A faded, yellow-tinted portrait of J. Gresham Machen, an older man with a serious expression, wearing a suit and tie, is the background of the cover.

THE Outlook

*Devoted to the Exposition and Defense
of the Reformed Faith*
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J. Gresham Machen

and the
Cost of
Faithfulness



J. GRESHAM MACHEN AND THE COST OF FAITHFULNESS

Daryl G. Hart

During the first half of the twentieth century J. Gresham Machen was widely regarded as conservative Protestantism's most articulate and forceful defender. When he died suddenly on January 1, 1937 at the age of 55, Presbyterians and Reformed mourned the loss of a man who had almost single-handedly kept Calvinism alive even if not entirely well. Casper Wistar Hodge, the grandson of Charles Hodge and one of Machen's colleagues at Princeton Theological Seminary, wrote that with Machen's passing, the church had lost "the greatest theologian in the English-speaking world." W. J. Grier of the Irish Evangelical Presbyterian Church believed that no one else of his generation more resembled John Calvin than Machen. And *The Banner* of the Christian Reformed Church editorialized that "the cause of orthodoxy has lost its most prominent champion in our country, the Church of Christ a truly great reformer."

A short list of Machen's accomplishments over his relatively short life justifies these assessments. He had taught New Testament since 1906, first at Princeton Seminary until 1929, and then at the newly formed Westminster Theological Seminary for the last seven years of his life. His care for and accessibility to students alone would have been sufficient to shape the lives of many Presbyterian pastors and scholars. But Machen was more than a gifted teacher. He was also the foremost conservative New Testament scholar in the United States and displayed his wisdom and expertise in books such as *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (1921) and *The Virgin Birth of Christ* (1930). In these works, which received the praise of conservatives and liberals alike, Machen defended the historical reliability of the New Testament narratives, demonstrated the connection between the historical Jesus and Reformed orthodoxy, and revealed the inadequacy of

naturalistic accounts of Christ and the early church. Furthermore, he wrote and spoke constantly to popular audiences. The most significant of his popular writings were two books written at the height of the fundamentalist controversy. The first was *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923), a book that argued intelligently for the essential incompatibility of liberal Protestantism and historic Christianity. In the second, *What is Faith?* (1925), Machen defended the intellectual integrity of Christianity while exposing the anti-intellectualism and subjectivism of liberal theology.

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But he was more than a popular teacher, accomplished academic and gifted writer. He was also a prominent figure in the ecclesiastical controversies that surfaced during the 1920s and 1930s as the Northern Presbyterian Church accommodated liberal theology. The fundamentalist controversy understood correctly was arguably the most significant battle of twentieth-century church history. For the last sixteen years of his life Machen was consumed by that struggle in every aspect of his life, from personal relationships to professional advancement. In fact, what made Machen so remarkable was his courage and dedication to a cause that was so unpopular and cost him so dearly.

UNLIKELY FIGHTER

Machen's courageous stand for the Reformed faith could not have been predicted by his early life and training. He was born

(1881) and reared in a prominent Baltimore family with deep ties to the South, and ran in the elite circles of the Northeastern cultural establishment throughout his life. His father, Arthur W. Machen, from Centreville, Virginia, was a well-respected lawyer, member of various cultural institutions, and elder in the Franklin Street Presbyterian Church. His mother, Mary Gresham Machen, from Macon, Georgia, was an author and devout Presbyterian who taught all three sons the *Westminster Shorter Catechism* and all the kings of Israel and Judah. She was hostess to numerous dignitaries in the Machen home. Machen's parents surrounded him with all the finery of Victorian culture and encouraged him to pursue a first-rate education.

Machen's academic training was also unusual for someone identified with a movement known for its ignorance and anti-intellectualism. He did not leave home to go off to a university but enrolled at the nearby Baltimore institution, The Johns Hopkins University—one of the pace-setting schools associated with the academic reforms of the late nineteenth century. Machen was a classics major and particularly enjoyed the Greek language and literature. After graduating first in his class in 1901, he stayed on at Hopkins for a year of graduate work in classical Greek. He left Baltimore the following year to reside in the small town of Princeton, New Jersey, where he enrolled in the regular course at Princeton Seminary as well as a Masters program in philosophy at Princeton University. Machen found his studies at the seminary to be a bit confining—he did not care for the practice of required attendance. But he distinguished himself to the faculty, winning several prizes in New Testament studies. He followed up his training at Princeton with a year-long stint in Germany, one semester at Marburg and one at Goettingen, for advanced work in Biblical and theological studies.

Even though Machen displayed a superior gift for biblical languages and an ability to contribute to the field of New Testament scholarship, he remained undecided about a vocation until he was thirty-three. No one in his family had ever been ordained as a minister or had become a seminary professor. Machen also was known to enjoy college football games, the theater, golf, tennis and mountain climbing. Because of the expectations of students and church folk, he wondered whether becom-

ing a seminary professor might require living a less active and less pleasurable life.

Plus, Machen had doubts about how deeply he had appropriated the Christian faith. His studies at Johns Hopkins, Princeton and in Germany had exposed him to biblical scholarship that questioned the veracity of Scripture. But Machen's doubts went deeper than intellectual concerns. Integrity demanded that whatever he decided to do with his life be something of ultimate consequence. This was even more the case if he went into biblical scholarship and the training of ministers. Until Machen felt entirely comfortable with work as a seminary professor he would not fully embrace the work and life of theo-

logical education. Even so, he returned from Germany in 1906 to become a lecturer in Greek and New Testament at Princeton Seminary and by 1914 had resolved his doubts sufficiently to pursue ordination, a step required to become an assistant professor, a position in which he remained for the next fifteen years.

Though Machen settled into the routines of seminary life, becoming a popular professor, identifying with the seminary's theological tradition of Calvinism and a high regard for the Bible, and participating actively in a local church, he still desired a more vigorous outlet. The outbreak of war in 1914 among European powers and America's eventual involvement presented such an opportunity. Machen knew that as a minister he could not bear arms and considered becoming a chaplain or ambulance driver. He eventually decided to serve as a YMCA secretary and was stationed in France from 1917 until the Armistice. Exposures to the horrors of war made a profound impact upon Machen. Already skeptical about the direction of Western culture, Machen became even more aware of the false optimism and high regard for human accomplishments after serving in the war. Most Presbyterians of Machen's day, even the strict Calvinists would have been postmillennialists. But the war convinced Machen that the direction of human history was not improving.

Consequently, he returned to the United States in 1919 with a sober estimate of human nature and where Western society was headed.

THE PRESBYTERIAN CONFLICT

Machen's experience during the first World War also turned out to be a form of training for the battle with theological liberalism of the 1920s and 1930s. After studying in Germany he knew first hand the destructive nature of recent biblical scholarship. But seeing how thoroughly the mainline denominations in the United States had identified liberty, democracy and social justice with the cause of Christ made Machen all the more resolute in opposing the witness of the American church. He believed most Protestants had become so concerned with the economic and political problems of this world that they had abandoned all interest in Christ's conquering sin and death and giving hope for the world to come.

Evidence of liberalism in the Northern Presbyterian Church took a variety of forms. It could take shape in such obvious forms as Harry Emerson Fosdick's sermon, "Shall The Fundamentalists Win?", in which the noted modernist reduced such doctrines as the virgin birth and the inerrancy of Scripture to old fashioned ideas that were no longer appropriate for educated Christians. Or liberalism could manifest itself in the various denominational agencies which did not so much deny cardinal doctrines but did pursue a range of activities, from medicine to education, which undermined the church's task of proclaiming the gospel and saving souls from sin and death. As Fosdick himself said in his notorious sermon, the world order was being torn to shreds politically and economically and all fundamentalists offered in response was the virgin birth of Christ and his literal second coming. "What incredible folly!"

But Machen was up to the challenge. He worked with other conservatives to organize a movement that opposed liberalism within the denomination. He also became a major reason for conservative students enrolling at Princeton Seminary, many of whom would also join conservative ranks. And one of the reasons for Machen's increasing visibility was his important, even if short, book, *Christianity and Liberalism*.

In that work he made a clear case for the essential antagonism between historic Christianity, a religion of sin and grace, and theological liberalism, a religion of morality and uplift. Even though the book rankled many liberals, it remains what one historian has called "the chief theological ornament" of conservatives.

Still, despite the favorable reception Machen's book received from journalists and observers of the ecclesiastical controversy, *Christianity and Liberalism* met with opposition from fellow Presbyterians. In fact, when the 1925 General Assembly appointed a committee to study the cause of the dispute within the denomination, the committee's report blamed conservatives for name-calling and failure to use the formal procedures of church polity.

The irony of the church's refusal to condemn liberalism was that it did so in the name of tolerance and diversity. Yet, such liberality did not extend to conservatives. In fact, the policies of toleration embraced by the Northern Presbyterian Church could be quite vindictive. This was especially the case for Machen who over the last ten years of his life experienced numerous indignities from church officials who prided themselves on Christian love, forbearance and preserving the unity of the church.

In 1926 the directors of Princeton Seminary nominated Machen to fill the open chair of apologetics, a decision that required the ratification of the General Assembly. But his opponents at the seminary, who were moderate evangelicals, as well as denominational officials used his political views against him (he opposed Prohibition in a church that voted Republican more often than today's Christian Right) and circulated rumors that he was temperamentally deficient and not equipped to assume the new teaching re-

sponsibilities. To make matters worse, Machen's opponents used this episode to launch an investigation of Princeton Seminary, the only denominational agency that consistently affirmed the church's theological standards and also criticized liberalism aggressively. The committee given the task of investigation recommended a reorganization of the seminary's administration, a change that moved conservatives from a majority position on the old board to a minority status on the new board. Machen believed that this administrative shake-up compromised Princeton's theological identity and so he founded Westminster Seminary in 1929 to perpetuate the theological and polemical tradition of Old Princeton.

Perhaps the greatest indignity Machen faced because of his consistent and faithful opposition to liberalism in the Presbyterian Church came a few years before his death. In 1933 he led the formation of the Independent Board of Presbyterian Foreign Missions, an agency designed to send out conservative missionaries and protest the liberal policies and practices of the official denominational missions board. Of course, church officials objected to the new agency as a rival to their own. But rather than following due process, church officials drafted an official document, the Mandate of 1934, that declared the Independent Board unconstitutional and required presbyteries to bring Independent Board members to trial. In the winter of 1935 Machen was eventually brought to trial by his presbytery. When it came time for Machen to present his defense the judicial commission ruled that it would hear no evidence concerning liberalism in the official missions board or the legality of the Independent Board. As he said, "I am to be condemned on the ground that I have disobeyed a lawful order but am not allowed to be heard when I offer to prove that order is not lawful." He added that the judicial commission had "dishonored Christ" before it had humiliated him. But

the humiliation Machen experienced at the hands of the Northern Presbyterian Church's denominational machine was truly astounding for its blatant unfairness. According to the religion editor for a Boston newspaper, the ruling against Machen was "deplorable" and "unpardonable," especially since Machen affirmed "the very letter of the church's belief."

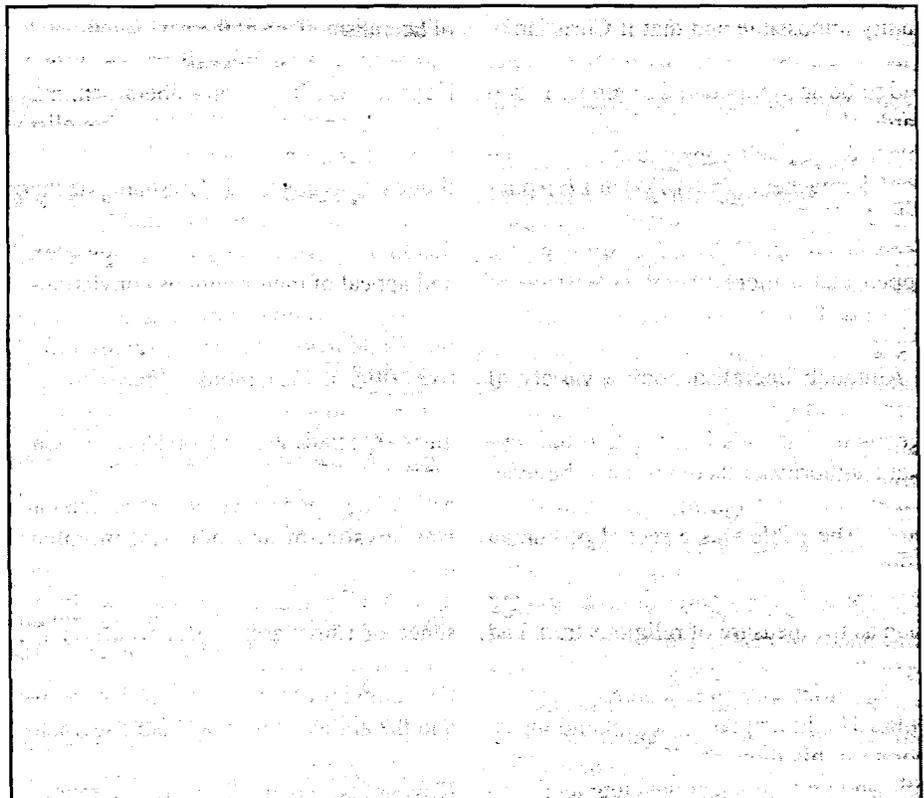
Yet, Machen was undeterred. After appealing his case to the General Assembly and losing the appeal, he and 5,000 other conservatives formed in 1936 the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. And only six months later he traveled to North Dakota to rally support for the new denomination and answer charges from local mainline Presbyterian ministers that he was a disreputable fellow. During that trip in late December Machen came down with pneumonia and died on New Years Day, 1937.

It was an ironic end to an impressive life. A man who had grown up in the lap of wealth and refinement and who gave himself unceasingly to the cause of the Reformed faith, died in the Roman Catholic hospital of a small provincial mid-Western town. Machen's life could have turned out very differently. He could have completed a Ph.D. and contented himself with a teaching career. He could have won the approval of friends and peers by avoiding controversy in the church. But Machen

had the courage of his convictions. He knew that it was not enough just to lecture in the classroom or write scholarly books. The cause of Christ demanded an ever vigilant stand for the truth and opposition to error. It also demanded the integrity of the church's witness. It was one thing for individual ministers and church members to be orthodox. It was another entirely for such orthodoxy to be reflected in the agencies and policies of the denomination at large.

Machen also had the comfort of his convictions. He knew that his only true hope, both in life and death, was in his Savior, Jesus Christ. On his death bed he wrote in a telegram to a colleague at Westminster: "the active obedience of Christ, no hope without it." That hope gave Machen the courage to stand for his Lord even when that stand was very unpopular. And that same hope provided comfort when he suffered the consequences of his faithfulness. It is no less the case today that the church of Jesus Christ needs the same kind of faithfulness and courage that Machen exhibited in his day.

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Liberalism: Attractions and Dangers

W. Robert Godfrey

J. Gresham Machen - honored in this issue of *The Outlook* on the sixtieth anniversary of his death - was the leading scholarly critic of liberalism in America in the 1920s and 1930s. He stood with others before and after him, such as Abraham Kuyper and Cornelius Van Til, in defense of historic Christianity against the rising liberal doctrine in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For those of us who are conservatives, the dangers of liberalism and the courage and nobility of those who stood against it are almost self-evident. But we will not really understand those dangers or that courage unless we pause to see something of the attractions of liberalism.

Liberalism arose, according to its understanding of its mission, as an effort to save Christianity. Liberals believed that the intellectual challenge of the Enlightenment had made the defense of traditional Christianity impossible and that if Christianity was to be preserved in any form, the faith had to be accommodated to modern standards of thought. One theologian took up this task very self-consciously. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) in 1799 published an influential work entitled *Religion, Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*. He hoped that a more liberal expression of Christianity might win unbelievers back to the faith.

Although liberalism took a variety of forms, certain *common characteristics* emerged. Liberals insisted that the ultimate authority in theology must be man, either in his reason, his will or his feelings. The Bible was a record of human religious reflection and while valuable, was not ultimately authoritative. Seeing man as the measure of religious truth had several benefits for the liberal. *First*, it made Christianity intellectually respectable. The liberal could accept and incorporate in his thought all the latest scientific and philosophical developments and

avoid any hint of anti-intellectualism. He could avoid the horror of being old-fashioned. *Second*, liberalism could be a force for human unity. As any exclusive claims for Christianity faded, various denominations and various religions could all be appreciated and affirmed as contributing to the advance of the truth. Liberals could exemplify the modern virtue of tolerance. *Third*, liberalism was progressive and forward-looking. Liberals could be optimistic, confident that the future held only advancement for mankind.

These characteristics of liberalism seemed very attractive to many - from the days of the late eighteenth century down to our time. One can be a Christian and fit right in to the modern world. Or so the liberals thought.

A variety of defenders of historic Christianity spoke out against the various forms of liberalism. Two of them were intimately acquainted with liberalism. Abraham Kuyper was educated in a liberal seminary and embraced for a time the liberalism taught there, only later turning to an orthodox Calvinism. J. Gresham Machen studied with some of the leading liberal theologians in Germany and felt the power and appeal of their religious convictions.

Kuyper's knowledge of liberalism from the inside made him an especially effective critic. In his famous *Lectures on Calvinism* he addressed the problems of liberalism especially in his second lecture, "Calvinism and Religion." He noted that liberalism had taken several forms: rationalism, mysticism and practical moralism depending on whether one stressed the mind, the feelings or moral duty as the essence of Christianity. But whatever the form of liberalism, it assumed the essential normalcy of the world in which we live and the ability of man without supernatural intervention to lead the religious life. Kuyper insisted that the Christian religion

taught that this world is abnormal and only by supernatural help—in revelation, redemption and regeneration—is there any hope for man.

Machen also attacked liberalism in his brilliant work, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923). In terms similar to Kuyper's, Machen wrote: "The many varieties of modern liberal religion are rooted in naturalism - that is, in the denial of any entrance of the creative power of God (as distinguished from the ordinary course of nature) in connection with the origin of Christianity." He argued that this liberalism was the most dangerous form of religion: "the great redemptive religion which has always been known as Christianity is battling against a totally diverse type of religious belief, which is only the more destructive of the Christian faith because it makes use of traditional Christian terminology."¹

The simple thesis of Machen's book - that Christianity and liberalism were two different religions - outraged the liberals. But Machen defended his claim clearly and effectively in the course of his book.² He maintained that Christianity must defend itself on both the religious and scientific fronts. Christians must not take refuge in anti-intellectualism: "Modern liberalism may be criticized (1) on the ground that it is un-Christian and (2) on the ground that it is unscientific."³ Real scholarship will not undermine, but will uphold Christianity.

Machen's book still reads today as if it had been written to the controversies of our time. Let me offer one small example from the introduction where he comments on the effect of liberalism as a broad cultural movement on the public schools in America in the early 1920s. "When one considers what the public schools of America in many places already are—their materialism, their discouragement of any sustained intellectual effort, their encouragement of the dangerous pseudo-scientific fads of experimental psychology—one can only be appalled by the thought of a commonwealth in which there is no escape from such a soul-killing system."⁴ He seems to have had a prophetic spirit in this comment - as in so many others.

What Kuyper, Machen and others saw clearly was that *the attractions of liberalism were themselves the dangers of liberalism*. That conclusion is more clear today than it was even earlier in this century as we have seen the intellectual and moral bankruptcy of liberalism. *Liberalism not only lacks a clear or convincing vision of truth, but also lacks a clear moral system. Radical relativism dominates both.* The effort to replace the Bible as authority with man as authority has been a total failure. Liberalism's weaknesses are seen in the very areas where it was attractive to many. *First*, liberalism has not been as successful as orthodox Christianity in providing an intellectually respectable defense of the faith. *Second*, it has promoted unity only by abandoning any claim to truth. And *third*, in its optimism it has failed to account for the undeniable evil in human nature.

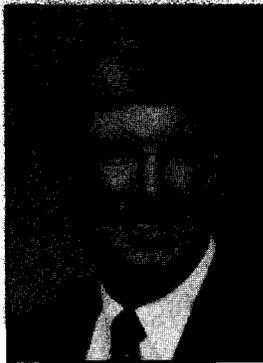
Liberalism has failed in its central task. It has not saved Christianity. Today it is the liberal churches that are increasingly empty while many conservative churches are growing and vital. Even liberal theologians, such as Harvey Cox, have come to recognize that their expectation of the decline of religion and the steady rise of secularism was wrong.

The world continues to need - just as it always has - faithful, orthodox Christianity. Christian churches still face the temptations of liberalism and tragically some continue to succumb. The lure of respectability in this world is often too strong. To help us all resist such temptation we need to know about some of the heroes that helped the church expose and resist liberalism. J. Gresham Machen was such a man and *The Outlook's* series on him will be a blessing for all Christians.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism*. Grand Rapids, Michigan (Eerdmans), 1923, p. 2.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p. 4.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 7.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 13.

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The *Apostles' Creed* says it simply and succinctly, "I believe in the Holy Spirit." The *Nicene Creed*, identifies the Holy Spirit as "the Lord and Giver of life; who proceedeth from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; who spake by the prophets." Pentecost is an appropriate time to reflect on what we believe and confess about the one whom Abraham Kuyper once observed is the "neglected" third person of the Trinity. One cannot begin to exhaust what can be said about the work of the Spirit, but in any discussion *three major themes* should emerge. In reading the Scriptures on this subject, one notices first of all the *omnipresence of the Spirit's work*. The Scripture continually testifies of the Spirit's presence at every point in the history of salvation. *Secondly*, the core of the Spirit's work is *to bear witness to Christ*. Thirdly, the Spirit is a *Comforter*. He brings to fruition a knowledge of Christ and comforts the elect with the assurance of belonging in life and in death to a faithful Savior.

THE OMNIPRESENT SPIRIT

The word "spirit" in both Hebrew and Greek can be translated as "breath on wind." In the very opening verse of Scripture we read that "the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters" (Gen. 1:2). Concerning the creation of man we read that "the Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and man became a living being" (Gen: 2:7). This is recounted in Job 33:4: "The Spirit of God has made me; the breath of the Almighty gives me life." God's Spirit is that which gives life. It is that which constitutes us as image-bearers of God with personalities, with a sense of the divine, so that we are

able to acknowledge and worship our creator.

But God's Spirit was not only present at creation; it continues throughout history. Its omnipresence is reflected in the pointed question of the Psalmist: "Whither shall I go from thy Spirit?" (Psalm 139:7). Nehemiah recalling the wonders of God in leading His people through the wilderness notes: "Thou gavest Thy good Spirit to instruct them, and didst not withhold Thy manna from their mouth, and gavest them water for their thirst" (Neh. 9:20). Without water and manna Israel would have starved physically; without the pres-

ence of the Spirit to instruct them they would have starved spiritually.

In the gospels we see the Spirit active at every point in the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was present at Christ's conception. The angel of the Lord tells Joseph that he need not fear to take Mary as his wife "for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:20). It was present at the beginning of His ministry when the Spirit of God descended on Him like a dove after His baptism; He was led up by that same Spirit "into the wilderness to be tempted by the Devil" (Matthew 4:1). When the Lord was first rejected in His home town of Nazareth, while speaking in the synagogue, He quotes from the prophesy of Isaiah and announces: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor." At the end of His earthly ministry, after announcing to His disciples His impending departure, Christ

Richard Blauw

promised to send another Counselor "even the Spirit of truth" (John 14:17). Indeed, every time a sinner comes with joy and trembling to the foot of the cross in repentance and faith we see evidence of the work of the Spirit. What Christian cannot testify to the presence and power of the Spirit? The apostle Paul reminds us of that in Ephesians when he says that in Christ those who believe are sealed with the promised Holy Spirit and that we who were dead in

trespasses and sins through the power of that Spirit are made alive (Ephesians 1 and 2). Without the work of the Spirit we could not be regenerate.

THE HOLY SPIRIT AS WITNESS

Shortly before His death on the cross, the Lord Jesus Christ promised the disciples that He would pray the Father "and He will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of Truth" (John 14:16,17). That Counselor "will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26). That Counselor also will bear witness to Christ (John 15:26). It is the Counselor that reminds us of Christ, that teaches us of Christ and that directs us to Christ. Unlike the incarnate Christ, who was risen from the dead and ascended into heaven, that Counselor remains with us and will remain with us forever.

The implications of the work of the Spirit as a witness to Christ are indeed far reaching. It is through the work of the Spirit that we are able to identify error, and alien spirits and false prophets may be tested. In I John 4 we read: "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God." At the root of every heretical movement lies this question, "What do you believe, what do you confess about the Lord Jesus Christ?"

The Spirit not only bears witness to Christ, but confirms our identity with Him. This confirmation can be seen in the fact that we believe in Christ, we love one another, and we keep His commandments and thus abide in Him. But this is reciprocal. Not only do we abide in Him, but He in us. And we know that He abides in us

"by the Spirit which He has given us" (I John 3:24).

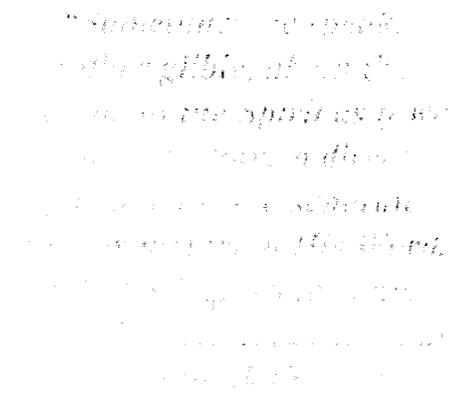
The work of the Spirit also points to the freedom and the renewal that is ours in Christ. The apostle Paul notes that the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom (II Cor. 3:17). This is a freedom that becomes increasingly evident in the Christian life. Through the work of the Spirit we are being changed into His likeness from one degree of glory to another. It will become totally apparent when we shall behold the glory of the Lord in His presence. Karl Barth once used the illustration that we are like birds in a cage flapping our wings against the side of the cage until we attain that glorious freedom that is ours in Christ. It is through the work of the Spirit that we comprehend this freedom.

The Holy Spirit is also the "Spirit of Truth." It bears witness to the Word. In fact, the Spirit should never be divorced from the Scriptures. Sometimes we speak, rather glibly, about the leading of the Spirit as if we somehow have a direct pipeline to God separate and distinct from His Word. What is important is not what the Scriptures say, but what we think they say. Thus the church of Rome can give the same weight of inspired authority to ecclesiastical tradition as it gives to the Scriptures. This same perspective can be seen in some who think that a majority vote in an ecclesiastical assembly reflects the leading of the Spirit despite what the Scriptures may in fact say. Obviously there are issues which the Bible does not address. In such situations it is right and proper to pray for the Spirit's leading. But when the Scripture speaks clearly to an issue and a church chooses to ignore the clear teaching of Scripture, it cannot claim to be led by the Spirit. Every spirit must be tested by the Word; that is the Spirit's voice.

This, of course, impacts worship. There are many siren songs calling us and our children to new forms and new styles of worship which ostensibly are more "meaningful." Some churches, in an effort to accommodate this thinking, have "alternative" worship services offering either a "traditional" or a "contemporary" format. The presupposition, of course, is that worship should be designed to please the subject rather than the object, to please the one worshiping rather than the God who commands our adoration. When we confess that we believe in the "holy catholic church," we confess that we believe "the Son of God by his Spirit and Word ... gath-

ers, protects and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith" (*Heidelberg Catechism* Lords Day 21). A local congregation is a visible expression of that spiritual reality. At the very least, worship rightly rendered ought to reflect a common consensus as to what is pleasing to God. This community united in true faith ought to in its worship, worship in Spirit and in truth, united around the truth of God's Word. It ought to reflect the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Instead of fostering, we fragment community in creating optional worship "experiences." But we fail to ask the question, "Does this help or hinder the work of the Spirit?"

A children's catechism based on the shorter *Westminster* asks the question, "What is prayer?" The answer is: "Prayer is asking God for everything He has promised us in His Word." Prayer first of all is related to God's Word. To separate prayer from God's Word reduces it to a meaningless exercise in self-indulgence. Prayer is related to the Word which is an evidence of the Spirit's work. The Word is God-breathed; it is inspired of God. However, prayer related to the Word only becomes effectual through the intercessory power of the Spirit. Our inarticulate, incoherent, sometimes rambling prayers are purified and made presentable through the work of the Spirit. We know the Spirit intercedes



for us with "groanings which cannot be uttered" (Romans 8:26). Without the Spirit's work we could not pray.

THE SPIRIT AS COMFORTER

In John 14, shortly before He would walk the last mile to the cross, the Lord Jesus Christ tells His disciples of the coming of the Spirit. He promises that He will send a "paraclete," a Counselor, or a Comforter. This Counselor "will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I

have said to you" (John 14:26). This text is followed with a wonderful promise of the Lord's peace, the Lord's shalom. "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you" (v. 27).

The word used for the Spirit in John's gospel has many nuances in related forms in other contexts. It can mean to summon, to invite, to pray, to comfort, to be an advocate, or to be a helper. All of these nuances are encompassed in the concept of the Spirit as a Counselor or Comforter. When the Spirit was poured out on the church on Pentecost, it was poured out on a church in disarray. Christ had been crucified, risen, had appeared to the disciples and other followers, and had ascended into heaven. His disciples were filled with questions. There was no manual giving them instructions as to what to do. They did not know what was expected of them. Earlier they had been ready to return to their nets and take up fishing, the occupation with which they were most familiar. After Christ's ascension, the disciples returned to Jerusalem and met with the company of the brethren that in total comprised a small band of about a hundred and twenty people. They prayed, they cast lots to pick a successor to Judas, but they had no direction for the future. It was not until the day of Pentecost and that huge in-gathering of souls, that the New Testament church began to take shape so that those who were converted "devoted themselves to the apostles' teachings and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42). The marks of the church were beginning to be made evident. *It was God who set the agenda and the direction for His church when the Holy Spirit was sent at Pentecost.*

But something else took place, because those who received that out-poured Spirit in true faith experienced the transforming power of Christ. Their outlook on life was radically changed. By the power of the Spirit, they believed the Word of the apostles. The covenant promises made to Abraham were fulfilled in Christ. They, as well as others who were far off, would share in Christ and all His blessings. But the greatest blessing was the comfort of knowing in life and in death that we may belong to our faithful Savior. It is that unsurpassing comfort we could not possibly possess without Pentecost, without the glorious work of the Holy Spirit.

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User-Friendly Evangelism and Reformed Evangelism Today (II)

J. Mark Beach

INTRODUCTION

Before His ascension into heaven, Jesus mandated His church to make disciples of all nations. In order to equip her for that task, He promised the Holy Spirit. "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the church—thus empowering the church to *be church*, that is, to go forth and fulfil the Great Commission.

Obviously, if the church is to fulfil the Great Commission she must do more than bring the gospel to members of God's covenant family (believers and their children). She must also bring the gospel to those who are "afar off."

Reformed churches of every stripe need to be reminded of their own theology—that the preaching of the gospel is one of the keys of the kingdom of heaven (*Heidelberg Catechism, Q/As 83 & 84*). In fact, it constitutes God's current redemptive action in human history. Just before His ascension, Jesus Himself expressed this idea when He established the preaching of the gospel as the third phase (His death and resurrection being phases one and two) in His program of redemption: "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46-47). Since confessionally Reformed churches have such a high theology of preaching, confessing its *redemptive significance*, they ought to be leading the charge to preach the gospel of peace to those in the family of faith and "to all who are afar off." There have been eras in church history where this has been the case. It is not the case today, particularly with respect to the evangelistic efforts of the local church.

As noted in last month's article, some Reformed churches, in their haste to remedy this situation, have adopted methods and measures of the seeker-sensitive move-

ment. Last time we examined the seeker-sensitive theology of evangelism. We offered a brief outline of this approach to evangelism and then focused our attention on five areas of concern or "five theological miscues," as we called them. The reader is encouraged to (re-)read last month's issue of *The Outlook* for the treatment of these matters.

As became evident in the prior article, the critique made of seeker-sensitive (or user-friendly) evangelism involves some fundamental issues—issues regarding the gospel itself. Yet the user-friendly movement does have strengths. While it is necessary to distance ourselves from the aberrant aspects of this movement (and we have), it is also incumbent on us to recognize the commendable features it exhibits which might aid us in our own evangelistic efforts. Consequently, in this article I want to point out three positive aspects of seeker-sensitive evangelism, and then make some observations for doing Reformed evangelism today.

POSITIVE FEATURES OF USER-FRIENDLY EVANGELISM

Somebody Cares

The first commendable feature of the seeker-sensitive movement is its genuine concern for lost people. Say what we want about its shortcomings, love for the lost drives many seeker-sensitive churches. This defines their mandate and certainly, to a significant degree, drives their efforts. As pointed out in our previous article, the church spearheading the user-friendly movement is Willow Creek Community Church in South Barrington, Illinois. Its co-founder and senior pastor, Bill Hybels, has a passion for the lost. He notes that "lost, wayward, irreligious people, in spite of their sin, really matter to God." Consequently, "that which is missing matters enough to launch an all-out search." In each case, "retrieval brings rejoicing." It is out of a desire to reach unbelievers that Willow Creek and many other seeker-sen-

sitive churches have geared their ministry the way they have.

I think we need to be aware of our tendency to become self-absorbed as churches. The Great Commission involves not only evangelism but also edification. We are not only to make disciples unto conversion, we are to make disciples by teaching them to observe all that Christ has commanded. We should not be ashamed of our traditional emphasis on catechetical instruction and Bible study. But in all frankness we need to learn from the user-friendly movement what our own theology already teaches us, namely, that we love lost neighbors enough to actually seek them out. Many seeker-sensitive churches do! They let their unbelieving neighbors know that somebody cares.

How Unbelievers Think

Another commendable feature of the seeker-sensitive movement is its effort to understand how unbelievers think. Lee Strobel's book, *Inside the Mind of Unchurched Harry and Mary*, is an example of such an effort. In our labors to seek the lost, we need to know what makes Harry and Mary tick. It is valuable to know how unbelievers perceive the church and think about spiritual things. Strobel, a teaching elder at Willow Creek and a self-described, one time, anti-church Charlie, offers some useful insight on this score. A note of caution is in order, however. What is the goal or purpose of acquiring insight into Harry's mind? Is it to manipulate or otherwise wheedle them into the kingdom? Is it to convert them *to us* or is it to convert them *to Christ*? Let us be clear: Scripture requires that we learn how unchurched Harry and Mary think *not* so that we can reshape the gospel to make it appealing to them, but so that we can aim the gospel's darts at the vulnerabilities in their lives! We want to hit the bull's-eye. We must be schooled in what they think about God and the church, but our message must be shaped by what *the gospel thinks about Harry and Mary!* With that caution, we can commend many seeker-sensitive churches for their sensitivity to get inside the mind of unbelievers.²

A Clear Strategy

The third commendable trait of the seeker-sensitive movement is that it has a clear strategy for ministry to lost people. That strategy consists of basically four ingredients: (1) Befriend unchurched Harry and Mary, (2) Invite them to a seeker service, that is, a service which is geared entirely for Harry and Mary, (3) Upon commitment to Christ, assimilate Harry and

Mary into a small group to help them grow spiritually, and (4) Send now-churched Harry and Mary forth to use their gifts to build the church and to reach out to unchurched Larry.

From my previous article, it is evident that I do not agree with certain aspects of point two in this strategy (at least as it is conceived and practiced by many user-friendly churches). But again, following the example of Willow Creek, at least many seeker-sensitive churches have a strategy for reaching out to lost neighbors. If we dare to admit it, a surprising number of confessionally-Reformed churches have no strategy at all. They simply and honestly don't! Consequently, outreach to unbelievers simply and honestly does not take place. Seeker-sensitive churches are to be commended for setting goals for outreach, marking out a strategy to fulfil those goals, and then implementing it.

OBSERVATIONS FOR DOING REFORMED EVANGELISM TODAY

In light of our criticism and commendation of user-friendly evangelism, we wish to make some comments for doing Reformed evangelism today. I offer the following observations as a framework from which to pursue the task of evangelism. Obviously, given the limitations of space, I can only sketch out a few observations.

What Evangelism Is and Isn't

As Reformed believers we *first* need to be clear about *what evangelism is and isn't*. One essential ingredient missing from the User-Friendly movement is a careful definition of evangelism. Biblically defined, *evangelism is the preaching of the gospel*. The Greek verb from which we derive our English word "to evangelize" (*euangelizomai*) means to bring or announce (the *euangelion*), the *evangel*, the good news or the good message. The regular use of the verb in the New Testament means to make known, *verbally*, the good message, the Christian gospel; and the spread of that gospel constitutes evangelism.³

In that light we must see what evangelism is *not*. In his book *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, John R. W. Stott explains that evangelism is *not* to be defined in terms of the *recipients* of the gospel. You do not evangelize people, you evangelize the Word. For example, in Acts 14:7 we read that "there they evangelized," meaning "there they preached the gospel" (see Rom. 15:20). Similarly, Acts 8:4: they "went about evangelizing the word," while Philip in Samaria, verse 12, "evangelized

concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8:12). The word "evangelism" can also be connected to places where the gospel was preached. For example, the apostles "evangelized many villages of the Samaritans" and Philip "evangelized all the towns" along the Palestinian coast (Acts 8:25, 40)—meaning, the gospel was preached to the inhabitants of those towns and villages.⁴

Secondly, we must not define evangelism according to *results*. As Stott perceptively observes, "There is no mention in these verses whether the word which was 'evangelized' was believed, or whether the inhabitants of the towns and villages 'evangelized' were converted. To 'evangelize' in New Testament usage does not mean to win converts, as it usually does when we use the word. Evangelism is the announcement of the good news, irrespective of the results."⁵ The user-friendly movement and most of American evangelicalism need this corrective.

It is common, of course, for evangelicals to think of evangelism as "winning people to Christ" or "converting them to the gospel" or "leading them to the Lord." And that is certainly the *goal* of evangelism. But evangelism itself means to preach the gospel. And that is why evangelism should never be defined in terms of success. We are not to think of evangelism as preaching the gospel *so as to achieve a desired result*. That would be to define evangelism in terms of *outcome*. It is not our task to make the gospel "successful," or to manipulate a certain "result." Indeed, if that were the standard, much of the evangelism recorded in the New Testament would fail the test.

Thirty-six years ago, J. I. Packer wrote that "the way to tell whether in fact you are evangelizing is not to ask whether conversions are known to have resulted from your witness. It is to ask whether you are faithfully making known the gospel message."⁶ The essence of evangelism, then, is the faithful proclamation of the gospel.⁷ Yes, we want to see conversions. No, we are not indifferent to the *effect* the gospel is having on people. Indeed, we pray for conversion and join the rejoicing in heaven when it happens (see Luke 15:7). But if conversion does not happen, the unresponsive, unrepentant sinner was evangelized nonetheless, that is, he still heard the *evangel*, the good message.

Thirdly, evangelism comes along one lone avenue—and that is the preaching of the Word. By preaching I do not mean a topical talk, with some Bible verses added on at the end. I mean an exposition, explication, and application of the text. To be

ABORTION LIES

Cal Thomas

In issuing the call of the gospel, in evangelism, may we keep before us the words of Colossians 4:2-6, for they outline a strategy regarding how we ought to conduct ourselves toward unbelievers. "Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains. Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone."¹⁰ Let us be sinner-sensitive churches.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Quoted from G.A. Pritchard, *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, pp. 26-27.
- 2 See Pritchard's analysis in *Willow Creek Seeker Services*, pp. 59-79.
- 3 John R.W. Stott, *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1975), p. 38.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1961), p. 41.
- 7 Stott, op. cit., p. 40.
- 8 In that connection, Os Guinness wonders why megachurches make so much of their front-door statistics (who comes and why) but are rather silent about their back-door statistics (who leaves and why). Could it be that there are a large number of sham conversions? Moreover, as much as 80 percent of the growth in megachurches is by transfer. It is not as if they are reaching as large a population of unbelievers as is often intimated. They aren't so much adding new cards to the deck, as reshuffling the original fifty-two. Besides, "most of the newly reached 'unchurched' are really spiritual refugees from the collapse of three groups—legalistic fundamentalism, watered-down liberalism and over ritualistic traditionalism" (that includes many Roman Catholics). Are already converted people simply switching churches—to one they like?—Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), p. 82.
- 9 Will Metzger, *To Tell the Truth: The Whole Gospel to the Whole Person by Whole People*, 2nd edition (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1984), pp. 32-33.
- 10 I am indebted to Rev. Carl Heuss, pastor of the Des Moines CRC, for alerting me to this important passage. In fact, Rev. Heuss teaches an evangelism seminar entitled "Outside Opportunities" that is self-consciously Reformed in its approach.

Rev. Beach currently serves as pastor of the First Pella CRC. He has accepted the appointment to teach Practical Theology at Mid-America Reformed Seminary in Dyer, IN.

The admission by a prominent abortion advocate that he lied about the number of babies killed during the called "partial-birth abortion" is surprising only in its candor. Ron Fitzsimmons, executive director of the National Coalition of Abortion Providers, said he misled the public because he feared the truth would damage the abortion rights cause.

Recalling a November 1995 appearance on ABC's "Nightline," Fitzsimmons said, "I lied through my teeth" when claiming the procedure was rarely used and that the only women who sought such abortions were those whose lives were in danger, or whose unborn children were severely damaged. President Clinton used nearly identical language in explaining his veto of a bill that would have outlawed the procedure.

The White House says it will take another look at the matter in light of Fitzsimmons's comments. But the administration is lock-step with the abortion rights movement, so look for more double-speak. President Clinton frequently says he wants to make abortions "safe, legal and rare," but has done nothing to limit the procedure even in the most extreme of circumstances, such as partial-birth abortion.

Legal abortion was conceived in a lie. Norma McCorvey, "Jane Roe," claimed to have been raped. She later admitted lying in order to make her case more compelling to the Supreme Court. The justices who made abortion legal believed testimony that thousands of women were dying from illegal abortions, a "fact" asserted by the National Abortion Rights Action League (NARAL), but later acknowledged to be false by top NARAL official Dr. Bernard Nathanson, who was at the time operating the nation's largest abortion clinic in New York.

To maintain a policy of abortion on demand, proponents have had to continue telling lies. Planned Parenthood, which consistently argues for maintaining the abortion status quo, once told a different story. In 1965, a Planned Parenthood pamphlet called "Plan Your Children" said of family planning: "Is it abortion? Definitely not. An abortion kills the life of a baby after it has begun. It is dangerous to your life and health. It may make you sterile so that when you want a child you cannot have it. Birth control merely postpones the

beginning of life." Was Planned Parenthood lying then, or is it lying now?

On December 11, 1993, NARAL's Kate Michelman was quoted in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* as saying: "We think abortion is a bad thing. No woman wants to have an abortion." Five days later a NARAL statement claimed that Michelman "has never said—and would never say—that 'abortion is a bad thing.'" But reporter Jodi Enda taped the interview and stood by the quote.

Sandra Cano, the "Mary Doe" in Roe's companion case, *Doe vs. Bolton*, stated that she never wanted an abortion and signed paperwork she thought was related to a divorce she sought from an abusive husband. The American Civil Liberties Union lawyer that Cano believed was helping with her divorce claimed that her client applied for an abortion but was turned down. Cano says she was lied to and that the lawyers handling the case did not explain to her what was happening and why.

During the partial-birth abortion debate last year, in which proponents claimed it is rarely done, the *Bergen County Record* reported that doctors in one New Jersey clinic perform 3,000 abortions annually, half of them the partial birth variety. Rather than admit the truth, abortion proponents attacked the professionalism of the reporter.

Also last year, pro-abortion groups claimed that anesthesia takes the life of the unborn child before the procedure in which its brains are sucked out. Though many physicians denied the claim, the media continued to spread the falsehood as if it were true, as if that would somehow make the procedure more ethically tolerable.

Then there are the daily lies told to women that their unborn child is not a baby, just tissue, and that having an abortion will solve the problems that lead them to seek one. And let's not forget the lie about no one being available to care for the child or the woman after birth.

Another bill needs to be introduced immediately that would outlaw partial-birth abortion before the public forgets that Fitzsimmons has added his name to a growing list of pro-abortion liars.

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In Times of Revival: BEGINNING TO KNOW THE SPIRIT OF REVIVAL (I)

Neal Hegeman

If and when spiritual Christian revival occurs, what will it look like? Scriptures gives us a sure answer. The inspired Psalmist writes: "Revive us, oh Lord, according to your Word" (Ps. 119: 107). Revival will be an awesome and unexpected fulfillment of the holy teachings and gracious promises of God as contained in the Scriptures.

The authors' interest in revival comes from witnessing the dynamic growth of the small and seemingly insignificant Christian Reformed Church in the Dominican Republic. The Hegemans spent over 12 years in the Dominican Republic. The churches are mostly comprised of Haitian immigrants working in the sugar cane fields of this tropical country. From the years 1982-1989, the struggling and scattered groups of about 400 attendees skyrocketed from 400 to over 9,500 in 1989. The number of groups jumped from 12-15 to over 230. What happened?

Several missionaries, including the author, spent considerable time in studying the history of the church, mostly from a School of Church Growth perspective. Was the growth due to the right application of sociological and contextualization principles or was it, as the national church leaders and members saw it, "lluvias de gracia" (rains of grace) and "avivamiento" (revival)? Without excluding the benefit of adhering to proper sociological and ecclesiastical principles and applying them in a common sense way, a more profound explanation is needed.

What convinced the author of the authenticity of the Haitian-Dominican revival was the whole scale return of church leaders, members, and seekers to the Word of God. Not only was there a "hunger and thirst for righteousness," in theory but also in practice. There was a communal return to the Word of God which only the Holy Spirit can affect.

Upon returning to Canada to take up the pastorate of the newly-formed London Independent Christian Reformed Church and

two years later being asked to serve as the director of Ligonier Ministries of Canada, the author has sought to encourage the study and seeking of revival for God's people. In meeting Christians throughout Canada, the prayer for revival is being offered by leaders and members from many denominations. Without the living presence of an almighty and holy God, denominations have gone spiritually bankrupt. Heresy, immorality, traditionalism, church politics, spiritism, superstition, materialism, spiritual deadness, and other ungodly manifestations are affecting most Canadian churches.

The main theme of these articles are to affirm that spiritual revival will be in fulfillment of God's Word: no more and no less.

Dr. Neal Hegeman
Ligonier Ministries of Canada

INTRODUCTION

The scientist, the researcher, in order to have a solid foundation for his investigation, has to go to the *primary sources*. Once we understand the beginning of our object of investigation, then it is possible to understand the present reality and make future calculations.

The righteous judge in the court room, in order to make the right decision, needs to hear all the evidence.

Believers are not necessarily scientists, lawyers or trained theologians, but they are committed to knowing God and knowing truth. They need the highest source of evidence for their beliefs about eternity. After all, eternity with God is what counts forever.

Revival is a supreme act of God. The only way we can understand it is to return to the primary source of revival, God Himself.

GOD CAN BE KNOWN

When the contemporary Christian expresses interest, prays for and would like to be involved in spiritual revival, certainly he or she would want a revival which comes from God. Potentially, we can be revived in our senses, revived in our emotions, revived in community, without experiencing the revival of God. **Revival, above all else, must come from God.** Revival is, in the first place, theological, that is, God-initiated, God-centered, and God-glorifying.

If true revival is to take place in the Christian church today, we will need a theological revival. We may not ignore the binding character of God's attributes and being in revival. Theology, not denominationalism, traditionalism, or personal preference, will be determinative in revival.

The *primary source* for knowing anything that is absolutely true is *God Himself*. He is truth. He is knowledge. He is, what the ancients called, the Word. Non-Christians have been shown by God's work in creation that He is a personal God (Romans 1:18-20). Christians know Him and follow Him personally.

The son of an atheist was reported asking his Dad, "Dad, do you think God knows we don't believe in Him?"

We know He knows. Romans 1 tells us.

GOD REVEALS HIMSELF

God shows Himself to be true through His *revelation*. You and I need to have the security of knowing that God can speak and act for Himself in such a way that we are not deceived.

The so-called "Toronto Blessing" is reported to have a variety of spiritual manifestations, including children falling to the carpet in convulsions and reportedly seeing visions of God. Does Scripture and common sense teach us that convulsing children will see visions of Christ in Sunday School class?

God reveals Himself in His creation, providence, and sovereignty, to name a few of His awesome works. Romans 1:18f indicates that we are without excuse. Not only are non-Christians without excuse, but Christians as well.

As a missionary in the Dominican Republic from 1981-1993, the small Christian Reformed Church, working among the Haitian sugar cane workers, suddenly grew from 400 to over 9,500 attendees in 1989. For anyone who knows Reformed missions history, that is a double miracle! During those days of revival, there was a deep longing for true theology, Bible

The Doctrines of The Fall and Salvation in Eastern Orthodox Theology (I)

David Van Druenen

Much attention has been given in recent years to the increasing number of conservative Protestants who are converting to Roman Catholicism. What is less well documented is that during this time a significant number of conservative Protestants - including some from Reformed backgrounds - have instead converted to Eastern Orthodoxy. The best known is perhaps Frank Schaeffer, son of the late Protestant apologist Francis Schaeffer. Reformed Christians confronting Eastern Orthodoxy for the first time, seeing the kissing of icons, the elaborate priestly garb, and the constant swinging of the incense sensor, will likely be struck by its strangeness and foreignness. Yet it is imperative for Reformed people to become acquainted with this ancient form of Christianity because it promises to be a player on the American religious scene in the years to come.

This paper seeks to familiarize readers with the doctrines of Eastern Orthodoxy in two important areas: the fall of man and salvation in Christ. Though these are by no means the only two points of Orthodox teaching which ought to be examined, the importance of these doctrines in Reformed theology make them an interesting starting point for us. For readers wishing to explore beyond these two issues in the history and theology of Orthodoxy, I suggest consulting Orthodox theologian Timothy Ware's *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993).

A BRIEF HISTORY OF EASTERN ORTHODOXY

Before we begin our examination of the Orthodox views of fall and salvation, it may be helpful to briefly sketch the historical background of the Eastern church. During the early centuries of church history, most churches regarded as "Eastern" were found in Greece, Asia Minor, the Middle East and Egypt. They were predominantly Greek-speaking, while the churches in the "West" were predominantly Latin-speaking. At this time, Christians in the East and the West, politically united in the Roman Empire, interacted with each other and mutually participated

in the Ecumenical Councils which worked out the critical trinitarian and Christo-logical doctrines. As time wore on, however, the cultural differences between the groups took their toll and variations in theological emphasis became more pronounced. Politically, the two groups were fractured: The eastern part of the old Roman Empire, centered in Byzantium/Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul), remained largely intact while the western part, which had been centered in Rome, crumbled. Socially, the Muslim conquests took a much deeper toll on the churches of the East than of the West, and thus more significantly shaped the Eastern experience. Theologically, two major rifts between the Eastern and Western churches gradually developed which came to a head in the 11th century.

The Nicene Creed

One major theological rift concerned the doctrine of the Trinity as expressed in the *Nicene Creed*. The original *Creed* had not included the words "and the Son" after the statement "I believe in the Holy Spirit...who proceeds from the Father." During the early Middle Ages, however, Christians in the West adopted the addition of these words as a more complete and accurate expression of the relationship of the persons of the Godhead. The Eastern churches never approved of this addition, and in fact developed their trinitarian theology in such a way as to make these new words quite unacceptable. This disagreement is often called the *filioque* (Latin for "and the Son") controversy, and this remains a noteworthy division between Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Christendom (both Protestant and Roman Catholic).

The Papacy

The other major theological rift concerned the Papacy. The Eastern churches had developed a hierarchical structure of church authority, including, in ascending order of importance, priests, bishops, metropolitans and patriarchs. They were also willing to afford the church in Rome a great deal of respect and to acknowledge the bishop of Rome as one of the great patriarchs. They would not, however, accept the supremacy of the Roman bishop (the

Pope) over the other patriarchs who were found in Constantinople, Antioch, Jerusalem and Alexandria.

Schism

These differences finally produced schism in 1054. In that year the Pope excommunicated Cerularius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, who in turn excommunicated the Roman messenger who delivered the bull of excommunication. Though some attempts at reconciliation were made over the next century and a half, the hostilities were sealed in 1204 when western Crusaders captured and sacked Constantinople, a deed of indescribable insult to the Eastern churches. In the many centuries since, East and West have communicated only sporadically and without much fruit to show for it. However, in recent years both the Pope and the Patriarch of Constantinople have displayed serious interest in resolving the differences between their respective bodies, and Orthodox theologians have entered into dialogues with some Protestant groups.

Today there are some remnants of Eastern Orthodoxy in Turkey, Palestine and Egypt. But Orthodox people are a distinct minority in these places and most live under Muslim domination. Orthodoxy does remain the primary religious force in a number of countries including Greece, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, the Ukraine and Russia. Immigrants from these places have established churches in America which can be seen all over this country. Most retain a very close link with their ethnic heritage, though some Orthodox people are seriously attempting to develop a distinctly American-style Orthodoxy stripped of its unnecessary old-world baggage. In short, Eastern Orthodoxy retains a significant place in the worldwide religious scene, and has established a presence in America as well. And for restless Protestants weary of informal worship and a lack of connection with a theological past, the reverence and seeming timelessness of Eastern Orthodoxy will likely continue to be a tempting alternative to both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.

THE EASTERN ORTHODOX DOCTRINE OF THE FALL OF MAN

We turn now to an examination of the Eastern Orthodox view of the fall of the human race into sin. At the outset, we should stress that this topic really is an important one. Not only is it one of the very first things which is recorded in the Bible, but it has serious consequences for

one's views on the doctrine of salvation itself. After all, people cannot really understand what salvation is all about unless they understand what they must be saved from. As we will see in Eastern theology, as in most other theologies, the doctrine of the fall shapes the expression of the doctrine of salvation, and thus it deserves a careful study.

Much of the Orthodox doctrine on the creation of Adam is consistent with the beliefs of Reformed theology. The Orthodox do affirm the historicity of Adam and his creation as a sinless bearer of the image of God. Some of the early Eastern theologians (whom we will call the "Greek Fathers") spoke in terms similar to those used by many Reformed theologians: Adam was placed in a provisional, probationary state in which his obedience to God was tested, and incorruptibility and union with God would have been the reward of obedience.¹ Some Orthodox writers do emphasize that the task set before Adam was a process of progressing in godliness, of ascending to the Divine. This is something usually lacking in Reformed thinking. But like Reformed theology, Eastern Orthodoxy affirms that Adam did not pass the test.

The serious differences between Orthodoxy and Reformed theology can be quickly seen, however, when one begins to examine the Orthodox view of the consequences of Adam's disobedience. To summarize, it seems fair to say that Eastern Orthodoxy does not believe that the results of the fall were as disastrous as Reformed theology believes them to be. Two major differences emerge: First, though Orthodoxy believes that each person bears some guilt for his own sin, it does not think that anyone bears the guilt of Adam's first sin except Adam himself; and second, while Orthodoxy does hold that human ability to do good was seriously damaged when Adam fell, it does not believe that man is totally depraved. We will now address these two issues in order.

The Guilt of Adam's Sin

In regard to the guilt of Adam's sin, contemporary American Orthodox theologian John Meyendorff has written:

From these basic ideas about the personal character of sin, it is evident that the rebellion of Adam and Eve against God could be conceived only as their personal sin; there would be no place, then, in such an anthropology for the concept of inherited guilt, or for a "sin of nature," although it admits that human nature incurs the consequences of Adam's sin.²

This statement summarizes some of the concerns which Orthodox theologians feel as they observe the way many Westerners, Protestants and Roman Catholics alike, handle "original sin" and the "imputation" of Adam's guilt. Though different Western theologians deal with these concepts in substantially different ways, one important similarity is that most Western theological traditions affirm that all people today, in one way or another, bear the *guilt* that Adam incurred by eating of the forbidden fruit. Some Westerners have proposed that we bear Adam's guilt because somehow we were all physically in Adam when he fell, and thus that we all participated in it. Other Westerners believe that we are all born corrupt, and that it is for this reason that God holds us guilty for Adam's first sin. This second view is sometimes called the "mediate imputation" of Adam's guilt because his guilt is "mediated" (or perhaps "passed down") through the prior generations to the present generation. A third Western view is that of "immediate imputation," which holds that Adam's sin is directly and "immediately" charged against each of his individual descendants, rather than being passed down from generation to generation. It is this last view which in large part won the day in Reformed theology.³

Eastern Orthodoxy would disagree with all three of these formulations (though it may be doubted whether it has seriously considered the third). As the quote from Meyendorff suggests, Orthodoxy does not believe God will hold anyone guilty for any sin which he does not personally commit. Thus, the focus of Eastern thinking on the consequences of Adam's sin is only on the *corruption and mortality* which he brought into the world. Adam's sin weakened human nature and issued hardship and destruction into the natural world. Adam's sin placed his posterity under the dominion of death and the tyranny of Satan. But, Orthodoxy says, Adam's sin did not make anyone else *guilty* before God. Only one's own sin can do that.

This theological debate might appear to be minor or hair-splitting. It is, in fact, of great importance to one's Christian faith. This is perhaps best illustrated by a glance at Romans 5:12-21. There the apostle Paul, in the midst of the Bible's most lengthy and detailed exposition of our salvation in Christ, explains the doctrine of justification by comparing it to our fall in Adam. In verse after verse Paul analogizes salvation in Christ with fall in Adam, and stresses that we stand in a relationship with Christ which is similar to our prior relationship with Adam. The upshot of this is

that *the accuracy with which we define the effect of Adam's fall on us will greatly impact our ability to accurately define the effect of Christ's saving work on us.* Romans 5:18 is particularly relevant here: "Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men" (NIV). Note that Paul here speaks about *condemnation* (which involves a judicial decree of *guilt*), and he speaks of it

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coming upon *all*, not just upon Adam, the one who actually sinned. How did condemnation fall upon everyone? Not by the individual sins of each person, but by *one trespass*, the first sin of Adam. And note also the comparison of Adam with Christ: the result of Christ's act of redemption occurred "just as" the result of Adam's sin did. Therefore, if we assert that Adam's sin only got people going down the wrong road, but that *they bring condemnation upon themselves*, then the logical corollary is that Christ's act of redemption only got people going down the right road, but that *they earn justification for themselves*. When we see how erroneous and dangerous a conclusion logically results from a misunderstanding of the consequences of Adam's sin, we ought to be encouraged to take this issue very seriously.

Has Eastern Orthodox theology, then, wholly gone astray in its doctrine of the sin of Adam? The answer, I think, is no. This is not because the issue is not important, but because there have been some revered voices in the history of Eastern theology who have actually affirmed the "Western" view that Adam's sin did bring guilt upon the whole human race. Eastern Orthodox people have an enormous respect for the Greek Fathers and a great desire to be faithful to the theological ground which they broke. Their opinions are afforded weighty status. Therefore, if we can show that some important Greek Fathers believed in an imputation of Adam's guilt, then a case can be made that such a doctrine has a legitimate place in Orthodox theology, even if it was never emphasized by most of the Greek Fathers and is rejected by modern-day Orthodox theologians.

Two examples will be offered here. The first quote comes from the great 4th century Alexandrian theologian, Athanasius:

But since the debt owed by all men had still to be paid, for all, as I said above, had to die, therefore after the proof of his [Christ's] divinity given by his works, he now on behalf of all men offered the sacrifice and surrendered his own temple to death on behalf of all, in order to make them *all guiltless and free from the first transgression*, and to reveal himself superior to death, showing his own incorruptible body as firstfruits of the universal redemption (italics mine).⁴

Note that here Athanasius states that Christ's death makes people guiltless of the first transgression. The implication one must draw from this statement is that apart from Christ's work, people were *guilty* of the first transgression, the very thing which modern Orthodox theologians deny.

A second quote comes from the highly-regarded preacher and biblical commentator of 4th and 5th century Constantinople, John Chrysostom, commenting on Romans 5:

For that one man should be punished on account of another does not seem to be much in accordance with reason. But for one to be saved on account of another is at once more suitable and more reasonable. If then the former took place, much more may the latter. Hence he has shown from these grounds the likelihood and reasonableness of it. For when the former had been made good, this would be readily admitted.⁵

Here John admits that the idea that one person would be condemned for another's sin is hard to accept. Yet he appeals to the fact that this has happened in the case of Adam and his posterity in order to demonstrate that people are also saved on account of another's work, namely, Christ's. For, he says, if the thing which is difficult to accept took place (one person bringing condemnation on another), then it is that much easier to accept that which is less offensive (that one person could earn salvation for another). Later John states even more explicitly: "[T]he world was condemned from Adam, but from Christ was saved and freed from condemnation"⁶ Certainly it seems that the beloved John Chrysostom also rejected the now-prevailing Eastern position. Examples such as these ought to be pointed out to Eastern Orthodox people in the hope that they may come to rediscover the important biblical truths here which are lying dormant in their tradition.

The Freedom of the Will and Total Depravity

We turn now to the second key difference between Eastern Orthodoxy and Reformed theology in regard to the consequences of the sin of Adam. This involves the Orthodox belief in the freedom of the human will after the fall and its corresponding rejection of the doctrine of total depravity. Contemporary English Orthodox theologian Timothy Ware writes:

Orthodox do not say, as Calvin said, that humans after the fall were utterly depraved and incapable of good desires. They cannot agree with Augustine, when he writes that humans are under "a harsh necessity" of committing sin, and that "human nature was overcome by the fault into which it fell *and so came to lack freedom*" (italics his).⁷

Orthodox theologians place great stress upon the retention of the image of God in fallen humanity, and on God's continuing love for the human race. They believe that one essential component of the image of God is free will: the absence of free will would make a being less than fully human. Thus Ware writes: "And because we still retain the image of God, we still retain free will, although sin restricts its scope."⁸ As one might expect, such views also lead to the conclusion that people must exercise their free will in cooperation with God if they are to be saved. Again, Ware's comments are instructive on this point:

The Orthodox Church rejects any doctrine of grace which might seem to infringe upon human freedom. To describe the relation between the grace of God and human freedom, Orthodoxy uses the term cooperation or synergy...If we are to achieve full fellowship with God, we cannot do so without God's help, yet we must also play our own part: we humans as well as God must make our contribution to the common work, although what God does is of immeasurably greater importance than what we do.⁹

From quotations such as these it should be readily evident to those familiar with Reformed theology how different such views are from those espoused by Augustine, Calvin and later Calvinist theologians. It is true that there is much attractive in the Orthodox position. Even at their worst, people are still image-bearers of God who retain the liberty to do good or evil. There is still much to admire even in the most fallen of human beings. Who would not like to believe this, and reject the Augustinian-Calvinist belief in total depravity,

which Ware terms "sombre"? Yet the biblical record compels us to hold otherwise, however unattractive. Though Ware, in defense of free will, states, "God wanted sons and daughters, not slaves," Scripture asserts that all who sin are "slaves" to sin (John 8:34). Though Ware speaks of sinful humans making a contribution to a common work with God, Scripture assigns us no such ability, instead describing us as "dead in our transgressions and sins" until God, of His own initiative and grace, makes us "alive with Christ" (Ephesians 2:1,5). Though most Reformed theologians believe that some spark of the divine image remains in fallen humanity, and that unbelievers can do "civil" good, they cannot ignore the graphic imagery of slavery and death which Scripture employs to describe the state of our race as we stand in Adam apart from Christ.

So, as we conclude this section, where does fallen man stand before God in Eastern Orthodox theology? He stands in a bad position, but not in too bad of a position. His human liberty and ability to do good works has been damaged, but not destroyed. Death and Satan prevent him from making the ascent to God that Adam could have made before the fall, but they do not prevent him from making a small step to God in cooperation with Him. He bears guilt for his own personal sins, but he is not condemned for the sin of Adam.

All these things must be kept in mind as we move to the next section, for they intimately shape the Orthodox doctrine of salvation.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 For some examples, see Athanasius, *Contra Gentes and De Incarnatione*, trans. and ed. Robert W. Thomson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 141; John of Damascus, "An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith," in *Writings*, trans. Frederic H. Chase, Jr. (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1958), 265-6. For a modern statement, see Sergius Bulgakov, *The Orthodox Church*, trans. Lydia Kesich (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), 105.
- 2 *Byzantine Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1974), 143.
- 3 For a detailed defense of immediate imputation, see John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959).
- 4 Athanasius, *De Incarnatoine*, 183.
- 5 *The Homilies of S. John Chrysostom, Archbishop of Constantinople, on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Oxford, 1848), 151-52.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 155. See also 154.
- 7 *The Orthodox Church* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 223.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 224.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 221.

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CAR 54, CRC ELDERS AND THEOLOGICAL CLASSES

Occasionally the comedy series "Car 54 Where Are You?" is rerun on cable television. The show's premise involves two police officers, Gunther Toody and Francis Muldoon, who seldom answer their squad car's two-way radio because they are either asleep, want to end their duty day quietly so they can go bowling, or, alternatively, more often than not they are afraid to respond to calls for fear that they will foul things up only to be criticized by their peers and supervisors.

"Car 54 Where Are You?" is a hilarious program often voted to be one of the best written television programs of all time because of its portrayal of human nature.

During the effort to advance the goal of forming at least four theologically identified classes within the CRC, I have come to wonder whether we elders as a group have in some ways emulated the "human nature" shown by the officers of Car 54. We have to at least consider the prospect that we have been "asleep," or are hoping that since our duties end in three years we can "just-get-by-until-then"; or, perhaps worst of all, the sense that to act is to invite criticism.

As Synod 1997 approaches, the modified phrase, "CRC Elders Where Are We?," is an appropriate question for the sake of unity within our beloved denomination.

THE TC OVERTURE

Synod 1997 will be discussing an overture put forth by Classis California South which will, if approved, establish at least four theologically identified classes within the CRCNA. In brief, such classes will end the congregationalism prevalent today, end the tensions present at so many classis meetings which are brought about by differing theological convictions, and help prevent the further erosion of members and congregations. Most importantly, TC's will provide the only available arena for many CRC congregations to help re-establish the historical, Reformed convictions of our beloved denomination.

I am hopeful that this examination of the discussion points I have heard surrounding the theological classes overture will be

instructive both to consider the overture itself and to serve as reflection of our activity (or non-activity) as elders in the past. May it also serve as a reminder that we must answer our call to service "for such a time as this."¹

HAVE WE BEEN ASLEEP?

A common reaction to the TC approach that I've heard is, "There are not enough churches concerned about the issues to take action of any kind, much less the route of TCs." This response implies that the issues upon which the TCs are based are not important enough to be troubled some.

Is that really true? Over 40 CRC congregations and 30,000 members have already left the CRC within the last few years over issues related to the direction of our denomination. We are at the lowest membership level since 1971.² Have we, elders, noticed this and objectively wondered why?

From the reverse angle, we also need to consider those who have not left the CRC. For example, **few of those supporting abortion issues, the "new hermeneutic," women in ecclesiastical office, homosexual rights, or universalism have seen a need to leave the CRC. One can only assume they are comfortable with its direction.**

Others of us are saying, "While issues of concern to most of us are being advocated within the CRC, it is only a small minority. One should not judge the entire CRC by the actions of a few." Fair enough³. But if that is true, while we slept a minority has institutionalized changes to our long-held Reformed tenets. So much so that denominations which are members of NAPARC (the North American Presbyterian and Reformed Churches) are considering sanctions against the CRC.

We need to be thinking about such things and our role in the process. For as much as we would like to think that these new directions are being set only by a minority, and since we like to think that it is not the general eldership, that leaves us with our pastors and/or the denominational leadership. Right? Not so fast! **We elders make**

up at least 80% of each elder body and 50% of any deliberative body at classes and synods. We have as much culpability as any - if not by our actions, by our silence.

One more interesting reaction to TCs falls in this category. It is, "If the 'conservatives' would just quit complaining and start doing ministry, we would all be the better off for it." This reaction may be proof enough that we elders have been sleeping.

Are we better off as a result of the CRC's substantial membership loss? Will we be "better off" to follow in the footsteps of those denominations who have taken the CRC's current direction and who are now losing membership? And how about the pending sanctions against the CRC coming from sister denominations? If that is being better off, may I suggest that we're not only sleeping, elders, we're dreaming.

OUR TERM LIMITS

If we have not answered the call to action because we have been sleeping, perhaps we have Car 54's Toody's and Muldoon's "let's-just-get-by-until-our-terms-are-up" attitude. This sentiment is often advanced by the response, "Let's not take time even to think about these issues. They are so laden with emotion and will take us away from our focus on bringing people to Christ."⁴

There is no doubt that the issues before us are tough to face and emotionally draining. But beyond that, the statement's conclusion ignores two facts. First, no denomination within the Presbyterian/Reformed family which has taken the direction the CRC is taking has gained membership as a result. None. What was done with promises of expansion has led only to implosion.

On the other hand, the memberships of those denominations which have closely guarded their Reformed distinctions, such as the Presbyterian Church in America (a denomination now nearly as large as the CRC and one of the sister denominations calling the CRC to reverse itself on the women in office issue are growing rapidly both within established congregations and via evangelism efforts.

This information can only lead to the conclusion that defending Reformed Biblical truths must be one of our priorities now, not later, if the CRC and our local congregations are interested in bringing

people to Christ. But must it be a primary concern? Yes, fellow elders within the CRC. In our day. During our watch. The CRC's stand for the truths of the Reformed faith is in peril.

Other leaders before us clearly saw this peril. But they are now either battle weary or have already left us for other successful ministries. If we - the reserve troops if you wish - do not step up to the plate, who will? And if not via TCs, how? Can we be so bold as to hope that Synod 1997 will, as a denomination, affirm each principal of the *Affirmations of Faith* and thereby return the denomination to its historical roots to its great advantage? If so, that would be wonderful! Failing that, we must at least approve TCs as a way to refresh the weary, and more importantly, to stem the tide of those leaving so that we can work together to reclaim the heart and soul of the CRC. **It is a call that we must answer not only for the sake of gaining new converts to Christ but for the sake of our children and our children's children as well.**

"Well," it is said, "maybe the call should be answered, but let us do so within the current classical structure. If we grant TCs now united around the *Affirmations of Faith*, what will stop the forming of other classes at some future date based upon other issues?" This reaction, too, sounds correct at first glance. But it suggests that we can expect change for the better via individual congregations or classes, a hope that has no historical precedent. More importantly, such a reaction fails to acknowledge that the *Affirmations of Faith* simply affirm the official commitments of the CRC since its founding and, most would argue, until 1995.⁵ They are not just a few fine points of practice to which only a few agree. In fact, those of us elders (and those ordained as pastors) prior to 1995 have already publicly committed ourselves to them in faith and practice when we were installed. The *Affirmations of Faith* contain nothing new.

And this leads me to my final comparison between CRC elders and the typical reaction of Toody and Muldoon when they received calls to action.

FEAR OF ADVERSE REACTION

Could it be that we are hesitant to exercise authority as we ought out of fear of adverse reactions? I often hear, "If Synod

passes TCs, we'll join. But for now we'll just wait and see. If we stand up now we may lose our influence in the future." Maybe this would be a good place to again remind ourselves that silence indicates acceptance?

But a variation to the above is even more common. It goes, "Perhaps what you are saying is true, but things are not that bad yet. Our congregation is fine, and we expect it to be for a long time to come. What's the harm in letting others do what they want? That does not mean we'll ever do it here."

I respectfully suggest that that line of thinking gave false comfort to many throughout other denominations when they faced similar issues. But again, experience does not support that hope.

There simply is no precedent of any denomination governed in a manner similar to the CRC that gives any encouragement that the leaven of unorthodoxy will not eventually pervade the whole - that is, to all congregations and to all members.

Others say, "Why do we need TC's when synod will allow transfers to neighboring classes?" The key to this approach is the word *neighboring*. Given the current situation, how many churches can answer an unequivocal "YES" to these questions: Would a transfer to your neighboring classis support your Biblically directed convictions over the long (or even short) term? Would your neighboring classis affirm the *Affirmations of Faith* as common ground? Would you be assured of synodical deputies who join your vision for ministry? Would you be making any progress to ensure that your Biblical convictions (and those of many like-minded churches!) are secure within the CRC for generations to come? If you can answer "yes" to all of the above questions you are blessed. Most churches can't. TCs provide a method for all churches within the denomination to be well served within either new or existing classes which support their Biblically directed convictions.

A final note in this category of fearing adverse reactions. It is said, "Let's accentuate the positive within our denomination! Let's not dwell on the negatives!" That is a fair statement which all of us should seek to follow.

But consider this illustration: Good dairy farmers and other agriculture operators rightfully pride themselves in being able to spot problems and take corrective action before the herd or the entire operation becomes affected. Take, for example, the

problem of mastitis in dairy cattle. Which dairyman would criticize a hired hand for pointing out that very contagious ailment? Would he say, "Oh how tired I get of you always pointing out the isolated incidents of mastitis in my herd! Today it's cow #123. Last month it was cow #345. Before that it was #764. Enough already! Can't you see how good the rest of the herd is? Focus on milking and quit complaining!" No, good dairy operators are constantly on the lookout for indications of such problems and take immediate corrective action when they do occur for fear of losing the entire herd to the infection.

My fellow elders, we need to do the same for our beloved denomination. If we have been sleeping, we must be awakened.

If we have been hesitant to take action for whatever reason, we must do so now. We're losing too many good members and congregations.

If we are afraid of adverse reactions, we must proceed with the confidence that our Lord will bless faithfulness to His Word as we seek to be a witness within our beloved denomination.⁶

FOOTNOTES

- 1 I do not mean to be so presumptuous as to suggest that approval of TCs is the only faithful call to service. I only mean to suggest that a review of our recent denominational history compels us to take action - and from where I sit at this point in time, TCs are the only hope we have to keep as many congregations within the CRCNA as possible.
- 2 *United Reformed News Service*, NR 970020
- 3 In fact, the statement is supported by a 1994 survey of CRC members conducted by a group of Calvin College students which showed that 67% of the laity within the CRC agrees that the ordination of women is unbiblical (*The Banner*, March 13, 1995, p. 6).
- 4 It has been curious to note the admonitions from some who seem to think that a congregation is wrong for even discussing the issues of the day within its own council and membership. It's as if some believe that ignorance is a badge of honor.
- 5 This also puts to rest the notion that the *Affirmations* are "supra-creedal." If they are, it must also be argued that those taking its positions between 1857 (the CRC's founding year) and 1995 were also being supra-creedal.
- 6 I can not resist this final footnote. Some say that the TC effort is a method to organize a secession. I would welcome hearing from anyone who can advance a remotely plausible reason why any group of churches wishing to secede would take the trouble to seek TCs first.

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The Hermeneutic of 'Literalism': Evaluating Dispensationalism (III)

Cornelis P. Venema

(Continued from the April issue, 1997)

PROPHECY, PROMISE AND FULFILLMENT

The first problem area in the application of a literal hermeneutic relates to dispensationalism's treatment of biblical prophecies or promises and their fulfillment. Here the dispensationalist insistence upon a "literal" reading of the biblical texts, especially the prophecies, *actually masks the more basic claim that only "earthly" or "non-spiritual" promises can be made to an "earthly" people.* The real reason for an insistence upon literalism is to prevent the promises made to Israel from being directly related to the church. Dispensationalism would collapse, as a method of reading biblical prophecies, were it shown that the promises made to Israel in the old covenant find their true and final fulfillment in the new covenant church. Because the promises to Israel are always and necessarily earthly and literal, they may not be directly applied to the church.

The problem here is that the New Testament repeatedly refers the Old Testament prophecies and promises made to Israel to the church. Whatever the previous fulfillments of Old Testament prophecy may have been, they reach their ultimate fulfillment in Christ in whom all the promises of God have their "yes" and their "amen" (2 Cor. 1:20). This can be illustrated with several examples.

Among the most basic promises in all of Scripture is the promise made by the Lord to Abraham, that "in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). This promise is repeated in Genesis 15 where Abraham is promised descendants as numerous as the stars of the heavens (v. 3), and then in Genesis 17 where Abraham is promised a "seed" and is said to be the "father of

a multitude of nations" (v.4). In the New Testament account of the fulfillment of this promise, especially in the apostle Paul's treatment of it in Galatians 3 and 4, it is expressly stated that this promise *has been fulfilled in Christ.* Not only is Christ *the seed of promise, the One in whom these earlier promises to Abraham are fulfilled, but all, whether Jew or Gentile, who belong to Christ are also Abraham's seed!* In the gathering through the gospel of believers from every tribe and tongue and people and na-

tion, there is *literally fulfilled* what the Lord had promised to Abraham. However, the dispensationalist's view is that this can only be, at best, a "secondary application," but not the literal fulfillment of the promise to earthly Israel. But this view contradicts the apostle Paul's teaching that all Jewish and Gentile believers are the "seed of Abraham" and therefore *co-heirs* of the promise.⁹

Similarly, the promises made during the old covenant to King David find their fulfillment in the coming and kingship of Jesus Christ, David's Son and his Lord. In the announcement of Jesus' birth through the angel to the virgin Mary, the angel is recorded to have said to her: "And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob for-

ever; and His kingdom will have no end" (Luke 1:31-33). This passage, when read literally, says that the child to be born is the fulfillment of the Lord's promise in 2 Samuel 7:13-16 (compare Ps. 89:26,27), the promise that David's Son would be seated *forever* upon the throne of His father David. However, dispensationalism in its classic form teaches that this Davidic kingdom is an exclusively earthly kingdom, a kingdom reserved to the period of the millennium (1000 years) and for the earthly people of God, Israel. Not only does this understanding fail the test of being a literal reading of the biblical descriptions of the promise of a Davidic kingdom (1000 years is not forever!), but it also seems far less a plain reading of the text than the one ordinarily adopted by non-dispensational interpreters — that Christ's coming is the beginning of the fulfillment of the promise made earlier to David.

One other biblical promise that illustrates the problem of dispensationalism's treatment of biblical prophecy is the promise of a restored temple. In Ezekiel 40 to 48, there is an extended description of the future rebuilding of the temple, after Israel's restoration from her captivity. This description speaks in detail of the dimensions of this rebuilt temple, as well as of the variety of sacrifices that will be offered in it, including sin offerings and the like. In the dispensationalist reading of this prophecy, it is insisted that this refers to the literal rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem during the millennial kingdom. However, this creates a problem of how to interpret the language describing the reinstatement of the sacrificial system, *at a time after the coming of Christ and the accomplishment of redemption through His once-for-all sacrifice upon the cross.* In the *New Scofield Reference Bible*, it is conceded that, on one understanding of this passage, this language need not be taken literally:

The reference to sacrifices is not to be taken literally, in view of the putting away of such offerings, but is rather to be regarded as a presentation of the worship of redeemed Israel, in her own land and in the millennial temple, using the terms with which the Jews were familiar in Ezekiel's day.¹⁰

This admission that some elements of Ezekiel's prophecy regarding the rebuilt temple is fatal, however, to the claims made by dispensationalism for a literal

reading of prophecy, especially the promises to Israel. The same reason that leads the dispensationalist to read the language about sacrifices in this passage in a non-literal way — because it would lead to conflict with other portions of Scripture — could equally well apply to other aspects of the prophecy. Indeed, there are indications that the fulfillment of this prophecy is taught in the Word of God, but not in the literal sense of a rebuilt temple in Jerusalem during the period of the millennium.¹¹

These are only some examples of the way dispensationalism fails to acknowledge the fulfillment of many of the Old Testament prophecies to Israel in the coming of Christ and the gathering of His church during this present age. Rather than allowing the New Testament's understanding of the fulfillment of prophecy to determine its viewpoint, dispensationalism operates from the prejudice that no promise to Israel could, in the strict sense of the term, ever be literally fulfilled in connection with the church. But this is a prejudice based upon an unbiblical dichotomy between Israel and the church, as we have already seen in a previous article.

BIBLICAL TYPOLOGY: AN "ACHILLES HEEL"?

A second and related problem area, the interpretation of biblical types and shadows, is in many ways the "Achilles heel" of the dispensationalist's literal hermeneutic. Biblical types may be loosely defined as those events, persons, or institutions in the Old Testament, that prefigure or foreshadow their New Testament realities.¹² In the instances of such biblical types, the Old Testament type is fulfilled in its typical and symbolical meaning by the New Testament reality. Thus, if it can be shown that many of the historical events, persons and institutions which were integral to the Lord's administration of the covenant of grace in the Old Testament, were typical or a foreshadowing of events, persons, and institutions in their new covenant reality and fulfillment, dispensationalism, as a method of biblical interpretation, would seem to be seriously imperiled.

Though there are many examples of biblical types that could be cited, there are three instances that are especially problematic for dispensationalism: the temple, Jerusalem, and the sacrifices.

The Temple

I begin with the *typology of the temple* because it is with this that we concluded the previous section on prophecy. In the teaching of the Scriptures, the temple (earlier, the tabernacle) of the Lord is *the place of His peculiar dwelling in the midst of His people*. The temple was the focal point for the worship of Israel, the place where the people of the Lord could draw near to God as their sins were atoned for by means of the sacrifices instituted in the law. Speaking of the tabernacle's significance in the Old Testament, Gerhaardus Vos, in his *Biblical Theology*, remarks:

The tabernacle was the place where the Lord dwelt with His people, and where they drew near to Him. It was the place of His peculiar dwelling in the midst of His people. The tabernacle was the focal point for the worship of Israel, the place where the people of the Lord could draw near to God as their sins were atoned for by means of the sacrifices instituted in the law. Speaking of the tabernacle's significance in the Old Testament, Gerhaardus Vos, in his Biblical Theology, remarks:

The tabernacle affords a clear instance of the coexistence of the symbolical and the typical in one of the principal institutions of the Old Testament religion. It embodies the eminently religious idea of the dwelling of God with His people. This it expresses symbolically so far as the Old Testament state of religion is concerned, and typically as regards the final embodiment of salvation in the Christian state... That its main purpose is to realize the indwelling of Jehovah is affirmed in so many words [Ex. 25:8; 29:44,45].¹³

In this, its typical significance, the temple was a "shadow" or "type" of the reality of the Lord's dwelling with His people. According to the New Testament, this reality is now found in Christ Himself (John 1:14; 2:19-22; Col. 2:9) and in the church as the place of God's dwelling by the Spirit (Eph. 2:21,22; 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 3:6; 10:21; 1 Pet. 2:5). Christ and the church, therefore, are the fulfillment of the symbolical and typical significance of the temple. Moreover, in the final state of con-

summation, when the Lord dwells forever in the presence of His people in the "new heavens and earth," it is expressly taught that *there will no longer be any temple for the Lord will dwell in their midst* (Rev. 21:22).

The dispensationalist insistence, therefore, that the temple is an institution which pertains, in its literal form, peculiarly to Israel, fails to appreciate its typical significance in biblical revelation. The idea that the temple would be literally rebuilt and serve as a focal point for the worship of Israel during the period of the millennium represents, from the point of view of the progress and unfolding of biblical revelation, *a reversion to Old Testament types and shadows, in the context of their having been fulfilled in their New Testament reality!* From this point of view, dispensationalism wants to turn back the clock of redemptive history.

Jerusalem

A similar kind of misunderstanding of biblical typology also characterizes the dispensationalist's treatment of "Jerusalem" or "Zion." In the Old Testament, Jerusalem or Zion is the city of David, the theocratic king, and symbolizes the rule of the Lord in the midst of His people. Jerusalem is the city of the Lord's anointed, the place of His throne and gracious rule among His people. It is the "city of God" (Psalm 46), the place where children are conceived and born to the Lord (Psalm 87). It is the city to which the nations, whom the Lord has promised to give to David's Son as His rightful inheritance (Psalm 2), will come.

However, in the New Testament, we are taught that Jerusalem is now the "heavenly Jerusalem." For this reason, the writer of Hebrews is able to say to new covenant believers: "But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" (12:22-23). This is also the reason the apostle John can report the following vision of the heavenly Jerusalem, as it will be at the close of the history of redemption:

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out

of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold, the tabernacle of God is among men, and He shall dwell among them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them" (Rev. 21:1-3).

These kinds of passages describe for us the fulfillment of all that the Jerusalem of the old covenant typified and foreshadowed. They confirm the pattern of biblical typology: the literal Jerusalem of the old covenant is typical of the new covenant city of God, the church. The dwelling of the Lord in the midst of His people, the presence of the temple sanctuary, the throne of David — all of these find their fulfillment and reality in the new covenant blessing and consummation witnessed by the apostle John in his vision on the isle of Patmos.

The Sacrifices

One further and closely linked instance of biblical typology is that of the sacrifices stipulated in the law of Moses, especially in the book of Leviticus. These sacrifices were symbols and types of the person and work of Jesus Christ, the high priest after the order of Melchizedek, who fulfills and perfects all that they foreshadowed. This is the *principal argument of the book of Hebrews which compares and contrasts the old covenant tabernacle, priesthood and sacrifices to their fulfillment and perfection in Christ.* To cite but one passage

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from the argument of this epistle, it is evident that the types and shadows of the old covenant have been abolished, or better, find their reality and perfection, in the realities of the new covenant:

Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary, and in the true tabernacle, which

the Lord pitched, not man. For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary that this high priest also have something to offer. Now if He were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law; who serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things...But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises...When he said, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear (Hebrews 8:1-6,13).

The point summarized in this passage, and exhibited in the previous examples of biblical types, constitutes what I am calling the "achilles heel" of the dispensationalist claim for a literal hermeneutic. Not only does this claim fail to do justice to the New Testament's teaching regarding the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy, but it also militates against the claim made by the inspired New Testament authors regarding the typological significance of the Old Testament sanctuary, priesthood and sacrifice: *the reality of the new covenant renders the shadow obsolete and superfluous!* The same principle, moreover, holds for *all* of the types and shadows of the old covenant administration. Once this principle is conceded, dispensationalism's insistence upon a literal reinstitution of the types and shadows of the old covenant seems to be in serious conflict with the teaching of biblical typology.

WHAT ABOUT "SPIRITUALIZING"?

The third problem area that remains to be considered is the dispensationalist claim that a non-literal fulfillment of the biblical prophecies and promises to Israel betrays a "spiritualizing" that cannot do justice to the biblical texts. According to dispensationalism, there are many promises to Israel which cannot be accounted for unless they are understood to be fulfilled literally and concretely during the period of the millennium to come.

Among such prophecies, dispensationalists will often cite passages like Isaiah 11:6-10 and 65:17-25. Both of these proph-

ecies are treated in the *New Scofield Bible* as predictions of the millennium, the one thousand year period of Christ's literal reign upon the earth from Jerusalem. This millennial reign represents the resumption of God's peculiar dealings with His earthly people, Israel, after the times of the Gentiles, (the parenthesis period of the church) has concluded with the rapture and the following seven year tribulation. According to dispensationalism, these prophecies are a compelling proof that the prophecies of the Lord to Israel can only have a literal, concrete fulfillment. The language used in both passages, according to the dispensationalist, can only be understood to refer to a literal millennium or Davidic kingdom on earth.

However, a close inspection of these two prophecies does not support this claim.

Isaiah 11:6-10

In Isaiah 11:6-10, the prophet describes a beautiful picture of the reign of the "shoot" from Jesse. This reign will be characterized by a circumstance of universal peace and tranquility. In this kingdom, the Lord declares that "the wolf will dwell with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the kid They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (vv. 6,9). But it is not clear that this is a description of the millennium of dispensationalist expectation. There is no mention made of this being a period which will be limited in time, perhaps a period of one thousand years duration. More importantly, this passage speaks of a reign characterized by a universal peace and knowledge of the Lord. The millennium of dispensationalist expectation, by contrast, includes the presence of some people who do not acknowledge the Lord and even the prospect at its close of a substantial rebellion on the part of many against Him (Satan's "little season"). The description of Isaiah 11:6-10, accordingly, might better be referred to the final state of the "new heavens and earth" than the millennium. Though this language is legitimately taken to be a description of the circumstance upon the earth — and therefore not to be spiritualized in a non-earthly sense — it better describes the universal peace and knowledge of the Lord that will characterize the final state in the consummation than the earthly and Davidic kingdom of dispensational expectation.

Isaiah 65:17-25

The second of these prophecies, Isaiah 65:17-25, is somewhat more difficult to interpret. In the *New Scofield Bible*, the first verse, which speaks of the “new heavens and a new earth,” is taken as a description of the final state, but the remaining verses (vv. 18-25) are taken as a description of the millennium.¹⁴ Thus, this passage is taken to be a description of both the final state and the millennium that will precede it. This reading has some plausibility, because verse 20 does describe a time when infants will not be cut off after having lived only a few days, and when those who are older will not die prematurely. And this verse expressly states that “the youth will die at the age of one hundred and the one who does not reach the age of one hundred shall be thought accursed.” Because death is mentioned in these verses, dispensationalists argue that it cannot refer to the final state.

Though this is a difficult passage, it may well be the case that, in this prophetic description of the new heavens and the new earth, this kind of language is used to describe the final state. If the language is pressed literally, it may seem to conflict with the biblical teaching that death will be no more in the new heavens and earth. But perhaps the language used is simply a way of figuratively or poetically affirming the “incalculably long lives” that the inhabitants of the new earth will live.¹⁵ It should be observed that these verses also speak of the lives of the inhabitants being “as the lifetime of the tree” (v. 22), language that suggests an extraordinary longevity of life. Perhaps more significantly, these verses speak of how there will no longer be heard in Jerusalem “[t]he voice of weeping and the sound of crying,” the very language used in Revelation 21:4 to designate the final state. The likeliest reading of these verses, therefore, is that they, from verse 17 through verse 25, describe in the language of present experience, something of the joy, blessedness, and everlasting life that will be circumstance of God’s people in the new heavens and the new earth.¹⁶

What I would like to emphasize, in terms of these and similar texts, is that they have an appropriate place within a non-dispensationalist reading of the Bible. It is simply not the case that all non-dispensationalists simply “spiritualize” these prophecies and fail to take their de-

scription of *renewed life on the new earth* seriously. One does not have to be a dispensationalist to do justice to the concrete, “earthy” language used in these prophecies of the new heavens and earth. So long as it is understood that the final state requires a new heavens and a *new earth*, the richness and concreteness of the imagery in these biblical passages can be appreciated. Indeed, from one perspective, it could even be argued that, to the extent that the dispensationalist millennium falls short of the blessedness of life in the new earth described in these passages, it becomes the more guilty of “spiritualizing” their language and meaning! So long as there is a proper insistence upon the restoration of the earth in the final state, non-dispensationalists need not concede in the least the charge that they have illegitimately spiritualized the prophecies of Scripture regarding the final state.

CONCLUSION

The dispensationalist claim regarding a literal interpretation of the Scriptures is really the product of its insistence upon a radical separation between Israel, God’s earthly people, and the church, God’s spiritual people. Without this undergirding assumption — that God has these two distinct peoples — there is no reason to deny the fulfillment of old covenant promises in the new covenant realities. Nor is there any longer reason to avoid the implications of biblical typology for the dispensationalist system.

Perhaps the most telling evidence against the dispensationalist hermeneutic is to be found in the book of Hebrews. The message of the book of Hebrews is, if I may be permitted to speak anachronistically, a compelling rebuttal of dispensationalism. Whereas the book of Hebrews is one sustained argument for the finality, richness and completion of all of the Lord’s covenant words and works in the *new covenant which is in Christ*, dispensationalism wants to preserve the old arrangements intact for Israel, arrangements which will be reinstated in the period of the millennial kingdom. However, this would be tantamount to a “going back” to what has been surpassed in the new covenant in Christ. It would be a reversion to arrangements that have been rendered obsolete and superfluous because their reality has been realized in the provisions of the new covenant. The Mediator of this new covenant,

Christ, is the fulfillment of all the promises of the Lord to His people. Thus, to the writer of Hebrews, any reversion to the old covenant types and ceremonies would be an unacceptable departure from the realities of the new covenant in preference for the shadows of the old.

Though it may seem too severe to some, no other judgment is permitted us respecting the system of biblical interpretation known as dispensationalism: it represents a continued attachment to the shadows and ceremonies of the old covenant dispensation, and therefore also a failure to appreciate properly the finality of the new covenant. Its doctrine of a “literal” hermeneutic proves not to be “literal” in the proper sense of the term. Rather than reading the New Testament “according to the letter,” dispensationalism reads the New Testament through the lens of its insistence upon a radical separation between Israel and the church.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Here and throughout this article I am using the term “hermeneutic” in the basic sense of a method or approach to the reading of the Bible. Dispensationalism is characterized by a particular hermeneutic or way (following certain rules or principles) of reading the biblical texts, one which especially stresses the principle of a literal reading.
- 2 Cyrus I. Scofield, *The Scofield Bible Correspondence School, Course of Study* (7th ed., 3 vols.; no place or publisher given), pp. 45-46; as cited by Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), p. 24.
- 3 Chicago: Moody, 1965.
- 4 Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1974.
- 5 *Dispensationalism Today*, p. 86.
- 6 *The Interpretation of Prophecy*, p. 29.
- 7 On the basis of this fourfold sense of the biblical texts, a reference to *water* could mean literally a colorless liquid, allegorically baptism by water, morally the need for purity, and analogically the eternal life in the heavenly Jerusalem. Or, to use another common example, *Jerusalem* could mean literally the city in Palestine, morally the need for heavenly-mindedness, allegorically citizenship in heaven, and analogically the Jerusalem of the new heavens and the new earth.
- 8 Speaking against this Medieval teaching of a fourfold sense, the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, chapter I, ix, states that “the true and full sense of any Scripture ... is not manifold, but one”
- 9 In my previous article dealing with the relationship between Israel and the church, the argument offered for rejecting any sharp separation between them is closely related to this biblical understanding of the fulfillment of the promises to Israel in the new covenant. Another example of this can be found in the teaching of Romans 9-11, to which reference was made in that article.
- 10 *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1967), p. 888. This note represents a change from the original *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford, 1917), which says:

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"Doubtless these offerings will be memorial, looking back to the cross, as the offerings under the old covenant were anticipatory, looking forward to the cross. In neither case do animal sacrifices have the power to put away sin (Heb. 10:4; Rom. 3:25)" p. 890.

11 There are a number of problems with the dispensationalist claim that the temple will be rebuilt in Jerusalem during the millennium: first, even were there no sacrifices reinstated or perhaps only "memorial" sacrifices offered, as some dispensationalists have suggested, *Christ could not minister in this temple because He is not a priest "according to the order of Levi"* (compare Heb. 7:14); second, Ezekiel says nothing about the rebuilding of the temple during the period known as the millennium; and third, the prophecy of the temple's rebuilding is a prophecy of the dwelling of the Lord in the midst of His people that is described in Revelation 22. Dispensationalism misinterprets this prophecy because it has an improper view of biblical types and shadows in relation to their fulfillment, a subject to which I will turn in the next section of this article.

12 T. Norton Street, *How to Understand Your Bible* (rev. ed.; Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1974), p. 107, gives the following, useful definition of a biblical type: "A type can be defined as a divinely purposed, Old Testament foreshadowing of a New Testament spiritual reality."

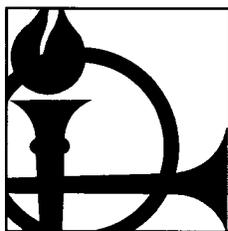
13 Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948, p. 148.

14 These verses are given the heading, "Millennial conditions in the renewed earth with curse removed" (*New Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 768).

15 This language and suggestion is that of Anthony Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 202.

16 Perhaps this is the place to mention yet another reading of these verses. Some post-millennialists would regard the description of these verses to refer to the millennium, the "golden age" which will precede the return of Christ and the final state. Though this view does not include the dispensationalist understanding of a kingdom reserved to God's earthly people, Israel, it does regard this passage to describe a period whose blessings fall short of the perfection of the final state.

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