

## **Antithetical to the World**

By [R.B. Kuiper](#)

The term world does not always have the same meaning. It can properly be used in a considerable variety of senses. In distinction from the Christian church it is “the ungodly multitude, the mass of men alienated from God and therefore hostile to the cause of Christ.” The term antithesis denotes “a strong contrast, the direct contrary.” It hardly needs to be argued that, the stronger the contrast of the church and the world, the greater is the glory of the church. White never seems quite so white as when it is seen against a black background. So the holiness and beauty of the church of Christ stand out most strikingly when contrasted with the filthiness and depravity of the world.

### **An Actual Antithesis**

The charge is often laid at the door of the church that it closely resembles the world. All too frequently it does. Always there is some worldliness in the church, oftentimes much. Then the church must needs be rebuked for the sin of being conformed to the world and be reminded of the antithesis as a duty.

However, the antithesis may not be thought of merely as a duty which at times is observed, albeit imperfectly, by the church and at other times is largely neglected by it. The antithesis is also an actual fact. So long as the church has existed the antithesis has been a reality, and so long as the church will exist in this wicked world the antithesis will continue as a reality. The world will never be permitted to absorb the church, and the church, though always marred by worldliness, will never become identified with the world. To be the opposite of the world is not only necessary for the well-being of the church but is essential to its very being. If the church should cease being antithetical to the world, it would no longer be the church. That can happen, and every once in a while does happen, to a portion of the church, but it will never happen to the Christian church as such.

The reason is that God Himself has fashioned the church as the opposite of the world and that, according to His own promise, He will preserve His church. God, who made the church radically different from the world, will most certainly keep it so.

As was previously observed, the history of the church goes back all the way to the garden of Eden. No sooner had man sinned than God promised him a Saviour. Presumably Adam and Eve believed that promise. If so, they became the first members of the body of Christ. Significantly, at the very moment when

God founded the church He also brought the antithesis into being. Said He to the tempter: "I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15). The seed of the tempter is the world; the seed of the woman is the church. It must be noted that God did not command them to be at enmity with each other and then leave it to them to obey or disobey as they might please. No, God Himself put enmity between them, and there it was. By a divine fiat the antithesis was established. And its continuation throughout the centuries is guaranteed by the unalterable will of God.

The apostle Paul told the believers at Ephesus: "Ye were sometimes darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord" (Ephesians 5:8). When they were of the world they were darkness; now that they have become members of Christ's church, they are light. One is the direct contrary of the other. Again it must be noted that the apostle did not command the Ephesians to stop being darkness and to become light in the Lord. That would have made no sense for the simple and conclusive reason that by the grace of God they had already as a matter of fact been transformed from darkness into light. To be sure, believers do not always manifest in their lives that they are light in the Lord. Therefore the exhortation is in order: "Walk as children of light." But that command does not detract so much as an iota from the fact of their being children of light. The truth of the matter is that the command is predicated on that fact.

The conclusion is irrefutable that the antithesis of the church and the world is actual. Now that has a direct bearing on the glory of the church. Its being the opposite of the world is not merely something to be desired without necessarily being realized. Nor is its being the opposite of the world a duty that may or may not be performed. The antithesis is reality, actuality. The church is as a matter of indisputable fact the opposite of the unholy world. And that is a way of saying that it is supremely holy.

### **An Absolute Antithesis**

The persons who constitute the world are "dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1), whereas those who constitute the church, having been born again, are spiritually alive. Because of that fact the contrast of the church and the world is obviously not relative but absolute. For men are either dead or alive; they cannot be both. Life and death are mutually exclusive.

This is not to claim that the Christian is sinless. On the contrary, the very best Christian is far from the goal of perfection. The apostle Paul, great saint that he was, readily granted that he had not apprehended the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:13, 14). And James, the brother of the Lord, said: "In many things we offend all" (James 3:2). There is point to the story of the minister who met a fellow minister on the street, inquired of him where he was

going, and, when told that he was hurrying on to perfection, replied: "If that is the case, I won't detain you, for I realize that you have a long way to go." Nevertheless, the new life which God the Holy Spirit has implanted in the Christian's soul dominates him. He is "dead unto sin" and "alive unto God" (Romans 6:11). And when he commits sin he does that which he would not and even hates. Therefore he dares to assert: "It is no more I that do it, but sin that dwelleth in me" (Romans 7:15, 17). In short, his sinning differs radically from that of the unregenerate.

Nor is this to say that the man of the world is less than human. In Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* Shylock contends that Jews are people, too. He argues: "Hath not a Jew eyes? hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh?" Certainly in that sense unbelievers, too, are people. In fact they are human in a more exalted sense. In them are remnants of the image of God in which man was originally created. They still possess rationality and morality. However, even the morality of natural, unregenerate man is, to quote the Canons of Dort, only "some knowledge of the difference between good and evil" and "some regard for virtue and good outward behavior" which "he is incapable of using aright even in things natural and civil" and "in various ways renders wholly polluted and hinders in unrighteousness" (Heads of Doctrine III and IV, Article 4). In the Christian, on the other hand, the image of God has in principle been restored to its pristine glory of true knowledge of God, true righteousness and true holiness. And that means that the difference between the image of God in the Christian and that image in the non-Christian is not merely quantitative, so that the former has more of it than the latter, but the difference is qualitative.

It has sometimes been contended that the gifts of the common grace of God render the antithesis of the believer and the unbeliever, and consequently of the church and the world, less than absolute. It can hardly be denied that both are recipients of certain manifestations of divine benevolence. "He maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust" (Matthew 5:45). Scripture even tells us that, certainly not by virtue of their innate goodness, which is non-existent, but by virtue of the common grace of God, unregenerate men can do good of a kind. Said Jesus: "If ye do good to them which do good to you, what thank have ye? for sinners also do even the same" (Luke 6:33).

However, it may be questioned seriously whether God is motivated — if one may speak of God as being motivated — by the same benevolence when He grants certain blessings to the unjust as when He grants the identical blessings to the just. He is indeed good, even loving, to the unjust, but only the just does He love as His children, adopted for Christ's sake. No doubt, He ever beholds them in

Christ, also when bestowing upon them the blessings of nature. It must also be remembered that only the regenerate can do spiritual good; that is, good prompted by love for God, and that in all the good that the unregenerate do there is not manifest so much as a speck of that love. It must likewise be borne in mind that the use which the regenerate make of the gifts of common grace and the use of them by the unregenerate differ radically. In principle the Christian does his eating and drinking, as well as all other things, to the glory of God, whereas the man of the world does precisely nothing to God's glory. And never may the truth be forgotten that saving grace, which only Christians possess, differs so completely in kind from common grace that all the blessings of common grace that God has ever poured out upon mankind, together with those that remain to be poured out to the end of time, do not add up to so much as one grain of saving grace.

True, the complete separation of believers and unbelievers will not take place until the consummation of that process which we call history. Therefore they can, and for the present should, co-operate in several worthy activities, albeit they are differently motivated in so doing. It is also true that the God of sovereign grace will to the day of judgment keep substituting hearts of flesh for hearts of stone and thus translating men from the kingdom of Satan to that of His dear Son. But the fact remains that even now the antithesis of the regenerate, who are spiritually alive, and the unregenerate, who are spiritually dead, is absolute, not merely, as is sometimes said, in principle, but in its very essence.

The absolute character of the antithesis of the church and the world is undeniable. It is not true, as is often supposed, that the church and the world run on the same track for some distance and then diverge. They are divergent from beginning to end. And that, too, bears on the glory of the church. So different is the church from the world that the two are incomparable. That makes the glory of the church transcendent.

### **An Active Antithesis**

An antithesis may be absolute without being active. Who will deny that black and white are opposites? White is seen when sunlight is reflected without absorption of any of the visible rays of the spectrum. Black is the absence of all spectral color. But they may exist alongside each other and be purely passive. It is not unusual nowadays to trim an otherwise white house with black. The effect is striking because of the complete contrast of white and black, but the two exist side by side in perfect peace. Neither troubles the other in the least.

But now let us suppose that the house just referred to has caught fire and that water is poured on the fire. There you have another antithesis, but it is extremely active. Fire and water work at cross-purposes. The one would destroy the house, the other would save it. They would even destroy each other. The water strives to

put out the fire, and the fire aims to transform the water into vapor.

The antithesis of the church and the world is not passive but decidedly active.

That the world is actively opposed to the church is abundantly clear from history. No sooner had God put enmity between the seed of the tempter and that of the woman than that enmity flared up. Cain killed Abel because his brother's works were good and his own evil (1 John 3:12). In cruel hatred the pagan Egyptians persecuted God's people. When Israel had occupied Palestine, the neighboring heathen nations were almost incessantly at war with it. The hatred of the world for the seed of the woman came to its fullest and most violent expression when it crucified the Son of man. But let no one think that this hatred burned itself out on that occasion. The followers of Christ have ever since experienced the truth of His words: "The servant is not greater than his lord: if they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you" (John 15:20); and "If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you" (John 15:19).

The church, too, must actively oppose the world, and in the measure in which it truly is the church, it does that. To be sure, the people of God do not hate the men of the world as these hate them. Christ's disciples love all men, even their enemies. Therefore they labor zealously and pray fervently for the salvation of all who are alienated from God and hostile to the cause of Christ. At the very time of their martyrdom at the hands of the world they plead: "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge" (Acts 7: 60). But that is not the whole picture. It has another aspect. By His death Christ both saved the world and vanquished it. And the church of Christ witnesses boldly against the sins of the world, with might and main opposes the works of darkness perpetrated by the world, and, unbelievable though it may sound, even hates the wicked.

Here is a paradox indeed. That the Christian must at all times love all men is true beyond the shadow of a doubt, but it is not the entire truth. This writer<sup>1</sup> likes to describe the antithesis thus: while the ungodly hate the godly, the godly love the ungodly. That description is both true and pointed, but it is not exhaustive. The statement, often made, that the Christian hates the sins of the ungodly but loves their persons is altogether true, but as a solution of the paradox it suffers from oversimplification. This paradox, like every Scriptural paradox, must be allowed to stand in all its inspired boldness.

God, who loves all men, [We take exception to this statement for God's love only extends to the elect. God does show benevolence to all men, however. - Editor] Esau included, declared: "Esau have I hated" (Romans 9:13). God's children, too, both love and hate the ungodly. They love them as their fellow men, their neighbors. They hate them in the very specific capacity of haters of God. Therefore the Psalmist exclaimed: "Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate thee, and am I not grieved with those that rise up against thee? I hate them with

perfect hatred” (Psalm 139:21, 22). According to several able expositors, among them F. L. Godet, Jesus had that hate in mind when He said: “If any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother, and wife and children and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Without any doubt, the apostle Paul gave emphatic expression to that hate when he wrote to the churches of Galatia: “If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed” (Galatians 1:9). So do the spirits of just men made perfect as they cry with a loud voice from under the altar in heaven: “How long, O Lord, holy and true, dost thou not judge and avenge our blood on them that dwell on the earth?” (Revelation 6:9, 10) And so will the inhabitants of heaven in the song of triumph: “Alleluia; salvation and glory and honor and power unto the Lord our God: for true and righteous are his judgments: for he hath judged the great whore which did corrupt the earth with her fornication and hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand” (Revelation 19:1-3).

The Christian loves God. For that reason he loves his fellow men, none excepted; for the same reason he cannot but hate God's enemies. So says Scripture.

As the actuality and the absoluteness of the antithesis of the church and the world reveal the glory of the church, so does the active character of the antithesis. If the church loved God less, the world would persecute it less violently and it would oppose the world less vigorously. The activity of the antithesis results directly and inevitably from the church's love for God and thus reflects the church's resplendent glory.

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