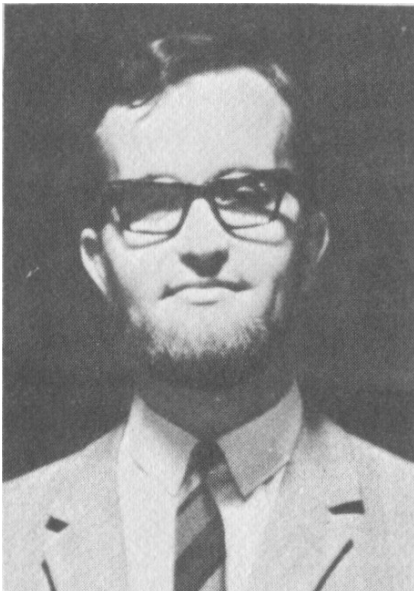


The Crisis of our time and the evangelical churches

Bernard Zijlstra

The following pages are based on various speeches which the author has presented to a number of groups mainly within the setting of the Christian Reformed Church, in both the United States and Canada. In nearly final form these pages served to introduce a day-long dialogue with elders and ministers sponsored by the Boards of Elders Conferences of Classes Hamilton and Toronto of the Christian Reformed Church in the Canadian province of Ontario on April 4, 1970.



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INTRODUCTION

The twentieth century is a critical era in human history. We have encountered times of crisis before in western civilization but the crises of earlier periods somehow were partial, not total. Philosophy was in a critical stage during the seventeenth century when the foundations of modern thought were laid. Politics experienced a precarious turning point in the eighteenth century with the embodiment of new ideas concerning man and society in the French Revolution. Industry received a new impetus in the nineteenth century with the application of science to technology in the industrial revolution. The arts and literature assumed a new direction in our culture at the turn of the century. Indeed, we are not strangers to times of crisis.

But the crisis of *our* time is not partial but total. The very nerve center of our civilization is paralyzed because the ideals and norms which have guided that civilization as a whole for several centuries are not only no longer believed by the major leaders of our culture but the disastrous effects of these ideals and norms are beginning to be felt by the mass of men in every area of their existence. The crisis of our time is clearly no longer merely one of ideals. It is a crisis of the meaning of human life itself.

The response to this crisis is varied. The many are not aware of it. Countless consciously deny its severity and locate it at the periphery of our life. There are others who acknowledge it and suggest, not too convincingly, that in a revival of the old ideas and norms lies a cure. A small, prophetic, and thus vocal minority points to the Marxist error as the avenue of recovery. Finally, especially among the young, there is a growing multitude of those who no longer dare to search for lasting meaning in a chaotic world not of their making. These tend to turn to immediate and ephemeral satisfactions.

Man cannot find meaning on his own. The proud pursuit of western man to go it alone in this quest is the root of the contemporary upheaval, the spiritual cause of alienation and aimlessness. Man must be redeemed before the brokenness of his life and his works can be healed. That is the Good News of the Kingdom of God which Christ preached. That is the Word which Christ charged his followers to hear and do as agents of redemption in the era of our Lord — *anno domini*.

That era includes our time. In the following pages the question is asked whether Christ's followers in the evangelical churches are agents of redemption, whether they are responding to the deepest needs of our time in the way their Master requires it. The material presented is readily divided in five parts. First, in order to understand the background of our time I draw a few hasty lines through modern history. Then I turn to the Scriptures for a delineation of the central task of the Christian Church.

Thirdly, in the light of that delineation the evangelical Protestant churches are subjected to an appraisal. After a diagnosis of what I consider to be the heart disease of these churches I briefly describe some of the consequences of this illness in the daily life of denominations and congregations. Finally, I conclude with a few suggestions regarding the revitalization of church life.

PART ONE: THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES

Christians today lack historical roots. But if we are to understand *our* time we will have to pay attention to *past* time — for that too was *our* time. Particularly, if we are to understand a little of the world rulers of today's darkness (cf. Eph. 6:12) we must look briefly at the sixteenth century, one of the founding periods of the modern era. There we notice four important developments: the Protestant Reformation, the Roman-Catholic Counter-Reformation, the rise of Humanism as a new spiritual force, and the discovery of the non-European continents. These developments still condition a good deal of the spiritual climate and the religious direction of our time. Let us briefly focus on some facets relevant to our problem.

THE UNFINISHED REFORMATION

The Reformation brought with it a partial return to the spiritual power and redeeming beauty and healing strength of the Gospel. It occasioned a shift in cultural power from Southern to Northern Europe, and later to North America. It stimulated the increase of political freedom, encouraged industrial growth, and enhanced scientific progress. It produced the great confessions that we still hold dear. It brought the Bible in the homes of the common man. It re-set theological reflection, bringing it closer to the contours of Scriptural revelation. And the Reformation inspired the artist: it gave us the paintings of Rembrandt and the music of Bach. It gave us a century of hope in the history of the world.

But the Reformation also divided the 'body' of Christ. And the strength required for a confrontation with the new spirit of Humanism was spent in the great religious wars of the post-Reformation period as well as in the debates between Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Calvinists, Anabaptists, and Arminians. The various spiritual forces which had been kept at bay within the encompassing Catholic Church during the Middle Ages now appeared on the surface in the diverse Protestant denominations, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world — with its Anglicanism, Presbyterianism, Puritanism, Congregationalism, and its later Pietism. Quite quickly the 'first love' of the Reformation was spent. And in the middle of the seventeenth century we detect that the major branches of Protestantism in England, Germany, Holland, Scandinavia as well as North America had adjusted themselves to the spirit of the times. We see the rise of a *rationalistic* orthodox theology, an *individualistic* view of man (providing roots for the destructive side of capitalism), and a *moralistic* puritan ethic. These mixtures between the spirit of the Reformation and forces foreign to the heart of the Gospel still condition the overall direction of contemporary evangelical Protestantism.

ABSENCE OF A PAULINE VISION

The globalization of our geographic horizon after Columbus' discovery of America did not create a Pauline vision in the Protestant world. The struggle between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism sapped the strength of both camps. Christ-followers became each other's enemies, and thus missed the opportunities to begin a *world-wide mission program* until the nineteenth century — when it was, humanly speaking, too late. Protestant mission history can be roughly divided into three main segments.

- (1) The first mission programs were often tied to the various national East and West Indies Companies, which were interested in economic gain in the first place and only secondarily in bringing the good news to those possessed by the dark demons of Asia, South America and Africa. The history of the slave-trade will forever remain a tragic indictment against Christian lands precisely in this context.
- (2) Later, when the deadness of a rationalist orthodoxy began to reign supreme in the major Protestant churches, the pietist movements of the eighteenth century assumed the burden of evangelism and missions. Here credit must be given where credit is due. But pietism reduced the claims of Jesus Christ largely to the conversion of 'individual souls' so that the 'principalities and powers' which govern the lives of men and cultures in their entirety were not conquered by the Gospel. This

meant that the convert — at home or abroad — was as it were saved from hell, prepared for heaven, *and taken out of this world* which was left to its devilish devices. Pietist missions did not grasp that a convert to the faith becomes a member of a Kingdom, which is “like leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal, till it was all leavened.” (Matt. 13:33 RSV) For this reason it becomes understandable that so much of Protestant mission work was not directed to the great cultural centers at home and in pagan lands—where Paul would have gone—but to the small rural communities. For these reasons the proclamation of the Christian faith did not uproot the pagan direction of non-western cultures at its foundation and in its totally encompassing life style.

(3) When the great missionaries of the nineteenth century — like William Carey — began to understand this it was nearly too late. For the inhabitants of the mission areas were by now confused: what really did the Christian nations want? Converts to a new religion or economic exploitation? In the meantime the Christians in the home-lands were confused: was the good news to be brought the faith of liberalism or the tenets of orthodoxy? If the latter, which stream of orthodoxy? Into the vacuum created by this triple confusion (pietism vs. secularism, a ‘western’ religion vs. ‘western’ colonial exploitation, and liberalism vs. pietist orthodoxy) stepped a new product of the West: the secular children of the Christian idea, first in the form of Renaissance Humanism and then in the form of Marxist Humanism. Hence, the major political and cultural leaders in the non-western world of our century have indeed shed the vestiges of native paganism, only to accept from the West what they think is valuable for their continents. Gandhi, Nehru, Sukarno, Ho Chi Minh, Mao-tse-tung, Nasser, Castro, Che Guevara — they are post-Christian prophets, doers of a non-gospel.

THE MODERN HUMANIST: BROKENHEARTED

What is so intriguing about humanism? For one thing, there is something ‘Christian’ about it. As a matter of fact, humanism as we know it in the West is a Christian heresy. It readily accepts the exalted position which the Bible ascribes to man: “Thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honor. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet.” (Ps. 8) Man does not occupy such a weighty position in any of the non-Scriptural religions, not even in the great systems of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that humanism as a religio-cultural force appears on the scene of history only after Christianity has taken

roots. Slowly at first, but then with a snowball effect, it assumed a place right in the heart of Christendom.

For there is also a second reason why humanism is so challenging, so intriguing. It eliminates the scandal and the folly of the faith once delivered unto the saints, viz. Christ crucified, through whom and through whom alone man can be saved and find genuine humanity. (Cf. I Cor. 1:200 Humanism is a counter-religion to Christ's teaching:

*If any man
would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross
and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and
whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. (Matt. 16:24f)*

The humanist is determined to create his own world; set his own task; redeem himself by means of self-realization; establish reason as a light upon his path; organize a kingdom of enlightened citizens; order a government of, by and for the people; find meaning within the resources of the human community, if not by way of individualistic capitalism then by way of collectivistic communism. And all that driven by a messianic zeal derived from Isaiah and Paul.

Western Europe and North America were the first battle-grounds between the Christian faith and the New Spirit of Self-reliance. With near total success the Religion of Man set out to assume spiritual and cultural leadership. First in the universities, then in the political arena, the schools, in the industrial sector, the arts, the means of communication: in the entire setting of our daily life. And where has it brought us? Today we are witnessing the bankruptcy of at least western individualistic humanism as it has come to expression in the 'North American way of life.' For man cannot live by his own light, cannot redeem himself, cannot find genuine humanity on his own. Claiming to be wise, man outside of the Gospel becomes a fool. Man's greatest discoveries and insights become his idols, exchanging the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man, exchanging the truth for a lie, worshiping the creature rather than the creator. (Cf. Rom. 1:24) Doesn't *this* explain the basic ambiguity in our response to moon flights — our greatest technical achievement but also a Frankenstein monster?

DARKNESS IN THE WEST

Because of the intensity of humanism's religious zeal — derived as it is from the Gospel itself — its decay is bringing about a chaos and destruction and loss of meaning un-paralleled in the history of mankind. We are, I believe, witnessing the beginning of that chaos in the twentieth century. First in the universities with its clashing ideologies or its assembly-lines of facts and data and information often haphazardly thrown at the innocent student. Then in the political arena, where Marx discovered the emptiness of our ideals of justice and set about to destroy the state. And in the industrial sector, with its inhuman idolization of profit, with its unending strife between employer and employee, and its technicistic reduction of man to a *consuming* thing by means of the advertising brainwashers. In the breakdown of the family: lack of trust, generation-gap, divorce. And so forth: crime, corruption, pollution, drugs, alienation in our cities, externalization of values because of radio and television, racial and class tensions, absence of norms and thus of authority, a return to pre-Christian dionysian paganism in the arts, revival of ancient fertility cults eased by the pill. Wars and rumors of wars. World War One and World War Two, and rumors of World War Three bringing man to the end of times.

Is the 'man of lawlessness', who will indeed come out of the bosom of Christendom — as the *Anti-Christ*, the Liar, who denies that Jesus is the Christ and proclaims himself to be God — is the 'son of perdition' casting his dark shadows unto the paths of 'Europa' so that the Light of the West is indeed going out? (Cf. II Thess. 2:3f and I John 2:18f, 4:1f)

The brokenness in the heart of modern man is becoming apparent in the polarization of forces in society, notably in politics and the university. And it is no wonder that a new and young generation turns away from the heritage of the fathers. Some become romantics, and find escape in sex or drugs, the rites of strange religions like Zen Buddhism, or the mysteries of the zodiac. Others become revolutionaries, believing that the present 'system' of the political, economic, educational establishment must be destroyed before a new and more meaningful society can be built. After all, is it not true that the greatest political leaders of the 'free' world — Roosevelt, Churchill, De Gaulle — were distinctive because they protected the *old* order (against the excesses of that same order: Fascism), while the leaders with a *vision* for our century — Lenin and Mao-tse-tung — were Marxists? That is,

revolutionaries who destroyed before they built anew? In the meantime, the revolutionaries-in-idea overlook the chaos caused by revolutionaries-in-power.

Does Christianity still have a message for this world? Or should it, like so many religions of the past, slowly disappear into folklore and into history text-books and into museums, simply to make room for a revived individualistic humanism or an expanded collectivist humanism? That is the question to be answered, no longer in terms of Western Europe or North America, but in a global context. For now we are beginning to realize that the cross of Jesus Christ stands at the center of human history, casting its light *or* its shadow over the entire world. And all of the history-makers of that world must decide whether that Cross is a stumbling-block and utter foolishness, or whether that Cross is the Wisdom of God, whence our Life comes.

PART TWO: INTERMEZZO:

THE HARVEST IS PLENTIFUL, THE LABORERS ARE FEW

Must Christ-followers now leave that world-in-crisis to itself? I think not. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.” (John 3:16) In order to get the message of Christ’s salvation into focus let us look at its Biblical setting.

THE REVELATIONAL SETTING

Man is God’s man (I Tim. 6:11) : made in His image; a loving servant of his Maker, along with his fellow-man; assigned to do the world’s work (the mandate of creation); at peace on earth (paradise). “And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good.” (Gen. 1:31).

While God is the sovereign Creator, man is the maker of history. For history is the stage on which man is to execute his divine assignment: molding the normative potentials of the creation-order into human culture. Man’s path through time is, as it were, the cultivation of the garden into a city: the ‘City of God’, with its families, its states, its schooling, its art, its justice, its economy, its technology, its beauty, its —everything. That ‘City of God’ was intended to be a scene of holiness, of righteousness, of goodness, of love, of harmony, of peace: shalom.

Sin makes all of this impossible. In sin, man declares that he no longer needs the Lord, that he can go it alone, that his humanity is not to be found in loving service but in being the master of his existence. Sin makes man a stranger to God (‘Adam, where art thou?’); to himself (‘I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself’); to his fellow-man (‘I will put enmity’); and it makes him a stranger in this world (‘thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you’). It is no longer ‘good’ in God’s creation. Shalom will not come. Paradise is lost. The City of God will not be built.

But the Lord is not only a Creator; He is also a Re-creator, a Redeemer. He took it upon Himself to begin building the ‘City’ of peace, with those men and women as His covenantal co-workers who repented from their evil ways. Mankind did not respond; instead, built the City of 83 Man. (Gen. 11). We see the rise of ancient civilizations — Sumeria, Egypt, Babylonia, Assyria, China, Ancient India, Greece and Rome — and their death, their decline, their sterility, because man did not desire to live by every word that proceeded from the mouth of God. That which ancient man did discover in a partial response to the mandate of creation was often immediately idolized (Rom. 1:22,23), bringing upon himself the curse of decay. (Rom. 1:24,25).

So the Lord starts again. He calls Abraham out of the City of Man and makes him a sojourner in Canaan: that little spot where for a thousand years He will localize and particularize His original global intents. He blesses Abraham, so that — at a later stage in history — all the families of the earth will be blessed. (Gen. 12:3) And God spells out to the sons of Abraham, by means of Moses, what the rules for the good life are. “Hear all that the Lord our God will say: and speak to us all that the Lord our God will speak to you; and we will hear and do it.” “Hear, o Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” “Be careful to do these commandments, that it may go well with you.” (Deut. 5:27; 6:4,5,3) In response to this gracious *re-publication of the Lord’s intents* man is in principle no longer a stranger to his Maker, to himself, to his fellows, and to his earthly setting. The contours of the Kingdom appear in skeletal outlines in the land flowing with milk and honey. In the fear of the Lord is the beginning — at least that — of wisdom, of knowledge.

*With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow
myself before God on high?
He has showed you, o man, what is good; and what
does the Lord require of you
but to do justice, and to love kindness,
and to walk humbly with your God? Micah 6:6,8.*

After a thousand years of preparation, the Son of Man, born of the virgin Mary, proclaims to men: “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt. 4:17; cf. Mk. 1:15) His death on the cross *in principle* breaks the hold of the Evil One over the hearts — and lives — of men. On that Easter Morning, Christ becomes the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. (I Cor. 15:20) He died so that we may live. And that Son of Man is thus the Christ, the Master of men, the Lord of history — which is now radically re-directed with respect to its ultimate destiny. The coming of the Kingdom can already be noticed. Behold, it is within you. (Luke 17:21)

For He who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood has now made us a Kingdom, priests to His God and Father. (Cf. Rev. 1:5,6) Behold, what a job, what power, what joy!

The seventy returned with joy, saying, “Lord, even the demons are subject to use in your name! “And he said to them, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing shall hurt you.” (Luke 10:17)

Christ’s brief ministry reveals to men the nature of His reign. He heals the brokenhearted ones, the alienated; he saves those who are lost. He has compassion on the hungry; he cures the leper, the lame, and the blind. He sets the rule for citizenship in His Kingdom: ‘Follow me.’ And he demands unconditional response: “Immediately they left their nets and followed him.” (Matt. 4:20) He explains the cost of discipleship: The Son of Man has nowhere to lay down His head. Let the dead bury the dead. Give everything you have to the poor. No one can serve two masters. Seek ye first. Without Me you can do nothing. I am the way, the truth, and the life. His is the only name whereby man can be saved, can find genuine humanity. He

made all things, he re-made all things, in Him all things hang together, and now He desires to be pre-eminent in all things. (Cf. Col. 1:15)

The great spiritual conflict which Christ thus introduces into human lives and mankind's history is the conflict between the Kingdom of Darkness and the Kingdom of Light. Men find meaning in terms of the Kingdom they belong to. The tension in the hearts of men, of Christians too, between demands for allegiance to the one lord or the other will not cease until the holy city will descend out of heaven, when the dwelling of God is with men and they shall be His people. (Rev. 21)

THE TASK OF THE NEW HUMANITY

In order to establish His reign, His Kingdom in the hearts and lives of men, Christ wants to make use of us. He makes His followers fishers of men: He has no other instruments for this task. The point is explicit in the book of Matthew. It begins with: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (4:17) And then throughout the book — the meaning of which escapes us if we do not read it in its entirety again and again — we see Christ explaining the nature of the Kingdom. Then, after He has risen from His death of reconciliation, He instructs his small band of followers what it is all about. The original cultural mandate of Genesis, never fully grasped by men estranged from their Maker, now comes to us in the context of the evangel, the Good News:

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age. (Matt. 28:18)

Perhaps of all the apostles Paul caught the message most clearly, and I cannot resist quoting the description of his — and our — assignment:

Of this gospel I was made a minister . . . to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make all men see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things: that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in

the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose which he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and confidence of access through our faith in Him. (Eph. 3:7f)

YOU HAVE THE NAME OF BEING ALIVE, BUT YOU ARE DEAD

The church often failed in its task; it did not always live by faith and thus lacked boldness and confidence. This was at times true the Old Testament covenant people. So the Lord sent His prophets: “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.” (I Kings 18:21). “How the faithful city has become a harlot, she that was full of justice!” (Isa. 1:21) In the New Testament, too, people just didn’t seem to catch on. The scribes and pharisees, the official authorities in the very orthodox Jewish synagogues, in reality had no authority because they missed the revelational point of the Old Testament. (Cf. Matt. 7:28; John 8:39) And Christ’s judgment of ‘orthodoxy’ is severe: “Woe to you lawyers! for you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering.” (Luke 11:52) “You hypocrites! ... teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.” (Matt. 15:7f) When the office-bearers in the synagogues so abuse their authority, Christ tells them what he tells us, in the words to Nicodemus. In spite of his immense theological training, Nicodemus must start from scratch: “Truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the Kingdom of God.” (John 3:3) Jesus has compassion on the crowds thus preached to death, “because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” (Matt. 9:36) And he invites those burdened by a narrow orthodoxy and a rigid legalism to follow Him: “Come unto me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” (Matt. 11:28f)

Even the disciples did not immediately understand that they had a role in the coming of the Kingdom of peace, that they had to become doers of the word and not hearers only. (James 1:22) Puzzled when they could not cast out a demon, Christ tells them: “Because of your little faith.” (Matt. 17:20; cf. 14:31) Often their hearts were hardened and thus they did not grasp the meaning of Christ’s miracles, viz. that suffering and pain and hunger have no place in the Lord’s good creation, and that those who follow Christ must alleviate the distress: “You give them something
86 to eat.” (Cf. Mark 6:52 and 37) At the most crucial moments in Christ’s ministry they argue childishly as to who will be first in the kingdom. (Cf. Luke 22:24) Just before Christ’s ascension, when they are still looking for some sudden turn of

affairs with respect to the establishment of the Kingdom, the Lord has to remind them: “You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth.” (Acts 1:6f) For His Kingdom comes through our witness.

In the early church there was a good deal of confusion precisely about the range of missions. Peter had to be reminded by a vision that the distinction between Jews and Gentiles belonged to the past: “What God has cleansed, you must not call common.” (Acts 10:15) And, quite typically, what one might call the first synod of the early church dealt with a dispute between Christ-followers: whether the Gentiles should hear the word of the Gospel. (Acts 15) Later, when Jewish legalism entered the Asia Minor churches, Paul had to be forthright: “do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.” (Gal. 5:1) At the end of the first century spiritual decay had entered many of the older congregations. And the judgment of the Lord of the Church is most explicit:

I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. Would that you were cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth. I know your works: you have the name of being alive, and you are dead; Awake, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God. Remember then what you received and heard; keep that, and repent. (Rev. 3:15f and 1f)

These words echo through every century of Christian history: “You have the name of being alive, and you are dead.” *Only in the measure that the Christian church today is willing to subject itself to this critique, this judgment of our Lord, is there hope for us.* “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” (Rev. 3:22) And again, only in that measure can a world which God so loved hear through the churches, the Good News: “that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in His name to all nations.” (Luke 24:47)

SUMMARY

What has been said so far can be summed up as follows: (1) We face a spiritual crisis of un-paralleled proportions in North America because the humanist consensus which has guided our culture for the last few centuries is breaking apart. The ideals of humanism have lost their foundation; an era of skepticism is upon us. The

pragmatic efforts of especially our politicians — Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Trudeau — to establish a national consensus are shattered by the polarization of political forces into extreme right and left wing directions, reminiscent of politics 87 in the Germany of the twenties and early thirties. (2) The role of Christianity is to witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ and to raise visible symbols of the good reign of our Lord by breaking the hold of the evil one over the lives of men and their cultures. (3) Because of the hardness of human hearts there is always the distinct possibility that followers of Christ individually and even the church as a whole may lose sight of their reconciling and healing task in an estranged world. (4) If the church does not then repent and return to its first love, the Lord of the church may remove its candlestick from its place, as the Ephesians were told. (Rev. 2:5)

PART THREE: THE EVANGELICAL CHURCHES:

A DIAGNOSIS

THE TASK OF THE CHURCHES

Since the major expression of Christianity in our time is found in the institutional churches — the journalists like to refer to it as ‘organized religion’ — one must not be surprised that in this brief compass I will speak mainly about these. In former times the Christian faith was also expressed in other dimensions of life, in the political order, in art and literature, in moral conviction, and in philosophy. By and large that is not the case today; the fact that it is not is a consequence of the disease we are diagnosing. But in view of this we must focus on the expression of the Christian religion in the ecclesiastical world.

In order to avoid misunderstanding I must stress that I am not one of those who argue that everything ‘Christian’ must be accomplished by, with the blessing of, and subject to the authority of the institutional church. But I do think that the absence of what Harry Blamires called *a Christian mind* in the arts, education and politics is indeed closely connected with the conception of the nature of Christian commitment on the part of those who occupy positions of leadership in the institutional churches. I have in mind here the leadership that we find in the ministry, in the theological schools, and in the ecclesiastical press. For somewhere along the line it is true here also that ‘a tree is known by its fruits’ — an adage I

hardly dare quote because of the context in which Christ Himself used it. (cf. Matt. 7:16f and 12:33)

In order to gain a measure of clarity in my diagnosis I can mention the major tasks of the institutional church as I have learned these from my reformed background:

(1) The proclamation of the Word of the Lord. Preaching declares Christ as the Way, the Truth, the Life and the Light for all men, and teaches them to observe all that the Risen Lord has commanded the church (cf. Matt. 28:20) so that the Kingdom of that Lord can become a reality in the hearts and thus in the lives of men. The proclamation of the Word is positive: it points to the Saviour who can heal our broken lives. The proclamation of the Word is negative: it is the Spirit's instrument in casting out the demons that possess us, the foreign lords, the idols, the 'nothings' — in our so-called individual existence as well as in our cultural endeavors.

(2) The nurture of the faith of believers and their children. In doing this the church teaches men that the meaning and security and hope of their life is not to be found on earth but with the Lord. Here, too, the church calls a spade a spade: "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin." (Rom. 14:23)

(3) The organization of a center of communal worship for the believers. The church provides a liturgical setting where men call upon the name of the Lord (cf. Gen. 4:26) in the beauty of holiness. (cf. Ps. 96:9)

(4) The work of the diaconate. Like Christ performing miracles as signs and symbols of the new order, the church exhibits the good life in the Kingdom by alleviating the immediate needs of those who are in dire distress and pain.

(5) One might add that the institutional church, when it enters a new area in missions or evangelism or in times of crisis, will often assume secondary tasks (in education, medical care, etc.) in order to make its primary task possible.

THE WORD AND THE KINGDOM

At this point I think we can locate the problem at hand. One does not have to argue that *without a proper understanding of the Word* the institutional church will fail — in whole or in part — in the execution of all of its major tasks as outlined above. Now, contrary to general opinion in evangelical circles, 'understanding the

Word' is not to be equated with 'intellectual assent to an infallible Bible.' Rather, it is accepting Jesus Christ as the Creator and Redeemer of all things and thus as the Lord and Savior of my life. Only after clarity has been given at this most fundamental level of heart-knowledge and heart-commitment can one begin to grasp properly the trustworthiness of the Bible, the Word of God Written.

With respect then to the first and crucial task of the institutional church I believe we can safely say that *the proclamation of the Word is the proclamation of the Kingdom*. The testimony of the Scriptures is clear on this. Christ Himself defined His task in these words: "I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God ... for I was sent for this purpose." (Luke 4:43; cf Matt 4:23) And He instructs His disciples to do the same: "Preach as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand,' Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out demons." (Matt. 10:70

The world-shaking effect of proclamation is evident in this passage. The Word of the Kingdom is up-setting; it destroys old systems of values. But it also sets things straight again. *It comes with a new order for human existence*. The devils are cast out. It brings forgiveness. And in this way the proclamation of the Word ushers in the good reign of the new Master. We are no longer enemies of God but become His sons. We are freed and discover who we are. When our hearts are opened to the Lord our personalities are opened to our fellow-men; we begin to see that the meaning of life lies not in being served but in serving. (cf. Matt. 20:25) And we notice that life, once a burden, becomes a blessing, a joy forever. Avenues of healing and restoration suggest themselves everywhere in the hollow lives, relations, and institutions of men still caught in dark allegiances. And thus, one by one, the effects of sin are removed: the blind see, the lame walk, and the lunatics are liberated. The Kingdom of heaven is indeed like a leaven: it does not want to leave anything untouched. That is the vision of the Kingdom which Christ-followers may dream, may live for.

THE LOSS OF A VISION

We have lost the Biblical vision of the Kingdom of God. *That is the heart disease of the churches today*. In the measure that the church's understanding of the Kingdom is not Scriptural its preaching is not Scriptural.

To be concrete I will present some examples from the denomination of which I am a member, the Christian Reformed Church. In doing this I do not in any way want to discount and disparage the many excellent facets of its

denominational life, such as: the possibility of an appeal to the Scriptures; the Biblical piety found in most of its homes; the sense of belonging together as a denomination while spread over vast areas of a huge continent; the faithful work of ministers and consistories; the system of family-visiting; the great willingness to sacrifice time and money to make possible not only the existence of local congregations but the very numerous and extensive denominational programs in missions and evangelism and education. One might indeed conclude that from many normal points of view the Christian Reformed Church is healthy. But my fundamental critique of the role of the evangelical churches in American life can most clearly be illustrated in terms of the 'healthy' life of one such church. I am certain that many will recognize that this description is typical and fits other denominations as well.

We have reduced the Biblical vision of the Kingdom of God to numerous often conflicting conceptions. One segment of the denomination is of the opinion that our major 'Kingdom concern' lies in keeping the denomination 'orthodox'. Here we discover a great stress on the importance of the church's creeds and a rather rigid adherence to reformed theology as it was formulated around the turn of the century by Kuyper and Bavinck, Hodge and Warfield. Interestingly, however, the great theological depth of a Warfield, the catholicity of a Bavinck, and the cultural breadth of a Kuyper are not found in this segment. Another group in the denomination, influenced by pietism and fundamentalism, stresses the importance of 'soul saving'. Here there is less interest in dogma and theology, more in 'personal Bible study' and the hymns written during the last two hundred years. A third group has sort of given up on North America entirely. After all, the number of persons who are received into the denomination through evangelism is small. Instead, this group focuses on foreign missions, where the heathen must be saved from the darkness of paganism before the tide of nationalism makes it impossible. By and large, the work of the church abroad is performed in an individualistic pietist manner. A fourth group must attend Christian schools since the public schools are a great spiritual danger. And of late, keeping up with contemporary trends, some of the younger and more educated members begin to argue that the churches must do a lot more in the area of social justice.

Needless to say, some of these groups in the denomination overlap in interests. But as 'directions' they can quite easily be distinguished. And in another denomination,

the interests, the stresses, the arguments, the various groups—will doubtless be somewhat different. For we haven't even concerned ourselves with liberal Protestantism where the old slogans of the social gospel, slightly redecorated to be sure, can still be found. And we have neglected the opposite side of the spectrum: gospel hall revivalism.

A CRAZY QUILT

But in all this one thing is quite clear. North American Protestantism represents a crazy quilt of a hundred different aims and directions. And whatever one section considers foremost, that will in effect condition its view of the Gospel, that will in effect condition the direction within which the Word is proclaimed. And so we find moralistic preaching, dogmatic preaching, liturgical preaching, decision-for-Christ preaching, social Gospel preaching, dispensational preaching, high church preaching, low church preaching, and a dozen other kinds of preaching.(1)

But in it all the Word of the Lord for North America is not heard. The 'principalities and powers, the world rulers of this present darkness, today's spiritual host of wickedness'—they are not exposed for what they are. And thus *these* forces condition our lives as they come to us by means of the educational system, the media, the political parties, and the myths of the industrial establishment. And it should not come as a surprise that those who make the decisions for our time and its sensitive youth do not turn to Christianity in searching for answers to the problems of a society falling apart at the seams. For the adherents of Christianity, those who call themselves Christians, those who proudly bear the name of evangel-icals, these do not evidence a faith in the radical renewing power of the Evangel as the source of Light for dark and dreary days.

The Bible itself is plain enough. Do we still believe it? "If any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come." (II Cor. 5:17f) If a society needs newness, Christ-followers better exhibit it. If a society needs light, it better shine through the witness and the life of Christ-believers. For, as Paul writes, God the Father "has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." (Col. 1:13f) Then, almost *ad nauseam* I suppose, we must remind ourselves of those passages in Colossians where we are told who our Master is, what His Kingdom is like, and where we fit in. Christ came to reconcile *all things, whether*

on earth or in heaven, making peace, shalom, by the blood of His cross. We, once estranged from God and hostile to his intents, he *has* now reconciled. And now that ministry of reconciliation, the ministry of peace, of erecting at least the symbols of the good life in the *entirety* of human existence--that ministry has now been entrusted to us. "So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us." (II Cor. 5:17f) That appeal must go out not to men as individuals, for these do not exist. Men are not islands, isolated atoms in a social ocean. Men are persons whose decisions determine the course of history in hundreds of personal and communal relationships, in 'families, states, schools, industrial complexes. In these relationships men try to realize norms, ideas and ideals. When a person accepts the appeal of the Gospel and becomes a Christ-follower, his norms and ideals change. These new ideals he will try to implement in the multiple relations in which he stands, knowing that he is never on 'neutral' ground, knowing that without Christ he can do nothing. (cf John 15:5) The confession that *Christ is Lord* is uttered not merely in the church and in the home but also in the state, in the school, in business. The life of the believer is not divided, limping with two different opinions for two carefully sealed off areas. For he knows that great things are bound to happen when he can witness to the Good News!

THE SACRED AND THE SECULAR

But what do we see? Contrary to the entire Biblical witness, a major tradition in the history of Christianity has persistently limited the range and radicality of the Kingdom of God so that it affected only a part of human existence. That un-Scriptural tradition is dominant in the orthodox Protestant churches in the United States and Canada. The reformed wing of Protestantism has often done battle with that major tradition but today even that wing has largely succumbed and adjusted itself to the major trend.

This means that within each denomination we are confronted with the dualism between the 'sacred' and the 'secular'. The sacred area of life is subject to the rule of Jesus Christ. The secular somehow becomes neutral with respect to the Creator and Redeemer and thus escapes His reign, is not subject to His sovereign and reconciling order. The major differences between the various denominations and within them concern these questions: (a) the exact place where we move from the sacred to the secular; (b) the specific content of the sacred domain; (c) the extent and direction of one's involvement in the secular or neutral domain; and (d) the manner and e

secular domain can influence Christian conduct and values in the sacred domain. The answers to these questions are endless and forever changing since they depend upon the spiritual climate of each new period of history. But these answers are bound to be misleading since the very setting of the problems they are meant to solve is at odds with the way a Christ-follower must be in the world without being of it.

PART FOUR: RESULTS OF THE ILLNESS

This diagnosis of our basic illness goes a long way toward explaining some of the secondary, though still important, problems that we find in the evangelical churches. These problems are results of the major affliction.

INTROVERSION

Since we have nearly identified the Kingdom of our Lord with its ecclesiastical manifestation, it is not surprising that most of our 'Kingdom activities' are indeed denominational activities. We build churches with extensive educational wings, engage in all sorts of 'church' gatherings, publish church periodicals, support denominational theological schools, erect church-related colleges, etc. Most of our 'Christian' activities begin and end with the church—with the denomination of which we happen to be members—as though this were an end in itself. And those who work within this context, ministers and missionaries and teachers, are indeed described as the full-time Kingdom workers' in our midst. What our fathers used to call church-consciousness has largely been reduced to denominational consciousness.

A HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH?

Closely connected with this is the loss of the church's *catholicity*. We love to sing: "We are not divided, All one body we, One in faith and doctrine, One in charity." But the institutional churches in North America *are* divided, tragically broken into a hundred diverse pieces. We are not unlike the Athenians of Paul's day who were indeed in every way very religious with altars at every street corner. Our towns and suburbs are cluttered with shopping plazas and gas stations and church buildings of every denominational stripe. We are invited 'to worship at the church of *our* choice.' How can Christians confess one Lord of history while in the actual historical situation His followers pursue a hundred different directions? The

brokenness of the institutional church spells its weakness. It has lost its directive place in human culture. The churches no longer make history since they do not speak the unifying language of Pentecost but the confused language of the Tower of Babel. This loss of catholicity is distinctly contrary to the New Testament norms for the church. (cf. John 17; I Cor. 12) The unity of the body of Christ must be manifested in the institutional church. And an escape into the conception of an 'invisible' church here is indeed that: an escape. A body is visible, so should its unity be visible.

The institutional churches have lost sight of the unifying directives of the Kingdom of God and in reality no longer have a *common* allegiance to the one Lord. Instead, because of a *multiplicity* of compromises with various non-Biblical life-conceptions the churches have gone into a *multiplicity* of confusing and conflicting directions. The twentieth-century attempts to overcome this diversity by means of a common-denominator between various denominations are bound to fail. A new unity, for which all must strive, can only be found in a new allegiance to the Lord of the Church, the Head of the Body. And that, I think, implies in the first place a recovery of the vision of the Kingdom, the heart of the Gospel, as taught in the Holy Scriptures. With respect to the central teachings of these Scriptures each denomination must most humbly be willing to look upon its own traditions in matters of faith and practice as of secondary import. For we have all gone astray. Each denomination, in its denominational onesidedness, represents a schismatic, often a heretical tendency. Perhaps if we begin by recognizing this our hearts can be opened to listen to the voice of the Master Who expects immensely great things from those who bear His name.

BY SCHISMS RENT ASUNDER

The recovery of the church's catholicity therefore presupposes the recovery of the vision of the Kingdom of God. For only when the churches learn to proclaim to the nation and all of its inhabitants both the blessing and the judgments of the Lord's Kingly rule will they discover the necessity of doing the job together. When the churches are engaged in that kind of redemptive activity they will also discover the real occasions for ecclesiastical discipline. For they will be able to test the spirits to see whether they are of God. They will detect the false prophets that have gone out into our world. They will know who the enemy is: the lying spirit of antichrist who denies that Jesus is of God. (I John 4:10) Any denomination that is engaged in this kind of redemptive proclamation in the United States or Canada will want to work closely together with any other denomination that is similarly concerned. And

such a denomination will readily relativize secondary differences in order to contribute to the creation of a mighty army that fights the good fight, that engages in battles that count, that preaches the only Name, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Every Sunday we confess: “I believe a Holy Catholic Church.’ Because of *faith* I still *hope* that millions of believers in a hundred churches can break down the walls of traditions and compromise and narrowmindedness and denominational introversion to come together in one congregation of the Lord Jesus Christ in North America to accomplish the task which that Lord—in the Scriptures—so clearly sets before us.

MUST CHRISTIANS BE CONSERVATIVES?

The lack of unity in Christianity is not confined to denominational fragmentation. The brokenness and confusion is generally present within each denomination as well. The division within denominations can be compared with the various elements of the pragmatic political spectrum as we find it especially in the Anglo-Saxon countries. Indeed, the labels are similar. There is a liberal or ‘progressive’ left wing, a conservative right wing, and in most cases a large somewhat colorless middle-of-the-road group hovering between these.

Since evangelicals, within the context of their ecclesiastical setting, are generally on the ‘conservative’ side of the spectrum I will limit my remarks to this wing. I think that the phenomenon of conservatism in the various Protestant denominations is largely a result of the absence of a Kingdom-vision delineated in the Scriptures and made relevant to the needs of our time. I tend to appreciate the attitude of the conservative, in the area of politics as well as in the churches. For the conservative justifiably loses trust in the leadership of those who want to ‘progress’ *without a clear basis of principle and without a lucid picture of the direction to be pursued*. In most instances the ‘progressive’ wing of Protestantism as a whole and of the evangelical denominations as individual units has not clearly articulated the direction it pursues in terms of an all-embracing Scripturally founded program of thought and action. Without this required clarity as to principle and direction the conservative says: “Sorry, that’s not for me!”

Since the last world war—perhaps the first world war? ! —the progressives in the evangelical churches have not placed before us any new encompassing programs of thought and action with respect to church-reform, the renewal of theology, social involvement and education. To be sure, in order to placate the uneasy conscience of modern fundamentalism there has been a good deal of patchwork. One can detect that in the excellently edited *Reformed Journal* within the Christian Reformed community as well as in the surprisingly successful *Christianity Today* which neatly covers up the scars within the entire evangelical world. But patchwork does not create a revival. And a band-aid type of Christianity today no longer heals the cancer beneath the confusion and aimlessness.

In this setting the conservative *No!* in response to suggestions for fundamental change is understandable. But nevertheless mistaken. Indeed, Christ tells His Church to ‘hold fast what it has until He comes’ and to ‘keep His works until the end’. (Rev. 2:25f) But what the Church must hold on to, keep and conserve is the faith once delivered unto the saints. In terms of that faith the Church will receive power over the nations and shall “rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I—Christ—have received power from my father”. (Rev. 2:27) The institutional churches must reflect that power and must so proclaim the radical Word of the Master that the nations are shaken out of the control of demonic forces. There is nothing particularly conservative about the expression of such Word-power. It upsets the entire spectrum of human values.

If the Gospel is interpreted as basically a conservative force it becomes ineffective. And it is quite clear that the conservative evangelical wing of the Protestant churches has come to a stand-still, defending ever more vehemently—at present especially in the rise of lay movements—a status quo position that is not open to new directions, that is not related to new problems and new needs. Christ’s judgment of the Pharisees is to the point here: “You have a fine way of rejecting the commandments of God, in order to keep your tradition.” (Mark 7:9)

THE SALT HAS LOST ITS SAVOR

But life in the churches must go on. The church periodicals have to be published; professors have to be appointed to the theological schools; denominational boards and administrative positions have to be manned, etc. Who are going to get the opportunity to lead the denominations? The conservatives or the progressives? That

is the problem of the smaller evangelical denomination. But it is also a troublesome question for such giants as the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church and the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. My analysis of evangelicalism as a whole was recently confirmed by the religion editor of *Time* in connection with current tensions in the Southern Baptist Convention: “with one wing straining toward a more progressive stance and the other digging in stubbornly on fundamentals, The SBC’s real problem seemed to be holding everybody under one denominational roof.” (*Time*, June 15, 1970)

In many cases these tensions are resolved by compromises, by the appointments of persons to positions of denominational leadership who are acceptable to both sides of the spectrum. As a result there may be quite some ferment at the extremes of the spectrum; for example, by means of independent periodicals edited by either ‘progressives’ or ‘conservatives’ within one denomination. But at the center, where the actual decisions for the entire denomination are made, there tends to be a colorless and saltless leadership. The decision-makers are interested in maintaining peace, in keeping the bureaucracy alive, in lubricating the ecclesiastical system of finances, in placating or isolating dissident voices. This colorlessness brings with it a lack of genuine honesty and authenticity in dealing with tensions within the denomination and creates an un-prophetic hesitation in dealing with issues in the world outside. A whole range of ‘touchy questions’ especially in the area of morality, sexuality and social justice are carefully kept hidden or ‘solved’ by platitudes. Many middle-aged believers give the impression that Christ-following concerns the maintenance of old rules and passive assent to ancient dogmas so that the young people in the church have no clue as to what Christ-commitment is all about. We alienate many in the church because of this lack of honesty, this saltless Christianity. And many outside of the churches pay no attention whatever to the voice of Christianity when there is no prophecy. For are our churches real lights in a dark world? Do we expose the idols of the age for what they are—demons that distort human life? Of course, we attack the spirit of communism. But do we dare subject the spirit of a materialistic and a capitalistic society—that is, our own society—to the penetrating critique of the Gospel?

THE LOCAL CONGREGATION

What is true of a denomination as a whole is often true of the ministerial leadership in the local congregation. The pastor must minister to the needs of the entire flock. But how does he do this when there are factions in the flock? By trying to please as many as possible? It is most intriguing to note that many pastors simply leave out entire books and chapters of the Holy Scriptures from their sermonizing because they do not want to give offense: we dare not relate their clear message to the issues at hand. In the meantime the flock also loses its salt and at the most crucial point of the church's activity—the proclamation of the Word—we sanction the existing social and ecclesiastical order. And the church itself becomes an 'establishment,' that is, an institution that looks upon itself as an end rather than as an embodiment of II Corinthians 5:17-6:2.

A preacher must *preach*. And there is only one Gospel, one Word, one Direction that he may proclaim to the flock. A preacher is a pastor, i.e. a shepherd, only in the measure that he is a servant, a minister. But then a *verbi divini minister*: a servant of the divine Word and not a servant of the various straying factions in the flock. If a minister interprets his calling differently his flock will be harassed and helpless, like sheep *without* a shepherd.

EVANGELICALISM AND EDUCATION

The one major exception to my general contention that evangelicals have not reached out beyond the walls of the institutional churches concerns the area of education. Where do we stand here? It is impossible to deal with this matter in its entirety since that would require separate and detailed analysis. But a few general observations are in place here.

(1) To begin with, Protestants in both the United States and Canada have relinquished the direction of *the public school system* to the cultural formers of humanism since the middle of the last century without developing an alternative Christian school system. This failure, perhaps more than any other, accounts for the rapid secularization of North American civilization. It would be ludicrous to assume that even a very elaborate Sunday School system could eliminate the values of an increasingly hollow 'democratic way of life' absorbed by the child during twelve or thirteen years of public school attendance. For this reason it is all the more tragic that those denominations which have correctly seen

the important place of the school in the development of the child—like the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church and the Christian Reformed Church—have largely looked upon the Christian schools developed in their milieu as extensions of the denominations and not as avenues of re-directing the educational enterprise in the larger national setting.

(2) At first sight one might expect that the hundreds of *evangelical colleges* especially in the United States would have provided a major alternative spiritual-cultural force to the dominant powers of pragmatic humanism—a humanism now in a stage of technicistic and thus anti-humanistic decline. But what do we find?

Most of the evangelical colleges in America—like Wheaton, Gordon, Calvin—were founded during the last century and a half as theological seminaries or Bible schools to meet the immediate needs of the churches for ministers and evangelists and missionaries. At a later stage of their development they expanded into liberal arts colleges to provide a safe and sound training for the youth of the church beyond the high school level. These schools were thus not in the first place the embodiment of a Christian cultural idea, made relevant to the various scientific disciplines. As a matter of historical fact, in most instances a broadly conceived and Scripturally directed view of life, comparable to the reigning idealist or positivist or pragmatist philosophies of the secular humanist universities supported by public funds, was simply absent. To be sure there was adherence to the ‘fundamentals’ of the Christian faith: an infallible Bible, the virgin birth, deity of Christ, the resurrection. There was strict maintenance of the Christian moral virtues. But there was no commonly accepted Christian philosophy giving cohesion and unity of outlook to the educational enterprise within the Christian colleges.

This problem was further accentuated by the fact that the professors appointed to the non-theological faculties—education, philosophy, the natural sciences, political theory, sociology, etc.—generally received their advanced degrees from the secular universities. In the vacuum thus created the dominant humanist systems of thought exerted immense influence on the spiritual, cultural and philosophic direction of the Christian colleges in the present century. At first it was idealism; then pragmatism; after the second world war an influx of

existentialism; and today, as in nearly every major North American university, the philosophical climate is conditioned by behaviorism and various forms of linguistic analysis. These philosophies are often combined with basic Christian beliefs; but such a synthesis is a confusion of elements that are spiritually foreign to each other.

The result of this development has been that, in spite of immense funds and energies spent, there is no unifying Scriptural direction and central focus in the various educational endeavours around which the staffs of these colleges could rally. And their students are not equipped with a radically Christian 'mind' and message in terms of which the evangelical community could engage itself Christianly and thus meaningfully in the major segments of American culture.

This has been the predicament of Christian higher education since the founding of Harvard and Yale universities. A synthesis basis of 'sacred' and 'secular' elements is like a house divided against itself which cannot stand. For it is always only a question of time before the 'secular' is severed from the 'sacred' and allowed to live its own autonomous life. In other words, the very disease which plagues evangelicalism as a whole is also the plight of its educational enterprises.

The burden of this predicament is borne in the first place by the graduate of the evangelical colleges. When he enters graduate school—and perhaps already before that—he discovers that he may have received a training in Christian doctrine as it is interpreted by the theologians of his church but also that he has no intellectually responsible and Biblically founded alternative to the philosophies that condition the direction in the disciplines of his graduate program. Generally he will then do one of two things. Either he will become a pure 'technician' in his field of research, claiming it to be wholly neutral with respect to any fundamental life-commitment. Or he will become adapt in the philosophical methods that underlie his field, denying their origin in a secularist and reductionist conception of reality. His Christian faith will at best be expressed in activities sponsored by movements like the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship or at worse haunt him like a guilty conscience.

Needless to say, with this background the Christian student has far less to contribute to the current debate about the nature of the university and the

structure of society than his Marxist counterpart. More tragically still, when that Christian student finally assumes his vocation he will hardly be a 'man of God, complete, equipped for every good work.' (cf. II Tim. 3:16) For the inspired Scriptures have not shed their indispensable light upon his 'secular' studies. And thus Christian leaders contribute to the continuing secularization of a technicistic view of life. 'Technicism' stresses the primacy of technique and method and therefore of efficiency. These are the major 'goals' of contemporary American culture. But they are radically at odds with a Christian *Weltanschauung* which never isolates technique and method from the divine order for human existence. Only the recovery of such a *Weltanschauung*, expressed in a Christian philosophy as the common bond among theoreticians in the evangelical colleges, can make these institutions educationally relevant in the future.

ORTHODOX THEOLOGY

The state of evangelical theology is not a healthy one. Since the days of Warfield and Machen the orthodox Protestant churches have not produced theologians who can be compared with the great Europeans, Brunner, Barth and Bultmann, or with the great Americans, Richard and Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich. Outstanding theologians and Christians philosophers are the products of great confrontations between the prophetic message of the Christian faith and the most demanding needs of a century. Since we have not understood the depth of the Christian message nor the profoundly spiritual needs of the twentieth century we have not produced great thinkers. Instead, we have stuck rigidly to the theological systems of the past thinking that present problems can be solved with old answers. In this rigidity we have lost contact with the real greatness of the past so that we cannot meaningfully face the future. The liberating and renewing power of the Gospel does not blow through the halls of our theological schools. And here again the first casualties are the students whose eyes are not opened to great horizons of prophetic proclamation. But we are all the victims of this vicious circle, for the graduates of these theological schools are our pastors and preachers.

PART FIVE: REVIVE US AGAIN, O LORD!

The greatest tragedy of our times lies not in the dominance of a non-Christian faith and practice but in the loss of radical commitment to the Lord of history and the subsequent absence of direction among those who call themselves Christian.

Christianity has lost sight of the nature and purposes of creation. As a result of this it has inevitably lost sight of the purposes of Christ's redemptive work with respect to the unfolding of creation in history. And for this reason Christ-followers do not read the signs of the times and cannot communally assume their responsibilities as bearers of the Cross in our generation. There are many Christian soldiers but there is no mighty army.

And thus before we as Christ-followers, as evangelicals, can address ourselves to the 'world', to those who know not the Cross or have rejected it, we must examine ourselves in the light of the Scriptures to find out again what wholehearted allegiance to our Master is in the totality of His creation.

A NEW REFORMATION?

Christianity, in short, is in need of a reformation and revival more radical than any it has experienced during two thousand years of history. The Christian church of the sixteenth century was faced with decadence in its own bosom and with the rise of a vital humanism. But to a great extent the lives of men were ruled by Christian norms. The process of a horizontal secularization had only just commenced. And the specific issues which led to Luther's reformation were indeed largely of an intramural Christian character.

But today we can no longer speak of a Christian church; it is a house divided against itself on a hundred issues. The internal decadence of the Christian community is so great that the very word 'Christian' is meaningless. The horizon of Christian conviction is so narrow that hardly anyone seriously considers it as a possible contribution to the solution of issues that count. And meanwhile the leadership of our culture—no longer Western but global—is in the hands of those who think they have no need of divine redemption. But even here the spiritual crisis is much more intense today than it was in the days of renaissance humanism. For the *idealism* of humanism-reborn is just about gone; it has declined into a *skepticism* of its own with respect to the basic answers. Modern man is lost—and he knows it. At least if he is honest and does not hide behind the external accomplishments of an industrialized and technicalized but dehumanized civilization. In view of this predicament, shared alike by Christians and non-Christians. I believe that only a radical revitalization of the Church will suffice. We have no guarantee of

‘success’. But start we must, at the beginning. *Ecclesia reformata semper reformanda est.*

CONCLUSION: STEPS TOWARD REVITALIZATION

The intent of this essay is to present a diagnosis, not a therapy. I am really inclined to throw up my hands: “The Lord has forsaken us.” But that can never be the final word, for the Lord is a covenant God, faithful to those who incline their ear toward Him. With that disposition I would like to make a few suggestions as to what I think should happen’ in our midst during the next decade.

(1) If a person is sick the first step toward recovery lies in a *recognition* of the illness. Needless to say, that recognition implies the acceptance of a criterion, a standard. That can only be unconditional allegiance to the Savior and Lord of our lives as delineated in the Scriptures.

(2) After recognition, the illness requires *diagnosis*. I have here tried to present a contribution to the necessary description of our malady. Many will doubtless say that this description is extremely negative. May one indeed speak thus about the institutional church? I would counter by saying that I have certainly been critical but not negative. A critical diagnosis of a serious illness is a positive step toward recovery. Anything less than this would not be an expression of concern for the church.

But this does not mean that my appraisal is necessarily correct. I welcome criticism. We must have other diagnoses of our predicament!

(3) All of this will require an open and honest *discussion* in the churches at every level of their existence.

(a) The members

of local congregations will want to come together in small groups to discover anew in the light of the Scriptures what the Gospel means for our broken lives. The reformational emphasis on the office of every believer must be revived among us. “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them.” Already at this stage a dialogue with

Christians from various denominations should be encouraged. After all, we face the same problems and we have all gone astray.

(a) Council meetings

of the local congregations will have to discuss the business of the Lord and the more routine matters of administration and finance can be farmed out to committees. The elders of the churches particularly must learn anew to execute their responsibilities in the light of Acts 20:28f; they must see to it that the Word is preached, heard and done. The elders will want to discuss with the youth of the church to discover whether in all of the routine of church life they have a Christ-commitment beyond the level of a decent moral life and often memorized faith.

(b) The agendas

of classes and presbyteries will have to be readjusted to a new set of priorities: what are we here for?

(b) Synods and

denominational assemblies will want to cut through a lot of red tape and ecclesiastical bureaucracy in order to devote time to sober and honest and heart-searching reflection.

(c) Those who

govern and work for the larger denominational enterprises—missions, evangelism, radio-ministry, education, publications, college and seminary—will have to appraise their endeavours from the bottom up: What is the message we are bringing? To whom do we bring it? Do we direct ourselves to the fundamental issues of our day? Is our message heard? Do we lose via the back door what we gain by the front door?

(4) All of this will have to take place in an ecumenical setting. Especially ministers of various denominations ought to discuss together the simple question: *Are we really prophets?* And profound differences should not be avoided or covered up but talked through until there is clarity about their presence. In such confrontations the participants should proceed from the assumption that the Word of God Written is not a divisive but a unifying force. As a matter of fact, if Christ the Incarnate Word is our Key, (cf. Luke 11:52) the Revelation contained in the Scriptures is the most powerful bond between men. For that Revelation re-veals the Truth that binds and un-covers the lie that divides.

(5) As long as the churches are sick we should not assign them new responsibilities. Since we have been influenced so much by an activistic pragmatism we tend to engage in all kinds of actions without knowing what we are doing.

(6) We must discover the holiness and the unity and the catholicity of the church. Can we begin striving towards a united evangelical church in North America? We must find out again Who our Master is; what His Word is; who we are; what it means to live the good life in His Kingdom even if we are persecuted for His sake; what our task is as the New Humanity between Christ's first and second coming. Moreover, we must become sufficiently flexible with respect to secondary matters so that we can indeed become ready instruments for the fulfilment of our Master's major assignment. This requires a willingness on our part to make relative—that is, not to minimize but to put in its proper place—what is not central: our traditions, our confessions, our ethnic color, our denominational specificity, our dated theologies and philosophies, our 'old' moralities, our church walls. Perhaps we can begin to find common bonds in a unified allegiance to our one Lord.

.... Revive us again, O Lord. "So that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." (Rom. 6:4)

I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living!

Wait for the Lord;

be strong, and let your heart take courage; yea, wait for the Lord! (Ps. 27: 13f)