

Sunday, December 1, 2013—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 117
The Stam/GBC Controversy, Part 1

Introduction/Review

- We ended the previous lesson (Lesson 116) by looking at Stam’s decision to leave the GGF in August, 1968. On August 1, 1968 Stam published *Silence Now Would Be Sin* in which he notified “select” readers of the *Searchlight* that both he and the Berean Bible Society were withdrawing from the GGF.
- Twice in this document Stam mentions a two year “behind-the-scenes struggle” with the GGF and GBC that precipitated his decision. As justification for his decision, Stam cites a “permissive attitude,” doctrinal compromise, and incursions of neo-evangelicalism into the organized Grace Movement as his reasons for leaving the GGF. The following is a list of Stam’s reasons for breaking fellowship with the GGF after twenty five years:
 - 1964—in the July/August issue of *Truth*, John T. Dean approvingly quotes the following comment from Bernard Ramm, “A student who has bypassed the liberal arts and who therefore has bypassed a real education, simply does not have the intellectual lung power to dive in very deeply. He does not have the tools for profound scholarship.” Stam equates these comments to Dean stating the following to Grace pastors, “You are not qualified to understand the deep things of God; you haven’t had a real education - a liberal arts education.”
 - 1964-65—winter issue of *Journal of Grace Theology* (periodical of GBC) runs an article titled “Anti-intellectualism in the Grace Movement” that advocated for the reading of immoral literature by Christian college students. D.H. Lawrence’s writings were mentioned. Editor John T. Dean runs this without criticism.
 - 1966—John T. Dean, acting president of GBC and member of the GGF’s executive council informed Stam that he favored neo-evangelicalism and did not wish to be known as a fundamentalist.
 - 1966—spring issue of *Journal of Grace Theology* runs what Stam considered a “left-wing” article by David Weddle titled “Spirit of Bereanism.” Stam notes that not only did Dean run the article without criticism but that he encouraged Weddle to write it. We will have much more to say about this article later in this lesson.
 - 1967 April 27—the Wheaton College *Record* publishes a picture of a young man and woman embracing and kissing each other along with an article that “Everybody’s making love. Don’t miss out on all the fun. It doesn’t matter where you do it. It doesn’t matter when you do it. It doesn’t matter how you talk about doing it. Just do it.” The reason this was significant to Stam’s controversy with GBC is because Dr. Peter Veltman, who was vice chairman of GBC’s board of directors was also Dean of Wheaton College.

This, coupled with the *Journal* comments (also by a board member) suggesting that young people should read D.H. Lawrence's books, was viewed by Stam as indicative of permissiveness and compromise on the part of the leader's of the institution.

- 1968 January—Dean, then president of GBC and the GGF, offered a choice of five books for the “prompt renewal of membership by GGF members,” one of which was *Your God is Too Small* by J.B. Phillips. Stam strongly objected because Dr. Phillips denied the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures, believed evolution, exalted man, minimized sin, proclaimed the social gospel, and taught that man should not seek individual salvation as a worthwhile cause. After writing Dean in protest, Dean's secretary responded stating that Dr. Dean did not see anything wrong with that particular book.
- 1968 March 6—Stam also cites Grace Mission's partnership in the EFMA, the missionary arm of the National Association of Evangelicals, and vocal support of the new evangelicalism as a reason for his decision to leave the GGF. Stam argues that Grace Mission joined the EFMA in recognizing the so-called “great commission” as God's program for today. When Stam and others wrote to Grace Mission objecting to the pamphlet and enquiring if it was released by mistake, one critic received a letter objecting to this persons “punctilious attitude in trying to protect Pauline truth.” Later, after receiving further criticism, Grace Mission issued a letter signed by the executive director stating in all caps “GRACE MISSION DOES NOT BELIEVE THAT WE AS MEMBERS OF THE BODY OF CHRIST MUST FULFILL THE SO-CALLED GREAT COMMISSION.” Not only did Stam view this incident as indicative of the duplicity of the GGF and its affiliated organizations but a betrayal of the original purpose of the mission.
- 1968 April 26—when the Bultema Memorial Library was dedicated not “one word about any stand for the Pauline revelation” was mentioned. In addition, a responsive litany was read that stated in part, “We set it (the new library) apart for the learning of thy holy Word and of all man's wisdom which is a gift from thee. . . Bow down thy heavens, O Lord, and come down and make this house now and forever thy dwelling place.” Stam viewed this dedication and litany as having cast a shadow over the man they were trying to honor by promoting viewpoints that Bultema would have repudiated.
- It is important to keep in mind that the preceding list provides only one side of the story. Any balanced history ought to consider both sides before rendering any judgments. Thankfully, my renewed relationship with Dr. Dale S. DeWitt has afforded me the opportunity to discuss the opposing side rather than relying exclusively upon Stam.
- Dr. DeWitt is the lone surviving member of the GBC faculty from the 1960s that engaged in this struggle with Stam. Twice in the past year, I have had the opportunity to have dinner with Dr. DeWitt and discuss the matter from the point of view of the college. In fact, it was DeWitt who first suggested that I could not adequately understand Stam's split with the GGF/GBC without

understanding the fundamentalist/neo-evangelical controversy. To assist me in my research DeWitt sent me his extra copy of Ronald Nash's *The New Evangelicalism*.

- During the controversy, DeWitt had the presence of mind to begin assembling a file of the personal correspondence that was circulating as part of the controversy. At a dinner meeting in July (2013), DeWitt granted me access to this file presently in the possession of the Bultema Library. In September (2013), I went to the Bultema Library and spent many hours reviewing the contents of the file. Based upon this research, the *Grace History Project* is prepared to present the most detailed account of what transpired between 1966 and 1968 than has heretofore been penned. It is important to keep in mind that the chronology we will be considering in the next couple of lessons was constructed based upon reading the primary documents in the form of dated personal correspondence.
- In terms of presentation, we will present the major developments in the controversy chronologically by year beginning with the year 1966.

Major Events of 1966

Spring, 1966—"Spirit of Bereanism" by David L. Weddle

- In the spring of 1966, the *Journal of Grace Theology*, the periodical of the faculty of GBC, published an article by David L. Weddle (then Pastor of Coopersville Bible Church) titled "Spirit of Bereanism." Weddle graduated from GBC in 1964 with a Bachelors of Religious Education and from Hope College with a Bachelors of Arts in 1966.
- In his article, Weddle challenged the accepted notion of Bereanism within the Grace Movement by arguing that Bereanism was a "way of life and thought" characterized by "total openness to new understanding." (Weddle, 79)
 - "But Bereanism, as a way of life and thought, also contains another element which we have perhaps not been so eager to adopt; a total openness to the possibility of new understandings. Not only were the Bereans firmly committed to the Scriptures as the normative statement of their faith, they were also responsive to any new light which might be shed on their interpretation or application of those Scriptures. In this attitude they also share the basic impulse of the Reformers who challenged traditional interpretations of the scriptures as obscure or inaccurate and proclaimed a "renewed" biblical message, derived from the original texts and shaped by the tools of scholarship developed in the Renaissance." (Weddle, 79)
- According to Weddle, Bereanism involved two themes of human experience as old as the pre-Socratic philosophers: "the old and the new, the permanent and the changing, the traditional and the revolutionary. The historic task of both philosophy and theology has been to strike the balance between the two." (Weddle, 79)

- Weddle saw the Bereans as having struck a balance between conservative/liberal, development/defending the faith, and orthodoxy/progress.
 - “The Bereans did not sacrifice one of these elements to the other. They did not deny “development” for the sake of “defending the faith,” but neither did they sacrifice “orthodoxy” in the name of “progress.” To be a Berean is to be open to the adventure of change and intellectual-spiritual advance . . .” (Weddle, 79)
- After quoting F.F. Bruce, who defined the Berean’s “readiness of mind” as “commendable open-mindedness,” Weddle encourages his readers to “imitate the openness of the first Bereans.”
 - “If we today would imitate the openness of the first Bereans, to what contemporary sources might we turn for the possibility of new truth arising? To what historical-social-cultural currents in our own time might we look for clues to new understanding of the meaning and application of our faith in Christ?”
- Weddle then goes on to discuss five sources that might produce new truth that true Bereans should consider. In fairness, it is important to note that Weddle states if one thinks him to be fully advocating for these five items, they have “completely misunderstood” him.
- *World Peace*—Weddle suggests that the UN might be one contender from which new truth might arise. “It is imperative that we come to grips with the need for a clear definition of the relationship between Christian teachings and the realm of political action, especially of a militaristic nature. The naïve identification of Christianity with “Americanism” must be abandoned if we would be true to the demands of both.” (Weddle, 80-81)
- *Civil Rights*—“. . . movements and the advocating of social changes, especially for the poor and discriminated. . . . The men of our times are not blind fools. They see clearly that Christians who offer their colored brethren money to “build a church in your own neighborhood and attend there” are only “keeping the Negro in his place” under the guise of love. . . . Until the church begins to demonstrate its preached convictions that all sinners are equal in condemnation before God and all believers are one in Christ Jesus, its practice will continue to give the lie to its doctrine. And what of us “grace people” whose chief doctrine is the oneness of all men in the Body of Christ, a realm where all distinctions are abolished?” (Weddle, 81)
- *Contemporary Theology*—“. . . particularly the areas of neo-orthodoxy and Tillich’s rejection of the “God of popular theism.” While Weddle is clear that he does not agree with the neo-orthodox view that the Bible “becomes” the Word of God in a personal “encounter.” He also does not see the Bible a “cold cadaver for exegetical analysis” or “a private garden in which we may pick proof texts for a pet doctrinal system,” but rather as the living word of God and vehicle through which the Holy Spirit works. Weddle does, however, agree with Paul Tillich that “the God of popular theism” is inferior to the “God above God,” and urges all true Bereans to agree. Even though Tillich taught much with which Weddle does not agree, “a true Berean is determined to embrace truth even though it be found in the company of error,” according to Weddle. “In any

case, refusal to involve ourselves in the contemporary theological ferment is to refuse the possibility of truth arising from new sources. In such a refusal we align ourselves with the Pharisees rather than the Bereans.” (Weddle, 82)

- *Contemporary Literature*—“. . . particularly the novel.” According to Weddle, “twentieth-century literature is permeated with theological significance and cannot be ignored by anyone who is seeking to understand the human situation in our time.” One must grasp the existentialist obsession of the individual cast adrift in a sea of meaninglessness as well as their rejection of the transcendent God of the Bible. “If our Christian witness is to communicate to the “existentialist dilemma, it must at least understand it and come to grips with the anguish it involves. Platitudinous and hypocritical Christianity is no help to modern man in his “search for authenticity.” The contemporary novelist is calling the church to make good its claims to provide meaning and satisfaction in the modern pluralistic society. The church dare not ignore this call.” (Weddle, 82)
- *Contemporary Psychology*—“. . . providing new awareness of the complexity of human nature, new avenues for the redemptive message, new insights into the plight of man.” Weddle argues that “psychiatry is no more an insidious Satanic plot to control our minds than is the printing press.” Both are viewed as “powerful instruments of healing.” “The insights of psychological research are a gift of the Father, but shall we refuse them because they are given through a “secular professor” instead of a “grace preacher?” (Weddle, 83)
- Weddle compares the one who ignores the current trends in modern thought to Don Quixote fighting windmills under the false understanding that they were dragons. Weddle questions whether one who refuses to be receptive to new understanding can truly be considered a Berean.
 - “Can it be that what we contemptuously term ‘the wisdom of this world’ may be the truth of God revealed in a context other than our own which we are too proud or too ignorant to examine honestly? One could not accuse the Bereans of either pride or ignorance when they invited Paul to preach his ‘new gospel.’” (Weddle, 83)
- As Weddle concludes his article he makes the following important statements about what it means to be a true Berean:
 - “Thus the Bereans struck the balance between the two elements: openness and commitment. They recognized that a house built on sand would fall and that openness without commitment would only lead to skepticism (the path and eventual end of Greek philosophy). While they received Paul’s teaching with “all readiness of mind,” they “examined the scriptures daily,” whether those things were so. The tension between safety and adventure, dogma and debate, foundation and building, which is characteristic of life, is also characteristic of Bereanism. Bereanism is an attitude of complete openness to “novel advance” in truth which is controlled by the constant expression of truth in the Scriptures.” (Weddle, 83)

- “He (true Berean) does not jealously protect his system as a finished gem but as a stone in need of much polishing; grace theology is not for him a destination, but a journey. Therefore, he does not forcibly squelch live options in doctrinal discussions. He remains open to frequent review and criticism of his creed.” (Weddle, 83)
- “The Berean is grounded in the firm belief in Jesus Christ as Lord and in the authority of His Word as the foundation on which our relationship to Him is established and maintained. All fresh insights are judged according to their harmony with that belief; it is never altered to fit new insights. . . For the Berean the cortical question to be raised with regard to a new insight or candidate for truth is: Does it enrich my relationship to Jesus Christ and my witness to the gospel? If it does, it is embraced as a worthy building material. . . Bereanism then involves these two elements in balance: openness to the possibility of new truth and new questions arising in the world; a firm commitment to the Lordship of Christ and a respect for the authority of His “living” Word. We dare not neglect either aspect if we would remain true to the spirit of authentic Bereanism.” (Weddle, 84)

Conclusion

- After analyzing “Spirit of Bereanism” it is easy to see why Stam took such strong offense. It is also easy to see why Stam viewed neo-evangelicalism as having made inroads into the Grace Movement. Many of the themes that Weddle writes about sound very similar to what we observed in the writings of Carl F.H. Henry and Ronald Nash.
- What Weddle is essentially arguing for is an expanded “new” understanding of what it means to be a Berean. One could argue that Weddle’s article is new evangelicalism in a “Grace” wrapping.
- Whether or not Stam’s claim that Dean encouraged Weddle to pen the article is unclear. What is clear is that the contents of the article were taken from a sermon Weddle preached at Berean Bible Church in Grand Rapids, MI on January 9, 1966. It is very possible that Dean was in attendance that Sunday, heard Weddle’s message, and later encouraged him to submit an article to the *Journal*.
- We will continue our discussion of the major events of 1966 in the next lesson.

Works Cited

Stam, C.R. *Silence Now Would Be Sin*. Chicago IL: Berean Bible Society, August 1, 1968.

Weddle, David L. “Spirit of Bereanism” in *Journal of Grace Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Grace Bible College, Spring 1966.