

Volume 3, Number 1

Current Religious Scene

The Current Religious Scene and the Gospel

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The Current Religious Scene and the Bible

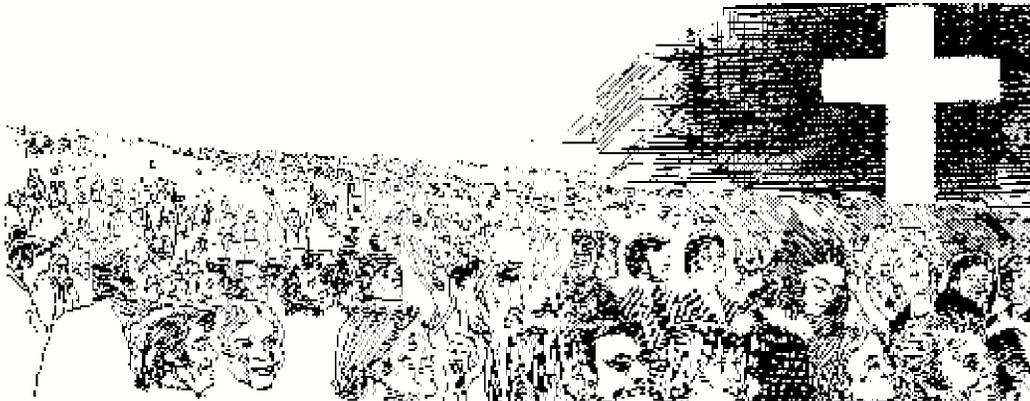
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The Current Religious Scene and The Gospel

By Robert D. Brinsmead



PART 1: The Burning Passion of the Current Religious Scene

In the last few years great changes have taken place in three branches of the Christian church-Pentecostalism, Romanism and evangelicalism.

1. Pentecostalism

The modern Pentecostal movement is an off-shoot of the American holiness movement. It made its appearance in this country in 1900. One of its leaders has called it "the greatest ecstatic movement in the history of the Christian church." It is distinguished by its overwhelming emphasis on experience-often called the baptism in the Holy Spirit. This baptism is usually, if not always, identified by ecstatic speech, which Pentecostals call the gift of tongues." This gift of tongues is regarded as the sign that one is baptized in the Holy Spirit.

Before 1960 Pentecostalism was a movement outside the mainstream of the Protestant church. It was very sectarian, and most churches looked upon Pentecostalism as a divisive, offbeat type of religious fanaticism.

About 1960 Pentecostalism took a new turn. It began to jump denominational barriers. The ecstatic experience of speaking in tongues began to appear among conservative Episcopalians, orthodox Lutherans, staid Presbyterians-indeed there was hardly a Protestant church that escaped the Pentecostal invasion. This new interdenominational phase of Pentecostalism became known as neo-Pentecostalism, or the charismatic movement.

Whereas the old ("classical") Pentecostalism was regarded as a divisive and sectarian movement, neo-Pentecostalism appears to be uniting and non-sectarian. Demonstrating a new openness toward all branches of the church, the charismatic movement has the ability to break down nearly all denominational barriers. The Pentecostal experience seems to be available to people of vastly different religious traditions, to liberals or conservatives.

When the neo-Pentecostal movement was getting under way in the Los Angeles area in the early 1960's, I talked to an Assembly of God preacher about the phenomenon. He said, "We used to be the leaders in experiencing the baptism in the Holy Spirit, but not since the Spirit has visited the great historic and Protestant churches. I know an Episcopalian priest in this city who is so liberal he neither believes in the virgin birth nor the resurrection. Yet he has recently received the baptism in the Spirit and exhibits a marvelous power in his ministry." The Pentecostal preacher shrugged his shoulders and added, "I can't understand why God would give all that power to a fellow so far out on the liberal left."

A few months ago a group of Pentecostal Christadelphians invited me to talk to them. Christadelphians not only deny the divinity of Jesus Christ, but also his pre-existence before His birth in Bethlehem. They also deny the personality of the Holy Spirit. Yet here were a group of Christadelphians who claimed the baptism in the Holy Spirit and spoke with tongues.

I cite these cases to show that it makes no difference where one stands in the theological spectrum when it comes to participating in this? Pentecostal experience. The "gift of the Spirit" seems to be available regardless of almost any denominational or doctrinal loyalty.

Since 1969 the Pentecostal movement has made a remarkable penetration into the Roman Catholic Church. Pentecostalism appears to be the first factor for more than 400 years which is able to bridge the gulf between Romanism and Protestantism. Dr. Henry van Dusen suggests that it has the potential of healing the wound of the sixteenth century. Pente-costals and Roman Catholics are no longer bitter religious rivals in South America. And all over the world Protestant and Catholic Pentecostals are meeting together to sing, "We are one in the Spirit." Says *Christianity Today* (Feb. 4, 1972, p. 8), "This movement [Pentecostalism) ... , is now becoming ecumenical in the deepest sense.

Speaking at the Presbyterian Charismatic Conference in March of 1973, the cardinal also said:

Our unity has to be done quickly because the Holy Spirit is leading it, God is desiring it, and the world is in need, badly in need, of that visible unity. . . . I see the heads of the Christian churches coming together. . . . Let us come back home: home means the Upper Room, Pentecost.
- Ibid., pp.8, 9.



Cardinal Suenens

2. Romanism

In the last few years the Church of Rome has emerged with a new stance.

a. *First*, she appears to be more open to the Bible. Rome has allowed her people free access to the Bible; some of her scholars are foremost in Biblical studies; and Catholics have worked shoulder to shoulder with Protestants in producing new translations from the ancient Biblical texts.

b. *Second*, Rome has, since 1967, shown a real openness toward the neo-Pentecostal movement. Thousands of her priests and nuns are embracing the charismatic movement. In June of this year, more than 20,000 Roman Catholic Pentecostals gathered at Notre Dame University for the seventh Charismatic Renewal Conference. One of the featured speakers was a powerful prince of the Church, Cardinal Suenens from Belgium. He came to give his enthusiastic approval to the charismatic movement within the Catholic Church. Said he:

The charismatic renewal has extraordinary ecumenical implications. Many important breakthroughs are happening in a wonderful way in the charismatic renewal. It will be a great impetus for Christian unity. Christians of different churches need to experience themselves as belonging to the same family, as being brothers, and that is happening in the charismatic renewal. - New Covenant, June, 1973, p.5.

The cardinal stood before the Presbyterians, holding the hands of two of their leaders (Jim Armstrong and Rodman Williams) and singing, "We are one in the Spirit."

c. *Third*, Rome has become far more open toward evangelicals. The Catholic Digest, July, 1972,) presented a feature article lauding Dr. Billy Graham. The Jesuit author wrote, "Billy Graham is orthodox. I have read nothing by him that is contrary to Catholic faith." In some places priests are being instructed to become familiar in the use of evangelical terminology like "getting saved" or being "born again." Witness how Roman Catholics are now able to join with evangelicals in cooperative efforts like Key '73.

This is neo-Romanism-marked by a new open-ness to the Bible, to Pentecostals and to evangelicals.

3. Evangelicalism

In the last few years a new evangelicalism has also emerged. Neo-evangelicalism began a few years ago with many worthy aspirations. It wished to avoid the obscurantism (anti-intellectualism), extreme Biblicism and narrow separatism of the right wing fundamentalists. Evangelicals felt a real desire to enjoy fellowship with other evangelicals across denominational boundary lines.

Recently the neo-evangelical movement has shown an increasing openness and sympathy toward the charismatic movement. If we may take *Christianity Today* as representative of the neo-evangelical movement, we may discern a real warming of the relationship between evangelicals and Pentecostals. A few years ago *Christianity Today* was decidedly negative toward Pentecostalism. Then it became tolerant. Now it is very sympathetic. In February, 1972 *Christianity Today* said:

The force that appears to be making the greatest contribution to the current Christian revival around the globe is Pentecostalism. . . . A new era of the Spirit has begun. . . .An evangelical renaissance is becoming visible along the Christian highway from the frontier of the sects to the high places of the Roman Catholic Communion.

Then in the September, 1973 issue, well-known evangelical scholar Clark H. Pinnock writes:

The new Pentecostal movement seems to this observer to be a genuine movement of the Spirit of God renewing His church. - . - It thrills my soul to see multitudes of people allowing the Spirit to operate freely in their midst.

Like many evangelicals, Dr. Pinnock expresses concern about the excesses of Pentecostalism, but one gets the feeling that if these periphery excesses could be trimmed away, all would be well between evangelicals and Pentecostals. We might therefore ask, Is the only difference between evangelicals and Pentecostals a difference of style? Degree of enthusiasm? Liturgical taste?

Evangelicals are also exhibiting a new openness toward Romanism. There is a great deal of optimism about the changes which appear to be taking place in the Roman Catholic Church. The June, 1973 issue of *Christianity Today* made this glowing appraisal of Rome's new openness to Pentecostalism:

Call it spiritual renewal, revival, or whatever, something big is happening in the Roman Catholic Church. . . . [Cardinal Suenens] told *Christianity Today* that he not only endorses the charismatic renewal as an authentic move of the Spirit, but also hopes it will become the mainstream of the Catholic Church.

A Threefold Union

Neo-Pentecostalism exhibits a new openness toward evangelicals and Roman Catholics. Neo-Romanism shows a new openness toward Pentecostals and evangelicals. Not to be outdone, neo-evangelicalism shows a new openness toward Pentecostals and Roman Catholics.

This "neo-trio" is moving closer and closer together in a growing bond of sympathy. There is a reason for this. Each of the "neo-trio" places a unique emphasis on inner experience. The uniting factor is that the message of each "neo" is the *centrality of religious experience*.

We choose the words carefully-"the centrality of religious experience." No one who believes the Bible questions the importance of religious experience, the place of genuine heart religion. But the "neo-trio" has moved religious experience to the center of its message.

1. *Pentecostalism and the Centrality of Experience*. Neo-Pentecostal literature is devoted almost exclusively to experience. It promotes what promises to be the exciting or satisfying experience of being baptized in the Spirit. Great use is made of personal testimony. A minister tells of how he felt a great sensation of peace "right down to the balls of my feet." In the *Christian Herald* of September, 1972, a Presbyterian woman testifies of what it is like to speak in tongues. She says:

All the joys of my life were blended together in one ecstatic moment-all the fun of childhood, my first date, the moment when the man I wanted asked me to share life with him, the exultation of the finished sex longing . . . I had the sensation I was almost floating instead of walking.

2. *Romanism and the centrality of Experience*. Anyone who knows anything about the classical medieval doctrine of *gratia infusa* knows that the mystical inward experience of infused grace is the central concern of Roman Catholic piety. The charismatic emphasis has found great acceptance in the Roman Church because, as its theologians have recognized, Pentecostalism "is in profound harmony with the classical spiritual theology of the Church." -- Fr. Edward O'Connor, *The Pentecostal Movement in the Catholic Church*, p. 183. Rome, who has traditionally been very uncomfortable with the Protestant doctrine of salvation by *imputed* righteousness, is very much at home where inward experience is the supreme emphasis. Roman Catholics have not only embraced the charismatic movement, but, as Presbyterian Rev. Robert Whitaker publicly declared, "Catholics have brought a depth and a breadth and a sanity which have saved this movement. - *New Covenant*, June, 1973, p.7

3. *Neo-Evangelicalism and the Centrality of Experience.* Not to be outdone by either Protestant or Catholic Pentecostals, the evangelical movement is well into the act of selling the gospel of marvelous inward experience. This is not a new thing in the evangelical movement. For years revivalism has laid great stress on a very dramatic heart experience. Evangelicals have generally had far more to say about the subjective experience of conversion than about the mighty acts of our salvation in Christ. Groups like Campus Crusade for Christ make their focus the inward experience of receiving Christ into the heart, "the exciting discovery of the Spirit-filled life " the development of "the radiant Christian personality."

Basically, there is not a great difference between the three " neo's " The fundamental *religious motifs* are the same. The message of each overwhelmingly centers on the inward, mystic experience of the believer. This pursuit after some dramatic, empirical, satisfying experience is the burning passion of the current religious scene.



PART 2: The Burning Passion of the New Testament

The apostles were men whose burning passion was the message of God's redemptive acts in Jesus Christ. They turned the world upside down with the preaching of the gospel, not by running around telling people about their exciting religious experiences.

Can you imagine the apostle Peter standing up on the day of Pentecost and declaring, "Friends, I want to tell you about the marvelous experience we had this morning when we were baptized in the Holy Spirit. I felt a great sensation of peace right down to the balls of my feet..." Can you imagine one of the Marys adding her glowing testimony, "I want to tell you what a thrill it is to speak with tongues. All

the joys of my life were blended together in one ecstatic moment-the fun of childhood, the excitement of my first date, the exultation of the finished sex longing. . ." Ridiculous!. This plain fact stands out in Holy Writ: Spirit-filled people were so preoccupied with the message of their crucified, risen and ascended Lord that they made scarcely any reference to their own experience. Their experience, of course, was real and genuine. It was the experience of being caught up in and identified with the Christ event.

Luke is the New Testament writer who makes frequent references to people who were "filled with the Holy Spirit." When Zacharias was "filled with the Holy Ghost" (Luke 1:67), he opened his mouth and proclaimed God's redemptive works. When the praying disciples were "all filled with the Holy Ghost," Luke very pointedly adds, and they spake the Word of God with boldness.. . And with ~ great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus." Acts. 4:31, 33.

This pinpoints the vital difference between the Holy Spirit's illumination and religious mysticism. When the Spirit is poured out, something is said. In mysticism something is *felt* The one bears testimony to the objective message of God's redemptive activity on behalf of His people. The other bears testimony to some subjective happening.

The Nature of the Gospel

We have said that the burning passion of the apostles was the gospel-the good news about the Christ event. The gospel is something historical and objective. This we must never forget.

When people believe the gospel and become preoccupied with God's marvelous work for them in Jesus Christ, it certainly brings them a new experience. It radically changes them, regenerates and sanctifies them to a new sort of existence altogether. All this is the fruit of the gospel. But it is not the gospel. The greatest treachery takes place when men take what should be the fruit of the gospel and make it the gospel. It is like using God's gift of grace to rob Him of His glory. The New Testament order is

gospel

experience

(gospel over experience); and it is grave heresy to place

experience

gospel

(experience over the gospel).

If the gospel does not hold first place, it holds no place. Paul's greatest difficulty was with people and churches who were continually inclined to place the gospel in a subordinate role to their own religious experiences. See it in the church at Corinth. What was the issue? Some of the Corinthians were becoming so preoccupied with their spiritual gifts that they were forgetting the gospel. So Paul had to say to them:

Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures. 1 Cor. 15:1-4.

It is not so hard to reconstruct what was happening at Corinth, Galatia and Colosse, seeing that the believers there faced identical temptations to ours. False teachers came among the believers, saying, "Paul brought you the gospel. That is fine-just what is needed to start the Christian life. Now you must go on and rise higher. We bring to you the secret of the deeper life, the full gospel, the real secret of victorious living." This was *the* great heresy of the New Testament church. It was the heresy of relegating the gospel to something that has great significance at the time of Christian initiation; but after that believers were supposed to go on to higher things.

Luther had to contend with the same sort of mentality in his day. The enthusiasts were prepared to admit that Luther made a good start with the doctrine of justification through faith in God's work in Jesus Christ. But, like neo-Pentecostal Dr. Rodman Williams of today,' they felt that the great Reformer was very deficient in his doctrine of the Holy Spirit's work in human lives. Wishing to go beyond justification by grace, the radical evangelicals cried, "The Spirit, the Spirit!" The center of their interest was God's work in the human heart, but tragically, like all those who make this the center of their message, they could not see anything higher than their own spiritual navels.

Luther understood the mentality of heresy when he described how people were constantly inclined to put the gospel behind them:

One must not surely stay forever with the same matter, but continue and progress [say the sects]. Dear people, you have now heard the self same stuff for so long a time; you must rise higher. - *What Luther Says* (St. Louis: Concord ia), Vol.3, p.1268.

The Relation of Gospel and Holy Spirit

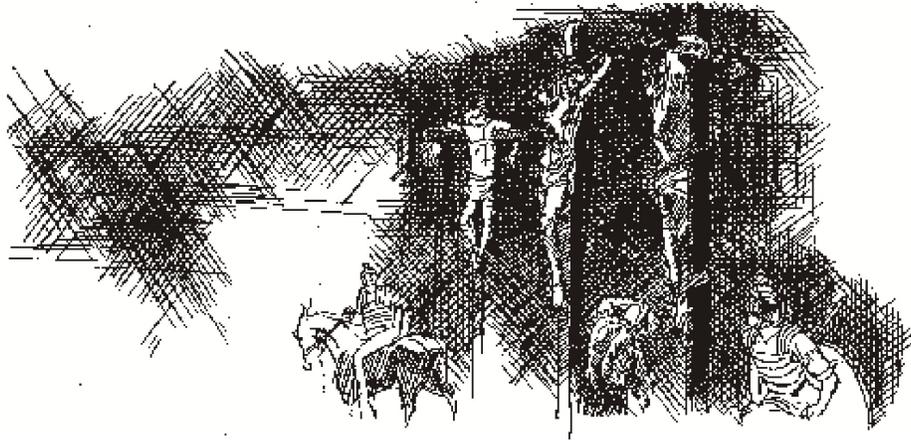
As church history has amply demonstrated, nothing threatens the supremacy of the gospel as much as a false preoccupation with the Holy Spirit. It is therefore urgent that we understand the true role of the Holy Spirit in human redemption. We must therefore address ourselves to this vital question: *What is the relationship between the Christ event and the Holy Spirit's work today?*

The answer is clearly given in the words of our Lord:

Howbeit when He, the Spirit of truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth: for He shall not speak of Himself; but whatsoever He shall hear, that shall He speak: and He will show you things to come. He shall glorify Me: for He shall receive of Mine, and shall show it unto you. John 16:13, 14.

As Christ came into this world to manifest (to reveal, to exegete, to expound) the Father (John 1:18; 14:9), so the Holy Spirit comes to reveal, to exegete, to expound the glory of Christ's Person and work. Concerning God's work for us in Christ, the apostle Paul declares:

Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him. But God hath revealed them unto us by His Spirit. . . . Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is of God; that we might know the things that are freely given to us of God. 1 Cor. 2:9, 10, 12.



No one could comprehend the significance of the Christ event without the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who comes to us (because of Christ's atonement) with no modified energy but with fullness of divine power. Nothing less than Pentecost is needed to see what Christ has done for us. This fact is clear from the New Testament record. No gospel sermon was preached until Pentecost. Why? It was not until Pentecost that the real significance of the Christ event dawned upon the disciples. It was Pentecost which gave to the disciples that illumination into Christ's Person and work. Not until Pentecost did they fully realize that they had actually been living in the presence of the Lord of glory. By the gift of the Spirit they were lost in the awesome wonder of the Incarnation, and they could talk of nothing else.

We also need the Holy Spirit to see what the disciples saw in the Christ event. Then we will know that the human mind can contemplate nothing greater than this:

God Himself made a visit to this planet in the Person of His Son. It was the Creator of heaven and earth who was born in that donkey's feed box. It was the Lord of glory who was wrapped in those swaddling clothes. He who owned the cattle on a thousand hills had not where to lay His head. It was the Judge of all who was arrested at midnight by sinful men and arraigned before corrupt courts where He was abused, spat on and bruised by unfeeling men. The Judge of all became the judged of all. The vile rabble judged Him worthy of death-not a decent death, but the cruelest, most shameful kind of execution reserved for those regarded as the scum of the earth. He was treated as a snake, a venomous serpent fit only to be crushed and cast out of human society. Thus He became the antitype of the serpent which Moses lifted up in the wilderness (John 3:14). See Him suspended between earth and heaven as that forsaken, cursed Man. Lifted up from earth because earth had refused Him. But not only earth, for heaven also numbered

Him with the transgressors. God laid our sins upon Him and treated Him as we deserve.

When Jesus Christ was crucified,
The darkness hid His face;
Forsaken there by God and man,
He took the sinner's place.
Transgressors cannot dwell with God,
They have no ray of light;
So Christ saw not the Father's face,
Only eternal night.

Having borne our sins and suffered their consequences, Christ rose from the dead, triumphed over death and ascended into glory.

And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness:

God was manifest in the flesh,
justified in the Spirit,
seen of angels,
preached unto the Gentiles,
believed on in the world,
received up into glory. 1 Tim. 3:16.

As we survey God's awesome act of atonement in Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit gives us faith by hearing the message of Christ (Rom. 10:17). As John Calvin said, "Faith is the principal work of the Holy Spirit." - John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Bk. 3, p. 541. Faith is the eye of the soul that sees our identity with Jesus Christ. Namely:

He became our Man. He took our human nature upon His divine nature. He was our Representative. Just as we were united to Adam, our first head, and were in Adam when he sinned (and were made sinners by his act of disobedience- Rom. 5:18, 19), so it is faith that enables us to see ourselves in Jesus Christ. The good news is not only that He lived, died and rose again for us, but that, as believers before God, we were in Christ when He lived, died, rose and ascended to glory. It was actually our human nature that lived a perfect life in Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago. It was our humanity which was punished, slain and buried in Joseph's new tomb. And when Christ rose from the dead and ascended into glory, we rose in Him and were made to sit down on the right hand of God's favor with Him (Eph. 2:5,6). In Christ, God purged us, perfected us and took us to the throne of glory. The good news is that we have been washed clean in Jesus Christ and taken into

perfect fellowship with God. The good news is not, "Be patient, God is not finished with me yet," but it is the message that God has finished with us in Jesus Christ, for "ye are complete in Him." Col. 2:10.

We say again that the Spirit's chief work is to give us faith-faith which comes by the Spirit's exegesis of the Christ event. Faith is the eye of the soul that can see nothing but the glory of Jesus Christ. Like the eye, it cannot see itself. New Testament faith is not faith in our experience-it is not faith in our new birth; it is not faith in our commitment and surrender; it is not even faith in our faith. It is faith in Christ's Person and work.

When Paul reaches his glorious climax in presenting His gospel thesis to the Romans, he challenges tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, sword, death, life, angels, principalities, powers, things present and things to come to condemn or separate him from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. Upon what was Paul's confidence based? On his Spirit-filled life (for Romans 8 is the great chapter on the Spirit-filled life)? Does Paul encourage himself by thinking of his new birth, his Spirit-filled ministry or great missionary experiences? No! His Spirit-filled life may rightly be called a faith-filled life. Faith in what?

Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Rom. 8:34.

See how the foundation of the apostle's confidence is completely objective. It is based wholly on historical, gospel verities.

Conclusion

The Christ event and the coming of the Holy Spirit-here are the two great themes that must be correctly related. These must not be seen as two focal points which compete for our attention. The New Testament knows of one focal point-the Christ event. The Spirit comes to unfold and exegete the significance of that to us.

We therefore must state that the burning passion of the current religious scene lacks the New Testament evidence of the Holy Spirit's work. Instead of being preoccupied with Christ's Person and work as were the apostles and Reformers, the current religious scene is preoccupied with religious experiences. This is a very serious observation, but most of the current religious literature must be thus judged on its own testimony. "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh."

Wherever the Spirit is poured out, there you will find men and women

preoccupied with the gospel-Christ our Representative, Christ our Substitute, Christ the Surety of the better covenant, Christ our high-priestly Intercessor at the right hand of God, Christ guiding the affairs of human history toward the day of His coming in glory. We say again that where God's people are thus preoccupied with Christ, there is the true evidence of the Holy Spirit.

The Current Religious Scene and The Bible

By Geoffrey J. Paxton



PART 1: Religious Experience Over the Word

We are living in an age of unprecedented ecumenical acceleration. Such is due to the three great "neo's" of the current religious scene neo-Pentecostalism, neo-Romanism and neo-evangelicalism.

Optimism is at an all-time high with regard to the religious ferment of today. Not so long ago, for instance, *Christianity Today* quoted John A. McKay as saying that the future of Christendom may well lie with a reformed Catholicism and a mature Pentecostalism. Not a few see the "awakening" of today as the greatest religious awakening since Pentecost!

The three great "neo's" are diverse, and this makes generalizations even

more hazardous than usual. However, the responsibility of assessing the current religious scene, amid its diversity, must not be evaded. It is not our intention to magnify excesses or successes but to arrive at the fundamental drift of the religious ferment.

Surely one of the basic aspects of any movement or conglomerate of movements is *the place of the Bible*. In the three "neo's" there are passionate assertions abounding with reference to the Bible. "The baptism in the Spirit" is said to give a greater love for the Bible; the "charismatic experience" is said to have unlocked the Bible for many. Few have not heard about Rome's "new approach" to the Scriptures, her new "open attitude" even to the fundamental tenets of Reformation theology. It behooves us to inquire into these assertions.

What does the evidence reveal? What is the fundamental drift with regard to the Bible? Can it be stated with relative safety in a short compass? Notwithstanding exceptions here and there, we believe that the general drift with reference to the Scriptures is cause for alarm. For the most part *the Bible is subordinated to experience*. The general drift is toward experience over the Word. We suggest that this is anything but a sound platform for the future of the church!

Neo-Romanism

The following statements may be made about new-face Catholicism and the Bible:

1. Neo-Romanism views the Bible in itself differently from the traditional Roman Catholic view of the Scriptures. Although the Bible was subordinated to the Church in traditional Romanism, nevertheless she held a high view of the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures. Neo-Romanism holds only to a qualified inerrancy and authority. This (as is to be expected) is stated variously by the different scholars in the progressive movement of the Church of Rome.

2. If the Bible has only a qualified inerrancy and authority, what has absolute authority? In order to come to grips with this question, we recommend that interested readers study the influence of the nineteenth century John Henry Newman in Vatican II's approach to the Bible and revelation. We can only state the crux of his view here: Newman believed that Scripture has reduced only a part of special revelation to written form. There is also revelation which is not found in Scripture—a nonpropositional revelation. The mind enables the Christian to come to grips with the written revelation, whereas "*intuition*" (also called "insight") allows access to unscripturated revelation. The revelation grasped by intuition "fills the gaps and puts flesh on the ribs of that which has been committed to writing."¹

The famous and popular Hans Kung reflects the same qualification of



Cardinal John Henry Newman

Biblical authority. Not all the Bible is the Word of God for Kung. In fact he would rather speak of "the infallibility of religious encounter" than the infallibility of the Bible. For Kung the Bible is the nearest that the theologian can come to describing the reality of God and of Christ. This being the case, both the words of the Bible and the theologian are defective.

3. To sum up, if the Bible does not have *absolute* authority, then absolute authority must be placed in man. *Despite the obvious differences between new-face and old-time Catholicism, this tragic positing of final authority outside the Bible itself is common to both. The religious experience of man still stands over the written Word.*

Neo-Pentecostalism

As mentioned earlier, claims of greater love for the Bible are not infrequently heard among charismatics (and sometimes outside the charismatic movement). "The baptism in the Spirit" is said to "unlock the Bible" for charismatics. To what

does the evidence point when we look into charismatic literature? It points to the subordination of the Bible to the human spirit-experience over the Word. We make the following observations regarding the charismatic use of the Bible:

1. Frequently the Bible is quoted *out of its context* When this takes place, a meaning from without is imposed on a text or passage. The word of man is placed over the Scripture and is then called the Word of God. We can do this with great fervor and enthusiasm, eulogizing the text. But falsification of the Word has taken place. "Text out of context is pretext."

2. In so much charismatic writing there is an alarming *superficiality* evident in the use of Scripture. A lack of careful consideration of a text or passage is not the sign of preoccupation with its meaning. A meaning which comes from a framework other than the Bible is imported into the Scripture despite the fact that a closer examination of the text will show another meaning. For instance, consider the frequent use of Acts 5:32 to show that obedience is a condition for the gift of the Spirit. In actual fact the meaning is exactly the opposite of what the charismatics seek to show. The text says God has given (past) the Holy Spirit to those who are now obeying Him (present). Obedience is the sign of the Spirit, not its precondition! Many other passages could be quoted along with references from charismatic literature, but such would be space-consuming. Superficiality with regard to the Bible is hardly a sign of increased devotion to the meaning, the real meaning of Christ's Word!

3. A third and tragic aspect of the charismatic approach to the Bible is that *it is lust ignored* in too many instances. This ignoring of the Bible is done with a show of spirituality, but it is none the less serious and tragic. Frequently, ignoring the Bible takes place under an appeal to the Spirit. This appeal, however, is an appeal to the Spirit *apart from* and even *over* the Word.

For example, Dorothy and Kevin Ranaghan in their book, *Catholic Pentecostals* (Parmus, N.Y.: Paulist Press, 1969); extol ideas solely upon the basis of experience. Also, in an appendix it is seriously argued that "the values of Pentecostalism as a meaningful and valid part of Christianity can be appreciated from both the theological left and right." - p. 261. By the left is meant the radical stream of Robinson and Bultmann, who have plainly discarded the orthodox view of the Bible; and by the right is meant those who still hold to the historic orthodox view. Apparently the Spirit is quite indifferent to the Word. It makes no difference whether the Bible is believed or denied; the Spirit still comes in His glory!

Should Protestants take refuge because the preceding citation comes from Roman Catholics, here are a couple no less disturbing citations from a Protestant charismatic, J. Rodman Williams, president of Melodyland School of Theology:

. . . we often in the past argued the nice points of the "Real Presence" among ourselves. Such now is completely done away, and in the fellowship of the Spirit we sit down together at the Lord's Table not to discuss the Real Presence, but to enjoy it.

I can . . . recall occasions of *full* participation at the Lord's Supper in traditions as widely different as Roman Catholic and Assembly of God, Episcopalian and Church of Christ. - J. Rodman Williams, *The Era of the Spirit* (1971), p.45.

The import of what Williams says is that the baptism in the Spirit has rendered meaningless the old disputes. It appears as though there is a fellowship of the Spirit which is *apart from the Word* - yes, even *above the Word*. Yet nowhere in the Scriptures can we find love for the Bible expressing itself by deliberately ignoring the Word. The tragedy is that such quotations as those just given could be multiplied ad nauseam.

4. The final point concerning charismatics and the Bible is that, essentially, the charismatic method of handling the Word is derived from evangelicalism. The charismatic uses an evangelical approach to the Bible and comes up with a different account of the Christian life (though in our estimation, not all that different).

All the things we have said about the charismatic's use of the Bible are applicable to evangelicalism also. It is impossible to raise serious questions about the way the charismatic uses the Scriptures without at the same time questioning well-entrenched evangelical methods.

This final point, it must be remembered, is not expressed by one who is not an evangelical, but by one who is evangelical and the principal of an evangelical Bible college in Australia. Behind this last point lies the observation of evangelical young people and their use of the Scriptures.

Neo-Evangelicalism

When we come to speak of neo-evangelicalism, we do not wish to deny the great benefits that have come from neo-evangelical scholarship in Biblical studies. The fact remains, however, that the great bulk of evangelical folk have their Biblical theology molded by popular convention speakers and authors and not by solid, sober theologians and exegetes from evangelical ranks. The big names in popular evangelicalism are not the names of our better theologians and exegetes. Often when the work of such scholars is consulted, it is consulted in the already fixed framework of the one doing the consulting.

1. We repeat for emphasis that what has been previously said about the neo-Pentecostal and the Bible is true of the neo-evangelical Christian. Frequently

the Bible is treated as a contextless repository of information supportive of a (very unsatisfactory) preconceived view of Christian existence. Superficiality marks so much of influential speaking and writing in evangelical circles today. Also, not infrequently, the Bible is just simply ignored. Only recently I was reading an earnest statement concerning Christian existence which was quite wide of the Biblical perspective. One of the chief characteristics of the presentation was the well-nigh complete absence of Scriptural support.

There are two chief characteristics of so many of the young folk who apply to our college in Australia. First, a self-confessed ignorance of the Bible. (Most of them give the reason for coming to college as "To get to know the Bible.") Second, an unshakable dogmatism in what they believe! Wherever they get their theology, it is not from the Word of God!

2. When we say that the Bible is so much ignored in neo-Pentecostal Iism and neo-evangelicalism, this raises the question, Where does their information come from? In many instances it comes directly from the Lord Himself-or His Spirit! More than once I have heard popular and influential leaders say things which could only be attributed to a "private session with the Lord Himself only the night before"! This, we might add, apart from the Word!

Sometimes evangelical leaders will even lay claim to special visions and revelations as the source of their (sometimes quite bizarre) views. We call this "evangelical guruism." But alas, how dominant is this type of thing! This is appeal to the Spirit apart from the Word. It is not unfair to say that if such a position is challenged, there is even appeal to the Spirit *over* the Word!

3. This leads us to a third characteristic of so much popular evangelicalism - *the determinative role of experience*. If the neo-Pentecostal or the neo-evangelical has experienced it, then the Bible must teach it! This appeal to experience over the Word takes different forms.

For example, one of the most frequently encountered forms is "*the changed life criterion*." How difficult it is to suggest something may not be Biblical if it has changed the person's life! Have you ever tried to get a charismatic to rethink his view when he keeps telling you how great a change it has brought into his life? How much more he loves Jesus because of the experience! This is the pragmatic approach: "It works!" It works; therefore it is Biblical.

Another form is "*the great numbers criterion*." If a particular Bible teacher has great crowds flocking to hear him, then surely this is a sign that the Lord is endorsing his message. Would the charismatic movement be endorsed so heartily were it not so huge and widespread? Would Bill Gothard's Institute in Basic Youth Conflicts seem so true if it were attended by only 200 people in an obscure part of Los Angeles rather than 18,000 in the Los Angeles coliseum? "Might means right"

is more a part of our mentality than we realize! It amounts to the fact that great crowds are seen, ipso facto, as the blessing and endorsement of the Lord. The basis of this is a legalistic premise-the Lord only blesses us when we are right.

How difficult it is to get people to consider what a person says if that person is in the minority! Minority is inferiority while majority is superiority in so much evangelical thinking.

In conclusion we suggest that the three great "neo's" are fundamentally agreed in this subordination of the Bible to the human spirit. Though there are outward differences and even some exchange of hostility, herein lies the fundamental affinity of the three "neo's."

When we speak of experience over the gospel, we are asserting that the message of the Bible is subordinated to the *message* of man. And when we speak of experience over the Word, we are saying that the *meaning* of the Bible is subordinated to the meaning which man imposes on the Word.

This focuses, we believe, the fundamental drift of the current religious scene. We do not suggest for a moment that there are no long-lost Biblical elements coming through the three "neo's" (e.g., the denial of papal infallibility and other emphases of Dr. Kung, the stress of the wide distribution of the gifts of God by the charismatic movement, etc.). But such Biblical elements are within a fundamentally wrong frame-work. We are all, because of our sinfulness, saddled with error. However, it is better to have elements of error in a correct Biblical framework than to have elements of truth in a fundamentally incorrect framework. In this last instance even the elements of truth serve the deeper-lying error.

Notwithstanding the imperfections of the sixteenth century Reformation, it was a Reformation in the true sense of the word. The Word of God dictated the thinking of the Reformers. Today in the supposed reformation to end all reformations, we suspect that the reformers are dictating to the Word what it should say and when it should say it. But there is no genuine movement of the Spirit without a genuine movement of God's gospel and the Word.

¹ For comments on Newman, see the Roman catholic Bruce Vawter's "Biblical Inspiration in Theological Resources (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), pp.23, 136, 137, 141,~166. See also Vatican II's constitution on the church, pp.12,35, and The Pastoral constitution on the church in the Modern World, p. 52, for a ratification of Newman's approach.



PART 2: John Calvin and the Appeal to the Spirit

In Book 1, chapter 9, of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin has some timely and helpful comments concerning the Spirit and the Word of God.

First, Calvin speaks of a *wrong appeal to the Spirit*. There is, he says, an extolling of the Spirit which amounts to nothing less than contempt for God's Word. Those who extol the Spirit in this manner effect a separation between the Spirit and the Word. Such a separation finds absolutely no precedence in the apostles of Christ. Calvin proceeds to quote Isaiah 59:21:

My Spirit which is in you, and the words I have put in your mouth, will not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your seed . . . forever.

All who separate Spirit and Word separate that which the prophet joined together with an inviolable bond. Calvin then gives us a memorable statement:

. . . the Spirit promised to us [by Christ] has not the task of inventing new and unheard-of revelations, or of forging a new kind of doctrine, to lead us away from the received doctrine of the Gospel, but of sealing our minds with that very doctrine which is commended by the Gospel.
- *Institutes*, Bk. 1, ch. 9.1.

Calvin speaks to all who would separate the Spirit from the Word, whether they be ethicists of a situationist stamp, charismatics or evangelicals. Here we have a sober Scriptural injunction: Do not make an appeal to the Spirit apart from the teaching of the Scripture. To do so is to put asunder that which God has joined together. If we wish to know the Spirit, let us know the Word.

Second, Calvin tells us *how we may recognize the Spirit*:

. . . if any spirit passing over the wisdom of God's Word, foists another doctrine upon us, he justly deserves to be suspected of vanity and lying. (Gal. 1:6-9). - *Ibid.*, ch. 9.2.

After this statement Calvin poses the important question, ". . . what authority will the Spirit have among us unless he be discerned by a most certain mark?" Satan, we are reminded, disguises himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). What is this "most certain mark" by which we are able to recognize the Spirit and not be tricked by the evil one? The answer, pure and simple, is *the Spirit's agreement with Scripture*.

Is this putting a test on the Spirit? We may say this if we wish. However, Calvin hastens to add that "it is a test by which it pleased him to establish his majesty among us." The Spirit is the Author of Scripture, and he cannot vary and differ from himself. Hence,

he must ever remain just as he once revealed himself there. This is no affront to him ...

If teaching does not square with Scripture, then it matters not how enthusiastically, influentially or emotionally it is presented, it does not issue from the Spirit of God. To honor the Spirit we must honor the Bible; and to honor the Bible means to seek above all things else to arrive at its precise meaning. Honoring the Spirit and careful Biblical exegesis are two ways of saying the same thing.

Third, for Calvin *Word and Spirit not only agree, but belong inseparably together*. Calvin says that Paul calls his ministry "the ministration of the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:8),

meaning, doubtless, that the Holy Spirit so inheres in his truth, which he expresses in Scripture, that only when its proper reverence and dignity are given to the Word does the Holy Spirit show forth his power. - *Ibid.*, ch. 9.3.

God, Calvin goes on to say, has so ordered things that when the Spirit shines, "the perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds."

We hear much today about "the outpouring of God's Spirit" and the new and epochal "shining of the Spirit." We must ask, Where is the perfect religion of the Word? A grand display of the Spirit will mean a grand display of the Word. There are those today who see the current charismatic awakening as the greatest revival since Pentecost. Ought we not to see the greatest revival of Biblical preaching and teaching since Pentecost? Alas, we see it not!

Calvin throws some good light upon a phrase which is thrown about a lot

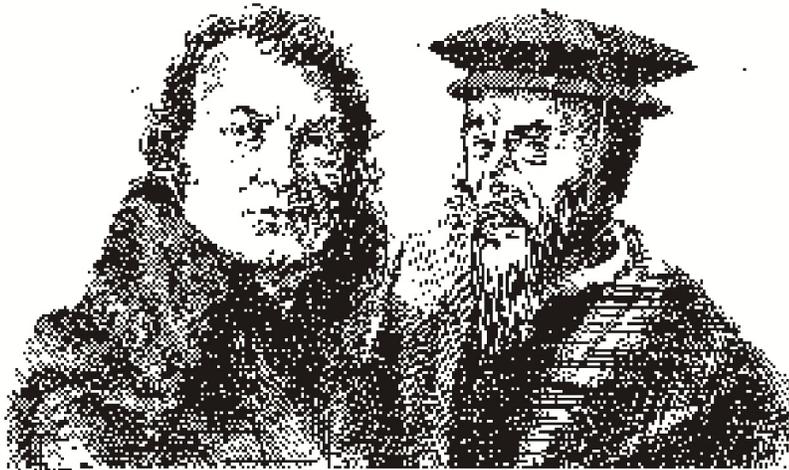
today: "Quench not the Spirit." 1 Thess. 5:19. This is often understood to mean that if we are skeptical about so much of today's spirit-centeredness, we are, ipso facto, quenching the Spirit. What is not realized is that it appears from the passage in 1 Thessalonians that the way the Spirit is quenched par excellence is by having a wrong approach to the preaching of the Word! Calvin says:

By this, no doubt, he [Paul] intimates that the light of the Spirit is put out as soon as prophecies fall into contempt.

Refusing to become preoccupied with the Spirit is not to quench the Spirit, but rather the Spirit is quenched when the Word falls into contempt.

Chapter 9 of the first book of Calvin's *Institutes* is only a short chapter. But how packed full of wisdom and insight it is! The current religious scene needs this Biblical and therefore spiritual balance. We fear that the appeal to the Spirit in neo-Pentecostalism, neo-Romanism and neo-evangelicalism is an appeal which, in the final analysis, deprecates the Holy Word of God. If the claims of the enthusiastic adherents of these movements are correct, this age ought to be second only to the apostolic age in the preaching and teaching of the Word. We should be treated to gospel preaching and teaching which overshadows even that of the Reformers and Puritans! Alas, how conspicuous is the lack of such today!

John Calvin challenges us to beware of falling into the clutches of the one who masquerades as an angel of light. Beware of crying, "The Spirit, the Spirit!" without crying, "The gospel, the gospel!" or, "The Word, the Word!" Any appeal to the Spirit, if it is created by the Spirit Himself, will mean, automatically, an appeal to the Word of God. Those who have ears to hear, let them hear.



PART 3: Luther and Calvin on the Authority of the Bible

What does it mean to say that the Bible is the sole authority? There are some today who would answer by saying that the authority of the Bible is seen in the "Word bearing" quality of the Bible. Only where the church hears the "Word" in the "words" are the Scriptures authoritative. Others would say that the authority of the Bible is in the great historical events of salvation which it records. Hence, the really authoritative portion of the Bible is found in the sections of holy history. Still others would say that the authority of the Bible is Christological. The canon with the canon is Jesus Christ. Scripture is authoritative in so far as it bears witness to Christ.

What did Luther and Calvin understand by the authority of the Bible? Can they offer us any guidance on this vital matter? We believe they can.

All acquainted with the sixteenth century Reformation know that the watchword was *sola Scriptura* - "Scripture alone!" This assertion was made over against pope, fathers and councils.

Luther and Calvin's "Scripture alone" meant at least four things: (1) the necessity of Scripture, (2) the authority of Scripture, (3) the sufficiency of Scripture and (4) the perspicuity of Scripture.

The Necessity of Scripture

Negatively, the necessity of Scripture is because of the blindness and darkness of the human heart and the hold of evil that Satan has over his miserable subjects. Positively, the necessity of Scripture is for the preservation of God's Word for mankind in an objective and self-attesting form. Sinful man desperately *needs* God's objective and self-attesting testimony.

Luther said that among God's people the rule is not to be a smart aleck or a nationalistic know-it-all,

but to hear, believe and persevere in the Word of God, through which alone we obtain whatever knowledge we have of God and divine things. We are not to determine out of ourselves what we must believe about Him, but to hear and learn it from Him. - *Luther's Works*, Vol.13, p.237.

The Bible is a necessity. *Sola Scriptura* must be seen as both a denial and an affirmation. It is a denial of man's ability to know God as he ought apart from Scripture, and it affirms that the Bible is the only (so/a) place where definite

knowledge of God is to be discovered. Man is wholly bankrupt of that knowledge which is able to save him. If he is desirous of salvation, he must turn to the written Word of Scripture.

Calvin takes great pains to stress that under both the old and new dispensation, God committed His Word to writing in order to insure a correct knowledge of Himself apart from any oracular experience (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Bk. 1, ch. 7.1). ". . . the priests might derive from it whatever they would communicate to the people." - *Ibid.*, Bk. 4, ch. 8.6. When the Reformer speaks of the apostles being authorized to teach what Christ commanded, he says:

Let this be a firm principle; no other word is to be held as the Word of God, and given place as such in the Church, than what is contained first in the Law and the Prophets, then in the writings of the apostles; and the only authorized way of teaching in the church is by the prescription and standard of his Word.- *Ibid.*,ch.8.8.

Calvin makes it clear that Christ limited the embassy of the apostles "when he ordered them to go and teach not what they had thoughtlessly fabricated, but all that he had commanded them." - *Ibid.*

Both Luther and Calvin believed in a twofold knowledge of God. They recognized a knowledge of God which is natural to all men as God's creatures and a knowledge of God which is a spiritual possession of believers as God's children. In expounding Galatians 4:8 Luther says:

All men have the general knowledge, namely, that God is, that He has created heaven and earth, that He is just, that He punishes the wicked, etc. But what God thinks of us, what He wants to give and to do to deliver us from sin and death and save us-which is the particular and true knowledge of God-this men do not know. - *Luther's Works*, Vol. 26, p.399.

Calvin declares:

Despite [the role of creation] it is needful that another and better help be added to direct us aright to the very Creator of the Universe. It was not in vain that he added the light of his Word. - *Institutes*, Bk. 1, ch. 6.1.

Without the Bible we have no sure direction or revelation from the Most High which is able to save us from sin and death. *Sola Scriptura* means the *necessity* of Scripture.



The Authority of Scripture

The authority of the Bible is implicit in its necessity. The Scriptures are necessary because an authoritative self-revelation of God is necessary for man in his dreadful plight. However, we need to distinguish between authority and necessity. Martin Luther's contemporaries admitted the necessity of the Bible, but it was his insistence upon its authority which brought them into serious conflict with the Reformer. Luther's *sola Scriptura* was revolutionary because it attributed to the Bible *absolute authority* - over pope, fathers and councils! The really offensive concept was *sola Scriptura* - Scripture *alone!* Luther was not content with belief in the relative necessity of Scripture. For him the Bible was the final authority.

In the empire of the church the ruler is God's Word. - *Luther's Works*, Vol.41, p.134.

We must judge according to the Word of God. - *Ibid.*, Vol.26, p.383.

We must judge and consider all wonder and miracles in the light of God's Word, to ascertain whether they are in accordance and agreement with it. - *Ibid.*, Vol.24, p.75.

Whether in opposition to Rome or the enthusiasts, Luther never tired of asserting Scripture *alone!*

Likewise, Calvin would not tolerate the subjection of the Word to human authorities. The mark of the church-indeed the sine qua non of the true church-was

the rule of the Word. Calvin declares:

Since the church is Christ's Kingdom, and he reigns by his Word alone, will it not be clear to any man that those are lying words (cf. J. 34.7.4) by which the Kingdom of Christ is imagined to exist apart from his sceptre (that is, his most holy Word)? - *Institutes*, Bk. 4, ch. 2.4.

Both Reformers were all too aware that sinful man seeks to be autonomous. He seeks to set himself up as a judge over that which presents itself to him as revelation. The Word of God does not come to man in such a way as to recognize his self-claimed autonomy. Rather, it comes challenging his authority and overthrowing his conceited attempt to have the final word. Calvin saw as blasphemous impiety the attempt to maintain the precedence and priority of the church over the Word. As Paul declares, the church is founded on the doctrine of the apostles and prophets. We must not speak as though the mother owed her birth to the daughter. Calvin understood that to reject the rule of the Word was to reject the very rule of Christ Himself (Comm. on Is. 11:4).

Modern views on authority do not echo the sentiments of Luther and Calvin. Yet interestingly enough, many of these views are anticipated in the defense of truth made by these two sons of Paul. As previously stated, some today wish to speak of Christ being the final authority while they reject the authority of the Word. However, Calvin sees the authoritative reign of Christ in and through, not apart from, the Word (cf. Comm. on Eph. 4:11). So also with those who would claim direct governance by the Spirit. Governance by the Spirit without or instead of the Word would be too vague and unstable. No, Christ has joined the Spirit to the Word to avoid such a vague, unstable government. Word and Spirit belong together-inseparably together (*Institutes*, Bk. 1, ch. 9.3).

Those (such as John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*) who wish to propound a multiple source concept of authority would do well to hearken to the so/a of Luther. He, like Calvin, repudiated the notion that the Scriptures are created by the church and not vice versa.

The Church is built on the word of the Gospel which is the Word of God's wisdom and virtue. - *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Vol.4, p.189.

The Word of God preserves the Church of God. - *Ibid.*, Vol.3, p.259.

Indeed the church owes her existence to the Word and is maintained by the same means (*Luther's Works*, Vol.24, p.362). Nor would Luther be patient with the argument by the sophists, who deduced the superiority of the church over the Word because of the supposed creation of the canon by the church. The inimitable

response of Martin cannot go un-quoted:

What a splendid argument! I approve Scripture. Therefore I am superior to Scripture. John the Baptist acknowledges and confesses Christ. He points to Him with his finger. Therefore he is superior to Christ. The Church approves Christian faith and doctrine. Therefore the Church is superior to them. - *Ibid.*, Vol.26, p.57.

Surely no more needs to be added. For Luther and Calvin, *sola Scriptura* meant the final and absolute authority of the Bible. Their position is but the reflection of Paul's and ought, therefore, to be the pattern of ours.

The Sufficiency of Scripture

We come now to the sufficiency of Scripture. Once again, this attribute is involved inextricably with the previous two. The interpretation of man is not partly but wholly bankrupt. There is need for no additional interpretation of man to supplement the divine interpretation. The necessity of the Bible had reference to all men; the authority of the Bible had particular reference to the autonomous pretensions of Rome; and the sufficiency of the Word challenged the attempted supplementations of the sectarians.

Sola Scriptura was the denial of any admixture of the word of man with the Word of God. The Holy Spirit is present in the revelation of the Word. Any teaching which does not agree with Scripture is to be rejected "even if it snows miracles every day" (*Ibid.*, Vol.24, p.367).



Luther did not despise the creeds of the church (*Ibid.*, Vol. 37, pp. 185, 186) but accepted them simply because they had Biblical content. Fidelity to the Word was the criterion for Luther, not only for the creeds of the church but for the fathers also. Though he, like Calvin, appealed time and again to the fathers, he would not bow to them when their teachings conflicted with that of Scripture. Declared the Reformer:

I will not listen to the Church or the fathers or the apostles unless they bring and teach the pure Word of God. - *Ibid.*, Vol.26, p.67.

The Scriptures are sufficient. In so far as the fathers help us to understand those Scriptures, Luther was happy to appeal to them. However, he never had any notion that Scripture had to be supplemented.

A council has no power to establish new articles of faith, even though the Holy Spirit is present. Even the apostolic council in Jerusalem introduced nothing new in matters of faith...- *Ibid.*, Vol. 41, p.123.

A council has the power-and is also duty bound to exercise it-to suppress and condemn new articles of faith in accordance with Scripture and the ancient faith . . - *Ibid.*

Calvin takes the same position (*Institutes*, Bk. 60, ch. 9) when he speaks as follows:

Furthermore, those who, having forsaken Scripture, imagine some way or other of

reaching God, ought to be thought of as not so much gripped by error as carried away by frenzy. For of late, certain giddy men have arisen who, with great haughtiness, exacting the teaching office of the Holy Spirit, despise all reading and laugh at the simplicity of those who, as they express it, still follow the dead and killing letter. - *Ibid.*, Bk. 1, ch. 4.1.

These fanatics, who appealed to the Spirit *instead* of the Word, showed contempt for that Word. They denied the all-sufficiency and perfection of the Word. However, the Spirit is recognized in His agreement with Scripture (*Ibid.*, ch. 9.2), for the Word and Spirit belong *inseparably* together (*Ibid.*, ch. 4.3).

Today we are not strangers to claims for authority in charismatic experiences any more than we are strangers to the positing of authority in some locus other than the Word. It needs to be stated again that the Word is sufficient. It needs no supplementation from popes, fathers or councils. It needs no supplementation by enthusiastic fanatics who stand on their own private revelations and visions.

The Perspicuity of Scripture

We have considered the necessity, authority and sufficiency of Scripture. Now we come to the perspicuity, or the essential clarity, of the Bible. If necessity was aimed at rationalism, authority at autonomy, and sufficiency at mysticism, then the perspicuity of the Scriptures was aimed at clericalism. Rome confined the Word to ecclesiastical pundits. Luther and Calvin broke the chains which held the Bible to the scholars' bench and gave the Word of God to the humblest peasant. In his comment on Psalm 37, Luther said:

There is not on earth a book more lucidly written than the Holy Scripture; compared with all other books it is as the sun compared with all other lights.



Luther accused the papacy of beclouding the inherent radiance of the Word and keeping the people from its unambiguous truth. He objected:

. . . they take from the Scripture its single, simple and stable meaning; they blind our eyes, so that we stagger about and retain no reliable interpretation. We are like men bewitched or tricked while they play with us as gamblers with their dice. - *Luther's Works*, Vol.32, p.26.

Erasmus was no better. He erred greatly in Luther's eyes in asserting that, apart from "the precepts designed to regulate our existence," the Bible is, in many places, obscure and impenetrable. In his *Bondage of the Will*, Luther complains:

It is with such scarecrows that Satan has frightened away men from reading the Sacred Writings and has rendered the Holy Scriptures contemptible.

It must not be thought that the perspicuity of Scripture is inconsistent with the Protestant emphasis of the diligent exposition of the Word. Notice these pertinent remarks of Calvin:

Since we ought to be satisfied with the Word of God alone, what purpose is served by hearing sermons every day, or even the office of pastors? Has not every person the opportunity of reading the Bible? But Paul assigns to teachers the duty of dividing or cutting, as if a father in giving food to his children, were dividing the bread and cutting it in small pieces. - Comm. on 2 Tim. 2:15.

The minister of the Word must strive to be a scholar! Declares Calvin:

None will ever be a good minister of the Word of God, unless he is first of all a scholar. - Sermon on Deut. 5:23-27.

How we need this counsel today! It is as if Calvin were speaking of our day when he says:

. . . how many [ministers] does one see who have only superficially glanced at Holy Scripture and are so pitifully poorly versed in it that with every new idea they change their views. - Sermon on 2 Tim. 1:13, 14.

Further, not only must the perspicuity of Scripture not lead us into academic indifference, but it must not lead us to think that, unaided by the Spirit, we can fathom the true intent of God's Word. Commenting on Calvin, R.S. Wallace writes:

The authority of the Scripture is authenticated by the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. The reverence which the church gives to the Scripture is due primarily to the influence of the Holy Spirit in giving inward testimony to the believer that this Word is the Word of God. - R.S. Wallace, Calvin's *Doctrine of the Word and Sacraments* (Oliver & Boyd, 1953); cf. *Institutes*, Bk. 1, ch. 7.5.

Finally, in reference to the perspicuity of Scripture, it must not be thought that the total clarity and comprehensibility of the Word is here being advocated. The perspicuity of Scripture refers to the basic or essential clarity. There are things in the Word which the best of God's children have not been able to fathom. However, by the gracious ministry of the Spirit, that which is necessary for salvation and godliness is clear.

The Reformers' Approach to the Bible

What do Luther and Calvin have to say to the church of today concerning *sola Scriptura*? We will note the salient points of their approach to the Bible.

First, both Luther and Calvin, echoing Paul, see man in a dreadful plight. He is lost and unable to come to his own rescue. Man desperately needs the Word from the Most High God if he is ever going to be saved. That there is a general revelation in nature neither Reformer denied, but man is not able to come to a saving knowledge of God apart from the Word. It is this somber reality that underlies the utter necessity of the Bible. The modern church needs to take fresh cognizance of this important fact. In his article, "Dateline: Bangkok" (*Christianity*

Today, Mar. 30, 1973), Harold Lindsell had this to say about the 1972-73 World Conference on Salvation Today:

Apart from listening to the three major papers, participants in the conference and the assembly spent most of their time in section and group meetings. Out of them came a plethora of pronouncements but no clear, unambiguous statement of the meaning of salvation today, yesterday, or tomorrow. The public opinion board did reveal some interesting opinions on the matter: "People matter, people suffer; salvation is in sharing suffering." Following an unscheduled session on China in which one delegate praised Chairman Mao as the saviour, this sign appeared, "Salvation-God save China from 'conversion.'" - p.7.

It is no surprise that in such a stream of thought concerning salvation, the utter necessity of the Bible should have no place. Luther and Calvin speak to such a church. In an age of "a swing to the East" for salvation, the church of God needs to sound the message of a lost world and the utter bankruptcy of non-Biblical religions of both East and West!¹

Second, not only do Luther and Calvin speak to the present church concerning man's lost condition and the utter necessity of the Bible. They speak concerning the nature of revelation in the Bible. Generally speaking, contemporary theology posits supreme authority in God alone and gives the Bible only a relative authority (cf. the approaches outlined at the beginning of this article). Contemporary theology bluntly refuses to give absolute authority to the Bible, for it fears that to do so is to rob God of His absolute authority. But we have seen that, for Luther and Calvin, *sola Scriptura* meant nothing less than the absolute authority of the Bible. Both Reformers saw the Scriptures as deserving the attribute of absolute authority-not in the place of God but as the expression of the very mind of God. In the words of Bernard Ramm, the two Reformers did not have "a monistic principle of authority." Rather, a "pattern of authority is visible. This pattern is the intersection of the authority of Jesus Christ, the Scriptures as the revealed Word of God, and the Holy Spirit in His internal witness to Jesus Christ and the Word (cf. Bernard Ramm, *The Pattern of Religious Authority*)

This is a point of cardinal importance. To select any one principle of authority to the exclusion of others is to fall into a grave mistake. To select God to the exclusion of the Bible, as much contemporary theology does, is neither true to the Bible nor the Protestant Reformation. This is because God, in His all-knowing wisdom, has designed to speak in and through the Bible by His Spirit. To select Jesus Christ as the normative criterion of revelation in the Bible (cf. Brunner, *Revelation and Reason*, pp. 127-130; *Dogmatics*, Vol. 1, p. 107f.) or to select the "new being in Jesus Christ" as that criterion (cf. Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol.1, p. 47f.), is to fall prey to an autonomous and arbitrary selection more

indicative of man's need than his wisdom. God speaks in the Bible-His Word through which Jesus Christ rules His kingdom by the Holy Spirit, who constantly testifies to both the living and written Word.

Hence, Luther and Calvin call the modern church back to the absolute authority of the Bible as the Word of God in the church and the world.

Third, Luther and Calvin issue an authoritative call to much evangelicalism. Not least because much evangelicalism has its own way of separating the Holy Spirit from the Word. If contemporary theology posits supreme authority in God to the detriment of the Bible, much present day evangelicalism is in danger of positing supreme authority in the experience of the believer to the detriment of the Word. Unless we are badly mistaken, the immediate reaction to theological liberalism (e.g., Schliermacher) also posited supreme authority in experience but made no excuses for giving unabashed formulation to it. Much evangelicalism formally denies this locus of authority but, in actual fact, gives a far greater place to it than is at all desirable.

Luther and Calvin constantly fought against Rome's pretensions to direct contact with the Spirit in and through the pope and church councils. Rome admitted that the Spirit spoke in and through the Bible but claimed this was not the *final* locus of the Spirit's working. As pointed out earlier, Luther attacked the right of councils to establish new articles of faith (cf. Luther's *On the Councils and the Church*, 1539). In addition, Luther and Calvin had to defend the absolute authority of the Bible against the enthusiasts, who boasted of immediacy of revelation by the Spirit.

Evangelicalism needs to beware. The miraculous, the unusual, the pragmatically "helpful" may govern our approach to the Word so that what we find is only the confirmation of our experiences. The slogan, "The man with an experience is never at the mercy of the man with an argument," is highly dangerous and can be positively pagan! A miracle, a "changed life," a helped life may be used as the final hermeneutical seal which closes all argument and brings down charges of resisting the Spirit upon those who wish to exercise reserve. But if a position is not in accordance with the Bible, it is wrong-irrespective of experience! Luther insisted that that which does not agree with Scripture is to be rejected "even if it snows miracles every day"! - *Luther's Works*, Vol.24, p.371. R.S. Wallace comments:

There is no more dubious and dangerous practice according to Calvin, than to try to make contact with the Spirit of God by turning to any other source than the Word of God. "It is the spirit of Satan that is separated from the Word, to which the Spirit of God is continually joined. - Wallace, *op. cit.*, p.129.

Fourth, Luther and Calvin challenge both contemporary theology and evangelicalism in their practical demonstration of utter commitment to the final authority of Scriptures. Witness the truly prodigious labors of these Reformers in expounding the Word in preaching, teaching and voluminous writings! This provides a stark contrast to much theology and preaching today. The Bible is sadly and shamefully neglected in so much modern theology and preaching (see Paul Tillich's monumental *Systematic Theology*, where grappling with Scripture is evident by its absence). Consider much of so-called evangelical preaching. One may encounter pseudo-dramatism. He may hear the imperatives pulverizing the people of God. He may listen to sickeningly glib clichés rolling off the preacher's (?) tongue with the greatest of ease. But where is that careful exegesis of the text? Where is that great concern to represent the message of the passage of Scripture? Ultimately, is not our view of the Word seen more in what we do with it than in what we say about it? Have we not separated the Spirit from the Word in our foolish notion that scholarship on the part of the minister of God is to be subordinated to emotional attachment, which we call keenness? If we really believe that the Word and Spirit are inseparable, would this not be shown in a high quality of exegesis and exposition? The truly prodigious labors of both Luther and Calvin call the quality of our ministry into question. May God help us to repent of our deprecation of His Word. The Bible is completely sufficient and, under the ministry of the Spirit, essentially clear.

¹ It is interesting to note a statement of Vatican Council II regarding the position of non-Christian Jews, Moslems and atheists. See Dogmatic constitution on the church, ch. 11, par. 16, for a thoroughly un-Biblical statement.