

---

# Pro Rege

---

---

Volume 32 | Number 1

Article 1

---

September 2003

## Runner's Impact on the Academy and Beyond: Personal Reflections

AI Wolters

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege)



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Higher Education Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

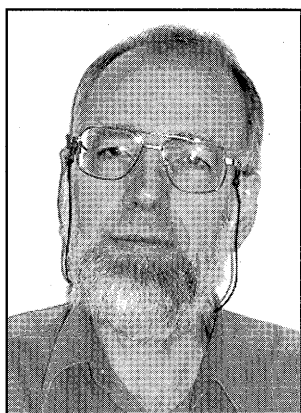
Wolters, AI (2003) "Runner's Impact on the Academy and Beyond: Personal Reflections," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 32: No. 1, 1 - 7.

Available at: [https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro\\_rege/vol32/iss1/1](https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol32/iss1/1)

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact [ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu](mailto:ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu).

*\*Editor's Note: The following article was the opening keynote address presented by Dr. Al Wolters at the Runner Legacy Conference held at Redeemer University College in Ancaster, Ontario, on October 4, 2002. The conference was jointly sponsored by Calvin College, Dordt College, Trinity Christian College, The Institute for Christian Studies, The King's University College, and Redeemer University College.*

## Runner's Impact on the Academy and Beyond: Personal Reflections



by Al Wolters

One of the things that Dr. H. Evan Runner taught his students was the futility of pretending that there is such a thing as autonomous rationality, that academic discourse can somehow transcend and be detached from one's personal commitments and fundamental life situation before the face of God. Like much of what he taught us, this was a philosophical insight that was well ahead of its time. So let me begin this academic lecture by putting my own cards on the table and acknowledging my personal debt to Runner. When I came to Calvin College in 1961, I was a self-proclaimed religious agnostic, even though I enrolled in the preseminary program. In the Lord's providence, there were two factors which brought me to faith in Jesus Christ during my first year at Calvin. One was

---

*Dr. Al Wolters is Professor of Religion and Theology/Classical Languages at Redeemer University College.*

the sudden death of professor Henry Van Til, who suffered a heart attack while teaching a class. The other was the impact of the Groen Club, the student club mentored by Dr. Runner, which I began to attend at that time. Through the Groen Club, and through the philosophy courses with Runner which I subsequently took, the whole course of my life was decisively shaped. I committed myself to Jesus Christ and dedicated my life to the pursuit of Christian scholarship along the lines of Runner's teaching. Among other things, this meant that I abandoned my plans of attending seminary and ended up pursuing a doctorate in philosophy at the Free University in Amsterdam. When I received my doctorate in 1972, the Latin dedication of my dissertation read as follows: *Patri Siert Wolters, Magistro H. Evan Runner*, "to my father, Siert Wolters, and to my teacher, H. Evan Runner." As I said at Runner's funeral earlier this year, "he was like a father to me, and he was my only teacher." Then, in 1974, by a bittersweet twist of providential leading, I was appointed to the chair in the history of philosophy at the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto, a position which Runner himself had initially been expected to occupy and which has now been officially designated the "H. Evan Runner Chair in the History of Philosophy," currently held by Dr. Robert Sweetman. For all these reasons, I acknowledge with deep gratitude the incalculable personal debt—spiritual, intellectual, and professional—that I owe to Runner, and I will not pretend that the "personal reflections" which follow are objective in any modernist sense of the term. I will, however, strive to be fair and judicious.

It is clear that in one sense Runner had an extraordinary impact on the academy. The fact that the

present conference, dedicated to the celebration of his legacy, is co-sponsored by six university-level academic institutions, three in the US and three in Canada, is ample proof of that impact. To the best of my knowledge, this circumstance, or joint sponsorship, is something quite unprecedented. There can be no doubt that he had a significant shaping influence on each of these institutions, as well as on many individual academics who teach elsewhere.

Paradoxically, however, Runner was in another sense an academic failure. Measured by the usual standards of the academic establishment, the kinds of things generally taken into account when one's academic peers decide on questions of promotion and tenure, Runner was not a success. This is true both of his publications and his teaching. His one published scholarly monograph was his dissertation, *The Development of Aristotle Illustrated from the Earliest Books of the Physics* (1951), which applied the problem-historical method of his mentor D. H. T. Vollenhoven to parts of Aristotle's *Physics*. Although I was delighted to find a reference to this work some years ago in Joseph Owens' *A History of Ancient Western Philosophy*, it is probably fair to say that, like most dissertations, it has contributed little to its field of study. It is also telling that Vollenhoven himself in later years came to different conclusions regarding Aristotle, and that the entire genetic approach to Aristotle that had been pioneered by Runner's earlier teacher Werner Jaeger, and subsequently refined by Vollenhoven, has been widely challenged in recent Aristotelian studies, and that one of its most effective critics today is professor Abraham Bos of the Free University, a respected Aristotle scholar who is himself a former student of Vollenhoven as well as a committed adherent of the same reformational philosophy advocated by Runner. In other words, even Runner's closest associates have not adopted the conclusions of his dissertation. I must confess that I myself have always been bothered by the analogies between Vollenhoven's analysis of Aristotelian texts and main-line historical criticism of the Bible. In both cases, a received text is analyzed and rearranged in terms of perceived inconsistencies, and in both cases, increased scholarly emphasis in recent years has been placed on taking the canonical or traditional text as having its own integrity.

Apart from this monograph on Aristotle, Runner's scholarly publications are few in number and are

generally of a broad and visionary kind, often directed to a non-academic audience and not concerned with careful argumentation or scholarly documentation. They are not the kind of thing accepted in refereed academic journals. It is striking, for example, that Runner never published an article in *Philosophia Reformata*, even though this journal was very close to him in religious and philosophical orientation. Most of his publications were occasional pieces, originally delivered at student conferences or at commemorative occasions of Christian organizations. Although he often talked of writing on various philosophical topics, especially after his retirement, these projects were never brought to completion.

If his publication record was weak, his reputation as a teacher was also decidedly mixed. Although he was an inspiring and prophetic teacher whose classes transformed the lives of many students (including me), his pedagogy left a great deal to be desired. His courses tended to be disorganized and to fall far short of covering the material announced in the syllabus. I remember that when I took his course on logic, most of the semester was spent on the general history of philosophy and on making the point that any given logic presupposes an epistemology and an ontology. This focus left the discussion of logic proper to the last weeks of the course, with virtually no time remaining for a discussion of the significant developments of twentieth-century logic. The course in Greek philosophy was not very different (in fact, malicious voices used to claim that he covered basically the same material in all his courses), with the text of the course consisting of Runner's own translation of sections of Volume 1 of Vollenhoven's never-to-be-completed *Geschiedenis der Wijsbegeerte*—a text that was hardly designed for undergraduate students with no philosophy background. Given these pedagogical shortcomings, as well as his colorful antics in the classroom, it is not surprising that he almost lost his academic position at Calvin in the 1950s.

If Runner was not a professional success by most contemporary academic standards, how can we account for the fact that he has had such an impact on so many academic institutions and individual scholars? To put it differently, how is it possible, not only that six academic institutions should co-sponsor this conference but that ten different workshops, led by established academics, could be organized exploring different facets of Runner's scholarly legacy?

Paradoxically, despite the pedagogical weaknesses that we have just noted, the answer lies principally in Runner's *teaching*. His impact on the academic world can be explained chiefly through the influence, not of his writings but of his students. And his teaching of his students was not primarily that of introducing them to the specific academic discipline of philosophy but of inspiring them with a vision of the entire academic enterprise. Another way of saying this is that what Runner taught was not in the first place philosophy but a worldview—specifically, the religious worldview of Dutch Neocalvinism. Let me elaborate a bit on that point.

Although Runner had a Ph.D. in philosophy, he was not primarily a philosopher. He had been trained mainly in classics, theology, and patristics and had little interest in—or indeed aptitude for—the details of philosophical argumentation. He had embraced the philosophy of Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd, not so much as providing solutions to pressing philosophical problems but as giving philosophical expression to the Neocalvinist articulation of the biblical worldview and as a tool whereby this religious worldview could have a reforming influence on the various academic disciplines. It is therefore not surprising that relatively few of his students went on in philosophy proper. He encouraged them to go into a whole range of different disciplines, from biology to jurisprudence, making fruitful for each different field the philosophical insights of Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd.

The fact that Runner's primary focus was not on philosophy as such, but rather on religious worldview, also comes out in the fact that he presented Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd as teaching essentially one philosophy. The differences between them were downplayed or considered complementary rather than mutually exclusive. I can remember as a graduate student being quite surprised to learn that there were quite substantial differences in systematic philosophy, for example on time and social institutions, between the two fathers of reformational philosophy. This tendency on Runner's part to conflate Vollenhoven and Dooyeweerd was especially striking in his treatment of the history of philosophy, where he worked with both the former's problem-historical method and the latter's groundmotive analysis. What was important for Runner was that each sought, in line with the basic Neocalvinist worldview, to uncover the religious presuppositions at work in all of culture, including

philosophy. The way in which this uncovering was done was secondary. It was distracting from the main point to dwell on such secondary differences.

This concern with emphasizing the basic worldview of Dutch Neocalvinism also accounts for the way in which Runner highlighted the work of other, not strictly philosophical, representatives of this tradition, such as Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper. It is very telling that the student club through which Runner exercised much of his influence was called the Groen Club, after Groen van Prinsterer, and that a major project of its early years was the English translation of Groen's seminal work

---

*What Runner taught was not in the first place philosophy but a worldview—specifically the religious worldview of Dutch Neo-Calvinism.*

---

*Ongehoof en Revolutie*. It is also significant that in the early years of his retirement Runner, together with his wife Ellen, devoted much time and energy to the translation of S. G. De Graaf's *Verbondsgeschiedenis* (in English *Promise and Deliverance*), which is essentially a popular guide to reading the Bible in the redemptive-historical way that had been developed or rediscovered in Neocalvinism. In all these ways, Runner was concerned about highlighting the distinctive strengths of Neocalvinism and the worldview it sought to embody. Philosophy was only one part—though a very important part—of this overall emphasis. One could say that he taught reformational philosophy as the most effective academic tool for carrying out Kuyper's program for the Christian reformation of culture, both in the academy and beyond.

Of course, Runner was not the only representative of reformational philosophy in North America and certainly not the only exponent of a Neocalvinist worldview or a Kuyperian approach to culture. What made him by far the most effective and the most influential apostle of this philosophy and this worldview on this continent during the latter half of the twentieth century? Let me mention a number of factors.

I think first of all of his passion. Runner was consumed by a sense of mission. For most of his early

life, he had thought of himself as preparing for missionary work in the Far East, and he brought a kind of missionary zeal for the gospel to his teaching of philosophy. All his pedagogical shortcomings were overshadowed—or perhaps one should say, outshone—by the passion of his teaching. Often his classes were more like preaching than teaching. What he said in the classroom was inspiring, prophetic, challenging. He was a “charismatic” teacher in the Weberian sense. He awakened in his hearers a sense of broad vistas and personal religious engagement. Students would forget to take notes, and sit, openmouthed and fascinated, as they listened to his soaring academic rhetoric. I know, for I was one of them.

I believe a significant aspect of his passion was also the zeal of the convert—a convert not to the gospel but to the vision of the gospel as a culture-transformative power as understood in Neocalvinism. In the preface to his dissertation, he writes that he had almost succumbed to historicism before he came to study philosophy under Vollenhoven. It was Vollenhoven and his view of the integral connection between the gospel and philosophy that saved Runner—saved him not only from historicism but also from the dualism of his American evangelical upbringing. He now saw that there was a broad and meaningful task for Christians in all of academic life, not just in theology, and beyond the academy in all kinds of other provinces of human endeavor. For the rest of his career, he became an impassioned apologist of this expansive and integral vision of the Christian life, which had meant such a liberation for him personally. And because he was a convert, he could articulate this vision with a freshness and an immediacy that was lacking in those who had grown up with these ideas. Ironically, he became an apostle of Neocalvinism to the heirs of Neocalvinism in North America. An American of Scots-Irish descent, he proclaimed the good news of a Kuypertian worldview to the ethnically Dutch Christian Reformed Church.

Next to Runner’s passion, we must also mention his erudition as a second element of his influence. He had been trained very broadly in classical and modern languages, history, theology, and philosophy. Although he wrote very little, and never to my knowledge attended professional academic conferences, he read very widely throughout his teaching career. He saw everything in terms of broad historical movements and overarching themes, and he could illustrate

his points at a moment’s notice with a wealth of detail from the whole history of western thought. It became something of a joke among his followers that he would approach any contemporary issue by going back to the Greeks. What he lacked in precise philosophical conceptuality he made up for with a keen sense of the spiritual dynamics of intellectual history. For an undergraduate student, his display of erudition was dazzling. I remember a lecture on the meaning of the heart in philosophical anthropology, how he moved effortlessly from a discussion of various words for “heart” in the biblical languages (throwing in Syriac for good measure) to Augustine’s often (but not always) intellectualistic usage of the Latin *cor* to the Romantic narrowing of the heart to feelings in Rousseau and so on. He gave us a glimpse of a master scholar, at home as a committed Christian in the cultural history of the West, supplemented with occasional excursions into non-Western cultures as well.

Third, I would mention Runner’s strategic sense. He was like a general deploying his troops as he advised his students on how best they could serve the cause of the reformation of scholarship. For those who were academically gifted, he would suggest strategic disciplines that needed to be addressed from a reformational perspective. Many students who had been heading for seminary were diverted into other graduate programs in order to qualify in some other field—jurisprudence, perhaps, or philosophy or biology or classics. Many were also directed to the Free University. A prominent example was Bernie Zylstra, one of the founders of the Groen Club, who did go to seminary but thereafter attended the University of Michigan law school and then went to the Free University to get a doctorate under Dooyeweerd in legal theory. I myself was one of these diverted pre-seminarians. In my senior year at Calvin, I virtually put my life in Runner’s hands and asked where I should go. As a result of Runner’s strategic direction of his students’ career plans, there are today a goodly number of academics in various disciplines—many of them teaching at the six institutions co-sponsoring this conference—who have sought to work out in their own disciplines the implications of an integral Christian worldview and philosophy.

Under this same heading of strategic sense, I would include Runner’s intense involvement with the Association for Reformed Scientific Studies, later to be renamed the Association for the Advancement of

Christian Studies, which was the organization that established the Institute for Christian Studies in Toronto in 1967. For many years, he was the intellectual force that dominated this association and that gave it its spiritual direction. It was no accident that almost all the first Senior Members of this fledgling Christian graduate school were former students of Runner who had completed their graduate studies at the Free University.

Fourth, I think it important to underscore the importance of Runner's personal relationships with his students—or at least with those students who were captivated by his vision of the Christian academic task. As I said at his funeral, these students became much more than students; they were more like disciples and adopted sons (they were virtually all male). He invited them into his home, discussed their personal problems with them, agonized with them over their plans for the future. In my own case, he and his wife, Ellen, even invited me to live in their home for my last semester at Calvin. In these ways, a strong personal bond was forged with the charismatic and visionary leader—a bond that often lasted for many years thereafter.

Alongside these four factors—Runner's passion, his erudition, his strategic sense, and the personal relationships he had with his disciples—there is a fifth that has nothing to do with Runner's personal qualities but which may be the most important circumstance accounting for his extraordinary influence. What I have in mind is the postwar Dutch immigration to North America, mainly Canada. A wave of Dutch immigrants, many of them Reformed, came to Canada in the 1950s and 1960s, and their children soon began to arrive at Calvin College. Almost immediately, a strong bond was established between Runner and many of these recently arrived young people. They were students whose native language was Dutch, who had grown up with Neocalvinist ideals, and who felt somewhat alienated from the surrounding North American culture. We thus witness the peculiar phenomenon that initially almost all of Runner's disciples at Calvin were the children of postwar immigrants who still spoke with a Dutch accent. Moreover, with the exception of a handful of immigrant Americans, they were all Canadians. The Groen Club consisted almost exclusively of these "wetbacks," as the Canadians were somewhat disparagingly called by other Calvin students.

If it had not been for these largely Canadian students, it is unlikely that Runner would have had the lasting impact that he has had. He had very little influence among non-immigrant American students (Cal Seerveld is one of the few exceptions). Indeed, without these Canadian students, Runner would probably have lost his position at Calvin altogether, since it was they who were largely responsible for preventing his being let go in the 1950s. Members of the Groen Club have often remarked that there was something providential about the fact that Runner first came to Calvin just as the first immigrant students were arriving there. Humanly speaking, it is unlikely that this

---

*As a result of Runner's strategic direction of his students' career plans, there are today a goodly number of academics in various disciplines . . . who have sought to work out . . . the implications of an integral Christian worldview and philosophy.*

---

conference would be happening today if these students had not started arriving when they did.

Having briefly sketched some of the factors that can at least partially account for the impact of Runner's teaching, I will consider some of the basic themes of his teaching. I believe it is fair to say that these themes are not original with Runner but are all faithful reflections of what he had learned from Vollenhoven, Dooyeweerd, and, in general, from Dutch Neocalvinism.

Central to all of Runner's teaching was the insight captured in the slogan "life is religion." Every aspect of human life stands in the service of either the true God of biblical religion or some substitute or idol. There is no religiously neutral ground. It is therefore impossible to demarcate some province of human life and declare it "secular" in the sense of being exempt from the claims of Jesus Christ. Every attempt to construct a "two-realm theory" that contrasts sacred and secular or holy and profane spheres of life must be resisted. Specifically, this claim means that human rationality is not an autonomous function unaffected

by spiritual commitment, but that it is deeply engaged in the fundamentally religious nature of the human being. The “dogma of the pretended autonomy of theoretical thought” must be unmasked for what it is, an idolatrous figment of the human imagination. Consequently, all academic work, whether in philosophy or another field of scholarly inquiry, is directed by some spiritual impulse, is controlled by presuppositions of an ultimately religious nature.

This fact does not mean, according to Runner, that no commonality exists between the believer and the unbeliever. This lack of any commonality is a caricature of Runner’s position that has often been made. But the commonality is that of a shared creation, of the same law-order impinging on humans of all religious persuasions, not of something intrinsic to human nature in its subjection to that law-order. Runner fully recognized the reality of God’s common or preserving grace, by which much that is good and beautiful and right is retained even in the fallen human condition, but he ascribes this residual goodness not to something inherent in fallen humanity but to God’s faithful upholding of his creational structures. Runner often spoke, in this connection, of the law-order of creation “impinging on” factual reality. Thus, a sinful human being is still a human being, not an animal, but this humanity is not due to any indestructible goodness or innate virtue on the part of the human being but only to God’s constancy in maintaining the order of creation.

Another way of making this point is to distinguish across the board (as Runner did) between “structure” and “direction.” “Structure” is the creational constitution of a thing, that by virtue of which it is the kind of thing it is, whether a geranium or a sculpture or a business enterprise. Since this structure refers to God’s ordinances for creation, what Dooyeweerd called “the law-side,” structure is dynamically constant and is unaffected by the fall or human sinfulness. “Direction,” on the other hand, refers to an adventitious dimension to reality introduced as a result of the fall, such that things do not conform to God’s structural design and are in need of being redirected in order to conform to it once again. Thus, there is a normative structure of the state, which is given in the created order of things, but a directional perversion of the state in tyranny and injustice. This fundamental distinction between structure and direction, Runner taught, is something that holds throughout created

reality after the fall. There is nothing that does not have an aspect of the good creation in it (“structure”), and there is nothing that does not fall under the curse of sin and the necessity of redemption (“direction”). This truth applies to institutions like the state and activities like farming or philosophizing.

A further corollary of Runner’s consistent application of the distinction between structure and direction is his philosophical resistance to reductionism of all kinds. If, by virtue of created structure, things have their own law-governed “kind,” then it does violence to the created order not to honor and respect this diversity of kinds, for example, to treat a school as though it were business or to treat faith as though it were an emotion, or to treat an animal as though it were a machine. Creation spells irreducible diversity, and the givenness of creation must be honored.

These are just a few of the central themes of Runner’s teaching which had such a powerful impact on his students and which his students have made fruitful in a variety of disciplines. These themes evoke an overall picture of a constant yet dynamic world order that encompasses all of human life and reality and that is pervaded by the push and pull of a double religious directionality, the one twisting and distorting God’s good design and the other conforming or reconforming to that design, while the whole moves toward a final unfolding and consummation in which all things will be restored to their intended creational glory. It is a captivating vision, centered in the figure of the Lamb that was slain, a vision that stands in stark contrast to the competing alternative visions of secular modernism and postmodernism and that offers great promise for a way of doing scholarship which forges a distinctive Christian direction.

Of course, Runner’s vision encompasses much more than the academy. The biblical vision of the coming kingdom of a restored creation applies to the whole range of human culture. It is therefore hardly surprising that Runner’s teaching has been an inspiration for all kinds of non-academic activity. Runner himself was actively involved in promoting the work of the Christian Labour Association of Canada and the Committee for Justice and Liberty. He encouraged, and his students actively participated in, these organizations and others like them, such as the Christian Farmers’ Federation of Canada, journals like the *Vanguard* (the 1970s), and—perhaps most importantly—the network of Christian day schools. I

have vivid memories, myself, of hearing Runner address meetings of the CLAC, of his always taking too much time, always going back to the Greeks, and always inspiring and uplifting his audience, most of whom had very little formal education, with the expansive vision of the cosmic claims of Jesus Christ.

Nor should we forget the institutional church. Many of Runner's students were *not* diverted from attending seminary and became leaders in the church, especially the Christian Reformed Church. A survey of recent officers of Synod of the CRC, or of current members of the faculty of Calvin Seminary, would show a significant proportion of Runner students among them. Some of his basic emphases have now become common coin in that denomination.

At the same time, the mention of the Christian Reformed Church prompts two sobering reflections. In large measure, Runner's influence during his lifetime was restricted to members of that denomination and its associated institutions. The six institutions sponsoring this conference are a case in point; they all belong to the "approved causes" of the CRC and have strong ties with a predominantly Dutch ethnic constituency. Runner's teaching had a very significant impact on these institutions and the other Christian organizations we have mentioned. Although they have all expanded beyond their Dutch immigrant base in recent decades, they still represent a fairly small segment of the evangelical—let alone Protestant or broadly Christian—population. Runner's direct influence has been largely restricted to this small segment, and many of the organizations he supported and inspired could not survive without the giving habits of a largely CRC membership.

The second sobering reflection is that the CRC has in recent decades suffered a serious bloodletting due to the secession of a significant proportion of its membership. Issues like the historicity of Scripture and the ordination of women have caused a number of theologically conservative congregations to leave the CRC. Among those who left were Runner himself and a number of his most committed disciples. As so often happens with the followers of a charismatic leader, various groups now vie with each other in claiming Runner as their prophet. Ironically, however, toward the end of his life, Runner himself

had become something of an isolated figure, estranged from many of his followers and the organizations they supported.

But this is not the last word on Runner's impact on the academy and beyond. His life's passion—to gain a hearing for the reformational vision in the mainstream of North American evangelicalism—is beginning to achieve a measure of success. Prominent evangelical leaders like Chuck Colson have begun to discover the Kuyperian heritage for public life and have openly acknowledged a debt to Runner in that connection. The members of the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities are increasingly looking to the CRC-related colleges for leadership in achieving what they call the "integration of faith and learning."

---

*His life's passion—to gain a hearing for the reformational vision in the mainstream of North American evangelicalism—is beginning to achieve a measure of success.*

---

In a way that could not have been anticipated only a decade or two ago, the broad vision of Christian cultural engagement to which Runner gave his life is catching the imagination and commitment of Christians across a wide spectrum of denominations. Runner stands as perhaps the most effective apostle of that vision in the second half of the twentieth century.

So we end where we began: with a note of gratitude. H. Evan Runner was a man who burned with a holy zeal for the coming of God's kingdom, and many of us were forever changed by him. He was a man who had his flaws—it is not necessary for us to dwell on these now—but he was a man of God who testified in his person and his teaching to the awesome reality of the powerful grace of God in all of human life. I'm sure I speak for hundreds of other former students of his when I say, "Dr. Runner, thank you very much. May your legacy bear fruit for many years to come."