

Kuyper on Coalitions and the Antithesis¹

The goal for which we [the Anti-Revolutionary, Christian-Historical and Roman Catholic parties] march together is holy, but that does not prevent many unholy things from still haunting the best of circles. Having stepped down four years ago, I now urge you not to judge your men in government too harshly. They too make mistakes sometimes, how could it be otherwise? They too are not beyond human fallibility. Criticism can therefore be indispensable once in a while, provided it is brotherly and constructive, and especially that it never become cutting. But never be harsh in your judgment; avoid all pedantry; warm them with your sympathy rather than undermining their strength by your coolness. And above all, never quench “brotherly love.” They are the ones who stand in the breach on your behalf, and those who attack them from the Left are unsparing also to them.

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But if it follows from this that the Antirevolutionary banner can never fly unfurled above a Cabinet of the Right, then just as surely know your calling to fly that banner uncreased and unfaded *above your own pavilion*. A “Right banner” does not exist, and at the gate of every Right Cabinet there always stand, bound in one bundle, the three banners of our party and the two other parties; but it must never be thus *in your own camp*. Each party, rather, must try to put its stamp on the Cabinet as much as is fair, and the three-colored stamp of the Cabinet may never be pressed on your own party.

Whoever would say, *We were* Antirevolutionaries but now we belong to the Right would violate our principle and our resplendent past. “I am of the Right” is a meaningless phrase; there is no such thing as a *tree*: there are oaks and cedars and willows; whoever joins the Right, therefore, has to show his colors and

¹ A. Kuyper, *Wij, Calvinisten . . .* (Kok, Kampen, 1909), 11–18. Selection from an address to the 17th national assembly of Anti-Revolutionary Party delegates, convened in Utrecht on 22 April 1909, in preparation for the coming general elections. Translated and annotated by Harry Van Dyke.

proudly and nobly declare whether he is joining the Roman Catholic, the Christian-Historical or the Antirevolutionary party; and you, Gentlemen, who from the beginning wholeheartedly enlisted in the party of Groen van Prinsterer, you may not disown the designation "*issus de Calvin*" and in your voters associations, in your propaganda clubs, in your Young Men's Societies, and especially here at your Assembly of Deputies, you must stand, in the midst of battle and on the day of peace, in triumph or in defeat, as unwavering and unweakened men of Antirevolutionary stock, unflinchingly true and unswervingly loyal to your own *green* banner. You therefore will remain *reasonable* in your conduct, sensing instinctively or intuitively what is possible and what is not possible. As stalwart citizens you will know the means and occasions, and at the coming elections you will not make senseless demands. But you will guard against the danger of causing your own color to bleed into the mixed color of the Cabinet. You accept the Coalition in order to achieve at least something, and in particular to avert much evil. Its leaders, who endure the heat of the day also for your sake, you will support with your sympathy and your prayers. But personally you know that you stand for a distinctive principle and a particular tradition, and that you have therefore been given a treasure with which to bless your nation, a blessing which you alone can share with your people. So let no one in your camp slacken off. Whatever you may accommodate [in the Coalition] in order to achieve one goal together does not detract one tittle or iota from what you have yourself described in your program as the foundation of our people's rights. Work for that, try to win others over to that conviction, and always take up the cause, against friend and foe, for what God has enjoined on your hearts as His holy will.

We worked for *federation*, and federation continues to appeal to us, but *fusion* you have always firmly rejected since fusion amounts to a slow suicide. What must never come into play is a desire for starting your own little party. Every political party that presents itself has to justify its appearance by advancing a distinctive principle, in line with its tradition, and this principle must furnish the guidelines for adopting an overall political philosophy and administering all

departments of government. This is something that needs to be emphasized all the more today when all kinds of groups are trying to unite around a single issue and allow their choice of candidate at the ballot box to be determined by this one issue. A pernicious example of this is the issue of state pensions. "You may be an Antirevolutionary," it is then said, "but vote for a socialist rather than your own candidate, because your pension, my dear friend, comes first!" The bar keeper in his own way sings the same tune. The liquor store owner is the third man to pursue you with his egotistic cry. A league that is opposed to enlarging conscription did the same. A similar voice was raised against provisions for agricultural accidents. They all pull politics down into the morass of egoism and show no concern for the country's common future. They forget about the general requirements of government and ignore the demands of common national life. Just one issue takes center stage for them, and they will sacrifice the entire state policy to their class or personal interest.

We Calvinists especially have earned the moral right to fulminate against this fragmentation and crumbling of all sound politics. Fifty years ago we faced a similar temptation, and we can proudly say, thanks be to God, that in that hour of temptation we did not give in. At that time the schools issue was our uppermost concern, and I can still hear the urgent plea which then went the rounds, to concentrate our strength in a *school party* which, indifferent to political principles and without choosing sides in the struggle of the parties, would pursue just one goal, the emancipation of elementary education; the goal once attained, it would abolish itself.² But that was not the kind of leadership we had been given by Groen van Prinsterer. With his slogan, *Against the Revolution the Gospel!* he always placed in the foreground—and we followed him in that—the general spirit of our Netherlandic Constitution and on it alone based our right to champion freedom of education. And that is how it must remain among us—and in the whole of our national politics. Primordial principles, which wrestle with each other in the conscience of our nation for the prize of ruling the State, must

embody themselves in distinctive parties. Those parties must robustly declare their fundamental principle, and all zeal for class interest or personal interest must remain subordinate to the demands of that principle. Only in this way is a healthy political development conceivable. Party formation must not be an arbitrary matter. He who has no primordial principle to advance should either not enter politics or join an existing party. Excessive divisions weaken and fragment our national strength. The duty to form coalitions with kindred parties follows strictly from the same cogent argument. In the end it must always be two comprehensive principles that contend for victory at the ballot box and in parliament. This circumstance teaches us these three maxims: As Calvinists you confess a distinctive standpoint, so form a distinctive party! That first of all; but then also, in the second place: Work together with other parties with which you have affinity! And then, thirdly: Make sure that in that Coalition you do not forfeit your right to an independent political existence!

Should you wonder if waving your own banner will not break the strength of the Coalition and ultimately break up the Coalition itself, then I say: One or the other. Either there still is a more general principle that unites you and your allies; or there is no such principle. If there is none, your Coalition was artificial and nothing is lost if it breaks up. But if there is such a higher principle—and for me this is beyond dispute—then your Coalition is *alive* and you will always find each other again, even if self-preservation forced you to withdraw for a while.

And that brings me to the Antithesis. The more you close your eyes to the reality of that Antithesis, the more you weaken your Coalition. But then also, conversely: the more you keep your eyes on that Antithesis, the firmer will your Coalition stand. It is not a case of positing or inventing that Antithesis. Despite the musings of some statesman or the oracles of some groups in the country, that Antithesis *exists*, and it constitutes the fundamental contrast in our lives. It is operative every day on every terrain—in the perception of our hearts, in the

² Reference among others to the leadership of the Anti-School Law League, formed in 1872. Its hundred-odd local chapters were absorbed into the new Antirevolutionary Party in 1879.

tissue of our thoughts, in our antipathies and sympathies, in our whole view of life and our entire outlook on private, domestic, social and political life.

The Antithesis is present in our science and our art, in our jurisprudence and our pedagogy. It penetrates everything; everywhere it asserts itself in two directions. To say that the people of the Netherlands are of one mind and one purpose is nothing but sentimental fantasy. We are one, praise God, when the preservation and honor of our country is concerned; and as one man we rally round the House of Orange. But in the overall conception of life we are not one, but irrevocably two. That is how it is in our country; so it is in every constitutional state, because what wars in the bosom of the nation shows up in Parliament and is heard at the foot of the Throne.³ In part it was already like that in the old days, but that opposition has become especially acute since 1789. In the Great Revolution of that year, opposition to the honor of God overturned the very wheel of political life, brought to the top what belongs at the bottom and toppled what should have stayed on top. A war broke out, a conflict of principle, a struggle of life and death over the question whether the guide for politics is to be derived from the will of man or the will of God. Everyone who forsook the Christ and his Cross exclaimed: Our compass is the will of man. And all who continued to kneel before Christ as God revealed in the flesh cried out: Our only guide is and remains the revealed will of God. That is how the opposition arose: *Against the Revolution the Gospel!* And that is the Antithesis which throughout the 19th century, and still today, divides citizens' approach to life. No one spun out that Antithesis, nor did anyone invent it. That Antithesis is here, it exists, and it governs our whole life. Only, sometimes it deliberately conceals itself in such heavy fogs that most people do not see it, until the sun breaks through again and everyone sees once more how that rock of offense still lies across the path of life right at our feet. Exactly for this reason the Liberals have always tried to deny the reality of that Antithesis, because they know that when the mass of the people

³ ". . . is heard at the foot of the Throne": possibly an allusion to the 1878 mass petitions to King William III, appealing to him to veto the education bill that discriminated against private Christian day schools.

see it clearly it turns against them. Hence their bitter resistance to Groen van Prinsterer, their bitter opposition to the Calvinists, and their bitterness again in 1905, because we had opened the eyes of the people on our side to the reality of the Antithesis, an action which they pleased to call “sowing discord” among the people.⁵

But that is not how things are.

The discord in question is not sown by any thinker, *but was sown by the Christ himself*. And not only did He do so, and continues to do so, but He said openly and sharply that this was in fact the goal of his mission. That He came to earth to bring *peace with God* was already announced by the angels in the fields of Ephratah; but when people called for unity, for concord, for peace *among the children of men*, then the Christ stated as stingingly as possible: “*Think not that I am come to send peace on earth; I came not to send peace, but a sword.*”⁶ He said the same thing about His mission in even stronger terms when he explained: “*I am come to send fire on the earth, and what will I, if it be already kindled.*”⁷ And that these words pointed not only to struggle *in men’s hearts* but also *in life* is unmistakably evident in what the Christ said about family life: “*From henceforth there shall be five in one house divided, three against two, and two against three. The father shall be divided against the son, and the son against the father; the mother against the daughter, and the daughter against the mother. And a man’s foes shall be they of his own household. They shall hate one another, and betray one another.*”⁸ These are words of such searing gravity that no child of men would have dared to speak them, but only the Christ, because He was God. And that this discord would not end with His leaving but would last so long as His gospel went out into the world is apparent

⁵ The bitterly fought election campaign of 1905 particularly targeted the head of the Cabinet of the Right, Dr. Kuyper, and resulted in a victory for the parties of the Left.

⁶ Matt. 10:34.

⁷ Luke 12:49.

⁸ Luke 12:52–53; Matt. 10:36; Matt. 24:10.

from what he told His disciples just before He departed: *"If they have persecuted Me, they will also persecute you. But be of good cheer: I have overcome the world."*⁹

And that is why, when they call out to us from the opposite side: You who call yourselves Christians and so should be seeking the peace, how can you champion such an Antithesis? the answer is clear: Whoever asks this has never known the Christ and is a stranger in Holy Scripture. But this is certain, whoever among us confesses the Christ from intimate attachment may not adopt any other standpoint than the one on which Christ himself has placed us. And whoever demands of us from the opposite side that we should close our eyes to the Antithesis assaults our conscience by asking us in fact that we shall deny what the Christ has impressed upon us with such dreadful earnestness. According to prophets and apostles, Christ simply is *"a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense,"*¹⁰ and the mission of the Son of God in this world could not but call forth the Antithesis in our life. It is no good disguising it; to close one's eyes to it is to play the ostrich. There is no room even for a *moderate* witness. On precisely this point Jesus, who never speaks except purposely, systematically avoided every moderate word. It is impossible to express it more stingingly than He did. On whatever point peace may be possible, on this point never.

Never fear, therefore, for a permanent breakup of the Coalition. Even it comes temporarily undone in the near future, it will always, from innate impulse, regain its strength; and the more you emphasize the Antithesis the more firmly it will take root. You may stand divided at a host of remote problems, but as soon as this Antithesis vibrates your every nerve will reverberate. That Antithesis is the cement of the Coalition. Whoever obscures or weakens it, weakens at the same time the collaboration of the Christian parties. The impulse that it conveys to the heart trembles throughout the veins of our body politic, and it dominates the whole system of our national life, in family and society, in State and Church.

⁹ John 15:20; 16:33.

¹⁰ Isa. 8:14; Rom. 9:33; 1 Peter 2:8.