

# Try the Spirits (I)

By Rev. J. Kortering

*“Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God”* I John 4:1a

Stormy winds are blowing over the ecclesiastical waters today. Doctrines which the christian church has professed for centuries are being cast aside with blatant disregard. It is no longer humiliating for a clergyman to be labeled a heretic; it has become a mark of distinction, a symbol of pioneering in an effort to make the gospel relevant in our day. One accusation after another is hurled against the christian church, charging her with being out of step with our times. Because the times have changed, it is assumed that the gospel must change with it.

We live in a day when as never before we have to heed the words of the Apostle John, “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God; Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God; and every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of anti-christ whereof ye have heard that it should come: and even now already it is in the world.” I John 4: 1-3

The amazing thing is that these winds of change are blowing up storms in every sphere of life.

Oh, I know there are the radical theologians who have become more daring than others. Listen to one example: “We are now living in a time when the whole inherited body of our theological language is disappearing into the past and a new history is dawning in our midst before which theology is increasingly becoming speechless. The christian can no longer find security in an absolute sovereign God who exercises a beneficent and providential government over the world. Theology must resolutely confine the christian name of God to the past and wholly refrain from proclaiming his redemptive presence in our historical present.” This is the voice of an outspoken advocate of the God is Dead movement, Thomas J.J. Altizer in his book, “The Gospel of Christian Atheism.”

Lest we think such a departure is far removed from us we had better take another look into the seminaries of traditional orthodox and conservative churches. Very few of them are faithful to the historic christian faith. The road of apostasy begins with what seems to be an insignificant doctrinal departure, but such a departure leads swiftly and surely to the same place, a denial of God!

Let me illustrate this a moment. Some time ago there appeared in the Reformed Journal articles by Prof. Harold Dekker of Calvin Theological Seminary. This institution historically stood upon the Reformed Confessions as e.g. The Canons of Dordt. Professor Dekker wrote, “There are therefore three senses in which we may legitimately speak of the atonement as being universal in design, i.e. the sufficiency, and availability of salvation for all men and the divine desire that all will receive it. The only point at which Scripture and the Reformed confessions point to a limited design in the atonement is at the point of efficacy. Only there can a doctrine of limited atonement be formulated which does not do dear violence to Biblical teaching concerning the universal love of God.” Mind you, God has sufficient love for all men that He has made salvation available for all of them. In this love God desires to save all men, yet He saves only a few. If this is true, why not be honest enough to say, such a God is dead! He cannot save those whom He desires to save.

We ask, Why should these winds of change blow so strongly today? There can be only one answer, the Word of God is no longer considered the only infallible rule for faith and life. The bible is not treated as the reservoir of God’s perfect revelation which, as John Calvin expressed it in his Institutes, are the spectacles with which alone we can see properly the purpose of God for all things.

Sometimes students express more openly and bluntly what their professors teach with subtlety. It’s interesting to observe student publications and writings from this point of view. Frequently, in their zest to write something bold and different, such students reveal the nature and character of their seminary instruction. It is significant that much

of student writing focuses as an attack upon the Bible itself. Let me give two illustrations. The first is from a letter written to Dr. Carl McIntire, editor of Christian Beacon, by two students of the Lutheran Theological Seminary of Mt. Airy, Pa. In this letter, published in the Christian Beacon, they give vent to their hatred for the Word of God. "From objectively studying both Scripture and the history of christianity, we hold that all fundamentalist and Bibliolatry are one of the grossest forms of pagan superstition. All major non-christian religions believe in such literal inspiration bunk... The bible may be viewed as a witness of the apostles and other godly men to the revelation of God in history, but it is not an infallible holy textbook." Derisively, they suggest, "Since you take the mythological story of Noah's ark literally, cute, go find your ark, get into it, and sit in the dung of the hippopotamus which you believe was there for 40 days and think a little; the christian church and the American people will never be deceived by such foolishness."

With more suavity and yet heading in the same direction are the words of an article published in the Stromata, a student magazine of Calvin Seminary. There, student M. Hoogland wrote concerning the errors of the Bible. His point was that the Holy Spirit was not concerned with these "errors," but only the content of the message. He wrote, "It must readily be admitted that the Bible nowhere explicitly claims to be infallible. Why then should we be so upset when someone suggests the possibility that certain narratives of Scripture are not historically accurate and are not meant to be?" He concludes, "Is the doctrine of infallibility essential to Christianity? By this time the answer to be given should be evident." Obviously his answer is no.

The Psalmist emphasizes, "If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do?" Psalm 11:3. This applies equally to the present controversy within the church world. If the Word of God no longer is considered to be the divinely inspired word of God, there is no touchstone for truth and error. The inevitable result is that error is exonerated as the truth, there is no more a dividing point between the truth and the lie. Isn't that apparent today? This applies to the doctrinal position of most any church. The winds of change have blown many a church off its historical foundation. Confessions are no longer taught and professed. In the words of J. Carson Blake, "A confession is not a monument, but the tool for the present mission of the church. It is not good Calvinism to let one document stand for three centuries." Even today the Roman Catholic church has an appealing sound for many a Protestant ear when she insultingly cries out through the voice of the recent Vatican Council, "Oh, churches that are so far and yet so close to us. Churches for whom our heart is filled with longing. Churches, the nostalgia of our sleepless nights. Churches of our tears and of our desire to do you honor by our embrace in the sincere love of Christ, oh may you hear, sounding from this keystone of unity, the tomb of Peter, apostle and martyr, and from this Ecumenical Council of brotherhood and peace, the loving cry we send to you."

When one departs from the truth and holds to doctrines that are in direct contradiction to the Word of God, the result is that his walk of life shall bear a similar evidence of corruption. I need not press this point, it is all too apparent today. Mind you, the so-called, new morality is not the product of heathenism, but the illegitimate offspring of what calls itself church. Surely God is not mocked, for when man denies that God is the only absolute sovereign God Whose grace alone can and does change the heart of the elect sinner who is redeemed through the blood of Calvary, God gives them over to a reprobate mind. "Professing themselves to be wise, they become fools and changes the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and four-footed beasts, and creeping things. Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, through the lusts of their own heart." Romans 1:22-24.

What are we to do about this situation? When the stormy billows of false doctrine and immorality crash about us, what is our calling? Shall we close the hatch and sink deeply beneath the turbulent surface and find security and isolation? Shall we try to run away from it all and nurse our wounded spirits in the bowels of past glories? NO, my friend, that may seem appealing, but that is not the calling of the faithful church. Rather, the church of Jesus Christ is to enter the storm as a battleship that is anchored firmly to the Rock of Ages, our Lord Jesus Christ as He has revealed Himself to us in His Word. Only then can we oppose the enemies of the truth, and sound forth in dear and certain words the pure preaching of the Gospel and not be dashed to pieces on the rock of unbelief. When we do this we can be certain that our eye will be focused upon the beacon light of God that directs us safely to the haven of rest.

Thy faithful church must try the spirits whether they be of God!