

In the End, God

Text: I Corinthians 15:28

Richard A. Rhem
Christ Community Church
Spring Lake, Michigan
Advent I, December 4, 1988

Transcription of the spoken sermon

In the year of our Lord 1988 and the fifty-third year of my life, I finally got fired. And I think congratulations are due. Well, I didn't really get fired, but I did lose my job. Well, I actually took the initiative to remove myself from the teaching position at the seminary at the conclusion of this academic year. And I did that as a consequence of my feeling that my remaining there could have serious consequences for the seminary. Actually, I went to the Exec. Comm. and asked them simply to agree to my demise at the end of this year in order to avoid what I felt would be a serious conflict that would be damaging to the seminary. You should know that I did have more than enough support on the Exec. Comm. to be sustained and supported, but that probably would have been unwise and I judged that it was better to yield this round than to exacerbate the situation. For those who made the move upon me, being frustrated because they have a sense of being outside of power and disenfranchised, were they not successful this time, they would only have accelerated the move on the seminary.

The controversy arose because of an article that I wrote in the theological journal of the Reformed Church called *Perspectives*. I have a couple of issues here. You perhaps know that I am on the board of editors of this theological journal. It is a journal of modest proportion. It is mailed to all pastors, college and seminary faculties, people in leadership positions in the Reformed Church, college and university libraries, and other persons who might desire to be on the mailing list. We have a circulation of about 4100, and its founding three years ago was for the purpose of stimulating theological discussion and thought within the Reformed Church, to push the limits a bit, to stretch the Church, to seek to nudge the Church forward in its theological endeavor, and to create a forum in which the leadership of the Church could exchange views and reflect together on the nature of the faith in the context of the contemporary world. Being a part of this editorial board has been a great experience for me, because it has given me the opportunity of writing and bringing to expression many of the things that I have worked through over the years, things which I preach, things which I have shared with you. I have written nothing that I haven't first preached here, so you wouldn't have any surprises, but apparently there were some surprises out in the

larger Church, which doesn't surprise me. But let me give you a little overview of how we got to this point.

It was five years ago that you gave me the opportunity to go on Sabbatical and to do some serious study. I began that experience by going to the University of Michigan for two days a week to be with Professor Hans Küng, the Catholic theologian. I was admitted into a seminar with him on Tuesday afternoon, and on Monday nights he delivered lectures which have subsequently been published under the title *Eternal Life?*. In those lectures, he dealt with all of the questions of The End, the questions concerning the "last things." He dealt with the near-death experiences of those who have seemed to move into death and then back to life; he dealt with the great religions of the world and how they answered these ultimate questions; he dealt with the Old Testament and with the New Testament, the biblical record of resurrection, and questions of judgment, of hell, of purgatory and of full redemption.

The University of Michigan is a vast institution of higher learning and it is a largely secular institution. There is a one-half time professor who has a half-time secretary who runs a Program on Studies in Religion. That's it. For the rest, that vast university is totally secular in its endeavor. There was some pressure on the university to take more seriously the whole field of religion, and Hans Küng was the first world-renowned lecturer brought in for a term in a new program that has brought others in the wake of that first year. It was a privilege to be with him, and as I listened to him on Monday nights deliver these lectures on themes of death and hell and resurrection, judgment, purgatory, I was amazed that the vast Rackham Auditorium was filled and sometimes filled to overflowing. There were students and faculty, the total academic community drinking in these learned discourses on these questions, sitting for an hour and a half to two hours to a lecture read with a heavy, Swiss-German brogue. And I said to myself, people are really interested in questions about the End. I admitted to myself that I hadn't really dealt with them in depth. You can preach pretty much your whole ministry and avoid some ticklish subjects. Just talk to me about it, I'll tell you how you do it. It was a moment for me when I recognized that these questions were very much a part of the secular person's agenda - that there were questions in the depths of the human person, existential questions about life and death, that people wanted to talk about and have some light about.

So, I came back that very Fall, Advent season, exactly five years ago today, December 4, 1983, and preached for the first time in this area. The Season was Advent when our focus is again the coming of the King and the End, and I preached on the double-image of the End, heaven and hell. I continued to think about it and study. I didn't really address it again in the pulpit until Advent, 1985, and then I did so seriously, with three messages - "Life Hereafter - Wishful Thinking?," "The Images of Heaven and Hell," and then the sermon, "Why I Believe in Purgatory," which was a strange sound in a Reformed church. But, it

began to raise the questions that I was thinking about and we thought about together.

The board of editors of *Perspectives*, of which I am a member, meets twice a year in a kind of “think tank.” It’s a wonderfully stimulating experience. And we try to determine what’s going on in the world, what’s going on in the Church, what the questions are, what the issues are that need to be addressed. How can we move the Church along in its own responsibility to translate the Gospel in the present age? In those discussions, I am sure that my experience with Küng and my conviction about the importance of these last things was a part of the mix that issued in the determination to have an issue on Purgatory. I have it here. “Purgatory-a Fresh Look at the Final Transformation of Life,” January of 1988. It was just a scholarly dressing up of the message I preached in 1985. We only got one response, I think. One person said you don’t have to send the journal anymore. For the rest, no reaction. Purgatory in a Reformed Church journal - no reaction? Maybe the Church is dead. So, as we came together again and continued to plan our issues we were talking about the triumph of God’s grace, the covenant of grace as it is rooted in the Old Testament and finds expression in Jesus Christ, I think it was probably Gord’s brother, Jim, who is our editor, who said to me, “Why don’t you write an article on the covenant of grace and the triumph of grace,” and so I said, “Okay.” Over the years I have been working through this material theologically and biblically. Last spring as we were about to make our major plunge with our capital funds drive, I was so concerned during Lent and Easter not to become a promotional institution, but to make sure that our decision to move forward would be rooted in our understanding of who we are as a people of God.

I put together a series for Lent and Easter very carefully. It was the major occupation of my winter vacation, and in March I preached a sermon simply entitled, “Universal Salvation” based in those chapters 40 to 55 of Isaiah and the Letter to the Ephesians and the Gospel of John. In that biblical study, in my theological reflection, I was becoming more and more convinced of the universal triumph of the grace of God, that what God began in the beginning, God would bring to consummation in the End, that the creation that had gone awry, would be reclaimed by the God Who would not give up until there was a conquest by love of all of those set in opposition against Him. It was in the sharp focusing of that, and then the series this summer on the foundations of faith and the understanding of the covenant of grace, that I came to the clarity that issued in an article in the September issue called “The Habit of God’s Heart,” the habit of God’s heart being to save.

Well, if in January Purgatory didn’t percolate a purr, in September, the suggestion that we might be able to close hell down caused a sharp reaction. Now, you have to understand that there was a theological issue here, and there were those that were concerned about that issue, but the larger picture concerned a growing discontent with some things at the seminary. Those things didn’t really

involve me, except that as I had been on the board for a number of years before I went on the faculty and had tried to push the seminary in the direction that I felt it should go; but the issues that were a source of growing discontent were not really my issues at all. But, I, with my article, threw a spark into a room loaded with fumes, and it exploded. I gave, with my article, my suggestion of the triumph of God's grace, an understandable, easy-to-grasp handle by which various disparate elements galvanized in a move on the seminary. It was, as I said a moment ago, my best judgment that the way to defuse that move on the seminary was to remove myself as an issue because my brothers in the faith were playing hardball and the threat to withhold funds from a small denominational school is a rather powerful weapon. You can be "dead right." So, I simply felt that if I removed myself, the seminary would not be in jeopardy and we would not exacerbate the controversy, but be able eventually to recoup and hopefully regain the initiative. You have to understand that there was sufficient support in the Executive Committee to sustain me. I asked them not to, so in a very real sense, I didn't get fired, but I have lost my job.

Now, that's a little bit of background. There are a couple of things that I want to say about that. The first is that through this experience I have been wonderfully supported. I have been supported by many people out in the Church who have written, who have spoken to me, who are grieved by what has happened and who have encouraged me. I have been marvelously supported by this community of faith. The Personnel Committee, Consistory, and right across the board - all of you who were aware of it have been forthcoming in your expressions of trust and confidence and love, and for that I am deeply grateful. I have not felt isolated, alienated or alone for one moment.

I also want to say that this is a wonderful place to be able to come back to. Going through this experience I learned that at the seminary they really thought that I would eventually slide down there. Because I think, there no one can believe that someone would choose to be the pastor of a congregation if one could be a professor in the seminary. I tried to be clear when I went there, but I don't think they really believed me. But, for me to remove myself from there and to be here again fulltime is a bright prospect. I enjoyed the teaching very much. I really enjoyed the engagement with the class. But, I have been stretched, and I have been dissatisfied with my inability to do everything here I have wanted to do in a pastoral way. You have not complained; you have been gracious and supportive. But, I have not been satisfied. I was trying to do probably too much and I am not content simply to appear here on Sunday and to be incomprehensible and disappear on Monday and be invisible for the rest of the week. I want to be here, and so I am grateful for the fact that I can return in full power to this place.

But, where do we go from here? There's never simply a going home. It cannot be just "business as usual." And I want you to reflect with me about what this experience says to us as a community of faith. I have encountered the ugly face of the Church. I have run head on into the defensiveness, the tearfulness, the

experience of threat, which is so much a part of so much of the Church. It's not a pleasant picture. And I am convinced that as Christ Community we must not retrench, we must not recant nor repent. We must not back down. We must become more of what we have been trying to become over these many years. I am convinced through this experience that far too many pastors stop thinking when they get out of seminary, and probably don't engage in serious theological wrestling beyond those years. It has become obvious to me that to engage in in-depth theological discussion in the Church in general is almost impossible. The reaction of fear, defensiveness and threat is so strong that one does so at one's risk and peril.

That tells me that Christ Community must not be less, but more of what we have become. That it is incumbent upon us to be a community that continues in that which has been our aim for eighteen years to combine intellectual integrity and evangelical passion: to bind together mind and heart, to be fully convinced of the glorious gospel of the grace of God in Jesus Christ, to be totally at home in this present age and day in this world translating the gospel for the last decade of the 20th century, preparing for Century Twenty-One with hearts full of hope, with confidence and with joy. It seems to me that what we have to become is even more of what we have been - a model, an island, if you will, a concrete, tangible community of faith in this place where we live out the gospel, where we incarnate the grace of God. We can become even more of a stimulus than we have heretofore. It is obvious that out in the broader structures of the Church one walks at one's peril. But, here, where we are in full trust and love in community, we can think together, reflect together and find new ways, other avenues, for impacting the larger Church. I think we cannot be content simply to have a good thing amongst ourselves. I think we must seek to continue to create here a community of faith that incarnates the gospel and that becomes a translator of the tradition in such a way that it may impact our day and our generation, and thereby become a stimulus to the whole Church.

How can we do that? Well, I'm not sure, but there must be some ways, and I invite you, with me, to think about how as a local congregation we can have a larger vision and a greater mission. It's not an accident that all of this stuff was born in Advent, for Advent is the season in which we celebrate that the King Who came is the King Who is coming. It is the season in which we celebrate that the Kingdom inaugurated in Jesus' first coming is a Kingdom that will come to its consummation in the fullness of time. It is the season in which we think about the End, in which the last things come into sharp focus for us.

John A. T. Robinson, a rambunctious bishop in the Church of England, now dead, was one of those people who was always stretching the Church, and he wrote a little book some years ago, *In The End, God*, in which he suggested that in a secular age the entree to the secular person with the gospel of Jesus Christ may well be through the avenue of the questions concerning the End. As I found at the University of Michigan in the secular campus, people, whether they were related

to the Church or not, still have some kind of haunting question in the midst of their being about what it means to live, what it means to die, and what there is to look forward to beyond. What is the meaning of life; what is the meaning of history; whence have things come; whither are things going; and what does it mean to me here and now? I am convinced that when that impacted me then, I was right. Robinson says that is the very avenue through which to approach the secular age.

The world is secular. The Church isn't doing it. Look around you at congregation after congregation after congregation! Friends, it's survival. It is maintenance mentality. There is no real dent on the modern age. There is no real mission, no real thrust, no real penetration. It is the reiteration of ancient thought forms, of classic statements of doctrine that in their own time of formulation were historic statements that impacted, but have become mere empty slogans in our day. How do we say Jesus Christ today? How do we spell hope today? How do we bring joy today?

Well, the season of Advent is the season in which those very questions occupy us, and we have a message. It's a biblical message. Isaiah the prophet lived in the midst of human darkness and anguish. He lived in human situations where infants died in infancy, and where old men failed to fill out their days. He lived in the midst of human tragedy where people built houses and never lived in them, planted vineyards and never harvested them. He saw a day coming when things would be different. He saw a new world, a new heaven and a new earth. He saw the day when the lion and the lamb would lie down together and when they would not hurt or destroy in all God's holy mountain. He lived by a vision; he believed in God, the God of covenant grace.

Paul knew that, and he was encountered by Jesus Christ, the risen Christ, and he was convinced the Jesus of Nazareth, crucified, had been raised by the power of God. He wrote to the Church in Corinth: "If Christ is not raised, you are yet dead in your sins. But, as a matter of fact, now is Christ risen from the dead, and as in Adam all died, so in Christ shall all be made alive, and he will reign until he has subjected all rule and authority and power and finally the last enemy, death itself, and when Jesus has subjected every rule and authority and power set in opposition to God and His Kingdom, then he will yield up the Kingdom to God and the Father, and God will be all in all." Or as the RSV has it, "Then God will be everything to everyone."

Well, I've got a lot of questions about that. There are a lot of things I don't understand. There's a lot of Bible to bring into dialogue. There are many mysteries that elude my insight and understanding at this point. But, this I'll tell you. I am gripped by the good news of the triumph of the grace of God. I don't know how, but I believe that God will be all in all, and consequently, I am saved from despair even now in the face of the historical scene because Jesus reigns, Jesus is Lord. And I am saved, as well, from a kind of superficial optimism that

fails to reckon with the present opposition to the Kingdom of God. Saved from despair, saved from superficial optimism, by faith I believe in God.

I don't believe that the kingdom will fully come and God will be all in all because there is something wonderful about human nature, that there is some kind of potential in the human person that through the evolutionary process will blossom into full bloom. I don't believe we have it in ourselves; I don't believe that there is some seed of perfection in history; I don't believe that this old world can be transformed through any human possibility! But, I believe in God! And I believe that God, in His grace, has intervened in our time and our space, and I believe that God's triumph of Grace will be the realization of His purposes of love and thus in the face of the darkness of this world I can bring light, and in the face of the futility of this world I can bring hope, and in the face of the despair of this world, I can bring joy - because God will be all in all.

I don't know how. I don't know when. But, I believe that, and that's the Advent hope; that is the vision; that is the dream and we can trust God for it. And in the meantime, live as a community of graced and forgiven people, full of love and care for the world, being here a beacon light, looking for the day when salvation will be brought to earth's farthest bound. Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us pray.

Our Father, our understanding is so small; we only see as in a mirror dimly, but we believe the day is coming when we shall see face to face. We only know in part, but we believe the day is coming when we shall know, even as we are also fully known. And in the meantime, we know that faith and hope and love abide. And in Your love, we rest, clinging by faith to the promise, with hearts filled with hope, through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Reference:

Richard A. Rhem, "The Habit of God's Heart," *Perspectives*, September, 1988.