

The Fourth Man: A Story of the Afscheiding

The Fourth Man, written by P. S. Kuiper and translated by Rev. Cornelius Hanko, tells the story of the Afscheiding in the Netherlands. Afscheiding is the Dutch word for “separation.” In this tale we are given the story of a separation from the state church from the perspective of different families in the Netherlands. Overall this story describes the struggles and hardships that these Dutch men went through in order to form a true church of God. Essentially, the struggles that these men went through are the same struggles that the church has had to go through in the past and will always be going through until Christ returns.

The story begins with a young boy Maarten (Martin) Boelhouwer at school. The one boy that Maarten does not like is Toon Bollebakker. Toon’s father is a deacon in the state church, and the Bollebakkers are wealthy which Toon likes to brag about. The story moves on to a poor boy named Koen Splint who works at a weaver’s mill where many others in his family work, including his father who was called “Pious Evert.” The story then shifts to four men who were part of the secessionist movement, who break a wheel while traveling near the Boelhouwer’s farm. The men go to the Boelhouwer’s, get the wheel fixed, and in the meantime convince the Boelhouters to join the secession. Once again the story goes back to Koen, whose father writes to the deacons at the state church telling them of their financial troubles. Toon’s father, the deacon at the state church, comes to assess the situation but offers no financial aid. Koen’s father then turns to the Secessionists, leaves the state church and gets fired, but the Secessionists help him get work. The story then moves on to Rev. Buddingh and Jan Donker who make a dangerous trip to Hilversum for the reverend to preach. Constable Van Huizen sees them, goes to the town mayor, and they both barge in on the worship service. The Secessionists get in trouble. A few days later the two policemen come to Gijsbert Haan’s farm where the Secessionists are gathered for worship and start attacking them with a mob. Most of the group gets away before they are hurt too badly. After this the members of the Secession movement are tormented by many people no matter their age. Finally, eleven years later, the Secessionists only option is to leave the Netherlands and come to America where they can receive freedom of worship.

In this story are many struggles that the members of the Secessionist’s movement went through because they felt that the state church was falling away from the Word of God. We can think especially of the time when the two policemen followed by a mob attacked the group which was gathered for Sunday worship. Then also we can think of Koen’s father losing his job because he left the state church. Another instance of this was Maarten getting beat up by Toon and all his friends. Also men from the Secessionist movement were put in jail for ridiculous reasons. Finally, it became so

bad for these people that they left the Netherlands and came to America. However, as the people prepared to leave for America, Maarten's grandfather made a very wise statement, "Maybe you will find freedom there, but not perfection." Now we, generations later, can see the truth of that statement. America has followed in the footsteps of the ungodly.

This brings us to the realization that not only the church in the Netherlands, but also the church of all ages is engaged in the fighting against apostasy in the church. Paul started the New Testament church out on the correct paths. Over time the church veered off these paths and God's people had to fight to continue the true church. Then again the church would veer off the old paths, and God had to call out men such as Martin Luther and John Calvin to bring God's church back to the truth of God's Word. Yet not long after the Reformation, as we read in the story, the church in the Netherlands (and more churches in Europe) left the old paths and again a reformation had to take place. Finally, many churches came to America so that they could have religious freedom, and America was a fairly conservative nation. Yet, slowly, all these churches began to depart from the Word of God, and now, centuries later, we see that America is running away from these old paths. America wants nothing to do with the Word of God and mocks and scorns those that do. Each time the church turns back to the old paths it is always a bitter struggle for God's people.

Even in the history of the Protestant Reformed Church we can see these patterns continued. First, the Christian Reformed Church started. Then as they began to veer off the path, the Protestant Reformed Church was formed. Since the formation of the Protestant Reformed Church we continue to struggle to keep apostasy out of our churches (i.e. year of 1953). We know that the two reasons for the veering off of the old paths are man's sinful and depraved nature and the work of Satan.

When we look at what has happened in the past to the church we may become dejected. For when we look to the past it seems inevitable that soon there will not be a true church of God. However, we must not despair. In Revelations 2:7 we find comforting words for the church, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto to churches; To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God." So the church of God must look to the future when Christ will come again. The church will be the perfect bride of Christ and will no longer depart from the Word of God. Instead the church will perfectly glorify and magnify God.

The Fourth Man is an encouragement to the Christian. As we see the courage that these people had, it encourages us also. We must give thanks to God for keeping his remnant church in the past and look forward to the day when he shall send his Son on the clouds of glory to bring his church into perfect fellowship with him.

