

Dear Young People in Kalamazoo,

It was a pleasure to meet with you on Oct. 17 in the Thies residence. You submitted many excellent questions, but due to lack of time I was unable to answer them all. Below you will find my answers to the remaining questions. Hopefully this will be helpful.

With warm regards,

Pastor Elshout

Question: In tonight's sermon, you said that the Pharisees were offended by the disciples plucking ears of corn to eat on the Sabbath. Aren't we supposed to sacrifice physical needs if we know we will offend our brother?

Answer: Your question relates to the practice and exercise of Christian liberty. Paul does indeed write in 1 Cor. 8:13, "If meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend." In the context of these words, Paul is addressing the practice of some Christians who would eat meat offered to idols. They would argue that since idols do not exist, offering meat to idols was a meaningless exercise. It would therefore be harmless to eat such meat. However, others who had recently been converted from their pagan idolatry had very tender consciences about eating such meat. For them the association with their former lifestyle was so great that they could not bring themselves to eat such meat. Paul thus advised believers who no longer had an issue with this to forego eating such meat out of loving deference to their weaker brothers and sisters.

In Matthew 12, however, we have an entirely different situation. The disciples were engaged in an entirely legitimate action: nourishing their physical bodies on the Sabbath. Christ fully endorsed the actions of His disciples to expose the God-dishonoring legalism of the Pharisees who designated something as work that was not work. By their legalistic and arbitrary distortion of God's Word, they imposed an unbearable yoke upon the shoulders of the people of Israel. By their man-made tradition, they made the Word of God of none effect and grievously misrepresented the character of God. Therefore, the Lord of the Sabbath, the Lord Jesus Christ, dramatically wanted to expose their hypocrisy by permitting His disciples to engage in something that was entirely legitimate for the Sabbath, illustrating that man was not made for the Sabbath, but rather that the Sabbath was made for man.

Question: What does it mean to be baptized by the Holy Spirit?

Answer: The consistent use of the verb "to baptize" in Scripture (the Greek verb "baptizo") refers to an act whereby one is brought into union and fellowship with someone or something. In Matthew 28:19, we read of Christ instituting New Testament baptism, commanding His church the use the formula "baptizing them **into** the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." I printed "into" in bold to highlight that this

is the word used in Greek. Thus, Christ was saying that baptism symbolizes sinners being brought into union and fellowship with the Triune God.

Baptism thus symbolizes the work of the Holy Spirit. Being baptized by the Holy Spirit therefore takes place when sinners are born again. At that moment, the Holy Spirit not only makes dead sinners alive, but He simultaneously unites that sinner to Christ and consequently incorporates him/her into the body of Christ. Being baptized by the Holy Spirit is the act whereby sinners are grafted into Christ and into His body—a being brought into union and fellowship with Christ. The Holy Spirit accomplishes this amazing work in every believer. All true believers have thus been baptized by the Holy Spirit. Being baptized by the Holy Spirit is not an experience that occurs after conversion whereby Christians allegedly are elevated to a higher level of spirituality. All God's children have been baptized by the Holy Spirit when He regenerated them. All believers, without exception, are united to the Lord Jesus Christ by His Spirit.

Question: What do you do if you have a friend who is wayward and you have used the Matthew 18 way—going to the person; bringing another person, etc.? I have prayed about it, feeling no peace about it. What do I do about it? How do I respond?

Answer: I commend you for having followed the Matthew 18 principle—a principle violated so frequently. It is much easier to talk about someone rather than to someone. Following this principle is truly an act of love and requires prayer and self-denial. It appears, however, that you have walked that pathway and that your friend refuses to repent. Christ does not stipulate a time-table for how frequently we, assisted by others, should continue to interact with such a wayward friend. Yet, there may come a point when out of genuine love for the soul of such a friend you would inform the elders of your church so that they may now engage themselves in urging this friend to repent. Of course, if your friend does not belong to the same church as you do, there may have to come a moment that at last you would have to cease and desist. Continued prayer would then be the only remaining option. But what an option that is, for what is impossible with man is possible with God!

Question: What are some good methods for evangelizing co-workers?

Answer: In the work environment, the most foundational method is your conduct—your walk of life. By our consistent walk, we must earn the right to be heard. God has often been pleased to use the consistent godliness of believers to get the attention of unbelievers. That being said, there should then also be consistent prayer that God would create providential opportunities to speak to co-workers about the gospel. However, even then we should behave ourselves wisely, knowing when to speak and when to take a step back. One thing is certain: We cannot force the gospel on someone. Though the gospel is a glorious message, the natural man is hostile to that message. Therefore, if you meet with hostility, it is time to step back and prayerfully wait for another opportunity—and to let your godly conduct continue to be a silent witness.

Question: How did salvation work in the Old Testament vs. the New Testament?

Answer: Sinners in the OT were saved the same way as sinners are in the NT: by faith in Christ. OT believers believed in the Christ that would come, and NT believers believe in the Christ that has come. Abraham is therefore called the father of all believers. Christ says of Abraham that by faith he saw “his day” and rejoiced. He believed God and it was counted unto him for righteousness. In other words, he was justified by faith! Paul therefore uses both Abraham and David in Romans 4 to illustrate justification by faith as the core truth of the gospel. Furthermore, Hebrews 11 is an enumeration of OT believers who all lived by faith—a faith that only has one Object, the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Question: What advice would you give to somebody struggling with assurance?

Answer: First let me say that all believers struggle with assurance—some more and some less. Especially at the beginning of spiritual life, assurance can be very fragile and short-lived. There is but one pathway in which believers can gradually arrive at an abiding assurance of their salvation, and that is by a continual and daily taking refuge to Christ. Though assurance of faith is also the sovereign gift of the Holy Spirit, it pleases Him to work and strengthen that assurance by the repeated exercise of faith. The Dutch divine, Wilhelmus à Brakel, says remarkably that the true believer takes refuge to Christ thousands upon thousands of times. Thus, as the believer increasingly learns to rest in Christ alone, he/she will gradually become increasingly assured of his/her salvation. As an illustration, think of a little child. The very first time it attempts to stand, it will do so for a very brief moment and then will fall down again. However, gradually the child’s legs will grow stronger and the periods of standing will become longer. So it is in the life of faith.

Question: What does your devotion time look like? What is a good way to have communion with God?

Answer: Your devotion time must be a time when you can truly be alone with God and His Word. That often means that in our busy lives we must consciously schedule a time for Scripture reading and prayer. You will need to find a place where you can do so without being disrupted and/or distracted. For most believers that will be during the early hours of the day. During that time of the day, there are usually no pressing obligations, phone calls, etc. to distract us—something that is so essential for a fruitful and edifying devotional time. However, there is no hard and fast rule for when and where we should have our time alone with God. The important point is that we must consistently strive to find time to be alone with God so that we can hear His voice through His Word and respond to His Word in prayer. That is the divinely ordained way in which we may experience communion with the living God through His beloved Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Question: Why aren't more articles and doctrinal papers written today? During the Reformation era many were written. Why the change?

Answer: I believe that more doctrinal articles and papers have been written than ever before. So much good material is now readily available via the internet.

Question: 1 John 1:7 says that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin, but in Matthew 12 it says that the one who blasphemes the Holy Spirit shall not be forgiven. Please explain.

Answer: Both statements are equally true. The blood Jesus Christ does truly cleanse from all sin—except the one sin specifically identified by Christ Himself. The sin against the Holy Ghost is of such an extraordinarily serious nature that for the one who commits it the door of grace already closes in this life. That person will be given over to such hardness of heart that there will not be a moment's remorse. Therefore, the fear of having committed this sin is the best proof that one has not committed that sin. Very briefly, the person who commits that sin will with full and malicious intent, as an expression of utmost hatred and enmity, ridicule and malign that which is holy.

Question: In James, we are counseled to pray in faith, nothing wavering. How can one do that when praying for faith?

Answer: James is simply saying that true prayer is in and of itself an act of faith. Calling upon God means that we believe Him to be who He has revealed Himself to be in His Word, "for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Heb. 11:6). And yet, while doing so, we can be greatly plagued by unbelief, causing us to waver. And therefore, we can find ourselves to be crying out to the God who hears the needy when they cry (which is already an act of faith!) for the increase of our weak and feeble faith. This seeming paradox is so beautifully expressed in a psalter verse we know so well:

"Open," saith the Lord,
"Wide thy mouth, believing
This My covenant-word:
'I will, if thou plead,
Fill thine every need,
All thy wants relieving.' "

Question: In what way is Christ's yoke easy and His burden light?

Answer: Christ is actually saying, "My yoke is not a yoke, and my burden is not a burden." In other words, He is saying, "To follow me in the pathway of loving and evangelical obedience will not be a life of bondage." Thus, in submitting ourselves to His will, looking to Him as the Author and Finisher of our faith, we will experience the

liberating power of the gospel—and thus that the truth will make us free indeed. His ways are ways of pleasantness and peace! (Prov. 3:13).