

II - Prof. Dr. H.M. Kuitert: A Portrait of a Rebel

To what extent ought Christian theologians take culture seriously? Although an ancient problem, the question of the relationship between culture and theology has generated intense and often heated discussion. Some theologians have been so keen to bring the Christian faith into the modern era that they married theology with the spirit of the age. They even allowed contemporary thinking to sit in judgment over the Bible. In their attempt to accommodate the Gospel, they lose it. They are the ones the apostle Paul warned against in his farewell address to the elders in Ephesus, "I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away the disciples after them" (Acts 20:29f.). I may sound harsh; but I believe that one of those wolves in the GKN is Prof. Dr. H.M. Kuitert, professor emeritus of Amsterdam's Free University, a creative, outspoken, brilliant, controversial and the best-known theologian in the Netherlands. He may have had good intentions in his attempts to engage the Church with post second World War Dutch culture; however, he contributed the most to the dismantling of the GKN.

Kuitert was born in Drachten in 1924. His parents were solid members of the GKN. In 1943 he finished secondary school, and went immediately "underground" to escape from the clutches of the Nazis. In a series of radio and TV interviews in 1989 he reflected on his war experiences and the impact they had made on him. He said that he had "a rotten youth." The interview also revealed Kuitert's aversion to authority and his rebellious nature. In 1950 Kuitert became a pastor in a GKN church in the province of Zeel and making pastoral calls to the elderly was difficult for him. He had a hard time dealing with their spiritual concerns. He also felt that he could do nothing right in their eyes. The terrible flood in 1953, which caused such devastation in Zeeland and took the lives of hundreds of people, had a strong effect on him. In 1955 he became a pastor for students in Amsterdam and in 1965 professor at the Free University. He retired in 1989 but remained active through his writings.

For Kuitert the role of youthful rebel was so intoxicating that he integrated it into his theology. He leaves the impression that our times are totally different from the past and that past problems no longer exist. Traditional GKN members don't understand the times. Their unbending attitude blocks progress. Only under the guidance of so - called progressive theologians such as Kuitert, the church has now finally discovered the needs of society. How did GKN members react to Kuitert's "crusades to liberate" the church from her past? On the one hand, young as well as old in the GKN feel that he expresses what they are experiencing. On the other hand, conservative GKN members call him a wolf-in-sheep clothing. He has also been severely criticized by theologians as well as philosophers. In 1993, for example, Dr. J. Hoek of the Dutch Reformed Church (NHK) wrote that it would be disastrous if theologizing à la Kuitert becomes a trend within Christianity at the threshold of the twenty -first century. Yet Kuitert considers himself a martyr for

the Reformed faith. In a speech, he said that his love for the Reformed faith drove him to create room for modern questions at the expense of a great deal of personal trouble and pain. However, Dr.A.P. Bos, professor of philosophy at the Free University, observed that Kuitert always played the martyr of the church. And he commented that Kuitert will never be a martyr if he has nothing better to say than what he did in his latest theological works.

Is Kuitert a Christian?

Why does Kuitert call himself a Christian? Because, he says, he grew up in a Christian culture and community he thinks of himself as Christian. He states that Christianity is something that gave his life structure and still does. But can he still be called a Christian? Dr. A. Van Egmond, GKN minister and professor of dogmatics at the Free University, points out in *100 Jaar Theologie: Aspecten van een eeuw theologie in de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (1892-1992)* [100 years of theology:]

Aspects of a century of theology in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands) that Kuitert has done the most to divorce morality from religion, as well as ethics from theology. Already in 1973 Kuitert remarked that he no longer wanted to speak about "theological ethics" but about "theology of human action." In other words, theology became ethics. Kuitert's view grieved many. In 1986 Rev. J.G. Lensink in Emmen even wrote a private letter urging Kuitert to surrender to the Christ of the Scriptures, and recant his radical theology and higher criticism of the Bible. But Rev. Lensink received no reply.

The Bible

What does Kuitert believe? Since the 1960s Kuitert propagates - under the guise of progress - a new understanding of Scripture, undermining the last vestiges of the church's authority, and sawing off the branch he sits on. Throughout his writings he has sought to eliminate the classical-reformed-view of Scripture. He has the greatest admiration for the "exact" sciences and their explanations of the origins of the world. Hence, he accepts the theory of evolution as "fact." He explains the Bible in such a way that evolutionists are accommodated, while trying to convince the church that this is the best approach to the Bible. On that basis he claims that Adam and Eve are not historical, and there was neither a paradise nor a fall into sin. He believes that in our modern culture, a Christian cannot pretend to own the truth by an appeal to the Word of God. He states that we cannot do anything with "revealed truth." Kuitert's theology is a theology from below; it begins with man and not with God. Hence, we can neither base our ethics on God's Word nor appeal to it for an answer to moral questions. "To be honest," Kuitert declares, "in daily life the Bible is of no practical use." An extraordinary confession by a theologian! Kuitert gives experience priority over the revelation. He says that you don't have to listen to the text of the Bible as claimed in the past. The Bible is not always right. It is not authoritative; it aids you

in your search for God. It is a time-bound book in which people talk about their experience of and with God. It tells the story of the Israelites' thinking about God, how they acted in their situation according to their faith understanding, and what the evangelists and the apostles thought about God. Why should we believe what Israel and the apostles say about God? Kuitert says that we can only believe the Bible when we experience it as true. In other words, the Bible is not the rock on which to anchor our faith.

Kuitert's Theology

Kuitert's acceptance of the theory of evolution and the liberal higher criticism of the Bible plainly contradicts the confessional historic view of the Bible. Article 5 of the Belgic Confession says about the authority of Scripture, "We receive all these books and these only as holy and canonical, for the regulating, founding, and establishing of our faith." And Articles 7 declares, "We believe that this Holy Scripture contains the will of God completely and that everything one must believe to be saved is sufficiently taught in it." Although Kuitert totally disagrees with the confessions of the GKN to which he gave his consent when he signed the form of subscription, he neither asked to be released from his position as minister and professor nor did synod discipline him. A gross neglect of responsibility by all parties concerned!

Kuitert's departure from the unfailing truth of God's Word leaves a bitter legacy. His theology has no resemblance whatsoever to Reformed theology. His focus is on man and his world and not on the holy God, Who revealed Himself in nature and through the sacred Scriptures. According to Kuitert, God is the Partner of Israel. He cannot do without people. He even is duty-bound to maintain partnership with all of mankind. God exists for man and not man for God. The service of God then is the service of man. And Kuitert thinks that a discussion on justification by faith, a key Biblical doctrine, "freezes the breath of the church." According to him, we must explain the work of Christ in terms of being human for others. Miracles also get short shrift. In a discussion of Joshua 10: 12f., where Joshua calls out: "O sun, stand stil over Gibeon, O moon over the Valley of Aijlon," he declares that this miracle is utterly impossible. The story of Jonah's three day stay in the belly of a great fish is also not true. Why does Kuitert have problems with the miracles in Scripture? Evolution has taught him that God does not intervene in nature.

In a discussion with GKN youth in 1968, he openly questioned the virgin birth of our Lord. Kuitert has also difficulties with the bodily resurrection of Christ. He seems to say that Christ lives on in our memories. For example, he stated that as the murdered archbishop Romero lives on in the heart of the oppressed people of El Salvador, so Christ lives on in our hearts. Will Christ return? In a 1973 TV broadcast, Kuitert declared that the second coming may well turn out quite different than what Jesus Himself taught - not a mighty impressive event from the

outside - but from the inside, the return of a Person who was already on earth. A rather strange view!

The institutional church does not receive a high rating in Kuitert's theology. The church as institute is like a hospital in which you stay only temporarily. After a while you feel better and you leave it to meet God in the world. The best Christians are those outside the church. No wonder GKN church attendance has plummeted!

Kuitert and Ethics

The denial of the authority of Scripture as the norm for faith and practice undercuts any valid ground for moral evaluation. Who determines what is moral? At issue is whether the view of Kuitert on ethics is a satisfactory way of determining over time what is "right" and "wrong" in society. Sad to say, he has led the way into lowering moral standards. The marriage institution came under attack. He opened the gates wide for co-habitation and homosexual relations. What the GKN once considered as contra Biblical norms and nature, Kuitert accepts as normal. He claims that we have the complete freedom to differ from the apostle Paul's view on homosexuality. He is also pro-abortion. He believes that the life of the unborn child is value-free for the first three months. And he outrightly stated that "if a woman absolutely does not want a child, she has the right to ask for an abortion." We can trust people to choose their own moral principles on the basis of "good reasons."

Conclusion.

I suggest that theologians resist the temptation to tell the church how terribly complex contemporary problems are in which they alone out of all the world are specialists. Although current problems are complicated, the inerrant Bible is still a "lamp to my feet and a light to my path" (Ps. 119: 105). And God gave it to make "wise" even "the simple" (Ps. 19:7).