

STUDY GUIDE for ALEXANDER SCHMEMANN'S *FOR THE LIFE OF THE WORLD*

by James B. Jordan

In reading *For the Life of the World*, the Protestant reader needs to bear two things in mind. The first is that Eastern theology is weak in the area of juridical theology. By this I mean that the East has a relatively weak understanding of how God has made matters right between Himself and His rebellious subjects. The strength of the East, and the weakness of the West, lies in the area of growth and transformation, reflection in the area of what it means that God has put us back on the track. Man is God's son, His agent for the transfiguration and glorification of the world. Man is to lay hold of the glorious creation and through his labors make it more and more glorious. The East has been strong in the area of reflection on this task of glorification, and this is the value of Schmemann's book.

Creation—Transfiguration (Eastern strength)

Fall—Redemption (Western strength)

Eastern theologians generally do not have a good understanding of the work of redemption, a doctrinal area developed mainly in the West. The East tends to stress that God cast Adam and Eve out of the Garden for their own good (which is true), without giving equal emphasis on the fact that God was rightly angry and was punishing them (which is also true). Similarly, the East stresses that salvation is re-creation and as a result man becomes readjusted to God's world (which is true), but misses the point that this re-creation is only possible on the basis of a judicial transaction between the Father and the Son accomplished on the cross. Thus, in chapter 4, "Of Water and Spirit," Schmemann emphasizes re-creation, but misses the fact that baptism applies to us the **judgment** of God in Christ. Indeed, it is just because baptism is the **application** to us of Christ's death and resurrection that it is to be done by sprinkling or pouring, not by immersion. (See Duane Spencer, *Holy Baptism*, published by Geneva Ministries, for a full discussion of the mode of baptism and its importance.)

The second matter the protestant reader needs to bear in mind is that Schmemann, and Eastern theology in general, uses the term "sacrament" in a more general way than we do. On pages 120 and 121, Schmemann explains that what he means by sacrament is "revelation," and

since the world **reveals and communicates the life of God**, the world is a sacrament. To be separated from God is to be separated from the world and from life, that is, to be in death; and to be restored to God is to be restored to the world and to fullness of life (p. 100). Not exactly an otherworldly pietism, is it?

Biblically speaking, this is absolutely true, and is right in line with what Cornelius Van Til has repeatedly written. Protestants, however, restrict the term "sacrament" to baptism and communion, the special signs and seals of the New Covenant. A way to do justice to both concerns is this: I propose we note the tripartite division of the world seen in Scripture:

"Nearest" to God

Old Covenant:
Garden of Eden
Heavens above
Temple
Holy of Holies
Priestly house

"Nearer" to God

Land of Eden
Earth beneath
Israel
Holy Place
Levites

"Near" to God

The World
Waters under earth
World
Temple courts
Priestly nation

New Covenant:

Heaven
(elders?)

Earth
(deacons?)

Abyss (Satan's realm)
(royal priesthood?)

[On this, see Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980). The point is not, n.b., that each of these sets correspond (as if the royal priesthood of all believers corresponds with the abyss!), but that this tripartite world model is found repeatedly throughout the Scripture in various forms and used in a variety of ways.]

With this in mind, we can distinguish three "levels" of God's revelation: special revelation, middle revelation, and general revelation. This "middle" area is normally overlooked by protestant theologians.

Let me illustrate. The special sacramental meal is the Lord's Supper. The general "sacramental" meal, which definitely ministers life to us, is every bit of food and drink God gives us, every meal we eat. Is there a "middle" meal? Yes, the New Testament speaks of the "Agape," or "Love Feast."

How about restoration to wholeness, entrance into the Kingdom? The special sacrament of this is baptism. The general "sacrament" is any time we confess sin and renew our covenant. What

is in the middle? The anointing with oil, spoken of in James 5, when we confess sin especially to the elders and are prayed over for special healing.

How about fellowship, which also "sacramentally" ministers life to us? The special form is the Church, the institution of the New Covenant. The general form is the Christian brotherhood. The middle form is marriage and the family.

How about time? The special time is the Lord's Day. General time is every day, which is to be dedicated to God. The Bible clearly reveals "middle" time as well, the seven "extra" sabbaths of Leviticus 23, the festivals, and so forth. Thus, the Church has always observed the Lord's Day strictly, but also more generally other times of feasting and fasting.

Catholicism has blurred the distinction between the special and middle, with its seven sacraments. Puritans have eliminated the middle, doing away with all festivals and special ordinances. There is need for reformation in this area, but with this in mind, we can see how the Church historically has developed confession, anointing, and marriage into "secondary sacraments."

Schemmann uses this as the outline for his discussion of a Christian worldview. The first chapter discusses man's general role as priest and king of the world, with the entire world as God's "sacrament" to minister God's life to him. The next two chapters discuss the special sacrament of the Lord's Supper, as we ascend into heaven for special worship and experience the transfiguring power of the Kingdom, and then carry these Kingdom principles in our "mission" to restore and transform the world. Chapters 4, 5, and 6, discuss baptism, marriage, and healing as special manifestations of the Kingdom which extend Kingdom principles into all of life.

In closing, the reader should bear in mind what Schemmann says in his Preface, which is that this book was not designed as a theological treatise but as a springboard for discussion. It should be read for insights, but not as if the author intended every statement to be his last word on a given subject, we at Geneva Ministries believe that this is a marvelous book, but as Protestants we don't agree with everything in it.

The last two essays in the book, added later, are somewhat more theological. In the first, Schemmann powerfully argues that man is made for worship, **homo adorans**. Secularism, thus, is

perhaps the ultimate heresy. Schmemmann traces the heresy of secularism, and of magic, to the nature/grace distinction that arose in the middle ages. (Orthodox theologians like to blame all this on the west, but the reader will note that Schmemmann carefully puts quotation marks around “western influences” when he refers to them. The problem was not just western, but worldwide during the middle ages.) The final essay discusses the Christian doctrine of symbolism. I am personally not satisfied with what Schmemmann comes to on the bottom of page 141, that a symbol is an **epiphany** of what it symbolizes. After all, the tree in my back yard shows God to me (general revelation), but I don't really think it would be appropriate for me to say "This tree is God," even in the sense Schmemmann means. That would be confusing. At the same time, Schmemmann's general discussion here is invaluable.