

III -The Battle for the Bible

The view that God is the author of Scripture in all its breadth and depth and that it is therefore authoritative and without error was the historic position of the Church. This was also the position of the Reformers, Martin Luther and John Calvin. And this historic doctrine is of the greatest importance for all Christian teachings, whether doctrinal or ethical, they are drawn from the Bible. If the Bible is not free from error and does not possess complete authority, the Church has no message. The song "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so" would then be meaningless. Sadly, during the last few centuries the Bible has been the subject of unprecedented attacks. Two key attacks upon its full truthfulness - higher criticism and evolution - have won their victories during the twentieth century. Leaders in mainline churches did not resist the deadly poison of modernity. Conservatives were urged to abandon the "outdated" historic view of Scripture and to adopt a view, which is acceptable to the modern "scientific" mind. Alarm signals were constantly raised about the enemy within the ranks of the Church.

The Original GKN Position

Already in the 19th century, orthodox Reformed Christians responded to the scathing attacks on Scripture. They oriented themselves to historic Calvinist theology which shaped the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (GKN), founded in 1892. One of its key leaders, Dr. Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) warned that the conflict concerning the Holy Scripture would most likely continue till the final return of the Lord. He clearly stated that the one who is in conflict with the historic position on Scripture is in conflict with Christ Himself. "He who breaks in principle with that ancient view of the Scripture cuts the cord of faith, which bound him to that Christ as his Lord and as his God. And he who cannot refrain from kneeling low before his Saviour cannot break with the ground of faith in the Scripture, as Jesus Himself has sealed it." Kuyper's high view of Scripture dominated the GKN for decades. With deep conviction GKN scholars used to claim with the Belgic Confession, "We believe without a doubt all things contained in" the Scripture (Art. 5). Reformed spirituality was based on it. Prof. Lucas Lindeboom (1845-1933) pioneer of Reformed evangelism and professor at Kampen's Theological School, taught the New Testament with great energy and enthusiasm. He was known as the "father of orthodoxy," a staunch defender of the infallible Word of God. He observed that the mark of the Reformed faith is that it does neither want to teach nor want to do anything except what Scripture says. He also declared that theologians must wage the battle of the Lord against all false doctrine with the sword of the Spirit. Prof. Dr. Herman Bavinck (1854-1921), GKN's foremost theologian, also wholeheartedly accepted the historic position of the Church on Scripture. He defended its infallibility and based his dogmatics on it.

The Beginning of Conflicts

In the beginning of the twentieth century conflicts about the foundational doctrine of the GKN arose. The first major confrontation was with Rev. J.B. Netelbos (1879-1934) of Middelburg. He taught that the form of Scripture came about through God's guidance; however, it was not inspired. After a lengthy procedure, Netelbos was deposed on May 13, 1919, by Classis Middelburg.

A defining moment for the GKN in the battle for the Bible was the 1926 Synod of Assen, which became known in popular parlance as the Synod which discussed whether or not the snake in the Garden of Eden spoke. What was the issue? In 1924, the gifted Dr. J.G. Geelkerken (d. 1960) preached - in the Schinkelkerk in Amsterdam - a sermon on Lord's Day 3 of the Heidelberg Catechism. In this sermon he left room for a non-literal interpretation of Gen.2-3. He said that Genesis 3 is a symbolic commentary of the fall into sin. He thought that a non-literal interpretation fitted into the framework of the ancient-eastern-worldview. He also repeatedly stated that the authority of Scripture was not at stake. However, in subsequent discussions on the sermon, he declared that he did not doubt the historicity of the creation story, the fall, the banning from paradise. A churchgoer, Mr. M. Marinus, lodged a complaint with Classis Amsterdam, which led to the decision of the Synod of Assen. Assen rejected the symbolic interpretation of the paradise story. It declared that Gen.2-3 described historical facts. It firmly believed the sound Reformed principle that science may neither rule over the sacred Scripture nor let its interpretation be in contradiction to the clear content and meaning of the author. This decision set the course for Biblical interpretation for decades. It also led to the deposition of Dr. Geelkerken and several other ministers, and a minor split in the GKN. Prominent GKN scholars, K. Schilder, J. Ridderbos and G. Ch. Aalders argued for the historicity of Genesis 3 and supported the decision of Assen. For a long time, the case of Geelkerken was a subject for discussion. Shortly after Assen, Dr. H.H. Kuyper (1864-1945) was asked if there was no room for someone who questioned the historicity of Gen.1-3. He answered that when its historicity is doubted, the authority of Scripture is abandoned. Since the authority of the Scripture is first and foremost of importance for the Reformed faith, the person who questions it does not belong in the GKN. And in 1931 Dr. K. Dyk observed that the Bible was still under constant attack. He said that people have criticized it, mocked it, and burned it, yet it did not disappear because it is the book of God. His monumental work *Het Profetische Woord (De Leer der Inspiratie)* (The Prophetic Word: the doctrine of Inspiration) is still a noteworthy study on the great theme on the nature, and the verbal inspiration of the inerrant Scripture. It is therefore with amazement and sorrow to observe that voices have been raised against its historic position in the GKN, where the battle for the Biblical authority was so courageously fought.

Changed Attitude

After the second world war, Assen became a stumbling block for the so-called "new" theologians. They considered themselves at the cutting edge of progress, repudiated traditions, and branded the historic Reformed view on Scripture as archaic. Dr. H. Leene, professor of Old Testament at the Free University, called the decision of Assen "tragic," and its view of Scripture "despicable." Dr. C. Augustyn critiqued that in practise Assen placed the Reformed Confessions on the same level as the Scripture. In 1967-68, the Synod of Amsterdam lifted the binding of the decision of the Synod of Assen. Although it meant allowing other than historic Reformed perspectives on the Bible, synod still desired to adhere to what the Heidelberg Catechism and Articles 14 and 15 of the Belgic Confession declared about the fall of Adam and Eve. But this decision was a thorn in the flesh of the proponents of the theory of evolution. When the Synod of Sneek met in 1970-71, Dr. Kuitert, and approximately 10 of his followers, declared that Adam had never existed and there was no fall as recorded in Genesis. But to its shame, Synod did not discipline these men. Assen was set aside and the new theologians went much further than Geelkerken ever taught. Today, only the GKN (Liberated) still abide by the decisions of Assen.

The New Hermeneutics

A new way of interpreting the Scriptures (the new hermeneutics) made its influence felt. Progressive theologians were adverse to revealed truth, and called conservatives - "fundamentalists." They thought that their mission was to enlighten the traditional Reformed folk of the error of their ways. They claimed that the historic view of Scripture can no longer function in our modern age with its new scientific discoveries, technological developments, the sexual revolution, the changing view on the relationship between men and women, and the apparent absence of God in post-Christian Europe. They also pointed to the horrors experienced during the Nazi occupation, the holocaust, the threat of nuclear warfare, and a new awareness of non-Christian religions. Hence, they believed that a change in theological direction was necessary, and enthusiastically supported the historical-critical method of studying Scripture, while subordinating themselves in the process to the Spirit of the Age. This new development should not come as a surprise, however. We must keep in mind that higher criticism of the Bible had been doing its work for decades. Progressive theologians no longer paid heed to Dr. Abraham Kuyper's severe rebuke of higher criticism. He rightly charged that it robbed the church of the Bible. He also noted that the results of higher-critical studies, which are not based on the Scripture as the inspired Word of God, will lead to the forsaking of Christ, Who would be then only a human being. Dr. Seakle Greijdanus (1871-1948), professor of New Testament in Kampen, warned that higher criticism would lead to a world-view estranged from the principles of the Christian religion.

In the 1960s a number of booklets called *Cahiers voor de Gemeente* (Primers for the Congregation) were published. Its authors were J.L.Koole, Tj.Baarda, R. Schippers, H.M.Kuitert and G.P. Hartvelt. These Cahiers average 75 pages in

length and their purpose was to make the members of the GKN aware of the significant changes in theological perspectives, and to bridge the gap between the "progressive" theologians and the average person in the pew who not been able to keep up with all the latest earth-shaking changes. In the Cahiers the human word in Scripture is so emphasized that Biblical criticism gets free reign. In fact, they were a frontal attack on the Scriptures. For example, Baarda said that higher criticism shows that the belief in the infallibility of Scripture is totally untenable. "We have come to know it as a very human book." Dr. J.Vos, professor at the Free University, observed that with the Cahiers, and especially since Baarda, the tradition of "reformed exegesis" has come to an end. And the conservative scholar Dr.J. Schelhaas commented that it would have been praiseworthy if the authors of the Cahiers had honestly confessed that their view of the trustworthiness of Scripture was in direct conflict with the Reformed confessions.

A constant refrain in the "new" approach is - the Bible is time-culture- bound. Dr. C.den Heyer, professor at Kampen, notes that its writers are people of their time and culture. It does not contain revelations, which have eternal values. It is an outdated book. Is den Heyer right? Absolutely not! When the Bible is accepted as time-culture-bound, its authority is lost. Who determines then what is normative for doctrine and morals? If the Bible is-time-culture-bound, how can one accept it as a guide for daily life? How can we respect and obey an errant book? Why even bother reading the Bible? Instead of the "progressive" theologians leading the GKN into a deeper reverence and deeper obedience to the Scripture, they led the church astray. They left the church voiceless, without a clear message, unable to tell Dutch society what the Bible says about anything. They preached another Gospel than the one revealed in Scripture (cf. Gal.1: 6-10). Those who argue that revelation is time and culture-bound are unable to exempt their own pontifications. Dr. Carl F.Henry once remarked, "Christianity's true immortals will insist that God addresses the truth of revelation objectively to all humans of whatever diverse culture." The Bible decides how it wants and must be explained. "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1 : 20f.). We are called not to explain away the message of the Scripture, but to believe it, to obey it, and to proclaim it. As the old hymn put it:

When we walk with the Lord in the light of His Word,
what a glory He sheds on our way!
While we do His good will He abides with us still,
and with all who will trust and obey.