

The Antithesis – Its Historical Development

The church militant. This is an apt description of the early church. Ever since the first Pentecost, the church had challenged the enemies of God to desert the prince of the world. She proclaimed the Gospel and wherever converts were won, it meant a gain for the Kingdom of God and a loss in the ranks of Satan's domain. To believers, demons were awesome, real and frightening. Every Christian had a task to confess Christ as Savior and Lord and to fight the good fight of faith. And the battle was fought not only in the private sphere of life, but also in the eternal world of culture, commerce and philosophy. The church saw paganism as the terrain of the devil (Rom 1:24, Gal. 5:19-21). She did not only witness demon possession in individuals, but also saw the devil's influence in the worship of idols, fortune telling, and the attending of circuses and theatres, where the whole sexual degeneration of the gods were acted out. As was predicted by our Lord (Matt 5:10-12, John 15:18ff), the church was bitterly opposed because of her antithetical stance. Wherever the church actively opposes unbelievers, immorality, injustice, corruption and persecution can be expected. The world will not easily let go of her ill-gained territory.

Augustine (A.D. 354 – 430), bishop of Hippo, became the great philosopher of the cultural antithesis. He put a lasting stamp on Christian thought. Next to his *Confessions*, *The City of God* became his most famous work. Its main purpose was to demonstrate the radical nature of the City of God and the city of man. These two cities are two spiritual kingdoms arrayed against each other. And their natural opposition is the keynote theme in the process of world history. In the *City of God*, God's grace is at work in the hearts and lives of its citizens. In this city, love reigns. Augustine taught restoration of the whole man in Christ to whom the whole world had been given under Christ. And our solemn goal is to bring every thought unto captivity for Christ (2 Cor. 10:5). Man's ceaseless cultural striving must be permeated and transformed by Gospel-based principles so that his culture can become God honouring. The Christian tries to think God's thoughts after Him. He works to serve God. The city of man is the kingdom of apostate faith and rebellious humanity. In this kingdom is found the love of self and concern with this life only. The City of God was neither a novelty nor the product of man's fanciful imagination. It was revealed in the Israel of the Old Testament and in the church of the New Testament, in Christ's promise and His coming. The city of man was symbolized by the terrible oppression of the Israelites in Egypt, Assyria in the East and Rome in the West.

When the church became powerful in the course of history, her antithetical stance lost its fervor. Prior to the Reformation, the church blunted the sharp distinction between the City of God and the city of man. The two often even mixed. The Church of Rome promoted synthesis (a putting together of parts to form a whole, or accommodation), instead of antithesis.

John Calvin brought the church back to her original basis. From his in-depth and thorough study of Scripture, he learned that sin and grace are antithetical in every sphere of human life. The Gospel brings healing as well as division. Calvin saw the

devastating impact of sin upon mankind and its effect on the world itself. Man is a rebel who has withdrawn himself from the absolute sovereign reign of God. He became a lawbreaker, who waves the independence flag in his sinful attempt to maintain his autonomy. Sin is not only in the heart, its ugly nature operates in all of life. John Calvin saw a world in conflict. And in our fallen world, Christians have their work cut out for them. In all that we do, we must oppose the forces of evil and offer our hearts and service to God. Calvin's influence became widespread. Whenever his theology became predominant, both personal and social life felt its powerful impact. For example, the English Puritans discussed the conflicts in their social order. They were convinced that work had to be done by Christians for the betterment of their nation. They were ready to wage the battle for the Lord and raise high the banner of the cross. "You have great works to do," remarked the Puritan preacher, Stephen Marshall in 1641, "the planting of a new heaven and a new earth among us, and great works have great enemies." Marshall's comment pointedly sums up the antithetical position of the Reformation.

Rise and decline, apostasy, revival and reformation describe the journey of the church through the ages. During the Reformation the antithesis was alive. In the Dutch lowlands the post-Reformation years became the Golden Age. Cultural developments and the sciences blossomed. Rembrandt Harmenszn van Ryn (1606-1669), Holland's most famous artist did not show the biblical figures he painted in a heroic light, like the Renaissance artists. He was a Calvinist, who saw not only men as real and suffering, but also as objects of God's grace and mercy. After the spirit of the Reformation had faded away, apostasy and liberalism began to undermine Protestantism. Humanism made its presence felt: the synthetic principle, the spirit of accommodation, gained the upper-hand. Higher criticism began to sap the foundations of Scripture. In 19th century Holland many pastors no longer preached the full counsel of God. Petrus Hofstede de Groot (1802-1886). Protestant theologian of the Groninger School, opposed Calvinism. He and his colleagues had an optimistic view of human-nature and lacked the awareness of sin that the orthodox had. De Groot said that he couldn't preach the Heidelberg Catechism or any other Reformed doctrines. The old dogmas had lost their value. Experience, emotions, feelings had to take their place. Dr. Ph. van Heusde, a platonist and professor of philosophy in Utrecht, was his guiding light. He was also enchanted by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), who defined religion as a "sense and taste for the infinite." He adopted an approach to religion based on a descriptive analysis of religious experience. He tried to reinterpret Christianity for modern man. Faith was not a commitment to certain doctrines but the awareness of one's total dependence on God. He was the theologian of feeling.

God didn't leave the church in the liberal-modernist wasteland. Revival awakened the hearts of many believers. The secession of 1834 led to the founding of a church faithful to the Reformed confessions. The Dutch revival was influenced by pietism, Methodism and the Swiss revival. With some notable exceptions, most of its followers were believers of the lower social class. It had as leaders Isaac DaCosta, Willem Bilderdyk and Groen van Prinsterer.

Isaac DaCosta (1798-1860) was a converted Jew, a poet and author of many fine biblical studies. He was a strict orthodox and a strong opponent of modernism and the Groninger School.

Willem Bilderdyk (1756-1831). a lawyer, poet and scholar, wrote, like DaCosta, against the spirit of his times. He battled rationalism and liberalism in theology.

Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876), aristocrat, many-sided scholar, historian, author of many publications, formed by the classics, consequent in his actions, a prophet, a lover of the Lord, a noble type of the old Dutch Calvinism, became the most prominent leader, whose major work, *Unbelief and Revolution*, is still read today. Though not a secessioner, he sympathized with the secessionist cause, and extended aid when they were persecuted for their faith. He worked hard for church renewal and supported the Christian school movement. He was often ridiculed in the press for his orthodox Calvinist convictions. Groen became influenced by Merle d'Aubigne, one of the men of the Swiss revival. He introduced Groen to the Reformers, Luther and Calvin, and to the work of the English historian Burke, who wrote against the revolution. Groen discovered that liberalism was a revolutionary theory, rooted in apostasy and unbelief. His slogan became "Over against the revolution-the Gospel!" He became a thinker of the antithesis. He clearly saw the devastating nature of sin doing its deadly work and the need for the all-pervasive healing Gospel of reconciliation. He did much to arouse Reformed Christians to the principles of the antithesis. On science and the Christian, he didn't draw the line as sharply as his followers would in later years. He said that faith may not be set aside in scientific endeavour. A Christian should have a Christian approach to science, and Groen realized that such an approach would offend non-Christians. Groen also spoke of an evangelical approach to science. He believed that those who want to evangelize must also realize that evangelism can and should be done in every sphere of life. He saw mankind divided by the Gospel. And as Christ believers, we must be separated from the world. "In our isolation lies our strength," he said. He did not mean to say that we must separate ourselves from persons, but that in all contacts with them, we must be vividly aware of our own distinctiveness, of biblical authority and of principles by which our lives must be directed.

The Revival, and Groen van Prinsterer's return to Calvinism, were crucial factors that led to the rebirth of Reformational thinking and Christian scholarship of which Abraham Kuyper was a key figure.

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