

Horizontalism

The present topic is a difficult one. It is difficult because it is a *broad* topic, and also because it has theological ramifications and a philosophical background. If you compare this topic with the two previous ones, you see that Jehovah's Witnesses are a well-organized group, whereas Neo-Pentecostalism is broader and pervades several denominations. Horizontalism has more in common with the topic of Neo-Pentecostalism than with that of Jehovah's Witnesses, for what is called Horizontalism is a mood or spirit of our age within Christianity — a widespread movement rather than a well-defined organization.

The Term

As far as I know, the term "Horizontalism" is used in Continental Europe, especially in The Netherlands, rather than in England or America. This does not mean what is *meant* by the term is only found there.

When did the term appear?

I remember that just before I left The Netherlands, in February 1969, a series of theological lectures was published entitled "Vertical — horizontal." In the same period, at the end of the sixties, M.P. van Dijk wrote a book under the title *Horizontalistische Godservaring* (Horizontalistic Experience of God), in which he dealt with the doctrine of God in J.A.T. Robinson and Paul Tillich.¹

In 1971 several "concerned" theologians in the Netherlands Reformed Church published a statement, a "*Getuigenis*," or Testimony. This declaration was directed against the tendency of theology and preaching in the Netherlands Reformed Church. The authors were concerned about a crisis of faith and wanted to witness about the things that have certainty — or ought to have certainty — in the congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ. But, they energetically state that they do not want "to defend a theological 'verticalism' over against a modern 'horizontalism.'" ²

To mention one more use of the term "Horizontalism," Dr. B. Wentsel published two booklets under the title *De Koers van de Kerk in een Horizontalistisch Tijdperk* (The Course of the Church in a Horizontalistic Era).³

¹ "Vertikaal Horizontaal," in *Rondom het Woord*, XI,1, February 1969, with contributions of G.C. Van Niftrik, A.J. Nijk, J.P. Pronk, and H. Berkhof; M.P. van Dijk, *Horizontalistische Godservaring: Het geloof in God bij J.A.T. Robinson en Paul Tillich* (Franeker: Wever s.a.).

² The text of "Het Getuigenis" in J. VanDerGraaf (ed.), *Het Getuigenis — motief en effect* (Kampen: Kok, 1973) pp. 10-18; Th.C. Vriezen a.o., *Breuklijnen in Kerk en Theologie: Hoofdmomenten van het Getuigenis* (Kampen: Kok 1974), pp. 134-139.

³ B. Wentsel, *De Koers van de Kerk in een Horizontalistisch Tijdperk*, Vols. I and II, (Kampen: Kok 1972).

We may conclude that the term "Horizontalism" appeared in the second half of the sixties.

More important is the question: What is *meant* by this term?

Several authors who use the term declare at the same time that they do not accept the dilemma "Horizontalism" — "Verticalism." Nevertheless, the term "Horizontal" evokes the idea of a contrast to "Vertical." In this usage of the term, *man* is taken as the starting-point. "Vertical" indicates, then, the line towards *God*. He transcends His creation; He is majestic; about Him Psalm 115 says: "Our God is in the *heavens*; He does whatever He pleases." "Horizontalism" does not acknowledge this vertical line. "Horizontalism," therefore, is a term used to label a world and life view that does not recognize the *transcendence* of God, the fact that God is exalted above His creation. If it speaks about God, then, as a horizontalist himself described it, the eye is not directed to above, upwardly, but eye, foot, and hand are stretched out to a city in the distance, where people live, and live together, a city in which peace and righteousness, freedom and love have become reality, the city in which He Whose name is mentioned will be all in all.⁴

The term "Horizontalism" can be explained by *other terms* that are used at the same time for the same movement or orientation in Christianity. I think, for example, of the terms, "secularization," "anti-metaphysical trend," or "anti-supernaturalism." In 1965 E.L. Mascall wrote a book entitled *The Secularization of Christianity*. *Saeculum* means "world." The secularization of Christianity means the movement or orientation that does not want to know of an "other-worldly" Christianity, but wants to promote a Christianity that is of *this* world, here and now. In the same year, Kenneth Hamilton wrote *Revolt Against Heaven* and gave it the sub-title "An Enquiry Into Anti-Supernaturalism." Supernaturalism is the position which holds that there is something *above* nature, that there is another world besides this world — the world of heaven and angels; in other words, there is someone above nature — God — not an earthbound God, but the majestic God, the Creator of heaven and earth. *Anti-supernaturalism* is the opposite view. It *denies* heaven and speaks of an earthbound God.⁵

Another expression for the anti-supernaturalistic position is "anti-metaphysical." In 1966, Dr. H.M. Kuitert published *The Reality of Faith* with the sub-title "*Over de anti-metaphysische tendens in de huidige theologische ontwikkeling*." In the English translation, the sub-title became the title of the first chapter: The Anti-metaphysical Trend of Modern Theology. "*Physis*" is "nature"; "metaphysical" is the same as "supernatural." Therefore, what Kenneth Hamilton called the anti-supernaturalistic posi-

⁴ A.J. Nijk, "Horizontaal — Vertikaal: Reeel Dilemma of Dubieus Denkschema," in *Rondom het Woord*, February 1969, p. 22 (my translation).

⁵ E.L. Mascall, *The Secularization of Christianity: An Analysis and Critique* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd 1965).

K. Hamilton, *Revolt Against Heaven: An Enquiry Into Anti-Supernaturalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1965).

tion, is the same as what Kuitert labels as the anti-metaphysical trend of modern theology.⁶

You will understand that in the terms "anti-supernaturalistic" and "anti-metaphysical" we touch philosophical concepts. Anti-metaphysical theology is defined as *existentialist* theology. To mention some names, Bishop J.A.T. Robinson, in his well-known booklet *Honest to God*, is influenced by the theologians Paul Tillich and Rudolf Bultmann, but they in turn have been influenced by the existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger. There is an anti-metaphysical tendency in modern *philosophy* which has led to an anti-supernaturalistic trend in modern *theology*, and thus to horizontalism in many denominations.

But rather than making things too difficult, let us hastily return to the line of the introduction.

The term "Horizontalism" indicates a world and life view that wants to be Christian but does not recognize the transcendence of God, the fact that God is exalted above His creation. English publications speak about the secularization of Christianity, about anti-supernaturalism, or an anti-metaphysical trend. There is no other world than this world. There is only one reality: the reality of this world, here and now.

Dr. B. Wentzel gives the following definition of Horizontalism: "Horizontalism means the approach to the reality of this earth from a God who is present in us and among us. All the emphasis falls on the human, on the element of being fellow-man, and on the society of mankind."⁷ Wentzel says that in a vertical vision attention is given to the relation of God and man, God and soul, the need of reconciliation to a holy and righteous God, the cult, the adoration, the celebration of God's mighty acts in history, the worship-service. Life is approached from this side. God is the great sublime center. But the horizontal vision emphasizes the necessity of imitating Christ by benevolent actions rather than the necessity of reconciliation to God. God reconciles man to Himself in this sense that He transforms and renews man. The trend in Horizontalism is to try to enhance God's credibility by the acts of Christians. Liberation movements are seen as manifestations of God's present liberating action. Think of the theology of revolution. The history of redemption continues in the present. Connected to this turn from verticalism to horizontalism is a new appreciation of "humanity."

Characteristics

We may mention *seven characteristics* of Horizontalism.

The first characteristic is the denial of the supernatural, the world above us and beyond us. The old-fashioned concept of God is criticized.

⁶ H.M. Kuitert, *De Realiteit van het Geloof* (Kampen: Kok 1966), Idem, *The Reality of Faith: A Way Between Protestant Orthodoxy and Existentialist Theology*, translated by L.B. Smedes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1968).

⁷ B. Wentzel, *Op. cit.*, I, p. 17. (my translation). I am also indebted to this study of Wentzel for the characteristics of Horizontalism.

Our age cannot believe in a good, completely wise, and righteous Lord or Architect of the cosmos Who governs all things by His providence. Some object against a concept of God that has served to maintain the establishment. God is not the being-God. He "happens" in the encounter between man and man. In our technical age we no longer can believe in a God in heaven above. Jesus no longer sits at the right hand of the Father in heaven, but He is in our neighbour as a brother. The kingdom of God is realized in the course of history by a series of revolutions. To summarize this first point, all emphasis is on that which is visible; God is *in us, with us, among us* in the human actions in the process of world history. God's existence in Himself apart from the world, His transcendence, is denied or neglected as being unimportant.

The second characteristic concerns the concept of *revelation*. The revelation of God does not come from outside reality, from another world. God reveals Himself in and through man, through man's deeds and his history. Miracles are interpretations of certain authors on the basis of their outdated world-view.

The third characteristic of Horizontalism is its stress on the fact that *man has come of age* and that man has his irreplaceable responsibility. It is said that we live in a new age of enlightenment. Rational man wants to utilize his reason and to be autonomous.

A fourth characteristic is the attention given to *structures* instead of to personal conceptions. Structures are the complexes of power in civil government, industry, technology. These structures have to be improved, if need be, by violent revolution. The words sin, guilt, individual atonement are replaced by terms such as renewal of the society, democratization, evolution, and transformation.

The fifth mark is the emphasis on the fact that man is man-for-others. Salvation means to love each other, "human-ness," being fellow-man, "co-human-ness."

In the sixth place, there is a depreciation of cultic elements, dogma, prayer, and doctrine. The encounter with God in prayer and liturgical acts are replaced by social actions.

Seventh, the doctrine of reconciliation and atonement is shaped in a completely different manner; reconciliation is not concerned with the vertical dimension of God and man, but it involves righteousness on earth, restoration of human relations.

If you want to add an eighth point, you may say that heaven and hell are demythologized; heaven and hell are within the earthly horizon; they are not beyond the scope of this world and the history of this world.

From Barth to Bultmann and Further

If we think about these seven or eight characteristics of horizontalism, we should understand that in the fifties and sixties there was a kind of shift from Barthianism to Bultmannianism. The period before the Second World War was dominated by Karl Barth, and the period after World War II is dominated by Bultmann. Karl Barth was the man of the dialectical theology, the theology of crisis. His was the contrast between God and man,

eternity and time. He started off reminding Christianity of the words: "God is in heaven and you on earth."

Now there is a line from Barth to Bultmann; there is continuity especially in the rejection of the infallibility of Holy Scripture. But where Barth was called neo-orthodox, Bultmann is neo-liberal. In his programmatic essay "New Testament and Mythology" (1941), Rudolf Bultmann wrote: "We no longer believe in the three-storied universe (heaven, earth, hell; JF) which the creeds take for granted. The only honest way of reciting the creeds is to strip the mythological framework from the truth they enshrine There is no longer any heaven in the traditional sense of a mythical underworld beneath our feet. And if this is so, the story of Christ's descent into hell and of His Ascension into heaven is done with. We can no longer look for the return of the Son of man on the clouds of heaven It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles."⁸

As I already mentioned, this manifesto of Rudolf Bultmann influenced Bishop Robinson. In *Honest to God*, he wrote that if Bultmann is right, the entire conception of a supernatural order which invades and "perforates" this one must be abandoned.

The other famous theologian who influenced Robinson was Paul Tillich. His influence was seen especially in the doctrine about God. Robinson thinks that in our space-age it is impossible to believe in a God Who is "up there" or "out there." This is mythological language which we have to abandon. God does not exist as a supreme and separate being. Now Tillich did not speak about a God-out-there, an Other-beyond-the-skies, but about God as the Ground-of-our-very-being. Tillich published a sermon in 1949 in which he said: "The name of this infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being is *God*. That depth is what the word *God* means. And if that word has no meaning for you, translate it and speak of the depths of your life, of the source of your being, of your ultimate concern, of what you take seriously without any reservation. Perhaps, in order to do so, you must forget everything traditional that you have learned about God, perhaps even that word itself. For if you know that God means depth, you know much about him He who knows about depth, knows about God."⁹

Evaluation

Here lies the basis of Horizontalism. If God is nothing but the depth of our life, He is not really transcendent. Tillich spoke about God as the infinite and inexhaustible ground of history. Literally he said, "That is what the word ('God') means, and it is that to which the words *Kingdom of God* and

⁸ R. Bultmann, *Kerygma and Myth: A Theological Debate*, ed. by H.W. Bartsch, translated by R.H. Fuller (London: SPCK 1972), p. 4ff.

⁹ J.A.T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (London: SCM Press 1963), p. 24 (about Bultmann), p. 22 (about Tillich).

Divine Providence point. And if these words do not have much meaning for you, translate them, and speak of the depth of history, of the ground and aim of our social life, and of what you take seriously without reservation in your moral and political activities." Bishop Robinson adopted these ideas.¹⁰ When Tillich speaks of God "in depth," he is not speaking of another being *at all*. He is speaking of "the infinite and inexhaustible depth and ground of all being," of our ultimate concern, of what we take seriously without reservation. What Tillich means by God is the exact opposite of a supernatural Being to Whom one turns away from the world and Who can be relied upon to intervene from without. God is not "out there." For Tillich and Robinson the word "God" denotes the ultimate depth of all our being, the creative ground and meaning of all our existence. It is completely clear that the way in which Tillich spoke about God is in the line of *panteism*. With Robinson it is not God is love, but love is god.

What do we have to say over against this Horizontalistic doctrine about God? God reveals Himself in His Word as the majestic God. "It is He Who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; Who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; Who brings princes to nought, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 40:21ff.). We may think of Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple: "But will God dwell indeed with man on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain Thee; how much less this house which I have built!" This language is not only the language of the Old Testament; it is also found in the New Testament. The apostle Paul sings a hymn of praise to "the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, Who alone has immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, Whom no man has ever seen or can see" (I Timothy 6:15, 16).

The whole Bible is full of this glorious sublimity of God. The whole classical doctrine of the triune God and His independence, His self-sufficiency, is at stake with each form of Horizontalistic thinking about God. God is not a certain kind of "fellow-man-ness." God is not another name — a very special name — for a special event that takes place in our experience of fellow-humanity. God is not that which makes us men-in-community. God is the Creator and the Re-creator. His acts of redemption are sovereign: He sent His Son and He sent His Holy Spirit, and creation and re-creation are directed to His glory. At the end of His work in humiliation the Lord Jesus prayed: "I glorified Thee on earth, having accomplished the work which Thou gavest Me to do" (John 17:5).

In this short outline I would like to point to the consequences of Horizontalism not only in the doctrine of God and His revelation but also of Christ and the reconciliation through Him. Bishop Robinson stated that the traditional doctrine about Christ had worked with a frankly supernaturalistic scheme. "For this way of thinking, the Incarnation means that God the

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 47.

Son came down to earth, and was born, lived and died within this world as a man." Robinson rejects this way of thinking. "Jesus never claims to be God, personally; yet, he always claims to bring God, completely." Jesus is the man-for-others, the One in Whom Love has completely taken over, the One Who is utterly open to, and united with, the Ground of His being. The doctrine of the Atonement is not a transaction between two parties. The notion that the Father punished the Son in our place is in any case a perversion of what the New Testament says.¹¹

The same idea is found in the dissertation of Dr. H. Wiersinga at the Free University (1971). He suggested an "alternative" doctrine of atonement. But "alternative" meant a doctrine of atonement-without-satisfaction. Jesus' blood is nothing but the price He paid to bring about a shock-effect and to end the chain reaction of bloodshed in this world. Wiersinga presents the history of salvation as an act which is still proceeding; he rejects the idea "that the essential has already been done."¹² We cannot go into details here, but it is clear that this thesis of Wiersinga is an example of horizontalistic thought. Not the relation between God and man is decisive but the relationship between man and man. The sacrifice of Christ is not offered to God, but it has only an effect on man.

As far as the task of man in this world is concerned, Horizontalism will always refer to the commandment that we have to love our neighbour as ourselves. Dr. S.U. Zuidema wrote an article about the great commandment which has been translated and published in *Communication and Confrontation*. Zuidema shows that the great commandment is the love towards God. Christ quoted from Deuteronomy 6:5 the words: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart," etc. To this quotation He Himself appended the words: "This is the first and great commandment." Zuidema states: "The love towards that God, Who is one Lord, Who is the only God (Deut. 6:5), and Who, at the time of the revelation of the ten commandments — the ten words of the covenant — had introduced these commandments with the following words, spoken *exclusively* to Israel: 'I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage' — that love to this Lord, their God, is asked by God in the great commandment. The love to the neighbour is *not* included in that . . . (T)his great commandment is also the *first* one. This implies that said commandment must at all times occupy the first place in our lives, and consequently, must never be supplanted from that first place. Our relation to God, our Redeemer, occupies the first place for God. From our side it should be a relationship of love, which should wholly dominate us, our heart, our soul and our mind. Said relation must not tolerate any rivalry; it should be unique and, also for *us*, should come at first place."¹³

¹¹ Ibid., p. 73, 76, 78.

¹² H. Wiersinga, *De Verzoening in de Theologische Discussie* (Kampen: Kok 1971).

¹³ S.U. Zuidema, "The Great Commandment" in *Communication and Confrontation: A Philosophical Appraisal and Critique of Modern Society and Contemporary Thought* (Assen/Kampen: VanGorcum/Kok 1972), p. 107.

Horizontalism time and again refers to Matthew 25, that the King will answer the righteous and say, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to Me." The Horizontalists refer to this passage to show that there is a kind of anonymous Christendom outside the church and that what only matters is the love towards our neighbour. But we read in the same passage of Matthew 25 that the King will say first of all to those at His right hand, "Come, O blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world." We cannot read those words without thinking of what the apostle writes about God's election: "The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places even as He chose us in Him before the foundations of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before Him" (Ephesians 1:3, 4). The blessed of the Father of Whom the Lord Jesus Christ speaks are the elect. They are those who have been called by the gospel (Matthew 24). Their good works are not a demonstration of human love apart from faith, but are the fruit of faith.

To summarize our introduction, Horizontalism is an orientation within Christianity after the Second World War in which the primary vertical relation between the transcendent God of creation and re-creation and His world is lost sight of. It does not believe Scripture as the divinely-inspired revelation. It rejects what Scripture reveals about the Person and the work of Christ, as the Son of God Who became man to redeem us from Satan, sin, and guilt, by offering Himself to God as our Vicar or Substitute, atoning God's wrath against sin. Horizontalism idolizes fellowman by neglecting the great and first commandment. It knows only of a kingdom of God established by man in history; it does not have place for a New Jerusalem that comes down from God, from heaven.

Horizontalism, therefore, is false prophecy; let us heed the warning: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols."

J. FABER