shepherds, and the baby Jesus. And most people will think of these things at Christmas time. But what does Christmas really mean? Simply put, Christmas is the feast of Christ's birth.

For many people Christmas is connected with Santa Claus. Since people do not believe in the reality of Santa Claus after childhood, they do not believe in the reality of Jesus either. Santa Claus only exists so that we can give each other presents as the family gathers together. Likewise, to many, Jesus only exists so that we can gather cozily around the Christmas tree and read a moving story.

The fact remains that almost 2000 years ago Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem. To remember that occasion properly requires more than a few enjoyable nights by the tree. To really celebrate Christmas we have to believe what God tells us in the Bible. Jesus was born on earth. That is, He was sent into our world by God in order to take our sins away. That is what Christmas really means.

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## **A Strange Beginning**

The New Testament starts by telling us how God brought salvation into the world through the birth of Jesus. We might think that the story of Jesus' birth begins very strangely (*Matt. 1*). Who would expect a boring genealogy as an introduction to the exciting events surrounding Jesus' birth? However, in the first 17 verses of Matthew, that is precisely what we have. They are neatly arranged in 3 groups of 14 generations. The names go from Abraham to David, from David to the exile in Babylon, and from there to Jesus.

The list of names which Matthew writes in the beginning of his gospel are the genealogy of Jesus, the son of David, the son of Abraham. The family tree of Jesus shows emphatically that Jesus is King. Through Jesus the "Kingship of Israel" was restored. The prophecy of Amos was now fulfilled. "In that day I will raise up the booth of David that is fallen..." (*Amos 9:11*). And the angel Gabriel says to Mary, "He will be great, and will be called the son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there will be no end" (*Luke 1:32,33*). Through this strange beginning the "royal lineage" of Jesus comes out very clearly. It is beautiful to see a genealogy which culminates in the King, who gives His people the gift of forgiveness of sins and life eternal (*Matt. 1:21*).

Yet, there is something else you can learn from this enumeration of names which you might be inclined to skip over when reading the Bible. The family trees of the people of Israel usually do not contain names of women, but this family tree does. Matthew

mentions the names of four women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. Having women in an Israelite family tree is odd, but having these women is even less understandable.

**Tamar:** the woman with whom Judah the son of Jacob committed adultery (*Gen. 38*).

**Rahab:** the harlot who had more confidence in God than the unbelieving people of Israel (*Jos. 2*).

**Ruth:** a woman from another nation who was included in the covenant of God with Israel (*Ruth 1*).

**Bathsheba:** the woman with whom David committed adultery which resulted in the pre-meditated murder of her husband (*2 Sam. 11*).

The names of these four women, and all the other names in the family tree as well, shows us that God uses sinful people for His purpose. It shows that God uses sinful people to bring about the birth of His Son. The genealogy which Matthew mentions in the beginning of his gospel draws our attention to God's mercy and forgiveness, not man's accomplishments. When Matthew wrote his gospel, he had the Jewish people in mind. Many of these people thought that they could earn their own entrance into the Kingdom. They trusted in their good works, but that is folly since there cannot be any merit from people's good works. Everything comes from God. Everyone in that genealogy had to a greater or lesser extent rejected God. Yes, most of them trusted God and tried to obey Him, but the trust and obedience was from God too. If God would have left them alone each and every one of them would have turned away from God. Yet, God forgave the sins of those who wanted to reject Him.

How can God do this? He knows that Jesus will bring *Ps. 130* to fulfillment. Jesus shall redeem Israel from all their iniquities.

## The Miracle of His Birth

If you consider all the circumstances, Christ's birth is nothing less than a miracle. God could have exterminated the people of Israel, and more than once He had much cause to do so. Sometimes the Israelites even felt as if God had done so. "Will the Lord spurn forever, and never again be favourable?" (*Ps. 77:7*) In spite of their sin God kept His promise. He sent the promised Redeemer into a sinful world. Great is God's faithfulness!

The miracle became even more astounding. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was with child, but she was still a virgin. Joseph, her fiancée decided to "divorce her quietly", but an angel of God explained the mystery to him in a dream. "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit" (*Matt. 1:20*). When God fulfills His promise, He does not need Joseph. The angel Gabriel said to Mary, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God" (*Luke 1:35*).

When God brought salvation to a sinful and lost world, He chose to do so through a miracle. Isaac was born by a miracle and Abraham's Great Son, Jesus, was also born by a miracle. This last miracle far surpassed the first one. The beginning and the end of the family tree of Jesus are miracles from God. Isaiah prophesied this miracle many years before. "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel" (*Isa. 7:14*).

God sent Jesus to earth in order to bring eternal salvation to mankind.

## Light In The Darkness

The miracle of the birth of Jesus, the Redeemer from sin, took place in a dark world. When the Saviour was born in Bethlehem, Herod reigned in Israel. Ironically, He was an Edomite, a descendant of Esau, the twin brother of Jacob. This put a black page in Israel's history book, for it was not Jacob who "ruled" over Esau, as their father Isaac had prophesied (*Gen. 27:29*). The roles had been reversed, and the people of God were oppressed by a man who became known in history as an infamous murderer. He did not even shrink from having his soldiers murder all the boys in Bethlehem two years and younger, in the hope that the newborn king of the Jews would perish as well (*Matt. 2:16-18*). But the plan failed, and from the moment of His birth a light shone in that dark world. "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death, light has dawned" (*Matt. 4:16*).

The Saviour was born. He would teach the people of God to serve Him in holiness and righteousness all their days (*Luke 1:74,75*). That light not only shone for the people of Israel. The King of Israel, the Son of David, is also the son of Abraham. According to the promise He will be a blessing to all nations. He is the Light of the world! He is a Light to you and me!

# Questions 19

## The Bible Alone

1. In *2 Chron. 26* you can find the history of King Uzziah. What is the connection between the sin of this King and the matter which this lesson dealt with?
2. In *Judges 17* and *18* there is a remarkable story about some maybe well meant, but still self-willed worship. From what can you derive that this people's ideas were put above God's will?
3. When do we speak about a self-willed (or self-opinionated) religion?

## The Church

1. Why did Jesus give office bearers to His congregation? (*Eph. 4:11,12; 1 Pet. 5:1-4*)
2. What should be the attitude of the church members towards their office bearers? (*Heb. 13:17; 1 Tim. 5:17-19*)
3. What does the Bible say about church attendance? How important is going to church for a person who wishes to believe? (*Heb. 10:23-25*)

## Bethlehem

1. Prophecies in the Old Testament often have a double meaning. They relate to events in the near future and to one or more events much further into the future. Who received the promise "Emmanuel" first, and what was contained in that promise? With regard to whom was that promise fulfilled and what was its meaning at that time? (*Isa. 7; Matt. 1:23*)
2. Jesus was both circumcised and baptized. Who baptized Jesus? (*Matt. 3:13-17*) What role did he play in God's plan of salvation? (*Matt. 3:3; Isa. 40:3-5*)