

# THE CHRISTIAN TEACHER AND HISTORY

## Can History Be Approached Normatively?

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by

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### 1. A Simple Statement of the Problem

If a Christian teacher asks the question: "Can the subject matter that I teach be approached 'normatively'?", we must realize that an answer to this question requires insight into the word 'norm.' That little word has many meanings. We speak of norms for social conduct, for language, for legislation, for sermons, for morality, for radio and television communication, for bringing up a child, for dental care, for preparing a meal, for group discussions in the classroom, for getting along as a team of teachers, for the production of an automobile, etc.

For the classroom situation; the question is: are there norms, directives, principles, for the teaching of the natural sciences, social studies, the literary and artistic disciplines etc.? Further, one may ask whether these norms are different for the Christian teacher and the non-Christian teacher.

### 2. Many Norms and the One Norm

I believe that the teacher who desires to make the Savior, Jesus Christ, pre-eminent in his work (Col. 1:16), should begin by discovering how the *many* norms that apply to concrete and distinct life-situations are related to the One Norm that applies to every situation, that holds for the entire creation, for human life in its wholeness, and subsequently governs the parts of that wholeness. That One Norm is the Word of God.

### 3. The Word of God in Creation

If we listen to the Scriptures very carefully, we will soon discover that these Scriptures themselves are not in the very first place 'the Word of God.' For the Bible

tells us that by 'the Word of God' all things were created that exist, as it were, 'outside of God.' (Gen. 1:3f, Ps. 93, . Ps. 119, Ps..147, Ps. 148, II Pet. 3:5f). The Word of the Lord is, first of all, the Word of the Creator. (Isa. 43:1). Moreover, the Word of God upholds and sustains all that exists.. This Word. of the Lord calls for the' glorification of the Creator on .the part of entire creation, ..centrally through man who represents the creation before the. face of the Lord. Man images the Lord, made in His likeness, (Gen. 1:26) made almost like a god. (Ps. 8; Seerveld's translation)

The Word of God in creation posits man, as it were, in a *unity* of four basic relations: a) man in his 'relation' to God, b) man in his relation to 'himself,' c) man in his relation to his fellows, and d) man in his relation to the rest.' of creation (the earth and the heavens, where the angels dwell, ministering to the needs of man and singing Hallelujahs).

The unique character of the Christian religion lies in the *revelation* -something man could never have found out by himself - that this unity in these four relations is *life*. This unity implies harmony, wholeness, wholesomeness, peace-shalom, rightness, righteousness. This shalom (the OT word that we translate as 'peace') is life in *paradise*. In paradise all creatures are 'at home,' in their right place: Adam walked with the Lord. Eve was made from the very rib of Adam. She was a helpmeet and partner to him: together they were to dress the Garden so that it would become a beautiful city - a City of God. Adam was to 'have dominion over' the rest of the Lord's creation, bringing all of its created potentials to full fruition. And Adam and Eve knew who they were, co-workers with the Lord, bringing. Him the glory in their work. "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." (Gen, 1:31) It was 'covenantally' good.

#### **4. The Word of God asks Love**

The Word of God for the creation calls for the glorification of the Maker. That Word, the Norm, can be summed up in another Word: Love. The first and great commandment is this: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.". And a second like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself.". On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets. (Matt. 22:37f). The fulfilment of these two commandments requires man's

stewardly administration of the 'earth' for the 'good' and well-being of all; assisted by the unseen servants of the Lord, the ministering angels.

## **5. The One Word Has Many Dimensions**

The One Word of God has many dimensions. For the creation has many inter-related *parts* and *potentials*. For each 'part' and each 'potential' the Word of God has a special directive, a special order, a special mandate. There are rocks and trees and creeping things. Clouds and colors and crystals. And man? When his heart indeed is opened to the Lord in love, he recognizes that the One Word implies many mandates, that the One Norm brings with it a multiplicity of norms, all special derivations of the overarching Word. Some of these special mandates and orders are: art, beauty, kindness, knowledge, understanding, justice, language, the gift and challenge of sexuality, emotional purity in one's own personality, emotional affinity with one's fellow-servant, the care of, things and beasts, the bringing together of complexities in the Lord's creation. for the makings of new things: technology and industry, the building of cities within the Garden, the expansion over, the entire planet and far beyond it,. insight into the depths and heights. and breadths of the whole harmonious order of the creation by scientific research and theoretical, reflection, the courting of a loving partner, the nurture and training of children, the development of justice in the bodies politic, the manufacture of tools and equipment for the quicker mobility and satisfaction of new needs and aspirations.

## **6. The Word of God is a 'Cultural Mandate'**

Summing the matter up, one may rightly say that from the vantage-point of our reflections the Word of God is a 'cultural mandate' to mankind: so to dress the garden of paradise in its original shalom-setting that the contours of the City of, God would be fleshed out by Adam. and Eve's children and-children's children in • the path of time.

In. this broad context, the question under discussion, "Can History be approached . normatively?", refers to mankind's entire response to the Lord's Word as a mandate for cultural development in the sequence of time. Has mankind obeyed the Lord? What does that - obedience or disobedience - mean for our 'understanding' of past cultures, civilizations, wars, tools, technologies, nation-building, institutions, art-

forms, revolutions, cultural leaders, growth and decadence of civilizations, new ideas and new institutions, our own cultural climate, etc.

### **7. Man is the 'Maker' of History: the Former of Culture**

It should be clear from these comments that in my view man is the 'maker' of history. God is the Creator. Man responds to the Creator by dressing the garden: by responding to the One Word and its many dimensions, also its many 'cultural' dimensions. The responsibility for the direction of culture .in the time-span of history is man's. A normative understanding of-history presupposes this view of man as God's imager, as a re-sponder, an answerer. An answerer to mandates' that are addressed to man by his Maker, Who- because he. is man's Maker - is simultaneously man's Master.

### **8. Man's Proud Pursuit to Go it Alone**

Sin breaks man's friendship with the Lord; it expresses man's proud pursuit to go it alone in the path of time. But the break of man's bond with God destroys the peace of paradise: man no longer knows his true. self as servant; man is alienated from his fellows; man is out of touch with the earth.. It is no longer good in God's creation; man is no longer at home: he becomes a stranger in a foreign land.

### **9. The City of God and the City of Man**

After the fall, God graciously seeks man again: "Adam, where art thou"? The Word of God now comes to .man as judgment, but also as grace. For the Creator now reveals himself as the Redeemer, intending the redemption, the restoration, of that which man, as head of the creation had destroyed. From this moment man's response to . the Word of the Lord is one of obedience ,of disobedience, or a 'mixture' of both. This is the first point that' a Christian teacher of history must. learn to understand and relate to the student in the history class and in Bible studies.

This means that in the path of history we are confronted with two spiritually opposing directions: the building of the City of God by those who learn to listen to the Word of the Master and the building of the City of Man by those who twist and distort the Word to suit their own devices. (Rom. 1)

In the City of Man we do indeed see a response to the (cultural) mandate of the Lord, but always in a distorted form. God judges that response; this is the meaning of Genesis 3-11: The story of Lamech (sons: Jabel, the father of those who dwell in tents and have cattle; Jubal: the father of those who play the lyre • and the pipe; Tubal-cain, the forger of instruments of bronze and iron; Gen. 4:17-44 The story of the Flood. The story of the Tower of Babel: revealing the brokenness in the City when God is not the Lord.

Because of the overpowering character of unbelief in the cultural response, God takes Abraham out of the City of Man (the great center of Sumerian civilization, Ur of Chaldees), and places him in the land of Canaan, where the Lord localizes his intents - originally 'global' - until the coming of Jesus Christ. Christ is the Word Incarnate, the perfect servant, who ushers in the Kingdom: (Matt. 4).. •

## **10. The -Kingdom of Light and the Kingdom of Darkness**

The time between Christ's first coming and His second is most fundamentally conditioned by the spiritual-religious conflict between the Kingdom of Light and the Kingdom of Darkness, between Christ and the Anti-Christ. We see the fulfilment of prophecy:

Have no fear; for I am with you;  
I will bring your children from the east  
and gather you all from the west:  
I will say to the north, 'Give them up',  
and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.  
Bring my sons and my daughters from afar,  
bring them from the ends of the earth;  
bring every one who is called by my name,  
all whom I have created, whom I have formed,  
all whom I have made for my glory,' (Isa. 43: 5f., NEB).

## **11. The Written Word of God**

The heart, essence and thrust of the Word of God in creation, in judgment and grace, - in the Gospel, - the Goodness. - and in Jesus Christ, by Whom God has spoken in these- last days (Hebr. 1:2), is infallibly recorded in the Bible, which is thus 'the Word of God Written'. The Bible does not contain God's 'special revelation', as

theologians generally think, but His 'general revelation', the widest and most encompassing Word that He gave to mankind. The Word it reveals in its reference . to the Word for creation, in its climax in Jesus Christ, Whose name is THE WORD OF GOD (Rev.19:13), and in its directives for man's path from the Garden to Golgotha to the New Jerusalem, - this Word is all man needs to hear, to believe,-to proclaim and do. It reveals the Truth that binds and un-covers the Lie that divides.

**12. Within this context the following facets for a Biblical Understanding of History can be seen:**

- a. Culture is the unfolding of God's Creation-Word by man(kind).
- b. Man is the 'maker' of history.
- c. The cultural unfolding-process is an opening-up process.
- d. History is in principle a unity in time: the norm of continuity, made possible in Jesus Christ.
- e. History is in principle a unity in space, the norm of globality, made possible in Jesus Christ, realized in the twentieth century (the Two Kingdoms in. Three Worlds).
- f. Culture, as an expression of the Kingdom-Word, is a question of the 'simultaneity of norm-realization' (differentiation, integration, disintegration).
- g. The dislocation of our times - industrially directed materialism - can be uncovered at its *spiritual* roots (contrary to the interpretation of the traditional or the revolutionary-revisionist historians).

**13 Concrete Suggestions for the Teaching of History**

(see a, below, p. 10).

#### **14. Bibliographical References:**

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- d. B. Zylstra, "Hegel, Marcuse, and the New Left"? *The Gordon Review* (vol. XI, 5, 1970; Reprinted ICS Mimeo.)
- e. J. H. Olthuis, and B. Zylstra, "Confessing Christ in Education", *International Reformed Bulletin*, (Summer Issue, 1970; ICS Mimeo.)
- f. J. H. Olthuis and B. Zylstra, "Schools in the Christian Community." *Calvinist-Contact*, October 22 and 29, 1970; ICS Mimeo.; for a sociological analysis of tile Christian educational enterprise in the contemporary historical setting.