

IV - The Loss of the Antithesis

According to the Evangelische Omroep (Evangelical Broadcasting Corporation), the fourth of November 1980 was a black day in the history of the churches in the Netherlands. It reported that the unbelievable had happened. A church, which was once a bulwark of faithfulness to Scripture, chose to become unfaithful to the same Scripture. The Synod of the GKN had adopted the report on the nature and authority of Scripture entitled God met ons (God with us). The report bowed before higher criticism of the Scripture, discarded the doctrine of the verbal and plenary inspiration, cast doubt on Scripture's complete trustworthiness of historical events and facts, and spoke of "the relational concept of truth." It created tension and uncertainty within the GKN. A special section was devoted to The Bible as Norm for Life. It states that the recognition of the authority of God's Word does not mean that we have to follow without any question the Biblical precepts regarding worship or ethics. No wonder GKN members asked: What is God's will? How can we know it? If the Bible is time-culture-bound, what role does it have in making moral choices?

Can the historic position on Scripture be abandoned without impunity? I believe there is something basically wrong if the GKN presumes that if it chooses no longer to accept the historic Reformed position on the nature and authority of Scripture, there is no harm done. It seems to have forgotten that doctrine and ethics are inextricably bound together. For more than a century the GKN didn't only stress pure doctrine but also a Reformed life style. When in 1924, Is. Querido's play Saul and David was performed in Amsterdam's City Theatre, in which Free University students also had a role, there was a storm of protest. In the 1920s it was clear that such a performance didn't fit a Reformed lifestyle. Dr. F.de Lange, professor of Ethics at Kampen, observed that the GKN once lived in a world saturated with the Scripture. It believed that the Bible was clear and forthright. All of life must be impacted by the Gospel. Social and moral questions were approached from a Biblical perspective. But to the consternation of the older GKN generation, this world has disappeared. The prevailing modern culture, suffering from relativism and decay, was accommodated. By mid 1960s many in the GKN were concerned about the decline of moral standards and the reserved attitude toward Christian political parties. However, despite protests of concerned members, the new theologians kept undermining the foundations of the faith. In 1980, the year the God with us report was published, Prof. Dr. G.Th.Rothuizen concluded that reformed ethics and life style no longer exist. What was lost? In the past, GKN members observed strict Sabbath rest. Work and travel with public transportation were not permitted, Sunday activities: Dancing, playing cards, and theatre attendance were forbidden. And there was a love for missions.

Missions

The GKN firmly believed that there was "no other name [Jesus] under heaven given to men by, which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). The GKN realized that our Lord's Great Commission (Matt.28 : 19-20) not only included the work of evangelizing the lost, but also of disciplining believers and teaching them to obey the commands of the Lord. And it believed that the church is primarily responsible for evangelism. The 1896 Synod of Middelburg declared that missions was not the task of societies but of the church - first of all of the local church. And GKN churches did get involved in supporting overseas mission work, especially in the Dutch East Indies. Local evangelism committees flourished. Medical missions and educational projects were considered important, but they did not belong to the heart of mission work. A missionary for the Jews was appointed for ministry in the Hague and Amsterdam. Many believed that in the future the Jewish nation would be converted to Christ and dramatically contribute to the flourishing of the Church. The Lord blessed GKN's missions and evangelism endeavours. Positive reports came from the mission fields. Local churches gained members from their communities. But times have surely changed! Let me explain. In the 1980s GKN mission and evangelism work didn't amount too much anymore. When Rev. A.M. Lindeboom discussed this sad situation with Mr.L.J.Habets of the GKN's Institute for Evangelism, Habets remarked, "I say it perhaps boldly. We departed from the Word of God; it is no longer authoritative, norm giving...The result is a weakened, unattractive church." He hit the nail right on the head. Historically, the Reformed faith has always maintained that main purpose of missions and evangelism was and is to lead sinners to the Saviour. And the transformation of society was also one of its goals. The consensus of the new thinking is that winning sinners for Christ is no longer an acceptable goal for evangelism. Evangelism now means protesting economic exploitation, opposing racism, and oppression. In other words, evangelism serves political and social purposes. Overseas mission work no longer focuses on winning converts and planting churches, but on digging water wells or supporting liberation movements. Practical help is always important, but not at the expense of the heart of mission work. The new theologians no longer believe in the uniqueness of the Christian faith. In 1980 Dr. D.C. Mulder said that the story of Jesus in the world must be told and His disciples should be willing to be His witnesses. " But we don't have to do this from the perspective that people outside of Israel and the church are all lost." This changed attitude toward mission also affected Jewish missions. Corrie ten Boom's love for reaching Jews for Christ is now out of harmony with modern times. Prof. Dr. Douwe van der Sluis at the Free University declared that the confession that Jesus is the Christ inevitably leads to anti-Semitism. According to him, in order to create a better understanding with Jews, Christians must forego their "pretension" that Jesus Christ is the only way to the Father. This unwarranted view is detrimental for Jewish missions. The new approach to mission signaled a loss of the spirit of engagement with the larger world and its spiritual needs.

Homosexuality

Who would have thought in the 1950s that homosexuality would become an acceptable lifestyle in the GKN? The changes in the GKN are almost breathtaking. In the 1970s the GKN began to tackle the explosive homosexual issue, including gay partnerships and same-sex unions.. At the 1971-72 Synod of Dordrecht the question of the homosexual neighbour was discussed at length. Dr. Kuitert, of course, contributed to the discussion in the churches. He said that homosexual orientation is for him akin to red hair or being left-handed. In other words, homosexuality was accepted as normal. Prof. Dr. G.H. Rothuizen said in a radio broadcast that the Bible makes it abundantly clear that the homosexual practice is wrong. Yet, he shares Kuitert's opinion on homosexuality. On what do the proponents of homosexual practices, base their views? On the new perspective of Scripture advocated by the new theologians! Scripture had to be reinterpreted to suit the spirit of the times. The Biblical texts, which forbid homosexual practices could no longer serve as a court of appeal. These texts were meant for another age. They are time and culture bound. The church should refrain from making pronouncements on whether or not same-sex unions are permissible. Whatever one's view of Scripture, church members must accept one another in love. At the heart of Christian ethics is the love command. All other commands must be seen from its perspective. Dr. J. Plomp comments that this exhortation became the regular procedure for all ethical questions. Co-habitation and extra-marital relations may not be judged, as long as people are faithful to each other in love. But there is no Biblical support for those views. The Biblical standard is that sexual behaviour is between one man and one woman in the context of marriage. Homosexual practice is contra nature, sinful, incompatible with Biblical moral standards. What happens when you oppose it from your orthodox perspective of Scripture? You are told to listen to the experts. Only theologians are able to explain the texts. It seems that these modern theologians suffer from hubris, which the Canadian Oxford Dictionary defines as "excessive pride." They appear to have forgotten the Reformation emphasis that the Bible belongs to the people - to each and every believer. But the new theologians were victorious. In 1980 Synod decided with a 37 for and 33 opposed that homosexuals were not only allowed at the Lord's table, but also to serve in every ecclesiastical office. It was expressly said that the acceptance of same-sex unions is included in this decision. Many GKN members wondered how their once staunch Orthodox Church could make such a decision. The GKN had to pay a high price for the new developments in their denomination. Many conservative members left for other churches, and some for no church at all. The GKN no longer had a Reformed ethos or recognizable Reformed ethics. It shunned absolutes, and lost its ability to judge between good and evil, truth and falsehood. It could no longer speak with an authoritative voice either to its membership or to the Dutch society. The new hermeneutics left many people in the pew bewildered. The love for the Scriptures diminished. In an essay in Theologie op de drempel van 2000 (Theology at the threshold of 2000), Prof. Dr. H. Vroom of the Free University commented that theological faculties could ascertain that youth were far less acquainted with the Bible than thirty years ago.

Women in Ecclesiastical Office

In 1968 the office of elder and deacon was opened up for women. In 1970 women were allowed to serve in all offices of the church. But the number of women ministers remained limited, in contrast to the number of women elders and deacons. Many believed that the GKN was right to welcome women to all the offices of the church. What led to the opening up of all the offices for women? The new view on the nature and authority of Scripture and hermeneutics! Vroom's observation is noteworthy. He said that whoever allows women in ecclesiastical office goes directly against the literal texts of the apostle Paul. He remarked that the evidence for women in office does not come from Scripture. The latter forbids it. Vroom noted that allowing women in office means therefore that a recognition that the truth from outside of Scripture weighs heavier at times than the letter of the Scripture. The solution was found in the reinterpretation of Scripture. And Vroom also pointed out that the proponents of women in office and homosexual practice used the same hermeneutics. And the still relatively new feminist theology is also impacting the GKN. It goes beyond the place of women in church offices. It is committed to liberation theology, liberating women from past negative experiences through the rereading and reinterpreting - from a feminist perspective - the history of Israel and Christianity. Kampen's feminist theologian, Prof. Dr. Akke van der Kooi declared that in the past few years women have made it clear that they do not only want a position in the church, but also a new church and a new theology.

This bird's eye view of the developments in the GKN show that ideas do make a difference, either positive or negative. I am convinced that the new ideas advocated in the GKN are in conflict with the sacred Scriptures, undermine the faith of the people in the pew, and signify a total surrender to secularism. Consequently, it is no longer the salt and the light in Dutch society. I do not take any pleasure in highlighting the sad situation in the GKN. (In some future articles I will point to past positive contributions of the GKN, which still influence Christians in many parts of the world). And judging by all those who oppose the new developments, there is still hope. For example, in 1970 concerned members founded the Reformed Confessional Council. It organizes meetings, and since 1984 publishes the monthly magazine Credo. Although we are far away from the Dutch scene, we can still pray for change in a church where many of our Christian Renewal readers have family members - for a return to the faith, once and for all entrusted to the saints.

(Jude 3) God still answers prayer (cf. Heidelberg Cat. 45:q.a. 117).