Klaas Schilder was born on December 19, 1890, in the city of Kampen, the Netherlands. His parents belonged at that time to the Hervormde Gemeente, but left a few years later for the Gereformeerde Kerk. Young Schilder grew up in rather impoverished circumstances. When he was six years old he lost his father, and there was no chance of continuing his education after finishing elementary school. So he got a job as an errand boy in a factory.

Due to the intervention of people who suspected that he had special ability, Schilder was given an opportunity to study further. He went first to the Reformed high school in Kampen, and then from 1909-1914 he studied at the theological college in Kampen.

Young Schilder attracted attention rather quickly because of his significant linguistic ability. He felt at home in classical languages (Greek and Latin), as well as in English, German and French. A new world opened up to him. He became acquainted with famous thinkers and writers like Dante, Goethe, Schleiermacher, Dostoevski, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. He experienced everything he read. And it brought him into a spiritual crisis. Out of that was born in Schilder a conviction he would later formulate like this: "It is wild opulence to be Reformed, and thus to think Reformed."

After he passed his candidacy exam cum laude (with honor), he became a minister in 1914 in Ambt Vollenhove. Schilder pastored five congregations, though he never stayed long in one place. While serving the Rotterdam-Delfshaven church, he was granted a leave of absence, and studied for two years (1930-1932) in Erlangen, Germany. In early 1933 he obtained a Doctor of Philosophy degree summa cum laude (with highest honor) from Erlangen.

It was obvious that a man with his gifts and education would become a professor in theology. That happened in 1933 already, when he was appointed to be the successor of Dr. A.G. Honig in the theological college in Kampen. He was appointed to teach the subjects of dogmatics, ethics, symbolics and encyclopedia.

**A genuine churchman**

Klaas Schilder was no ivory-tower student who concentrated on writing theological books. By means of the magazine *De Reformatie* (The Reformation) he helped give direction to ecclesiastical life in a sparkling way. He argued with people from the Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk about their stand-offish church behavior, with Barthians about the reliability of God's Word, with people of his own church about the nature of the church, common grace, the covenant and a number of other subjects. In an age when Abraham Kuyper's opinions were still practically the end of all argument, Schilder came with his careful and respectful criticisms of Kuyper's theology.

The ecclesiastical disagreements within his own circle increased. The relationship between the faculty of the Free University and that of the Kampen theological school, always a bit on the cool side, became tense. Schilder crossed swords repeatedly with his Amsterdam colleagues H.H. Kuyper and V. Hepp. But also in Kampen itself the contrasts were visible. Except for the New Testament professor, S. Greijdanus, Schilder found little theological support among his colleagues.

Alongside the ecclesiastical clouds on the horizon were political ones as well. Hitler's star was rising while Schilder had studied in Germany. When he studied there, he had attended a discussion about "Students and Anti-semitism," and had even dared to take part, for which he
received the applause of Jewish sympathizers! In 1936 he wrote for the synod of Amsterdam of the Reformed Churches a report in which membership in the Nazi-sympathetic National Socialist Alliance and the pacifist Christian Democratic Union was ecclesiastically forbidden for Reformed church members.

His vehement protest against national-socialist opinions would cost him dearly when, in May 1940, the Germans occupied the Netherlands. A number of courageous articles in *De Reformatie*, written in a time when most writers were either too dazed or too scared, was enough for the Nazis to arrest Schilder. From August until December 1940 he was imprisoned in Arnhem, and the publication of *De Reformatie* was forbidden.

**The liberation**

But the most severe trial in his life would come after his release. And not from the side of the Nazis, but at the hands of his own brothers. Despite wartime circumstances, the synods of the Reformed Churches (Gereformeerde Kerken) issued pronouncements concerning differences of theological opinion among the churches, involving the matter of covenant and baptism. Schilder did not wish to subscribe to these pronouncements, and by means of correspondence to all of the consistories of the Reformed Churches he alerted them to this. His writing of this letter would become one of the reasons used by the general synod of Utrecht to suspend him from office as professor in Kampen on March 23, 1944. On August 3 he was deposed. The same misfortune befell his colleague, professor Greijdanus.

At the "liberation meeting" in the Lutheran Church of the Hague on August 11, 1944, Schilder read the "Act of Liberation and Return." The Liberation of Christ's church became a fact. The larger part of the Kampen student body went along with both deposed professors when these teachers continued giving ministerial training, also in Kampen, but at a new address: Broederweg 15.

Schilder could continue his work as professor for only a couple of years. On March 23, 1952, he passed away suddenly, due to heart trouble, only 61 years old. The years following the Liberation (from the synodical Gereformeerde Kerken) had not been pure ecstasy.

First he faced the group following Rev. B.A. Bos (people who thought the church break could be quickly healed through inter-denominational discussion), who rather quickly left the Liberated Reformed Churches.

Shortly thereafter Schilder publicly opposed the independentism of Rev. K. Doornbos and others. In reaction to "synodical" tyranny during the years before the Liberation, such preachers placed all the emphasis on the independence of the local church, without paying proper attention to the decisions of broader assemblies. From this struggle came Schilder's well-known statement that Christ shed His blood also for the church federation.

The conflict with the American preacher-theologian, Herman Hoeksema, also caused Schilder disappointment. Schilder had become acquainted with Hoeksema and his group (the Protestant Reformed Churches) during his first visit to the United States in 1938. The mutual bond was strengthened during Schilder's second visit upon the invitation of these churches in 1947. But a few years later a break came between them. While Schilder supported Hoeksema in his critique of Abraham Kuyper's common grace doctrine, he rejected Hoeksema's strongly Kuyperian doctrine of the covenant!

Lingering local and national conflicts in his own churches after the Liberation demanded Schilder's constant attention, so that he had less opportunity to produce new theological publications. Consequently, though he had begun an extensive exposition of the *Heidelberg Catechism* before World War II, he got no further than Lord's Day 10.

The deep love for Schilder among the Liberated Reformed Churches, as well as the deep respect of many outside the circle, appeared from the widespread attention devoted to his death and funeral in the press.
On his gravestone in the municipal cemetery of IJsselmuiden is engraved the text, "That they all may be one" (John 17:21). This verse shows most clearly why, finally, Schilder had been ready always to do battle on various fronts.

We would like to single out two important aspects of his work, looking first at Schilder the dogmatician (doctrinal thinker) and finally at Schilder's view of culture.

**Schilder as doctrinal thinker**

Of all the subjects in this area that are worth considering, we will select two: man as image of God and the church.

What Schilder said about man as image of God is this: often when people speak of this doctrine, they reason that man is God's image-bearer because he possesses certain qualities (intellect, will, righteousness, holiness, etc.). People also invented the distinction between the image in its broader sense (everybody is created in God's image, since they are human beings) and the image in its narrower sense (only believers, since they know what "knowledge, righteous and holiness" are). Such distinctions betray the fact that people are looking at the image as consisting primarily of human qualities.

According to Schilder, one who reads Genesis 1 carefully will come to another conclusion. In his explanation of the Heidelberg Catechism, Schilder explains that as image of God, mankind represents God in the world, with the task, as vicegerents, to exercise dominion over other creatures. The primary question has to do with office or calling, and only then do qualities like knowledge, righteousness and holiness become important. These qualities are nothing but the gifts which people are called to employ in the performance of their task here upon earth. This perspective becomes important for understanding the natures and work of our Mediator, Jesus Christ.

From any competent biography of Schilder's life and work, it is apparent that the subject of the church lay close to his heart. He labored earnestly for the unity of Christ-believers and refused to make his peace with ecclesiastical division. For that reason he attacked Abraham Kuyper's teaching about the "pluriformity" of the church, and along with it the distinction between "visible" and "invisible" church. If the church can appear in various forms (pluriform), then why strive for ecclesiastical unity? But plurality in the church's form provides a glimpse of self-will and disobedience. And if being a member of the invisible church (to which all believers belong) is all that's necessary to be saved, then why make so much fuss about the unity of the visible church here on earth? Just as with the Bible's teaching about the image of God, Schilder attacked various "scholastic" distinctions that have been applied to the church.

**Schilder as cultural visionary**

"Culture" is for Schilder something you can find already on the first pages of the Bible: tend the garden, inhabit the earth, multiply and have dominion. The world wasn't created in its final form: there needs to be "evolution" (meaning "development") on the basis of "creation" (contrast this with evolution instead of creation, NDK). We must move from the garden of Genesis 1 to the city of Revelation 22. "Culture" is an all-encompassing program, a systematic endeavor of the human race that is on the way to its full number.

The possibility of culture isn't due to "common grace," since the penetration of both curse and blessing is being retarded as history continues. That history continues at all, and with it "culture," is but the condition for the outworking of God's curse as well as His blessing. Strictly speaking positive culture-building occurs only where God's will is followed, though even unbelievers perform cultural work. In addition to koinonia or fellowship between believers, there is in the world sunousia or a common existence among all human beings. Schilder insists that there is only one creation shared by believers and unbelievers, but a twofold development of creation's material; one cultural impulse, but a twofold cultural struggle. Both the believer and the unbeliever work in the same marble quarry, but the one quarries marble to build a cathedral, the other to erect a dance hall.
The church is the "hearth" (or furnace) of culture. "Take the church away, and the Kingdom of God is lies shrouded in fog. Shroud God's Kingdom in fog, and the Christ is smothered by culture." Only the church binds people in an unbreakable fellowship, and teaches norms for every life-relationship, also outside of the church.

Permit me to add only this personal note: it was under the leadership of Klaas Schilder and his theological-intellectual comrades that Kuyperian theology experienced a "purification" in the Netherlands, the likes of which we Reformed Christians in North America are in such desperate need. Concerning especially the doctrines of the covenant, of common grace and of the church, Schilder provided such incisive analysis. But most importantly, because he wrote and preached with the soul of a poet, K.S. has become for many of us a poet of and for the soul.

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