

Liberation



August 11, 1944 – that was 70 years ago last month. Worth remembering?? After all, the event happened on another continent, in a foreign language, in the lives of people few of us know. Besides, we feel, we have enough issues to think about today, so that we don't need to be weighed down by baggage from long ago. Allow me then to demonstrate that the fine point of the Liberation of 1944 revolved around whether one could take God's Word at face value. And that really is a central issue today. In fact, the reality of World War II didn't seem to the folk of the time any reason to ignore this church issue. If it was that important for them, there's maybe a good lesson in the event for us.

Background: Presumptive Regeneration

Abraham Kuyper, a major and gifted church leader half a century earlier, learned from Scripture that all mankind had fallen into sin and so joined Satan's side. God, though, in mercy had chosen some people to salvation (election) while He in justice passed other people by (reprobation). So the human race was divided into two groups on the basis of election. On the one side were the believers and on the one side the unbelievers. The believers, Kuyper knew from Scripture, were regenerated, while the unbelievers were not regenerated; the believers had faith, while the unbelievers did not. So far so good. The question arose: where do children fit into this? To which camp does your newborn belong? Kuyper answered that believers' children belonged with the believers, and then added that the newborn already had faith and was regenerated. No, the faith in the infant's heart was not alive yet and the regeneration was not evident yet, but that would come when the child grew. Kuyper pointed to seeds of grain that archaeologists of his day had found in Egyptian tombs; this grain had lain dormant for years and now when water was added they sprouted and grew. So too with faith, he said; God plants the seed of faith in the heart of the infant, and after many years waters it with the preaching of the Word, and behold, the seed of faith sprouts and grows into a living faith. Then the regeneration that God worked in infancy manifests itself in a godly lifestyle. Since the child already has the seed of faith in his heart and so is regenerated, the infant ought also to be baptized – as a sign that God has in fact regenerated the child. Notice: baptism is here not a sign and seal of God's covenant, but is instead a sign and seal of God's accomplished work of regeneration in the child's heart.

Problem

But consider now a practical problem. Suppose a godly couple is blessed with twins. Both receive the sacrament of baptism to signify (as Kuyper taught) that God has already worked faith in their hearts and regenerated them. Some weeks after birth the one child dies. In your grief you find comfort in the good news of baptism-as-sign-of-regeneration, and are assured that this child has gone to be with the Lord in heaven because her heart was regenerated. The other child continues to grow to manhood and –horror of horrors– wants

nothing to do with God and His service; the second twin is a drunk and a thief – obviously not regenerated. But what, then, are you to think concerning what you were told when your babies were baptized? Was baptism not a sign that God had regenerated the twins, and wasn't that the ground of your comfort when the first twin died? But if it's evident now that the surviving twin was not regenerated, on what grounds can you maintain that the deceased twin was regenerated – despite the baptism of both? Is the first one then not in heaven after all?!

Kuyper answered the question by insisting that when parents present their infant for baptism they are to *presume* their child is regenerated, and so *presume* that the Lord has placed the seed of faith in their infant's heart. That becomes, then, the ground for baptism; parents have their children baptized on the grounds of *presumed regeneration*. They may train up their child on the assumption of his regeneration (and therefore of his election), and may maintain that assumption until it proves to be wrong in adulthood.

Beyond Kuyper

As Abraham Kuyper aged, younger leaders arose who dared to question some of Kuyper's teachings – including his instruction on presumptive regeneration. In response, a number of Kuyper's followers carried their master's teachings to further extremes. They stated the obvious when they said that not all children in the covenant in fact received salvation; after all, everybody knew of children baptized in infancy who in adulthood showed themselves to be unbelievers and unregenerate. To tidy up the messy side of that –how could you be baptized (as sign of regeneration), and then have a lifestyle that showed you were obviously not regenerated– Kuyper's followers came up with this solution: God makes a different sort of covenant with those who will believe and be saved than with those who will not believe its promises and not be saved. The one covenant is the 'inner' and real covenant, while the other is the 'outer' and not-so-real covenant. Those children who would believe were from infancy in the inner covenant, while those who would not believe (equally baptized on the grounds of presumed regeneration) were in fact in the outer covenant. And yes, this all made logical sense....

But where was this stuff in the Bible? Where, those younger leaders asked, does the Scripture speak of the infant already having faith in his heart so that you may presume his regeneration already in the cradle? When father Isaac looked at his two toddlers Jacob and Esau, did he have to think in terms of inner and outer covenant, that God's promises to the one child were real while to the other they might not be? Schilder and those with him resisted the several distinctions Kuyper (and his followers) made on grounds that these distinctions were not found in Scripture and not echoed in the Reformed Confessions. So: your children are all equally God's children, with the same promises –forget the inner and outer– and so each child has the same right to call upon God as Father and the Saviour as Redeemer. This is the way parents should approach their children, this is equally the way elders should approach the lambs of the flock, and it is the way preachers need to address the entire congregation irrespective of age. All belong to God in equal measure, simply because the Lord said that He establishes His covenant with believers and their seed (see Genesis 17:7; Acts 2:39). And that, of course, means that all have equal responsibility to respond obediently to God's rich promises in the covenant.

Synod

The 1936 Synod of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands mandated a committee to evaluate the distinctions Kuyper (and his followers) made as well as the criticisms levelled against these distinctions. This committee's report served the synod convened in 1939. As a result, this synod (which, as it turned out, lasted four years – but that's another story)

insisted that Kuyper's teachings in relation to presumptive regeneration and his distinctions about inner and outer covenant, etc, were Biblically and confessionally correct, while those who criticized his positions were Biblically and confessionally wrong. In fact, this Synod made clear that all preachers and teachers in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands were expected to present and defend these emphases in their preaching and teaching. Kuyper's word trumped Scripture.

Predictably, the next synod, convened in 1943, received on its table a multitude of appeals and objections against the decisions of Synod 1939-42. The Dutch nation was still heavily engaged in its war against Nazi Germany, and so freedom of movement and freedom of expression was much curtailed. Schilder himself, for example, had to hide from the invaders as they considered him dangerous to their cause. Understandably, this state of affairs produced the plea to maintain the pre-1939 status quo until the churches again had freedom and opportunity to consider responsibly the decisions of Synod 1939-42. But the new Synod had no such patience. In fact, Synod 1943 demanded compliance with the decisions of the previous Synod, to the point that those office bearers who objected were to be deposed from their offices in the churches. The first man deposed was Dr Klaas Schilder who by now was professor of Dogmatics at the Theological College of the churches in Kampen. Though Synod did not know where he was hiding, and did not speak with him face to face, they yet deposed him on the grounds that he (they said) unsettled the peace in the churches through his objections to Synod's embrace of Kuyper's distinctions.

Other depositions quickly followed, so that soon enough a rupture appeared in the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands. The grounds for the rupture were not only the dogmatic positions adopted by Synod in relation to Kuyper's teachings, but also the inflexible and authoritarian attitude Synod adopted in forcing its position on the churches. There was no room left for freedom of conscience among those who could not find Kuyper's doctrine in the Bible or in the Confessions.

Liberation

While the war was still going on, a meeting was held on August 11, 1944 to discuss what to do in response to Synod's hard insistence on believing doctrines not found in the Bible. Schilder himself appeared at this meeting (and disappeared directly thereafter) to encourage those in attendance to stay simply with the Bible and its faithful echo in the three Forms of Unity. An Act of Liberation and Return was read out, in which those in attendance pledged faithfulness to God's Word and the Confessions of the church, and refused to be bound by anything beyond that. In so doing these 'liberated people' distanced themselves from the distinctions of Synods 1939-42 and 1943-44, on grounds that these distinctions were not found in Scripture or echoed in the confessions. More, those who liberated themselves from the bindings of Synod wanted to hear God's Words to sinners in their own God-given clarity, and that's to say that parents did not want to hear that maybe their little Johnny was regenerated or maybe he was not, and did not want to hear either that maybe their little Suzie was in God's inner covenant or maybe she was in His outer covenant – all of which left the parents puzzled as to what God actually said to them and their child at baptism. They wanted to hear instead no more than the Bible actually revealed, and that was that God genuinely established His covenant of grace with believers and their seed, and that included themselves and therefore the children God sovereignly gave them. As they set themselves to their task of parenting, these parents wanted and needed reassurance that God's promises were actually true and real for *their* little son, and so they could see their son as God's child, count on God's faithfulness, and impress the reality of God's promises on their boy and train him to respond obediently and humbly to God's covenant promises.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, then, the fine point of the Liberation of 1944 was not about what one ought to think about presumptive regeneration. The fine point revolved around whether one could take God's Word at face value, or whether one had to box it in with maybes and possibilities, so that the clarity of God's Word was fogged in. Despite the war raging around them, many considered the clarity of God's Word of greater importance than safety itself. We are today 70 years after the Liberation took place. The people involved in the Liberation –including persons deposed from their offices by Synod– include our parents and grandparents. Our ancestors received in the Liberation a new appreciation for the simple clarity of what God says. They were willing to pay a big price to keep seeing God's Word as the final source for all instruction and comfort.

And we're the beneficiaries of that willingness. And share it

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