

- When John Glenn made his orbital flight six months ago, he was questioned often regarding his religious faith in contrast to Gagarin Pito's scornful assertion that he didn't see God anywhere up there, Glen commented quietly, "I do not know the nature of God but he'll be wherever we go." That affirmation of faith made me resolve to wrestle with the mammoth issues related to the God of outer space. Obviously, this is a timely topic even without this week's assist from the Russians. I did not know that the North Carolina Methodist layman's conference meeting on this campus this weekend was to have a discussion group dealing with Christianity in the space age. Even if I had been invited I should not have dared to attend for you men have probably completely undermined this sermon. During the University Alumni weekend here at Duke this past June, a panel of distinguished professors approached the year of the astronaut from various perspectives and thereby whetted the appetite of many of us for further exploration. Two weeks ago another Methodist related school, Simpson College in Iowa, held its second Aerospace Institute for college and church leaders with the avowed purpose to explore a concept of God and his relationship to man and the universe, adequate to man's expanding concept of the universe. I regret that I do not yet have a report on their findings. But if we are to venture into the vast reaches of outer space, we must obviously reject certain unreliable rockets, which are popping off all around us. A recent television fantasy about flight to another planet took as its theme, the conviction that quotes, "God shaped people from a fixed formula. Therefore they'd be the same as here. Minds and hearts must have souls that makes them people." The ironic conclusion was that these planet people did look and talk and act like human beings though they had extraordinary powers that we do not yet possess. But when they captured the hero and put him in a cage on display as a strange inferior earth-man, he realized tearfully that they were just like us, with the same, yes alas, the same hearts and minds and souls. Or take a very different approach, one religious magazine this month turned to a verse in the first chapter of John's revelation of Jesus Christ. "Behold, he is coming with the clouds and every eye will see him." The editor then hailed the marvel of tale star which thrilled us all as answering at long last the biblical puzzle of how every eye will see the return of Christ. A fulfillment of John's prophecy, not as poetry he said, but literally, and in precise detail. Now, I think we are somewhat off course if we expect to see the second coming on our television screens, simply because a visible image now comes literally from heaven. One further example, sometime ago a German scientist convinced that there may be as many as 10 inhabited stars within a 1000 light years of earth suggested that we should watch for signals from these planets in the particular hope that stellar civilizations, which have already experienced atomic war may advise us how to avoid it or how to meet it. A commentator cynically inquired the probability of having to listen to planetary commercials claiming that stardust travels the light 50 light years, the smoke 50 light years further. But many Christians have a far more serious concern with the implications of the space age for their religious faith. If this is a timely topic, it is also an eternal topic. And I prophesy that we shall hear many speculative discourse like this in the years ahead. Having neither scientific nor theological qualifications for the intricate details involved, I would share with you this morning only some of the introductory thoughts about the problems which are raised. To my own surprise, this turned out to be not only a three point sermon as all professors of preaching recommend, but a Trinitarian sermon as well. That is, I wanna suggest very briefly, some questions related to our understanding of God as Father, Son, and

Holy Spirit. If this particular astronaut lands in the drink, or if you have to probe the data for days or months or years after this daring flight, that too will be typical of our embryonic space age. First of all, the God of outer space reveals himself as a creator of infinite magnitude and love. Long before Galileo and other pioneer astronomers began peeking at heavenly bodies other than angels, the Psalmist and shepherds and wisemen looked to the stars and found their incredible beauty, perplexing questions and reassuring faith. Today, as in ages long ago, the heavens are telling the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handy work. Of course, this is an affirmation of faith, not open to scientific proof, but on the other hand, no scientific discovery gives any reason thus far for doubting the opening assertion of Genesis, that "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." To be sure there are some religious people who look doubtfully at investigation and exploration lest presumptuous man be guilty of tampering with God's creation. In a recent lecture to a group of ministers, a Michigan professor of mechanical engineering spoke hesitantly about possible spiritual conflicts resulting from interplanetary travel and suggested that outer space might upset certain narrow visions about life only on earth or man as the pinnacle of creation or the absoluteness of time and matter. But he decided that this kind of intellectual rigidity is really an attempt to limit God to man's image. That it may be closer to sin than to enlightenment and that man has a moral obligation to seek to know God and his universe more fully. What shocked me even more than his fear about man's spiritual mandate to leave this earth, was it its distance that the most urgent present reason for pushing ahead in the space program is that of national survival. He listed three facets of justification, national security, national prestige, and the future economic and spiritual development of our nation. Now, one may expect such narrow patriotism from the Pentagon and occasionally from Congress, but for a scientist and Christian layman, addressing a ministerial conference, to put the whole focus of space exploration on national survival, even spiritual development for the sake of our own country alone seems to me to miss the religious significance of the space age, namely the creation of a vast universe by a God whose power and love infinitely transcend one nation or one planet. In a sense, one might say that the exploration of outer space shatters both deism and humanism. The further we push our scientific horizons, the more we might be in to say with the Psalmist, "What is man that thou art mindful of him?" The infinite complexity and scope of the universe makes it easy for some people to talk about an impersonal mechanical God who set the planet spinning but cannot possibly have loving concern for the infinitesimal insects who inhabit the tiny dot of earth. But when those infinitesimal insects begin to unlock the mysteries of that vast universe, when they speculate and plan and reach for the moon both physically and spiritually, then we are led toward the conclusion that they do have a purpose of place in the entire scheme. For the miracles of creation line not only in the distant phenomena of stellar space, but also in the minds of men. God shows his love not merely in the beauty and vastness of the heavens but in the wisdom and the ambition of human seekers after his truth. By the same token, those who have thought that man is the master of things, the lord of all he surveys, the apex of creation must look again. In this space age, we become newly aware of the incredible magnitude of the universe, of the distances and problems, which still separate us from the nearest star. We have come a few hundred light years on the path of scientific knowledge, but we have millions more to go. The question of whether life exists on other planets is but one small reminder that the universe lies infinitely beyond man's understanding. And if one can multiply infinity still further beyond man's control. The vastness of our physical setting makes it difficult to believe that mortal man has any absolute power. The vastness of human thought makes it difficult to believe that we are accidental specs of dust. Very simply, but very profoundly, the Christian faith assures us that an infinite God created not only

the miracles of outer space, but human hearts and minds capable of receiving and using fragments of truth. This is one aspect of divine revelation. The second aspect of divine revelation is even more difficult. For some, it poses the threat of spiritual danger in space exploration because it relates to the central doctrine of Christian theology, namely the Christological problem. If there should be life in outer space, whether remotely similar to human beings or not, we shall try as Christians to fit them into God's purpose. No monotheists can exclude Mars or the hypothetical and much maligned Martians from God's creation. Furthermore, we would find it extremely difficult to exclude them from his plan of salvation. But what form of salvation? How, and when, and by whom? In Peter's bold proclamation about Jesus Christ of Nazareth, traditional Christianity has found its assurance that there is salvation in no one else, "For there is no other name under heaven given among men, by which we must be saved." You will note that this sentence speaks of the only name given among men and hence may not apply to the Martians but in view of the inconceivability at that time of intelligent self-conscious beings beyond earth, we may regard that as a dubious escape clause. According to John's gospel, Jesus himself was even more explicit. "No one comes to the Father, but by me." What then are we to say about creatures in outer space? Creatures who have obviously never known about Jesus of Nazareth, whatever relationship they may hold with God, the father and creator. I do not know. In these few minutes I can only suggest a few areas of thought for you to pursue the next time you talk about men on Mars, or the next time you read your Bible. If one God made heaven and earth and all that lives and moves and has its being, and if he promises to some of these a unique eternal fellowship with him as Christian doctrine maintains, are the Martians in or out? Did the man who died on the cross 2000 years ago, offer redemption to beings totally outside of human history? Or are they forever excluded from the glorious salvation to be found in Jesus Christ? All sorts of suspicious arguments may be proposed. If Mars didn't have an Adam or perhaps more aptly, an Eve to disobey God in the first place, creatures without a fall may not need a cross. But as we seek to understand original sin today, in terms of pride and selfishness rooted in our finite natures, I suspect that finite men on Mars, if any, have also sinned against God and one another, even if they too created in the spiritual image of God, they remain creatures. And creaturehood itself needs redemption and restoration by a loving God, rather than an arbitrary judge. I mentioned earlier, the German scientist who is waiting perhaps a thousand light years for words of advice from outer space. The commentator suggests a story in the style of CS Lewis in which the astronomer feverishly decodes a message from space, just as the first missiles of an atomic war begin to fall on earth. The message reads, "Watch oh, wise man of the dark planet. Watch for the star of the king of the Jews." That theme is poetically moving and spiritually valid for us earth men. But it does not explain how our Martian neighbors know about the Jews, even if they know about the king. So for myself, I would seek an answer in the infinite love of God, not in theoretical or even biblical formulas. Remember that the same gospel which includes the most exclusivistic passages about the role of Christ in salvation history starts with the assurance that, "In the beginning was the word and the word was with God, and the word was God." In other words, although we may recognize him as incarnate at a particular time and place in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The second person of the Trinity, Christ, the son is eternal with the father and not to be limited by space or history. John's gospel goes on to say, "The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world." And Paul and Barnabas declare that in past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways, yet he did not leave himself without witness. Jesus, the itinerant carpenter of Galilee manifested God's redemptive love in human history. And those who draw close to him will see God's will for us more clearly than in any other form. But the word, the light which enlighteneth every man and the

planet, the way, the truth, the life, may conceivably, perhaps necessarily, reveal God's love in other forms as well. Now, some of you will be asking why we are playing at word games, why we are apparently tampering with Orthodox Christian beliefs, I submit that the once fantastic notion of life in outer space, merely dramatizes a profound and crucial problem, which has confronted the church in its evangelistic mission for 2000 years. The distinction must be kept in mind between universal salvation, the conviction that all people are ultimately to be forgiven and restored by grace and universal opportunity for salvation. That is, for a deliberate choice between obedience and rebellion toward God. Are we compelled to believe by the Bible or historic creeds or the master himself that the loving father whom we see revealed in the son will permanently exclude from his kingdom all those on Mars or in Old Testament times, or in India, or even in our own country who have never heard of Jesus of Nazareth? Is it possible that the God of outer space may send or have sent his son on other missions, to other places, that other peoples may know his love in other ways? I simply raise the question, I do not presume to answer it. The third point is more obvious and perhaps more imperative. The God of outer space is also the God of inner space. The God who reveals himself in his fabulous creation and by his incarnate son reveals himself also as the holy spirit who acts in and through his receptive creatures. If we reject the notion of divine automation, which pushed the starter and let the mechanism roll, then we must recognize that somehow God works not only in history, but in human relationships and in individual lives. Jesus himself promised the counselor, the holy spirit whom the father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. How tragically we have failed to prepare a solid launching pad for spiritual journeys, into outer space. From a material, economic or political standpoint, it may be true as we are being warned on many sides, that our moral foundations are inadequate to win the space race. A civilization riddled with corruption and shady values, in home and school and office, as well as public life may lack the single minded commitment that it takes to reach the stars. An affluent society, which spends more for shifting fashions or conspicuous waste than it does for lifting hungry masses to subsistence level, can hardly afford the sacrificial cost of soaring to the moon. A people not yet ready to treat dark-skinned fellow citizens with equality and dignity and love are far from prepared to deal with unknown creatures on distant planets. A world of disunited nations poised fearfully to destroy itself will find itself at critical disadvantage for interplanetary war or peace. As Jesus himself asked, "If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?" Astute Bible scholars will remind us that the very next sentence declares, "No one has ascended into heaven but he who descended from heaven, the son of man." Skeptics may claim derisively that this week's sensational space achievement disproves the scriptures. What it may reveal instead, is the vast difference between physical space where man has now lived for three spectacular days, and heaven where God dwells, eternally. All of us are odd and fascinated by the conquest of space even when accomplished by our political rivals. But we know full well that man is not really worthy to live among the stars until he has learned to live with himself and with his fellow man. If our great culture would invest 1/10th of the money or resources or energy or brains which go for space research into conquering juvenile delinquency, crime, race prejudice, mental illness, and so on, we might be better able to cope with problems of outer space. Thus, if we are unprepared mechanically and morally to win the stellar universe for Uncle Sam, how much less prepared are we to recognize God's presence there? Even though John Glenn does say, "He will be wherever we go." I'm not proposing immediate plans for an evangelistic crusade to Mars, although I have read recently an unpublished manuscript about our missionary task in space, and there is good biblical warrant for such concern. Paul's letter to the Ephesians

speaks of the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things, that through the church, the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. In other words, the church does have a truly universal mission. But the basic to the job of the church is the power and purpose of God. The marvels of outer space and of human knowledge merely emphasized the majesty of creation. Man's dreams and his determination to free himself from earthbound life are part of his God-given nature, however, corrupted by mortal pride. To quote again from Ephesians, "He has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. Things in heaven and things on earth, united in him." For the God of outer space is the God of inner space, of moral values and of Christian love. The God who created the farthest galaxies and the laws by which they move, ordained also the laws of space technology which man now dabbles with and tries to use. He, it is who implants in man, the longing, the courage and the wisdom to reach for the stars. And he revealed himself to us in his son, Jesus Christ, gave us in that act of grace, a more excellent way, namely, the assurance that the Lord of the far horizons is nearer than hands and feet as close as the smallest act of loving service, as imminent as the whisper of a prayer. What is man, that thou art mindful of him? We do well to wonder. We do better to capture the faith of Psalmist, "Thou hast made him little less than God, but less, neither equal nor more. Thou hast given him dominion over the works of thy hands to an extent the Psalmist never dreamed." Oh Lord, our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth. Let us pray. Lord.