

ABANDONED AT THE ALTAR

John H. Kromminga

This is a story of a young couple who failed in their attempt to join with each other in marriage. For some years they had argued and quarreled with each other, in spite of a large area of agreement and mutual interests. But then came a moment when quarreling turned to flirtation and flirtation to courtship. Then came a proposal for marriage, seemingly arising from both parties at about the same time. What could be more promising? But just before the agreed date, the bride asked that the ceremony be postponed for one week. Then, on the shortest of notice, she indicated that she was withdrawing from the process. The groom was left standing at the altar.

Difficult as it may be to believe, the groom went ahead with some sort of ceremony, but it was not a joyful occasion. Not only did he complain of having been jilted, but he proceeded, in the presence of guests who included some friends of the bride, to catalog her character flaws. When the ex-fiancee learned of this, she did a little psychoanalyzing of her own. And then, perhaps most puzzling of all, both parties asserted that they still loved each other and would go on being friends and cooperating in neighborhood projects. Understandably, however, further talk of marriage was abandoned.

This is the story I want to tell you. Although the marriage analogy fails us at a few points, the story is true. The prospective groom was the youthful Christian Reformed Church and the somewhat reluctant bride was the western or immigrant section of the Reformed Church in America. The courtship was centered in the year 1894, ending with a whimper on November 22nd. Our concentration will be on that year, and our principal source of information the major newspapers current in the two communions at the time. All but two of these newspapers were published in the Dutch language and all but one were religiously oriented.¹

To understand what was going on, however, we must briefly identify certain outstanding developments which affected the lives of the two communions in the years immediately preceding. It was, in a way, not surprising that there should be talk of union between them. Union was very much in the air in their ecclesiastical world. References to some of these actual or proposed unions will be found in the story as it unfolds before us.

In the Netherlands from which practically all of these church members had recently come, and where ecclesiastical events were watched with close interest, the Afscheiding and the Doleantie had joined forces with each other just four years earlier.² The general synod of the Reformed Church in America was toying with the idea of a federal union with the German Reformed Church in the United States. Meanwhile the synod of the Christian Reformed Church was exchanging fraternal delegates with the United Presbyterian Church and appointing members to a committee to explore possible union with them.³ Recognizing a certain identity of interests and needing a boost in the direction of Americanization, the Christian Reformed Church had recently merged with Classis Hackensack of the True Reformed Protestant Dutch Church, which had seceded from the Reformed Church in America in 1822.⁴

All was not quiet, however, on either the eastern or western front. The question whether lodge membership was compatible with church membership was particularly troublesome and erupted in disputes with consequences for unity.⁵ In 1882 the Christian Reformed Church welcomed into its membership a number of congregations from the Reformed Church in America who had sought, unsuccessfully, to persuade their synod to establish a denomination-wide prohibition of such dual membership.⁶ By 1898, however, the Christian Reformed Church was experiencing its own share of trouble with some congregations of the newly-acquired Classis Hackensack over the same question, and eventually all but three of the congregations of that classis left the denomination.

Both denominations were experiencing solid growth in membership. In October, 1894, at the very time when the preparations for union were at their height, the editor of the *Christian Intelligencer* gave a summary report on the 1894 Synod of the Reformed Church in America. The report consisted of little more than a recital of membership figures and related comments. The comments are quite revealing.

The editor observes that the membership report offers reason for gratification and optimism "to every member of the church whose memory retains the conditions of twenty years ago." The church counts 612 congregations, 614 ministers, 54,792 families, and 100,811 communicants. The net increase in total membership, including children, is 3,066 for the year, but this is deceptive. The increase would have been 5,106 were it not for a change in counting members. In the past, inactive members had not been removed from the rolls. Now that this has been corrected, the reported increase is temporarily less than the actual increase.

The editor proceeds to comment as follows: "Nearly 200 years were needed to reach our first 50,000 members; since that time, in about thirty years, we have added 50,000 more. If that same rate of increase be maintained, we should be able to report a quarter of a million within the next two decades." If the immigrant members could thank the denomination for help in adjusting to their new country, the denomination, in turn, could thank them for a new injection of active membership.⁷

The Christian Reformed Church could not match these numbers, but its growth was even more rapid. The total membership, including baptized children, reported for 1894, was 44,891. The number of communicants was 14,004, or a mere 14% of the RCA total.⁸ But compared with the 12,001 souls reported in 1880, the Christian Reformed Church had experienced a 365% increase in a dozen years.

Americanization was a more pressing problem for the Christian Reformed Church than numbers, and this fact was being more and more recognized. Straws in the wind in 1894 included the appointment of a third professor at the theological school, with the stipulation that he should be able to lecture in English, the introduction of English-language services in some churches, and beginning efforts to form a congregation which would use English exclusively for its worship. These were forward-looking moves and occupied a good deal of the church's attention. The full impact of Americanization, however was not to strike the church until twenty years later.⁹ This, in brief, was the situation when leaders in the two denominations began in 1894 to make a concerted effort to bring the immigrants together.

Both the remote and the immediate background of the union discussions lay in the ongoing debate, perhaps more properly called an argument, between the CRC and the RCA, particularly its midwestern members, about the validity of the Secession of 1857, and, hence, the right of the CRC to exist. This argument had never completely disappeared since the beginning of the separate existence of these two groups. Whenever it seemed about to subside, something would happen to fan it back to life again.¹⁰ Such a new flareup was to be found in the agitation over the church membership of Freemasons, which had climaxed in 1882, but which had lingering effects.

The latest outbreak of such discussions began with a series of articles in *De Hope*, by Dr. N. M. Steffens, a Reformed church professor of theology.¹¹ On December 6, 1893, he published the fifth of his series of "letters" (each of them about one and a half newspaper-size columns long) reviewing and evaluating the reason given for the secession of the CRC group from the RCA in 1857.

In this article, which was intended to be the last in the series, he offers the opinion that all Reformed persons must agree that on such grounds as the seceders gave, no secession could have been justified. Even the seceders, he thinks, if they would consider the matter calmly, should agree.

Steffens seeks to be gentlemanly throughout, but he might well have taken as his motto, "*fortiter in re, suaviter in modo*." He has, he says, no intention of carrying on a crusade against the seceders, but merely seeks to strengthen members of his own communion against their attacks.

Lately, he notes, a new issue involving Freemasonry has arisen. He summarizes arguments and answers. When it is said that Freemasons must not be allowed in the fellowship of the church, the RCA responds that discipline should involve only public sins. In response to the claim that lodge members cannot be members of the church, he says that the only membership requirement is public profession and a godly walk. If it is claimed that the church should declare lodge membership to be a censurable sin, the reply is that a member is innocent until he is proved guilty of actual sin. Furthermore, Steffens cannot understand how those who left the RCA over the lodge question in 1882 could have gone on to affiliate with the earlier seceders.¹²

Early the next year, however, Steffens was involved in a preliminary discussion of possible union. It is inconceivable that he could have contemplated union on any other basis than the reception of the seceders into the entire body of the RCA. Lack of clarity as to the kind of union contemplated and the conditions laid down for it offered some reason for optimism about the eventual union. But as we shall see, when the actual proposals became clear, the impossibility of implementing them quickly became evident.

Letter number five, described above, was to have been the conclusion of this series, but in the following weeks there were two postscripts on the same subject. On January 3, 1894, Steffens raises the issue of the secession

of Classes Hackensack and Union from the RCA in 1822. He claims that those who seceded at that time did not want to have anything to do with the free offer of the gospel, and contests the description of Hopkinsianism given by its critics.¹³

A month later, on February 7, Steffens notes that Editor G. K. Hemkes of *De Wachter* is replying to his articles. Steffens will consider replying to the Hemkes articles later. For the present he only wishes to deny any parallel between the seceders who formed the CRC and those who formed the "Scots Free church."¹⁴ As one more note of interest, in the February 14 issue of *De Hope*, the five Steffens articles on the "rechtsbestaan" of the CRC are offered in booklet form for the price of fifteen cents in postage stamps.¹⁵

When the Hemkes articles had been concluded, Steffens undertook to reply. On March 21 he noted that Hemkes had expressed a desire for the union of all Reformed believers in this country, but specified that these must be truly Reformed. "Truly Reformed," says Steffens, in Hemkes' interpretation, excludes not only a certain Rev. Mathews, who declared table and pulpit fellowship open to all who love Jesus, but also Steffens himself, who is said to agree with Mathews. At this point in Steffens' reply various points from the controversy concerning the 1857 secession are rehashed.¹⁶

On April 4, Steffens responds to Hemkes' references to the 1822 secession. The seceders and the RCA, he says, agreed on the marks of the church as found in Belgic Confession Article 29, but the RCA did not agree that absolute purity of the church was a requirement.¹⁷

Other questions also were lurking in the wings. On June 27, Steffens takes up a challenge from Rev. Klaas Kuiper of the CRC. Why did not Dr. Steffens support Christian schools? Steffens professes great sympathy for what the supporters of Christian schools stand for. But "our striving for Christian education must have a national character. That emphasis is not to be found in the system of parochial schools. We have received much from America. It is only fair that we should give something back." He is critical of parochial schools, but does present arguments for a school which is parentally controlled.¹⁸

We may note in passing that the Steffens-Hemkes exchange had not gone unnoticed in other quarters. In April 1894, the editor of *The Banner of Truth* (a publication of Classis Hackensack, later to become the English-language weekly of the CRC) includes the following item under "church news:"

The contention as to the history of the Christian Reformed Church between Prof. Hemkes and Prof. Steffens, D.D., does not seem as if it has reached its terminus. We believe, with Solomon, "Iron sharpeneth iron," and if done in a Christian spirit, which may be expected from two Christian soldiers, it will leave some blessing.¹⁹

Our attention is next drawn to Steffens through the Christian Reformed weekly, *De Wachter*. He sent a long letter to Rev. Henry Vander Werp, editor of "Uit en voor de Pers," a column of comment on items from other publications. Vander Werp had received the letter some time earlier, but delayed his reply until October 17, so that he might accompany the publication of the letter with the announcement of a public meeting to be held in November.²⁰ Preparations for this meeting must be briefly sketched before we return to Steffens and Vander Werp.

Prof. Hendrikus Beuker of the CRC, according to a report which he gave later,²¹ had been invited to a meeting shortly after his arrival in the United States. The invitation came from J. Vander Bilt and Rev. Buursma, evidently from the RCA. The meeting, to be held on July 5th, was designed to promote cooperation between RCA and CRC. It never becomes entirely clear just who initiated this meeting, although elder Teunis Keppel of the CRC (and recently of the RCA) seems to have played an active part.

In spite of the informal nature of the meeting, and contrary to Beuker's personal preference, the participants proceeded to elect a chairman and a clerk, who were respectively Dr. Steffens and Rev. Hemkes. When a second meeting on August 2 failed to resolve differences and difficulties, it was decided to call a public meeting for November 15th and to designate three ministers from each side to propose agenda items for that meeting.

We shall return to this meeting shortly, but must first resume the review of press comment. The content of Dr. Steffens' letter may be summarized as follows: There are some oversimplified answers to questions which have long been discussed. "Just love one another and keep quiet about the issues." The Reformed and Christian Reformed have stood over against each other for years. Sometimes the strife has been fierce. Words have been spoken which could better have been left unsaid, slanders which would delight Satan and his wicked angels and cause the good angels in heaven to hide their heads in shame. And these have not come from just one side.

Many would-be healers say that if we will only mutually acknowledge our sin all will be healed and we can live together in one house. My problem, says Steffens, is with the mixing of two things which should not be confused with each other. As Christian persons we must live in love with all Christians, not only those of the Reformed family. But has our strife been only about personal prejudices? No, no, we have fought for what we held to be serious and weighty principles. We may have been mistaken about what is a principle, but we have operated out of that kind of conviction.

Suppose I argue long and heatedly with a Baptist, and then we decide we should live in love. He does not cease to be a Baptist, nor do I cease to be Reformed. And we can still discuss our differences. If we do really differ in doctrine, discipline, and worship, it would be better if we would live side by side in peace. But is there a difference? Even equipped with a microscope, I can't find any.

Some of our classes in the West have helped the brothers on the other side by declaring that we do not admit Freemasons to church membership. But I see this declaration as an act of war, because I do not believe that any classis has the right to establish any rule outside of the Church Order. I think the CR brothers must finally come to see that they cannot bind the conscience of brothers. If this point is not resolved, we can't get together.

You have heard that an open meeting is planned in which Reformed and Christian Reformed brethren can freely discuss their differences. Note that this is not an ecclesiastical assembly. It has no authority. Only the churches have authority in this matter.²²

Vander Werp, in a brief reply, takes this occasion to announce that the long-desired meeting will take place in Holland, Michigan, on November 15th. He hopes for a delegation of ministers and/or elders from the various congregations and looks forward to an evening session of joint prayer after a day of discussion in one of the churches of Holland.²³

The Rev. Peter Moerdyk, RCA minister in Chicago, added a provocative voice to the preliminary discussions. Rev. Moerdyke had begun his ministry as pastor of the First Reformed Church of Grand Rapids, and in his eighteen-year pastorate there had evidently had a great deal of success in luring Christian Reformed young people to a vigorously Americanizing church.²⁴ Three years prior to 1894 he had moved to a similar ministry in Chicago, and was now contributing a weekly "Chicago Letter" to the *Christian Intelligencer*.

On August 8, Moerdyke commented that union is being more and more discussed. Some are for and others against it. There are weighty things to consider, and we must not be hasty; but how shall we begin? Both sides should begin immediately to follow these rules:

Pray regularly and earnestly for each other.

Cease to fight and bicker in periodicals, in public, and in private.

Recognize each other as brothers and practise Christian fellowship with each other.

Mutually observe lawful ecclesiastical procedure in church work (evidently a reference to inter-denominational disputes about the propriety of organizing new congregations where the other denomination was already at work).²⁵

Moerdyk's column of October was much more pungent. He wrote:

That question of reunion with the Holland Christian Reformed Church is very differently viewed in the West, and the conviction prevails that many years will elapse ere it will be practicable, if really it can ever be effected. Many who desire to cherish and manifest only the kindest spirit toward said body, sincerely hope it will not for years come to pass, lest our Western development, and possibly our denomination, be seriously hampered and retarded by this element, which is, as all know, very far behind us in progress. Certainly, at present, it would be hard anywhere to consolidate two churches, and find life pleasant and fulfill the mission of a church. And this is due largely to the fact that the Holland Christian Reformed Church contains mostly those who are still thoroughly Hollandish and Provincial, while our people are such as have become rather American. "Let every one of them get to heaven in his own fashion." There is no disputing about tastes, and yet many such matters, involving no doctrine or great principle, separate Christians. Some day the younger element can and will dwell together, we trust, but we

should now agree to disagree, if possible.²⁶

Obviously such comments could not pass without reply, although originally when Rev. Vander Werp reproduced Moerdyke's comment in translation in *De Wachter* of October 24, he allowed it to stand by itself.²⁷ A rebuke to Rev. Moerdyke came, somewhat unexpectedly, in a comment by Dr. Steffens, published by Vander Werp in *De Wachter* of October 31. Vander Werp provides some background for the comment. Federal union between the RCA and the German Reformed Church was under discussion, with opinions sharply divided within the RCA. Moerdyke was a proponent and Steffens an opponent of this union. Vander Werp observes that one might expect that therefore Moerdyke would also advocate and Steffens oppose union with the CRC. But such expectation would prove false.

The pertinent portion of Steffens' comment, as quoted by Vander Werp, follows:

Now one would think that our Federalists would be friends of church union wherever the opportunity is offered. Such is not the case. Just talk to our Federalists about union with the Christian Reformed and it is as if you had dropped a bomb in their camp. Union with these narrow-minded people? Who could think of it? We are much more advanced. How could we attach ourselves to the rearguard of the army of Christ? No, then let us rather take as motto the word of old Fritz, king of Prussia, who, when he himself had become a freethinker and friend of Voltaire, adopted this rule: "In my kingdom everyone can be saved in his own way." The ground for union in the minds of some Federalists is progress. But what is meant by such progress? Progress in knowledge of God and Christ? Would it not betray a pharisaic spirit if we were to claim that we had made more progress than others in that knowledge? Is it progress in culture, Americanization, or something of that sort? Where in our Bible can we find reason to think that such a thing should keep believers separate from each other? In the days when Jesus walked upon earth the sophisticated people were opposed to him and His gospel. There may be grounds which will make union between the Christian Reformed and Reformed impossible. But the aforementioned grounds are without merit.²⁸

As the date for the proposed meeting drew nearer and the discussion heated up, Vander Werp expressed some misgivings. In his column in *De Wachter* of October 24, he admitted that the nearer the November 15 date came, the more nervous he became. Evidently the discussion was not going to be as amicable as he had hoped, and he had not wished for a fight.

If you have read the planned program, you will see that we are in dead earnest. But from the other side, the question arises whether union is really to be desired. So many problems have been brought up by the other side that it is hardly possible to hope for the union of all the Dutch Reformed. What have we read recently in *De Hope* and the *Christian Intelligencer*? "Union with the separatists? Yes, but only in this sense, that they return to the church which, without due cause, they have left." Just as Dr. Cole of Yonkers said at his synod of Grand Rapids in '83 or '84; "Dear brothers, if you return to the bosom of our church we will bid you a hearty welcome as brothers who have gone astray but can be forgiven." Some say, "Leave the East? Never!" But we have not even mentioned the East.²⁹

Vander Werp observes that some Christian Reformed members have no desire for union. He cites one member who held that the cleft in doctrine (presumably between the decadent Eastern RCA and all true Reformed believers) would have to become deeper before any union could take place.

Finally, after noting the Moerdyke comment quoted above, Vander Werp says, "I consider 1882 the crisis of reunion. If ever we could have come together it was then. Then the Reformed brothers still fought for what we all stood for, but now no longer."

In *De Wachter* of November 4, Rev. I. J. Fles chided Vander Werp for his apparent faintness of heart. If the RCA thinks the way Moerdyk does (and many others with him), they should honestly say to the Christian Reformed church, "Brothers, we do not at all want union with you, because it will be a great hindrance to our progress." But by no means all members of the RCA share that attitude. Vander Werp should forswear his

misgivings and go on in support of the project.

Rev. Vander Werp, in a reply which was longer than the critique, insists that he has not lost heart, but was accurately reflecting the progress or lack of progress in this matter.³⁰

Vander Werp was not the only interested person who was beginning to have misgivings. In the same November 4 *Wachter*, Teunis Keppel (a Christian Reformed elder who apparently came over from the RCA in the lodge agitation of 1882) opines that a meeting may now be superfluous. Both sides have published their proposals, and they are very far apart from each other. Perhaps too much has been written before a meeting ever took place. It seems, say Keppel, as if there is less heart for union now than there was some months ago. "We hope we are wrong. We have received more than thirty letters and cards from ministers, about equally divided between the two churches, all expressing a desire for union."³¹

It was, indeed, high time that the preliminary discussions should yield place to actual proposals and action upon them. By mid-October the matter was moving toward its climax. The October 17 issue of *De Hope* published the reports of the respective agenda committees, looking toward the forthcoming meeting scheduled for November 15. We present the two reports at some length in view of their central importance for what follows.

A committee report signed by H. Beuker, J. H. Vos, and K. Kuiper for the Christian Reformed Church reviewed the history of the discussions and the appointment of committees. It emphasized that neither the program nor the findings of the public meeting could have any binding character. But the discussion might prove helpful for getting to know each other better and for providing useful information. The report continued:

We conclude that both groups have the same doctrinal standards. Although the respective church orders differ in form, both groups affirm that they have no other intent than to regulate their ecclesiastical life in accordance with the Church Order of Dordt. We judge that it is nothing short of sinful that brothers who acknowledge the same confession and wish to live by the same church order should be ecclesiastically separated, at least insofar as they speak one language. . . . Our division adversely affects our influence in the world. It is our duty on the one hand to confess our guilt for so much strife and division and on the other hand to do all in our power to express the unity of the Reformed witness practically and positively. To do this, we must mutually disavow all of our accusations, judgments, and harsh words; so exercise discipline as to ensure not only that members do not deny Reformed doctrine but also that they live a life in conformity with it; abide by the church order of Dordt except that the respective synods may indicate which articles no longer apply in our time. The church must not admit to membership anyone who is a member of the Freemasons or any oath-bound society . . . because such membership is incompatible with membership in the Church of Jesus Christ, being anti-republican, anti-christian, and anti-reformed (Wisconsin Report, 1880). And therefore we must not enter into, or we must break off, relationship with any church group which recognizes as members such as hold such membership. We must officially evaluate the collection of hymns and at least see to it that hymns are kept to a minimum so as to ensure that the Psalms retain the place of honor. If we cannot get together, we must mutually recognize each other's discipline, unless it is evident that it is administered in conflict with God's Word, the Reformed confessions, or the Church Order; open pulpits to each other's ministers, if the consistories have no objection; cooperate in supporting Christian education on a Reformed foundation; accept each other's membership certificates and avoid establishing rival churches in remote areas.
(Other particulars were added.)

In the same issue of *De Hope* the Reformed church committee published their report on agenda proposals, signed by E. Winter, A. Kriekaard, and R. H. Joldersma. Slightly condensed, it reads as follows:

Whereas the RCA and the CRC, as we have agreed, hold the same confessions and church order and the principles of application of confessions and church order, be it resolved (1) that it is our deepest conviction that the historic RCA is the true and proper home for the Dutch Reformed in America; (2) That we therefore do not for one moment entertain the possibility of any union which would involve the prospect of withdrawal from that church with which we have so long lived in blessed fellowship. And that at the same time we are convinced that there is no

tenable reason why the CRC should remain separate from us. If organic union is not possible, it is very desirable that a better relationship should exist between us. The Particular Synod of Chicago and the General Synod of the CRC should recognize each other ecclesiastically; and wherever an existing church is capable of supplying the spiritual need in the area, the other church shall not enter that field.³²

(The report goes on to such matters as acceptance of membership certificates, discipline, and pulpit exchange.)

It is readily evident that with an agenda like this, the November 15th meeting would be a wild affair. Vander Werp's pessimism when he saw the proposals has been mentioned. In his Chicago Letter, Moerdyke commented as follows:

The emphasis in the first program on language ("at least in so far as they speak one language"), and that test of membership which bars Masons and others, foreshadow the main result, yet the cause of Christ has suffered so much and so long, and, as one puts it, "so many souls of our young people have been murdered by this contention and the religious newspaper controversy" that we pray and trust this gathering will "consider one another to provoke unto love and good works."³³

Poor attendance of the RCA contingent at a late committee meeting had already suggested that enthusiasm was waning.³⁴ Then, shortly before the scheduled date of the meeting, the RCA committee asked for and were granted a one-week postponement, to the 22nd of November, owing to a conflict with a Sunday School convention.³⁵ Perhaps this was further evidence of reluctance to meet.

However that may be, these hints were minor compared with the bomb which was thrown into the proceedings one week before the revised date. On November 14, Winter, Kriekaard, and Joldersma published a brief notice in *De Hope*:

In the light of specified circumstances, the committee of the RCA has decided to withdraw their program together with their cooperation in holding a public gathering in Holland, Michigan, on the 22nd of this month. Reasons for this withdrawal will be reported, D.V., by the committee next week in an article in *De Hope*.³⁶

That further announcement reads as follows:

The committee had the freedom to act unilaterally in this way because nobody had officially appointed them. Because of the absence of some members they could not consult with the other side. The desire to hold such a meeting did not arise with us, although we consented to it. We do long for better relations. But, taking note of the manner in which things were written immediately after the publication of the program, and the opinion expressed by many that there was too wide a chasm between the two programs to raise any expectation of a good outcome, and the eagerness of the other side to elicit a churchly confession of sin from us, we decided to act as we did. If a reunion is to take place, we leave the program to those who seem to know how that is to be done. We do not desire it on any other basis than the one we outlined. We did not cause the schism. The Christian Reformed brothers separated from us. We call on both churches to recognize the historical fact that both churches exist. (Datelined Grand Rapids, November 15)³⁷

Consternation and outrage prevailed in the Christian Reformed camp. The committee members, in particular, complained bitterly, although fruitlessly, that they had received no advance notice of the intention of their counterparts to withdraw from the meeting, and had no information about their reasons except what they, together with the rest of the public, could read in the newspapers.³⁸

The announcement is certainly not as specific as it might have been, although clues as to the reasons for withdrawal are probably clearest in the reference to a churchly confession of sin. The only additional information as to the reasons for withdrawal comes second hand, in comments made by Christian Reformed elder C. Kelder

during the discussion in the public meeting. Kelder said that when he talked with Dr. Winter about the withdrawal, Winter told him that the committee had no choice but to withdraw, because if they had not done so there would have been war in the RCA camp.³⁹ Although there is no record of confirmation of this by anyone else, it is not at all impossible that Dr. Winter said this, and that it was an accurate evaluation of the situation. Perhaps it was even a valid reason for avoiding a meeting, but that is open to debate.

The Christian Reformed committee decided to go ahead with the meeting. Both *De Wachter* and *De Grondwet* published detailed accounts of the meeting, devoting several columns in three successive issues apiece to this subject.⁴⁰ There is a remarkable degree of agreement between the two accounts, one of them from a partisan religious newspaper and the other from a secular paper with a slight bias toward the other side. Those who recorded the speeches must have taken copious and generally accurate notes. *De Grondwet* describes the Christian Reformed accusations in greater detail than does *De Wachter*, and also identifies by name more RCA speakers, all but one of whom were elders.

While *De Wachter* speaks of the locale as "the Pillar Church," *De Grondwet* identifies it as "the old Van Raalte Church," a pointed reminder that this RCA landmark had gone over to the CRC in the lodge dispute of the 1880s. While no estimate of numbers is given, it is reported that the church was fairly well filled. *De Wachter* reports that there were members, elders, some ministers, and some professors and students from the RCA in attendance. Only one RCA minister spoke, but several elders contributed to the discussion. It was quite evident, however, that they were badly outnumbered and very much on the defensive.

In preliminary remarks, Prof. Beuker defended the Christian Reformed committee's decision to go ahead with the meeting. It was not their fault that the RCA committee had withdrawn their cooperation, and there was no good reason for doing so. Somewhat later in the meeting, elder Keppel bemoaned the fact that there were so few RCA members present. They should not have allowed a little group of three men (the RCA committee) to lead them around in such fashion.

There were understandably some problems in knowing how to organize the meeting. After some debate it was decided that the privilege of the floor should be shared by all confessing members of the two churches. There was even more argument about the agenda. Finally all substitute proposals were set aside in favor of an agenda prepared by the Christian Reformed committee, which incorporated questions which the RCA committee had raised. The way they were phrased and dealt with sounded more like a rebuttal of unstated arguments than like positive presentations. Some participants were unsure of the propriety of discussing propositions whose authors were not present to explain and defend themselves, but this agenda won the day.

The CRC committee had designated certain of their members to introduce the various items on the agenda. Prof. Beuker was the first to have the floor. He began with an extended review of the events leading up to this meeting. Some of his points deserve mention here.

When Beuker came to the United States he was already desirous of promoting union between the two groups. He desired, he said, "a reunion of all of the Reformed, such as he had witnessed in the Netherlands." This is evidently a reference to the union between Doleantie and Afscheiding. But referring to these two churches as "all of the Reformed" seems to write off the State Church as not belonging to that category. If Beuker thought the Netherlands situation was parallel to that in the United States, did that mean that he thought the Eastern RCA was a parallel of the repudiated Dutch State Church? That thought, if present, was not expressed. At one point in the November 22 meeting, however, one of the Christian Reformed spokesmen asked pointedly, "When the Hervormde Kerk declined, was there any protest from the RCA? And how did they evaluate the Secession of 1834?"⁴¹

Only rarely in the entire discussion of union is the Eastern RCA mentioned. On one of those occasions, Vander Werp, as reported earlier, is at pains to point out that the CRC committee had not even mentioned the East. But this little-mentioned issue was very much in consideration.

After further preliminary review by Beuker, in which he recounts the invitation given to him to participate in discussions looking toward union, the assembly proceeded to its business. It was judged best to have a chairman and a secretary (although nobody really wanted the latter task) and Rev. Gabriel D. De Jong and Rev. J. Groen were chosen, respectively, to these two offices.

The six-point agenda for the day-long meeting consisted of the following questions:

- 1) Is the RCA the natural home for Dutch Reformed people in America as the "other side" maintains?
- 2) Is it true that we are one in church order and its application?
- 3) Are there concrete instances of the RCA departing from its doctrinal standards and church order?

- 4) Is lodge membership compatible with membership in the RCA?
- 5) Is the use of the RCA hymnbook compatible with Reformed principles, and is not the use of the Psalms thereby deprived of priority?
- 6) If we cannot unite, can we consider exchange of membership certificates and fellowship at the Lord's Supper?⁴²

It was Prof. Beuker's assignment to introduce the first question. This he did at considerable length. No attempt will be made here to summarize his presentation; only a few items significant to the discussion will be mentioned. He contested the assertion of the RCA committee that unanimity in confession and church order prevailed between the two churches. This recurring point was far from abstract, since it had to do with the question whether it was the business of a synod to take a stand on the church membership of Freemasons.

Beuker went on to review the history of the Union of 1850, repeating familiar CRC arguments about the hastiness of the action, the short notice of a meeting for discussion, and the failure to gain sufficient information about the RCA. The leaders had no evil intent, to be sure, but the whole thing went too fast.

A complete review of Beuker's arguments will not be given. They are the points made again and again in the long-running debate between RCA and CRC on the subject of their parting from each other. It may be remarked that, although some of his points were evidently painful to some RCA members, he sought in the main to be moderate in his accusations. Among the more innocent of his comments, however, was one to which a later speaker returned with some emotion. Beuker observed that a common language was important in sensing where another party really stood. The 1847 immigrants, he said, did not really know what kind of a church the RCA was.

In the discussion following Beuker's presentation, elder Klooster of the RCA compared the two denominations to a young couple who had married, then divorced, and now were together again. When asked by a relative how matters were proceeding, the husband said, "We still need a koppelstok (a singletree used for harnessing a team) and a doofpot (a pot for snuffing out hot coals). The one is needed so that we can work together, and the other is needed to set aside old arguments." Klooster evidently did not think the Beuker address had made enough use of the doofpot.⁴³

Organization of the meeting and Beuker's address had consumed nearly the entire morning. Immediately after the lunch break, the lone RCA minister to take the floor also responded to Beuker. Rev. Van Houten was pastor of the First Reformed Church of Holland. He had intended to keep silent, he said, but there were assertions about the RCA which needed an answer. He had come from the Netherlands to the RCA after having declined calls to the CRC. He judged that the issues in 1882 were no valid cause for separation. Beuker's language argument, he said, works in just the opposite way from what Beuker thinks. The RCA is the best place for the immigrants because it prepares them for the future which they will face. There are indeed shortcomings in the RCA; are there none in the CRC? How can we deal with the agenda of the RCA committee when they are not here to defend themselves?

Becoming more and more heated, he stated that the two churches are not ready for union. As a young man who was courting his daughter once said to him, "It hasn't come to hugging yet." Then, shouting "Hands off the RCA!" Van Houten left the meeting in a highly emotional state, and refused to return, despite the urging of his fellow members.⁴⁴

Because of the familiarity of the arguments, the various points of the agenda tended to overlap each other. We can present only a brief summary of the way in which the meeting dealt with the remaining five points. Rev. Klaas Kuiper was the person designated to introduce the question whether the two churches were indeed one in confession and church order, both in theory and in practice. He stated that the two were certainly not one in the application of the church order. The clearest example of this was in the way the question of Freemasonry had been dealt with. Classes Holland and Wisconsin of the RCA had spoken out clearly on the negative side of church membership for masons, but the synod acted in an independentistic or collegial manner on this score.

Rev. Groen walked rather gingerly around the question whether there were actual departures from Reformed doctrine in the RCA. He did offer some evidence of toleration of Arminianism.

When attention was formally focused on the question of Freemasonry, it was claimed that the Hollanders were agreed on this point, but that the English-speaking churches would not listen. Patience was apparently wearing thin by this time, and the discussion became rather unpleasantly personal at some points.

The question of the use of hymns in worship services produced some difference of opinion in the Christian Reformed camp, reported somewhat more fully in *De Grondwet* than in *De Wachter*. Rev. Vander Werp was asked to introduce this subject, apparently somewhat to his surprise. He offered the opinion that the use of some hymns

was not contrary to the church order, as long as the priority of psalm-singing was protected. Others in the CRC, however, thought this was too permissive. With some difficulty the discussion was recalled to the more precise question whether the particular selection of hymns approved by the Reformed church could pass muster. On the negative side it was pointed out that in a collection of 1,000 songs there were indeed some psalms interspersed, but that sixty-nine of the 150 psalms were missing.⁴⁵

The final question concerned practical cooperation between the two denominations on such matters as comity, membership exchange, and pulpit fellowship. Nearly every suggestion raised in this context ran into difficulty. It was feared that a resolution on the formation of new congregations would bind the conscience. It was judged that there was as yet insufficient unity to allow for free exchange of membership certificates. Even a resolution of good will toward the RCA failed of adoption, not so much because there was no good will as because this kind of meeting was technically not empowered to adopt a resolution.⁴⁶

In October, when he announced the date of the forthcoming meeting, Vander Werp had visualized an evening session devoted largely to joint prayer and worship.⁴⁷ Lack of RCA participation had already put this under a cloud. Difficulties encountered in completing the agenda further complicated it. The business of the meeting came to a rather speedy close when it was announced that the train which many delegates would have to take was about to leave. The discussion was broken off and a brief prayer closed the meeting.⁴⁸

The meeting began with a disappointing representation and followed a course which could have brought little satisfaction to either side. There were, throughout the preliminary discussions and at the meeting itself, differences of opinion within the two communions. This reflects some of the difficulties involved in the question of unity. It also provided controversialists from either side with opportunities to divide and conquer.

There is not much to report about post-mortems on the meeting. When he closed his lengthy report in *De Wachter*, editor Keizer expressed the hope that the pages of *De Wachter* would not be filled with quibbling in the forthcoming weeks.⁴⁹

Peter Moerdyke could not resist the temptation to take one more jab. In his Chicago Letter of December 3, he writes:

The Holland Christian Reformed party evidently enjoyed the meeting of November 22nd at Holland, and had the floor for most of the day, as "its rights there were none to dispute." Our side had cancelled its engagements, and hence our friends through the surgery of their new professor Beuker, fresh from the old country, probed the old wounds afresh, and demonstrated to his and their perfect satisfaction the utter and mortal unsoundness of our church. Of course, that will promote union! It is gratifying to hear, however, that many of his constituency regretted his divisive, insolent spirit and method.⁵⁰

It is difficult to find warrant for these adjectives in the report which either *De Wachter* or *De Grondwet* gave of Beuker's address. But the Moerdyke comment is an indication that it has become high time to put this whole union discussion, at least temporarily, into the doofpot.

There seems to be little doubt that the promise of union was ephemeral from the very beginning of the discussions, because the respective parties were talking about two completely different kinds of union.⁵¹ The Reformed church participants (with some exceptions) wanted the Christian Reformed church to join them in the Reformed Church of America. The Christian Reformed participants (also with some exceptions, although these are less well documented) wanted their fellow immigrants to leave the RCA and join with them in a single denomination of recently-arrived Hollanders.

The difficulty in either of these courses of action, amounting to an impossibility, lay in the fact that to follow either course would require one or the other of the parties to admit that they had made a mistake requiring correction, not to say a sin requiring repentance. Either the Union of 1850 was a mistake to be repented of, or the Secession of 1857 was purely a schismatic action.

The mystery does not lie in the failure of the negotiations. The mystery is why any of these leaders ever thought they would succeed. These men were not stupid. If, contrary to all indications, the problems had not been evident from the beginning of the discussions, they were certainly crystal-clear from the moment when the two agenda reports were published.

Some misreading of each other may have been involved. The lodge agitation of the early 1880s had deeply troubled the western segment of the RCA, and the CRC may have thought this issue was still such as could prompt

a general change of heart. The RCA may have thought that in open discussion they could persuade their counterparts of the untenability of the Christian Reformed position; the opinion was frequently expressed that even the separatists, if they would stop to think, would recognize that the RCA position was right.

But something deeper and more honorable was operating in their minds and hearts--perhaps in their hearts more than in their minds. In many quarters, and particularly in the Netherlands, some old wounds were being healed and unions were taking place which would have seemed impossible a few decades earlier. The only alternative to thinking that the likes of Steffens and Beuker and Vander Werp and Keppel were cynical, scheming, or utterly naive, is to give them the honor of concluding that they yearned for the unity of believers who belonged together, took heart from the union of Afscheiding and Doleantie, and hoped against hope that some miracle would occur which would resolve their differences and end their separation.

The miracle did not occur and the hopes were dashed. But the failure of frail humans to repair the damage done at some time in the past should not diminish their credit for daring to hope that it might be done and for working as hard as they could to bring it to pass.

Endnotes

1. The newspapers consulted are:

The Banner of Truth, vol. XXVIII; this was the publication of Classis Hackensack, and later to become the English-language weekly of the Christian Reformed Church; at this point it was a regional CRC publication commenting on those issues which would seem to be of interest to English-language members;

The Christian Intelligencer, Volume LXV; the English-language weekly newspaper of the Reformed Church in America;

De Grondwet (The Constitution), Volume XXXV; a secular newspaper published in Holland, Michigan, bearing on its masthead the words, "liberty, union, and constitution";

De Hope, Volume XXVIII; published weekly in Holland, Michigan, "in the interests of society, school and church" (the "school" is specifically Hope College);

De Wachter (The Watchman), volume XXVII; a Dutch-language weekly published by the Christian Reformed Church especially in the interests of the Theological School.

2. The Afscheiding was a secession from the State Church of the Netherlands in 1834; most of the immigrants to Western Michigan between 1846 and 1880 came from this background. The Doleantie was a later secession, associated most prominently with the name of Dr. Abraham Kuyper. These two movements united in 1890 to form the Gereformeerde Kerken. Incidentally, Prof. Beuker was vice president of the synod which effectuated this union.

3. Rev. H. Vander Werp and Prof. H. Beuker, two of the principal writers on the subject of the 1894 union proposal, were the delegates of the Christian Reformed Church to the union discussions with the United Presbyterian Church. *The Banner of Truth*, Vol. XXIX, No. 2, September, 1894, p. 25.

4. Union proposals sometimes appeared on the local scene, including one occasion involving the Eastern classes of the Christian Reformed Church. *The Banner of Truth* (Volume XXIX, Number 3, September, 1894, page 4) reports concerning Classis Hudson (neighbor of Classis Hackensack) that "Among the questions deliberated was: Whether the time had not yet come to make an effort to unite with all those congregations that held to the same confession of faith?" The answer was yes. Consistories were asked to meet with consistories of the Reformed church to discuss the subject of union and report to the next classis.

This evoked a firm editorial rebuke in the November issue (*Op. cit.*, Number 5, November, 1894, page 72). The editor comments that such union proposals and activities are not the business of any classis, but belong to the General Synod. He goes on to say that this move by Classis Hudson is a threat to Classis Hackensack because it will be an occasion to renew the slanderous accusations made against the forefathers as having acted in a schismatic way when they withdrew from the ecclesiastical judicatories of the RCA. The editor then proceeds to review the history of Hopkinsianism and the 1822 secession.

Nothing is heard further of this matter in *The Banner of Truth*.

5. Cf. *De Wachter*, Vol. 14, No. 7, April 28, 1881, p. 3. The background of this matter is discussed at some length in J. Kromminga, *The Christian Reformed Church, a Study in Orthodoxy*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1948, pp. 49 ff.

6. In view of the fact that 1882 had marked a relatively large-scale defection of congregations from the RCA to the CRC over the issue of lodge membership, and the Christian Reformed Acts of Synod of 1883 record these proceedings in considerable detail (Acts of Synod of the Christian Reformed Church, 1883, Appendix II, pages 32-42), an event recorded in the Acts for 1884 must be considered remarkable. We reproduce the account in full, part of it in translation.

Article X. It was announced that a committee of the Synod of the Reformed Church, which is meeting at this very time in Grand Rapids, wishes to speak to our assembly. After this has been declared acceptable, Rev. Henry Dosker leads them into the meeting. The committee, through Rev. Isaac S. Hartley, reads the following in the name of their synod:

GENERAL SYNOD OF THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA, GRAND RAPIDS, JUNE 11, 1884: EXTRACT FROM THE MINUTES OF THE SYNOD

Whereas: There is at present convened in this city a Synod of the Christian Reformed Church;

Resolved: That this General Synod of the Reformed Church in America appoint a delegation of three ministers and three elders to express our kind and fraternal feeling toward them, and the hope that the Divine Spirit may bring all these into union who hold the common faith, and principles of the Reformed Church.

Resolved: That this committee consist of Rev. Isaac S. Hartley, Rev. George S. Bishop, Rev. Henry Dosker, and elders M. H. Crosby and A. Pyl.

Signed, Paul D. Van Cleef, Stated Clerk

From the above-named committee hearty words were spoken to our synod by the brethren Dr. Isaac S. Hartley, Rev. George S. Bishop, Rev. Henry E. Dosker, and Dr. M. H. Crosby. Response is made by Professor G. E. Boer and the President, after which we sang together Psalm 134:3.

SYNOD OF THE HOLLAND CHRISTIAN REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA, GRAND RAPIDS, JUNE 11, 1884: EXTRACT FROM THE MINUTES OF THE SYNOD

Whereas: the Synod of the Reformed Church kindly has sent a delegation in return whereby to show their feeling toward us;

Resolved: That the Synod of the Holland Christian Reformed Church in America appoint a delegation to express the wish, that the God almighty for Christ sake grant you a blessing in your assembly, and with the prayer to Him above, that all having the same faith and based in the same fundamental principles, become one.

Resolved: That this committee consist of the Brethren L. J. Hulst of Grand Rapids, L. Rietdyk of Zeeland, J. Noordewier of Kalamazoo, Prof. G. E. Boer of Grand Rapids, and G. Hemkes of Vriesland. (*Acts of the Synod of the Holland Christian Reformed Church, 1884*, pages 5, 6).

7. *The Christian Intelligencer*, Volume LXV, Number 40, October 3, 1894, page 1.

8. *Jaarboekje van de Hollandsche Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerk, 1894*.

9. For a background discussion of Americanization in the CRC see Kromminga, *op. cit.*, pp. 98 ff.

10. A description of the ongoing discussion, including identification of the main participants, is given in Kromminga, *op. cit.*, Chapter 2.

11. The Christian Reformed Church gave evidence of high appreciation for Dr. Steffens. Having determined in 1892 to add a fourth professor to the staff of the theological school, the synod included Dr. Steffens on a nomination of five persons for the position. Steffens was elected by a wide margin on the first ballot. He was notified by telegram of this action. It appears from the acts of the subsequent synod that he declined the appointment. Cf. *Acts of the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church, 1892*, Article 709 and *Acts, 1894*, Appendix VIII, p. 77.

12. *De Hope*, Volume XXVIII, Number 6, December 20, 1893.

13. *Op. cit.*, Numbers 7 and 8, January 3 and 10, 1894.
14. *Op. cit.*, Number 13, February 7, 1894.
15. *Op. cit.*, Number 14, February 14, 1894.
16. *Op. cit.*, Number 19, March 21, 1894.
17. *Op. cit.*, Number 21, April 4, 1894.
18. *Op. cit.*, Number 33, June 27, 1894.
19. *The Banner of Truth*, Volume XXVIII, Number 10, April, 1894, pages 157.
20. *De Wachter*, Volume XXVII, Number 34, October 17, 1894.
21. Beuker's account is reported both in *De Wachter*, Volume XXVII, Number 40, November 28, 1894, and in *De Grondwet*, Volume XXXV, Number 14, November 27, 1894.
22. *De Wachter*, Volume XXVII, Number 34, October 17, 1894.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Cf. the report of the dedication of a new building of the Grand Rapids church in *The Christian Intelligencer*, Volume LXV, Number 44, October 30, 1894. Moerdyke says that his Grand Rapids ministry had taken as its key the development of a congregation which would gradually Americanize the young people of Holland extraction in this community. "If you would see how it succeeded, look about you."
25. *De Hope*, Volume XXVIII, Number 39, August 8, 1894, page 2.
26. *The Christian Intelligencer*, Volume LXV, Number 40, October 3, 1894, page 8.
27. *De Wachter*, Volume XXVII, Number 35, October 24, 1894.
28. *Op. cit.*, Number 36, October 31, 1894.
29. *Op. cit.*, Number 35, October 24, 1894.
30. *Op. cit.*, Number 37, November 4, 1894.
31. *Ibid.* Keppel, was the most visibly active elder in the entire discussion. He thought both *De Wachter* and *De Hope* were excessively slow in giving the reading public an account of the preliminary meetings. In a letter to *De Hope* he seeks to remedy this failure. Because many have been asking what progress was made at a meeting in Grand Rapids on August 2, he asks the kind indulgence of the editor for a brief note. He writes, "We have met twice as ministers and elders and spoken of the desirability of union, but that goal has not yet been attained owing to the small numbers in attendance at the meetings. Therefore the group has appointed six ministers, three from each side, as a committee to draw up a program leading to discussion of unity. The committee will designate a date on which a meeting, open to the public, will be held in the old Van Raalte church in Holland. Cf. *De Hope*, Volume XXVIII, Number 40, August 15, 1894.
32. *De Hope*, Volume XXVIII, Number 49, October 17, 1894, pp. 1 ff.
33. *The Christian Intelligencer*, Volume LXV, Number 44, October 31, 1894, p. 11.

34. Prof. H. Beuker, in his opening address at the meeting of November 22nd, reported that after the meeting of August 2nd and before November, there was another meeting of the preparatory committee, date unspecified, to discuss progress. Only one RCA member was present, the others stating that they were unable to attend. *De Wachter*, Volume XXVII, Number 40, November 28, 1894.
35. *Ibid.*
36. *De Hope*, Volume XXIX, Number 1, November 14, 1894, p. 4.
37. *Op. cit.*, Number 2, November 21, 1894.
38. *De Wachter*, Volume XXVII, Number 40, November 28, 1894.
39. So reported in *De Wachter*, Volume XXVII, Number 41, December 5, 1894.
40. The accounts in *De Wachter* are found in Volume XXVII, Numbers 40, 41, and 42 (November 28 and December 5 and 12, 1894). Those in *De Grondwet* are found in Volume XXXV, Numbers 14, 15, and 16 (November 27 and December 4 and 11, 1894).
41. Reported in *De Wachter*, Volume XXVII, Number 40, November 28, 1894.
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Op. cit.*, Number 41, December 5, 1894.
45. *Ibid.* For in an interestingly different account, see *De Grondwet*, Volume XXXV, Number 16, December 11, 1894.
46. *De Grondwet, loc. cit.*
47. *De Wachter*, Volume XXVII, Number 34, October 17, 1894.
48. *De Grondwet*, Volume XXV, Number 16, December 11, 1894.
49. *De Wachter*, Volume XXVII, Number 42, December 12, 1894.
50. *The Christian Intelligencer*, Volume LXV, Number 49, December 5, 1894.
51. Perhaps symptomatic of this difference is an early amendment in the preparatory discussions of the two denominational groups. Whereas the question which had first been posed was whether all the "Reformed Hollanders" in the United States could unite, it was altered during the meeting to read simply "all the Reformed" (Gereformeerden) in the United States. *De Wachter*, Volume XXVII, Number 40, November 28, 1894.