

GERMAN INFLUENCES IN THE CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH 1857-1872

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In 1857, when the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) was founded, sixty-five percent of the Graafschap congregation was of German origin, and thus thirty percent of the new denomination's 246 adult members stemmed from the Westphalian province of Graafschap Bentheim.¹ This fact certainly alters the general perception that the CRC stems exclusively from Dutch people, but it is more significant to note that the German Bentheimers dominated the early years of the CRC's history and much of that influence must be traced to their religious experiences in Graafschap Bentheim.

That the Graafschapers came to Michigan and associated with A. C. Van Raalte's colonists is readily explained by the provincial borders of Northern Europe. Graafschap Bentheim forms a German peninsula jutting into the Dutch provinces of Overijssel and Drenthe. In addition the German Reformed Churches of the region used Dutch in worship services because German was considered to be a proper vehicle for Lutheran but not for Reformed worship. And, because the local dialects differed only slightly across the borders, religious movements spread easily. So when the orthodox religious revival of the 1830s spread throughout the Netherlands interaction with the Bentheimers was inevitable. It should be emphasized, however, that the German revival had independent origins.

The founding father of the German secession was Harm H. Schoemaker who, ten years before the 1834 secession in the Netherlands, had already become a popular lay leader. After his conversion in 1823 Schoemaker immersed himself in the pious writings of Wilhelmus A. Brakel, Bernardus Smijdegelt and Jacobus Koelman, sources which, together with advice from an aging lay leader, prepared him for his work among the seceders at Northwestern Graafschap Bentheim, a site which also facilitated an acquaintance with A.C. Van Raalte's work in Drenthe and Overijssel. Thus, when Schoemaker and his people were officially ejected from the German Reformed Church in 1837, they sought counsel from Van Raalte who crossed the border to organize the first congregation of the Old Reformed group in Itterbeek on January 1, 1838.

Some twenty miles to the Southeast another lay leader, Jan Barend Sundag, had also begun to conduct private worship services near the city of Bentheim. He, however, sought advice from Hendrik De Cock in Groningen and not from Albertus Van Raalte. After a brief career as lay leader, Sundag moved to Groningen where he prepared for ordination under De Cock's supervision. In 1840 De Cock joined Sundag in Bentheim where they organized a new congregation. Because Sundag was the only ordained pastor in the Old Reformed Church until 1848, he exercised a powerful influence in the denomination, and he was an outspoken opponent of A.C. Van Raalte.²

In an 1848 letter dictated during one of his many imprisonments and intended for circulation among the Old Reformed congregations, Sundag declared,

Very likely it is known to you that, since the beginning of secession, there has been a great deal of differing opinion within the seceded congregations. At least it is true that for a long time there have been two parties in the body of the secession. However, those on the Van Raalte side make up by far the smallest party. And it is from this side that many novel ideas have come which have caused unrest and also great harm . . . When I attended the seceders' 1846 synodical session in Groningen, several articles which were proposed from the side of Van Raalte were considered by the Synod and unanimously condemned . . . Van Raalte does not agree with the church when she wishes to be true to the church order of Dordt. This he has proven in my presence at the Synod of 1843, in Amsterdam.³

As the letter indicates, Sundag was an ardent proponent of De Cock's faction in the Afscheiding. This so-called Northern Party was marked by its espousal of the Church Order formulated by the 1618-19 Synod of Dordrecht, and it differed from both the Scholte and Van Raalte subgroups on that issue. In addition the Northern segment highlighted the dual preaching of election and reprobation (double predestination), whereas both Scholte and Van Raalte were less inclined to focus on reprobation. Sundag's training under De Cock solidified both his attachment to the Northern view and his opposition to Van Raalte.

Because these same issues were at the core of the discontents leading to the organization of the CRC in 1857, Graafschap's participation in that event cannot be very surprising. The Michigan congregation's continuing attachment to the Northern Party was clearly evident in 1851 when the church called Hendrik De Cock's son, Helenius, to be their pastor. The Consistory's correspondence with Helenius declared, "You received all but eleven votes [from the congregation] partly because you are known to some of us but even more, because your father's name is engraved upon our hearts. Also, because of your training,⁴ we are convinced that you are more suited to our congregation than many others."

Helenius did not accept Graafschap's invitation, and neither did a host of others who were beckoned from the Old World. The prominent among them, J. Bavink and W.A. Kok, together with others such as J.H. Schoemakers and W. Coelingh were either natives of Graafschap Bentheim or firmly identified with the Northern Party.⁵ Finally Douwe Van der Werp, who had been ordained with Helenius De Cock in 1844, did accept a call from Graafschap in 1864. Van der Werp was the congregation's first pastor after the 1857 secession and in him the church acquired one of Hendrik De Cock's most intimate disciples; they had worked hand in hand from the earliest moments of the 1834 Afscheiding. Furthermore Van der Werp was well acquainted with J.B. Sundag who had also studied with H. De Cock. Thus the ecclesiastical threads of the Northern Party webbed outward from Groningen to both Graafschap Bentheim and Graafschap, Michigan.

The denomination which Van der Werp joined in 1864 had an exceedingly inauspicious initiation into the family of American churches. The Grand Rapids congregation, with less than 100 members, had been plagued by instability. The original pastor, H.G. Klijn, had returned to the Reformed Church in America after six months of service, and the leading elder, G. Haan, had shifted loyalties several times between the CRC, RCA, and independentism. The second Grand Rapids pastor, W.H. Van Leeuwen (1863-67), left after a brief and divisive term, while the third pastor R. Duiker transferred to the R.C.A. at the end of his Grand Rapids pastorate in 1872. Another founding congregation, Noordeloos, began with only twenty members and some of these were embroiled in a persistent conflict because Jan Rabbers wished to organize a separate congregation in Zeeland. The founding group in Polkton, Michigan, simply vanished while two additional clusters were only ephemerally evident in Vriesland and Grand Haven.⁶

The key to Graafschap's prominence, and also perhaps to the survival of the C.R.C. itself, was the arrival of Douwe Van der Werp in 1864. Until then the Graafschap congregation had persisted under the sporadic attention of Koene Vanden Bosch who as the denomination's only ordained cleric (1857-1863) had functioned from his Noordeloos parsonage as an itinerant minister for congregations and informal groups meeting in Grand Rapids, Grand Haven and elsewhere. But when Douwe Van der Werp arrived he quickly became the C.R.C.'s dominant pastor. Born in Uithuizen, Groningen, Van der Werp was a tinsmith's son, but because he demonstrated scholarly inclinations, he was apprenticed to a school teacher. By 1834 he had become the assistant teacher in the Houwerzijl school for basic education, and he expected to replace the school's aged headmaster upon his retirement. Meanwhile Van der Werp had become an ardent disciple of Hendrik De Cock, and when it became known that the assistant teacher at Houwerzijl had authored a controversial pamphlet, entitled, "Whom Shall We Believe, God or Man?" he was summarily dismissed. The pamphlet attacked the views of Hofstede De Groot, a leading proponent of ethical theology at the University of Groningen, who was also the school inspector for the Houwerzijl school district. Van der Werp's writing was not only associated with the censured Hendrik De Cock, but it was also rather easily interpreted as a flagrant insubordination.

Since he was no longer employed, the youthful educator moved to Ulrum, where he became Hendrik De Cock's secretary during the hectic days prior to the secession. Even though De Cock's censure prohibited him from preaching, he continued to gather with his congregation. On such occasions Van der Werp and several other lay leaders read sermons to the parishioners who assembled in local shops and barns. De Cock however, led these gatherings in prayers which lasted nearly as long as a typical sermon.⁷

After the Ulrum church seceded in 1834 Van der Werp continued to assist De Cock in Ulrum and elsewhere; a recently published account of the secession suggests that Van der Werp may have had a part in drafting the official act of separation which became the foundation for the seceded churches of the Netherlands. In any case, Van der Werp was certainly a leading participant in separating the Ulrum congregation on October 13, 1834, and his commitment to that secession never wavered.

Before beginning his pastoral activities, Van der Werp organized a Christian day school in Smilde. There he instructed some forty students.

Following the demise of the Smilde Christian School, Van der Werp became an itinerant lay leader, a position for which he had been prepared by his close association with De Cock. He served the congregations of Dwingeloo, Sampemeer, Franeker, and Uithuizermeeden, among others. In Uithuizermeeden he became well known for his preaching and drew crowds to open fields and large barns. But there, too, he suffered fines and the antagonism of opponents who met him and his followers with sticks and stones.

While still a youthful twenty-nine, Van der Werp had become an experienced lay leader. In 1840 he joined four other lay pastors in organizing the Church Under the Cross. This splinter group originated in reaction to H.P. Scholte's views of church polity. They resented the ease with which Scholte seemed to give up the 1834 seceders' claim that they, rather than the State Church, truly represented the Reformed tradition in the Netherlands. Unlike the Seceder church, the Church Under the Cross disregarded the ordinary channels of ordination: The "Kruis Kerken" pastors simply ordained each other. Van der Werp remained with that church for less than a year, because in 1841 he became an official student of Hendrik De Cock. One year later he moved to Leeuwarden, where he studied under Tamme F. De Haan and was appointed as the lay pastor to the Leeuwarden congregation. Van der Werp passed his exams in 1844 to become a candidate for the regular ministry. Though troubled by internal conflicts, the six churches he served in the Netherlands flourished, for he was an exceptionally energetic pastor. In Ferwerd, for example, he preached three times each Sunday and then instituted a Thursday sermon as well. In addition to his four regular catechism classes, he organized a fifth class for the older folk who could not read, and he insisted upon a prominent place for benevolence within the congregation.

Apart from leading founders like Hendrik De Cock, few others in the Netherlands could have carried better credentials to the Christian Reformed Church than Van der Werp. His theological persuasion was unmistakably northern, and his close association with Hendrik De Cock assured him a measure of trust and respect which no other association could have provided. Van der Werp offered the 1857 seceders in America their closest link to the 1834 secession in Holland. And since the founders of the Christian Reformed Church insisted that they were returning to the views of the seceders in the Netherlands, Van der Werp virtually incorporated those views. He became, in effect, the Van Raalte of the Christian Reformed Church.

It is hardly surprising, then, that the denomination assigned its most crucial tasks to Van der Werp. One year after his arrival he became the denomination's theological instructor in the Graafschap parsonage. Then, in 1868, when the denomination began to publish *De Wachter*, Van der Werp became the periodical's editor with the task of "advancing the Christian Reformed Church and its confessional principles." *De Wachter's* first issue declared that, while it should stand for the truth, it was not a vehicle for troublemaking, for God had commanded Christians to "stand for the truth in love."⁸

Unfortunately, the publication was not able to maintain this high ground. It soon became a vehicle for debate; nearly every issue contained some response to accusations printed in the R.C.A.'s periodicals. In fact, the antagonism ranged well beyond decency on both sides. Finally, on October 9, 1868, Van der Werp urged his contributing authors and correspondents to refrain from "using *De Wachter* as a battlefield," but the war of words continued for many decades.

In spite of the battle with the RCA, Van der Werp did introduce positive issues for denominational consideration. Perhaps the most significant of these concerned the importance of Christian day-school instruction. In 1870 the editor argued that merely reading the Bible in school did not adequately satisfy the objectives of Christian instruction, since the Bible also required explanation.⁹ It was a short step from this position to the establishment of Christian schools in which both the reading and explanation of the Bible could be guided by the church. The impetus that Van der Werp provided for establishing both the theological school and Christian day-schools provided a foundation which has distinguished the denomination for more than a century.

Van der Werp remained in Graafschap until 1872 when both he and his students moved to Muskegon. Following his death in 1875 the students were transferred to Grand Rapids where Gerrit E. Boer continued their instruction. In 1876 Boer was appointed as the first professor of the newly founded Grand Rapids Theological School. With that the city became the ecclesiastical center of the CRC, and Graafschap's prominence diminished rapidly. Nonetheless, the prominence and significance of that largely German congregation in the C.R.C.'s early years should not be forgotten.

As the Graafschap community filled up and the overflow population moved to other communities or founded, as in the case of Lucas, Michigan, a new settlement, the Bentheimers spread across West Michigan. They were, of course, particularly noticeable in the Lucas CRC where over the years 47% of the congregation's elected officers have been from Graafschap. The Allendale CRC's membership in 1976 indicates a Graafschap contingency

of 43 % and the more recently organized (1940) Montello Park congregation in Holland also contains a rich tincture of Graafschapers.¹⁰

Although it is clear that the mother of those churches lost her leading role in the denomination after 1872, the arrival of Roelof T. Kuiper in 1879 and the publication of his *Voice from America about America* in 1881, refocused the Dutch community's attention on the white steepled church located on Graafschap's highest knoll. Kuiper's booklet, although partly an attempt to justify the CRC's 1857 secession, provided a useful overview of Michigan's Dutch-American community and stands as a fitting but final testimony to the prominent influence of the Graafschap congregation in the CRC.

ENDNOTES

1. Henry Beets, *The Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eastern Avenue Book Store, 1923) p. 60-61; the Bentheim segment of the membership was identified by comparing the Graafschap CRC membership list in *Souvenir: Historische Schets* (Graafschap, Michigan, 1917) pp. 28-35 with *The County of Bentheim and Her Emigrants to North America*, by Swenna Harger and Loren Lemmen.
2. H. Beuker, *Tubantiana* (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1897) pp. 51-66. Gerrit Jan Beuker, *Unkehr end Erneuerung* (Bad Bentheim, Germany: Synode der Evangelisch-Altreformierte Kirche in Niedersachsen, 1987) pp.243-256; 287-302.
3. Letter of J.B. Sundag, March 18, 1847 in *Immigrant Letter Collection 1840-1980* in the Calvin College and Seminary Library Archives (hereafter Calvin Archives).
4. Helenius received his education from his father, H. De Cock, who died in 1842. Thereafter T. H. Haan continued the education of students in Groningen.
5. *Minutes 1851-1863* of the Graafschap CRC. Microfilm in the Calvin Archives.
6. *Minutes* of the CRC Classis September 5, 6; December 12, 1866; Henry Beets, "Ds. W.H. Van Leeuwen, *Gereformeerde Amerikaan*, January, 1901, Vol. V, pp. 13-22. H. Beets, *De Chr. Geref. Kerk* (Grand Rapids, MI: Grand Rapids Printing Co., 1917), pp. 127-8; 178.
7. It seems likely that the "long prayer" so common in the CRC liturgy originated in this era, for such "prayers" permitted De Cock to preach a sermon within the prayer. Later, lay leaders who were not permitted to preach also used the "long prayer" for this purpose.
8. Henry Beets, *De Chr. Geref. Kerk*, pp. 42-3; Foppe M. Ten Hoor, "D.J. Van der Werp," *Gereformeerde Amerikaan*, January 1898, Vol. II, pp. 282-285; J. Wesseling, *De Afscheiding Van 1834 in Friesland*, (Groningen: De Vuurbaak, 1980) Vol. I, pp. 22, 75, 77, 100-102, 106, 125-130, 276-79; J. Wesseling, *De Afscheiding Van 1834 in Groningen* (Groningen: De Vuurbaak, 1972) Vol. I, pp. 46, 57, 73, 97, 106-110, 146-152; Vol. II, 1974, pp. 38-41, 137, 158, 178, 187, 197, 262.
9. *De Wachter*, February 14, 1868; October 9, 1868; and May 6, 1870.
10. *Directory*, 1983 of the Lucas, Michigan CRC; *Directory*, 1976 of the Allendale, Michigan C.R.C.; *Montello Park Christian Reformed Church, Holland, Michigan 1940-1990: Fiftieth Anniversary Directory* of the Montello Park CRC.