

# THE CALVIN FORUM . . .

Christmas  
In Scripture and History

The Christmas Narrative  
Story of the Unexpected

John a Lasco  
Polish Calvinist

Leprosy and Tuberculosis  
A Comparison

Soren Kierkegaard  
Sources for Americans

Letters—  
From Russia, Australia, China, India,  
Hungary, Canada, California

News

Books

Verse

*The*  
**CALVIN FORUM**

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Address all editorial correspondence to: Managing Editor, THE CALVIN FORUM,  
Franklin Street and Benjamin Avenue, S.E., Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Address all subscription and circulation correspondence to: THE CALVIN FORUM,  
Business Office, at the same address.

THE CALVIN FORUM is published monthly, except bi-monthly from June to September.  
Subscription price: Two Dollars per year.

Entered as second-class matter October 3, 1935, at the Post Office at Grand Rapids,  
Michigan, under the Act of March 3, 1897.

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# The CALVIN FORUM

VOLUME V

GRAND RAPIDS, MICH., DECEMBER, 1939

NUMBER 5

## CHRISTMAS IN SCRIPTURE AND IN HISTORY

### SOME RADIO QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

#### What Did the Angels Sing?

**Question:** In the Douay version of the Bible, Luke 2:12 reads, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will." In the authorized version of the Bible it is translated as follows, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." Which is correct? Does the translation have any doctrinal implications?

**Answer:** Neither of the two is an exact translation. Of the two the Douay translation is well-nigh a word for word translation of the original. But translations must express the thought of the original and a verbatim translation does not always succeed in doing just that. The last words of the Douay translation, to wit, "men of good will" may mean that the men are the object of divine good will or that the men are the subject of good will toward others. The former interpretation seems now to be regarded as correct by the majority of recent New Testament scholars. Here is, for instance, the translation of the American Revised Version. "Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace among men in whom he is well pleased." Moffatt discovers that same thought in the passage. He translates it, "Glory to God in high heaven, and peace on earth for men whom he favors." Here is Goodspeed's version, "Glory to God in heaven and on earth, Peace to men he favors." I would therefore recommend the American revised rendering of this passage as being the most accurate. There may be some doctrinal implications in the various translations. It is certainly in line with the Calvinistic position that God will send peace to men whom he favors or in whom he is well pleased. The source of all men's benefits derived from above proceeds from a divine favorable disposition toward the objects of his grace. The reason for the peace toward men is found not in man but in God. The translation which credits the good will to man suggests that it is ultimately the disposition of man that determines whether God will grant him peace or not.

#### Are Christmas Trees To Be Condemned?

**Question:** Does Jeremiah 10:3-5 condemn the popular custom of having Christmas trees? The passage reads as follows, "For the customs of the people are vanity; for one cutteth a tree out of a forest, the work of the hands of a workman with an axe. They deck it with silver and gold; they fashion it with nails and with hammers, that it move not. They are like a palm tree of turned work, and they speak not. They must needs be borne, because they cannot go. Be not afraid of them; for they cannot do evil, neither is it in them to do good."

**Answer:** When one receives a question of this kind, he is at first inclined to cast it aside as one that is too ridiculous to deserve a serious answer. But when he realizes that there are hundreds of sincere Christians that harbor in their souls sincere objections to the use of a Christmas tree and when he notes that there is something in this text that seems to be a fairly accurate description of the preparation and the character of such a tree, it would seem that it is not superfluous to honor the question with a brief answer. It has obviously, as a careful reading of the chapter in question will reveal, no reference to a Christmas tree whatsoever. This word of Jeremiah constitutes a condemnation of the making of heathen gods. The God of Israel is compared with the gods of the pagans that are made with hands and that are consequently not able to speak, move, do good or evil. Whatever condemnation there may be of the Christmas tree custom among us, it will have to be sought elsewhere. There is no condemnation of the practice here, except in case the tree should be worshipped as a god, or if it tends to displace the Christ from the center of our devotions on the day dedicated to the observance of Christ's birthday.

#### Wasn't It Too Cold for the Shepherds?

**Question:** It has been argued that the twenty-fifth day of December could not have been the birthday of Jesus, because it was then altogether too cold for the shepherds to be out at night tending their flocks. Is that a cogent argument?

# KIERKEGAARD FOR AMERICANS

William T. Riviere

First Presbyterian Church, Victoria, Texas

SOREN KIERKEGAARD (1813-55), made more than one stir in Copenhagen during his lifetime. A demonstration by the university students at his funeral prefigured the fact that after his death he would attract still more attention. A generation later that began to be true in Germany; but it seemed to require post-war moods to give him vogue on the Continent. Despite Professor David F. Swenson's valiant work at the University of Minnesota, to most Americans Kierkegaard was just a queer name: in the eleventh and fourteenth editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* the title of his first great book, *Enten-Eller, Either-Or*, is misspelled; while some of our scholarly young pedants, liking that forceful expression for "you must choose," cite not the original Danish but the German form "entweder-oder," which is less emphatic than our plain and simple "either-or." Perhaps we Presbyterians noticed Kierkegaard's name in Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, p. ix; or in Denny, *The Death of Christ*, p. 216ff. We may have noticed such phrases as Forsyth's (id.): "That searching Christian genius Kierkegaard—the great and melancholy Dane in whom Hamlet was mastered by Christ." Then came Karl Barth, who brought Kierkegaard to our attention, and Dr. Walter Lowrie, *Our Concern with the Theology of Crisis*, p. 11, called this stranger to us "that tremendous Dane . . . who failed to make any impression upon his own century and has become the predominant intellectual factor in ours." I even devised a pun and in *The Evangelical Quarterly*, Jan. 1936, p. 63, called him "the gloomy Dane"; but on Feb. 4 of the same year found the very same expression on the jacket of Bain's book published in the preceding November. Despite my honored correspondent Dr. Swenson, the adjective can be defended: the journals frequently show the melancholy diarist as a lonely man who showed a cheerful face to the world and who, in earnest, almost desperate, solitary written prayer, counted his blessings in honest effort to be of good cheer in his heart.

Now, in our native language, we are beginning to have a considerable available literature by and about Kierkegaard. Swenson and Lowrie will soon publish other books; I propose to list those already printed in English of which I know today. Furthermore, as a pastor who enjoys Kierkegaard but who, of course, has not surrendered to him, I shall venture to express some personal opinions about these books.

A word of warning: Kierkegaard was a voluminous and many-sided writer. It would be hard to outline him satisfactorily, even with three or more heads bracketed between introduction and conclusion. The nearest I have come to an outline was in

a slight talk on him to a Rotary club: some of his main teachings were subsumed under the theme, "It's hard to be a Christian." Part of the real Kierkegaard always eludes such simplification. When I first read Allen's book, to be listed below, it seemed to me that he over-schema-tized Kierkegaard's thought; then I found every item of his schematization in the Dane's own writings; but still the scheme is as unlike what Kierkegaard's books and journals reveal to me as a caricature in a political cartoon is unlike a real portrait. The scheme is valuable. But unlike Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Hamilton, or Spencer, Kierkegaard's thought cannot be fairly presented in summary form—not even by himself! Perhaps Bergson's basic distinction between fluidity, duration, life, on the one hand, and the geometrical form of our thinking about that living flow of experience on the other, may help the student of philosophy to understand what I am trying to say.

\* \* \* \* \*

We have several books that include treatments of Kierkegaard. Lowrie's book on the theology of crisis has been mentioned. Professor Donald MacKenzie's *Christianity the Paradox of God* is another. Far better is the section in Aubrey, *Present Theological Tendencies*; Professor Aubrey follows a competent German scholar, W. Ruttenbeck, and introduces his study of Barth by something about Hegel; then Kierkegaard's anti-Hegelianism as a starter for Barth. The chapter on Kierkegaard in Mackintosh, *Types of Modern Theology* (in other respects a splendid book) is utterly infelicitous, in fact wretched: the Scot unfortunately depended upon a German writer on contemporary philosophy, Werner Brock. A glance through Brock's book suggests unripeness; careful reading of his pages on Kierkegaard fails to show a Kierkegaard that this student of Kierkegaard can recognize.

There is not much valuable information about Kierkegaard in most of our books about Barth and about Brunner. The famous passage where Barth quotes him, in the preface to the 2d edition of *The Epistle to the Romans*, is usually cited too briefly. This deals with what is literally translated as "the infinite qualitative distinction between time and eternity." Let me offer a simpler translation: Barth is replying to the charge that his system makes him force a meaning upon the text: "If I have a system, here it is: as persistently as possible I keep in view what Kierkegaard called the infinite unlikeness in kind" (one might almost say, as the French translators do, "in nature") "between time and eternity, taking this dissimilarity in both its negative and its positive aspects." These two aspects are not sufficiently treated by those who comment on Barth,

Following Höffding, I made a feeble stab at it in the *Ev. Q.* already mentioned, p. 54f. Immediately after the words which I have just translated Barth quotes most of the last half of Eccl. 5:2: "God is in heaven, and thou upon earth." Barth's omission of the last clause of the verse may amuse you until you observe that the Preacher probably agreed with our Swiss brother here: he warns against presumptuous thinking and speaking rather than against mere verbosity and longwindedness. Barth's next sentence may be quoted from Hoskyns' translation, p. 10: "The relation between such a God and such a man, and the relation between such a man and such a God, is for me the theme of the Bible and the essence of philosophy." And Barth goes on to state that while philosophers speculate about this relationship in terms of ultimate origin, the Bible puts Jesus Christ here connecting God and man.

\* \* \* \* \*

There are two American translations of Kierkegaard which are not readily available. The first was in the Comparative Literature series published by the University of Texas years ago: *Selections from Kierkegaard*, by Dr. Lee M. Hollander of the faculty. The translator's interest was largely in the style; but his selections are admirably chosen for our religious interest; they are somewhat less apt, but not much less, if our interest is in philosophy. But this little volume is out of print.

Several years ago someone privately printed 500 copies of Kierkegaard's *Diary of a Seducer* in Ithaca, New York. I have not been able to get a copy of this translation; but have read a French translation of the same work. It is the last part of the first half of *Either-Or*, presenting the aesthetic view of life, namely, thoughtful provision for selfish pleasure. It is a psychological study of one who wants to take without incurring obligation. Commentators suggest that Kierkegaard wanted to show the vanity of such a life; certainly, the morning after his success, Seducing John writes, "All is over, however, and I don't want to see her again."

\* \* \* \* \*

There are three books by Kierkegaard which you can buy for about two or two and a half dollars apiece.

The first is Swenson's translation of *Philosophical Fragments*, 1936. Here you have something worthy of study, a type of religious philosophy which is not even mentioned in such a new book as Burtt's on that subject. The important part of the book is very briefly and plainly put. There is a good introduction and there are good notes. A much longer sequel is being translated by the same competent hand.

The next was published by Harpers late last summer or early in the fall: *Purity of Heart*, beautifully translated by Douglas Steere. This was recommended by the Religious Book Club, and worthily so. From the translation and introduction, however, you would not realize that Kierkegaard was

writing this meditation to be read before the Lord's Supper. In 1937 the same religious discourse was printed in London, translated under the title of *Purify Your Hearts!* by Aldworth and Ferrie. Comparing the two translations with Tisseau's limpid French version, one finds that sometimes the American is better than the British, and sometimes the British is better. In one place a bit of quotation is given an entirely different meaning by each of the three!

In the early summer of 1939 the Oxford Press brought out Robert Payne's translation of *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard thought enough of this book to predict that it would outlive him and give him a name. It is a study of Abraham's faith, and is generally believed to present one side of Kierkegaard's own thinking about faith. Ninety-six years ago this volume and its twin *Repetition*, of which Payne's version will soon be printed, appeared the same day under different pen-names. Both deal with faith as hoping against hope. This English edition of *Fear and Trembling* is a very attractive volume, and offers a good place to begin your study of Kierkegaard. The translator fails to acknowledge an apparent indebtedness to Dr. Hollander, who translated nearly a third of the same work in the university bulletin already referred to. There are some striking verbal similarities.

\* \* \* \* \*

There are four books about Kierkegaard for about the same price as these translations.

By far the best is *Lectures on the Religious Thought of Soren Kierkegaard*, by Eduard Geismar, Professor of Theology, University of Copenhagen. These were the Stone Lectures at Princeton in March, 1936. Even better than these fine informative lectures, with their well-chosen presentations of parts of Kierkegaard's own writings, is Swenson's introduction.

The other three are British, but the first of them is well advertised over here. *Kierkegaard*, by Allen, gives an account of the author's life and a study of his teachings. This study has been mentioned in the first part of this paper. But Swenson, without giving Allen's name, in his introduction to Geismar, p. xxiii, demolishes Allen (p. 205) as follows: "To one who has through a reading of the *Journals* seen how Kierkegaard's reflection, with respect to each and every position he was about to take, anxiously guarded the integrity of this guiding principle of not 'lying himself into the possession of a result'—to such a reader the lofty superiority with which a recent English writer on Kierkegaard, intending to bestow a compliment while pointing a criticism, says of him that 'he was a valiant fighter in a cause he did not understand,' can scarcely fail to convey a sense of something a bit ludicrous. . . . A professor in philosophy passes in review during the course of a year the greatest thinkers of all time, and shows precisely where each of them failed and where they succeeded. The reviewer-journalist . . . quickly concocts an article. . . ." *Mea culpa.*

Bain's *Soren Kierkegaard* is very interesting. The summaries of certain works are excellent. The quotations, especially the prayers, in the appendix are well selected. Dr. Bain finds some dangerous elements in Kierkegaard's teaching. Ferrie criticizes both Allen and Bain for trying to explain Kierkegaard, that is, to explain him away.

The third British book is Dru's translation of an essay by Theodor Haecker of Innsbruck. Really, of course, it is a German (now; Austrian when published) Catholic presentation. The title is *Soren Kierkegaard*. This is a very valuable study. Haecker finds the real Kierkegaard in the various edifying discourses and other religious writings, rather than in the many volumes which, though he afterward acknowledged them, Kierkegaard originally published under a variety of carefully discredited *noms-de-plume*.

\* \* \* \* \*

And now we have two big books in the seven dollar class.

The "magnum opus" of Dr. Walter Lowrie, after years of ministry in Rome and of lecturing in America, is his *Kierkegaard*, which appeared last year. This is a large book, thoroughly equipped with appendix after appendix, abounding in long quotations, with very exact references to the Danish collected works. No serious student of Kierkegaard can do without this great book. The method of presentation gives a better understanding of the Danish thinker than a more formal statement. Many choice passages are translated.

With reference to one remark of Lowrie's, and to another in the review of this book by Dr. S. G. Craig in *Christianity Today*, let this be said: no Calvinist can read much of Kierkegaard without observing with regret that the Dane had not read Calvin. Calvin would have helped his soul in its solitary battles for truth. But Kierkegaard was a rebel soul: he admired Luther but not only disagreed with him on some points but wrote violently against him; the suggestion that his ascetic conception of Christianity might have led him to Rome seems more absurd than the famous Absurd of which he had so much to say; and our Calvinism, though it might have helped him, would not have won the full allegiance of this man who could not understand the serpent and so omitted him from his study of the Fall and of Original Sin in his book, *The Concept of Dread* (which you can get in German, and in two French translations, but not yet in English).

The last book we have is Alexander Dru's large volume, *The Journals of Soren Kierkegaard*. This selection is based on Haecker's and the point of view is the same. Having just mailed an extensive notice of this book to *The Union Seminary Review* (Richmond, Va.), and commended it for browsing or for study, I may limit myself to three remarks:

First, Dru omits the note of March, 1844: "There are only 3 positions between faith and knowledge.

1. Paul: 'I know Whom I have believed.' 2. Credo ut intelligam. 3. Faith is direct, unmediated. In each, knowledge follows faith."

Second, Dru gives (p. 282f.) the full context of Kierkegaard's famous remark to the King of Denmark. It seems that Kierkegaard really felt it to be true of himself, but complimented Christian VIII, when he said: "It is hard luck to be a genius in Gopher Prairie." Naturally Dru renders this well-known remark with dignity: "It is a misfortune to be a genius in a provincial town."

Third, let me close with these words, written for the *Union Seminary Review* about this book. "Kierkegaard's writings need less comment than those of almost any other serious thinker. They also need more comment. Less because he writes clearly, plainly, and amply; more because of the variety of viewpoints from which he treats his themes."

## CHRISTMAS MUSINGS

AND again the lights and shops, the music and the money changers proclaim that it is the Christmas season. But do they know why? From the open window of a church from the lips of diligently practicing choristers comes the answer, "*Unto us a child is born . . .*" and a joy should flood the world like the joy that sweeps a father when the news is brought, "*Unto us a son is given.*" I wonder what He must think of the world and the government of man's destiny. I suppose what shall be shall be and we shall all one day say, "It was well done," but I think that when He looks down the cross must still seem to weigh heavily upon His shoulder. And His name is supposed to be held in honor in these "Christian" nations! I wonder if ever His help shall be called in by this mad world and her leaders. They say there will be a wonderful day when He shall become the world's Counsellor, at His coming again. Will the Mighty God condescend to take personal charge of the muddled threads from the skeins of the world's weaving? For me it is sufficiently marvelous that He is still willing to hear us call, not any too often or consistently either, to him and name him our "Everlasting Father." He must not be fooled by our mercenary motives. When He comes he cannot but come to judgment and the Prince of this world shall be cast out and all his petty minions in high places with him. Then only could His peace descend upon us. Without that fiery purge men may continue to cry, "Peace, Peace!" But there is, there can be no peace.

Best CHRIST-mas wishes to you all!

ALA BANDON.