

## **Ecclesiastes 12:8-14**

### ***The Teacher Summarizes the Evangelical Wisdom of the Shepherd of Israel in a Conclusion***

#### **A. The Canonical Authority of the Gospel**

The question of the authorship of vv. 8-14 is not very important (although there is no real reason to doubt that The Teacher wrote them), as long as one maintains that these words are also inspired by the Holy Spirit. The Teacher has been occupied a lot with dying (vv. 1-7). This does not mean that, for him, death is the end of everything, but it does mean that death is the end of everything that we see on earth. Everything has its time and passes. The author once again establishes that everything is vain (empty, without purpose), at least when it is taken by itself, without experience, apart from the revelation of the Word and temple. Thus, v. 8 again underlines the necessity of that revelation (and, in it, faith).

For the first time it is stated here that The Teacher was wise (pious). This means he held on to God as Creator, Shepherd and Judge. But he has also taught the people knowledge. This book bears eloquent evidence of The Teacher's weighing and studying (v. 9). Further, he arranged proverbs with great care, also in this book. But the book is much more than a collection of proverbs (see Outline 2 about the unity of the book). It is possible that The Teacher wrote many more proverbs than have been preserved. In any case the words, "upright" and "true" exemplify the book. The emphasis is on the phrase, "what he wrote was upright and true"; they give unimpeachable truth; you can depend on it; you must yield to it (cf. Articles 4-7 of the Belgic Confession).

The phrase, "the wise" (v. 11), refers to the prophets and, more generally, the instruments of divine revelation. In this context, it also refers to the whole Old Testament, in which The Teacher clearly is rooted. The sayings of the wise are like (ox) goads (cf. Judges 3:31; 1 Samuel 13:21; Acts 26:14). They nettle and irritate the wicked heart, and provoke opposition. They also evoke questions and stimulate thinking and religious deeds. The collected sayings are like nails firmly fixed: they give stability, certainty. That is why the study of Scripture is necessary and rewarding.

#### **B. The Pastoral Character**

The sayings are given by one Shepherd, namely the Lord God of Psalms 23 and 80; Isaiah 40:11; etc. There are many proverbs (collections), many books, and yet only one Author. In Christ this Shepherd has become flesh and blood (Matthew 9:36; John 10). The Spirit of this Christ speaks in the book. It has been pointed out already, that the shepherd theme is decisive for the whole exegesis of Ecclesiastes (see Outline 1). The book binds the sheep together; it gathers the church of all ages, not only in the time between Old and New Testaments, but also in "the last hour" in the time between the New Testament and the New Jerusalem. It brings her further (Revelation 7:17), also by referring back to the beginning (7:29).

Verse 12 is a pastoral warning: beware lest you do not see the forest for the trees. All books are not written by the wise: don't delve too deeply into things; it causes weariness and it leaves you no wiser than before. One can have numerous problems, many questions remain, but the conclusion of the matter is simple (v. 13). The theme of the fear of the Lord runs throughout the book (3:14; 5:17; 7:18; 11:9).

The Pastor demands the entire man, the entire heart. This is a *pastoral* demand. Verse 13b says: "this is the whole duty of man" that is, this mandate takes up his time completely. One also sees the entire man here: Adam is fully the man of God (cf. 2 Timothy 3:17), being the wonder of a merciful re-creation by the Spirit of Christ, the last Adam, referred to in chapter 7:28. God promised the Spirit when man fled trembling from his presence (Belgic Confession, Article 17).

### **C. The Messianic Perspective**

That God, the Creator and Shepherd, is also Judge (v. 14), has been said more than once by The Teacher as a warning and comfort. Each time a view of eternal life in the city of the eternal messianic peace was opened. In that advent-light man may enjoy the good which God gives.

Whoever respects God as Creator, Shepherd and Judge, has connected the beginning, middle and end of history, and has, in principle, overcome the complaint that "all is meaningless."

That God will bring everything into judgment, even the secret things, is a comfort and a warning: watch for secret sins. When this judgment will come, is not mentioned. That it will come, is a fact. We know about God's coming in Christ (Bethlehem, Pentecost, Christ's return).

In this conclusion, we see how the Shepherd of Israel (he is also the Shepherd of all nations (Matthew 25:32) - sheep on the right, goats on the left), by means of The Teacher's service, keeps his people on the advent way as advent congregation, especially in times of pressure and injustice, which his people have to undergo and in which his messianic expectations and claims are rejected and suppressed.

### **Questions**

1. Who calls the Canonical authority of Scriptures into question today? Can we do that, and yet remain Reformed?
2. Find words of The Teacher which are "like gods".
3. Are you only allowed to read books based on Scripture? What standards do you apply in your choice: this is allowed, but not that?
4. Is "much study" (v. 12) not a cultural mandate? Do we not study too little rather than too much?

5. Pay attention to the parallel text in the New Testament (2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10).
6. Can you name people or movements which deny eternal punishment? Does the Bible speak clearly about that punishment?
7. What connection is there between Ecclesiastes and Article 37 of the Belgic Confession?

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