

GUARDIAN

Westminster Seminary Commencement Address

Corruption of the Best

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Westminster Theological Seminary was founded in 1929, 34 years ago. I ought to know, for I was a member of the original faculty. Now a good deal can happen to a seminary in 34 years. In fact, a good deal can happen to a seminary in half that time, in 17 years. Some of us have witnessed that very thing. I was a graduate student at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1912. It was at that time a bulwark of Orthodoxy. Seventeen years later, in 1929, it had changed so radically that Westminster Seminary had to be founded as the succession of the old, the true, Princeton. However, as for Westminster, 34 years after its founding it invites for a commencement address a member of its original faculty. That may well indicate, and no doubt does, that it continues on the same solid foundation on which it was built, the infallible and inerrant Word of God and, I may add, that interpretation of the Word which is known as the Reformed faith.

The Romans used to say, "*Corruptio optimi pessima*"; that is, "The corruption of the best is the worst."

How right they were! Few things taste as good as a ripe strawberry; few things taste as bad as a rotten strawberry. One of the noblest gifts of God to man is the gift of speech. By it man is related to God. It is a significant aspect of the image of God in man. But what if it is corrupted? James, the brother of the Lord, has told us: "The tongue is a fire, a world of iniquity . . . It defileth

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the whole body and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set on fire of hell" (Jas. 3:6). Angels rebelled against God and became demons; their chief was transformed into the very devil.

The ancient Romans were aware that the corruption of the best is the worst. So are we. So is Satan. And he makes frequent and effective use of that knowledge.

Scripture tells us that Satan goes about as a roaring lion (I Pet. 5:8). Then his object is to devour. Scripture also tells us that he operates as an angel of light (II Cor. 11:14). Then his object is to deceive, if possible, God's very elect. And it must be admitted that he often succeeds in leading some of the elect astray for a time.

What are his tactics when he operates as an angel of light? Of his many devices let me specify two. Often he mingles a little truth with a big lie. In that way he would render the lie palatable. However, if I may change the metaphor, that is hardly his trump card. Perhaps his cleverest device is to mingle a little lie with a big truth. Often the lie is so small in comparison with the truth as to be hardly noticeable. In other words, he leavens the most precious truths of the Christian religion with just a bit of falsehood. But when that leaven has done its work the result is appalling. The corruption of the best has become the worst.

I want to call attention on this occasion to a few instances of such work of the devil. And before doing so let me remark that, although Satan is wont to employ men, not every man in his employ is necessarily his child. Often he makes use of men respectable as well as respected.

The Bible Is the Infallible Word of God

That the Bible is the infallible Word of God is the most basic truth of the Christian religion. If you want to speak of fundamentals, this is the most fundamental of all Christian fundamentals.

What does Satan have to say on this subject?

He tells us that the Bible is indeed the God-given infallible rule for faith

and life, in fact the one and only such rule. When Satan says that, he utters a truth, a big truth, a most significant truth. That is precisely what the Bible is. To be sure, when Satan affirms this he implies that there are portions of the Bible which do not bear directly on the Christian faith or the Christian life and that those portions may or may not be true. But really, who cares about that? The important fact remains that the Bible is the one and only infallible rule of faith and life.

For centuries Satan has talked in that vein, and he is still doing it today. That position was taken by Faustus Socinus of the second half of the sixteenth century. He taught that, while the Bible is infallible on matters of religion, on all other matters even the apostles may have been mistaken. A similar position was taken by Charles Augustus Briggs, who taught at Union Seminary of New York late in the nineteenth century and early in the present. Essentially the same position is taken by Emil Brunner. When, in the academic year 1938-39, he served in Princeton Seminary as guest professor, he made the statement that listening to the Bible is much like listening to a record of Caruso on a phonograph. In this case one hears the voice of that great Italian tenor but also at least a little scratching of the needle on the record; in the other instance one hears the voice of the infallible God but also the voices of the fallible human authors of the Bible. Rudolph Bultmann, too, who insists that the Bible is in great need of being demythologized, would not deny that it contains God's revelation for faith and life. And how many self-styled conservatives today ascribe infallibility to the so-called *kerugma*, the central message of Scripture, but are less than insistent on the infallibility of those portions of Scripture which they deem to be peripheral!

Illustration

Is it serious to restrict the infallibility of Scripture to matters of faith and morals? In answering that question let me make use of an old illustration. An army had been defeated in battle. It was now in flight. The pur-

suing foe kept shooting down one soldier after another. Finally, however, the fleeing army arrived at a place of safe retreat, the only thing wrong with it, when it got there, being that not a single soldier was left. In like manner, it has been said, he who today gives up part of the Bible will tomorrow give up another part and will sooner or later have nothing left but the two covers.

What is one to think of that illustration? That it proves nothing goes without saying. Illustrations are not intended as proofs. Admittedly, few illustrations, if indeed any, afford a perfect parallel. This illustration has been condemned for being much too strong and for going much too far. But as a matter of fact it is much too weak and does not go nearly far enough. He who presumes to determine what in the Bible is true and what is not, is not merely going to lose the Bible as the Word of God; he has already lost it. Rather, he has rejected it. By the very act of setting up himself as judge he has spurned the Bible as the authoritative Word of God.

More Must Needs Be Said

It has long been contended that the Bible teaches both divine truth and human error and that therefore it is quite incorrect to say that the Bible is the Word of God; to be precise one must merely say that the Word of God is in the Bible. In recent years that ancient heresy has been refined, and this refinement looks very much like an improvement. Karl Barth, for instance, has informed us that the Bible not only *contains* the Word of God but often *becomes* the Word of God. Two men go to one church. They hear the same Scripture read and the same Scriptural sermon preached. The one is truly affected, the other is not. Then God has spoken to the first and to him alone. In his case the Bible is said to have *become* the Word of God. More recently Barth has improved even on that statement. He now says unqualifiedly that the Bible *is* the Word of God. More than a few have been swept off their feet by that pronouncement. They applaud it. "At last," say they, "Barth has come around to the position of the sixteenth-century Reformers." But has he? To be sure, Barth tells us that the Bible is the Word of God, but in the very next breath he

informs us that the Bible contains numerous errors. Listen! To say that the Bible contains both truth and error, God being the author of truth and men being responsible for error, is one thing, and an evil thing. But what is one to think when it is said that the Bible contains both divine truth and human error and that God is responsible for one as well as the other?

Truly, the corruption of the best is the worst.

Godly Conduct Is Essential to Christianity

That godly conduct is essential to Christianity constitutes one of the most emphatic teachings of Holy Scripture. Jesus said: "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of the Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). James tells us: "As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also" (Jas. 2:26). And the author of Hebrews insists that without holiness no man shall see the Lord (Heb. 12:14).

Says Satan: "Just so. And that is exactly what you conservatives have been forgetting. In effect you have even been denying it, for you have been identifying Christianity with doctrine. When are you going to wake up to the plain fact that Christianity is not a doctrine but a life?"

What will be our reply?

First of all we admit, and we do so willingly, that there can be such a thing as orthodoxy without Christianity. Paul challenged: "King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets?" "The prophets" were the Bible of that day. The apostle added: "I know that thou believest" (Acts 26:27). But Agrippa was not a Christian. He kept living with his sister Bernice as his wife. To a considerable extent even demons are orthodox. Some of them confessed Jesus to be the "Son of the most high God" (Mark 5:7). Says James: "Ye believe that God is one; thou doest well; the demons also believe and shudder" (Jas. 2:19). There is such a thing as dead orthodoxy, even the orthodoxy of demons. It is an intellectual acceptance of the truths of the Bible without a preceding change of heart and without a consequent change of life.

However, we deny emphatically that there is such a thing as Christianity

Satan often operates as an angel of light.

without orthodoxy. There is much truth in the saying that what the bones are to the human body Christianity is to orthodoxy. Bones alone are not a body but a skeleton. But neither does a body without bones qualify as a body. Likewise Christianity without orthodoxy is not Christianity. The Bible tells us that Christian living is rooted in Christian doctrine. Said the Lord Jesus: "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:32). He was speaking of freedom from sin and said in effect: "The truth will make you good." And he prayed that the Father would sanctify his disciples "through the truth" (John 17:17).

We are driven to a significant conclusion. He who exalts Christian living at the expense of Christian doctrine is undermining not only the truth but also godliness. He is destroying the very foundation of Christian ethics.

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All Believers Are One in Christ

One of the most beautiful teachings of the Word of God is the unity of believers. True believers of every race, nation, and even church, also at every age, are one in Christ. They constitute one body and have one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father (Eph. 4:4-6).

Says Satan: "Precisely so. That is the unmistakable teaching of Scripture. And how obvious it is that this unity is obscured by the denominationalism of our day! Therefore denominational differences must be sunk, denominational boundaries must be erased, denominational walls must be demolished. In short, all churches should be merged into one world church." And in order to clinch the argument Satan reminds us that it was for this that the Head of the church prayed in his high-priestly prayer of John 17.

What is our answer?

First, let us consider for what Jesus prayed in John 17. Obviously, he prayed for the *spiritual* unity of believers: that they might be one even as he and the Father are one (v. 22). And just as obviously, he prayed for their unity *in the faith* (vs. 20, 21).

At once the question arises why

Jesus prayed for a unity which already exists. According to Scripture do not believers as a matter of fact have one Spirit and one faith (Eph. 4:4, 5)? The answer lies at hand. He prayed that this unity might be *perfected*. So long as believers are not fully sanctified they are not fully unified. Therefore Jesus said: "Sanctify them through thy truth" (v. 17). And he prayed that their unity might be *manifested*. Said he: "That the world may know that thou hast sent me" (v. 23). But who has the right to aver that spiritual unity in the faith can come to visible expression only in organizational oneness? Such a statement would indeed betray a narrow view of unity.

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And now the question must be answered for what Jesus did *not* pray. Emphatically, he did not pray for the unity of believers and unbelievers, nor did he pray for the unity of true churches and false churches. Yet that is the unity which is being advocated by Satan; and without a moment's hesitation it may be said, that is the unity which is being sought by the present-day modernist ecumenical movement represented by such an organization as the World Council of Churches.

That unbelievers are prominent in the World Council is self-evident. One of its late leaders once said that a God who would demand a bloody sacrifice for sin, particularly the bloody sacrifice of his own Son, in his estimation is "nothing but a dirty bully." That there are false churches in the World Council is just as evident. It contains churches which not only tolerate but highly honor, ministers and professors of theology who deny the eternal and essential deity of Christ.

The Word of God strictly enjoins believers from membership in such an organization. "Be ye not unequally yoked together with unbelievers. . . . For what part hath he that believeth with an infidel, and what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? . . . Wherefore, come ye out from among them and be ye separate, saith the Lord" (II Cor. 6:14-17).

Lo and behold, at this point Satan interrupts. He has a suggestion to make, a suggestion that excels in piety.

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Says he: "I am perfectly willing to grant that the World Council is marred by serious faults. It is by no means what it ought to be. But do you not see that for that very reason you conservatives should become affiliated with it? You must witness to it, and in order that your witness may be effective, you must witness *in* it. Who knows, in that way you may reform it and render it consistently Christian. And what an accomplishment that would be! That would really be to the glory of God and his Christ."

When he speaks thus, do you know what Satan is up to? He is presenting a typically Satanic temptation. It is the temptation to do evil that good may come, to do a seemingly little evil in order that an obviously great good may come. Such was the temptation he presented to our Lord in the wilderness when he said in effect: "Kneel before me in worship for just a moment, and I will give you all the kingdoms of the world; the grand purpose of your entire mission will be fully accomplished forever" (Matt. 4:8, 9).

Truly, the corruption of the best is the worst.

God Is Love

Perhaps the most comforting teaching of the Bible is that God is love. Believe it or not, the holy God loves sinners, and he loves them with an infinite love. That is the meaning of the best-known and most-beloved verse of the whole Bible, John 3:16 — "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life." Scripture does not stop there. It says: "God *is* love" (I John 4:8). God identifies himself with love.

Let no one think for a moment that Satan denies this. He affirms it emphatically. And he goes on to say: "When God declares himself to be love, he identifies himself with love as with none other of his attributes. In other words, that he is love is easily the most important thing the Bible tells us about God, it is in summary *all* that God has told us concerning himself." And reprovably Satan adds: "I stand amazed to see you conservative Christians suppress so great a truth."

We ask: "What do you mean 'suppress'?"

Satan replies: "Do you not see that if you are truly to honor God as love,

you will have to discard once and for all some of your pet notions?"

We query: "For instance?"

The answer is forthcoming: "If God is love, the horrible doctrine that God decreed unalterably from eternity that certain men, many even, would perish everlastingly — the doctrine of reprobation — certainly cannot stand. And if God is love, quit telling yourselves and others that God will forgive men of their sins only on the basis of the bloody sacrifice of his Son on the accursed cross. And if God is love, how can you possibly insist that there is such a place or condition as eternal hell?"

It is not evident what Satan by now has done? In the interest of the Scriptural teaching that God is love he has ruled out many other Scriptural teachings concerning God. I speak the plain truth when I say that he has cut the God of the Bible in pieces. That which is left is not the only true God of Holy Writ.

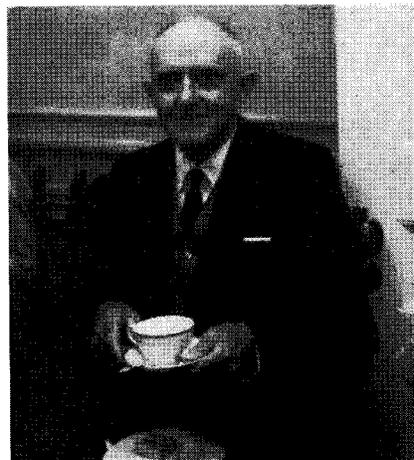
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Love Is the Greatest of Christian Virtues

Let us consider Satan's corruption of one more precious truth of Holy Scripture. Says the Bible: "Now abideth faith, hope, love, these three; and the greatest of these is love" (I Cor. 13:13).

Satan jumps to the conclusion that this rules out the imprecatory psalms. And never before has he assailed those psalms quite as violently as he is wont to do today.

Says Satan: "They are Old Testa-



Professor Kuiper relaxes in Machen Hall following Commencement exercises.

ment stuff, quite unworthy of the new dispensation." We reply that they are worthy not only of the new dispensation but of heaven itself. For the perfected souls of the martyred saints cry from under the heavenly altar: "How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth" (Rev. 6:10)?

Satan says: "The imprecatory psalms are a patent and flagrant violation of the second table of God's law." We answer that they are a patent and powerful manifestation of obedience to the first table of the law. The imprecatory psalms are a passionate expression of love for God. The Christian does indeed love all his neighbors, even his enemies, and he does that because he loves God; for the second table of the law is rooted in the first. At the same time he hates those who hate God, and he does that too because he loves God. For that reason the Psalmist exclaimed: "Do I not hate them, O Lord, that hate thee? . . . I hate them with perfect hatred" (Ps. 139:21, 22).

Says Satan: "Whatever may be the Christian attitude to God's enemies, one thing is completely certain: the Christian will never contend with God's friends. And so, while there may be room in God's church for debate, there is no room for anything like controversy. In fact, what ought to characterize the church more than anything else is peace, peace rather than truth, peace, for that matter, at any price."

But whosoever takes that advice is appeasing the devil.

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We conclude that it behooves us to put on the whole armor of God that we may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil (Eph. 6:11).

Prominent in that panoply, as is indicated by the seal of Westminster Theological Seminary, is "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God" (Eph. 6:17). May the students in this Seminary learn to wield that sword effectively. May the graduates of this Seminary teach God's people to wield that sword effectively. May we all be ever ready to answer the tempter as our Lord did: "It is written" (Matt. 4:4, 7, 11).

And the God of peace will bruise Satan under our feet shortly (Rom. 16:20).