

The Standard Bearer

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Special Reformation Issue:

The Reformation of 1857

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The Reformation of 1857

Church reformation is God's work. The church is God's, and when it deforms, He raises up the necessary leaders; but God reforms His church. Reformation involves a rejection of errors present in the church and a return to biblical teaching and practice as summarized in the confessions of the church. Reformation almost always results in the church being re-formed, i.e., a new institute forms, because an apostatizing church rarely returns to the biblical pattern.

A reformation occurred in 1857. Four small churches seceded from the Reformed Church of America (their current name, then the Reformed Protestant Dutch Church). The seceders formed the Holland Reformed Churches, later adopting the name Christian Reformed Church.

As reformations go, this was not the cleanest, most well-defined break. Disagreement existed then, and still exists today, as to whether or not the issues raised by the seceders were genuine or manufactured, grossly exaggerated or real problems.

In spite of these differences in viewpoint, history has made plain some of God's purposes for this new beginning. Through this new denomination God would preserve in this new land the Reformed heritage

of the Afscheiding (Secession) of 1834. Into the CRC would flow thousands of Reformed Dutch immigrants belonging to the Reformed Church of the Netherlands (the Gereformeerde Kerken Nederlands, the union of the Afscheiding and the Doleantie). Out of the CRC would later come three other denominations—the Protestant Reformed Churches (1920s), the Orthodox Reformed Churches (1980s), and the United Reformed Churches (1990s).

With this issue, the *Standard Bearer* continues its practice of highlighting a church reformation, in commemoration of the great sixteenth century reformation. The goal of this issue is to acquaint the reader with the history and significance of 1857. Various articles explain the doctrinal and practical matters involved in the event.

The church must know her history in order to remain faithful in her doctrine and walk. May this *SB* issue be used to assist churches in the twenty-first century—reinforcing the determination of the faithful to continue in the right paths, and calling those who have left them to examine the past, look for the old paths, and (may God grant it) return to them (Jer. 6:16). 

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Editorial Office

Prof. Russell J. Dykstra
4949 Ivanrest Ave. SW
Wyoming, MI 49418
dykstra@prca.org

Business Office

Standard Bearer
Mr. Timothy Pipe
1894 Georgetown Center Dr.
Jenison, MI 49428-7137
PH: 616-457-5970
FAX: 616-457-5980
tim@rfpa.org

Church News Editor

Mr. Ben Wigger
6597 40th Ave
Hudsonville, MI 49426
benjwig@juno.com

United Kingdom Office

c/o Mrs. Alison Graham
27 Woodside Road
Ballymena, BT42 4HX
Northern Ireland
alisongraham2006@
hotmail.co.uk

Rep. of Ireland Office

c/o Rev. Martyn McGeown
Apartment 10, Block D
Ballycummin Village
Limerick, Ireland

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Reformation and Apostasy—A Sad History

Withdrawing from a church is no small matter. Every member of a congregation is part of a living body—a manifestation of the body of Christ. Paul instructs the church of Corinth (I Cor. 12) that the Spirit equips each member for the place and function that God determines for him in the body of the church. Each one is necessary (v. 22). And there must “be no schism in the body,” but the members must “have the same care one for another” (25).

Departure from one church to begin another is a serious matter indeed. A member must be convinced that the church where he is a member has apostatized. He may leave only after he has done his duty to warn the church of their errors and wicked course of life. Understanding the significance of membership in a church, sincere believers rarely leave a church. Rather, protestors are driven out by the apostatizing church, and they are forced to form the church anew.

The origin of the Christian Reformed Church is different. The founders of the CRC were not put out of the Reformed Church, they pulled out. Coming from the Afscheiding churches in the Netherlands, they joined the RCA, the church with ministers who could speak their language, and

the church that bountifully assisted them. Without the RCA’s help it is quite possible that the Dutch settlers would have starved in the woods and swampland of western Michigan.

The Dutch immigrants joined the RCA, but they did not know the RCA. How could they? After arrival in America, most went quickly into the interior of the country, to Michigan. Had they stayed in the East coast and worshiped in a Reformed church—they would have understood virtually nothing of the all-English service. Though nearly all of them were literate in Dutch, they were unable to read the publications, the songbooks, or the minutes of the RCA ecclesiastical gatherings—all in English.

After joining the RCA as *Classis Holland*, they heard disturbing reports. Reformed Churches sang hymns in worship services, and some of these hymns contained Arminian errors. The Heidelberg Catechism was not preached systematically in some (many?) churches. In some of the churches, choirs sang in the Sunday services. It was reported that Sunday school replaced catechism classes for the youth. In addition, some Reformed churches were loose in guarding the table, and freely allowed non-Reformed people to partake of communion.

The people in western Michigan were appalled. Many of these very

errors were the cause of their leaving the *Hervormde Kerk* (Reformed Church) back in the Netherlands. Perhaps they had made a mistake.

The bad reports continued. They were told that the RCA tolerated membership in the lodge—clearly antichristian secret societies—even for ministers and elders. They discovered that the RCA had modified the Canons of Dordrecht, dropping the rejection of errors. Besides that, house visitation was neglected, as well as observation of special holidays like Christmas and Pentecost. And it was said that some pastors baptized babies in homes or consistory rooms.¹

In all fairness, it must be noted that many of these reports were hearsay, most of them brought by one man, an elder of the church in Grand Rapids; and most of these

¹ Sources for these eleven reasons are Kromminga, D.H., *The Christian Reformed Tradition: From the Reformation till the Present* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1943). Van Halsema, Thea B., *I Will Build My Church* (Grand Rapids: Grand Rapids International Publications, 1956). *Classis Holland Minutes 1848-1858*, translated by a joint committee of the Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950). Even though the website of the RCA includes Christian schools as a factor, none of the histories consulted include that as a cause for the division in 1857.

reports were hotly contested and rejected by Rev. Van Raalte.

Nonetheless, hearing these reports, several hundred people became convinced that they could not in good conscience remain members in the RCA. Accordingly, they withdrew and formed a new denomination—the CRC.

The CRC had weaknesses rooted in the Afscheiding churches from which her members came. Nonetheless, by the grace of God it stood for the Reformed faith embraced by the Afscheiding churches in the Netherlands. In matters of worship, Psalm-singing, confessions, and doctrine, they returned to the Reformed (i.e., biblical) pattern. They established their own Christian schools, set up their own seminary, and eventually had the manpower and means for missions. They were not ashamed to stand for the Reformed faith, and to live antithetically over against worldliness in America. They prospered under God's blessing.

And then...

But where is the CRC today, 155 years later?

Any Reformed man or woman, knowing the courageous stand of the early CRC and their return to Reformed doctrine and practice, will be both astonished and grieved at the state of the CRC today.

Somewhere along the line, the CRC lost her Reformed moorings and was swept away with a flood of false doctrine and a tide of worldliness. The sad reality is that, out of the eleven reasons given by CRC church historians for why they left

the RCA, they have gone back on ten. Ten of these evils are openly practiced or maintained in the CRC. The only one that is not approved is membership in the lodge.

Of all the evils that corrupted the CRC, the most deadly was the admission of Arminianism—the rejection of the Reformed doctrine of salvation set forth in the Canons of Dordrecht. The CRC did this in 1924 with the official adoption of the Three Points of Common Grace.

The Three Points posit a grace for all—elect and reprobate alike. Contrary to the Reformed doctrine of double predestination (Canons, Head I), that God eternally chose Jacob in love, but hated and rejected Esau, the CRC officially decided that God has a certain favor toward all, including the Esaus. Predestination was effectively gainsaid. The Reformed doctrine of predestination could hardly be proclaimed in the face of the “Three Points.”

Implicit in the Three Points is a denial of limited atonement (Canons, Head II). If God has a grace for all, what is the basis for it? God's grace *to His people*—guilty in Adam, worthy of death—is grounded in the *cross*. Christ paid for the sins of His people, and the ever-righteous God has favor on this people made righteous in the blood of Christ. But on what basis does the Holy God have favor on the ungodly reprobate? The CRC theologians struggled and concluded that, in some sense, Christ died for the reprobate as well. And now “the world” of John 3:16—the world God loved and for whom Christ

died—is interpreted to mean every man, woman, and child who ever lived, or will live.

In 1924 the CRC officially decided that this common grace of God, while not changing the heart, made the unregenerate man not as bad as he would be without common grace and even able to do good deeds of which God approves. This explicitly denies the doctrine of total depravity as taught in all three Reformed confessions.

Besides, the synod of 1924 officially adopted the well-meant gospel offer—the same offer that the Remonstrants taught in 1618, and which the Reformed church rejected in the Canons. That the CRC adopted the Remonstrants' concept of the free offer was recently demonstrated in an article in the Calvin Theological Journal.² One sadly concludes that no one in the CRC cares that his church officially adopted Arminianism—at least, cares enough to do something about it.

Common grace has bitter fruits. The judgment of God is evident in that He has given them over to the follies of common grace. Some of the gross errors tolerated include approval of women in the special offices of pastor, elder, and deacon; toleration of, if not official approval of, theistic evolution; membership in labor unions that strike against the employer; contemporary forms

² Raymond A. Blacketer, “The Three Points in Most Parts Reformed: A Reexamination of the So-Called Well-Meant Offer of Salvation,” *Calvin Theological Journal*, April 2000. Also found at: <http://www.prca.org/articles/ctjblack.html>.

of worship (liturgical dance, drama, e.g.); allowing a form of higher criticism in the doctrine of Scripture and its interpretation; approval of worldly entertainment such as the movie and the dance. All these and more, it can be demonstrated, were justified on the basis of common grace.

Dreadful is the spectacle of the CRC in 2012. They have forgotten the reasons their forbears gave for coming out of the RCA. Consequently, they corrupted themselves with the same errors. And while the RCA sinfully tolerated (failed to discipline) those who taught Arminianism, the CRC officially adopted the main tenets of Arminianism and disciplined those who would not sign the Three Points. Thus the lamentable state of the CRC.

Why not Reunion?

One question demands an answer—Why are the CRC and the RCA separate?

One major difference separating the two denominations historically has been their attitude toward the education of their children. For decades the CRC was strong in establishing and maintaining their own Christian grade schools and high schools. The RCA was content to use public education for their children and only establish and maintain Christian colleges. Today, that difference has largely disappeared. The *Banner* reported several years ago that only 19% of the CRC youth receive Christian education.

So why not reunite?

Efforts toward reunion started already in the 1880s. Almost no progress was made for many years. More recently, these efforts seem to be bearing fruit. In 2006 the two denominations decided to allow the exchange of ministers. They seem to be on the path to unity. There is no reason not to unite, and with the heavy losses in memberships to both, they have another reason to join together.

But for all that, it will not be a union blessed by God. Two denominations apostatizing, manifesting not the marks of the true church, but of the false. Any union will be based on the common ground of error, and as

*This sad history
is a warning
to seek
the old paths.*

they hold hands, they will travel farther down that road to destruction.

This is no cause for gloating. This is sad, unspeakably sad.

And it is a warning.

This history—both the reformation of 1857, and the subsequent departure—calls the believers in the CRC to come out. It calls them to seek the old paths, the Reformed faith and walk.

This same history is a warning to the United Reformed Churches that came out of the CRC. The URC came out of the CRC long after the mother church had gone back on ten

of the eleven reasons for leaving the RCA. The URC have many of the same errors in their midst. Much worse, the URC have the official adoption of Arminianism—the Three Points of Common Grace—as part of their “heritage.” Unless the URC reject this error and root it out of their theology, practices, and thinking, they will not escape the apostasy of the CRC. This sad history is a warning to seek the old paths.

And finally, this history is a solemn warning to the Protestant Reformed Churches. The return to Reformed faith and practice in 1857 is our heritage. Likewise, and of greater significance, the reformation of 1924 rejecting the Three Points, and the reformation of 1953 rejecting the conditional covenant, along with the concomitant positive development of Reformed doctrine in both instances—all this belongs to the heritage of the PRC. God has graciously preserved the PRC in that heritage, i.e., in the Reformed faith.

Believers, know your history. Zealously embrace the truth and reject the lie. Hold fast what you have. God does not guarantee the preservation of any particular denomination or congregation. He does, however, promise to preserve His church as the pillar and ground of the truth—the church that loves and uncompromisingly stands for His truth. ☞

From Secession to Union to Secession: The Birth of the Christian Reformed Church

Rev. Koenraad van den Bosch was not pleased. The church scene in America that greeted this immigrant from the Netherlands was intolerable, and he intended to do something about it. The result of his actions was the formation of a new denomination of churches. The year was 1857. The setting was western Michigan. The new denomination was the Christian Reformed Church.

In order to see how this story unfolded, we must back up a few years to 1847 and take up our position at the mouth of the Black River in what would become Holland, Michigan. It was here that a group of settlers from the Netherlands began to build homes and clear the land for farms. The settlers were led by an influential minister, Rev. Albertus C. Van Raalte. In the neighboring areas of Michigan, including Zeeland, Graafschap, and Vriesland, other Dutch settlers were doing the same.

These immigrants from the Netherlands had not originally intended to leave their homes and come to America. But life was not easy for them in the Netherlands, because they belonged to churches that had separated from the official State Church, known as the Hervormde Kerk. In 1834, a number of members seceded from the State Church because of alarming doctrinal and church political weaknesses in that church. They were led by ministers such as Revs. Hendrik De Cock, P. Scholte, A. Brummelkamp, S. Van Velzen, A. Van Raalte, and others. Those who left the State Church called themselves the Afscheiden: the Separated, or Seceded.

Because the seceders had left the official church of the State, the Dutch government considered their ac-

tions illegal. Soldiers were quartered in the homes of seceders; heavy fines and imprisonment were imposed on their ministers, while their families were evicted from the parsonages; their officebearers were deposed; their children were ridiculed and shunned at school. Although the official persecution by the State ended after a few years, the seceders remained outcasts in Dutch society. Employers would not hire the men; markets would not accept the products of their labor to sell; their children continued to suffer at the hands of their classmates.

The seceders needed a place where they could begin their lives anew, free from the persecution of Dutch government and society. They turned their eyes to America. In 1846, Revs. Van Raalte and Brummelkamp wrote a letter to any believers in the United States who might be willing to help those seceders who were interested in emigrating from the Netherlands. The letter made it to Albany, New York, where it was received by Rev. Isaac N. Wyckoff, a minister in the churches that would later be known as the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Another minister in the RCA, Rev. Thomas De Witt, also took an interest in the immigrants. He committed himself to help the immigrants not only with financial assistance, but also by keeping American readers informed of their progress in the pages of the *Christian Intelligencer*.

Up until this point in 1846, none of the main leaders of the Secession had planned to accompany the emigrants to America. That changed late in the year when Rev. Van Raalte decided that he, too, would leave the Netherlands to guide the emigrants into their new home in the United States. Arriving in New York, the immigrants were greeted by the RCA ministers. Revs. Wyckoff and De Witt had been good to their word to help the immigrants. In response to the needs of the Dutch settlers, both ministers had founded societies for

Rev. Lanning is minister-on-loan from Grandville PRC to Covenant Evangelical Reformed Church in Singapore.

their relief. The pages of the *Christian Intelligencer* continued to keep the needs of the immigrants before the minds of the RCA members. The immigrants benefitted greatly from the RCA's kindness and generosity in those early days of their travels.

Rev. Van Raalte went farther into the interior of America to find a suitable place for the immigrants to settle, deciding finally on what would soon be known as Holland. And so it is, that in 1847, from our vantage point on the banks of the Black River, we find Van Raalte and his struggling flock making a new home for themselves in the wilds of Michigan.

Life for the seceders had not been easy in the Netherlands, but life in Michigan was deadly. The settlers had the enormous task of clearing the forests for farmland. They battled swarms of mosquitoes and fell victim to numerous diseases. Often they went hungry. Many died. One particular Sunday, after several members of the colony had died, Van Raalte halted in his sermon and cried out to heaven, "O God, must we all die?" Although some members rebelled against God in the face of these hardships, the colony as a whole counted their trials to be light suffering, compared with the opportunity to worship God according to His Word, free from oppression.

God not only brought hardships upon the settlers; He led them through many joys as well. Within the first three years, seven congregations had been established. The churches were able to organize a classis, standing together on the cherished Three Forms of Unity and the Church Order of Dordt. Christian schools had been established in Holland and Zeeland, with the other areas expecting to do the same soon.

In 1849, the colony in Holland experienced one of the most significant events in its young life: a visit from Rev. Wyckoff on behalf of the Board of Domestic Missions of the RCA. In his report back home, Wyckoff wrote, "My reception, as your messenger, by the Colony was met almost literally with a shout of joy." The immigrants remembered with fondness the generosity this brother had shown them upon their arrival in their new home.

During his visit, Rev. Wyckoff had opportunity to meet with an assembly of the ministers and consistories of the churches. Although this was the first official

contact between the RCA and the classis in Michigan, the weighty matter of union was discussed. After some initial hesitation, the colony took the extraordinary step of agreeing to enter ecclesiastical union with the RCA. A significant portion of Rev. Wyckoff's report informs us of the proceedings:

At the Classical Meeting it was soon made known that the brethren were a little afraid of entering into ecclesiastical connection with us, although they believe in the union of brethren and sigh for Christian sympathy and association. They have so felt to the quick the galling chains of ecclesiastical domination, and have seen with sorrow how exact organization, according to human rules, leads to formality on the one hand, and to the oppression of tender conscience on the other, that they hardly know what to say. I protested, of course, that it was the farthest from our thoughts, to bring them to bondage to men, or to exercise an ecclesiastical tyranny over them. And I stated that they would be most perfectly free, at any time they found an ecclesiastical connection opposed to their religious prosperity and enjoyment, to bid us a fraternal adieu, and be by themselves again.

...As the result, they agreed, with these explanations, to join our Synod. It was deemed best that they should not merge themselves into our existing Classis of Michigan, but unite as a separate Classis with our Northern Synod. They will, however, correspond with the delegates of our Classis there. To this arrangement I saw no insuperable objections, and I would report the Classis of Holland accordingly.¹

At the next Particular Synod of the RCA, the classis made up of the immigrant churches was represented by Rev. Van Raalte. The synod was not sure whether it was proper that a classis organize itself, and so referred the matter to the General Synod. On June 5, 1850, the General Synod met and ratified the union of the immigrant churches with the RCA. The immigrant churches were now known as Classis Holland of the Reformed Church in America.

¹ Excerpts from Rev. Wyckoff's report, quoted in John Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949), 28; and in Elton J. Bruins and Robert P. Swierenga, *Family Quarrels in the Dutch Reformed Churches of the 19th Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), 50.

From the beginning of the union with the RCA, there was trouble. For one thing, the RCA represented the State Church of the Netherlands in America. The RCA was founded in America by the State Church shortly after the Synod of Dordt, in the year 1628. Ties between the daughter and the mother had gradually weakened over the centuries, but the RCA still represented the American version of the Dutch church from which the immigrants had seceded. Some of the weaknesses of the mother church that the seceders had criticized were present in the daughter church.

Another source of trouble was the haste of the union. Neither side had carefully examined the distinctive positions of the other. If the churches had taken the time to study each other, Classis Holland would have discovered that the RCA tolerated some departures from the historic Reformed faith. Without time to examine and discuss their differences, the RCA and Classis Holland could not be sure they stood upon the same foundation.

Perhaps the most influential factor in the union of Classis Holland with the RCA was the appreciation Classis Holland had for the help of RCA men. Wyck-off and De Witt had shown themselves to be true Christian brothers in helping the immigrants. Classis Holland held them in high esteem. However, as much as the two sides may have appreciated each other, mutual respect and brotherly love cannot be the foundations of ecclesiastical union. They are necessary in a union, to be sure, but they cannot be the foundation. Only the truth of God's Word, as confessed and maintained in the Reformed confessions, can be the foundation of

ecclesiastical union. On crucial points, as discussed in other articles in this magazine, the RCA and Classis Holland were different.

To finish the story, we must shift our vantage point from the mouth of the Black River in Holland to nearby Noordeloos. In 1856, six years after the union was completed, Rev. K. van den Bosch from the Netherlands came to pastor the Noordeloos congregation. Because of the weaknesses the RCA tolerated, he found the union to be intolerable. Along with others, including Elder Gijsbert Haan, Rev. van den Bosch saw that the only way to retain the strength of the 1834 Secession was to secede again. Most of Classis Holland decided to stay with the RCA; only a few came out.

In 1857, Rev. van den Bosch and a few others notified Classis Holland of their departure. As Rev. van den Bosch wrote in his letter:

By this I notify you that I can hold no ecclesiastical communion with you, for the reason that I can not hold all of you who have joined the Dutch Reformed Church [i.e., the RCA—a.l.] to be the true church of Jesus Christ, and consequently I renounce all fellowship with you and declare myself no longer to belong to you....²

Late in the year, those who had seceded formed their own classis, numbering five churches, with one minister. Thus began the Christian Reformed Church. Through secession, false union, and secession again, God reformed His church. 

² Excerpt from Rev. van den Bosch's letter in *Classis Holland Minutes 1848-1858*, 240.

REV. CORY GRIESS

The Secession of 1857: A Return to Psalm-Singing

Rev. Griess is pastor of the Calvary Protestant Reformed Church in Hull, Iowa.

The summer of 1847 was a nightmare for Albertus VanRaalte, leader of the Dutch immigrants who had recently founded the

colony now known as Holland, Michigan. The colonists had never seen rain like they saw that summer. So many people were dying they could not build coffins fast enough, and when they did have coffins available, many of the people were too weak to bury their dead. However, if you happened to be visiting this little settlement on Sunday, you would have heard a distinct sound. Rather than the wailing of despair you would have heard a congregation singing Psalms. In a clearing made in the forest, sitting on rough-hewn logs, under the open sky, whether that sky brought rain or sunshine, these men, women, and children worshiped God from His inspired song book, and gained strength for the week ahead in so doing.

Psalm-singing, congregational Psalm-singing, was the heritage of the Dutch Reformed in America. Going all the way back to the sixteenth-century Reformation, the Reformed churches had been Psalm-singing churches. In the Middle Ages the singing was done by the professionals while the congregation was for the most part silent. The Reformation was a return to congregational singing. Calvin and the other Reformers understood that worship was the covenant in action. God was meeting with His people, and the people must respond to their God especially in the worship of song.

The formal principle of that great Reformation had been *sola scriptura*, the Bible alone as the source of special revelation. Thus, when Calvin and the others re-formed worship, the principle according to which they re-formed it was the Bible alone also for worship. God's Word must govern how we worship and what we do in worship, and it must be the *content* of worship, Calvin said. Thus, the heart of the service was to be an exposition of the Word of God. The response to the Word of God was praise on the lips of the people, praise that was found already in the inspired Word of God, now made the peoples' own by the power of the Spirit. This conviction led Calvin especially to restore the singing of the Psalms to public corporate worship. Calvin composed tunes and put the Psalms into versifications for singing, collecting them in 1562 in what was known as the Genevan Psalter. So much was Psalm-singing a part of the life of the Reformation churches that if the Roman Catholic man on the street knew nothing else

about the Protestants in town, he knew at least this, they were Psalm-singers.

Calvin's Genevan Psalter was translated into Dutch already in 1566, and the Dutch Reformed churches carried not only the singing of Psalms but the Reformation principles undergirding the practice into their land and into the next century. However, in the 1600s there were many in the Netherlands who wanted to sing hymns in congregational worship. Controversy erupted and things did not settle down until the great Synod of Dordt made a pronouncement on the issue in 1618-1619. In the church order established by Dordt, the principle of Psalm-singing was maintained. "Only the 150 Psalms of David" were to be sung, Article 69 said. Yet the Synod allowed for a few exceptions, mostly hymns recorded in the New Testament (Song of Mary, etc.). The Synod did not take, therefore, an exclusive psalmody stance. It did not advocate the notion that the regulative principle demanded exclusive psalmody. However, Dordt did understand that the principle of *sola scriptura* recovered in the Reformation had to be maintained, as much as possible in worship too, for the life and health of the church.

After Dordt, there was continued struggle to maintain Psalm-singing in the Reformed congregations of the Netherlands. For two centuries some clamored for hymns, and others called the church to maintain the decisions of the great Synod. Finally, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the desire for hymns prevailed in the state church. Nonetheless, those who wanted to maintain Dordt's emphasis on Psalm-singing had the freedom to do so for the most part—that is, until 1816.¹

In 1816 the state had complete control of the church in the Netherlands. The state-run Synod of 1816 demanded that every minister in the Dutch Reformed Church select at least one—but preferably more—hymns from the newly-fashioned hymnal. This hymnal included 192 hymns alongside the Genevan psalms. This tyrannical mandate was clearly a far cry from the vision of the Synod of Dordt. Some members of the church refused to sing when this happened and walked out of the church while hymns were being sung. Some

¹ Some particular synods mandated at least one hymn per Sunday even before 1816.

ministers refused to obey the mandate and were disciplined for their refusal.

This all led to the secession of 1834 in the Netherlands, known as the *Afscheiding*. The *Afscheiding* was a movement in which many left the state church in order to reform the church according to the principles of the sixteenth-century Reformation and the Synod of Dordt. Though there were many signs of apostasy in the state church at this time, mandated hymn singing beyond what was approved at Dordt became one of the lightning-rod issues around which the seceders rallied. De Cock, one of the main leaders of the secession, wrote vehemently against the singing of hymns. Van Velzen, another central leader of the secession of 1834, was suspended from his ministry in the state church precisely because of his opposition to the mandate to sing hymns.

When Van Raalte and his band of Dutch immigrants settled in Holland, Michigan twelve years later, their purpose was to carry on the principles of Dordt restored in the *Afscheiding* of 1834. The seceders of 1834 had faced persecution for their cause, and many had fled to other parts of the world where there was Dutch influence. Van Raalte urged immigration to America. There, land was cheap and the worshipers could maintain their heritage in freedom. Many of the seceders of 1834 responded to Van Raalte's call. Thus, if you were walking through the trees of Holland, Michigan in the summer of 1847 you would have heard a congregation singing the Psalms with vigor, thankful to escape the tyranny of the state church in the Netherlands, thankful to be able to maintain the religion of Dordt and of the *Afscheiding* without fear. If you were an American visitor whose religious songs would have been only revivalist hymns, it would have been a surprise. If you were a Dutch visitor who had recently made the journey to the new land to escape religious tyranny, it would have been a familiar and sweet sound.

Nonetheless, the struggle to maintain Psalm-singing was not over. The small group in West Michigan, desiring monetary and brotherly support in their struggle to maintain a colony, eventually decided to join with a group of Dutch Reformed who had settled on the East Coast of the United States. These latter were

emigrants to America not from the secession church of 1834, but rather from the state church that had persecuted the seceders.² This group on the East Coast was not like the churches of the *Afscheiding*. They had already admitted 800 hymns into their worship, which hymns were pushing Psalm-singing out of their services. They also had choirs silencing congregational singing altogether. An elder from the Dutch Reformed West Michigan churches named Gijsbert Haan knew this firsthand, for he had spent some time on the East Coast with these churches. By 1857 Haan and four churches from West Michigan decided to leave the Van Raalte group and form their own group, later named the Christian Reformed Church. One of the main reasons for doing so was the fact that Van Raalte and the rest of the churches in West Michigan had forsaken their heritage and joined a denomination (later the RCA) that was not convicted about Psalm-singing as the fathers of Dordt had been.³ The very reason they had come to America was to maintain the religion of Dordt without compromise and without persecution. And now the churches in Holland, Michigan had willingly submitted themselves to the same compromises from which they had fled.



Why the fight for Psalm-singing throughout history, and why a reformation to restore Psalm-singing in 1857? First of all, because of the Psalms themselves. They are the Word of God. They put God's inspired expressions of anguish, trust, praise, into the mouths of God's people. As Calvin wrote, when we sing the Psalms, "we are assured that God puts the words in our mouth, as if he himself were singing through us to exalt his glory."⁴ God has inspired a book of songs for His church to sing. Surely the church must sing them!

² These specific people were already in America before the 1800s, that is, before the state church had become thoroughly corrupt. By the 1830s, however, they had begun to compromise.

³ Joint Committee of the Christian Reformed Church and Reformed Church in America. *Classis Holland Minutes 1848-1858* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1950), 242. The consistory of Graafschap, the main congregation that seceded, gives here as its first reason for separating, "the collection of 800 hymns introduced contrary to the Church Order of Dordt."

⁴ Preface to the Genevan Psalter.

And we can see the benefits of God's inspired songs over the tendencies of many non-inspired songs. The Psalms are rich theologically and do not suffer the threat of leading the church into spiritual fluff. They contain the expression of every emotion the child of God experiences (not just the happy ones as some hymns are prone to do). They are the Spirit's own expressions of our grief and anguish and trust and conviction. As such they resonate deeply with the soul of the child of God, for the Spirit knows the hearts of God's people better than they know them themselves.

The singing of Psalms binds us to the church of all ages. An important point to consider, a point that was in the mind of the reformers of 1857 too, is the long heritage of the orthodox church's conviction regarding Psalm-singing. A return to convictions concerning Psalm-singing in 1857 was a return to the convictions regarding Psalm-singing in 1834, which was a return to the convictions regarding Psalm-singing in 1618-19, which was a return to the convictions regarding Psalm singing in the Great Reformation of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which was a return to the convictions regarding Psalm-singing of the apostolic and early church, which was a carrying on of the convictions regarding Psalm-singing in the Jewish synagogue where Jesus worshiped, which was a carrying on of the Psalm-singing of the worship of Old Testament Israel.

The second reason for a return in 1857 to ecclesiastical convictions regarding Psalm-singing was that throughout history the introduction of hymns had been used as a vehicle to carry false teaching into the church. False doctrine is not a *necessary* consequence of the introduction of hymns, but it is certainly a repeated pattern, a pattern of which Haan and others were very much aware.

The group that started the Christian Reformed Church in 1857 knew that at the time before the Synod of Dordt the clamor for hymns in worship came especially from the Remonstrants, who used those hymns to teach their errant theology. The men who started the Christian Reformed Church knew that Article 69 of the Church Order of Dordt was written in part because of the renewed conviction regarding

Psalm-singing that came from that experience with the Remonstrants and their hymns.

These men in Holland, Michigan in 1857 knew that at the time of the *Afscheiding* one of the reasons their fathers De Cock and Van Velzen spoke and wrote so strongly against hymns was that hymns were again being used as a means to smuggle Arminianism into every corner of the Netherlands.⁵ They knew that maintaining the singing of God's inspired Word prevented that. The men who formed the Christian Reformed Church read De Cock's pamphlet attacking hymns as "a concoction of siren love songs fit to draw the Reformed believers away from the saving doctrine,"⁶ and they saw that indeed hymns were being used that way.

In 1840, six years after the *Afscheiding* in the Netherlands, a German minister who had joined the seceders in the Netherlands went rogue. He began promoting hymn-singing along with his refusal to uphold Dordt's condemnation of Arminianism. One of the delegates to the Synod in the Netherlands that sustained the dismissal of this minister from the ministry was Gijsbert Haan.⁷ This is of course the same Gijsbert Haan who led the formation of the Christian Reformed Church seventeen years later in 1857. Haan had seen with his own eyes at that Synod the connection that he had been taught by *Afscheiding* ministers, that hymn singing is often a vehicle for smuggling false doctrine into the church.

And so, when Haan later traveled to the Eastern United States and saw in the Dutch Reformed Churches there not only hymn-singing but also elders and ministers filled with Arminian theology,⁸ Haan undoubtedly made the connection again and was gravely concerned. When he came back to West Michigan and found Van Raalte wanting to join hands with those very same compromising churches on the East Coast

⁵ Bruins, Elton J., and Robert P. Swierenga. *Family Quarrels in the Dutch Reformed Churches of the 19th Century* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999), 12. The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America.

⁶ Bruins and Swierenga, *Family Quarrels*, 19.

⁷ Brinks, H. J. "Another Look at 1857, the Birth of the CRC." *Origins* IV.1 (1986): 30-31. Web. 11 July 2012. <<http://www.calvin.edu/hh/origins/Spring86.pdf>>.

⁸ Kromminga, D. H. *The Christian Reformed Tradition From the Reformation to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1943), 108.

he had just visited, Haan could not but call the immigrant churches to separate. They must hold fast to the emphasis on Psalm-singing that had always been in the history of the Reformed church, an emphasis that historically had prevented theological decay.

Not only in the world but also in the church, history tends to repeat itself. The Christian Reformed Church, unfortunately, has ecclesiastically left behind Dordt's, the Afscheiding's, and their own call for Psalm-singing. We must learn from this history, lest we repeat the errors of the past. Although Elijah had a wrong attitude

when he said them, his words were true enough and bear repeating, "I am not better than my fathers."

Let us use the Psalms as God's inspired song-book given to His church, love them, improve our versifications of them if need be, so that they may be loved and used for generations. Though Psalm-singing is in the minority now as far as the broader church is concerned, let us understand that when we sing Psalms on Sunday and throughout the week, we are privileged to be a part of a long history of the church that has struggled to maintain the glorious practice of singing the Word of God. 

REV. HEATH BLEYENBERG

The Sacraments Matter...

How precious are the sacraments to the people of God! We confess in Lord's Day 25 of the Heidelberg Catechism that the sacraments are holy, visible signs and seals used by God to declare and seal unto us the promise of the gospel—the free remission of sin and life eternal—for the sake of the one sacrifice of Christ. Does your heart wax warm when you meditate upon the forgiveness of all your sins and the life that awaits you in heaven? Then your heart will wax warm as you meditate upon the sacraments. So precious are they to God's people.

How necessary are the sacraments in our lives! Our Savior commanded, "Take, eat...take, drink, and do so in remembrance of me." Just as our physical bodies need to be nourished and strengthened, so also our spiritual lives need to be nourished and strengthened. We need the visible sign that points us to the invisible grace of God that works mightily in our hearts.

It is exactly for these reasons that when the sacraments are corrupted and defiled, when the sacraments

are gutted of their significance, when the sacraments are not administered properly, then something must be done.

Something was done in 1857. Reformation.

One of the official reasons for this reformation was the Reformed Church in America's (RCA) "inviting [men of] all religious views to the Lord's Supper, excepting Roman Catholics."¹ Because of this (and other reasons) Dutch immigrants living in western Michigan seceded from the RCA in 1857.

Gysbert Haan, a leading voice in the secession of 1857, brought this matter of the sacraments to the attention of the churches. After emigrating from the Netherlands, Haan resided for a time in the RCA churches of Albany and Rochester, but eventually moved to West Michigan, where he became an elder in Vriesland and Grand Rapids. At the September Classis meeting of 1855 Haan asked the Rev. VanderMeulen (a delegate to that summer's synod) to relate what happened at Synod with regard to the Lord's Supper. In the official minutes is recorded Rev. VanderMeulen's rather perturbed response: "Shall the members of the

Rev. Bleyenberg is pastor of Providence Protestant Reformed Church in Hudsonville, Michigan.

¹ *Classis Holland Minutes 1848-1858* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 242.

Synod observe the Lord's Supper alone, and exclude therefrom others, professors, ministers, and students, yea the Christians who reside in New Brunswick and are present?"² The minutes continue by affirming that all present at the Synod were indeed allowed to partake. Not that this was an isolated incident. The standard having been set by Synod, open communion was allowable, if not outright encouraged, in the RCA out east—allowing any and all who made an outward confession of Jesus Christ to come and partake. This was very troublesome, not only for Haan, but for others in West Michigan as well.

In addition to this issue concerning the Lord's Supper, the sacrament of baptism also came into view. In 1871, in his memoir, *Stem Van Een Belasterden* (translated "Voice of One Slandered"), Haan recounts an incident when he lived out east. Haan notes,

After residing in New York for some time I left for New Jersey and settled in the vicinity of Paterson, occupying a house jointly with an elder of the Dutch Reformed Church. Since this man loved to talk and spoke Dutch quite well we often conversed together. Among other things, he told me that none of his nine children had been baptized. To my question "but Mr. Van Es, is that right?" he replied, "Oh yes! I prefer to have them reach maturity and then they can decide for themselves with which denomination they wish to affiliate."³

There was another man, a certain elder in the church at Vriesland, T. Ulberg, who had similar experiences. Already in 1851 Elder Ulberg noted that, when he was in Albany, baptism was sometimes administered apart from the public worship.⁴ Though these examples pertaining to baptism may not be regarded as the prevailing practice in the RCA at the time, nevertheless it was tolerated. And this toleration is what grieved the men in many of the churches in west Michigan.

Such was the "sacramental" condition of the RCA in the years leading up to 1857. But does this warrant a drastic act of reformation to oppose these abuses? The

² *Classis Holland Minutes 1848-1858* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950), 180.

³ G. Haan, *Stem Van Een Belasterden* (Grand Rapids: C. Nienhardt, 1871), 4.

⁴ *Word and World*, ed. James W. VanHoeven (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 51.

churches of 1857 answered with a resounding "Yes! The sacraments matter."

Why do the sacraments matter? Why do the sacraments matter to us today who stand in the tradition of 1857? The sacraments matter because Jesus Christ is presented in them. The Belgic Confession, Article 33, states: "Therefore the signs are not in vain or insignificant, so as to deceive us. For Jesus Christ is the true object presented by them, without whom they would be of no moment." Slight the sacraments, you slight Jesus Christ. Mishandle the sacraments, you mishandle Jesus Christ. Dishonor the sacraments, you dishonor Jesus Christ. "Open communion" is not an option for a Reformed church.

But what exactly is open communion? There are thoroughly apostate churches that practice open communion without any supervision whatsoever, so that anybody off the streets is welcome to partake. Reformed and Presbyterian churches who do practice "open communion" would declare they are not *that open*. They would not allow Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, those under discipline, or those who are defiled with sin and lead offensive lives to partake of communion. By "open communion" is usually meant an open invitation for all believers who trust in Jesus Christ for salvation to come and partake. According to the RCA's official website: "Who may participate in communion? Christ is the host and invites us to his table. All who have been baptized into Christ are welcome to participate in the Lord's Supper, although local boards of elders have been given the responsibility to decide at what age and under what circumstances young children may be served."⁵

I Corinthians 11:28-29 is key to the proper understanding of the Lord's Supper. "But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of that bread, and drink of that cup. For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body." To discern the Lord's body does not mean simply that one understands that the bread is a picture of Christ's body and the wine of His blood. To discern

⁵ <https://www.rca.org/sslpage.aspx?pid=315>. Now is neither the time nor the place to discuss paedocommunion (children partaking of communion), except to note that a church that practices open communion inevitably will, by its own position, allow children to partake as well.

means that one understands the significance of the Christ presented in the supper; understands His suffering and His death; understands who He was, the very Son of God in the flesh. To discern is to grasp the truth of the cross, that Jesus died for His sheep and them alone. To discern is to know the truth about myself, that I am a desperate sinner in need of the forgiveness of sins.

This is weighty. This is serious. If a man comes to the table without having examined himself, and comes unworthily (not discerning the Lord's body), he brings upon himself the severe judgment of God. And not only upon the man individually, but upon the whole congregation. Question 82 of the Heidelberg Catechism asks whether those may be admitted to the supper who by their confession or life declare themselves ungodly. "No; for by this, the covenant of God would be profaned, and His wrath kindled against the whole congregation." Therefore, it is the duty of the elders to exercise very close oversight over the Lord's Supper. This is *close communion*. This is in accord with our Church Order, Article 64: "The administration of the Lord's Supper shall take place only there where there is supervision of elders."

The charge usually leveled against those who maintain that the sacrament must be *closely supervised* is that this practice is unloving and does not promote unity and peace. Christians are kept from the table who otherwise should be invited to partake. In full promotion of this spirit of love, unity, and peace, the RCA in 1997 adopted a "Formula of Agreement," which made full communion possible with three thoroughly liberal denominations.⁶ Doctrine is set aside for "love and unity."

But the issue is not "who may partake of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper?" All in the Reformed camp agree that communion is for believers who have placed their trust in Christ alone for all their salvation. Rather, the issue concerns the church supervising closely who may and may not partake of the sacrament. Will the elders give an open call that "if you believe in Jesus you are welcome to partake, no questions asked," thus leaving it up to the judgment of the individual whether he ought to partake? Or will the elders *closely supervise*

⁶ The PCUSA, the ECLA (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America), and the UCC (United Church of Christ).

the table to ensure that those who desire to partake are able to discern the body and the blood of the Lord? For this close supervision the churches in 1857 fought.

They also fought for the truth concerning baptism. The truth concerning baptism is not believers' baptism—that *only* adults who confess their faith in Jesus may be baptized. Baptism is a sacrament that must be administered, not only to adult converts who confess their faith, but to the children of believers as well.

Must? Yes. The Belgic Confession Article 24 states, over against the error of the Anabaptists, that infants *ought to be* baptized. Q&A 74 of the Heidelberg Catechism states: "Are infants also to be baptized? Yes: for since they, as well as the adult, are included in the covenant and church of God...they must therefore by baptism, as a sign of the covenant, be also admitted into the Christian church." Jesus declares, "Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:14). If the kingdom of God belongs to children, and if they too are included in the covenant of God, must they not receive the *sign* of the reality that is theirs? The churches in 1857 answered, "Yes! Infants must be baptized."

There are those in Reformed churches today who find themselves sympathetic to Baptist theology. These parents opt not to baptize their children, but instead are allowed to *dedicate* them. This dedication involves the parents' promise to raise their children in the fear of the Lord and teach them His statutes. When the child matures and decides to confess his faith, then the sacrament of baptism is administered. But this is not Reformed. This is not pious. This is catering to false doctrine. This is pure disobedience to the Word of God. The infants of believing parents must be baptized.

These two sacraments, held highly by the church, are to be administered only in the public gathering of the congregation. The Belgic Confession, Article 35, speaks of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper: "We receive this holy sacrament in the assembly of the people of God with humility and reverence, keeping up amongst us a holy remembrance of the death of Christ our Savior." Also, our Church Order, Article 64, requires that the Lord's Supper be administered "in a public gathering of the congregation." The same would apply to the sacrament of baptism.

No home baptisms. No communion being administered in the homes of the elderly. There are churches today that allow for exceptions. The Protestant Reformed Churches adhere strictly to the stipulation in Article 64 of the Church Order.

The danger in private administrations of the sacrament is that the sacrament is made to stand all by itself. It becomes an end in itself. But the sacraments are signs. They point away from themselves. The Belgic Confession, Article 33, states that the sacraments are “joined to the Word of the gospel.” In the word of the gospel is where we receive the invisible grace signified in the sacraments. Let the two—sacrament and gospel—not be separated. The sacraments are no private affair.

They are to be administered in the public gathering where is the preaching of the Word.

Some might call the dissenters of 1857 stubborn, inflexible, and overbearing. I prefer to think of them as creedal, confessional, biblical, and as those who honored the sacraments and sought to administer them properly. Such is pleasing to the Lord. For when the sacraments are kept undefiled, then the people of God enjoy the reality to which the sacraments point—the grace and mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ for us poor and weak sinners. May God grant that the sacraments be so honored among us.

And, yes, after all these years, the sacraments still matter. 

PROF. RON CAMMENGA

The Lodge— “This Foreign Plant upon Holy Soil”

Unsettling Reports

Among the issues that prompted a number of the churches of the Holland Classis of the Reformed Church in America (RCA) to withdraw and establish what would become the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) was the issue of lodge membership, particularly the lodge of the Freemasons.

The Freemasons is the oldest and best known of the lodges. This fraternal organization had its origins, as best as can be determined, in the early 1700s. Likely the organization sprang up among the members of the masons’ guilds, which had existed for centuries, and which had built many of the cathedrals and castles across Europe that still attract visitors today. Gradu-

ally these guilds developed into fraternal organizations, opening up their membership to those who did not share their trade, but their interests and values. The lodge is considered by many to be a child of the Enlightenment. Members were given access to the rites and rituals of the organization, but had to swear a solemn oath never to divulge the secrets of Freemasonry. The organization is based on the belief in the universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of all men. It is religiously eclectic, borrowing often from the Bible, but from other religions and religious sources as well, including pagan religions.

By the mid-nineteenth century the Freemasons had become primarily a fraternal and social organization, and to a large extent membership in the Freemasons was an indication of how high a man had climbed the social ladder. Men of wealth, many professionals, politicians, and even the clergy joined the Freemasons, which went a long way to gaining widespread acceptance, for the

Prof. Cammenga is professor of Dogmatics and Old Testament in the Protestant Reformed Seminary.

lodge, among the people. Members claimed that the lodge was not inimical to Christianity, but completely consistent with Christian beliefs and practices. By the time the folk who had embraced the Secession of 1834 made their way to America in search for greater opportunity, Freemasonry was not only found throughout Europe, but had become well-established in the eastern portion of the United States.

As the Dutch immigrants passed through the east coast on their way to the colonies that had been established by Van Raalte and his fellow Secessionists in western Michigan, they observed things that in their judgment were not consistent with the principles of the Afscheiding. They brought with them reports of objectionable beliefs and practices. One matter that was especially troubling to them was involvement of some church members and ministers in the Freemasons.

Strain in the Holland Classis over the Joining of 1850

From the very beginning of the union of the Holland Classis, under the leadership of the Rev. A. C. Van Raalte, with the Reformed Church in America, the relationship was strained. More and more reports of irregularities in the east heightened tensions within the churches in Michigan and beyond. The immigrants increasingly objected to what they called the “Americanization” of the churches in New York and New Jersey. By “Americanization” they meant “worldliness.” The eastern churches had become worldly and were not living antithetically. The new settlers saw no real appreciation for what they and their leaders had fought for in the Secession of 1834 in the Netherlands.

One of the main indicators of creeping worldliness was the acceptance of Freemasons as members of the church. To many in the settlements in western Michigan this was altogether objectionable. Their position was that those who belonged to the secret, oath-bound societies forfeited their right to membership in the church. The two were incompatible.

As early as the meeting of Classis Holland on September 26, 1853, the issue of lodge membership was raised. The judgment of the Classis was that “it is not lawful for a member of the church to be a Freemason.”

And it is reported that “all look upon it as works of darkness, and thus unlawful for a (church) member.”¹

Gysbert Haan, a fiery elder in the Grand Rapids congregation, was especially critical of the RCA. After worshiping for a time in the RCA congregations of Albany and Rochester, Haan made his way to western Michigan in 1850 and settled in the colony. He brought reports of numerous “irregularities” in the RCA. Among other things, he also reported that many members, and even elders and ministers, were members of the Masonic Lodge.

Haan began to agitate for separation from the RCA and a return to the way things were before Rev. Van Raalte had negotiated the union with the RCA in 1850. Haan, and those who shared his viewpoint, desired a formal relationship, not with the RCA, but with the denomination that they had left behind in the Netherlands, the Afscheidene Gereformeerde Kerk, their mother church. Although Van Raalte and others attempted to dissuade Haan of his viewpoint, and were inclined to dismiss him as a troublemaker, newly arriving settlers substantiated Haan’s report. Many, such as Rev. Koene Vanden Bosch, pastor of the Noordeloos congregation, from the beginning of his arrival in 1856, decried the union of 1850. Vanden Bosch voiced his concerns to classis, but these concerns were never brought in any official way by Classis Holland to the general synod of the RCA.²

The Separation of 1857

The end result of all the turmoil was the separation of 1857 that marks the formation of what would come to be known as the Christian Reformed Church. Originally, the fledgling denomination had only two ministers: Rev. Koene Vanden Bosch, pastor of Noordeloos, and Rev. H. G. Klyn, pastor of Grand Rapids, having previously served in Graafschap and Milwaukee. Besides the Noordeloos and Grand Rap-

¹ *Classis Holland Minutes 1848-1858*, trans. by a Joint Committee of the Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America (Grand Rapids, MI: Grand Rapids Printing Company, 1943), 144.

² Robert P. Swierenga, “True Brothers: The Netherlandic Origins of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, 1857-1880.” Available at: www.swierenga.com/Kampen_pap.html, 5.

ids congregations, they were joined by Polkton and Graafschap, and soon by Vriesland. Truly, a day of small beginnings!

Of the four consistories that left Classis Holland and the RCA, only one sent a formal letter to the Classis informing them of their action and the reasons for their action. That was the consistory of Graafschap. Interestingly, the letter received by Classis Holland did not contain any mention of Freemasonry.³

This is not to say that Freemasonry was no longer an issue in the minds of the separatists. Not at all. It was well known that the conservatives in Classis Holland opposed the lodge and saw membership in the lodge as incompatible with membership in the church. It was well known that they considered the rites and rituals of the lodge to be ungodly in nature, the practice and promotion of a religion contrary to the Christian religion. They viewed the lodge as a denial of Jesus the only Savior in its concessions to Jews, Deists, and practitioners of other religions. They viewed membership in the lodge as contrary to the antithetical calling of the child of God, whom the apostle warns not to become unequally yoked together with unbelievers (II Cor. 6:14). And they viewed the oath demanded of the members of such secret organizations as an unbiblical oath, contrary to the third commandment of God's law.

So well known was the opposition to the lodge, that all were aware that it was something about which the secessionists were deeply concerned. For that reason, Dr. Henry Beets is right to include in his resumé of what was usually objected to by those who parted ways with Classis Holland and the RCA in 1857: "(4) The toleration of Free Masons as members in good standing."⁴ From henceforth, all the officebearers and members of the seceding churches were unanimous in the judgment that membership in the lodge was incompatible with membership in the church. Henceforth, those who were found to belong to the lodge were not tolerated, but made the object of Christian discipline.

³ *Classis Holland Minutes 1848-1858*, 241, 242.

⁴ Henry Beets, *The Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: Eastern Avenue Book Store, 1923), 47.

Continued Agitation over Lodge Membership

The separation of 1857 did not put an end to the issue of membership in secret organizations among members of the RCA. There continued to be differences of opinion between churches, particularly the eastern (more established and more liberal) churches and the western (immigrant and more conservative) churches. Some churches permitted lodge members as church members and invited them to the Lord's Table. Other churches did not allow lodge members to become members or to transfer their membership, and some consistories placed known lodge members under censure.

More than a decade after the CRC was established, in 1870, the RCA Classes of Holland and Wisconsin overtured the General Synod to ban membership in the lodge. The appeal of Classis Holland reads in part:

Since the decisions of the General Synod in 1867-1869 in reference to Freemasonry, a steadily growing antipathy to secret societies has been revealed by our members. This has prompted a closer investigation of those organizations by our consistories.... The more this investigation acquaints us with the outward form, the nature of the secret oath, and the known tendencies of the work of this and other secret societies, the more inward pain we feel that this foreign plant upon holy soil is permitted not only to encumber the ground, but proves harmful to the life of faith and the progress of sanctification, which is the calling of the church....⁵

After quoting the appeal to the General Synod of the RCA, Dr. Kromminga adds, "This renewing of the fight against freemasonry was watched with great interest by the Christian Reformed Church, which had definitely opposed the lodge in the Secession of 1857."⁶

This renewing of the battle against the lodge within the RCA came to naught. Although the General Synod discouraged lodge membership and pointed out the evils associated with membership in the lodge, it refused to outlaw such membership. It was clear that too many of its members and clergy belonged to the lodge to allow

⁵ Quoted in John H. Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Church: A Study in Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1949), 49.

⁶ Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Church*, 50.

the RCA to take a firm stand and uproot “this foreign plant upon holy soil.” Concessions were made, concessions that undermined God’s truth and the life of the antithesis to which God’s people are called. Nevertheless, the result of this agitation was that between 1881 and 1882 eight RCA congregations left the denomination, as well as various groups of believers who organized seven new congregations, all of whom affiliated with the CRC.

The Protestant Reformed Churches embrace wholeheartedly the opposition to the lodge on the part of the secessionists of 1857. In a pamphlet written by Dr. William Masselink, likely published in the mid to late

1950s, he reports concerning the Protestant Reformed Churches that, “The Lodge member is positively barred from their communion.”⁷

This is the position to which the PRC remain committed. For the sake of the truth of the gospel and Jesus Christ the only Savior of sinners, as well as the holy, antithetical life of gratitude that includes separation from the world, we call lodge members to repent of their sin of membership in the lodge in order to be faithful members of the church. 

⁷ William Masselink, *What is Wrong with the Lodge?* (Chicago: National Christian Association, n.d.), 29.

REV. RODNEY KLEYN

Confessions and Catechism Preaching in the Reformation of 1857

S*emper Reformanda!*
Always reforming!

Just as the life of the believer is one of progressive sanctification, so the life of the church should be one of continual reformation. The opposite for the believer is spiritual deterioration. The opposite for the church is apostasy.

Was the formation of the Christian Reformed Church (CRCNA) in 1857 a legitimate reformation/reforming of the church? This is not just a question for historians in the CRCNA, but an important question for us in the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRCA) who were formed out of the CRCNA in 1924, and who thus share the history of 1857 with the CRCNA.

A list of reasons for the formation of the CRCNA can be found in the history books of that denomination. Dr. Henry Beets lists seven things that were ob-

jected to in the Reformed Church of America (RCA) by the founders of the CRCNA.⁸

1. Departure from the Calvinism of the standards—particularly as to the two points just mentioned, atonement and election.
2. Neglect of Catechism-preaching and teaching.
3. The use of 800 hymns contrary to the Church Order of Dordrecht.
4. The toleration of Free Masons as members in good standing.
5. Private baptisms taking the place of public administration of the sacrament in connection with preaching, according to the Reformed principle.
6. Admission of non-reformed people to the Communion table: open communion.
7. Neglect of family-visiting as required by the Church Order.

From the above list it is obvious that the RCA was

⁸ Henry Beets, *The Christian Reformed Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eastern Avenue Book Store, 1923), 46, 47.

Rev. Kleyn is pastor of Covenant of Grace Protestant Reformed Church in Spokane, Washington.

on the road of departure and apostasy. In each of the areas above, the CRCNA sought to return to her roots and to the biblical principles and rich heritage God had given to His church in the great Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century.

The History

In the 1840s a wave of Dutch immigrants began to come to the USA. Many of them settled in Holland, MI with Rev. A. Van Raalte. Just two years after their arrival, Van Raalte and his congregation were received into the RCA.

VanRaalte himself was a secessionist, that is, he had left the State Church in the Netherlands in 1834. The reasons for this secession were:¹

1. A falling away from the pure doctrine of the Reformed Church, as expressed in its standards.
2. A hierarchial form of church government and arbitrary regulations.
3. The introduction of unsound hymns.
4. A new and dubious-sounding formula of subscription.
5. Unfaithfulness of preachers regarding their ordination vows.

The immigrants who came to settle with Van Raalte were mostly a part of this secession too. As these immigrants came into the USA they passed through the East, where there was a concentration of RCA congregations. Some of the immigrants even settled for a while in the East before moving on to the Midwest. These immigrants noticed that the issues of the Secession of 1834 were also present in the RCA, and because of this they were unhappy that Van Raalte and his congregation had so quickly joined with the RCA. As these immigrants moved into West Michigan, they began to form new settlements with new congregations. The leaders in these congregations then began to express their concerns at the classis meetings, and eventually, in 1857, a group of these immigrants departed from the RCA to form the CRCNA.

The obvious parallel between the Secession of 1834 and the formation of the CRCNA in 1857 is the departure from Reformed doctrine as expressed in the standards or confessions of the Reformed churches.

¹ Beets, *The Christian Reformed Church*, 21.

This departure from doctrine was especially evident in the singing of a large number of Arminian hymns in worship. It was as though these hymns took the place of the confessions in the life of the church.

Learning from this History

We do well to learn from this history by asking a few questions. What happened in the RCA, how did this happen, and can/does this history repeat itself?

What happened was this. Reformed truth in the confessions became an obstacle to the acceptance of the Reformed churches in American society. Because of this the confessions were modified and set aside. The RCA dropped the “Rejection of Errors” from the Canons of Dordt, and fundamental tenets of Calvinism, particular atonement and sovereign predestination, were openly challenged and denied. At the same time, the important Reformed practice of preaching and teaching from the Catechism and confessions was neglected. Because the confessions were no longer being used, they could not function in their task of guarding the church against error. The positive purpose of the confessions, which is to protect the church against error, was viewed negatively. Instead of serving as guardians of the church and truth, the confessions were viewed as obstacles and barriers to development.

Obviously, this history has repeated itself in the CRCNA, who just recently adopted the *Belhar Confession* alongside the Three Forms of Unity, if not as a substitute, then certainly as an alternative that softens the Reformed and Calvinistic theology of the confessions. This began, of course, much earlier in the history of the CRCNA. The adoption of the Three Points of Common Grace in 1924 was a rejection of the Calvinism of the confessions. This developed into the teaching of a universal love and universal atonement in the churches, and to a denial of the biblical teaching of predestination. Along the way, the confessions lost their place and were no longer used in teaching and preaching.

The warnings for us are obvious. First, we ought never assume an attitude of pride or superiority, as though we have made ourselves to differ by remaining strongly committed to the confessions, and as though this deterioration could never happen in our churches.

Grace is grace, and we best be thankful for the goodness and grace of God in maintaining us. Second, there is an obvious calling for us to remain committed to the confessions in the churches, especially by using them for instruction and so being familiar with their teaching.

Remembering Why We Have Confessions

When churches and theologians outside the Reformed camp look at the departure and apostasy in Reformed denominations, they are tempted to blame the confessions, to say that this apostasy comes because we are confessional churches. They argue for “Bible Churches” rather than “Confessional Churches” and say that the emphasis in Reformed churches on doctrine and truth leads to personal apathy in the lives of Christians.

While this danger may be real, and we should be warned against an institutional security, at the same time it is good for us to remember why we are confessional churches, and why it is important that we remain committed to the content and use of our confessions. These five reasons should help us to see the value of our confessions.

1. Confessions promote unity. True unity is not external, but spiritual, a unity in faith. Just because someone says he is a Christian does not mean he is one with me in faith. His confession needs to be examined. The confessions provide the standard. What do you believe about sin, about salvation, about the death of Christ, about God? The confessions are a summary of what the Bible teaches and what we believe and provide a standard for membership, teaching, and discipline in the churches.

2. Confessions can help us to understand God’s Word. When we come to a difficult doctrine or passage in Scripture, we can turn to the confessions for guidance. The confessions are written as a summary statement, pulling together all the major passages of Scripture on the main doctrines in Scripture. For example, if I want to know what the Bible’s teaching is on the Trinity, I can reference the confessions and look at the different passages used to support the confessional teaching. I will not find the word “Trinity” in the Bible,

nor passages that speak specifically on the “person” and “natures” of Christ. But these doctrines are important and need to be carefully defined, and that is what the confessions do for us.

3. The confessions guard against error. They function as a standard for truth and a wall of protection against false teaching. There is nothing new under the sun, and all the false teachings of today have been faced, dealt with, and answered, at least in principle, by the church of the past. Confessions keep us tied to the church of the past and the work of the Spirit in leading the church into all truth.

4. Confessions lay the foundation for the church of the future. Our interest is not only to be historical but also to look forward—to be covenantal. This is especially important in a day of so much evil influence and when the winds of false doctrine are so fierce. The confessions set a course, they provide direction, they are a road map for the church in every generation.

5. Confessions are useful as teaching tools, not only for subsequent generations, but also for new converts. The confessions provide outlines of theology and use the Scriptures as the source and the support for all their teaching. Using the confessions for teaching, and the catechism for preaching, we remain faithful to the Word of God, and not to the whims of man.

If the confessions are truly to remain a doctrinal standard for the church, we must be familiar with them, and so they must be used in the life and teaching ministry of the church. They must be more than a reference book that we pull off the shelf when a question arises. This is why regular catechism preaching is important in the churches.

We are thankful to God for our Reformed confessions, and we pray that He will keep us faithful to our heritage and to the work of the Spirit through history in leading the church into truth. May God use the confessions to promote unity between believers in the present, and use them to keep us one in faith with the church that has gone before us. And may we remain committed to them, so that the church may be protected against false teaching and thus remain a pillar and ground of the truth. 

The Underlying (Doctrinal) Reasons for Separation

At bottom, the Reformation of 1857 that gave birth to the Christian Reformed Church was doctrinal. The reason our spiritual fathers formed a new denomination rather than remaining in the Reformed Church of America was doctrine: the truth of God's Word, theology. Separation for *non*-doctrinal reasons is hardly justifiable, to understate the matter. The unity of the body of Christ is too important. Denial of the truth of God and of God's Word—*that* justifies secession and re-formation of the church.

To say that the separation of 1857 was on account of doctrine is a somewhat bold claim because it is not the usual explanation for it.

Reading many analyses of the history may lead you to believe that the division was unjustified and unjustifiable. Some contend that the doctrinal issues were not *significant*, but many deny that *doctrine* was in view at all. Some scholarly articles allege mainly social and economic reasons for the division. Others contend that a contentious spirit in the immigrants drove the secession. Another claims that an improper view of the antithesis—as mostly physical—brought it about. Because these views are widely believed today, strong appeals are being made both to confess the secession as sin, and to re-unite what was divided.

That there were social and economic *factors* in play in the separation can be shown. Also, we should not be surprised if some immigrants manifested a sinfully contentious spirit. Sadly, the history shows this too. And it can be shown that the motto "In isolation is our strength" was wrongly applied by some in the 1850s. But admitting these things is not to concede that these

were the deepest reasons and most fundamental justification for the secession.

The reformation of 1857 was doctrinal.

An initial reading of the stated reasons for secession might not make this clear, but a more thoughtful reading does. Carefully written grounds for separation were given by only one consistory, of Graafschap, Michigan.¹ A few individuals wrote letters, but of the two (only two) consistories that gave reasons, Graafschap alone was specific. They objected to (along with a couple other matters): 1) singing hymns rather than Psalms; 2) loose supervision of the Lord's Supper; 3) failure to preach the Heidelberg Catechism and teach catechism to the youth; 4) a general failure to acknowledge the importance of the costly and painful secession the immigrants had been involved in but twenty years prior in the fatherland. Involved, although not listed by Graafschap, was the RCA's approval of lodge membership. These do not form the kind of ecclesiastical grounds one would expect to justify a denominational division. And on the surface at least they do not indicate that the explanation for separation was doctrinal.

But (although the doctrinal divide was deeper than this) it must not be overlooked that even these *stated* reasons for secession were doctrinal.

First, supervision of the Lord's Supper is doctrinal. Those and those only are allowed to the table who maintain a godly *confession* and walk (Lord's Day 20). The keys of the kingdom must be used to keep them from profaning the table. Besides, loose supervision of the Lord's Supper means that discipline was lacking, and without discipline, truth disappears in a church. Second, 800 hymns, full of *teachings* both explicit and implicit, is a doctrinal matter. There is an old adage that heresy is sung into the church before it is preached. Third, lodge membership and its allegiances are emi-

Prof. Gritters is professor of Practical Theology in the Protestant Reformed Seminary.

¹ Graafschap is near Holland, just south of Lake Macatawa.

nently a matter of theology. And how will a church know and maintain the “ancient landmarks” of *doctrine* except by preaching of the Heidelberg Catechism and the weekly instruction of the youth? Doctrine moved our forefathers to form their own, new denomination.

Yet the doctrinal ground for secession was more fundamental than these stated reasons.

One layman complained by letter that the church was guilty of “harboring doctrinally unsound leaders.” What was this unsound doctrine? The consistory of the Polkton church (one of the four churches that seceded, just west of Coopersville, Michigan) said, “... your denomination fraternizes with those who are in opposition to the doctrine of our fathers.”² What doctrine? Admittedly, these statements are seriously deficient in *specifying* the errors, *demonstrating* that the errors were indeed taught in the churches, and *establishing* from Scripture and the confessions that they were error. Yet they point to more basic doctrinal weakness that existed.

To understand the 1857 reformation, the fascinating history of the Dutch Reformed Church in America *prior* to 1857 ought to be read. It can be found in many books.³ Not to know this will lead to improper judgments of the schism. Too easily, Reformed folk in the United States and Canada imagine the Reformed faith in America to be only a few generations old, and mentally skip back to the Netherlands for the rest of the story. But the Dutch Reformed Church (RCA) existed in this country for a couple of centuries before the 1857 schism, and its history reveals very serious doctrinal weaknesses and compromises, on account of which the small band of immigrants should not have joined her in the first place. The union, less than ten years prior to the split, was premature. The union was understandable: the Reformed brothers in America

² Quoted in Robert P. Swierenga, “True Brothers: The Netherlandic Origins of the Christian Reformed Church in North America 1857-1880,” in *Breaches and Bridges: Reformed Subcultures in the Netherlands, Germany, and the United States*, edited by George Harinck and Hans Krabbendam (Amsterdam: VU Uitgeverij, 2000), 68.

³ “The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America” now numbers *seventy-five* volumes, and many of them recount this history, albeit from an RCA perspective. Go to the RCA’s web-site under “resources” to find information about the series.

welcomed the immigrants to the new land in a warm and genuinely Christian way; their doctrinal standards were identical;⁴ and the immigrants understood the need for ecclesiastical fellowship. But the marriage was made after too short a courtship. With more investigation, the immigrants could have learned a good deal.

What Graafschaap and the others were referring to in their letters of explanation were doctrinal errors that had been creeping into the RCA for generations already. One minister called them “abominable, church-destroying heresy.” In this short article, they can be explained only briefly.

First, when the RCA adopted their new constitution in 1793 (which constitution included a liturgy, the Church Order, and the creeds) the Canons of Dordt were adopted, but *without* their “Rejection of Errors.”⁵ This already was evidence of a weakness regarding the essential truths of the Reformation, for both the *content* of the “Rejection of Errors” and the biblical *stance* of *rejecting errors* are crucial for the maintenance of truth.

Second, there is good evidence that the Formula of Subscription, essential for maintenance of sound doctrine, was not binding.⁶ For a denomination to survive, she must require her leaders to promise to maintain and defend the faith, *as that faith is expressed in the Three Forms of Unity*, and to promise submission to severest penalties if they are delinquent in this calling. There is good evidence that doctrinal laxity and even indifference towards confessions was widespread.

The doctrines slipping away were the doctrines of the Canons of Dordt—sovereign election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and total depravity.

One of the seceders, well-travelled in the Midwest, claimed to know elders who did not believe in election,

⁴ The Rev. Wyckoff, leading RCA minister at the time, said: “On comparison of doctrine, a perfect agreement with our standards was found.” James W. Van Hoeven, *Word and World: Reformed Theology in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 31.

⁵ Daniel Meeter, *Meeting Each Other: Doctrine, Liturgy & Government* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 7. Also part of the “Historical Series of the RCA.” The major change in the constitution was to move the church away from a more Erastian form of church government to a Reformed form of independence from the state.

⁶ See *Breaches and Bridges*, 67. Swierenga explains that not all agree on this point.

and visited an elderly minister who admitted that he never preached it.⁷ Although this claim is hearsay, much can be learned from *Classis Holland Minutes 1848-1858*.

Significantly, in one of the more important books of the “Historical Series of the RCA,”⁸ James W. Van Hoeven explains that the spirit of revivalism and the influence of pietism were factors in this slippage from Dordt. Van Hoeven speaks of a “profound influence” of revivals on the theological course of the RCA. Revivals’ emphasis on experience rather than on truth caused the RCA “to distance itself from the formulations of Dordt.” In less than a hundred years, the church made a “transition from classical Reformed orthodoxy to American style evangelicalism.” “The issues raised between 1800 and 1850 were the doctrines of election and limited atonement.”⁹

Not that no one noticed or objected to the slippage. An 1820 RCA synod still had the fortitude to examine a minister regarding his orthodoxy in the matter of the atonement. But it was officially recorded that at that synod delegates were openly denying aspects of the

⁷ John Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Church: A Study in Orthodoxy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1943), 32.

⁸ Van Hoeven, *Word and World*.

⁹ Van Hoeven, *Word and World*, 17.

truth of Christ’s atonement.¹⁰ Following this, and very likely as a direct result of it, in 1822 a small number who loved the truths of Dordt formed another denomination, “The True Dutch Reformed Church in the United States of America.” In 1865, this church merged with the Christian Reformed Church, then only eight years old.

The influence of revivals also explains the use of Richard Baxter’s writings in the churches. A Dutch translation of Baxter’s *Call to the Unconverted* was widely distributed, and occasioned one man to complain to Classis Holland, where the issue of Baxter’s questionable doctrine was raised twice. Baxter was not Reformed according to the standards of the Canons of Dordt. So when the immigrants heard Van Raalte come to the defense of Baxter’s writings, grounds for a secession accumulated. And when Baxter was defended by an attempt to distinguish between fundamental and non-fundamental doctrines, sin and grace being included in the non-fundamentals, our forefathers had reason enough to know they could not remain.

Doctrine—essential doctrine of sovereign grace—must be defended and maintained.

The underlying issue in the 1857 reformation was doctrine. 

¹⁰ Van Hoeven, *Word and World*, 21.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Reformation Lecture

Friday, October 26, 2012

7:30 P.M.

Prof. Russell J. Dykstra

will speak on:

**“False Prophets and the
Certain End of the World:
What the Reformation
Can Teach Us”**

to be held at :

Immanuel Fellowship Church

6015 West H Avenue

Kalamazoo, Michigan

sponsored by the

Evangelism Committee
of Kalamazoo PRC

Upcoming Lecture - November 2

Was the intent of the Protestant Reformation to establish a worldwide Protestant kingdom of God on earth before Christ’s second coming? Should today’s Reformed church unite with all nominal Christians to defeat the forces of the devil and establish an earthly Kingdom of Christ? Is the Reformed church guilty of world flight and ignoring the call of Jesus to Christianize the world? We invite you and your friends to hear a biblical, confessional lecture on

**“The Coming
of the Kingdom of Christ:
‘Christianizing the World?’”**

by Prof. D. Engelsma

sponsored by the

Evangelism Committee of Southwest PRC

at 7:30

on Friday, November 2

at the First CRC of Byron Center.

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Notice

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Wedding Anniversary

■ With all praise and glory to our heavenly Father, we, the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of

EDWARD and ADRIANA OPHOFF are thankful for the blessing of their 60 years of marriage in Him that began on October 30, 1952. It is through His love and guidance that they have fulfilled their vows to raise their family in a covenant and godly home, and to this day continue to guide them by His grace. We pray for the Lord's continued blessing in their remaining years together. "Know therefore that the Lord thy God, he is God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations" (Deuteronomy 7:9).

- ❖ Eric and Marilyn Ophoff
 - ❖ Edward and Libby Ophoff
 - ❖ Mark and Cindy Ophoff
 - ❖ Jim and Faith Noorman
 - ❖ Ray and Joy Schwarz
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Resolution of Sympathy

■ The Consistory and the congregation of Edgerton PRC wish to express Christian sympathy to the Brands family of our congregation, following the passing of their brother and uncle,

MR. GERRIT BRANDS.

May they find comfort in God's Word, Psalm 23:6: "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Rev. Douglas Kuiper, President
Chester Hunter, Clerk