

# THE *October 15, 2007* STANDARD BEARER

A REFORMED SEMI-MONTHLY MAGAZINE

*Special Reformation Issue: Church Reformation, 1834*

◆ **What?** *Afscheiding* (that is, the “withdrawal” or “secession” of six ministers and thousands of believers to form a new body of churches).

◆ **Where?** *The Netherlands.*

◆ **Who?** *A new denomination formed out of the state church—the only Reformed church in the Netherlands in that day.*

◆ **Whose history is this?** *Members of the Reformed Church of America, the Christian Reformed Church, the Protestant Reformed Churches, and others trace their lineage back to this reformation.*

The history of God’s church is a demonstration of God’s faithfulness to an unworthy people. God’s goodness draws His people out of the darkness of unbelief and into the light of His gracious revelation, but the church tends to stray from His truth. She becomes deformed and apostate, worthy of being put aside by God. Sometimes God removes His Spirit from such a church. Sometimes, God graciously reforms His church—calling a faithful remnant out of an apostatizing church to form His church anew.

The special Reformation Day issues of the *Standard Bearer* have treated many such reformations—from the great reformation of Luther and Calvin to the present day. This special issue treats another such notable work of God...and fascinating history. The issues involved, as indicated in the contents (below), include essential elements of what it is to be Reformed. All who love the Reformed faith, or want to know more about it, are welcome to turn the pages of time back to 1834, and see how God preserved His church.

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Volume 84 ◆ Number 2

# The Food of Jesus

A Sermon on John 4:34

by the Rev. Simon VanVelzen  
(a "Father of the Secession" of 1834)<sup>1</sup>

**T**he great multitude of mankind does not work for the food that endures unto everlasting life [John 6:27], and the result is discontentment. Empty complaints are heard about unemployment. Is then the activity which is commanded by Jesus "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness" [Matt. 6:33] so burdensome, so grievous, that there is reason to be averse to it? On the contrary! Never has anyone who was busy in this work complained about it. The most out-

standing God-fearing people have found inexpressible satisfaction in it. Not only this; Jesus Himself has led the way for us: He called it His food to do the will of His Father. Let me point this out to you.

#### Text

John 4:34: "Jesus said to them: My food<sup>2</sup> is that I do the will of him who has sent me, and finish his work."

The Savior spoke these words at the very beginning of His ministry. In Judea, the envy of the Pharisees had already become manifest. The Lord therefore judged it good to go again to Galilee, where the sermon on the mount, as we commonly refer to it, was preached by Him. There were two ways which led thither. The one ran through the land east of the Jordan and was the longest. The shorter went through Samaria, but was seldom taken, because the Jews and the Samaritans were hostile to each other.

Nevertheless, Jesus chose this way. Accompanied by His disciples, the Lord came in the vicinity of the Samaritan city Sychar and sat down, wearied by the journey, at Jacob's well. But the disciples, who, I think, were muscular, strong men, went to the city in order to buy food. Now, while the Lord was sitting there by Himself, there came a woman to draw water. He entered into a conversation with her. And this had the result that that woman was convicted of her sins and brought to faith, so much so that she went away in great haste in order to gain also her fellow-citizens to Jesus.

In the meantime, the disciples, provided with food, had returned. They set what they had bought before Him and, knowing that He had been deprived of food for a long time, urged Him to eat. "I have," Jesus responded, "food to eat that you know not of" [John 4:32]. The disciples said to each other, "Has

1. Translation by Prof. David J. Engelsma of an excerpt from the sermon *De spijs van Jezus*, preached by VanVelzen in December 1886, when he was seventy-seven years old. The sermon is found in *Avondstemmen. Opstellen van Wijlen Prof. S. VanVelzen* (Leiden: D. Donner, 1897).

2. The Authorized Version has "meat." The Greek original is 'food.'

The Standard Bearer (ISSN 0362-4692) is a semi-monthly, except monthly during June, July, and August, published by the Reformed Free Publishing Association, Inc., 1894 Georgetown Center Dr., Jenison, MI 49428-7137.

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\$17.00 per year in the U.S., US\$20.00 elsewhere.

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16mm microfilm, 35mm microfilm and 105mm microfiche, and article copies are available through University Microfilms International.

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anyone brought him food?" [v. 33]. And now Jesus said to them, "My food is that I do the will of him who has sent me, and finish his work."

The idea of these words is that what food is for the mortal body of a man—so strengthening, invigorating, and necessary for a man—the doing of the will of His Father, who has sent Him and whose work He must finish, was for Him, as Mediator and Savior, according to the spirit. These words allow us a deep look into the disposition of the Savior. We hear in them mention of the food of Jesus. This is a food:

- I. that witnesses to the inexpressible greatness of the Savior;
- II. that is an urgent reason for the sinner to come to Jesus; and
- III. that gives us a glorious prospect with regard to the future.

If it is given to us rightly to understand the language of the text, then at the end of our gathering for worship we will have to say, "Never have the glory and loveliness of Jesus been made more plain than by this word of the Savior."

For us, it cannot be difficult, and in any case must not be difficult, to understand what the Lord means when He speaks of the will of His Father. Two chapters later in this gospel, we read that Jesus said to the Jews, when they were offended at Him, contradicted Him, and repudiated Him, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out. For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me. And this is the Father's will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day. And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and

I will raise him up at the last day" [John 6:37-40]. Also the apostle Paul has spoken many times of the will of the Father. For example, he said, "Having predestinated us unto the adoption of children by Jesus Christ to himself, according to the good pleasure of his will" [Eph. 1:5].

All these passages speak of the will of the Father with the same word, so that the truth that Jesus intends is so plain that, although the theologians, as is usually the case, are offended by it, a child can comprehend the meaning.

If Jesus has come down from heaven, then He existed before He came to earth. If He has come down in order to do the will of the Father, then He was familiar with this will, has committed Himself to accomplish it, and has assumed an inexpressibly great work. This great work is, not only that He gather all who were given Him of the Father, but also that He preserve them and finally raise them and bestow upon them eternal life.

What a work it is that carries out this eternal decree of God! How much must be performed, in order that the good pleasure of the Father may be perfected! One thinks only of his own sins. I do not even mention that all of us have fallen away from God in Adam, our head, although Scripture does charge us with this guilt. But now let each one be convicted concerning the guilt of his own behavior. How have we behaved in our youth? Were we always obedient? How did we behave as a young man or a young woman? Was not a great deal of vanity manifest in our life? How do we behave as a man or a woman? How do we behave as an old man or an old woman? Many times we have spoken hastily and thoughtlessly of God and His service. Scripture says, "Thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord thy God in vain" [Ex. 20:7]. Many times we have used the day of rest entirely or partly for our own pleasure. The

Scripture says, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy" [Ex. 20:8]....<sup>3</sup>

If there is someone who, like the rich young ruler, thinks, "all these have I observed from my youth" [Mark 10:20], let him ask himself whether he always has loved the Lord above all, whether he is willing to give up all his money, goods, honor, reputation, and life for the sake of his communion with Jesus, which is infinitely more than all those earthly treasures.

Let him ask himself whether he truly loves his neighbor as himself, as he ought to be loved himself. If we found our worst enemy sleeping on the edge of a giddy precipice, would we not be rightly condemned as unmerciful if we passed by without dragging him away from that dangerous place? How much more guilty is not the man who goes on living without extending a hand unto salvation, while his fellow men find themselves on a way that ends, not merely in temporal destruction, but in eternal perdition—in the terror of hell.

Indeed, there are many who tempt others to sin, or to continue carelessly in the way of destruction. They make themselves guilty of double murder of souls. And many parents give no thought to it, at least make no serious effort, to save their own children. They misuse the short time of life they have with their children, and the invaluable opportunity God gives them, to be saved by Jesus.

Well may each one of us cry out with Ezra, "O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift up my face to thee, my God: for our iniquities are increased over our head, and our trespass is grown up unto the heavens" [Ezra 9:6].

These iniquities, not only of a single man, but of all that the Father has given to Him, Jesus has

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3. VanVelzen here applies several other commandments in similar fashion.

taken upon Himself. Therefore, He became their substitute, not only to make good the obedience that was demanded of us by God, but also to suffer the punishment which is threatened upon sin. God cannot deny Himself. His righteousness

and the truth of His threatenings must remain undamaged.

Nevertheless, it was His will, His decree, His good pleasure to save a multitude that no man can count.

This work the Son of God has assumed and perfected.

How inexpressibly great is He!<sup>4</sup> 

4. This excerpt ends (because of constraints of space in the *Standard Bearer*) midway through the first point of VanVelzen's sermon.

Prof. Russell Dykstra

## Why the Secession of 1834?

**T**he Reformed believer esteems highly the unity of the church. "I believe *an* holy, catholic church," we confess. The Reformed church rightly condemns schism—division in the church body. The form for adult baptism demands that members reject all heresies and schisms repugnant to the doctrines they confess. Upon the Reformed minister is laid a greater responsibility—he must *refute* all schisms and heresies repugnant to pure doctrine (Formula of Subscription). One of the gross sins for which an officebearer is suspended and deposed is the sin of public schism (Church Order, Art. 80).

The church of Christ is one, and every Reformed church and believer is called upon to manifest that unity as much as possible.

Thus, for a Reformed believer, a secession from a church or group of churches is no small matter. He loves the church, his spiritual mother. He is therefore loyal to her, supports her, and prays for her. Leaving her is painful and is never done without compelling reasons. Those reasons should never be mere personal offense. The believer does not walk away from a church that is still spiritu-

ally feeding him. He leaves when it is impossible to remain in the church because she is no longer his spiritual mother. She no longer feeds him. She has forsaken Christ her husband and has become a whore. When that happens, the voice of Christ is no longer heard there. Christ no longer rules. He leaves, and takes His Spirit with Him. At that point the church that was his mother will often wrongfully discipline the faithful member for his stand for truth.

That is what happened in the Reformed Church in the Netherlands in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. She lost the marks of the true church of Jesus Christ. A reformation was necessary. Absolutely necessary.

But that raises a question. How did such dreadful apostasy prevail in the Reformed churches of the Netherlands? This was the church that had rejected the pernicious heresy of Jacob Arminius, that had called the rest of the Reformed church world together in 1618 to write a careful and united rejection of the error of the Remonstrants—the Canons of Dordrecht. At that same Great Synod, the Reformed churches officially adopted the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession as creeds. They adopted a church order that set forth the principles and right practices of Reformed (biblical) church

government. That extraordinary synod also decided that every officebearer must sign the creeds, a formula of subscription, promising to maintain and defend all the doctrines taught in these three creeds. How did such a church, with such Reformed credentials, such a rich heritage, and such glorious confessions, apostatize and, finally, put out and persecute Reformed preachers and members?

The Reformed churches obviously did not apostatize in a day or a year. The letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor (Rev. 2, 3) indicate the start, even the principle of apostasy. The first letter (to the angel of the church of Ephesus) reproves the church for the loss of her first love. The King of the church commands, "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works." And then He adds this warning, "or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place." Dreadful warning for the church of all ages.

The Reformed Church of the Netherlands lost her first love. She had stood valiantly for the truth and put out the false teachers. The truths of sovereign grace were carefully explained and defended in her confessions. The churches continued officially to maintain the Reformed faith, but gradually the zeal

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for the truth waned. The confession was there, but the will to fight for it weakened steadily. The spirit was willing, perhaps, but the flesh was weary.

Thus the churches entered into a spiritual slump, often described as dead orthodoxy. This was aided and abetted by the prosperity in the Netherlands, for prosperity tends to make the church earthly-minded. The decline was fed by the rationalistic philosophies of Descartes and Spinoza. Descartes came to the Netherlands in 1629 and began teaching that the only way to true knowledge is to doubt everything. Spinoza is considered the father of modern higher critical views of the Bible. These men helped undermine the very foundation of the church—the authority of Scripture.

As a result, serious errors appeared in the church already in the 1600s. A certain Rev. B. Bekker, influenced by Descartes, published a book in 1691 in which he denied the existence of angels and devils. A theological professor named H.A. Roëll rejected the term “generation of the Son” in his Christology. He maintained that Jesus is called “Son of God” because He had a “divine mission.” But when he was opposed by fellow ministers and professors and rightly charged with the ancient heresy of Arianism (denying the essential deity of the Son), the State of Friesland banned discussion on the issue. Prof. Roëll was allowed to continue teaching theology.

Error abounded. Not only liberalism, but outright modernism grew and prospered. In his history, *The Reformed Church in the Netherlands*, Maurice Hansen describes the kinds of errors found in the Reformed churches.\*

[T]he cardinal doctrines of religion underwent a wondrous transformation. Election, the Trinity, justification by faith in Christ, were wholly rejected as absurd and dangerous to morality. The Deity of Christ is only his God-likeness.

Original sin is merely a corruption of morals. Depravity is simply weakness. Regeneration is no more than a moral improvement. Inspiration is only a higher degree of enlightenment. Geology shows that Moses was wrong. Anatomy and physics indicate the supremacy of matter. The progress of Greek literature shows that the New Testament is full of mistakes.

For the faithful in that day the question was not, Was reformation needed? but, Would the church of Christ in the Netherlands survive? Would the light of the Reformation be so soon snuffed out in the Netherlands, only a hundred years or so after the great Synod of Dordt? Again, the questions—Why? And why so soon? And why could not the Reformed men in the Netherlands condemn the errors and put out the false teachers?

The answer contains the key to much of the apostasy in the Netherlands. The church of Christ in the Netherlands was not free to follow her Head, her Master and King. She was under the domination of the state.

The root of this problem can be traced to the very beginning of the Reformation in the Netherlands. At the dawn of the Reformation, the Netherlands was under the control of Spain, then ruled by Philip, who also sat on the throne as emperor. Roman Catholic Spain was virtually untouched by the Protestant Reformation. Philip, a staunch supporter of the Church of Rome and the pope, vowed never to be king over heretics, by which he meant Protestants. He did his utmost to stamp out (brutally) the cause of the Reformation in the Netherlands.

However, his repressive measures in the Netherlands led to open revolt against Spain. As a result, the cause of the Reformation and the cause of liberation from Spain were closely intertwined. The one came with the other. No doubt God used the revolt to give the Reformed churches in the Neth-

erlands freedom from Rome’s oppression. But the price was high. The government controlled the church buildings. The government paid the salaries of ministers. And the old maxim holds true, whoever holds the purse strings has control.

The great danger of the state’s domination of the church became abundantly plain in the Arminian controversy at the turn of the seventeenth century. The orthodox wanted to condemn the error and put out the heretics, but they could not call an ecclesiastical gathering with the authority to accomplish this. It took many years for the churches to gain the state’s permission to hold the national synod in Dordrecht in 1618-1619. At that synod, the churches adopted a church order that would have given the church sole authority over her own affairs. However, the government refused to approve the new church order and insisted on the right to dominate the church.

The goal of the church is radically different from that of the state. The church is committed to preaching the truth of the Scriptures and rejecting all errors. The state wants peace. Thus in the Netherlands the government pressed for tolerance in the church. Time after time, when heresy arose in the church, and the faithful defended the truth, exposed the error, and called for discipline, their efforts were stymied by the state. No more discussion. No discipline. Get along. Toleration was the watchword.

Thus the two hundred years after Dordt is a sad history of decline morally, spiritually, and doctrinally. An indication of the decline is seen in the new hymns that were forced upon the churches—Arminian, modernistic hymns.

The end of the eighteenth century witnessed the rise of Napo-

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\* Hansen, Maurice G., *The Reformed Church in the Netherlands*, New York: Board of Publication of the Reformed Church in America, 1884, pp. 253-4.

leon Bonaparte's power in France, and his subsequent subjugation of the Netherlands. This foreign government cut the church loose from the state. But this was short lived. The eventual defeat of Napoleon enabled William V of the house of Orange to return to the Netherlands. The Dutchmen were so overjoyed to be free of the French rule that they made William the first official king of the Netherlands (in 1813).

William had spent nearly nineteen years in exile in England. He liked the relationship of the church and state in England, where the king was officially the head of the church of England. William moved to impose the same upon the Reformed churches in the Netherlands. He insisted on the right of the government to appoint members of consistories, classes, and synods. In many cities these ecclesiastical gatherings became boards controlled by the state.

Along with this, the government officially decreed freedom of religion and pressed for tolerance. William determined that toleration be practiced also within the Reformed churches. Under his guidance, the synodical board amended the form that all officebearers were required to sign in which they promised agreement with the creeds. In the form adopted at the Synod of Dordt, each officebearer affirmed that he believed and would both uphold and defend all

the doctrines found in the Reformed Confession *because* they are in harmony with the Bible. After 1816, officebearers merely promised to maintain and defend the doctrines of the confessions *insofar as* they agreed with the Bible.

This change in the form of subscription was monumental and devastating. It meant, practically speaking, that each man would be allowed to decide for himself which doctrines of the confessions were biblical. As critics pointed out, even Jews and Romanists could sign the form. The creeds became meaningless. The Reformed Church was effectively creedless! But a church that is not bound by Reformed confessions is not Reformed.


This was the dire and woeful state of the Reformed churches in the Netherlands in the 1830s. It seemed that the Reformation was over and done in the Netherlands.

Yet God was preparing to reform His church. He raised up men of stamina and strength. He brought them to the convicting knowledge of the glorious Reformed truths so long neglected. Once again the doctrines of sovereign particular grace were preached. The cross of Christ was magnified and Christ honored. And the sheep, hearing the voice of the good Shepherd, flocked to the preaching of deCock and Scholte and the handful of men raised up by God.

By the power of preaching, God reformed His church. The Secession of 1834 was a true reformation. The church returned to the confessions. The church returned to the Psalms. The church was freed from governmental control and could submit herself to Christ her King.

The way was difficult beyond the comprehension of most twenty-first century Christians. God's people suffered horribly at the hands of the apostate church and the government. Adding to the misery were the bitter conflicts fought within the Secession churches.

With the Secession of 1834, the God-ordained reformation of the church was not finished. As the Lutheran reformation required the further refinement and precision of Calvin and the Reformed and Presbyterian churches, so the Secession would need the doctrinal advances of an Abraham Kuyper and the *Doleantie*. But the Secession was a glorious, hard-fought reformation for all that.

We are honored to number ourselves among the sons and daughters of the Secession. We thank God for preserving His church and His truth by this reformation of 1834. May He continue to raise up men and women who are willing to follow in the footsteps of these saints, sacrificing all for the sake of the Reformed truth that was reaffirmed in 1834. 

Rev. Ronald Hanko

## A Brief History of the Afscheiding (1)

### Introduction

**T**he *Afscheiding*, or "Secession," that took place in Holland in 1834, when a large group of dissenters separated from the state church, is a movement that had a profound impact

on the history of Reformed churches, including that of the Protestant Reformed Churches. The historical roots of the Christian Reformed Church and of the Protestant Reformed Churches are in that Secession. The Dutch immigrants who first formed the

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Christian Reformed Church and then the Protestant Reformed Churches were almost all from the Secession.<sup>1</sup> Herman Hoeksema and George Ophoff, the founders of the Protestant Reformed Churches, were both from a Secession background. The history of the Secession, therefore, is a part of the history of the PRC to which the words of Psalm 78 apply:

Let children thus learn from  
history's light  
To hope in our God and walk in  
His sight,  
The God of their fathers to fear  
and obey,  
And ne'er, like their fathers, to  
turn from His way.<sup>2</sup>

### The Causes

There were numerous causes for the Secession, but they all had to do with apostasy in the Dutch Reformed Church (*Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk*). This apostasy was protected by the reorganization of the Dutch Reformed Church into a full-fledged state church in 1816 by King William I. The church, as a result of reorganization, was ruled from the top down by a national synod, and protest and reformation from within became impossible. Thus, the apostasy continued and grew until it became intolerable to those who loved God and His Word.

The protests against this continuing apostasy focused on five matters: 1) the replacement of Christ's headship and the Word of God by synodical authority in the churches; 2) the rejection of the old Church Order of Dordt, which was replaced by William I's new rules for the church; 3) the rejection of the creeds and their binding authority, especially of the Canons of Dordt; 4) the teaching of heretical doctrines by liberal, unbelieving ministers in the state church who no longer considered themselves bound by the creeds; and 5) the introduction of a new hymnbook and rules making the use of these hymns obligatory.

In their "Appeal to the Faithful in America," A. Brummelkamp and A.C. VanRaalte, two leaders of the Secession, said of the state church: "we found ourselves standing in opposition to our national, or world-church, which in many instances is nothing but a mere State machine, dependent upon worldly government, and supported by the State fund, with a minister of public worship at its head."<sup>3</sup> In their different "Acts of Secession" the dissident ministers and their congregations called the state church the false church.

The old Church Order of Dordt was superseded by the rules William I and his government established for the church in 1816. Among other things, these rules gave the king the power to appoint the members of each synod, as well as its president and clerk, made the rulings of the synods subject to the approval of the king, and gave nearly unlimited power over the church to a political Minister of Public Worship appointed by the king.<sup>4</sup> The attitude of the seceders towards these changes is beautifully illustrated by a story of Rev. Cornelius Vander Meulen, ordained shortly after the Secession. When Vander Meulen was preaching near Axel, the service was interrupted by two armed officers who said:

In the name of the king we come to tell you that you may not preach before this group; we order you all to leave this place.

Vander Meulen told them:

You have indeed brought the message in the name of the king. But now I must say to you in the name of the King of kings that I am charged to proclaim the Gospel to the people gathered here.... You have sinned, but those who sent you have sinned more grievously.<sup>5</sup>

The binding authority of the creeds was opened to question, and subscription became meaningless

when in 1816 a new formula of subscription was adopted that no longer required candidates for the ministry and officebearers to subscribe to the creeds *because* they agreed with the Word of God, but only *insofar as* the creeds agreed with Scripture. The attitude of the national church toward the creeds was seen when the national synod of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands, having commemorated, in 1817, the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Reformation, refused to commemorate the bicentennial of the Synod of Dordt in 1819.<sup>6</sup>

It was no wonder, then, that the spirit of unbelief already present flourished and grew in the churches. One writer says:

...that Christ was simply an ethical teacher and that religion was essentially a matter of inculcating good morals. The ancient Reformed teaching of man's inability

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1. Seceders dominated in the first immigrant wave; some 13,000 emigrated between 1845 and 1880, and they comprised 65 percent of all emigrants in the peak years 1846-1849. In 1847, the founding year of the major colonies in Michigan, Iowa, and Wisconsin, 79 percent of all emigrants were Seceders. This was at a time when barely one percent of the Dutch populace were Seceders.... Of the 114 clerics ordained in the CRCNA from 1857 to 1900, *every one* had been affiliated with the *Afscheiding*. (Robert P. Swierenga, "True Brothers: The Netherlandic Origins of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, 1857-1880," [http://www.swierenga.com/Kampen\\_pap.html](http://www.swierenga.com/Kampen_pap.html).)

2. *The Psalter*, rev. ed. (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1995), 180 (#213: 3).

3. Henry S. Lucas, ed., *Dutch Immigrant Memoirs and Related Writings* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 15.

4. Maurice G. Hansen, *The Reformed Church in the Netherlands* (New York: Board of Publications of the Reformed Church in America, 1884), 290.

5. Lucas, ed., *Dutch Immigrant Memoirs*, 368.

6. D.H. Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1943), 80.

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ity to do any good that would merit salvation in God's sight was misunderstood and ignored. Sermons often were simple moral discourses. Discipline was lax and doctrinal standards were neglected. Catechetical instruction was abandoned, at least in some places.<sup>7</sup>

Those who insisted on a return to the creeds and to the doctrines of Scripture were regarded as sectarian troublemakers. One modern writer calls them "believing, theologizing, psalmsinging, quarreling, snarling, mutually slandering pilgrims" and calls the Secession a "schism," though he adds: "they were men and women who had the courage of their convictions, no matter how narrow-minded they may appear to us."<sup>8</sup>

The new hymnbook was disliked by the people and many of the ministers, not only because of a long tradition of Psalm-singing in the Dutch churches, but because the hymns introduced unbiblical teachings into the church, as hymns so often do. The opposition to the hymns was so great that many members would hurry out of the services when one of these hymns was announced or cover their heads during the singing of them. Opposition to the hymns was a factor in the discipline of some leaders of the Secession: deCock, Brummelkamp, Gezelle Meerburg, and VanVelzen.

The Secession was a true reformation of the church, of her doctrine, worship, government, and practice, and it came about through the power of the Word of God as it worked first in individual hearts and then, through the preaching of the gospel of grace, in congregations. It was a return to the creeds and church order and through them to the Word of God itself.

### The Leading Figures

Some of the leading figures of the Secession have already been named, but the history of the Se-

cession cannot adequately be told without mentioning some details from the lives of several of them. The principal figures were:

**Hendrik C. deCock (1801-42).** deCock was the first light of the Secession, the oldest of its leaders, the first to suffer for his opposition to the practices and doctrines of the state church, and one whose biography is a summary of the history of the Secession. We will look at his history separately and in more detail.

**Hendrik Pieter Scholte (1805-68).** Scholte was, next to deCock, the leading figure in the Secession. It was at University, in a club named after himself, the Scholte Club, that many of the other leaders of the Secession were prepared for their places in the Secession and in the churches born out of the Secession. From a Lutheran background, he was ordained a minister in North Brabant in the state church in 1833, only a year before the Secession. Suspended from the ministry for preaching in deCock's church, he and his congregation seceded in October, 1834. A proud and outspoken man, he was deposed in 1840 by the churches of the Secession, and in 1847 sailed with a large part of his congregation to the United States, settling in Pella, Iowa, where he and his congregation remained independent for a number of years. In 1854 most of his congregation left him to join with the newly formed denomination that became the Christian Reformed Church.

**Antonie Brummelkamp (1811-88).** Brummelkamp was ordained the year of the Secession, 1834, in Hattem, Gelderland. He was deposed from office in the state church in 1835, without having first been suspended from office, for refusing to baptize the children of non-members, and for refusing to use the new hymns. He had been a member of the Scholte Club, but later fell out with Scholte and was accused by him of Pelagianism and Arminianism.<sup>9</sup> Though he encour-

aged emigration to America, he himself remained in Holland. He was later appointed professor of theology at the University of Kampen when that was established in 1854.

**Simon VanVelzen (1809-96).** VanVelzen was also a member of the Scholte Club at University and was ordained at about the same time as Brummelkamp, though his installation was delayed. He was very quickly thereafter suspended for allowing Brummelkamp and VanRaalte to preach for him (though they were still in good standing at the time), and for refusing to pledge unconditional submission to the church regulations of 1816. He and his congregation seceded in 1835. He, like Brummelkamp, remained in the Netherlands. He was the strongest of all the Secession leaders doctrinally, holding an unconditional covenant and a particular gospel promise.

**Albertus Christiaan VanRaalte (1811-76).** VanRaalte, along with Scholte, is among the best known of the leaders of the Secession. He too had been a member of the Scholte Club and was never ordained in the state church, because he would not promise unconditional obedience to the synodical laws. He was ordained in 1836 as pastor of the Secession congregations in Genemuiden and Mastenbroek, and thereafter served congregations in Ommen and Arnhem. With a large group he emigrated to the United States in 1846, settling in the area of Holland, Michigan, thereafter joining the Reformed Church in America (RCA). VanRaalte was in many ways more liberal than some of the other Secession leaders and for that reason did not leave the RCA when many of the other Seceders left to form the Christian Reformed Church (CRC). He was much vilified for his domineering ways, but it is doubtful that the new colony in Michigan would have succeeded without his strong leadership. It is to be regretted, however, that he



remained in the RCA, a denomination that already then was losing its Reformed character.<sup>10</sup>

Others, such as Gisbertus Haan, the elder who led the seceders out of the RCA in the United States and founded the CRC; G.F. Gezelle Meerburg and Louis Baehler, the other members of the Scholte Club; N. Schotsman of Leyden, who waged an unending battle for the creeds in the years before the Secession; and Cornelius Vander Meulen, an important Secession preacher, could also have

their histories given, but it must be acknowledged that all were but men, with their own faults and weaknesses, and were therefore but instruments in the hands of the Almighty for the preservation and rebuilding of His church. To Him alone must be the glory for the reformation of the church in 1834 and the years following.

... to be continued. 

7. Henry S. Lucas, *Netherlanders in America* (University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 1955), 43.

8. Jacob VanHinte, *Netherlanders*

*in America*, ed. Robert Swierenga, trans. Adriaan deWit (Baker: Grand Rapids, 1985), I, 362.

9. Scholte's charges were probably correct, since Brummelkamp was the one who introduced the theology of the well-meant offer into the Secession churches.

10. Disinterest in Christian education, the use of hymns and choirs in worship, doctrinal laxity and Arminianism in the RCA, lodge membership, ecumenism, open communion, a lack of catechetical instruction and neglect of catechism preaching were all issues in the dispute that led to the formation of the CRCNA.

Translation by Homer Hoeksema\*

## Act of Secession or Return

**W**e the undersigned, Overseers and members of the Reformed Congregation of Jesus Christ at Ulrum, having observed for a considerable time the corruption in the Netherlands Reformed Church (*Nederduitsch Hervormde Kerk*), as well in the mutilation or denial of the doctrine of our fathers, based on God's Word, as in the degeneration of the administration of the Holy Sacraments, according to the regulation of Christ in His Word, and in the almost complete neglect of ecclesiastical discipline; all of which matters are, according to our Reformed Confession, Article 29, distinguishing marks of the true Church; having received through God's grace a Pastor and Teacher who set forth to us according to the Word of God the pure doctrine of our fathers and who applied the same both in particular and in general; the congregation was thereby more and more awakened to direct its steps in con-

fession and walk according to the rule of faith and of God's holy Word: Galatians 6:16, Philippians 3:16; and also to renounce the service of God according to human commandments, because God's Word tells us this is in vain, Matthew 15:9; and at the same time to make us watchful for the profaning of the signs and seals of God's eternal covenant of grace; through this the congregation lived in rest and peace; but that rest and peace was disturbed by the highly unjust and ungodly suspension of our commonly loved and esteemed Pastor as a consequence of his public testimony against false doctrine and against defiled public religious services; quietly and calmly has the congregation with their Pastor and Teacher conducted itself to this point; various very fair proposals were made, both by our Pastor and Teacher and by the rest of the Overseers of the congregation; repeatedly investigation and judgment on the ground of and according to God's Word was requested, but all in vain. Classical, Provincial, and Synodical Ecclesiastical Boards have refused this most just request, and on the contrary have

demanded repentance and regret without pointing out any offense from God's holy Word, as well as unlimited subjection to Synodical regulations and prescriptions, without demonstrating that those are in all things based on God's Word; thereby this Netherlands Ecclesiastical Board has now made itself equivalent to the Popish Church rejected by our fathers; because not only is the previously mentioned corruption observed, but in addition God's Word is rejected or invalidated by ecclesiastical laws and decisions, Matthew 15:4; 23:4; Mark 7:7, 8, and they are persecuted who will live godly in Christ Jesus, according to His own prescriptions, recorded in His Word, and the consciences of men are bound; finally on the authority of the Provincial Ecclesiastical Board the preaching of the Word of God by a publicly acknowledged minister in our midst, the Rev. H.P. Scholte, Reformed Pastor at Doveren and Genderen, in the land of Heusden and Altena, Province of North Brabant, was forbidden, and the mutual assemblies of the believers, which were held with open doors, were punished by

\* This translation by Homer C. Hoeksema appeared originally in the February 15, 1984 issue of the *Standard Bearer*, p. 221.

fines;—taking all of this together, it has now become more than plain, that the Netherlands Reformed Church is not the True, but the false Church, according to God’s Word and Article 29 of our Confession; for which reason the undersigned hereby declare: that they in accordance with the office of all believers, Article 28, separate themselves from those who are not of the Church, and therefore will have no more fellowship with the Netherlands Reformed Church, until it returns to the true service of the Lord; and declare at the same time their willingness to exercise fellowship with all true Reformed members, and to unite themselves

with every gathering founded on God’s infallible Word, in whatever place God has also united the same, testifying hereby that in all things we hold to God’s holy Word and to our old forms of unity, in all things founded on that Word, namely, the Confession of Faith, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of the Synod of Dordrecht, held in the year 1618 and 1619; to order our public religious services according to the ancient ecclesiastical liturgy; and with respect to divine service and church government, for the present to hold to the Church Order instituted by the aforementioned Synod of Dordrecht.

Finally, we hereby declare that we continue to acknowledge our unjustly suspended Pastor.

Ulrum, the 13<sup>th</sup> of October, 1834. (signed) J.J. Beukema, Elder; K.J. Barkema, Elder; K.A. van der Laan, Deacon; D.P. Ritsema, Deacon; Geert K. Bos, Deacon. [On Oct. 14 signed by 67 members in behalf of some 268.]

Note: At the meeting of the congregation on October 14, 1834 at the home of the Widow Hulshoff, almost the entire congregation agreed with this position of the Consistory and also signed the Acts of Secession or Return. —H.C.H.



by Prof. David Engelsma

## The Covenant Doctrine of the “Fathers of the Secession”

At the beginning of that reformation in the Netherlands, the fathers of the Secession of 1834—Hendrik deCock, Simon VanVelzen, Anthony Brummelkamp, and perhaps others—were agreed that election governs the covenant of grace. They differed in other respects, especially whether children of unbelieving members of the congregation should be baptized and concerning the meaning of the phrase “sanctified in Christ” in the first question of the Baptism form. But with one voice they confessed that election determines the covenant promise, covenant membership, the enjoyment of covenant blessings, and the realization in some baptized children of covenant salvation.

For the fathers of the Secession,

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the covenant is a covenant of *grace*. God establishes His covenant unconditionally with the elect, and with the elect only. The reason was not that those benighted men had not as yet been able to free themselves from the fetters of “scholasticism,” as C. Veenhof contends. The “liberated” Reformed theologian dismisses VanVelzen’s covenant doctrine, which Veenhof correctly describes as the doctrine that has election governing the covenant, as a “typically scholastic method of reasoning.”<sup>1</sup>

Rather, the leaders of the Secession formed their doctrine of the covenant according to the gospel of sovereign grace that they found in the Bible and in the Reformed confessions. It was this gospel of sovereign grace that gave birth to the Secession. The Secession of 1834 had its origin in Hendrik deCock’s heartfelt conviction of the truth of salvation by the almighty

grace of God. By reading Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, deCock came to know the truth of the confession of one of his parishioners, Klaas Kuipenga: “If I must add even one sigh to my salvation, then I would be eternally lost.”<sup>2</sup>

The Canons of Dordt played a powerful, indeed decisive, role in launching the Secession. With good reason, one scholar has called the Canons the “*credo*” of the Secession. deCock discovered the Canons after his ordination to the ministry. Previously, this Reformed confession was unknown to him, even though he was a graduate of a Reformed seminary (as is the case with many graduates from Reformed seminaries in North America today). At the beginning of the Secession, deCock had the Canons reprinted at his own expense and then distributed copies far and wide throughout the Netherlands.

Hendrik deCock preached the gospel of grace as confessed and defended by the Canons. To this, God's people responded by a living faith, as they always do, so that the Secession became a mighty and nation-wide reformation of the church. Algra tells us that in the early days of the Secession people traveled half a day on foot to Ulrum (where deCock preached), in order to hear a sermon that did not teach that one is saved "by 'doing and permitting,' but by the eternal wonder of unmerited free grace."<sup>3</sup>

The first sermon deCock preached after the Secession had taken place in Ulrum was on Ephesians 2: "By grace ye are saved" (the afternoon sermon was on Lord's Day 1 of the Catechism). The date was October 19, 1834, and is worthy of remembrance.

In his biography of his father, Helenius deCock acknowledged Hendrik deCock's embrace of the gospel of salvation by sovereign grace. Reading Calvin's *Institutes*, wrote Helenius deCock, Hendrik deCock

now recognized...the great truth, that later shone through in all his preaching and writing, that it is God who seeks man, who must first love us, if we shall be able to love Him; and who has known and loved His people from before the foundation of the world, so that He would sanctify them. *Now it was God alone and He in everything, to whom the honor of redemption belonged.*<sup>4</sup>

The enemies of the Secession understood well that the Secession was church reformation by means of and for the sake of the gospel of grace as confessed by the Canons. When, early in the Secession, VanVelzen pleaded with the leaders of the state church to defend the confessions, one of the ministers replied, "I rather have my neck wrung than subscribe to the Canons of Dordt."<sup>5</sup>

Men gripped by the truth of

sovereign grace must teach a covenant of grace, that is, a covenant governed by election.

This was the covenant doctrine of the fathers of the Secession.

Fundamental to the doctrine that the covenant is governed by election is the truth that the covenant promise refers to the elect children of believers in Jesus Christ, and to the elect children only. Regarding these objects of the covenant promise to Abraham, that God will be the God of Abraham and Abraham's seed, Hendrik deCock wrote: "That promise did not refer to all the children of Abraham's family, head for head, but to all the elect children, which God would later indicate (Rom. 9:7, 8)." He added:

For a child that went lost circumcision could not be a sacrament sealing the promise to this child, because the promise was not made to that child, but to Abraham, not with respect to every child head for head, but with respect to the elect children, to whom that reprobate child did not belong (Rom. 9:7, 8; Gen. 17:10).<sup>6</sup>

Simon VanVelzen, the outstanding Reformed theologian of the Secession, also taught that the covenant is governed by election. Curiously, Canadian Reformed theologian Dr. Jelle Faber overlooked VanVelzen when he listed the representatives of the two contending covenant views in the churches of the Secession later in the nineteenth century. As a representative of the doctrine that election governs the covenant, Faber could only think of Joffers, whose personal reputation suffers among Reformed scholars (thanks in no small part to the "liberated" Reformed, who never fail to lament his narrow-mindedness and stubbornness), and who, in any case, does not belong to the fathers of the Secession. However, Faber could give a long list of Secession ministers who, according to Faber, taught a doctrine of the covenant

from which election is strictly banished.<sup>7</sup>

Another vitally important element of the covenant doctrine of those Reformed theologians and churches that confess that election governs the covenant is the explanation of the phrase in the Baptism form, "our children...are sanctified in Christ," that identifies these children as the elect in Christ among the physical children of believers. In 1857, VanVelzen explained this phrase as follows:

We know that everyone who is sanctified in Christ is infallibly saved, that the covenant, of which Baptism is sign and seal, is called an eternal covenant of grace, so that they, who are included in it, cannot perish. How then must we understand it, when at Baptism the little children are said to be "sanctified in Christ"? Must we conceive this of all children who are baptized, of all children head for head who have believing parents? Neither the one, nor the other! It is incontrovertible, I

1. C. Veenhof, *Prediking en Uitverkiezing* (Kampen: Kok, 1959), 77. This and the other quotations of the Dutch in this article are my translations.

2. H. Algra, *Het Wonder van de 19e Eeuw: Van Vrije Kerken en Kleine Luyden* (Franeker: T. Wever, 1966), 107.

3. Ibid.

4. Quoted in B. Wielenga, *De Reformatie van '34* (Kampen: Kok, 1933), 41. The emphasis is deCock's.

5. Ibid., 80. The Dutch is irresistibly forceful: "Ik laat mij liever den hals afsnijden, dan dat ik de Dordtsche leerregels zou onderteekenen."

6. Hendrik deCock, "Korte Verklaring van den Kinderdoop. In Vragen en Antwoorden, in *Verzamelde Geschriften* (Houten: DenHertog, 1986), 494. I express my thanks to Mr. Marvin Kamps for obtaining for me this and some of the other Dutch writings I have read for this article.

7. Jelle Faber, *American Secession Theologians on Covenant and Baptism* (Neerlandia, Alberta, Canada: Inheritance Publications, 1996), 26, 27.

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think, that the words in view cannot be understood definitely of every child who is baptized. Rather, they have reference to the seed of the promise, and here the elect are counted for the seed.<sup>8</sup>

Eight years later, VanVelzen availed himself of his privilege as editor of the magazine *De Bazuin* to respond to the covenant doctrine of his colleague Rev. K.J. Pieters. By this time, Pieters was introducing into the churches of the Secession, and defending, a radically different doctrine of the covenant than that held by the fathers of the Secession. Pieters taught that, at Baptism, God extended His gracious covenant promise to every child alike. According to Pieters, God assured every child that he or she was now in possession of the grace of the covenant. At Baptism, every child participates in covenant grace, although this by no means assures the salvation of any, for the covenant is conditional. Pieters argued that only this doctrine does justice to God's assuring all the children that they are heirs of the covenant and its blessings. The other doctrine of the covenant—that of the fathers of the Secession, that of VanVelzen, editor of the magazine in which Pieters was defending his new doctrine of the covenant, as Pieters well knew, that which has election governing the covenant—Pieters charged, makes God a liar and is, in fact, "blasphemous" (Dutch: "*Godslasterlijk*").

Incidentally, Pieters' violent assault on the doctrine of the covenant that has election governing the covenant exposes the error, if not the foolishness, of those today who plead for the tolerance in one church federation of both doctrines of the covenant that struggled for the heart, mind, and confession of the churches of the Secession in the latter part of the nineteenth century. These two doctrines of the covenant are mutually exclusive. They detest each other. And necessarily so. They are, in principle,

two different gospels with specific reference to the grace and salvation of the covenant.

VanVelzen's response to Pieters' outrageous charge clearly revealed the covenant doctrine of this father of the Secession.

By circumcision, God had given assurance to Israel that they were in possession of the righteousness of faith in the most solemn and earnest manner, and many Israelites have not obtained this righteousness and have not participated in it. But God's assurance nevertheless does not fail. For the children of the promise, those who are brought to faith out of the power of God's election and promise, are counted for the seed.<sup>9</sup>

Anthony Brummelkamp, whose teaching of a "well-meaning offer" of salvation would contribute to a radically different doctrine of the covenant, was originally one with deCock and VanVelzen in teaching that election governs the covenant. Brummelkamp maintained that election determines the true seed of Abraham, and the true children of believers, to whom the promise is made and who alone are included in the covenant of grace. Replying on behalf of the important, early Secession synod of 1837 (Utrecht) to questions raised by Hendrik deCock, Brummelkamp said this about the holiness of children taught in I Corinthians 7:14 ("now are they [your children] holy"), and by implication the sanctification of children in the first question of the Baptism form, and about the relation of election and covenant:

The word "holy" used by the apostle [in] I Cor. VII:14, concerning the children of believers, has the same meaning in this passage as it does at the beginning of the epistle [in] chapter 1:2 when the apostle addresses the congregation as sanctified in Christ Jesus, called saints, since the children of the congregation as well as the adults are included in the covenant of God, and the Lord has

shed His blood as well for them as for the adults and has adopted them as His children and taken them into the covenant of grace (Bel. Conf., Art. 34 and the form of infant baptism). Giving this explanation, we must at the same time observe that we most vehemently deny that we are thereby saying: *that each and every child of the congregation head for head possesses or will possess a holiness worked in their heart by the Holy Spirit* (Dutch: "*eene inklevende heiligheid*"), as little as we would give such an explanation concerning every one of their parents, who show themselves to us as sanctified in Christ, although we treat them as such. For not because they are produced from the congregation according to the flesh are they all children of God, but the children of the promise are the holy seed (Rom IX:7, 8). This holy seed, as well as all the other elect, is taken into the covenant of grace, in which covenant nothing is included that is unholy.<sup>10</sup>

Conclusive is Brummelkamp's appeal to Romans 9:7, 8. The appeal to this passage in a discussion of the covenant promise indicates that one views the covenant, particularly the membership of children in the covenant, as governed by God's sovereign predestination. This, of course, is precisely the doctrine of the apostle in the passage.

Two synods of the Secession churches expressed the judgment of the fathers of the Secession that election governs the covenant. The first was the Synod of Utrecht (1837). Among other decisions, this synod declared that

the children of believers are included in the covenant of God and His congregation with their parents by virtue of the promises of God. Therefore, Synod believes, with Head I, Art. 17 of the Canons of Dordt, that godly parents must be admonished not to doubt the election and salvation of their children, whom God takes away in their infancy. Therefore, Synod, with the Baptism Form, counts the children of believers to have to be

regarded as members of the congregation of Christ, as heirs of the kingdom of God and of His covenant. Since, however, the Word of God plainly teaches that not all are Israel who are of Israel, and the children of the promises are counted for the seed, therefore Synod by no means regards all and every one head for head, whether children or adult confessors, as true objects of the grace of God or regenerated.

The synod added that it denied “a falling away of saints or a falling out of the covenant of grace.”<sup>11</sup>

These statements by the Secession Synod of Utrecht express the covenant doctrine of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America.

The other synod was the Synod of Leiden (1857). This synod treated a protest against the preaching of Brummelkamp, who was universalizing the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ by a “well-meaning offer” of salvation. Significantly, the synod was compelled to declare that the “Three Forms of Unity” “rejected universal atonement.” But the synod also made a statement concerning the doctrine of infant baptism: “That the children of the congregation must be baptized as members; but just as not all were Israel who were of Israel, that likewise also among

the children of believers there are unconverted and reprobates.”<sup>12</sup>

From the very beginning of the Secession in 1834 through the 1840s and 1850s, the fathers of the Secession and therefore the churches of the Secession proclaimed a doctrine of the covenant that has the covenant governed by (not: “oppressed by,” “stifled by,” “burdened with,” “identified with,” or any of the other pejorative phrases used by Reformed theologians who oppose this doctrine of the covenant) election—election as an eternal, gracious, sovereign decree. There were other differences concerning the covenant, particularly how the holiness of the infants was to be explained. But on this vital matter, the fathers of the Secession agreed. They agreed because they read, rightly interpreted, and loved the covenant gospel of grace taught in Romans 9. E. Smilde was right when he said that the “Churches of the Secession lived in Rom. 9 and held fast the connection of election and the covenant of grace without wavering.”<sup>13</sup>

In the 1860s, two Secession ministers, K.J. Pieters and J.R. Kreulen, introduced a radically different doctrine of the covenant. This doctrine denied any relation of election and covenant. The two ministers were so bold as to declare

that every thought of election must be banished at the Baptism font. This new doctrine of the covenant—new to the churches of the Secession—found a reception. This is the covenant doctrine of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands (“liberated”). This is the covenant doctrine that now comes to full development in the heresy of the Federal Vision.

... to be concluded. 

8. Simon VanVelzen, “*Brief over de Heiliging van de Kinderen der Geloovigen in Christus*,” *De Bazuin* [a magazine of the Secession churches] (Aug. 14, 1857) [the magazine is not paginated].

9. Simon VanVelzen, *De Bazuin* (Jan. 20, 1865). The article by Pieters, which editor VanVelzen freely footnoted in order to add his running rejoinders, is titled, “*Eenige Opmerkingen over de 69e vr. en Antw. van den Katechismus*.”

10. Anthony Brummelkamp, quoted in H.[elenius] deCock, *Hendrik deCock, Eerste Afscheiden Predikant in Nederland Beschouwd in Leven en Werkzaamheid* (Delfzijl: Jan Haan, 1886), 569, 570. The emphasis is Brummelkamp’s.

11. Quoted in Hendrik deCock, *Verzamelde Geschriften*, 530.

12. Quoted in Veenhof, *Prediking en Uitverkiezing*, 59.

13. E. Smilde, *Een Eeuw van Strijd over Verbond en Doop* (Kampen: Kok, 1946), 27.

Prof. Herman Hanko

## The Afscheiding and the Well-meant Gospel Offer

### Introduction

**T**he *Afscheiding* (Secession) of 1834 was a true reformation of the church. It

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was a work of God through the Spirit of the exalted Christ by which the true church of Christ was delivered from the apostate state church (Hervormde Kerk). The *Afscheiding* is, therefore, part of the history of the Protestant Reformed Churches.

That the *Afscheiding* was a true reformation of the church does not

mean that there were no problems, differences, divisions, or disagreements among the many people and leaders who left the state church and joined the movement. One of those differences was the question of the well-meant gospel offer. It is that difference that is the subject of this article.

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## Background

It is not possible to understand this crucially important difference over the preaching of the gospel without going back over a century to developments in the Reformed churches in the Netherlands.

While the *Afscheiding* is certainly to be explained against the background of the apostate state church (the only Reformed Church in the whole of the Netherlands), that apostasy had been a long time present. Amazingly, that apostasy had begun a little over fifty years after the great victory of the Synod of Dordt in the conflict with Arminianism. Over the years, that apostasy worsened, until God's people could hardly bear to worship in their own or even other congregations. The worship was sinful, and the gospel was not preached. The souls of the saints were not being fed.

The result of such a spiritual agony as the faithful people of God were enduring was the formation of *gezelschappen* (conventicles or house meetings). In these house meetings, usually held on the Lord's Day, saints came together to study and discuss God's Word, read old writers who were Reformed, and pray together to bring their collective needs to the throne of grace.

Not all these *gezelschappen* were equally orthodox. This could hardly be expected when the people had no leader and the members were frequently of the uneducated lower class. One more gifted, more educated, and more fluent of speech, if such could be found, would assume a leadership role as an *oefenaar*, or exhorter, who was not an ordained minister, but who could give the people some guidance.

In their search for sound Reformed writings, they came across the writings of some Scottish theologians who, as it seemed to the members of the conventicles, struck the right spiritual note of genuine inner piety. The faithful in Scot-

land faced many of the same problems as the faithful in the Netherlands. A state church existed also in Scotland, and, like the state church in the Netherlands, had become corrupt in that land in the north of the British Isles. Differences did, however, exist. The state church in Scotland was not as *doctrinally* apostate as the state church in the Netherlands; but the Scottish church was extremely worldly and carnally minded, and could rightly be accused of dead orthodoxy.

The faithful in the church in Scotland were gratified by the creedal orthodoxy of the church (such as it was), but the looseness of morals and the wicked lives members lived filled them with dismay. They concluded, rightly, that the problem was "a religion of the head, but not of the heart." And this they set about to correct with an emphasis on piety. Piety was defined as a genuine conversion of the heart, rooted in a deep conviction of sin and a need of Christ's sacrifice, and a life of holiness that followed on "closing with Christ," an expression much used among the godly in Scotland.

The difficulty is that these people had no true conception of the covenant and of conversion within the covenant. And so they expressed the fruit of biblical preaching in terms of evidences of conversion in the lives of people, among which evidences was conviction of sin. Here is where some introduced into the thinking of people the idea of a well-meant gospel offer. Those who were under the conviction of sin were not yet converted and brought to Christ; in their misery and anxiety over sin they had to be urged to come to Christ. The offer of the gospel, expressing God's love for them, God's desire to save them, God's assuring them that He had done all to make their salvation possible and real, was the way to accomplish

this goal and bring convicted sinners to Christ.

The piety of these men in Scotland appealed to the people in the Netherlands who faced the same problems of moral laxity and worldliness in their own churches. And so the ideas prevalent among the concerned people on the other side of the North Sea were adopted in the conventicles, and the writings of Scottish theologians were avidly read. The result was that the idea of a well-meant gospel offer entered into the thinking of some of these people. Because of their emphasis on holiness, they became known as Pietists.

When the *Afscheiding*, under the leadership of deCock, took place, those who rushed to form new congregations, as deCock had done in Ulrum, were, for the most part, from the conventicles. One characteristic of the movement in its earlier years was the drastic shortage of ministers. The situation was so serious that many of those who were *oefenaars* (exhorters) in the conventicles, now assumed the same role in newly established congregations. It is, therefore, not surprising that the idea of the well-meant offer entered into the thinking of the *Afscheiding* churches.

Not all the ministers and members of the *Afscheiding* churches by any means accepted the doctrine of the well-meant gospel offer. In her book *Son of Secession: Douwe J. VanderWerp*, Janet Sheeres speaks of the fact that there were serious doctrinal divisions among the seceders. Generally speaking, there were two factions in the churches: a so-called Groningen faction (*richting*) and a Gelderse faction (*richting*). The Groningen faction was strongly orthodox and was intent on maintaining the confessions. It was found chiefly in the provinces of Groningen and Friesland. The Gelderse faction was primarily in the south and had leanings towards Arminianism.

The leaders of the *Afscheiding* in the north were deCock and VanVelzen. The leaders in the south were Brummelkamp, Helenius deCock (Hendrik de Cock's son), and, to a lesser extent, VanRaalte. The story is told (I cannot vouch for its accuracy) that when Hendrik deCock heard that Brummelkamp was preaching a well-meant offer, he said: "Hij is geen broer; hij is e'n neef" (He is no brother; he is a nephew).

When the seceders felt the need for a seminary and one was established in Kampen, both factions were represented, the northern or orthodox faction by VanVelzen, and the south or more liberal faction by Brummelkamp and Helenius deCock. The graduates from the school were themselves divided, and the more orthodox congregations in the north did not want graduates who showed the influences of the teachings of Brummelkamp and Helenius deCock.


So the well-meant gospel offer appeared in the thinking of the *Afscheiding* churches, and many within those churches came to believe this doctrine. They were

committed to the idea that God desires to save all who hear the gospel and expresses His own hope that those who hear will surely come to Christ to find their salvation in Christ's blood. God assures men that, on His part, He has done all that He can to make salvation available to them. It remains the responsibility of the hearers to attend to the words of the gospel and obey the command to "close with Christ."

This Arminian strain was present in the *Afscheiding* from its very inception. It has endured in many churches who trace their origin back to the Secession of 1834. The Western Michigan settlements were composed primarily of people of the Secession, and both strains of thinking could be found in the settlements: the more orthodox northern faction and the more Arminian southern faction. Thus the idea of a well-meant offer entered the thinking of the Christian Reformed Church.

In the Netherlands, the Secession of 1834 was followed by the *Doleantie* led by Dr. Abraham Kuyper. One could not find the teachings of the well-meant offer in Kuyper's reformatory move-

ment, because Kuyper himself was completely opposed to it. But when the *Afscheiding* and the *Doleantie* (Kuyper's reformatory movement) merged in 1892, the well-meant gospel offer came along into the merged churches, the *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*. Since then, the GKN has merged with the old state church and a Lutheran denomination to form the Protestant Church in the Netherlands (PKN), a completely apostate denomination.

The Christian Reformed Church, in its history in the late Eighties and early Nineties, reflected the same divisions as were to be found in the *Afscheiding* churches, divisions that were made worse by the adoption of Kuyperian common grace in the denomination. The divisions were healed, and peace was restored, by the adoption of the three points of common grace by the Synod of the CRC in Kalamazoo in 1924. Because of that settlement of the problem, many orthodox and faithful, from both the *Afscheiding* and the *Doleantie*, came out of the CRC to form the Protestant Reformed Churches in America. 

Prof. Barry Gritters

## The Afscheiding's Commitment to Psalm-Singing

**T**he Protestant Reformed Churches are a Psalm-singing denomination. They sing Psalms in worship—and little else. The families sing Psalms (as

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well as good hymns) in their homes—many Psalms. Their children are taught the Psalms in the Christian schools—where Psalms have pride of place.

The PRC are gladly Psalm-singing churches. They understand what an old preacher meant when, praising the Psalms, he said: "David has for ages subdued more

hearts with his harp than ever with his sword and scepter." And they believe that *one* of the instruments God uses to preserve them is the singing of the Psalms. By the Psalms they teach and admonish one another. By the Psalms the Word of Christ dwells in them richly (Col. 3:16).

That the Protestant Reformed

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Churches are Psalm-singing churches is due in part to God's work of preserving Reformed Christianity in the Secession of 1834. There is history behind the PRC's Psalm-singing.



When the churches' youth ask why the church worships God by singing Psalms, the pastor would be wise to reason from Scripture, but very quickly also direct the youth to ask another question. It is what I always call "the question of history." Those interested in why the church believes or practices *anything* should always ask the "question of history." That is, how did the church of the past worship? Did they sing Psalms?

Asking the question of history is faithfulness to God. He commanded: "Ask for the old paths, where is the good way." He instructs the church: "Hold the traditions." One of these traditions of the church is singing the Psalms.

The fathers of the *Afscheiding* contended that separation from the existing church was necessary. Though Psalm-singing was not the central issue in the Secession, the requirement that the churches sing hymns may well have precipitated the schism. A substitution of hymns for Psalms was a departure from the old paths, the good way.

### The Battle for Psalms

Some 300 years *before* the *Afscheiding*, the great Reformation of the sixteenth century restored Psalm singing. The German branch of the Reformation, under the influence of Luther, maintained the singing of many hymns; although no one may suppose that Luther did not love the Psalms and the singing of the Psalms. However, the Swiss, French, Scotch, and Dutch branches believed that faithfulness to the old paths was to sing the Psalms, and perhaps exclusively.

This was true emphatically in the Lowlands. In 1566 the reformer Petrus Dathenus published a vol-

ume containing his translation into Dutch of the Psalms in meter, after the pattern of the Genevan Psalter. Already in 1568, the Dutch churches at Wesel adopted this as their Psalter. This was the songbook of the Dutch Reformed churches for many years, although not without struggle. When the Great Synod at Dordt met in 1618-1619, the churches had to fight off an attempt by the Arminians to introduce hymns. Thus, Dordt adopted a church order that called the churches to sing Psalms (Art. 69). The synod did permit a few hymns to be sung (as well as the 10 commandments, the Lord's Prayer, the Apostles' Creed), but Dordt's intent was to convey a message no one could miss: "We are Psalm-singing churches!"

For 150 years after Dordt, the Dutch churches maintained the practice of singing from King David's songbook. Again, not without struggle. Confirming the adage "If you want a fight in the church, debate money or music," the Dutch Reformed during the 1700s fought about which version of the Psalms would be used. "Datheen," as they called the Psalter of Petrus Dathenus, was the songbook of choice, and even "went underground" when the rulers determined another would be used instead. So it is not a surprise to hear that there were riots in some of the fishermen's towns near Rotterdam over proposals to use something other than Dathenus' version of the Psalter.

But soon there were moves to add hymns to the church's repertoire of worship songs. In 1789, a Psalm book was published that included an appendix with hymns. These were known as the "*evangelische gezangen*," or "Evangelical Hymns." In 1796, the provincial Synod of North Holland initiated an *official* adoption of hymns by proposing that all seven provincial synods in the Netherlands jointly compose a new songbook that would include both Psalms and

hymns, a kind of "Psalter-Hymnal." Some of the synods were slow to sign on, but by 1805 the joint committee presented their songbook to the acting head of the Dutch republic. By 1807 it became the official song-book of the Reformed churches.

Now it becomes clear that, although the matter of Psalms and hymns was not the central issue in the Secession, it was an important part of the struggle to maintain the purity of the church and persevere on the old paths.

### The Psalm-Singing Leaders

The ministers who led their flocks out of the departing churches testified that Psalm-singing was one of the reasons for secession.

Hendrik deCock first wrote a preface to a layman's attack on hymns. Later deCock wrote his own tract. "Will you, I say, trample and disobey and stray from the path and do away with all the decisions of the general synods of our fathers regarding their pronouncements against these songs?" deCock's pamphlet quotes Peter Martyr, who said that by hymns, the "Roman church received copper in exchange for gold."

He objected not because the hymns were bad hymns—modernistic and theologically unsound—but because they were *hymns*. One historian's analysis of the history confirms this: "They decried the introduction of hymns into the worship as another channel of heterodoxy—hymns being the words of man as opposed to Psalms, the words of God."

A Christian Reformed historian tells of the church discipline applied to H. Scholte. The reasons? "He had objections to the preparatory questions for the Lord's Supper... and his flock objected to the use of the hymns."

Anthony Brummelkamp "refused to baptize children of non-confessing members... and declared that he would no longer give



out the hymns since there were many objections to them....”

Theirs were not the only testimonies of love for the Psalms. But they are representative of the people of the *Afscheiding*.

### Reasons for Hymns

Those who promoted the hymns claimed that ministers needed songs that were appropriate for the particular Lord’s Day of the Heidelberg Catechism sermon. Or they suggested that the church needed a songbook that extolled “the fulfilled gospel; the honor of the Savior and of the Holy Spirit; the atonement; and grace.” They suggested that the hymns were the Dutch people’s attempt to have a “freer church hymn in which the Christian heart should find the satisfying expression of its holiest emotion.” The committee proposing the hymns was so bold as to claim that the hymns were “... to guard in our congregations the purity of doctrine in the midst of a stream of manifold dangerous modernities.” The problem with these claims is, first, that hymns are not needed to sing of Jesus Christ, as Jesus Himself said in Luke 24:27, 44, and as Paul said in Colossians 3:16 (see also Eph. 5:19). Second, some of the new hymns themselves were doctrinally unsound.

One of the Reformed ministers not on the side of the Secessionists went on the offensive against Psalm-singing. J.J. VanOosterzee’s criticism was sharp. First, he flayed the seceding ministers by labeling them as shepherds “who minister to the disease of the congregation.” Not satisfied with promoting hymns, VanOosterzee attacked ministers. He also assaulted the Psalms. “As the Dutch metrical Psalms now are, they are found to be...for the greater half, altogether unusable, and also actually out of use in the Church of the New Covenant; which can indeed *read* all these Psalms, but can only to a very partial extent *sing* them in public worship.”

### The Defense of Psalms

The *Afscheiding* ministers defended Psalmody primarily, but not exclusively, by an appeal to the history of God’s church. The Reformation had restored Psalms. The Great Synod (Dordt) had so recently called the Dutch Reformed to be Psalm-singers. The church must preserve this precious heritage.

deCock opened his pamphlet against hymns this way:

Hymns were never introduced into the church, except to cause degeneration and contempt for the welfare of the church, or perhaps in cases of incomplete Reformation.... We see as well that in the best of time, in the purest churches, hymns are never found nor tolerated.... Where Reformation has broken out in its purest form, the hymns are completely done away with.

Then:

... not with us nor in France nor in Geneva, are hymns tolerated or found, and certainly not in Scotland. However, in England, where Episcopalian church government remains, and where Romish ceremonies are still partially allowed, one will perhaps find hymns being sung.

In their appeal to history, these Reformers could be sharp, too:

Where, therefore, were the hymns or other whorish songs ever used in the days of the apostles in the congregation of the Lord? Do we find any reference to them? Never!

After referring to the heretics of ancient times, deCock said:

These heretics... had innovations in mind and caused congregations to become perverse, blinded through errors, and they did these things by means of new songs of human composition.

Psalms in worship! The Reformers of 1834 called for Psalms.

Although their concerns in reformation were more, and deeper, their reform included restoration of the churches’ pure worship.

### PRC Tradition

The Protestant Reformed Churches come out of the tradition of the *Afscheiding*. They are one of the few denominations of Reformed with Dutch roots that has remained true to that tradition (there are a few Presbyterian denominations that maintain the Psalms in worship). We call our Reformed and Presbyterian brothers worldwide to join with us in singing God’s praises through the Psalms.

The tradition of the *Afscheiding* is maintained. But not without struggle.

When our fathers, many from the *Afscheiding* churches, came to America in the mid-1800s, they sang the Psalms. But the battle that was waged in the Netherlands repeated itself in this country. When the immigrants joined the existing “Dutch Reformed” denomination in the States, they soon found membership there unacceptable. One of the reasons was the use of hymns in worship.

In 1857, five American congregations seceded from the “Reformed Protestant Dutch Church” (known today as the Reformed Church in America) with this confession (take note what is listed *first*):

We are obliged to give you notice of our present ecclesiastical standpoint, namely, separating ourselves from your denomination... with which we thoughtlessly became connected upon our arrival in America. We are uniting ourselves with the *Afgescheidene Gereformeerde Kerk* in the Netherlands.... The reasons for this our secession ...are as follows: 1) The collection of 800 hymns....

This was the beginning of the Christian Reformed Churches.

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The CRC, too, struggled long to maintain the singing of Psalms. By today, the CRC has adopted mostly hymns. In 1932, at the beginning of that struggle, that denomination prefaced their new songbook with these words: "...during the 77 years of its existence, the Christian Reformed Church has sung practically nothing but Psalms in public worship." The preface said:


We were aware of the unsound or unsatisfactory character of many current hymns, and we feared that in an environment where the Psalms are seldom sung, the introduction of hymns in public worship would lead to the neglect of those deeply spiritual songs of

the Old Testament which the Church should never fail to use in its service of praise.

*The deeply spiritual songs of the Old Testament which the Church should never fail to use in its service of praise!*

Knowing this history may be helpful for the people of God to maintain their love for the Psalms. It may assist them to show their questioning youth that they stand in the line of godly men and women who worshiped God in this way for hundreds and thousands of years.

May the Lord Christ, the "sweet Psalmist (Singer!) of Israel," put His Psalms in the church's heart and mouth, so she does not

miss out on their depth, breadth, and God-centered focus. To say nothing of their inspired "instructions" and "admonitions" by which the people of God converse in the beauty of covenant worship (Eph. 5:19). 

(Please write the editorial office for the sources of the quotations in this article. If you ask, we will be glad to send you a list of literature that explains the biblical basis for the church's practice of singing Psalms. The literature will include an explanation of how the words of *Christ* dwell in the church when she sings the Psalms. A subject that may be worth treating in a future special issue. Ed.)

Rev. Steven Key

## The Afscheiding and Christian Education

**T**he history of Christian education in the Netherlands is a long history.

### Prior to the *Afscheiding*

The Reformation, beginning already with Martin Luther, called for and established schools where the foundation would be the teachings of Holy Scripture. The Dutch Reformed gave the same emphasis to Christian education as early as 1574, when a Reformed synod called on preachers to see to it that there were good Christian schoolmasters.<sup>1</sup>

But while the schools in the Netherlands—government schools

—once had significant Christian content in their instruction, this was no longer the case by the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The spirit of toleration that characterized the Enlightenment had gained the upper hand in the churches, at the expense of sound doctrine and antithetical, godly living. Secular and humanistic ideas and critical views of Scripture, which were already prevalent in the universities of the Netherlands, had worked their way through the schools as well.

While there remained in many areas a certain Christian influence, including Bible reading and prayer, the foundational principles of Christian education established in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were largely lost. The truth of the Reformed faith no

longer permeated the instruction.

By the time Napoleon's revolutionary army made its way into the Netherlands in 1795 and uprooted the remnants of Reformed theology and practice from public life, there were few who cared.<sup>2</sup> All religions were given equal footing under the law, and under the banner of toleration or non-sectarianism the teaching of any distinctively Reformed perspective in the public schools was ousted, to be replaced with deistic religion.

There were, however, schools owned and operated by Reformed churches.<sup>3</sup> The Education Law of 1806 allowed for private schools alongside the public schools. Private schools were supported by tuition payments for the students, as well as by the foundation or society that founded them. They could

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also be church-operated, and subsidized if necessary by the deacons of a congregation. Private schools were not subject to the government restrictions of religious perspective or content.

But the Education Law of 1806 did forbid even private Reformed schools the right to use any doctrinal standards in the hiring of teachers. The hiring of teachers was subject to the approval of the state.<sup>4</sup> This contributed to a further weakening of Reformed principles in Christian education. Teachers, after all, are the heart of a sound biblical and Reformed education. With the government preventing "sectarian" (read, solidly Reformed) teachers from being hired by Reformed schools, the generic instruction of the state schools continued to advance also in the private schools.

### The Development of the *Afscheiding*

The leadership of the *Afscheiding* of 1834 came from men who had come through those schools marked by toleration and higher critical views of Scripture. They had rejected those erroneous views and presuppositions, seeking to maintain the authority of Holy Scripture as maintained in the Reformed confessions.

Prior to 1834 these young men had been members of the so-called "Scholte Club" at the University of Leiden, a group begun by Hendrik Scholte and some fellow students.<sup>5</sup> That group proved to be an incubator of ideas that would later influence the direction of the *Afscheiding*. One matter of importance to these men was a sound education, beginning at the elementary level and continuing all the way through university studies.<sup>6</sup>

With the Reformation of 1834 and in the years immediately following, there was tremendous upheaval even among the new congregations of the *Afscheiding*. The unsettled nature of the movement and the persecution that ensued

prevented any development of an educational system for the children.

Already on November 10, 1834, a Christian school was opened in a very humble setting at Smilde, with Douwe J. VanderWerp the first teacher. Almost immediately, however, the civil authorities closed it and fined VanderWerp a significant sum of money.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, the chief focus initially, besides the care of the congregations, was upon developing a program of theological instruction for training young men for the ministry.

Within a few years, however, there arose hopes among Christian parents that emigrating to America would enable them to provide a Christian education for their children.

### The Movement to America

Our interest turns to the members of the *Afscheiding* as they soon began to emigrate to the United States of America.

It isn't within the scope of this article to develop the reasons for the emigration movement. The suffering of extreme poverty, burdensome taxes, and the desire for a more free exercise of religion were the main contributing factors. But among some there was also the hope that emigrating to America would enable them to provide a Christian education for their children.<sup>8</sup>

In late 1846 a sizable group boarded a ship bound for America, accompanied by their pastor, the Reverend A.C. VanRaalte. By early 1847 they were clearing the forests of West Michigan to establish a new colony. Other companies followed, and by the spring of the following year several churches had been established and a new classis was organized, Classis Holland.

Already at the second classical meeting, held September 27, 1848, the following decision was taken:

Art. 6. Rev. Ypma proposes that the interests of the schools shall be discussed. The discussion takes place, and the judgment is: the schools must be promoted and cared for by the churches, as being an important part of the Christian calling of God's church on earth. All lukewarmness and coldness toward that cause must be condemned and rebuked.<sup>9</sup>

At the meeting of Classis Holland on April 30, 1851, Rev. VanRaalte reported that there was a plan under consideration in the Board of Domestic Missions of the

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1. H. Bouwman, *Gereformeerd Kerkrecht*, vol. 1 (Kampen, Netherlands: J.H. Kok, 1928), pp. 517ff.

2. Elton J. Bruins, and Robert P. Swierenga, *Family Quarrels in the Dutch Reformed Churches of the 19th Century* (Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), p. 10.

3. Cf. Gerrit J. tenZythoff, *Sources of Secession, The Netherlands Hervormde Kerk on the Eve of the Dutch Immigration to the Midwest* (Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987), pp. 25-26.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.

5. "To this group belonged such men as Simon VanVelzen, George Frans Gezelle Meerburg, Albertus C. VanRaalte, and Louis Bahler. All except the last became with deCock the first pastors of Secession congregations." Peter Y. DeJong, and Nelson Kloosterman, editors, *The Reformation of 1834, Essays in Commemoration of the Act of Secession and Return* (Orange City, IA, Plum Publishing, Inc., 1984), p. 20.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 62

7. Janet Shaarda Sheeres, *Son of Secession: Douwe J. VanderWerp* (Grand Rapids, MI, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2006), pp. 40-41.

8. D.H. Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1943), p. 98.

9. *Classis Holland: Minutes 1848-1858* (Grand Rapids, MI, Grand Rapids Printing Company, 1943), p. 26.

Dutch Reformed Church<sup>10</sup> to send a man who could serve as a teacher in West Michigan. The Minutes then record the following:

This purpose, or plan, aroused rejoicing, and several of the brethren endowed with insight into the importance of some such step, expressed themselves as heartily glad of what they had heard; and expressed their own feelings with regard to the supreme importance of the education of the youth, upon which depend the character, the destiny, and the prosperity of a people; (saying) that for their own posterity they sought above all else God-fearing instruction in all the branches of knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

As classes began in the various communities, even equipment was lacking. There were no desks, slates, blackboards, or textbooks. "Here, classes were held in a kitchen, there in a loft, somewhere else in a church."<sup>12</sup> Conditions were less than ideal. Students were few, partly because many parents saw little value in formal education.

But those who understood the importance of that education recognized that the important thing was the *content* of the instruction and the doctrinal perspective and understanding of those who taught. And by the promotion of sound education by faithful consistories and preachers, that importance began to be more clearly understood and the support grew – among some.

VanRaalte very soon turned his attention to higher education. Understanding that the colonists could not bear the costs of establishing a school for higher education, he turned to the established churches on the east coast for help. The result was the establishment of the Academy, initially set up as "a high school to prepare sons of the colonists from Holland for Rutgers College, and also to educate daughters of said colonists."<sup>13</sup>

Ministers such as VanRaalte and Vander Meulen faithfully and constantly reminded the colonists of the value of Christian education and of supporting also the school for higher education.

We must not let the years fly by without training our children to take over the positions and responsibilities in church, school, and society. As supervisors, fathers, and leaders of the people, we can not die with a clear conscience if we do not, while it is still day, work to leave behind us successors and shepherds and if we do not see to it in time that the people grow and mature to assume, in the right way, the responsibilities God has entrusted us with in this place.<sup>14</sup>

These were men with vision!

Belonging to that vision was the idea, found in that last quotation, that education was critically important in taking up "the responsibilities God has entrusted us with in this place." Christian education was to be permeated with biblical truth, the truth which is applicable to all of life, and more particularly a life to be lived in the particular location and position to which God calls us.

But by 1862 the Christian grade school in the Dutch colony had died out. With the establishment of a district public school, "the poverty stricken pioneers found it much easier to let the government bear the burden."

They were not sufficiently convinced of the need of Christian schools to make the necessary sacrifices. In a letter to a certain Rev. and Mrs. VanDerWall, VanRaalte laments, "Parochial instruction lies buried here.... I am following the advice you gave me. I am doing nothing at all..."<sup>15</sup>

So only higher Christian education continued at the time. If not seen by many as unnecessary, it was generally thought that the establishment of Christian grade

schools would hinder the transition of the children into American culture. It was this attitude that took root among the people of the Reformed Church in America.

Ironically, the principled stand of VanRaalte was carried on by those who separated from him and began what would later become the Christian Reformed Church. And when numerous educated Netherlanders settled in America during the 1890s, they also brought with them the influence of Dr. Abraham Kuyper's educational ideals.<sup>16</sup>

But it was the contribution of the *Afscheiding* to restore the significance of Reformed Christian education to the church, the education of the children according to the truth of Holy Scripture and the Reformed confessions.

What a worthy labor for us to carry on today! 

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10. The reference here is to the Dutch Reformed Church in America, which would become known in 1867 as "The Reformed Church of America."

11. *Classis Holland: Minutes 1848-1858*, p. 52.

12. Jacob VanHinte, *Netherlanders in America* (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Book House, 1985), p. 256.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 257.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 258.

15. Marian B. Schoolland, *The Story of VanRaalte* (Grand Rapids, MI, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1951), p. 89.

16. Jacob VanHinte, *Netherlanders in America*, p. 870.

# The Secession of 1834 and the Struggle for the Church Order of Dordt

**C**hurch reformation ordinarily involves a return not only to true doctrine, but also to biblical church government. These two, it seems, almost always go hand in hand. Corresponding to departures in doctrine within the church are invariably departures also in the area of church polity. Often the errors in the government of the church serve the promotion of the errors in doctrine, countenancing the doctrinal deviations and protecting those who are promoting them. When reformation takes place, therefore, not only must the truth be restored, but it is also ordinarily necessary that proper church government be re-established.

History has demonstrated the truth of this. The Roman Catholic Church had become both corrupt in doctrine, and hierarchical in church government. The reformers of the sixteenth century not only championed the restoration of the doctrines of grace, but also worked for the restoration of biblical church government. Especially did God use John Calvin to restore to the church proper biblical church government. What was true of the reformation of the sixteenth century was also true of the Arminian controversy in the seventeenth century. Not only did the Arminians promote false doctrine, which false doctrine was con-

demned by the Synod of Dordt, but the Arminians also were agitating for a church polity that was un-Reformed and unbiblical. In the Church Order that it drafted, the Synod of Dordt responded to the Arminian errors as regards church government. In the reformation of 1924, the issues were not only doctrinal, but also church political, particularly the autonomy of the local consistory, as opposed to the hierarchical presumption of the right to suspend and depose officebearers by the broader assemblies. God used the founding fathers of the Protestant Reformed Churches not only for the defense of the truth of sovereign, particular grace, but also for the defense of proper, Reformed church government, the government of the Church Order of Dordt.

What has been true of reformation movements generally throughout the history of the New Testament church was also true of the Secession of 1834 in the Netherlands. Significant doctrinal issues were at stake in the Secession movement. Without question the Secession represents a genuine return to the truth of the Word of God and to the Reformed confessions. But the Secession also represents a return to proper church government. An important aspect of the Secession of 1834 was its struggle for the restoration of a biblical polity in the churches. Matters of church polity were a significant factor leading up to the Secession, and matters of church polity led to intense internal struggles

within the churches of the Secession in their early history. Through these struggles, God led the Secession churches to a return to the Church Order of Dordt.

## Church Political Struggles Leading up to the Secession

The Napoleonic era in the history of the Netherlands ended with the return from exile of King William I. On November 30, 1813 William returned to the Netherlands after eighteen years of absence. He returned at the request of the Dutch after Napoleon's defeat at Leipzig in October of 1813. In 1814 William gained sovereignty over the whole of the Low Countries. And on March 16, 1815 he proclaimed himself King of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands. As part of the sweeping reforms that he introduced in the wake of the departure of the French, William reconstituted the Reformed churches in the Netherlands. By royal decree issued in January of 1816, the king imposed a new hierarchical, collegial system of church government that dismantled entirely the classes and synods of the Dutch Reformed churches. William replaced the Church Order of Dordt with a new church order called the General Regulations (*"Het Algemeen Regelement"*). The General Regulations placed the Reformed churches of the Netherlands under the control of the state. The Department of Education, Arts, and Sciences was charged with administering the affairs of the Reformed

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

churches in the Netherlands. Executive boards took over the government of the churches, whose officers were appointed by and subject to the government. Although William's reorganization of the churches was radical, very few protests were voiced. The churches were so relieved to be delivered from French rule that they were willing, for the most part, to yield control over their affairs to the restored monarch.

But by their acquiescence the Dutch churches had relinquished the cherished Church Order of Dordt. And that proved to be a costly concession indeed. For not only did the churches become subject to the dominance and interference of the state, but because of this the churches were unable to stem the growing tide of liberalism that swept through the Dutch churches. Time and again, the state boards protected the heretics, and time and again the state boards came down with a heavy hand to crush ministers and consistories who voiced their objections to those who were promoting wrong doctrines and practices in the churches.

From the very beginning, the Secession of 1834 expressed a determination to return to the Church Order of Dordt. Already the "Act of Secession or Return" formulated by the consistory of Ulrum made reference to this resolve. In this document, the consistory expressed that the "... Church Board of the Netherlands has made itself like the Papal Church which was rejected by our fathers...." And the document closes with the resolution that "Our public worship services will conform to the time-honored liturgy of the church, and as regards worship and government, for the time being we will abide by the Church Order drafted by the aforementioned Synod of Dort." At its root, therefore, the Secession of 1834 was not only a return to right doctrine, but a return to proper church government—a return to proper church government in the form of the rees-

tablishment of the Church Order of Dordt in the churches. The church would not any longer be subject to the intrusion of the state, but would be governed by the principles of God's Word, as those principles were articulated in the Church Order of Dordt.

#### **Internal Struggles over the Church Order of Dordt within the Secession Churches**

Although the Secession of 1834 began with an interest in restoring the Church Order of Dordt to its rightful place in the Dutch Reformed churches, this did not immediately happen. Soon internal struggles erupted over this very issue, struggles that threatened to and did eventually splinter the reform movement. Differences of opinion divided the leaders of the Secession movement, some favoring the restoration of the Church Order of Dordt, others supporting a new church order that, while it might borrow from Dordt, would be unique to the Secession churches. Those who favored the restoration of the Church Order of Dordt were deCock and Van Velzen especially. It was particularly Scholte who favored a new Church Order.

In 1837, Scholte presented to the second synod of the Secession churches, meeting in Utrecht from September 28 to October 11, the draft of a new Church Order. This new Church Order borrowed from the Church Order of Dordt, but was at the same time a radical revision of the Church Order of 1618-1619. The new Church Order was adopted after lengthy discussion and some modification.

But hardly had the synod recessed before opposition to the new Church Order was raised. The main objections were the following. First, it was objected that the new Church Order was too much the work of one man. Even though the synod had approved it, the Church Order itself was primarily the work of Scholte. There was a strong sen-

timent that if the Secession churches were going to adopt a new church order, many more of the leaders of the new denomination should be involved in its formulation. Second, there were those who opposed setting aside the Church Order of Dordt in favor of a new church order because this negated the Secession's claim that they were not only seceding but returning to the old paths and the time-honored traditions of the Dutch Reformed churches. The Secession was not only a separation from the apostate state church of the Netherlands, but a return to Dordt. Many felt that, by setting aside the Church Order of Dordt, the Secession's claim to be a return to Dordt was compromised. And third, the new Church Order was opposed because it gutted the broader assemblies of any real authority. Following Scholte's fear of hierarchy, the broader assemblies had no binding powers in the new Church Order. All decisions of the broader assemblies were to be ratified by the local consistories, and the decisions of the broader assemblies were to be only advisory. In his new Church Order, Scholte manifested the streak of independentism that would plague him in his labors among the Secession churches in the Netherlands, and later in his work in Pella, Iowa.

After much debate and heated exchanges, and after extensive wrangling in the assemblies, the churches of the Secession finally put the controversy over church polity to rest at the Synod of Amsterdam in 1840. At this synod it was decided to rescind the new Church Order and to establish the Church Order of Dordt as the church order of the Secession churches. At this same synod, Scholte was reprimanded and subsequently deposed for refusing to accept the original Church Order of Dordt. At a considerable cost, the issue over church polity was resolved and the peace of the churches was restored. And the

Secession churches returned to the biblical principles and polity of Dordt.


### **The Significance of the Church Political Struggles of the Secession Churches**

The history of the struggle of the Secession churches over issues of church polity underscores the importance of biblical church government. Without question, this is one of the monuments of the Secession, that it restored to the Dutch Reformed churches proper church government. This is part of the heritage of the Secession to those who count themselves heirs of the Secession. The Secession restored not only the doctrines of Dordt, but also the polity of Dordt.

The Secession was a return specifically to the Church Order of Dordt, its principles and provisions. Opposition to the Church

Order of Dordt from without and within was put down. And in the end the Church Order of Dordt was confirmed in the churches of the Secession. The struggle to restore the Church Order of Dordt ought to endear that Church Order to churches that, like the Protestant Reformed Churches, count that Church Order their own.

The Secession's struggle over the Church Order of Dordt makes plain the conviction of the Reformed that proper church government belongs to the being (*esse*) of the church, not merely to the well-being (*bene esse*) of the church. This is the settled conviction of the Reformed, a conviction reinforced by the history of the Secession. In the end, the churches of the Secession came to see that this is the confessionally Reformed position. That position is expressed in Ar-

ticle 30 of the Belgic Confession of Faith: "We believe that this true church must be governed by that spiritual policy which our Lord hath taught us in His Word...." Article 32 adds: "In the meantime we believe, though it is useful and beneficial that those who are rulers of the church institute and establish certain ordinances among themselves for maintaining the body of the church, yet they ought studiously to take care that they do not depart from those things which Christ, our only Master, hath instituted." The restoration of the Church Order of Dordt rested squarely on the conviction that proper church government pertains to the very being of the true church of Jesus Christ. That conviction must motivate those who are the spiritual descendants of the Secession of 1834 to maintain the Church Order of Dordt. 

## Announcements

### **RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY**

The council and congregation of the Hull PRC extend their Christian sympathy to LeAnne Westra following the death of her grandfather,

#### **ROGER KOOIENGA.**

May we find our comfort in the words of the psalmist David, "In God is my salvation and my glory: the rock of my strength, and my refuge, is in God" (Psalm 61:7).

Rev. Steven Key, Pres.  
Ike Uittenbogaard, Asst. Clerk

### **RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY**

The council and congregation of the Hull PRC wish to extend their Christian sympathy to Mrs. Dena Blankespoor following the death of her sister,

#### **MRS. JEANETTE WASELINK.**

May we find our comfort in God's Word as we find it in II Corinthians 1:3, "Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of all mercies, and the God of all comfort."

Rev. Steven Key, Pres.  
Ike Uittenbogaard, Asst. Clerk

### **NOTICE!**

Faith Christian School in Randolph, Wisconsin is seeking applicants for a combined first and second grade classroom starting in the 2007/2008 school year. Interested applicants are encouraged to contact Mr. John Huizenga, administrator, at (920) 326-6186 or [principal@randolphfcs.org](mailto:principal@randolphfcs.org). Resumes may also be e-mailed or sent to Mr. Huizenga at Faith Christian School, 611 N Columbus St., Randolph, WI 53956.

### **RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY**

The congregation and council of Hull PRC wish to extend their Christian sympathy to Roger and Marjean Buys and their family following the passing of Roger's sister,

#### **LAVONNE RIECK.**

May we be comforted by God's Word as we find it in Psalm 27:14, "Wait on the LORD: be of good courage, and he will strengthen thine heart: wait, I say, on the LORD."

Rev. Steven Key, Pres.  
Ike Uittenbogaard, Asst. Clerk

### **WEDDING ANNIVERSARY**

On September 8, 2007, our parents, **CLARENCE AND JANICE KUIPER**, celebrated their 40<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. We, their children, thank God for preserving them in the state of holy marriage, and causing them to fulfill the vows they made at our baptisms to raise us in the fear of Jehovah to the utmost of their power. We pray that God may continue to guide and care for them as long as He wills them to remain on this earth. "Except the LORD build the house, they labor in vain that build it... Lo, children are an heritage of the LORD: and the fruit of the womb is his reward" (Psalm 127:1, 3).

- ❖ Debra and Nicholas Kleyn
- ❖ Rev. Douglas and Teresa Kuiper
- ❖ Brian and Karen Kuiper
- ❖ Marc and Rebecca Kuiper
- ❖ Cara Kuiper
- ❖ Kevin and Amy Kuiper
- ❖ Rachel and Doug Feenstra
- ❖ Randall Kuiper

21 grandchildren

Walker, Michigan

### **UNABLE TO ATTEND CHURCH SERVICES?**

Trinity Protestant Reformed Church invites you to listen to our worship services live over the Internet. Services are Sunday at 9:30 A.M. and 6:00 P.M. Eastern Time (14:30 and 23:00 UTC). To listen visit our website at [www.trinityprc.org](http://www.trinityprc.org).

### **REMINDER:**

If you wish your own issues of the *Standard Bearer* to be bound, you must have them to the RFPA business office by October 15 (see masthead for address).

October 15, 2007/*Standard Bearer*/47

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### WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

With thankfulness and praise to our covenant God, we join our parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents,

**EDWARD AND ADRIANA OPHOFF**, in celebrating 55 years of marriage on October 30, 2007. We are thankful for the many blessings He has given to them, and to us through them. We are blessed through the covenantal instruction they have given us and for their continued support through prayers and example. We wish them the Lord's blessing and all our love as they continue their lives together. "But the mercy of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting upon them that fear him, and his righteousness unto children's children" (Psalm 103:17).

- ❖ Eric and Marilyn Ophoff  
George and Lisa Ophoff  
James and Melissa Ophoff  
Eric, Jr. and Annette Ophoff
- ❖ Edward Jr. and Libby Ophoff  
Brent and Alisa Snippe  
Edward III and Amanda Ophoff  
Luke and Erin Griess  
Joseph and Audra Ophoff  
Tyler
- ❖ Mark and Cindy Ophoff  
David, Kristin, Bradley, Daniel
- ❖ James and Faith Noorman  
Alison, Elizabeth, Benjamin, Lydia
- ❖ Ray and Joy Schwarz  
Sarah, Jacob, Ruth, Mary  
19 great-grandchildren

Caledonia, Michigan

Join us for our  
**Reformation Lecture!**  
Friday, October 26, 2007 at 8:00 P.M.  
Prof. Russell J. Dykstra  
(Professor of Church History and New Testament  
at the Protestant Reformed Seminary)  
will speak on:  
**"The Reformation and God's  
Covenant of Grace—  
Laying the Foundation"**  
Location and sponsored by:  
**Wingham Protestant Reformed Church**  
181 Augusta Street  
Wingham, Ontario  
Call 519-357-1082  
for more information

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### NOTICE

With gratitude to God we acknowledge the 25 years of service in the Word and sacraments of

#### REV. THOMAS MIERSMA.

He served in the First PRC of Edmonton, AB from 1982-1994. From 1994 to the present he has served as our Western home missionary, having labored in the San Luis Valley in southern Colorado for 4 1/2 years, and in Spokane, WA, for the last 8 1/2 years. May the Lord continue to use him for the spread of the gospel.

Loveland PRC Council  
Rev. Rod Miersma, President  
Robert Brands, Clerk

### RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The consistory and congregation of the PRC of South Holland express Christian sympathy to Mrs. Anna Zandstra, Mr. and Mrs. Gerrit Holleman, Mr. Ed Holleman, Mr. and Mrs. John Holleman, and Mr. and Mrs. Egbert Holleman and their families because the Lord, in His infinite wisdom, took to Himself

#### MISS VIOLA HOLLEMAN.

Psalm 23: "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.... Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever."

Rev. Allen Brummel, President  
Gysbert VanBaren, Clerk

### RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The Doon Martha Society expresses Christian sympathy to fellow member Gert VanDenTop in the passing of her brother,

#### HENRY P. VAN BEMMEL.

"Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Rev. David Overway, President  
Grace VanDenTop, Secretary

### RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The Doon Martha Society expresses Christian sympathy to the VanDenTop family on the passing to glory of fellow member

#### WILMINA VAN DEN TOP.

May they find comfort in the Word of God: "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory" (Psalm 73:24).

Rev. David Overway, President  
Grace VanDenTop, Secretary

### RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The council and congregation of Byron Center PRC express their Christian sympathy to Bernie and Ruth Lubbers, Bruce and Deb Lubbers and family, Ken and Machele Elzinga and family, Heather Lubbers and family, Ed and Melanie Hekstra and family, Sid and Lisa Miedema and family, Brent and Shari Dommissee and family, in the death of their daughter-in-law, sister-in-law, and aunt,

#### SUE LUBBERS.

Also to Doug and Deb Kooienga and family in the death of his father,

#### ROGER KOOIENGA.

"Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory" (Psalm 73:24).

Rev. Ron VanOverloop, President  
Mike Elzinga, Clerk

### RESOLUTION OF SYMPATHY

The council and congregation of the Grandville PRC wish to express their Christian sympathy to Tim and Sharon Rus, Courtney and Alisha, Stuart and Betty Bylsma, Phyllis Bylsma, and Andy and Shannon Bylsma in the passing of their dear daughter, sister, granddaughter, niece, and cousin,

#### CHARITY HOPE RUS.

"Behold the Lord God will come with strong hand...he shall feed his flock like a shepherd; he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom. ...they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint" (Isaiah 40:10, 11, 31).

Rev. Kenneth Koole, President  
Bill Joostens, Assistant Clerk

### Fall Lecture The Deterioration of the Christian Church

- I. From Deformation to Reformation and Back Again
- II. From Carnal to Spiritual and Back to Carnal
- III. Deformation: A Sign of the End

Speaker: **Rev. T. Miersma**  
Wednesday, October 31, 2007  
7:30 P.M. at **Loveland PRC**

Tapes or CDs available for sale.