



Theological Thievery

A precious truth is being taken from God's people!

By Manfred Kober

IN 97 MINUTES of high drama and precision operation, a daring band of professional thugs pulled off the greatest cash robbery in the history of Britain, the epic heist of \$7 million. Just before 3 A.M. on August 8, 1963, the stillness of the English countryside was broken by the sound of the Glasgow-London mail train making its nightly run. In the second of thirteen cars trailing the engine were 128 sacks containing packets of one-pound and five-pound notes. The money had been collected from the northern branches of London banks after a long holiday weekend and was destined for London.

At 3:03 A.M. the train suddenly screeched to an unscheduled stop near an isolated Buckinghamshire bridge. Masked thieves had blocked the regular signal with a glove and hung a false red light in its place. Moving with the well-drilled precision of commandos, fifteen men overpowered the train crew and the five unarmed guards, loaded the cash sacks into trucks waiting under the bridge and vanished. The gang moved to a secluded hideout called Leathersdale farm, 20 miles from the scene of the robbery. Immediately, Scotland Yard initiated the most comprehensive manhunt in Britain's history for criminals the earth seemed to swallow. With little success in catching the ringleaders, they called on tireless Tommy Butler, the legendary "Gray Ghost" of Scotland Yard, who tracked

down the perpetrators of Britain's Great Train Robbery in five years and three months to the day.

However, this robbery is like stealing a piece of bubble gum in a candy store when compared to the one that has taken place within Christendom since the turn of the century. Unlike the masterminds behind the Great Train Robbery, the theological thieves and thugs are still at large.

THEFT OF THE BELIEVER'S HOPE

The significance of the theft. When German higher criticism inundated the theological schools of our nation (early 1900s), the liberals crept among the true flock of Christ's sheep much like the thieves and robbers in Christ's parable (John 10:1, 8). They attempted to steal those doctrines on which the fundamentalists feed.

It was Charles Briggs of Union Theological Seminary who tried to rob fundamentalism of the doctrine of verbal plenary inspiration. It was the notorious liberal Nels Ferre who denied the virgin birth of Christ, with his blatant suggestion that the Savior was fathered by a German soldier. Harry Emerson Fosdick attempted to wrest the doctrine of the deity of Christ from believers. Bishop G. Bromley Oxnam rejected the substitutionary death of Christ, suggesting that if God demanded the death of His Son for man's sins, God is a "dirty bully." Finally, it was the neoorthodoxy of Barth and Brunner which rejected the Biblical idea of the physical resurrection and return of Christ. For Barth, the resurrection happened "on the rim of history,"

wherever that is. For Brunner, resurrection was of the body (that is, the Church which is His Body) but not of the flesh. The return of Christ has vanished in the mist of an undefined and unreal eschatological and existential encounter. Liberalism and neoorthodoxy have robbed the believer of any real hope and help. Thieves have robbed fundamentalism and thieves of like kind are still at work.

The seriousness of the theft. This theological thievery has not come unexpectedly. Long ago Paul predicted that "in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils" (1 Tim. 4:1), "for the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables" (2 Tim. 4:3, 4).

In ages past believers always had to battle theological thieves. Every Paul had his Alexander (1 Tim. 1:20). Every Polycarp had his Marcion. Every Althanasius his Arius. Every Augustine his Pelagius. Every Luther his Erasmus. Every Calvin his Arminius. But that which distinguishes the perilous nature of the latter times from the doctrinal problems of previous centuries is the startling fact that theological thieves arise within the fold of fundamentalism itself, rather than without.

The seriousness of the theft is further underscored by the crucial doctrine which is now being attacked. If any one doctrine gladdens the believer's heart, it is the blessed truth of the any mo-

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ment return of Christ. Historically, fundamentalists have championed this doctrine as part of the fundamentals of the faith. The practical importance of this truth can hardly be over-emphasized. The any moment return is called the comforting hope (1 Thess. 4:18); the blessed hope (Titus 2:13); the purifying hope (1 John 3:3); the sure hope (2 Pet. 1:19). It is this hope which we are about to lose. It is the theft of this truth about which I warn.

Perhaps believers in America, amid their comfort and conveniences, cannot appreciate the salutary effect of the doctrine of Christ's return. However, this truth takes on tremendous significance for those believers who are persecuted and perplexed. Each year as I visit believers behind the Iron Curtain, I face the problem of knowing what to tell them which will bring them comfort and cheer. What does one tell believers who have been enslaved by communism for over three decades? I certainly cannot promise them that if they wait just another five years the nations of the West will liberate them from their Communist yoke. I cannot tell them conditions will improve. Yet one truth never fails to bring joy and hope to their lives. What a delight to share with them passages such as 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 and John 14 which set forth the truth that Christ might come today. Repeatedly believers have told me they can hardly wait for the voice of the archangel and the trump of God. As they leave this earth they plan to look down at their Communist slavemasters and shout, "You see? All your barbed-wire fences and minefields were not able to keep us in after all." For these believers with trials and troubles, the any moment return is a blessed, a comforting, a purifying and a sure hope. Would that we were equally ready for that event!

This great theological theft is carried on right under our noses. As the dark curtains of apostasy close around us in these final days of the Church Age, we believers are being robbed of that one hope that is to comfort our hearts. What makes this especially serious is the nature of the doctrine stolen and the kind of people who are engaged in the theft. The greatest hope of believers in this life is stolen by those in the ranks of evangelicalism. Who are they?

THIEVES OF THE BELIEVER'S HOPE

The subversives. While George E. Ladd's *The Blessed Hope* has for many years been the diatribe against the pretribulation rapture, the most scholarly attack on this position comes from Dr. Robert H. Gundry of Westmont College. His book, *The Church and the Tribulation* (Zondervan, 1973), is billed by the publisher as "the standard text on the posttribulation viewpoint of

the rapture of the Church." Dr. Gundry, graduate of a GARBC school, has repudiated his alma mater's as well as his own former position. Now he is encouraging others to defect to his posttribulation position.

More recently an associate professor of music at Wheaton College has entered the controversy. Arthur D. Katterjohn wrote *The Tribulation People* (Creation House, 1975), and therein suggests that we are that generation which will have to go through the Tribulation. "The hope of many devout believers" is robbed of its Biblical content by Katterjohn's insistence that the Church, instead of looking for the blessed hope, must prepare itself for the blightful hour of tribulation.

Bill Bright, the founder and director of Campus Crusade for Christ International, has positionalized himself with these theological thieves. In an interview recorded in *Christianity Today* (Sept. 24, 1976, p. 21), he expressed his belief that there will be a worldwide revival. Whereupon there follows this response:

Q. Scripture seems to teach that at the end of the age the world situation will get worse, and love among Christians will grow cold. So it appears that if this great awakening you anticipate does happen, then the coming of the Lord may not be imminent.

A. I do not personally believe that the Lord's return is imminent. I think the current teaching that it is imminent is leading many, many Christians to fold their hands and disobey what Jesus said to do. Jesus said we should work, for the night is coming when no man can work. According to Scripture, He has delayed His return in order that more people might have a chance to hear.

Besides this clear denial of the any moment return of Christ, the interview also showed that Dr. Bright rejects the doctrine of the total depravity of man.

One final illustration of the passion manifested by posttribulation rapture leaders to pilfer the doctrine of the imminency of the Lord's return. In the June 1976 issue of the BAPTIST BULLETIN appeared an article against the posttribulation rapture error by Dr. Bernard E. Northrup of the Baptist Bible School of Theology, Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania. He ably demonstrated that the resurrection of Church-age saints before the resurrection of Old Testament saints argues for a pretribulation return of the Lord. Readers responded to this article in the September 1976 issue of the BAPTIST BULLETIN. One pastor showed his disdain for the glorious truth of the pretribulation rapture by writing:

I think I know why a competent scholar like Dr. Northrup is forced into an impossible exegesis of 1 Corinthians 15 in his defense of pretribulationism. The reason is that pretribulationism is not the teaching of Christ and the Apostles. It is bad enough that the pretribulation view has such a firm

hold on the minds of GARBC pastors and professors, but to make this an official part of the Articles of Faith and thus a test of fellowship must be the ultimate in logical and ecclesiastical suicide! Whatever one's view on the subject may be, to call the GARBC discussion of eschatology "serious Bible study" borders on the absurd.

Pressures are mounting even in Regular Baptist circles for believers to hand over to theological thieves the doctrine of the blessed hope.

The subtlety of the thieves. Those "seducing spirits" (1 Tim. 4:1) who are turning away from the truth are both sinister and subtle in their approach. They are sinister because they arise within evangelicalism. They are subtle because of their specious argumentation.

Fortunately for American fundamentalists, numerous books which show the Biblical basis for a pretribulation rapture are available. However, until recently no single volume by a pretribulationist has ever been devoted entirely to critical evaluation of the posttribulation position. Dr. Walvoord's book, *The Blessed Hope and the Tribulation* (Zondervan, 1976), finally meets that need. Scores of books have attacked the pretribulation position. Walvoord returns the attack with the four major schools of thought within posttribulationism by showing how they completely contradict one another. He demonstrates that these schools lack exegetical grounds and hermeneutical validity. An argument-by-argument refutation of Gundry's book shows how illogical its supposedly scholarly arguments are.

The letter to the BAPTIST BULLETIN argued that pretribulationism is neither taught by Christ nor the Apostles. The fact is, the doctrine of the any moment return is no less clearly taught in Scripture than many other major doctrines. Obviously, this is vigorously denied by many. There will always be those who "wrest . . . the scriptures, unto their own destruction" (2 Pet. 3:16). But, then, just because four-fifths of Christendom baptizes by other than immersion, are we to say, therefore, that the Bible is unclear in the matter of believer's baptism by immersion? Just because most denominations have a sacramental view of the ordinances, does this mean we should jettison our concept of their commemorative nature? In theological discussion, counting noses is always a dangerous procedure for arriving at the truth. Good men can usually be found on both sides of a theological issue. The determining factor should be the exegetical position and hermeneutical correctness of an interpretation. The doctrine of the any moment return of Christ is based on sound exegesis.

(concluded next month)