

VIII. - Wiser in their generation.

The children of the world are far-standing in their generation than the children of light. LUK. 16:8.

AN man thus in paradise was given dominion over Nature. Through the fall into sin and the curse that came from it, weakened mankind redeemed this dominion over Nature.

But in Christ as the Son of Man this dominion returns, and the Christ restores this dominion in three ways. First, immediately by the direct miracle, a power that continues in His apostles. Second, indirectly, by the high development of spiritual factors in our generation, in all lands where the Christian religion triumphs. And thirdly, in the finale at his return, something that is part of this, and which the New Testament repeatedly points out, as an indispensable part of the great work of redemption. This is how it reads: 10. Jesus restores man's power over Nature by the miracle. Jesus restores man's power over Nature on a much broader scale and permanently, by the light that rises over the nations, when the Gospel transforms people's lives; and 30. This third point, the finale at Jesus' return, can only be referred to briefly here. To go into it at greater length would distract us from our subject. Suffice it, therefore, to refer to what Isaiah already prophesied with an apparent reference to paradise, that one day "the wolf will walk with the lamb and the lion will eat straw like the ox" (11:7), yes, that "a child will amuse himself over the den of a viper, and will stretch out his hand in the pit of the basilisk" (vs. 8). An Eastern poem, but for that reason no less powerful, way of expressing the complete restoration of the power of man over Nature; a restoration that will only be completed when Jesus, at His return, and forever, has nullified the power of Satan and broken all opposition of the evil spirit. This, however, will not happen until the end of days, when the work will be completed and the kingdom of glory will triumph.

What is already working, however, is the restoration of man's indirect power over Nature. This power over Nature in the second period of its restoration is the power which now serves us, and which has made such a surprising breakthrough, especially in the last century. This is not the immediate miraculous power that Jesus exercised when he was on earth. It is a power of an entirely different order, of an entirely different kind, of an entirely different effect. And in the miraculous power, as well as in the indirect power that Jesus now exercises over Nature, it is spirit that rules over matter in both instances, but that spirit ruled over matter

directly in the miracle, while the same spirit now rules over matter in the medium way through the development of man's spirit. Although less correct, for the sake of brevity we may call this the power of the spirit over matter by means of science and the technical arts. Less correct, because next to science stands invention, the stroke of genius, energy and talent, perseverance and will. But the result of all this is then dissected, thought through, explained and expounded in science and in the technical art. That technical art is mankind's ability, his ability to subdue Nature; something which of course includes medicine and so many other skills. This, our indirect power over Nature, also a miraculous power, but not a miracle power, has come to us through and from Christ. His Gospel has called forth an entirely different, much higher development of mankind's spiritual life. Only in Christianity has this greater light been clearly seen, and from this newer, richer, higher development of our spiritual life has naturally arisen our greater power over Nature through our knowledge and ability. We owe this too to Christ. It emanated from Him. He has wrought it in us and through us. And it is equally clear that this second indirect restoration of power over Nature, which we owe to Christ, is a greater thing, if you compare it to what Jesus accomplished directly through His miraculous power. Not a greater thing, as if it revealed a higher power. Nothing is better than commanding the wind and storm on the lake of Genesaret, multiplying the bread and raising the dead. But this power given to us now is a greater thing, if you look at its size, scope and durability. Everything that Jesus did through his miracle power was for one specific case, a single sick person, a single possessed person, was limited to one specific area. This second indirect power over Nature, which has now been placed in our hands, on the other hand exercises its equal effect and influence among all countries and peoples, century after century, and blesses thousands at a time in all distress and sickness. While it in itself sounds mysterious to our ears that our power over Nature would exceed the miraculous power of Jesus, it is nevertheless perfectly understandable how Jesus, knowing what he would work and accomplish in and through us in later development, could prophesy to his disciples that they would accomplish a greater work than was seen in his miraculous work.

The error in which they fell, and which caused them not to see this, lay in the fact that they attributed power to Christ, which remained foreign to his faithful. They imagined that what went on outside faith was also outside the sphere of Jesus' action. What unbelieving science or art achieved was regarded as evil and as the work of evil. Jesus was excluded from this. His kingship was limited to that which

pertained to the salvation of the soul for eternal life. The "world" was regarded, not only in its unholy spirituality, but also in its ordinary human life, as lying outside the realm in which the Christ exercised His royal power and dignity. The fact that God so loved the world that He gave it His only begotten Son, not in order to destroy it, but in order to save it, was understood to apply only to the elect. The world was given up, and salvation was only seen in Jesus' coming for the eternal salvation of the elect. That this was in direct conflict with what Scripture reveals about the restoration of paradise, about the new earth under the new heaven, and about the glorification of our bodies, was not understood. And so we have ended up in the false position of not denying, on the one hand, that we in the Christian country have come to a much higher development of our human earthly life, but on the other hand, of conceiving of all this as going beyond Jesus' Kingship, as having no causal connection with the Christ, and thus taking an attitude hostile to the Christ. The full, rich, comprehensive meaning of the words: "I have been given all power in heaven and on earth" was neither seen nor understood. If, on the other hand, one widens one's view and recognizes that Jesus, as our King, has dominion over our entire human life, then it cannot be otherwise than that both, our spiritual development for eternal life as well as the general human development, which has increased our power over Nature and has expanded our knowledge and abilities so incredibly, fall under his dominion, are due to him and have come to us from him. A comparison of the human development in the pagan and Maho-mediterranean life with that which came about in the Christian country provides conclusive proof of this assertion. The two, our spiritual awakening to salvation and our general human development for this life, do not stand apart. They are two activities in the same organism, which have influenced each other mutually. And you would be doing the honor of Jesus' Kingship a disservice if you refused to honor His majesty in both.

Yet it is not difficult to see how this disregard of Jesus' Kingship in this general human development has come about. The fact cannot be denied that the general human development has as a rule been carried more by the unbelievers than by the believers. What we see today, that those who practice natural science and the technical arts only exceptionally worship their Savior and God in Christ, is not an isolated event. Almost throughout history the same phenomenon has occurred, which in the Gospel of Luke is expressed in these words, that "the children of the world in their generation tend to be wiser than the children of light". Because in our Staten-translation it says: "be more careful than the children of light", this

statement has been taken rather loosely. This is because in our ancient language the word caution had two meanings. Firstly, the meaning of caution, which it still has today, is that of being cautious, of paying attention to the consequences, of thinking about the dangers to which one can expose oneself. Along a dangerous, steep mountain path one climbs carefully down. But on the other hand, careful meant something completely different and was used for skillful, shrewd, intelligent and clever. To an eminent person one sometimes wrote on the address: "To the prudent Lord." A French proverb says : "*prévoir c'est gouverner*," i.e. the art of governing lies in foresight. And so, a "prudent man" was a good regent, an able judge, an eminent scholar. And this is expressed in Luke 16:10 by the Greek word *phronimos*, the very same word used of the "wise virgins" in the parable. Wiser, more clever, would therefore certainly be a better translation in modern Dutch. And if these words are interpreted in this way, it is then expressed that in their area the children of the world are spiritually more clever than the Children of Light, i.e. that in worldly matters, in everything relating to the life of Nature and visible things, the people of the world generally know how to exercise greater power than the faithful, here referred to as the Children of Light. Something condemnable is meant here at the very least, because it is written: Jesus praised the judge who acted so sagaciously. The fact was only established that it is so; that in the area of general human life the non-believers usually show more resilience than the believers. It is not discussed any further; it is not stated that it could and should be different; nor is the cause traced, why it is so; but from life itself, from practice, from experience, the rule is established, that it appeared to be so and not otherwise. In the area of general human life in this world, the unbelievers usually outshine the believers.

Already in the Old Testament the young people found this confirmed. Abel prefers to walk thoughtfully before his lambs, and Cain is the man who strives and puts the spade in the ground. It is said of Cain that he "built a city"; something which, of course, can only be understood as a poor interior design, with a certain palliative against wild animals, but which nevertheless points to a first revelation of technical art. And when later Seth stands opposite Cain and his line, it is not in the believing lineage of Seth, but in the unbelieving lineage of Cain, that Jabal, Jubal and Tubal appear to Cain, who are mentioned as the great inventors of the working of metals, of musical instruments, and of the weaving of cloth for the tent. So now 't all goes on. Egypt is a pagan land, and Moses must learn from the Egyptians their wisdom, and in Egypt Israel is formed into a nation. The gifts of Bezaleel and Aholiab were

a special talent, given to them for the construction of the Tabernacle, but still in connection with what Egypt already knew in this field of fabrication. When the temple on Zion will arise, there will be no master builder in Israel, but the great architect Hiram from Tyre will have to come to Jerusalem to build the House of the Lord. Even in the days of Saul we read that at a certain time there was no blacksmith in Israel, something that probably means that the Israelites themselves did not care about metalworking, and that as blacksmiths among them there were men from those dissolute groups of boilermakers, as we still know them in the Gypsies, and that the Philistines, to weaken Israel, chased these dissolute men out of Israel's land posts. Israel did not excel in any field of science or art in the days of the glory of its nation-state. Trade was mostly in the hands of the Canaanites, Israel's shipping was insignificant compared to that of Tyre and Sidon. And not only Egypt, but also Assyria, Babylon and Persia were higher than Israel in every field of science and technology, not to mention the Greeks and Romans. The richest antiquities museums in Israel contain almost nothing of ancient Israel. Under Solomon an extraordinary wealth must have reigned in the palaces in Jerusalem for a moment, but everything leads to the suspicion that foreign art was called in to help here as well. And also, in Jesus' days the newly built cities of Caesarea and Tiberias are of foreign origin, while Jesus gathered around him a few simple fishermen from Galilee's lake, and there is no mention at all of intellectually or artistically high standing persons in his circle. Only with Paul, Apollos and Luke does the higher intellect enter the holy circle. With the exception of Paul's writings, the splendor of Gospel and Apostolic literature is not the fruit of scholarly learning, but the spark of holy inspiration.

This phenomenon is not accidental, but has its well-founded explanation in the spiritual fact that our spiritual power is as a rule too weak to encompass both spheres at once: that of the kingdom of heaven and that of general human life. If the mind focuses too much on general human development, then the acquired science and art will stimulate the self-concept of the individual in such a one-sided manner that becoming a "child of God" through one's own sense of superiority is almost impossible. Newton and Agassiz continue to testify how even this pitfall can be avoided, but they remain exclusions, and, as a rule, study and art seem to heighten one's own sense of power so much that becoming small and humble before God is only rarely accompanied by it. The doubt, thrown into the heart by this study and art, brings with it a real confusion and temptation, of which the ordinary confessant can hardly conceive. It makes man stand too high and the

worship of the Lord's glory suffers. Even at our colleges today we still see how young men who went there with a sincere confession of Christ go home at the end of their studies as unbelievers. Life in this field occupies too much of the whole person to leave a good chance for looking upwards.

And conversely, among the "Children of Light" as the Gospel calls them, one finds too often a tendency to flee from life out of fear and anxiety that one would finally succumb and lose one's faith if one were to enter into the fullness of human life. The hermit, the saint of the pillars, the man who locks himself up in his cell are the most telling examples of this. One seeks one's God, one wants to enjoy one's community, the world distracts from that community, and now one flees the world, flees all temptation, and withdraws from full human life "alone but in communion with God". And even though this does not take on such a scary form in the wider circle of believers, the tendency to avoid the world and to separate oneself from the world within one's own circle still prevails, as it has in almost all centuries. What the Baptists are held to be, 't "with a little book in a corner," may be exaggerated, but there is truth in it; And although the Calvinists have always understood things differently, and although they cannot be denied the praise for having excelled in the field of general human life, thanks to the profession of Common Grace, it can hardly be denied that after their decline, at the end of the 17th and 18th centuries, the tendency among them to isolate themselves in groups and to withdraw from the general human field again gained ground. Things are improving, but the tendency is still there. And even if one looks down on it from on high, there is still a sacred principle involved in this desire for avoidance and seclusion. What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and to suffer damage to his soul? Entering the world, one immediately encounters what is called "the world" in an evil sense, its unholy spirit, its luxuriant guidance, the demonic background of its life. Now it is true that faith also conquers this "world", but whoever feels too weak for it would do better to withdraw into the light than to wander off the path of life in the darkness of the world.

This can now be counted on in the course of history. For the spiritual battle all power must continually be drawn to the spiritual. The world, in order to advance, must continually concentrate all its spiritual power on the material and visual. Both currents continue to follow their own course. That is how it was, how it is, and how it will remain. On the one hand, there is a powerful development of human knowledge and ability, which is mainly promoted by men who concentrate all their mental power on this, but precisely because of this they remain alien to the

mysteries of the higher life. And on the other hand, a powerful development of the spiritual life, which is carried and promoted above all by men who, as Children of Light, concentrate all the tension of their spiritual power on that eternal light.

There is even much to be said for recognizing that this and no other is the order of our God. And does not history show us how He pleased to bestow on the heathen nations, and not on His Israel, the gifts and talents of our human knowledge and ability? Did not Egypt and Babylon, Greece and pagan Rome possess gifts of science and art which were denied to Israel? Does not the contrast between the sons of Seth and the sons of Cain run through all history? And as we descend into our own days, do you not see how the same rule continues in the distribution of gifts in this field? You would like to pray time and again that those eminent men in every field of science and art would fall under Jesus' feet, and you lament: why don't we have such men. And yet it remains so. The gifts and talents for the general development of mankind are distributed to a far greater extent to the children of the world than to the Children of Light. Calvinism alone has broken this rule in its heyday, and what we recently remembered of Rembrandt's bibles and De Ruyter's heroism and of Bilderdijk's poetry has enlivened our awareness that exceptions are possible, not only in a single person, but also in a whole group that follows a different school of thought, but without overturning the basic rule. It is only that we should never lose sight of the fact that, even where this basic rule continues to apply, the higher and richer light that has been kindled in the human sphere, and the higher power over Nature that has thereby become ours, even if it turns against the Kingdom of Christ in persons, never leaves its order, so that even in this general human development, now that we have dispensed with its sinful admixture, we have to honor a gift that came to us from the Cross.