

Willem Bilderdyk (1756-1831)

Bilderdyk was a modern Christian in an age of religious apostasy and decline in spiritual vitality both in Protestantism and Catholicism. The times in which he lived were not his and would never become so. He was a pioneer of a new age, one of the spiritual fathers of the nineteenth century. He was ahead of his times. He was disgusted with what was dished out in the arts, sciences and theology.

Chronologically speaking, we usually refer to post World War II thought as modern. However, much contemporary thinking was echoing the revolutionary changes that were introduced by the English and the German eighteenth century Enlightenment. The same kind of hostility toward traditional theology existed then as it does today. Bilderdyk's contemporaries considered the Enlightenment the pinnacle of wisdom. Man was seen as an autonomous and rational being, who rules over all things. He can no longer believe on the basis of authority. He must trust himself, act morally and in this way gain eternal life. Dutch liberalism had an optimistic view of man, though it still held to his fall into sin because of tradition. Jesus Christ was no more than the highest teacher of those truths that lead to eternal life. None of the church leaders wanted to openly dispute the divine nature of Scripture, the deity of Christ or the Trinity. These doctrines were received by the church, but they were preached from a liberal perspective. In general, preaching was weak, rationalistic and sentimental.

Bilderdyk was born in Amsterdam. His youth was very somber. He learned about life mainly from books. He was extremely well read. He was withdrawn, often depressed and had poor health. He became quite eccentric. If he were asked about his health, it was almost impossible to get him off the topic. Because of his difficult character he was often in conflict with a number of people. At times, he was his own worst enemy. He was a man of deep feeling, a nationalist, who loved the House of Orange. He was a genius, a many-sided scholar, the most philosophical and universal of all Dutch poets, master of the Dutch language, a prozaist, historian and jurist. His works of poetry number more than 200,000 lines. He also wrote papers on linguistic, literary, historical, religious, ethical and philosophical subjects. His insights were brilliant. His conversion to Christ was gradual. Through birth and education, through reading the Bible, poetry and philosophy, he became a committed Christian. Christ became too strong for him. In 1792, he became a lawyer in The Hague. Three years later, he refused to swear an oath of allegiance to the changed state of affairs and was banished from Holland. He spent eleven years in exile, first in London and later in Germany. After his return he settled once again in Leiden.

Bilderdyk was a man of deep convictions. He dared to stand alone and oppose the rationalism, pelagianism and moralism of his age. He was a living protest against the theories propagated by the Enlightenment. His principles went directly against those which were accepted by a large part of the Dutch population. He was a man of the antithesis. Over against the wisdom of the world stands the foolishness of the Gospel, over against love, hatred, over against God, satan. He strongly opposed the principles of the French Revolution. His slogan was: "Over against the Revolution the Gospel!" In

the chilly atmosphere of the eighteenth century Enlightenment that gripped Dutch religious and cultural life, Bilderdyk became God's instrument to call his nation back to God; the God who had revealed Himself through Jesus Christ and the Scriptures. Bilderdyk may disappoint as a Christian when his private life is researched, but this does not take away the fact that the Dutch revival would have been unthinkable apart from him. He was a voice crying in the wilderness. Opposition to his views was fierce. He was repeatedly bypassed for a professorship because of his defence of the Bible and his attachment to the Reformed creeds. In 1827 an article appeared in a liberal paper, which raised the question whether the government should call Bilderdyk and his followers to account. The paper accused them of spreading principles which destroyed morality, order and the welfare of society. Bilderdyk's work was compared to "the work of Jesuits."

In Leiden, Bilderdyk had a small group of students who wanted a different kind of instruction than that received at the university. He taught them Dutch history in his home every week. His point of departure was that the source of all authority is found in God and in His appointed authorities and not in the will of the people. For Bilderdyk the Reformed faith was not just a set of dogmas, but a living reality.

One of his most famous students was Isaac DaCosta (1798-1860). He was a converted Jew, a gifted poet, fiery in temperament. He fought against the spirit of unbelief in all its manifestations. He wrote his famous Grievances against the spirit of the age. He protested the loss of faith in God's electing and free grace, the low level of morality, the misuse of science in order to contradict God's revelation. He took the Bible seriously, defended the deity of Jesus Christ, and the doctrine of original sin. His work profoundly disturbed leaders both in church and state. DaCosta saw sharply and correctly that modern culture, boasting in man's autonomy, is in principle anti-Christian. He had a life-long friendship with Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876), Christian statesman and historian. In many ways they worked together in church, state and social spheres. Groen was also a pupil of Bilderdyk, though he differed with him on occasion. Bilderdyk's circle became a movement with many branches, which battled for the restoration of the church, for schools with the Bible and works of Christian mercy.

Bilderdyk was not well received by many leaders of his time, but he was much appreciated by the "kleine luiden" (the little people). Throughout his life he had contact with them. He once wrote to DaCosta that in his time the confession-that there is no other virtue than God's saving grace-could only be found with the "kleine luiden" He truly felt one with the simple believers. During the last year of his life he received a letter from a simple man, who heartily thanked him for all that he had meant to him and to so many others.

Bilderdyk's relationship to his church was strained. His church attendance was irregular. His irregular attendance was mainly due to the watered-down preaching, which was so common in his time. In this type of preaching he could not see the church as church anymore. Once he spoke of his church as "a church that is no longer a church." Dr. K.J.

Popma suggests that Bilderdyk's unfaithful church attendance was a witness against the spirit of his age and the content of the preaching.

Bilderdyk deplored the spiritual conditions of his church. He wondered how sincere Christians could remain in a church where the doctrines of God's grace were seldom heard and the sacraments administered to those who had no right to them. In 1810 he wrote an appeal to "The Truly Reformed in the Congregations of Holland." In this appeal he advised his fellow believers to secede from a congregation where Jesus Christ is not in the midst and held up the secession from the Lutheran Church in 1791 as an example, and concluded with this provocative statement: "Let us bid farewell to an association where Jesus is not in the midst but where human wisdom, which is foolishness to God, speaks the word." Yet he was ambiguous in his view on secession. He never meant to secede himself, as he believed that Christ would return soon. Bilderdyk saw history as a drama in which heroes and nations perish. History would reach its climax in the coming of Christ. His whole view of history had as a last word "Maranatha." His hope for the church's restoration was solely based on the second coming of Christ. Since the end was near, why secede?

Bilderdyk was thoroughly Reformed, a follower of John Calvin, but was not anti-Catholic. He disapproved of clergy preaching "absolute" sermons against Rome. He called this polemical Protestantism. He recognized that Rome taught many false doctrines-the doctrine of free will, good works, calling upon saints, papal infallibility. He believed that true Roman Catholics would leave their church and, with faithful Protestant Christians, reorganize. Bilderdyk made a distinction between the church of Rome as it had developed since the Council of Trent (1545-1563) with all its deplorable heresies and sincere members of that church, whom he recognized as devout Christians. He accepted as believing Christians all who remained true to the basic doctrines of Christianity, especially the doctrines of sin and the atonement of Jesus Christ. Over against apostasy Bilderdyk called for a biblical ecumenism. Faithful Christians in all churches were duty bound to unite and strengthen one another in faith. The church must become one through the Holy Spirit working in the hearts of individuals. Church unions enforced by man have always failed. God must build His church.

Bilderdyk was a confessional Christian. He had bound himself to the Reformed confessions. He wrote that we are not orthodox because the three forms of unity so teach and preach; we accept the confessions because they agree with our faith. Anyone who wants to force his opinions in the church against the confessions is intolerant, the intruder. Bilderdyk defended the Synod of Dort. In his typical, very personal and prophetic manner, he confessed that the doctrine "our Lord Jehovah is an electing God" is at the heart of the church's confession. He said that whoever reads the Canons of Dort must be either blunted to this truth or be conquered by it. And he didn't only know the Canons, he also knew the "acta" of Dort.

Bilderdyk was not only Reformed in the narrow confessional sense, but also in his world and life view. He called fallen man back to the living God, back to the source of life. Religion is a matter of the heart. Out of the heart come all issues of life. The sacred and

secular cannot be separated. Religion cannot be separated from art, poetry, science and government. Everything must be viewed from God's perspective. And not the god of the philosophers, but the God of revelation was the starting point of his thought. Nothing is neutral. He liberated poetry from rationalism's embrace. In his poetry he was influenced by the classics, but also by the great Dutch poets of the past and the Bible. In history Bilderdyk saw the tragic conflict between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of the world. History is not merely a summary of events! It is the work of God. The Lord reigns. The Gospel must be preached until the end of the world. When Christ comes to earth, not only a new era will come for the church, but also for the world. As Moses stood on Mount Nebo and saw the promised land, so Bilderdyk's poetry and philosophy of history point to the promised land.

Bilderdyk lived in the period of decline and fall of the Dutch Republic. He had seen the horror of the French Revolution, witnessed its follies and lost his faith in the rationalism of his people. He was an original thinker, independent of spirit, a man of prayer and vision. He loved his Lord, dared to stand for truth over against the lie and take the consequences. It is easy to torpedo his views as old-fashioned. No doubt some of them were. His faults were numerous. Some of his ideas can no longer stand the test of time. Bilderdyk too, in his life and work, was a child of his time, as we are children of our time. Yet as a prophet he has much to teach us. He dared to say "no" when the world said "yes." He was not a pragmatist. He dared to maintain his convictions over against the opinions of his contemporaries. He was called by the Lord to give honor to His name, when multitudes had turned their backs to Him. He had the interest of the public at heart, a sharp eye for the contrast between the rich and the poor. He longed for the day when justice, peace and righteousness would return to the earth. Even today we can still learn from Bilderdyk. If ever man trumpets his autonomy, his rationalism, his independence from God, his apostasy, it is today. How wonderful it would be if the Lord would raise up in our day Reformed leaders with Bilderdyk's intellectual sharpness, spiritual stature and courage to stimulate the church in her battle for truth and righteousness.

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