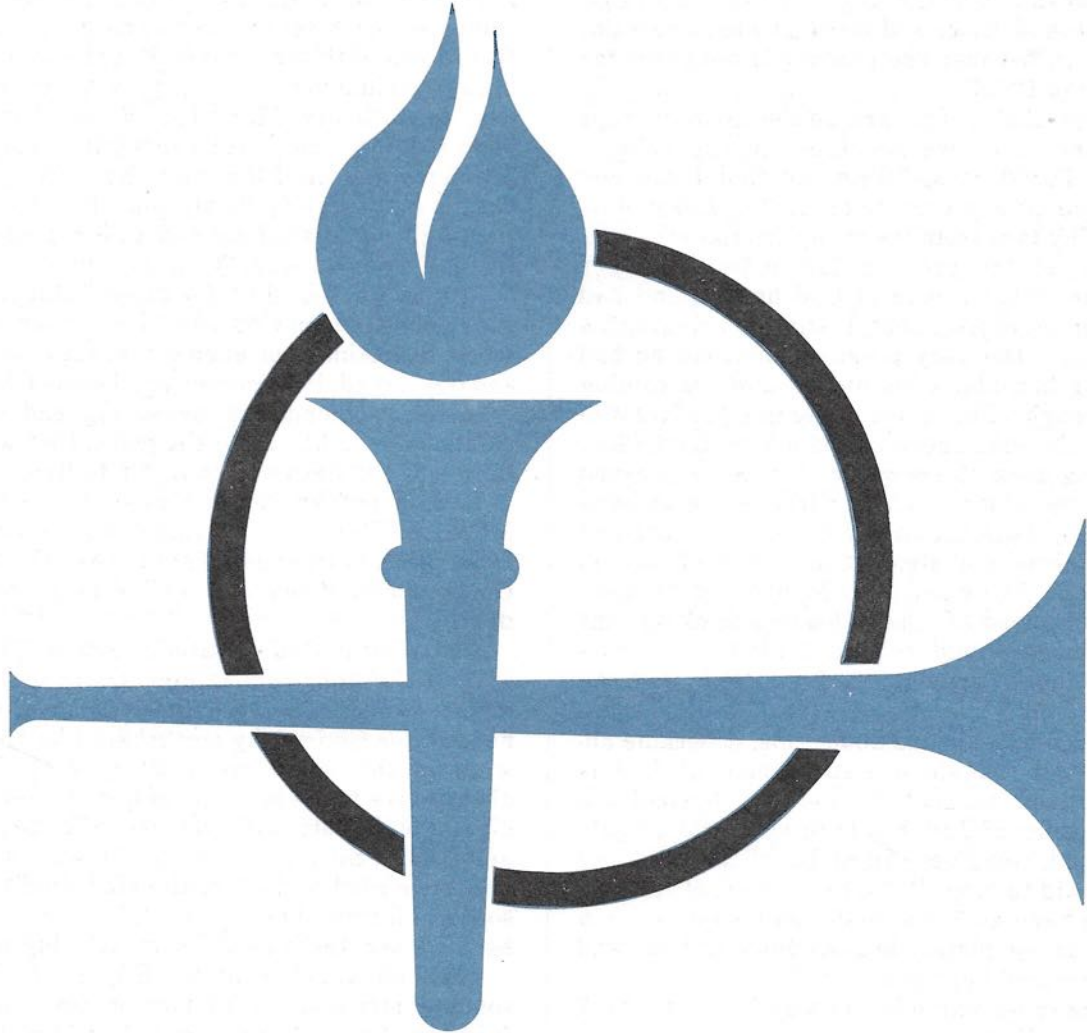


THE OUTLOOK

DEVOTED TO THE EXPOSITION AND DEFENSE OF THE REFORMED FAITH

FEBRUARY 1981



**WHAT WILL SYNOD 1981 SAY?
THE UNPARDONABLE SIN
IMPRESSIONS OF THE HOLY LAND**

GOD'S UNDERSTANDING LOVE FOR DISCOURAGED CHILDREN

John Blankespoor

"And he (Elijah) lay down under a juniper tree; and, behold, an angel touched him, and said unto him, Arise and eat. And he looked, and behold, there was at his head a cake baked on the coals, and a cruse of water. And he did eat and drink and laid him down again. And the angel of the Lord came again the second time, and touched him, and said, Arise and eat, because the journey is too great for thee." I Kings 19:5-7

Sometimes God's people are on the mountain tops and at other times we see them in the valleys. Sometimes David says, "With my God I can run through a troop" and then he asks, "Lord, why dost thou hide Thy face from me in my troubles?"

Here we see the great Elijah under a juniper (broom) tree. What a man of God he was and had been! A prophet of judgment, fearlessly bringing his messages. Into the very presence of Ahab he had gone, telling him about his prayer and the coming dreadful drought. That's like going into the Kremlin and telling the men there of some sure impending doom coming upon Moscow and that he had prayed for it. And therefore it would surely come to pass. What a man of faith Elijah had been, in the sacrifice on Mount Carmel and also in the slaying of the 450 Baal prophets. And what a joy he had had, running "like a deer" ahead of Ahab's horses, thinking that now the people would repent. Hadn't they "confessed" on Mount Carmel, "The Lord, He is God, the Lord, He is God"?

But when Jezebel heard about this, it became apparent to Elijah that she was still in control. And he got scared. And he fled! All the way beyond the southern border of Judah. There he would be safe from her. And, being very tired, he fell asleep under a tree. He said to himself, "What's the use!" He felt that he has been as unsuccessful as his fathers had been. He was completely broken down in body and spirit. All seemed hopeless.

Is this the same man who appeared before Ahab? Is this really Elijah?

* * * * *

Don't be too critical of Elijah. It is possible that young people will be more severe in their criticism than older people who have been longer on the "battlefield."

The truth is that many Christians can identify themselves with this great man of God. In fact, in this history he comes very close to many of us. Like Elijah, we don't commit suicide, or attempt it, but we are tired of life and would rather die than live.

The Scriptures often speak of battling, struggling Christians who face much opposition. But there are many church people to whom this does not apply. Surely we may not compare Elijah's depression with the general, mental and emotional depression which is common to millions of people. People have been compared with salmon fish. The dead ones always float down with the stream. But the living ones are always swimming up stream, with determination, despite difficulty. Many church members, like the dead fish, go along with everything. They have no problems and no difficulties. But the living Christian, is always going up stream, often facing opposition, fighting against sin and all it represents. He is the one who can sing, "Onward Christian soldiers," or "Stand up, Stand up for Jesus." But it is exactly such people whom God often sees under the juniper trees. Sometimes, or even often, they become tired and depressed. How discouraged some Christians do become! Problems can be so big and disappointments so great! Even to the point, that with Elijah, they lose the desire to continue to live.

This is not an isolated case in the Scriptures. Moses and Jeremiah became discouraged. Even the Lord Jesus in His human nature had the struggle in Gethsemane, when His soul was sorrowful unto death.

And what is God's attitude toward Elijah?

Does the Lord rebuke him? On first thought one might expect this. Wouldn't it have been most natural for God to say something like this: "Elijah, what in the world are you doing here? Didn't I always give you what you needed? Haven't I always given you the strength you needed?" Or, "Come on, get with it. Surely this is not the way of faith."

But we read nothing of the kind. God's attitude is so considerate. The Lord lets him sleep. Already here we see Jesus as the sympathizing high-priest.

Then an angel, sent by Elijah's faithful Lord, touches him and wakes him up, showing him the food that has been prepared. The Lord knows that his body is in need of strength, and therefore needs food. Right next to him there is a "charcoal fire" with food on it. God is concerned also about Elijah's physical needs.

Elijah eats the food. He doesn't seem to be surprised to be awakened by an angel. Neither does he seem to be impressed by the way that fire and food appears. Having eaten it, he lies down again and goes back to sleep. Who cares? Deeply depressed people don't have many questions. Elijah is completely indifferent. But God is patient and understanding with him. He sends the angel the second time, again showing him the food and telling him

that he will need this because of the great journey he still has to make. The Lord is thinking about his future.

What love, and what patience!

* * * * *

Isn't the Lord often very impatient with the unbelief of sinners? Don't we often find Jesus arguing with and condemning the Pharisees severely for their unbelief?

Surely there is a big difference between the unbelief of non-Christians and the weak faith of true children of God. The Pharisees didn't really believe; they wanted *signs instead* of faith. But true Christians want to live in faith; they live by the Word and pray for more faith. But, their faith may at times be weak. The hills can be so steep or the valleys so deep, that their faith falters, and they, too, want to lie down under their juniper trees.

Elijah thought about nothing but dying. But God had different thoughts. First of all in His great love (which is the love of Jesus Christ) He cared for Elijah's body. The Lord also thought about his future needs. God is way ahead of Elijah! He was thinking of that long trip Elijah has to make to the south to Mount Horeb. And the Lord also took care of that. How faithful He is!

* * * * *

Elijah had to see the *miracle* of the fire and food. "My children," the Lord means to say, "I am the God of miracles." Don't ever forget this. With God there are no big and small problems. He is the God of the impossibilities. And as long as we have to live He will give us what we need, physically and spiritually. Of this we may be sure!

And He thinks of our future much more than we do. He is always ahead of us, as He was with Elijah. Also in special needs and circumstances He will see to it that what we need will be supplied.

Often we hear Christians who have confronted special needs, speaking of some radio message, or some sermon, or thought in a sermon, or some article in a Christian magazine that was "just for them." This is not an accident. The God of Elijah, the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, put that message ahead of them, knowing their needs and caring for them in His great, infinite, understanding love.

Of course, this also means that He will provide for those needs in the future. He knows the journey each one of His people will have to make in the future. For older people that journey may not be much longer. For younger people it may be much longer, and who knows in what kind of world. But the length of time really makes no difference. Remember this, parents of younger children, the God of Elijah will provide, *always*.

God's promises are exceedingly great and rich for all of us in our weak faith under the juniper trees. His understanding, love and amazing patience are so real.

My God how great Thou art!

THE OUTLOOK

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"And the three companies blew the trumpets . . . and held THE TORCHES in their left hands, and THE TRUMPETS in their right hands . . . and they cried, The sword of Jehovah and of Gideon" (Judges 7:20).

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EDITORIAL COMMITTEE: Arthur Besteman, John Blankespoor, John Piersma, Harlan Vanden Einde, Henry Vanden Heuvel, Syburn Voortman, Clarence Werkema.

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Business Manager: Mrs. Mary Kaiser.

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EDITORIAL AND CIRCULATION OFFICES

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4855 Starr Street, S.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49506, Telephone 949-5421

Office Hours: Monday, Wednesday, Friday 9-11 a.m.
After Office Hours please call: 452-9519

Mailing Address: 4855 Starr Street, S.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan 49506

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WHAT WILL SYNOD 1981 SAY?

Edward Heerema

Rev. Edward Heerema, retired pastor living at Cape Coral, Florida begins a series of articles dealing with what promises to be a major issue at the next Christian Reformed synod — the issue of women in church office.

An hour of decision for the Christian Reformed Church is due in June 1981. Then the synod is scheduled to settle the question which in 1978 was wrongly presumed to be settled, namely, the matter of opening the office of deacon to women. Perhaps we ought to say that the Synod of 1981 will be faced with the larger question of opening the special offices in the church to women, that is, the offices of minister, elder and deacon, for it is no doubt correct to say that the opening of the office of deacon to women means the opening of all the offices to them. This is especially so because of our common practice of having deacons sit with the elders and minister on the ruling council of the congregation.

From 1970 On

The issue of women in office first came before the Christian Reformed Church in 1970. It did not arise out of the life and concern of the church itself. It came by way of a recommendation from the Reformed Ecumenical Synod that synod appoint a committee "to examine in the light of Scripture the general Reformed practice of excluding women from the various ordained offices of the church." (Note the delicate prejudice in the word *excluding*.) It is significant that the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (meeting in 1968) decided by a close vote (25-22) that "it is the plain and obvious teaching of Scripture that women are excluded from the office of ruling and preaching elders." It is also interesting to observe that the Reformed Ecumenical Synod decided that "member churches should be cautious to proceed in the direction of the entrance of women into the diaconal office" (*Acts of Synod 1970*, p. 346). Synod 1970 decided to appoint the committee asked

for in the recommendation rising out of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod.

The committee appointed in 1970 reported in 1973. This committee in its recommendations to synod declared that "the practice of excluding women from ecclesiastical office cannot conclusively be defended on biblical grounds." But synod, following the lead of its advisory committee, felt that the report left too many important questions unanswered, and so decided to appoint a new committee to report in 1975.

The new committee, reporting in 1975, recommended that synod adopt the following: "Biblical teaching is not opposed in principle to the ordination of women to any office that men may hold in the church." But synod's advisory committee, subjecting the report to a thorough analysis, judged that "the material of the report does not support the conclusions which are drawn from it." Synod 1975 then declared that "the practice of excluding women from the ecclesiastical offices recognized in the Church Order be maintained unless compelling biblical grounds are advanced for changing that practice." Synod further decided that "sufficient biblical grounds have not been advanced to warrant a departure" from the present practice of the church. (It should be noted that 31 delegates had their negative votes recorded on the first declaration of synod, but only 8 delegates recorded their negatives votes on the second more substantive decision.)

Synod's advisory committee (in 1975) pinpointed a problem that seriously affected the interpretation of biblical material bearing on the issue of women in office, especially in the case of statements by the apostle Paul. The problem is this: What in Paul's statements bearing on the place of women in the church is conditioned by the culture of his time and what in his statements is expressive of enduring divine teaching? Synod accordingly appointed a committee "composed of Old Testament and New Testament scholars to undertake a study of the hermeneutical principles which are involved in the proper interpretation of the relevant Scripture passages. . . ."

This committee on hermeneutical principles reported in 1978, and concluded its report with the recommendation that "consistories be allowed to ordain qualified women to the office of deacon." A minority report recommended the same with the

Rev. Edward Heerema is a retired Christian Reformed pastor living at 619 S.E. 32nd St., Cape Coral, Florida 33904.

added clause, "provided that their work is distinguished from that of elders." The recommendation of the minority report was adopted. Synod also adopted an amendment to Article 3 of the Church Order in line with the opening of the office of deacon to women, with the understanding that the amendment "be ratified by the Synod of 1979."

An Avalanche of Protest

Synod 1979 received an unprecedented avalanche of overtures on the decisions of 1978, most of them taking issue with the decision to open the office of deacon to women. Many of the overtures also expressed disfavor with the failure of Synod 1978 to make clear that no implementation of its decision could take place until the churches had opportunity to reflect on the change in the Church Order (as called for in Article 47 of the Church Order), and the change had been ratified by the next synod. In response to this storm of protest from the churches, Synod 1979 appointed a new committee to "review without prejudice the 1978 report on 'Hermeneutical Principles . . .' and the decision of the Synod of 1978 regarding the ordination of women as deacons." The committee was instructed to report in 1981.

Worthy of special note is the decision of Synod 1979 to "defer decision with respect to ratification of the proposed wording of Church Order Article 3 and its Supplement, and instruct consistories to defer implementation of the 1978 decision, until the study committee has rendered its report to synod, and the churches have had opportunity to consider its recommendations." We assume that everything after the word "until" in that decision refers to both parts of the action to "defer." If that is the case, final action can probably not be expected until 1982. But Synod 1981 will have to take some decisive action.

What Will Synod Say — To The World?

What action will Synod 1981 take? What will the Synod say? That is the question to which this article in part addresses itself and to which three subsequent articles will address themselves. The question is sub-divided as follows: What will Synod 1981 say — to the world, to women, to the church, to God?

Does synod concern itself with the world in seeking to deal with a matter such as whether the church should ordain women to the special offices in the church? Isn't this simply and exclusively the church's business? What does the "world" have to do with this question?

To be sure, as the church wrestles with a pressing issue and seeks to arrive at a biblical answer it is not particularly concerned about what the world may think of the decision in the case. Nor, on the other hand, are we to think that the world is waiting with bated breath to hear what the church has to say on the matter of women as deacons. However, we can be assured that segments of the secular media will take note of the church's action in this matter, largely because of the current preoccupation in the media with women's rights and "woman's lib."

There is more to be said at this point. The church does not exist in a vacuum. It exists in the world, the world to which it is called to be witness. The church must be light and it must be salt in the world as that world may present itself at any point in its history. The church would do well always to remember this, also in its decision-making in the assemblies.

The church today exists in a world in which there is much cultural and social unrest with the attendant brokenness and pain. Following the example of our Savior and Lord, the church must ever have a deep feeling of compassion for a world thrashing about in a welter of problems of its own making. Like Christ let His church feel deep compassion for these masses of men that are so much like sheep without a shepherd.

Two Points of Testimony

In coming to a decision on the question of women in the office of deacon how will Synod 1981 witness to the world? What kind of testimony will it raise? Will the Synod raise a testimony that can be just a bit helpful to a culture beset by all sorts of social and personal problems? There are at least two matters that are at the center of much current unrest, matters on which Synod 1981 can raise a positive testimony by its decision on women in office. These two points of testimony are as follows:

1. Will Synod make clear that there is a sure, infallible and authoritative guide by which people can walk with certain step and clear direction through the maze of life, in the 1980's as well as in hundreds of years gone by?
2. Will Synod say that this sure, infallible and tested guide gives to society's basic unit, the family, a structure and character by means of which it can operate in such a way that all involved can live their lives in orderly fulfillment, to the blessing of mankind?

More discussion on these two matters is to appear in future articles. At this point we ask whether Synod 1981 will clearly enunciate the infallible, authoritative character of the Bible. Or will synod say that the Bible has been so affected and so conditioned by the cultural forces prevalent in the day in which it was written that its teaching on the place of women in the official life of the church is no longer to be understood to say what that teaching so clearly seems to say to the average devoted reader? If synod says the latter it will reinforce the worldling's assumption that the Bible is a relic of a less enlightened past, and his floundering in the sea of relativism and existentialism will become just a bit more frantic and a bit more hopeless.

Or perhaps synod, while maintaining the authoritative infallibility of Scripture, will make that avowal without substance for many by asserting that one cannot understand the Bible's teaching such as that bearing on women in office unless he has knowledge of a sophisticated theory of biblical hermeneutics that really only a select number of advanced Bible scholars are privy to. Such declaration by synod would compromise the church's cherished positions on the perspicuity (clarity) of Scripture

and the universal priesthood of believers, would in effect remove the Bible a long step away from the grasp of the "little people" in the Kingdom, and would tend to make distribution of the written Word to unbelievers an exercise in futility.

Synod 1981 and the Family

The family, the basic and most important unit of society, is under heavy attack from all sides today. Easy and frequent divorce, single-parent situations by choice, cohabitation without the legal and moral sanction of marriage ceremony, sexual promiscuity, facets of the woman's lib movement, undue stress on individual rights, economic pressures, a flood of morally tainted television fare — these are just some of the many forces at work today undermining the family. Will Synod 1981 in dealing with the issue of women in office, after ten years of reflection, say something that will be supportive of the family? Or will it in some measure add to the forces damaging the family?

Central to the whole issue of women in office is the matter of "headship," as the discussions of the past ten years amply show. Synod 1978 seemed to be saying that women cannot be elders and ministers because their being such would violate the headship of the man over the woman. Therefore that synod decided that consistories could ordain qualified women to the office of deacon "provided that their work is distinguished from that of elders." But this

well-meant proviso did not solve the problem, but rather called attention to the depth of the problem. It seems evident that within the present system of church government in force in the Christian Reformed Church women cannot be ordained as deacons if regard for the headship principle is to be maintained. If women are to sit on the church council they must inevitably participate in forming many decisions having to do with the ruling of the congregation. In actual practice there are situations in which deacons have as much to say as elders about matters of church government.

Will synod's decision in 1981 come down strong and clear on this matter of headship? Or will it render only lip-service to this important biblical principle? If the Synod speaks with clarity and firmness on this issue, it will be raising a testimony to a world in which support for the family structure is desperately needed. That testimony cannot, of course, bear on all aspects of the erosion of the family today. But such clear, positive testimony could be helpful to those many who are voicing their concern over the breakdown of the family and who are asking for stronger families. Such testimony can be helpful to those who are calling for a strong father-figure who can do his part in a proper family structure to supply that loving discipline so widely seen as sorely lacking, a father-figure who also can do much to help growing children achieve that sense of personal identity that is wanting in so many of today's troubled youth. Will Synod 1981 raise such a clear, positive testimony? ●

CHRISTIAN VERSUS HUMANISTIC EDUCATION

Neal Frey, M.A., Acting Chairman

(Department of History and Social Science Christian Heritage College)

A certain man had a son; and the son said unto his father, "Separate me, I pray, from my stewardship as a Christian intellectual, that my faith reproach me not in my discipline." So his father loosed him from his birthright.

And it came to pass, not many days hence, that the son fell under bondage to humanism,¹ which pertaineth to secularism,² and squandered his witness in man-centered inquiry. And he went and joined himself to a reputable university, which certified him in the academic disciplines to grope for truth more elegantly; for he said, "I seek truth," but he fled Christ. And he would fain have filled his thoughts with the absolutes which man doth give — but no man gave unto him.

¹Humanism is a man-centered view of value.

²Secularism is a non-Christ-centered view of being.

And when he had compromised all, there arose a mighty famine in his soul, and he was afterward in perplexity. And when he regarded his bankruptcy, he said, "Yea, though my fellows and I seek value through the disciplines, we perish with hunger!" so that his thoughts turned again homeward.

And he said, "I will arise, and return to my father; peradventure he will restore me. For my soul famisheth for meaning on these secular husks, and my heart for hope." And though he stood a great way off, he assayed to reconstruct his thinking as a Christian, but the road back was anguished and lonely. But his father saw him, and had compassion on him, and ran, and fell on his neck, and kissed him, and said, "Rejoice, for this my son's thinking was man-centered, but now it is Christ-centered; he was dead, but is alive!" And the son gave thanks. In the irresistible quest for absolute truth, meaning, real-

ity, and purpose, the Christian first personally confronts the absolute Biblical Trinity, after which he can *apprehend* Christ-centered truth reflected in creation through properly Christ-centered disciplines. The humanist begins with himself or with nature and *invents* absolutes. "Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth," the humanist organizes his discipline upon the absolute that ultimate truth is not absolute, truth being relative to expedience or preference.

The method of research in an academic discipline refers to the standards upon which data in that field are evaluated. The methodology of research refers to the assumed value basis underlying the standards upon which those data are evaluated. From the standpoint of ultimate truth, meaning, reality, and purpose, research methodology absolutely determines the underlying value content of the organized body of data in a discipline. Methodology is the theology of method.

Only two types of knowledge exist — humanistic knowledge, whose view of being is not Christ-centered and whose center of value is nature or man, and Christian knowledge, whose views of origins and value are Biblical and Christ-centered. Whether origins and values are centered in nature or man, or whether both are centered in the written and Incarnate Word of God, profoundly determines the content of each type of knowledge. The values underlying both types of knowledge are commonly unstated and unconsciously assumed by the teacher, and uncritically accepted and unconsciously assimilated (along with the structure of the knowledge) by the student. The most vital and formative dimension of education lies below the threshold of perception. From the primary to the postdoctoral levels, the prevailing structure of knowledge is predetermined and distorted by humanism. But man-centered knowledge never determines ultimate truth, meaning, reality, or purpose, because it never satisfactorily settles the question, What is the absolute source and content of a value system?

"Neutral" knowledge does not exist. There are no value-free facts, nor fact-free values: there are, that is, no citations of "facts" without attached significance. Introduction to a body of knowledge and an assembly of facts necessarily means initiation into an underlying set of value assumptions upon which such knowledge is based. There can be no knowledge without values, no education without initiation into some value system. From the standpoint of value, all education is moral training. The momentous question is not, Shall education inculcate value? but, Shall education inculcate man-centered value or Christian value?

Christ created the world to honor Himself. Men structure the academic disciplines to magnify themselves; hence the difference between "knowledge" and truth. Christians deal in absolute truth revealed in Scripture and employ it to enlighten the disciplines; different humanists formulate various truths and arrive at collective moral skepticism in their disciplines. Human reason produces relativistic knowledge; Biblical revelation produces truth.

Much can be done to rescue Christian students from the morass of relativism³ which humanism unleashes in the disciplines. All branches of true knowledge are subdivisions of theology, dealing with various spheres of life under an absolute Trinity. Christian teachers, are stewards of absolute truth: they point out to their students what truth is, and what difference it makes in their discipline. If students are merely exposed to rival systems of knowledge — hence to mutually contradictory assumptions of value — without having Christ-centered, Biblical truth rigorously defined, organized, and persistently brought to bear on the subject in question, those students will commonly select from each system the elements which to them seem most plausible, and will amalgamate them into a world view labeled "Christian." Such a philosophy will be highly eclectic, full of internal contradictions, perplexing, mostly secular, and implicitly relativistic. Worst of all, most students will *never realize* that they have been intellectually compromised by the "neutral" posture of their instructors, and will go through life *believing* as Christians but *thinking* as humanists. To appear after such a life before Christ's judgment seat will be grievous indeed for the Christian students, and what will it be for their teachers?

Christian teachers should stress the implications, in their subject areas, of creation, the fall, original sin, the flood, the incarnation, the resurrection, individual redemption, the return of Christ, and the sovereignty and transcendence of God (rather than of man). Failure to spell out these basic absolutes in the various disciplines is absolute relativism, for it awards equal respectability to less as well as to more Christ-centered structures of knowledge, making truth a mere matter of taste. Christian education should not insulate students from humanist scholarship. It should keep humanism at bay, at arm's length, while repeatedly and faithfully inculcating intellectually consistent Christ-centered knowledge based on Scripture. It should not deprive students of a truly Biblical liberal arts education by merely giving the Christian side "equal time" with humanism. Christian education is not accomplished by baptizing humanistic classroom content with an opening prayer, or by rephrasing non-Christ-centered thought in Christian rhetoric.

Familiarity with as much humanist thought and knowledge as possible helps one hone his Biblical position in opposition to humanist error. On the other hand, precious souls are subverted through perversion of the intellect when students fail to see (or are not shown) how they must deliberately separate themselves from humanistic thought. Christian teachers should define Christ-centered thinking, refute humanist thinking, and refer the fundamental differences to the question, What is the absolute source and content of value?

Christian teachers midwife the intellectual rebirth of their students. "Be not conformed to this

³Relativism is the belief that ultimate truth, meaning, reality and purpose vary with time and place, and may be differently defined by each individual or group.

world, but be ye transformed, by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God." Taught by the Holy Spirit, Christian teachers define truth, value, and reality in their disciplines in Christ-centered terms and demonstrate to their students how this definition will determine the organization of knowledge in their field, and how it fundamentally differs from systems of knowledge based on non-Christ-centered views of truth, value, and reality. Nor will Christian truth triumph in competition with humanist error in the disciplines if truth is merely not suppressed, but not actively espoused. Why is not all human knowledge already Christ-centered? Why is self-consciously Christian education so necessary? The delusion that Christian truth could so triumph unaided is based on an unscriptural, over-optimistic reading of human nature. It ignores original sin, which predisposes man against the truth. Man has a vested self-interest in error and in the self-centered organization of knowledge. Even Christian students, deeply conditioned by our secular culture, will commonly miss the alternative Christ-centered frame of knowledge if left to sort out Christian and humanist thought for themselves. Truly "free thought" is the liberty to think in Christ-centered terms. Thought which has slipped out of militant subservience to Christian truth — which has become man-centered — is no longer free. But in the current intellectual

climate, humanist scholarship passes for enlightened free inquiry, while consistently Christian intellectual enterprise is stigmatized as "biased" and "narrow."

"Lord, how is it that thou wilt manifest thyself to us, and not unto the world?" The Christian scholar in the process of self-definition as a Christian intellectual wrestles, usually almost alone, with a great mass of Satanically clever error. It is a warfare essentially spiritual, of renewed minds against man-centered darkness. Frequently the Christian scholar knows not where the enemy lies and therefore cannot coherently cry out for help. At times he feels almost overwhelmed. Often he hardly knows what questions to ask, let alone how to answer them. But he clings to his Biblical absolutes as the basis for his Christ-centered reconstruction of liberal arts data in his field. Withdrawing from one's humanist conditioning is mentally exhausting, but it is one of the most intellectually exhilarating and spiritually rewarding things the Christian scholar will ever do.

Run thou the race through God's good grace,
Lift up thine eyes, and seek His face;
Life with its way before us lies,
Christ is the path, and Christ the prize. ●

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SOME IMPRESSIONS OF THE HOLY LAND

As air travel becomes a commonplace we are apt to forget that ours is the first generation in human history that has been permitted actually to see man's life and works in the perspective that we get when peering down at them from the small windows of a pressurized jet-liner at 40,000 feet. The bird's eye view (we even took off in a plane with the Republic's blue goose insignia) of man's shrinking and disappearing constructions ought to come as a recurring reminder of what the prophet Isaiah had to inform us is God's perspective on these designs and labors of men that so often especially in our time

The editor and his wife were given a trip to the Holy Land as a farewell gift on retirement from the ten year pastorate of the Dutton Christian Reformed Church. It was the suggestion of the Editorial Committee that our readers might be interested in these reactions.

threaten to absorb and overwhelm us. "Behold, the nations are a drop of a bucket, and are counted as the small dust of the balance; behold, he taketh up the isles as a very little thing." "All nations before him are as nothing; and they are counted to him less than nothing and vanity." And then in sublime scorn the prophet must invite us to consider the foolish idolatries of men: "To whom then will ye liken God? or what likeness will ye compare unto him?" "Have ye not known have ye not heard? hath it not been told you from the beginning? have ye not understood from the foundations of the earth? It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers . . ." (Isaiah 40:15, 17,18,21,22). For the first time in history we may literally do what the psalmist did in flights of poetry, "If I take up the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy

hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me" (Ps. 139:9,10).

After an abbreviated night flight across the Atlantic our anticipation of seeing the land my father never saw and of which my mother had only a remote childhood memory was disappointed. A few glimpses of fields and neat farm buildings under the rainy clouds, some waterways, and a quick change of planes at Schiphol Airport were all we saw of Amsterdam. And the rest of Europe did not appear until we saw some of the Greek coast and islands before a brief landing at Athens. And by the time we were herded through customs at Amman, Jordan it was night.

Jordan and Petra

Why land in Jordan when our destination was Israel? The answer was significant. Israel has priced itself off the market by charging a \$200 per passenger landing fee! This had the unintended effect of introducing us to the "promised land" by the route Israel itself had had to take, from across the Jordan. Before that crossing our route was to further parallel that of the Israelites. We were scheduled for a 300-mile round trip to the south to visit the ancient capital of Edom, the rock-city of Petra. The direct route for us from Amman (the ancient Ammonite capital, Rabbath Ammon of the Bible) would have been over the mountains of Moab via "the Kings' Highway." This route, denied to Israel for political reasons, was denied to us to save time. And so, after traveling through wealthy suburbs where oil dollars are funding a building boom of high-rise buildings we sped in air-conditioned comfort through the 150 miles of barren desert where Israel toiled and complained. Petra in spectacular, many-colored and very rough mountain country resembles very closely the canyon cliff-dwellings in south-eastern Utah. That robber stronghold in jagged narrow canyons with walls hundreds of feet high was the target against which Obadiah had to pronounce God's judgments. "The pride of thine heart hath deceived thee, thou that dwellest in the clefts of the rock, whose habitation is high; that saith in his heart, who shall bring me down to the ground? Though thou exalt thyself as an eagle and though thou set thy nest among the stars, thence will I bring thee down, saith the Lord" (Obadiah 3,4). And the ruins at Petra underscore the fact that the destruction of that civilization is just as complete as God's prophet said it would be (compare also Malachi 1:3,4,5).

Amman to Jerusalem

From Amman to Israel's border at the Jordan is less than 25 miles but it is a drop of thousands of feet by twisting mountain road looking up at Mt. Nebo from which Moses saw the promised land and down on the canyon of Heshbon until it opens out on the garden spot of the Jordan plain 1000 feet below sea-level. Since Israel and Jordan are in a state of war we had to pass through 4 military check-points, two

on each side of the border. The well-known Allenby Bridge turned out to be an insignificant crossing of a river at this point hardly more than a 20-foot irrigation ditch, but on the other side we were delayed some 3 or 4 hours while the Israeli soldiers thoroughly inspected and photographed our baggage to prevent the entry of any more terrorist bombs. Beyond the military checkpoint the country was a land of eroded gray dunes — the traditional desert haunts of John the Baptist, resembling the barren bad-lands of the Dakotas. Abruptly we found ourselves among the palm trees, bananas and brilliant flowers of Jerichos oasis. It must have seemed indeed a land of "milk and honey" to the Israelites after years of desert wandering. "Elisha's spring" lies almost at the base of the mound where we were told the ancient walled city once stood. Less than 20 miles away by another twisting mountain road we climbed up 4000 feet to Jerusalem. The significance of the Biblical phrases "up to Jerusalem" and "down to Jericho" begin to take on meaning. Part way up the climb there is a pause at a ruined monastery, the "Inn of the Good Samaritan," in the robber-country in which the Lord placed His parable. Around the corner of the Mount of Olives, just before one reaches Jerusalem there is another pause at the hill village of Bethany to see the traditional site of the house of Mary and Martha and Lazarus' tomb. As is usual on these traditional sites in Palestine, some kind of church has been built over them. All of the elaborate ecclesiastical architecture and the clamoring souvenir sellers outside, each calling for "dollars," do not help one to visualize the Biblical events which once occurred at least in the area.

Jerusalem

Jerusalem, the old city and temple Jerusalem area, whose walls rise across the steep valley from the Mount of Olives is still impressive, though the traditional site of Abraham's and David's sacrifices, and presumably the Temple, remains crowned with blue tiled and gold Moslem "Dome of the Rock." On the slope of the Mount of Olives, again in the garden of a church, there are still some ancient olive trees which may have been there when the Lord came to Gethsemane. Within the city, on the other side of the temple area, one can still see under what was believed to be Pilate's residence in the Castle of Antonia the place where the soldiers marked their games on the ancient paving stones. And from this point in the narrow, dingy "Via Dolorosa," the Lord is supposed to have been led with His cross. There are markers, where he is alleged to have stumbled, where Simon had to help him, where Veronica wiped his face. There was something incongruous about it the Saturday we crowded our way through the busy shops that line this narrow, crooked street of the Moslem quarter. The Jewish city was all closed down because of the sabbath, but we were told the crowds today were especially great because the Jews came to do their shopping in the Moslem quarter! Jerusalem today is about as indifferent to the Lord as it was in the day He walked its streets. Two

sites are claimed for the crucifixion and burial, one at the cluttered Church of the Holy Sepulchre, laden with more than a half dozen different ecclesiastical traditions. Some patriarch was parading around an altar when we were there. The other, outside of the Damascus Gate at the Garden Tomb beside a hill that had some faint resemblance to a skull, "felt" more authentic, especially when we attended a church service there led by an evangelical Anglican who knew and brought the gospel. The place had "atmosphere," but the preacher made it plain that God's good news did not depend on the authenticity of the site, but on what He had said and done.

South of Jerusalem

Jerusalem and its environs, especially to the south are far more rocky than I had expected. The stony hills of Bethlehem do not resemble the farms we know. Someone long ago has found a cave in which to locate the manger and over which to build a church, and the place confronts one with more souvenir sellers and shops than reminders of authentic Biblical history. And Hebron, further to the south, an Arab city, stirred up by Jewish efforts to settle, features a mosque covering the cave of Machpelah, Abraham's burial place. Israel is also claiming the place for a synagogue so that we as visitors had to put paper skull-caps on our heads, but our Arab guide, as a Moslem, exempted himself from the requirement. When Jew and Moslem dispute as they do about this place, and for that matter, the whole of this land, arguing about which of its shrines shall belong to each to be centers of ritual, and threatening the whole world with war, a Christian can afford to be rather non-partisan about the argument. Neither recognizes the Lord whom we and all men must worship as Savior. And He is not "worshiped in temples made with hands as though He needed anything" and is not tied to this or that traditional holy place, but He is to be worshiped "in every place" throughout the world (Mal. 1:11). There is something touching and pathetic about the Moslem in his arrogance worshiping under his Dome of the Rock with its pure gold inscriptions, and about the Jews gathering at the "wailing wall" near by and below mourning the lost glories of Israel and tucking scraps of paper with written prayers into the cracks of the wall. We recall that our Lord said, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no man cometh unto the Father, but by me."

Masada and Qumran

Especially unforgettable was another side-trip the day after our arrival in Jerusalem returning down the mountain road to Jericho's plain, then south past the northern end of the Dead Sea and along the base of the barren cliffs of its western shore until near the southern end of the sea we stopped at the foot of a rocky 1300 foot high crag of Masada. Our trip to the summit was not by the ancient trail already called by Josephus "The Snake

Path" but by an aerial tramway hanging from cables above the zig-zags of the trail. On the 23 acre top of this high table mountain surrounded by nearly vertical cliffs looking away and down at some of the most desolate country imaginable, King Herod in 34 B.C. built a remarkable fortress and palace whose ruins are being excavated. Some of the colored decoration on the walls of his bath house are still visible after almost 2000 years. Over a century after Herod built the fortress-palace, after the Romans had taken Jerusalem, some 1000 Jewish zealots took refuge in the stronghold for a last stand against the conquering Romans, holding out against them for three years. In the final siege by 15,000 Roman soldiers the Romans impressed Jews to build a steep ramp up one part of the cliff up which they made their attack. On their final assault they found to their surprise that only two women and 5 children were left alive in the fortress. All of the rest of the defenders had died in a suicide pact. The enormous ramp and the outlines of the Roman camps and their two mile siege wall can still be seen after the passage of almost 20 centuries.

The return trip north included a stop for a swim in the eye-stinging salt water of the Dead Sea, 5 times as salty as the oceans, and then a stop at the north end of the sea at the excavations of Qumran. There a sect of Essenes had busied themselves copying the Scriptures and other records and when threatened by the invaders hidden their manuscripts in caves in the near-by cliffs. Just across the wash from us was Cave Number 4 where a very early copy of the Book of Isaiah was discovered. These manuscripts, forgotten and preserved in the dry desert climate for almost 2000 years, have only recently been discovered, as the famous "Dead Sea Scrolls," to confirm and authenticate the accuracy of some of the oldest copies of the Bible.

North to Galilee

The journey north from Jerusalem takes one past Saul's country and Samuel's old home until one drops off the Judean hills down a long grade into the olive orchard covered rocky hillsides and richer valleys of the ancient province of Samaria. There is a stop at Jacob's well to remember the Samaritan woman, as the Lord directed her and her countrymen to Himself as the Messiah, instead of to their groping worship in their temple on the near-by Mt. Gerizim (John 4). This mountain, on one side of the narrow valley where Shechem lay and Mt. Ebul, on the other side, were where Israel had to gather and respond to the blessings and the curses of God's law as the tribes were divided with half on each mountain. A few more miles northward bring us to the fertile Plain of Esdraelon or Jezreel, open farming country, where Sisera's Canaanite chariots were overcome by Barak and Deborah when the Lord sent a storm to turn the valley into a sea of mud. There in our times Israeli tanks battled like iron chariots of the Canaanites. At the edge of this plain is the site of Megiddo, ruins of a very ancient city where Solomon and Ahab kept their stables. We had

dinner at a "Kibbutz," one of Israel's many collective farms. When the manager was asked about the religion of the communal settlement he told us frankly that there was none. If some of the old folks wanted to go to worship there was a synagogue a few kilometers away, but the young had no interest in such things. If we needed any evidence about the religious character of much of modern Israel he gave it to us.

From this plain one may drop down a few hundred feet to the lake of Galilee, 700 feet below sea level. From Tiberias we were taken by boat, recalling the journeys of our Lord on the same lake, to ancient Capernaum and its ruined synagogue. Our bus trip varied a little from recent routine in taking us across the Jordan at the north end of the lake past many a military camp on the barren hills reminiscent of the dry foothills of California to the Golan heights, where, under the hill-top forts we looked across a few hundred feet of border at the UN peace-keeping camps and the Syrian city of Quneitra. Then, swinging northwest, we began to climb the slopes of 9,000 foot Mt. Hermon, past some Druse villages (a very strict sect of Moslems), past the Berekhat Ram Lake in the crater of an old volcano, and then in a spectacular drive with hair-pin switchbacks down into the valley to the sources of the Jordan River. One of them is the spring of Banias, site of ancient Caesarea Philippi. A return to the Sea of Galilee takes one alongside of farms where the lake of Hileh has disappeared, past the ruins of the ancient Canaanite Hazor, Sisera's capital, and past the mountain of the Beatitudes.

Nazareth to the Coast

Nazareth, the hilly village where the Lord grew up, has become a thriving city. It was the headquarters of the bus company which took us through Israel in one of the most luxurious buses I have ever seen. A very elaborate new church covered the underground site where our Lord is supposed to have lived and worked at Joseph's carpenter shop. Today the place is surrounded by bustling souvenir shops. A westward journey took us gradually down into the narrowing Kishon River valley to look up at the heights of Mt. Carmel where Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal, and upon their discomfiture, ordered them slain at this river. After dinner on the mountain top at Haifa, "San Francisco of the near East" we dropped down to the plains of Sharon where most of Israel's population live, past endless banana plantations, to the ruins of Caesarea where Paul was once imprisoned. We sat in the ancient Roman amphitheater and listened to the speculation about whether Paul had his hearings before the Roman governor and Agrippa here.

Egypt

A short flight from Amman to Cairo brought a brief but colorful introduction to Egypt. From the teeming city with 10,000,000 inhabitants it is only a

short trip to the ancient pyramids, with the last hill surmounted on the back of a camel. Nearby are the small intensively cultivated farms and canals, remarkably like those of China's Yangtse valley, surrounding the ancient capital, Memphis, allegedly the land of Goshen where Israel once sojourned. As impressive in its way as the pyramids, is the display in the Egyptian Museum of King Tutankhamon's treasures, featuring especially his unbelievably elaborate and extravagant preparations for his burial. There were most of the 8 successive coffins, gold-lined and covered, all designed to insure the eternal life of the royal remains. "What incredible waste and superstition!" someone might say. That poor man was, indeed, sadly misled, but was he not, according to his lights, trying to provide for the everlasting future much more diligently than our society which usually gives little thought to it? What will he and others like him have to say to us in the judgment in view of the gospel privileges, which we often neglect to use. The Lord said, "He that believeth on me hath everlasting life" and in faith in Himself He enjoined, "Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven."

At many points in these two weeks we had crossed or followed the trail of the patriarchs and Moses. They had been called and taught us to live by God's covenant revelation and Word. That meant learning to esteem "the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt" (Heb. 11:26). It meant living in this world as pilgrims, along with ones covenant children, looking "for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10).

THE OUTLOOK



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THESSALONIAN LESSONS

Henry Vander Kam

THE RESTRAINT OF THE MAN OF SIN.

Lesson 13 — II Thessalonians 2:6-12

In the previous verses the author had spoken of the nature of the man of sin who will come before our Lord returns. The question may well rise in the minds of the readers: Why is his coming delayed until the time just before the return of Christ? Paul addresses this question in these verses and also shows them what effect his coming will have.

These verses belong to the group of very difficult passages of the New Testament. There are grammatical difficulties and difficulties of interpretation. Paul writes to people who do know what he has in mind and therefore does not consider it necessary to go into detail. However, we do not know of a certainty the things to which he refers in the verses six and seven. One thing is clear — there is something or someone which restrains so that the man of sin has not yet appeared. There have been all manner of interpretations given as to who or what this restraining power might be. There are those who believe that the Apostle is writing in a vague manner because he has in mind the power of Rome and does not wish to write anything which might be held against him or the church. Others believe that he refers to the Holy Spirit as the restraining force. However, none of these interpretations satisfy. Although no one is able to speak with complete certainty concerning the identity of the restraining power, it seems as though he is hereby referring to the rule of law which is operating in the world. The man of sin is the "lawless one." All the laws of both God and men will be trampled by him. God is maintaining a rule of law in this world despite the sin of man. This force holds back the man of sin. Such a force of well-ordered society can be spoken of as "that which restraineth" or as "one that restraineth." The Apostle speaks of the importance of a well-ordered society under government in other places (Rom. 13). He himself used his own Roman citizenship effectively for the welfare of the gospel. In this kind of world in which laws are still enforced for the benefit of the people the lawless one is not able to operate.

The "Mystery of Lawlessness"

There is a "mystery of lawlessness" which is already at work in this world long before the man of sin is revealed. Whenever the New Testament speaks of "mystery" it does not refer to the mysterious but to the things which have been kept secret. When Paul, in other places, speaks of the "mystery of godliness" he means the things which had not been revealed and have now, in this New Testament period, been made plain. So here too. It has not been clear to men how the evil one is working and what purpose he has in mind. But, it is now clearly seen that his is an on-going work which will culminate in the revelation of the man of sin. The Apostle is not interested in giving these Thessalonian Christians some information concerning the order of events at the time of the Savior's return and just before that time, but he is giving them a view of history! They (and we) must realize that the forces of lawlessness are indeed at work in the present time and that these will ultimately lead to the man of sin. So we also do justice to the words of the Apostle John and to the words found in this chapter. John speaks of "Antichrist" as a present reality — Paul speaks of the "man of sin" being revealed shortly before the return of Christ. The "mystery of lawlessness" is the spirit of the "Antichrist." *That* is in the world long before the man of sin appears.

His Appearance

When the restraints of the present time are removed, the man of sin will make his appearance. He will, in the words of the last part of verse six, be revealed in his own season. He is not able to do as he pleases nor to appear whenever he wishes. God determines the proper season for the appearance of this man of sin. God has placed the restraints. The evil one is able to do nothing except with divine permission! God is in control — not the devil! This fact must be clearly fixed in the minds of believers. When they see the day of the man of sin, they will tremble. But, they must be assured that their God is

sovereign. The man of sin may give the impression for a time that he is in control and that he has dethroned God, but His people must not fear, their God is still on the throne and also has complete control over the man of sin.

His Defeat

It is therefore not surprising that we read that the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of His mouth. He will bring him to nought by the manifestation of His coming. Notice that the Apostle does not picture a strife or a battle. It is so simple! When the Lord breathes on him, he will slay him. The coming of Christ takes all his power away. He simply melts and withers before the presence of the Lord Jesus. This again emphasizes the total sovereignty of our God and His Christ. The man of sin will boast great things and will call men to bring him divine honors, but the Lion of the tribe of Judah will conquer him easily and gain the final victory.

The Energy of Satan

However, let no man think that there is no cause to fear this embodiment of evil when he appears. For men he will be far too strong. Never have men seen such power of evil as they will see when this one comes. He will come with the power, the energy, of Satan. Satan will take over this man of sin. No, the power of Satan is not to be compared to the power of the Christ, but it is a ruthless power far greater than that of man. He will come in the power of Satan and will come with signs and wonders, or miracles. This reminds one of the Christ who came in the power of God and did signs and wonders! He is indeed "Antichrist." His signs and wonders are falsehoods. But, he is going to do great things so that men will stand amazed. He will imitate the Christ of God. It is no wonder that many will be led astray and follow him. Many will not be able to judge whether his works are false or not. When he does his signs and miracles on the earth, many will place him on the same plane with Christ or above Him. There always have been those who could not distinguish between the power of God and the power of Satan nor between falsehood and truth.

A Power to Deceive

The power which the man of sin shows is to deceive those who perish. They see his supernatural works and are deceived by them. This sounds like a truism, but the Apostle is not in the habit of writing such things as are obvious to everyone. Their minds are not able to discern, they are not able to distinguish between truth and error. Why not? They did not receive or accept the love for the truth! The gospel had been preached to them. They, however, did not receive it — they did not believe it. The gospel had come with the urgent appeal to believe unto salvation. This they had rejected. No one can reject the gospel with impunity. When He calls them to believe so that they might be saved He is placing the empha-

sis on the responsibility which man has toward the gospel. Therefore the Scriptures *command* men to believe even though it teaches us very clearly that faith is worked by the Holy Spirit. Men are responsible beings both in accepting or rejecting the gospel. Instead of a love for the truth, they now believe the lies of the man of sin! Sin is lawlessness, it is wicked, but it is also irrational! How can men reject the truth whereby they may come to salvation and substitute for it the lie whereby they perish?

A Judgment of God upon Unbelief

The Scriptures frequently speak of the power and the effects of sin. This is a truth which everyone must grasp in order that he may know the danger in which he stands and may flee for refuge to the only Savior of men. The first thing a person must know is how great his sin and misery is. This is a difficult truth to apply to one's self and a bowing before the Scriptures is the absolute requirement. Only in this light are men going to be able to see the true nature of sin. There are certain parts of Scripture which bring this truth home to the individual as no others can. At the cross of Christ men can see what their sin has cost. In his teaching concerning the man of sin and the time in which he will rule the Apostle also gives us a view of the effects of sin which is crystal clear. There will be a deluding power sent forth by God Himself whereby man will finally believe the lie rather than the truth. When the sin of man has finally given birth to the man of sin he will do those things which he had never thought possible. Man had always prided himself on his ability to know and to find the truth. But, when God sends a working of error, he is blinded and is no longer able to distinguish between truth and falsehood. Those who have hardened themselves against the appeal of the gospel, he hardens. When Pharaoh hardened his heart — God hardened his heart! When men practiced impurity — God gave them up to their lusts! (Romans 1) The sin of man contains its own punishment within itself! Let sin go unchecked and it will consume him who practices it! When the man of sin appears the sins of men will know no bounds. There is that which restrains in the present time so that the man of sin cannot appear as yet, and there is that which restrains so that the sin of man does not yet appear in its most awful nature. But, when that restraint is removed, he appears and sin shows its true nature. Those days will be the most difficult time which the history of the world has ever seen. When God has given them over to the lie the opportunity for repentance is past. They cannot grieve, resist and quench the Spirit of God forever! The Bible often speaks of the patience, the longsuffering of God. In this His people glory. But, there is an end to that patience. As long as He still speaks to them there is still hope. But, when He gives them up . . .

A Gospel Warning

Throughout these verses Paul has been speaking about those who are the followers of the man of sin. It is, therefore, not a passage which only gives us

some information about the last days which otherwise we might not have had. It speaks in warning and is therefore still gospel. The end of the matter is that those who believe the lie of the Antichrist will be judged. These words refer to the final judgment. Those who have rejected the truth of the gospel and have believed the deceptions of the man of sin have placed themselves in the position that there is no opportunity to turn to Him anymore. The judgment is to be expected because He is righteous. We must not conclude, first of all, that God casts them away; they have cast themselves into destruction.

The words which the Apostle now uses to sum up the things he has said above are very instructive. They are the ones "who believed not the truth." The opportunity was given them. God will restrain the coming of the man of sin until the gospel has been preached to all nations. He will not allow the evil one to dictate the order of events. Having heard the gospel they consciously and deliberately turn against it and reject it. Herein they are completely responsible for their actions. When they have not believed the truth, they "had pleasure in unrighteousness." Not only the intellect but also the will was involved in their rejection of the truth. Their will and emotions are involved in the pleasure they find in unrighteousness.

It is always true that a man's actions are shaped by his beliefs. The child of God who believes with heart and understanding the truth of God will delight in righteousness. The one flows from the other. So too, the person who has rejected the truth will not practice righteousness but will find his pleasure in lawlessness. These cannot be separated. In the present time the impression may be left that although the gospel is rejected, nevertheless there is

an attempt to live a moral life. However, in the days of the man of sin, when all restraints are lifted, sin will show its true nature and its true "consistency." He who does not love the truth, does not love God Himself, will also trample all the laws of God and man. No wonder Jesus says that if those days were not shortened even the elect would be in danger.

Paul has given us an extremely important message in these verses regarding both the time of the appearance of the man of sin and the conditions which shall obtain at the time. This chapter is one of the most important for the proper understanding of the doctrine of the last things. We must never lose sight of the fact that, whether we speak of the doctrine of God, of man, of Christ, of salvation, of the church or of the last things, God is in complete control and therefore His people are always safe.

Questions for Discussion

1. Why must the man of sin be "restrained?" Would Antichrist have appeared long ago if this restraint were not present? Discuss.
2. What is the history or "development" of sin? Does sin grow worse the longer time lasts?
3. Why is the victory of Christ over the man of sin so "easy" while the battle was so furious in Gethsemane and on Golgotha?
4. What kind of wonders will Antichrist perform?
5. Is the gospel a matter of "take it or leave it?" What effects will the rejection of the truth have for the present?
6. Why does the time come when repentance will be impossible?
7. If our actions are determined by our beliefs, how important is doctrine?

THANKSGIVING AND PRAYER.

Lesson 14 — II Thessalonians 2:13-17

In the previous verses of this chapter the Apostle had dealt with the man of sin and all the ills which will accompany his coming. This was necessary for these Thessalonian Christians because they had a wrong conception concerning these things and because they were fearful as a result of their misconceptions. Paul is never afraid to deal with the difficulties which may bother a church at a particular place nor is he afraid of dealing with particular sins which may be present in a church. However, his interests lie elsewhere. He would rather deal with the marvelous salvation which has been revealed by the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh! These other matters need attention because the people might be led astray and consequently lose the joy of salvation. Then the Apostle attacks the things which would be injurious to them. He defends the believers from all the attacks made on their faith. But, the condemnation of falsehoods and of a sinful life is not separated

from the positive declaration of the truth of God as it is in Christ Jesus. This is instructive for all those who come later. Evil must be condemned fearlessly and the gospel must be proclaimed in all its beauty!

People the Lord Loves

So he begins the verses before us. Those who follow the man of sin will fall into deeper errors as time progresses, but we are bound to give thanks to God always for you! What a blessing that, even though there were wrong views present at Thessalonica concerning the doctrine of the last things, the members of the church would not fall into the clutches of the evil one! These are the beloved of the Lord. That is the proper name for the church of Jesus Christ. They are not 'friends' or 'hearers,' they are His beloved. That church is by no means perfect, but it is the beloved of God! Naturally they are his brethren because they confess the same faith in Christ. God has chosen them to salvation from the beginning.

From earliest times, or, as he says in another place, from before the foundation of the world, He has chosen them. The doctrine of election is very practical in the thought of the New Testament. It is not a doctrine divorced from all reality; in fact, it is the reason for their salvation. Long before they were aware of it, God was busy in their salvation. Those who deny election cut away the foundation of the salvation for His people.

Saved by God through Faith

This election of God has even further practical benefits. He indeed chose them to salvation but this is not to be thought of in such a way as though it has nothing to do with the present manner of life. The sanctifying work of the Spirit is given to those whom He has chosen. These will live a life of which He approves. The whole person is affected by it. The whole man is claimed by the Christ and the Spirit does His work so that the whole man is brought in service to Jesus Christ. Those whom He has chosen come to believe the truth of the gospel. For the non-elect the gospel is but a dead letter while the elect hear the voice of their God speaking peace to them in this gospel. Why this difference in attitude? God's election makes the difference.

Called through the Gospel to Glory

From the election of God the Apostle now concludes to the effectual calling of His people. These are closely related as he has also taught in Romans 8:30. Election does not exist by itself but has consequences. Election is but the first link in the chain of salvation. Those whom He has chosen will also share in all the other benefits which have been promised to His people. The means for calling them is the gospel. It was the glorious responsibility of Paul and his helpers to preach that gospel. In this he rejoices that he may be a co-laborer with God. He never wearies of bringing this good news to the men of his day. It reveals to us that the election of God will bear fruit. Those elected are called by the gospel of salvation. They were called "to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ." Between the effectual calling and the "glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" there are various other steps, but the Apostle fixes the eyes of the Thessalonians on the ultimate future. They will share in the glory of Christ. Despite all the evils which may come during the time of the man of sin, they can rest assured that theirs will be the glory of their Savior because God has chosen them to be His own. He is here called our "Lord Jesus Christ" to emphasize the complete sovereignty which is His so that they may realize that no one shall snatch them out of His hand. Although that glory is future when He shall come again in power, there is also a present glory given to His people. They already share in the benefits He has come to bring so that their lives have been renewed. What glory shall it be when they shall be like Him for they shall see Him as He is!

Stand Fast and Hold Fast

Therefore, because of all he has taught in this chapter, they are called to stand fast. Not even the man of sin will be able to overthrow the work of God begun within them. They may indeed rejoice that God has chosen them, and that is the only reason they will be able to stand in the evil day, but they are also called to responsible action. They must not be shaken by any of the interpretations which some have given concerning the doctrine of the last things. They must stand fast upon the foundation which has been laid for their faith. They must also cling to the traditions they have been taught. They must hold fast to the gospel. The person who is fully aware of the fact that he has been chosen of God will have the desire to cling to His word. It is true, of course, that no one can believe his election nor the gospel unless God causes him to do so. Paul, however, never falls into the intellectual trap which teaches that man cannot have any responsibility if it is God's work from beginning to end. Man is called to believe! He is called to hold fast the teachings which have been given him! He honors both God's complete sovereignty and man's complete responsibility.

God's Word Spoken and Written

The author further defines "the traditions which ye were taught" as the word which he had spoken to them while he was in Thessalonica or the epistle which he had addressed to them. Paul was convinced that he was writing the word of God. That epistle (I Thess.) was a part of "the tradition," of the gospel. All too many in our time have reduced the epistles of Paul to interesting historical documents which show us how a certain man, brought up in the Jewish tradition, thought about religious matters. His own claim is that he is writing the word of God to which men must cling for their salvation! This honor may not be given to other writings which may have been present at that time, no, it must be an "epistle of ours." Not only the things which he has written them are to be believed, but also the words which he spoke to them. He never makes any distinction between the written word or his spoken word as being the word of God. The church of today must realize that those who come in His name to preach the word are actually bringing the word of God! They may not come with anything other than this! Paul desires that the faith of these Thessalonians may flourish and prosper and therefore has spoken and written to them. Only then will the faith of believers be built up when the word of God is accepted from the sacred page and from the pulpit.

We stand amazed at the manner in which the Spirit of God is able to say so much in so few words. The Apostle needed only a few verses to make known to the Thessalonian church (and thereby to the church of all ages) the nature and times of the Antichrist. Many books have been written about this matter later but Paul gives us all we need to know. The safety of His people in such times and the marvel of their

salvation is then spoken of in very few words. Much more could, of course, be said about the salvation of men and he has done so in other places, but here, in capsule form, he gives us the revelation of the glorious salvation of God's people. He knows that salvation so well that he can speak of all its parts at great length or can give a summary of it in very few words. That is the nature of the word of God.

The Concluding Prayer

It is no wonder that he ends this chapter with a prayer. In fact, prayers are found throughout his writings. The responsibility which he has placed on the shoulders of these Thessalonians will never be met unless God gives the ability to meet it. The strongest will not be able to stand nor to hold fast the word of God in their own strength when the days of persecution come, how much less these Christians who have but recently come to conversion? This fact does not remove the responsibility but he points them to the Source of their strength when these days come.

The Help of Son and Father

He prays that they may receive the help of "our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father." Notice that he has placed the name of the Savior before the name of the Father. This is not the usual order of the New Testament nor of the Pauline epistles. In II Corinthians 13:14 and in Galatians 1:1 he also follows this order. Why does he use this order? Seeing that he is dealing with the doctrine of salvation it is most probable that Christ's name is mentioned first because He stands in the foreground in our salvation. It also shows us that the Deity of Christ is so much a part of his theology that he can use either order. The Father and the Son are indeed one. Both Father and Son have revealed their love to the people of God. God, the Father, so loved that He gave His Son. The Son loved them so much that He emptied Himself of His glory and assumed the nature of man for them and carried it to the cross. Surely, they need not doubt the love of either Father or Son as they come to them in prayer.

Pray for What is Promised

He prays that Son and Father who have given them everlasting comfort (or encouragement) and good hope may give them encouragement and strength. Here it is a prayer for those things which they already have. But, that is the nature of the prayer taught us in Scripture. We are to pray for our daily bread while we are promised that bread and water are assured us. We pray for the forgiveness of sins while we are taught that our sins have been forgiven. Here the Apostle reminds them that God has given eternal encouragement and good hope and now prays that God will give them these things! Is this not the very nature of prayer as the Scriptures have taught us? Are we not to pray for

the things which have been promised us? Then we can pray with confidence.

These believers need this encouragement and hope. All believers do. Whether they have the proper view or an erroneous view of the doctrine of the last things, they must all realize that faith will be tested before the end of time. God graciously gives them what they need. He is able to speak to the heart of man and is able to encourage their hearts. The hope He gives is based on all the events in the history of their salvation and on His promises which will always remain true. Their hearts will therefore be strengthened by God — and for that the Apostle prays.

"In Every Good Work and Word"

As they receive these gifts in answer to the prayer of the Apostle, they will be moved to a life of gratitude. The salvation has been wrought and the strength has been given to endure even in difficult times. The believer then responds in gratitude to his Maker for all he has received. This is expressed by Paul in the concluding words "and establish them in every good work and word." The works and the proper words must follow upon the gifts of God. He gives His gifts for the welfare of those who receive them but also expects the thanks from them. But, gratitude must be learned. Unbelievers are accused by Paul of not giving thanks for the gifts they have received (Romans 1). He will strengthen their hearts so that the good work and word will not be lacking.

So ends this very important chapter. In greater clarity than anywhere else the author has revealed the man of sin, the Antichrist. But, he doesn't end there. The salvation of God's people stands on solid rock! Regardless what the future may bring, they are safe. He prays that God may give these Thessalonian Christians, and all who come later, the grace to stand when the evil day comes. He is confident that they will.

Questions for discussion:

1. Is the warning against sin and various evils gospel? Did the people of Nineveh come to true conversion? Give reasons for your answer.
2. Must election be preached? Does the Heidelberg Catechism deal with it?
3. Is there enough emphasis in our circles on human responsibility? In which areas are we responsible? In justification? In sanctification?
4. Would you say that some preaching is not the word of God? Should such "preachers" be allowed on the Christian pulpit?
5. Are parts of the New Testament time-conditioned? What standard should be used to determine this?
6. May we pray for everything? Do some prayers give the impression that we come to One who is a dispenser of gifts and that we ask for our share? Is this prayer? See Lord's Day 45 of the Heidelberg Catechism. ●



THE UNPARDONABLE SIN

Richard J. Venema

In the pastoral ministry I have often observed much confusion in the minds of God's people regarding the "unpardonable sin." Professor R. B. Kuiper, who was President of Westminster Theological Seminary and later President of Calvin Theological Seminary, suggested that a faithful minister of the Word should preach a sermon on this subject at least once a year. On occasion when I have preached on this subject I have been overwhelmed by the many expressions of thanks for my doing so. One church member, a Christian psychiatrist, remarked that every week he counsels Christians who fear that they may have committed this sin. All of this suggests that the subject may interest OUTLOOK readers. In this effort to deal with it I am grateful and indebted to the late Professor Kuiper for his clear and Biblical instruction regarding it. The Bible passages which especially bear on this matter are Matthew 12:31,32; Mark 3:28;29; Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:26-29; 2 Peter 2:20-22 and 1 John 5:16,17.

Two kinds of people should hear about this subject. And every person sitting in a church pew belongs to one of these two categories.

First, the sincere Christian people who at times fear that they may have committed this sin need to hear what the Bible says about it. That would comfort and encourage them, because it is certain they have not committed it. The fact that they worry about it shows that the Spirit is still working in their hearts.

Second, there are people who are in danger of committing this sin which John calls "the sin unto death." They need to be warned against it.

Let's therefore recall what the Bible says about "The Unpardonable Sin."

1. What it is.
2. Who are in danger of committing it.
3. Why it is unpardonable.

Rev. Richard J. Venema is pastor of the First Christian Reformed Church of Chino, California.

What is the Unpardonable Sin?

In 1 John 5:16-17, the Holy Spirit speaks of it as "a sin unto death." Elsewhere the Bible calls it "the sin against the Holy Spirit." On one occasion Jesus spoke of it as "the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit." In Matthew 12, He said, "Whosoever speaketh a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him; but whosoever shall speak against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him, neither in this world, nor in that which is to come."

But for some people that presents an insurmountable problem because the Bible also says, "If we confess our sins, God is righteous and just to forgive us our sin, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

God Himself said, "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." And Jesus unmistakably said, "Come unto me all ye that are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest." "He that cometh to me shall in no wise be cast off."

In spite of all this, Jesus plainly says, there is a sin which is unpardonable, a sin unto death, a sin which shall not be forgiven in this world or in the world to come.

What therefore, is the unpardonable sin?

First of all, the Bible tells us it is a *sin against the Holy Spirit*. And yet — we cannot say that every sin against the Holy Spirit is the unpardonable sin. For if that were so, who then could be saved? After all, who doesn't sin against the Holy Spirit?

When you doubt, isn't that a sin against the Spirit who testifies to us that we are sons of God? When you do things you ought not to do, when you ignore the Lord's call to you, when you walk the broad way of the world, isn't that neglecting or resisting the gift of the Spirit which is in you?

In Paul's letter to the Ephesian Church, he says, "grieve not the Holy Spirit." It's evident from the Greek word used that he really said: stop grieving the Holy Spirit. They were certainly doing it, but Paul didn't say they had committed the unpardonable sin, or that there wasn't any hope for them. Therefore we have to say that the unpardonable sin is a sin against the Holy Spirit, but not every sin

against the Holy Spirit is an unpardonable sin. Rather, it is a *specific kind of sin against the Holy Spirit*.

What is *this specific sin* against the Holy Spirit? It is a sin against the Holy Spirit by sinning *against better knowledge*. That's suggested in Hebrews 10:26 and 29 where we are told, "For if we sin wilfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sin." In other words, it's a sin which is committed when one knows it is wrong.

But again, we must observe that not every sin against better knowledge is the unpardonable sin. It is dreadful to sin against better knowledge. Jesus said about those cities of Galilee, such as Capernaum, which knew the way and refused to walk in it, that it would be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for them.

But although serious, this is not the unpardonable sin. David in his sin with Bathsheba knew better. Yet, he testifies concerning God: "And thou forgavest me." Peter denied his Lord. He knew better and he had also had a special warning. But Peter who went out to weep bitterly, knew the forgiving love of Jesus. The unpardonable sin is a sin against the Holy Ghost, but not every sin against the Holy Ghost. It is a sin against better knowledge; and yet not every sin against better judgment is unpardonable.

What then is it?

Hebrews 10:26-29 says, "If we sin wilfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth." In other words, it's a wilful sin against better knowledge. It's a wilful sin against the Holy Ghost.

Some people think that here or there somewhere, at a given time, they have committed this sin. That's not true. That may have been a terrible sin — but that isn't the unpardonable sin. For the Greek in this statement, "For if we sin wilfully" indicates that it is an *on-going kind of sin*. It is a *persistent, habitual, wilful continuing in sin*, against better knowledge. It is a persistent, habitual and wilful neglect of the Spirit of God, and living contrary to the commandments of God. That is why the 6th chapter of Hebrews also pictures it this way: It is a "trodding under foot of the Son of God;" it is a "counting of the blood of the covenant an unholy thing."

In other words, basically it consists of a *complete rejection of the way of salvation in Jesus Christ*. It is a wilful, persistent turning of one's back on the Gospel and God's offer of redemption in Jesus Christ. It is a resisting of the Spirit who testifies concerning Jesus Christ as our only hope of salvation; a resisting of the Holy Spirit who calls us to walk in the way of the Lord.

As Hebrews 6 says, the person who commits this sin is one who knows the way of salvation. He is one who has tasted the good Word of God. He is one who has been touched by the Spirit of God — but then, against better knowledge — he knows better — he openly and persistently turns his back upon it.

That's also illustrated in the story of Matthew 12 where Jesus spoke of this sin. Jesus had performed

many astonishing miracles. He had proclaimed the way of salvation. He had even cast out devils. But what happened? The Pharisees in the face of all this clear evidence that Jesus was the Son of God, declared that he cast out devils by Beelzebub, the prince of the devils. Openly, defiantly, persistently they rejected Jesus as the Christ, and the salvation He came to bring. They had a knowledge of the truth. They had been enlightened. They knew the way of salvation, but willingly and knowingly they turned their backs on it.

Then, in that context, Jesus solemnly warned them, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, all manner of sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven unto men, but the blasphemy against the Holy Ghost shall not be forgiven unto men." The Pharisees in other words, were in danger of committing this sin.

Who are in Danger of Committing it?

First of all, I should like to point out, there are two kinds of people who can never commit this sin!

First, they are those who have never heard the Gospel.

And secondly, they are those who are born again, regenerated by the Spirit of God.

Those who have never heard of the Gospel, just haven't been enlightened; they have not tasted the good Word of God; they can't very well fall away, through a persistent and wilful rejection of the testimony of the Spirit, and of the Gospel of Salvation. On the other hand, those who have been born again may commit terrible sins at times, but if they have been born again of the Spirit of God, they will never fall into this sin unto death. After all, Jesus very clearly teaches the Perseverance of the Saints in such passages as John 10:28,29.

Recall the words of the sixth chapter of Hebrews: "For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost; and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they fall away, to renew them unto repentance, seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put Him to an open shame."

In other words, it's people who have heard the call of the Gospel; it's people who have been confronted with Jesus; who were privileged like the scribes and Pharisees, and I might add like us, and then who carelessly and openly turn away. They are the ones who are in danger of committing the unpardonable sin. Not the Davids, or the Peters who momentarily slip into sin and repent, but people like Esau, who know of God's promises, who grow up in godly homes, and then wilfully turn their backs on them are the ones who are in danger of committing this sin.

This word of God confronts us with this burning question: have you been born again of the Spirit of God? Have you tasted of the good word of God and as a result have you allowed the Spirit of the Living God to take hold of your whole life and soul? Are you responding to that call of the Spirit that He may become a power in your life?

It is easy to say, "Regeneration, being born again, is a work of God." "God has to do that." "I can't really do anything about it." In a way, that is true. But at the same time that is a half-truth. If anyone baptized in the church does not have the Spirit of God, is that God's fault? Or is that his own fault? Hasn't the indifferent one in the church been resisting and grieving the spirit of God? Has anyone ever asked the Lord for His Spirit in vain? Can a Covenant child ever say, "I wanted to belong to the Lord but the Lord didn't want to be my God?"

Today the Spirit says to you and me: "Today is the day of salvation." "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found. Turn ye unto Jehovah and He will abundantly pardon." And if we don't accept that, or believe that, then we are resisting the Spirit! Then we are placing ourselves in danger of committing this sin unto death!

This is the clear teaching of Scripture concerning the unpardonable sin: if you wilfully harden yourself in sin and unbelief; if you constantly and wilfully neglect the Lord's salvation and grace, there can come a time in which you like Esau, will find no place of repentance. There can come a time in which, as the writer to the Hebrews put it, "It will be impossible to be renewed again unto repentance."

Why is it Unpardonable?

The sin is unpardonable not because you can commit a sin which transcends the grace of God or because this sin is too big for the blood and sacrifice of Jesus to cover. The Bible says clearly enough, "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin." Furthermore, this sin is unpardonable, not because repentance comes too late. Look at the thief on the cross. Jesus said to him in his dying hour, "Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise."

The sin is unpardonable because repentance never comes at all! The person who wilfully, persistently neglects the call of the Gospel; the person who wilfully, persistently tramples under foot the claims and sacrifice of Jesus Christ; the person who wilfully and persistently rejects that testimony of the Spirit of God; that person is in danger of committing the unpardonable sin simply because there can come a time in which God gives him up to a reprobate mind. God, in other words, allows his heart to be completely hardened.

He wants to live in sin. He wants to live without Christ. He doesn't want the Spirit to live within him in such a way that he surrenders his life wholly to Jesus; and finally God, as it were, says: "O.K., have it your way!"

And that's a sin unto death! Not because it is too big for the Lord to forgive, not because the Lord's love isn't great enough, but because that person becomes so hardened in his sin he never seeks forgiveness. The Spirit no longer speaks to him. The Spirit leaves him.

And that's the sin unto death. That's to be without God and his forgiving grace in this world. That's to be without the love of God forever in hell!

As we are gathered together in the Church we may have reasons to believe that none have com-

mitted this sin. It is doubtful that anyone would come if he had.

But one can. The Lord invites us to His Church and says: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the Church." Today the Holy Spirit speaks to us through this Word. He is telling us to seek the Lord. He is telling us to surrender our life to Jesus. If today we say "No," and tomorrow we say "No," let me warn you: "That's the way of the unpardonable sin!" "That's the way to travel so that some day you may become so hardened in sin that it may forever be too late."

But on the other hand, to you in the Church, to you as God's Covenant Child, we can say:

Come ye sinners, poor and needy; weak and wounded, sick and sore;

Jesus, ready stands to save you. Full of pity, love and power.

He is able; He is able. He is willing, doubt no more.

PRESBYTERIAN DEVELOPMENT

Peter De Jong

Reports in recent months have continued to reveal how the largest Presbyterian denominations in our country become increasingly demoralized.

The Kaseman Case

A Report in the July 28 *Christian News* recalled how a Rev. Mansfield Kaseman, who was ordained by the United Church of Christ, was examined by the National Capital Union Presbytery (a combined presbytery of both the Northern and Southern Presbyterian denominations) last year. When asked whether he believed that Jesus is God, he answered, "No, God is God." Despite his refusal to affirm even such fundamental Christian doctrines as that of the Deity of Christ, according to the August 13 *Presbyterian Journal*, he was overwhelmingly welcomed by the presbytery. Opponents of his acceptance filed repeated appeals, the first with the denomination's Permanent Judicial Commission, and a second with a similar commission of the Synod of the Piedmont. Mr. Kaseman continues to be cleared despite his beliefs or lack of them. The latter commission declared (according to the *Christian News* report) that "mere differences in methodology of Bible study, in theological investigation, and in opinions need not divide or polarize the church. Jesus Christ and the realities of the Christian faith are far too big and broad and gracious to be confined within the limits of human thoughts and creeds." The comment of the editor of the *Presbyterian Journal* seems appropriate, "Need one further evidence of a once

great church whose candle has been removed—whose salt has lost its savor?”

A Liberal Hierarchy

Accompanying this welcome to and official defense of heresy there has been a growing intolerance on the part of the denomination in requiring that women must be given fair representation in local church government, and insisting that the denomination and not the local church is the real owner of church property. As a constitutional amendment regarding this property matter moves toward ratification it means that churches who seek to leave the denomination will be deprived of their property.

Reading of these developments reminds one of our Belgic Confession's description of "the false church" (Article XXIX): "As for the false Church, it describes more power and authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God, and will not submit itself to the yoke of Christ . . . and persecutes those who live holily according to the Word of God and rebuke it for its errors, covetousness, and idolatry."

A New Secession

An increasing number of churches, grieved and disgusted with these developments, are leaving the

denomination. Some 25 of them are forming a new "Association of Evangelical Presbyterian Churches." Although some of the disenchanting churches are attracted to the existing more conservative Presbyterian denominations, the Reformed Presbyterian Church Evangelical Synod, the Presbyterian Church in America, and Orthodox Presbyterian Church, the fact that some of the break-away churches have already elected women elders stands as a barrier to joining these denominations which forbid the practice.

Movement Toward Union of Conservative Presbyterians

In the meanwhile there is also some movement toward unifying the other conservative denominations. The newest and largest of them, the Presbyterian Church in America, had extended an invitation to other conservative Presbyterian bodies to join it. According to the December 24 and 31, 1980 *Presbyterian Journal*, the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod, had responded favorably to the invitation, while the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America Covenanters had rejected it. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church which has turned down a proposal looking toward such union "is likely to get another look" at its General Assembly next May. ●

PUNT'S "BIBLICAL UNIVERSALISM"

John Vander Ploeg

Rev. Neal Punt is pastor of the Evergreen Park Christian Reformed Church, Evergreen Park, Illinois. Recently (1980) he authored a 169 page book published by William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, *Unconditional Good News* with the subtitle, *Toward an Understanding of Biblical Universalism* (\$6.95). By request, I am addressing myself to an evaluation of this volume; hopefully, to give some guidance with respect to it. The book is not exactly easy to read, but, nevertheless, one that we can hardly afford to disregard.

In the *Foreword* to the book, Dr. Alexander C. De Jong advocates the reading of Punt's book by saying: "When one tries to explicate with theological precision the gracious character, the God-glorifying content, the eschatological urgency of gospel preaching, together with the biblical warrant for that preaching, he undertakes a demanding task. This book adds a fresh, important, and attractive dimension to the continuing discussion. We owe it to ourselves to consider seriously this unique contribution of Rev. Punt."

Moreover, as the author states in the *Preface*: "The Rev. Winston C. Boelkins, neighbor and col-

league, collaborated in this work so closely, literally paragraph by paragraph, that without his insights and counsel regarding format and expression as well as his constant encouragement, this book could and should not have found its way into print."

And added to this, in the *Preface* Punt also expresses his gratitude to: "Dr. Lester De Koster, Editor of *The Banner* [at that time] who, as one of the first readers of a preliminary draft, recommended that I complete the manuscript and present it for publication. . . ."

Although all this does not add up to any kind of an imprimatur, it does lend an additional impetus for giving our studied attention to this publication.

PUNT'S PREMISE — As the title and subtitle indicate, Punt wishes to set forth his thinking on "Unconditional Good News" and "Biblical Universalism." It is well, right at the outset, to have clearly in mind, from Punt's own statements, precisely what he wishes to say. Consider the following quotes:

"If 1 John 2:2 and other universalistic texts are seen in the light of the entire context of Scripture they can be most readily understood as teaching the

premise of biblical universalism — that all persons are elect in Christ except those who the Bible declares will be lost” (p. 55).

“The assumption with which we work is that all persons are elect in Christ. On the basis of this assumption we must tell all people what God has done for them in his Son! The awesome truth about God’s wrath is to be reserved for those who remain indifferent to or reject this good news which the church has been commissioned to proclaim to all people” (p. 132).

“The assumption with which we work is that all persons are elect in Christ *except those* who the Bible declares will be lost.

“What a difference it makes to view others in connection with Jesus Christ! We should regard every person as a ‘brother for whom Christ died’ (1 Cor. 8:11). This general approach of biblical universalism breaks down barriers between people. It promotes a feeling of interdependence and mutual concern. . . .” (p. 143).

And what is the “unconditional good news?”

“Yes,” says Punt, “all persons — except those who wilfully disregard the will of God — can rest assured that Christ has died for them and has secured their salvation. This is the unconditional good news of the gospel” (p. 139).

Well, there you have it in brief.

What shall we say of this? Like mine, your retort may be: Punt’s “biblical universalism” is neither biblical nor universal, and his “unconditional good news” is obviously not unconditional.

Now let’s take a further look.

PUNT’S INFERENCES — The inferences that Punt draws from his premise are significant. Notice carefully what he says:

1. About reprobation — “True,” Punt writes, “in some mysterious, ambiguous way, the reprobation of some also occurs within the broad perspective of God’s ‘definite plan and foreknowledge’ (Acts 2:23). But one may well question the biblical validity of the claim made in the Canons of Dort that the reason some do not receive the gift of faith ‘proceeds from God’s eternal decree’ or that ‘it is the express testimony of sacred Scripture’ that ‘others are passed by in the eternal decree’ (I, 6,15).” In a footnote, Punt refers at this point to Dr. Harry Boer’s gravamen addressed to the CRC Synod about reprobation.

“The more guarded confession which Lutheran theology makes,” Punt goes on to say, “seems closer to the express testimony of Scripture. The *Formula of Concord* expresses the Lutheran teaching as follows: ‘The eternal election of God or God’s predestination to salvation does not extend over the godly and the ungodly, but only over the children of God, who have been elected and predestinated to eternal life *before the foundation of the world was laid*, as St. Paul says, *even as he chose us in him, he destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ* (Eph. 1:4,5).”

And, says Punt: “The advocacy of a doctrine of eternal election without a corresponding doctrine of

eternal reprobation does not in the least diminish the usefulness of the doctrine of election or detract from ‘its very sweet fruits’ as these are set forth by Calvin. . . .” (pp. 59, 60).

So much then for the doctrine of reprobation.

2. About the atonement — Punt writes also about the inference he draws from his premise as to the atonement made by Christ for sin. According to Scripture and the specific teaching of the Canons of Dort, this atonement is limited or particular — only for the elect. Punt writes about this at some length and recognizes that this is a doctrine not to be denied.

However, Punt confuses the issue when he goes on to say: “What a difference it makes to view others in connection with Jesus Christ. We should regard *every person* [italics added] as a ‘brother for whom Christ died’ (1 Cor. 8:11). This general approach of biblical universalism breaks down barriers between people. . . . Biblical universalism puts lenses on our eyes so that we treat our fellow human beings as those for whom Christ died unless and until they by their indifference or continuing hostility separate themselves from us and from the Christ who lives in us” (p. 143).

But now notice what Punt does with 1 Corinthians 8:11. When Paul writes about the “brother for whom Christ died” Punt simply identifies this with *every person* with the exception of those he mentions. In verses 11, 12, 13 Paul calls those of whom he speaks a *brother* repeatedly (four times) and also as *the brethren*. How can Punt possibly make this mean *every person* in any sense?

“The only reason” says Punt, “some need for not using the expression ‘Christ died for you’ in their evangelism endeavors is that it ‘may be untrue of many who hear.’ This appears to be a formidable argument at first sight. But its weakness is evident in this response [given by Harry Boer in *The Reformed Journal*, May-June 1966, p. 18]: ‘“If I cannot say to every man that Christ died for him because some of those to whom I speak may be lost, then I can also not say to every believer that Christ died for him because some of them may in the end prove not to be elect. The history of the Church is replete with men and women who after having given every reason to be counted as believers died in unbelief and infidelity. . . .”’ (pp. 148, 149).

The Canons of Dort are crystal clear and founded squarely on Scripture in teaching that the atonement is limited or particular. The matter becomes badly blurred in the position advocated by Punt and Boer.

3. About infant salvation — Another inference Punt draws from his premise is that “all who die in infancy are saved.” He writes:

“Traditional Reformed theology allows for the possibility of infant salvation. Biblical universalism goes a step further. Its basic premise not only allows for the possibility of infant salvation, but teaches that all who die in infancy are saved.

“The premise of biblical universalism does not imply that all infants without exception are elect in Christ. It does assure us, however, that those *who*

die in infancy can never be numbered among those who have disregarded God's will for their lives. We may conclude, therefore, that the death of an infant is evidence of the child's election and salvation. Stated conversely non-elect infants do not die in their infancy. They continue to live to the age of accountability. . . ." (p. 126).

My recollection is still very vivid of being present at the deathbed and also conducting the funeral of a child of irreligious parents and also of how eagerly those parents, who had never taught their child how to pray, looked to me for the assurance that their dear one had gone to heaven. How easy it would have been for me to say that, but it was impossible without any clear ground from Scripture for saying so. A pastor is eager to give comfort when this is warranted by God's Word but to extend God's comfort to those who do not love and serve Him is an altogether different matter.

Accordingly, I must remain with what Punt calls "traditional Reformed theology" which does not go beyond *allowing* for the salvation of those who die as infants. We *know* that our covenant children who die in infancy are saved; we *hope* that the rest are saved.

4. About preaching the gospel — From his premise Punt draws inferences also about the preaching the gospel. He writes:

"There is a valid scriptural reason for announcing the divine anger against sin and the threat of judgment in order that sinners may recognize the need to repent and to turn to Christ as their only refuge. . . .

"Nevertheless, we must not assume that it is first of all necessary to warn sinners of impending disaster, to tell them that because God is displeased with their sin they are living on the brink of hell. Faithfulness in evangelism requires that it is not only the truth of God's anger but also the revelation of his kindness that can lead to repentance and faith (Rom. 2:4). All persons are elect in Christ except those who refuse to have God in their knowledge — that is the good news Scripture declares in the universalistic texts. . . .

"The assumption with which we work is that all persons are elect in Christ. On the basis of this assumption we must tell all people what God has done for them in his Son! The awesome truth about God's wrath is to be reserved for those who remain indifferent to or reject this good news which the church has been commissioned to proclaim to *all people*" (p. 132).

Punt continues: ". . . if one does not feel free to say 'Christ died for you,' one finds himself in the awkward situation of inviting, asking, and even demanding of others that they believe something one does not feel free to declare of them. . . . How can one be asked to believe that one's sins are forgiven if there is no scriptural warrant for telling that person that Christ died for him or her?" (pp. 154, 155).

We may well ask whether there was any New Testament preaching of the kind Punt advocates.

How did John the Baptist preach? We are told that he came preaching in the wilderness of Judea,

saying, "Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3:1,2). That's quite different.

And what about our Lord's preaching? We are told: "Now after John was delivered up, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent ye, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:14,15). Also different.

Consider also Paul's preaching. On the Areopagus in Athens, he said: "The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked, but now he commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent; inasmuch as he hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he hath ordained. . . ." (Acts 17:30,31). Also different.

And what about Peter's preaching? On the day of Pentecost he told the multitude: "Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). And that also is different.

Obviously, Punt has the cart before the horse. To be sure, in God's counsel our election precedes our experience of salvation. However, our subjective assurance of election follows upon our repentance, faith, and obedience as evidence for the fact of our election.

The Canons of Dort know nothing of Punt's proposed method of preaching. Article 5 in Dort's "Second Head of Doctrine" states: "Moreover, the promise of the gospel is that whosoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have eternal life. This promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the gospel."

About the antithesis — In writing about "the cultural mandate," Punt also presents an inference from his premise as to the antithesis: He writes:

"Biblical universalism necessarily implies that we may never propagate or cultivate the point of separation between belief and unbelief (the antithesis) simply to make that division become apparent to everyone. God's Word is not intended to engender opposition or to arouse hostility. To be sure, the antithesis does come to expression. . . ." (pp. 130, 131).

Undoubtedly, the missing note in so much of Christendom today is an obliteration of the antithesis. "Think not," Jesus said, "that I came to send peace on the earth; I came not to send peace, but a sword" (Matt. 10:34). As Hendriksen says in his commentary on this verse: "The entrance of Christ into this world divides in two, splits apart; *cleaves asunder*, and in so doing 'sets' or 'turns' one person against another" (p. 475).

By this time it should be sufficiently apparent that Punt's premise and inferences are not to be reconciled with our historic Reformed commitment. His book is baffling in that he attempts to do the impossible — to reconcile his universalism with the particularism clearly taught in the Bible. ●

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

A LOOK AT BOOKS

Editor:

I found it somewhat ironic that John Piersma had an article on page 10 of the December Outlook entitled "Concern For Truth," yet on page 5 of that same issue he distorts the truth in an article on the seminary's view of women in office. While it is true that this article did appear in the *Kerux*, John Piersma fails to state that this article came from a voluntary poll of students and is not a sampling of enough of the seminary community to be considered accurate. I am not sure [of] his purpose in reporting this article, but it is an example of distortion of facts. Perhaps the poll is accurate, but unless you know, don't say that it is.

Tom Walcott
127 Paddock S.E.
G.R. Mich. 49506

Editor's note:

If Mr. Walcott can give us some evidence that the poll does not correctly represent the sentiments of the seminary community, we welcome it. It appears that the *Kerux* article was correctly reported, and that the writer's quarrel is really with *Kerux* rather than with the *Outlook*.

To the Editor,
The Outlook:

A hearty thank you to Rev. John R. Jackson for his short, timely article on the "older" minister in the December 4 issue of The Outlook.

I am in full agreement with him when he states that undue emphasis is placed on "youths" when considering the calling of a Pastor.

We are members of a new, small Orthodox Presbyterian Church which is blessed to have a Pastor who is in his sixties and who served in his previous congregation for 24 years.

We are greatly benefiting from his maturity in both preaching and pastoring.

This has also presented him with a new challenge and opportunity for his wealth of experience and talents.

And, incidentally, he also relates well to our "young" people.

Garret Van Der Heide
St. George Road
Thomaston, Maine 04861
December 8, 1980

LITERATURE AND THE GOSPEL by Merle Meeter. Published by Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., Box 185, Nutley, NJ 07110. 168 pages, paperback, \$3.50. Reviewed by Peter De Jong.

The Problem of Christian Education

Many of us are familiar with the problem of first getting and then continuing to maintain a Christian School for the training of our children in our faith. That demands a great deal of effort on the part of parents and Christian communities. Although in our circles this has become an old tradition, in many other Christian circles in which the public schools have long had general support parents are becoming so disillusioned with the public institutions that they are beginning to seek similar Christian education for their children.

Even bigger and just as important as the problem of getting and maintaining such schools is another problem much less commonly recognized. That is the problem of having the education in such schools at least attempt to give a genuinely Christian direction to all that is taught and done. A really Christian school demands more than Christian teachers and the addition of Bible courses to the usual public school curriculum. If Christian teachers, however sincere they may be in their personal faith, in the classroom simply pass along virtually the same secularly oriented course material which they themselves learned in some graduate school, the result is something considerably short of real Christian education. Christ our Savior is also Lord of our lives and He claims every area of those lives. That claim really commits every Christian to a spiritual warfare which involves, as the Apostle Paul picturesquely expressed it, "casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5).

How to try to realize this aim in each field in which he or she is teaching is the enormous problem of especially the conscientious Christian teacher, in which he or she often gets very little help. (It ought to be recognized as the problem of boards and parents too.) What makes the book mentioned at the beginning of this article especially interesting is the fact that it is an ambitious effort to deal with this problem in the teaching of Literature.

An Effort in Christian Interpretation

Merle Meeter taught English for some years at Dorset College and is currently teaching in this field at Christian Heritage College at El Cajon (a suburb of San Diego), California, where he also edits their *Christian Heritage Courier* magazine. In the thirty chapters of the book under discussion he introduces with a variety of Bible references what he sees as the "Norms" (standards or rules) that should guide the Christian's study and activity in the field of Literature. After first introducing each norm with Biblical references he proceeds, by citing examples of a variety of common writers, to show how he believes that a Christian should evaluate this literature.

Meeter is reacting to and is especially critical of "uncritically" accepting "the definitions and norms of literature formulated by a professedly agnostic and autonomous, God-excluding and self-gratifying world" (p. 92). "The Christian writer may not cleverly camouflage his foundation — the Rock who is Christ, the Chief Cornerstone — in order to speak 'with the enticing words of man's wisdom.' Rather his artistic presentation of truth, his fashioned proclamation of the Biblical Christian interpretation of reality (which is unified . . .), is to be evidently 'in the demonstration of the Spirit and of power' (1 Cor. 2:4-5), so that the faith — 'once for all delivered to the saints' — may be established and propagated without emasculating accommodationism, *not* in the self-serving wisdom of ungodly men, but in the Power and Wisdom of God, namely, the Lord Jesus Christ" (p. 74). He has no illusion about the response that such Christian labors as he suggests may expect. "Christian writers . . . can expect the persecution of harsh criticism and the sharp intolerance of those who are marching down the broad and populous way under the garish standard of the world. The God-revering author will be called 'naive,' 'simplistic,' 'evangelical,' 'arrogant,' 'Bibliolatrous,' 'anti-intellectual,' 'pietistic,' 'fanatic'; for the wisdom of God is foolishness to the world, and the Truth of God is despicable and dreadful to the unrighteous because they hate Him who accuses them of sin, yet who stands ready to pardon, offering blood-washed robes of righteousness to justify sinners — all who confess their need and fear the Lord" (p. 87).

A Sample

As a sample of Meeter's literary criticism we may consider his treatment of Graham Greene "English novelist, nominally Roman Catholic, who portrays moral humanism under a facade of piety and Christianly religious terminology." "A carefully written example of Graham Greene's . . . glorification of the disobedient sinner rather than the God who demands obedience, is his novel *The Heart of the Matter*." This book Henry Zylstra has called "A Tragedy of Pity" and of it he said (in *Testament of Vision*, p. 110, 111) "In the universe of this novel, the ordinary man, when the religious issues of life are operative in him, takes on the proportions of heroism. Scobie pities those he encounters, and feels responsible for their happiness. His weakest point is this virtue of pity, and evil seizes on him at precisely this point. Pity is his tragic frailty. So, far from not

getting into trouble, consequently, the usually considerate, cautious, and justly dealing Scobie... has abused his office by withholding evidence from his superiors, has cooperated with a diamond-smuggling Syrian and thus aided the enemy in time of war, has committed adultery, been an accomplice in murder, used the holy Sacrament unworthily, and done the deed of spiritual despair which is suicide. Such is the enormous breach that pity has blasted through his integrity." It seems to Meeter, however, that in this evaluation "Dr. Zylstra comes too near to accepting Greene's ingeniously naturalistic justification for his protagonist..." "Observe with what craft Greene defends his principal (and his principle) despite, and even *through*, his crimes. We are induced to feel that if God does not pardon this beleaguered, well-intentioned, and pitiful man *because Scobie's own goodness and compassion make him deserving of it*, then God is a Tyrant ruled by Theology (such as the blood atonement of Christ on Golgotha), rather than a Divine and Tolerant Humanist in the classical liberal-arts tradition of emancipating and self-redeeming virtue. But obedience to the laws of God for Christ's sake is not a real factor in the anthropocentric universe of Graham Greene. Here, from the novel, is the portrait of the noble and self-justifying man, who is, of course, unconcerned with the obedience of Christ. "The Heart of the Matter is indeed 'A Tragedy of Pity,' for the pretense of pity is employed with eminent sophistication to escape the justice of God. But apart from the Way, Jesus Christ, *tragedy* (eternal separation from God in the anguish of hell) is as inescapable as it is ultimate and endless" (pp. 80-83).

Appreciation

The author is to be congratulated for his effort to deal so extensively with a subject that urgently calls for more attention than it usually gets. In the November *OUTLOOK* (pp. 6-8 "Educational Double-Mindedness") I quoted the charge of a recent graduate that our college education is generally betraying its expressed aim to prepare students for Christian living, presenting instead a disinterested, academic, (really secularized) introduction to the various specialized fields of study. This book is to be welcomed as a conscious effort in the field of Literature to counteract that kind of pressure and movement toward betraying our Christian commitment.

How successful is the author in his effort to achieve what he sets out to do? The organization of the book into 30 discussions of various "norms," "unity, variety, simplicity, rhythm, vitality, newness," etc., is threateningly philosophical. The actual discussion is more interesting and concrete than the chapter titles might suggest. Also

the introductory part of each chapter, attempting to give a Biblical definition and description of each norm, tends to pack a tremendous amount of doctrinal detail in a few paragraphs. The book might be more readable for many, if the author had not tried to say so much in so few words. The style is, in this respect, somewhat "preachy." But the author is preaching in an area in which far too little preaching has been done, and in which real Christian confession and activity is badly needed. Many a Christian English teacher, groping for suggestions as to how to evaluate in Christian perspective, much of the mass of literature with which he has to deal, will find Meeter's work helpful and stimulating. We may not necessarily agree with each detail of his reaction, but let's make good use of his effort to do something that urgently needs to be done. And many who are not teachers, if they will take the time to read his book, will find it interesting and profitable. It is not enough to deplore in general terms the secularization of our society. We have to go on in various ways, by the grace of God, to try to set it right. This is a welcome effort to do that in the big field of Literature.

THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST by Mariano Di Gangi. Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1975, 111 pp; \$4.95. Reviewed by Rev. Paul E. Bakker, pastor of Second Byron Center Christian Reformed Church, Byron Center, Michigan.

The author, a graduate of Westminster Theological Seminary and recipient of the D.D. from Gordon Divinity School, is Director of the Bible and Medical Missionary Fellowship in Agincourt, Ontario, Canada.

In his preface the author indicates something of his purpose when he records with approval the following quotation from Abraham Kuyper's *The Work of the Holy Spirit*: "The Church has never sufficiently confessed the influence of the Holy Spirit exerted upon the work of Christ. The general impression is that the work of the Holy Spirit begins when the work of the Mediator on earth is finished... Yet the Scripture teaches us again and again that Christ performed His mediatorial work controlled and impelled by the Holy Spirit." The author shows in ten brief chapters that from His conception by the Holy Spirit to His resurrection and glorification by the power of the Spirit Jesus was always dependent upon and qualified and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The author further seeks to show that the same Spirit who filled Jesus Christ and qualified Him for His work likewise creates the new life in the Christian and qualifies him for his spiritual service and will raise him at last from the dead. Throughout the book he draws a parallel between what the

Spirit did in the life of Christ and what He does in the life of the believer. For example, "The Spirit who wrought the miraculous conception of Jesus in the womb of the Virgin Mary brings about our spiritual regeneration. He dispenses with human paterinity and acts in sovereign grace to create new persons."

The author contends that the Spirit and His gifts are given to advance the cause of the gospel message. They are not given for mere personal enjoyment, much less for ego inflation, but for service and witness. After showing that Jesus was filled with the Holy Spirit at the time of His baptism, he asserts that it is God's will that we should experience a similar fullness of the Spirit. He indicates, however, that he does not understand this to mean something "synonymous with excitement, ecstasy, a 'spiritual high,' emotional upheaval, and a trip to the edge of irrationality," but rather fullness of the Spirit prompts us to speak of our Lord and serve in His name. Fullness of the Spirit is synonymous with surrender to the lordship of Jesus Christ.

De Gangi emphasizes that the Holy Spirit always seeks to glorify Christ. "The Holy Spirit is intensely Christocentric. He does not call attention to Himself. He does not encourage preoccupation with our own religious feelings nor stimulate excursions into the exotic in search of a 'spiritual high.'" When Peter at Pentecost is filled with the Holy Spirit the first thing he does is to expound Scripture and exalt the Savior. He does not concentrate on relating his personal experience but puts the focus on Jesus Christ.

The author's emphasis upon the importance of Scripture and its relation to the work of the Holy Spirit is clear. He points out that the Spirit whom Christ sends from heaven is the Spirit of truth. "What truth? The truth that is God's written Word and the truth who is God's incarnate Son. We look for no new revelations now that the Biblical record is complete but only seeks further illumination from Him who is the Spirit of truth." Again, "To be led by the Spirit is to appreciate and accept the message of God's Word." He further indicates that we cannot hope to meet God and experience a personal relationship to the living Lord apart from the written record and its statements of truth concerning Christ. "It is only as the Holy Spirit shows us the incarnate Word in the written Word that we may know Him, enter into His fellowship, and have everlasting life."

This book is more practical than it is profound. I found it to be interesting and easy to read. In a clear and simple way it shows the importance of the Holy Spirit in the life and work of Jesus Christ, and likewise His importance in the life and work of the Christian. The approach of the author very sane and Biblical.