

Henry Wierenga: Sunday Isn't Sabbath

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The theological issue associated with Professor Ralph Janssen's career and dismissal in 1922 was, and probably still is, the CRC's most notable tar baby. Virtually every pastor, professor and educator who publicly defended Janssen suffered either aspersions on their orthodoxy or severance from the denomination. Janssen taught at the Grand Rapids Theological School from 1902-1906; 1914-1922. Throughout most of that era he was the only professor with a doctoral diploma (Ph.D., Halle, Germany, 1902). His education in several German universities, together with additional study at the Free University of Amsterdam

(Th.D., 1908), shaped his teaching of biblical interpretation (exegesis), an obviously crucial aspect of theological training. He taught his students to interpret scripture with what he called, "The application of strictly scientific methods of exegetical study."* That required a careful analysis of the original languages, an understanding of specific literary types (poetry, history, proverbs etc.), an effort to identify the authorship of each book and a study of the cultures surrounding biblical accounts. It demanded, in other words, the questions careful readers ask of any book--who wrote it and when, to whom was it addressed, and why it was written.

When several of Janssen's most ardent disciples displayed the products of this method in their sermons, disputes followed because the method fosters a critical examination of traditional interpretations. Quirinus Breen, a Janssen student who defended the Professor, left his Twelfth Street, Grand Rapids congregation in 1924 after Synod denied validity to any part of his sixteen-page protest against Janssen's ejection from the Seminary in 1922. Breen subsequently became an internationally prominent historian of the Protestant Reformation. Frederick Wezeman, another "Janssen man," sustained a barrage of theological examinations during the 1930s while teaching Bible studies at Chicago Christian High School. Nonetheless he continued there until 1951 when he became the President of Northwestern College (1951-55) in Orange City, Iowa. Rev. Henry Wierenga, who was dismissed from his Jamestown pastorate in 1926, refused to reenter the ministry under any institutional umbrella. He chose instead to found and develop an appliance business in Grand Haven, Michigan. Although he turned down an opportunity to serve the Presbyterian denomination, Wierenga did minister to vacationing cottagers for many years.

The "Wierenga Case," although long forgotten by nearly everyone apart from his descendants, provides a revealing snapshot of a watershed decade in the history of the Christian Reformed church--a decade in which the CRC adopted English rapidly and began to define itself as part of the American church world while also shrugging off the Netherlandic mantle which had, until then, defined its most important debates and ecclesiastical patterns. Wierenga grew up in the West Side of Grand Rapids, enrolled at Calvin's prep school (high school) in 1913, and after just one year advanced to the college course. He graduated from the seminary in 1920,* but his first pastorate, Jamestown, was his last. A 1944 summary of his service there declares:

Candidate H. Wierenga heeded the call of the congregation and began his labors with youthful energy and idealism. During the early part of his ministry greater use was made of the English language in our activities, a new organ was acquired, the budget system of giving was introduced, and the erection of a new church building was discussed. We came to an unpleasant experience in our history at this point. Classis Zeeland, with the advice of the synodical delegates, found it necessary to depose our pastor from the gospel ministry because it was judged that he held erroneous views regarding the fourth commandment and the New Testament Sabbath. We are reminded that the church lives in an imperfect world, and she herself is far from perfection in the midst of her world.*

* Year Book of the Theological School and Calvin College, 1919-1920, p. 11.

*High school, college and seminary in eight years. Wierenga delivered the Seminary Commencement Oration titled, "Immortality," which was printed in the Calvin Annual, 1920.

The details of this "unpleasant experience" are delineated in Henry Wierenga's papers which include the offending sermons and the proceedings of Classis Zeeland together with a cluster of correspondence from Dr. Ralph Janssen, and the Reverends John Van Lonkhuyzen, Jan K. Van Baalen, Edward J. Tuuk and Quirinus Breen. The papers also include Wierenga's four-part article titled "The Light of Nature" in Religion and Culture, Feb.-July, 1923, a slice of research which established his credentials as a careful scholar, a Janssen protege and a vigorous proponent of common grace.

Wierenga's two Jamestown sermons on Lord's Day 38 examined a number of New Testament texts** which led him to conclude that the Sabbath as instituted in the biblical creation account and by the fourth commandment were not applicable in the New Testament era. He highlighted instances when Jesus and his disciples publicly violated Sabbath rules to challenge the Jewish religious establishment, and he cited Christ's words (Mark 2: 27-28),

"The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath," as the key to understanding Sunday observance. Furthermore, Wierenga argued that by his behavior and preaching

* Fiftieth Anniversary: 1894-1944, Jamestown CRC, np.

** Exodus 20:8-11; Mark 2:27-28; Mark 3:4; Acts 15:28-29; Romans 14:5-6; Galatians 4:9-10; Colossians 2:16-17.

Christ's view of the Sabbath was concentrated in Mark 3:4 which asks, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save a life or to kill?" The obvious answer, "to do good" implied a number of things for Wierenga which he proceeded to delineate.

"Doing good" certainly incorporated the primary features of a typical CRC Sunday--attending and participating in worship, teaching, tending the sick, the elderly and others in need. But, Wierenga argued, these good things were required every day and moreover every day was equally holy. With that assertion the young pastor broke new ground and challenged settled behavior.

He asserted that Sunday had no hallowed status in the New Testament and was nowhere sanctified as a replacement of the Jewish Sabbath. He did not dispute the fact that the first Christians gathered on Sunday to commemorate the resurrection, but he did challenge the view that Sunday had been thereby institutionalized. For proof he cited Paul's letter to the Romans (14:5-6). "One man considers one day more sacred than another, another man considers every day alike. Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind." Wierenga was entirely content with the selection of Sunday as the proper day for Jamestown's parishioners to gather for worship, but he was against elevating that day above others.

More controversially still, he asserted that the Old Testament Sabbath with all of its ceremonial rules and especially its proscriptions on work had no status in the Christian era because Christ fulfilled that Sabbath. Or, in other words, the eternal peace and rest which the Jewish Sabbath foreshadowed had become a present reality with Christ's advent, death and resurrection. Again Saint Paul (Colossians 2:16-17) provided Wierenga's proof. "Therefore do not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink or with regard to a religious festival, a new moon celebration or a Sabbath day. These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ."

With these presuppositions Wierenga concluded that the church had no biblical foundation either to establish Sunday rules or to discipline those who did not observe a traditional Reformed Sunday. He argued instead that the Lord's Day existed for believers to celebrate the resurrection and experience the Lord's promised presence. All behavior should enhance that objective, but there could be no specific formula to gain that end. Nonetheless Christ's example--doing good on the Sabbath--pushed in the direction of feeding the hungry tending the sick, visiting prisoners, and other functions including work and even recreation if properly conceived.

Although Wierenga's sermons may not seem very radical today, in 1924 they created immediate unrest in his Jamestown consistory and led to his examination by and deposition from Classis Zeeland in 1925. Classis asserted and the Synod of 1926 agreed that the early Christian church and the Reformed tradition had sanctioned the transfer of the Jewish Sabbath day to the Christian Sunday. And although that transfer did not include ceremonial laws, it did include the requirement of rest as indicated in Genesis 2:2-3. Furthermore because the CRC Synod of 1881 had adopted six Sabbath observance rules from the 1619 Synod of Dordrecht, Wierenga's views conflicted with that decision.

Those rules, and especially points five and six, required the observance of Sunday as the Lord's Day which was "so consecrated to worship that on that day we rest from all servile

works except those which charity and present necessity require. And also from all such recreations as interfere with worship."

To be fair, Wierenga did not argue for wage earning on Sunday nor for frivolous fun and games. He did allow that a walk in the woods or on the beach could be worshipful and that gardening on a Sunday afternoon need not be sinful. His aim, though, was not to construct a list of permissible Sunday activities, but to hallow all Christian behavior on Sunday and every other day.

Classis and Synod were not convinced by his biblical interpretations and the conclusion that his views conflicted with church order could not be contested easily. Wierenga's adherence to Janssen's "scientific" exegetical perspectives assumed that biblical evidence superseded church rules and even major confessions like the Heidelberg Catechism and the 1618 Synod of Dordrecht. In theory, that is true, but confessions and rules can only be changed when Synod concludes that a particular practice or viewpoint does not merit biblical support. In Wierenga's case the 1926 Synod decided that his protest was wrong on all counts both procedural and substantial.

Before Synod dealt with the issue a number of CRC pastors encouraged Wierenga to request a hearing at Synod and to point out procedural irregularities involved in his deposition by Classis Zeeland. Nearly every CRC journalist, including Banner editor, Henry Beets, had questions about the procedural rectitude of the case and they were especially distressed by the speed of its implementation. "Why," Beets wrote, "was there so much haste in following up suspension . . . with final deposition. Why was not the young brother given more time to make up his mind?"*

John Van Lonkhuyzen, editor of the Chicago area's Onze Toekomst, urged Wierenga to "publish the whole thing in a little booklet addressed to Classis [Zeeland] in the next session. But in the meantime have it sent to various papers and advertise it for sale. In the booklet I would relate the procedure and state my grounds. Do this as soon as possible. May the Lord grant you great wisdom."**

* The Banner, May 22, 1925.

** Letter of John Van Lonkhuyzen to Henry Wierenga, 1925.

In accord with that advice Wierenga produced a 95-page booklet titled, Toch Afgezet maar Ten Koste van Recht en Waarheid* (Deposed, but at the Cost of Truth and Justice).

With that the whole matter became public for those who could read Dutch and that certainly included the Synod in 1926. After Synod spurned Wierenga's position, his support in the denomination vanished, probably because the whole church was wearied by major disputes which had engaged the CRC in 1922 and 1924. The first of these resulted in Ralph Janssen's deposition and the 1924 debates led to a denominational split and the establishment of the Protestant Reformed Church. In a sense, Wierenga's case was a footnote on the Janssen

matter. Similarly, Quirinus Breen's carefully crafted protest in 1924 would have required a thorough reexamination of Ralph Janssen, an unattractive prospect at best. Finally on August 15, 1926 Wierenga resigned from the CRC and requested a statement of his membership status from the Jamestown congregation.

"Brethren," he began,

I would be pleased to have you send to my address a statement to the effect that I and my family have been up to this present date members of the Christian Reformed Church at Jamestown. I have waited for a synodical reply to my final communication but since it is not yet forthcoming, I am taking this means to sever my relationship with the Christian Reformed Church.

Assuring you that I have no feelings of any personal animosity to any member of the consistory or congregation, that I think back with much pleasure and satisfaction on the amicable relationships which existed during our more than four years' stay in your midst, that I regret keenly if in the performing of my duty I have been the cause of trouble or sorrow to anyone--that I would not for the world undo what I have done or deny the thrust of my message to you and finally assuring you that without troubling myself about this case anymore, I am laying it before the final tribunal knowing that the Judge of all the earth shall do justice. I am yours in the service of the Master, Jesus Christ. H.W.

* Grand Rapids, Louis Kregel Publishing Co., 1925.

P.S. I would be glad to have you read this my final word to the congregation.

After 1926 Wierenga's correspondents narrowed down to those who, with him, left the CRC. And among these, the letters of his classmate and intimate friend, Quirinus Breen, arrived throughout the following five decades.

Both Breen and Wierenga experienced periods of bitter reflection which tested their faith. Breen, after attempting a business career in Cincinnati returned to study as a graduate student at the University of Chicago. Recalling his time of rage Breen wrote in 1927,

Spiritually I stood on as low a plain as the least of them,* if not lower. For I despised them in my heart. And I have learned to repent of that. My soul has experienced a thaw as in an early spring. I have been ecstatic since I have learned to use not only my head but my heart.

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You may be surprised to learn that all my intellectual difficulties about matters like the resurrection of Christ have vanished. Scientifically I cannot prove them. Neither can I prove the existence of God scientifically.

* His former cohorts in the CRC pastorate.

If I relied merely on science I would now be the agnostic I was becoming. . . . I do not regret my experiences or my rebellion They have taught me to be very considerate of the revolutions of youth. But there came into my life a time when I must confess to a cardinal sin--the failure to give God the glory and think of Him as central.

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I care very little what the affect of my [current transformation] will be on others. Nor do I consider whether the Christian Reformed Church will rejoice [gloat] or not. What if they do? Am I better than they? Oh, if the organization wants me back, it will have to take me as I am, Janssen man, reformer, critic (but also love and all). Only six weeks ago I thought Janssen was too mild for my taste when he told me that I shouldn't think that church was all wrong. Of course, under the present circumstances I can't join it. What I'll do in the future I don't know. I predict nothing of myself.

Breen, obviously, had regained respect for the institutional church, and particularly the creedal expressions associated with the Presbyterian and Reformed family of churches. Wierenga, however, remained wary of institutional links. He, of course, had experienced official rejection. Breen, by contrast, left the CRC voluntarily before an impending ejection could be effected. That difference probably explains Wierenga's initial determination to maintain an independent ecclesiastical posture even though he did ultimately affiliate with the RCA. Some people, including family members and friends, misunderstood him. His detractors branded him a modernist, and others viewed him as a fundamentalist.

Wierenga answered these concerns in his December 23, 1927 letter addressed simply, "Dear Friends."

I am neither a modernist nor a fundamentalist but I confess gladly and wholeheartedly that I am a Christian . . . that I am justified by faith alone and for me that belief means that I know God, that I have fellowship with Him and that I am deeply moved to do His will. That belief means that I am bound to Jesus Christ and I desire to be more like him. At this same time I undoubtedly interpret some teachings differently than some orthodox Christians. But I am fully in accord with the beliefs that the Christians of all ages have affirmed against the enemies of the faith* and I enjoy the wonderful expectation of eternal life. I am strongly convinced

that my interpretation of the Christian religion is in full agreement with the demands contained in God's word. And that includes, obviously, the demands established by Christ himself.

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I subscribe wholeheartedly to the words of Paul the apostle,**
"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death and so somehow, to attain the resurrection from the dead.

With his convictions untarnished Henry Wierenga devoted the balance of his life
* Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed, Athanasian Creed.

** Philippians 3:10.

to business and a part-time pastorate. At a time when even the typical pastor often enjoyed more security than a struggling appliance dealer, the Wierengas left Jamestown to rent a small back-lot house on Prince Street in Grand Rapids. There Henry found work as a Maytag appliance salesman, a position which led to his gaining a Maytag franchise in Grand Haven, Michigan.

His 1975 recollections of these crucial months describe the events which changed his career.

After paying one month's rent I recall that we had about \$60.00 left over. That, the furniture and an auto were all of our earthly possessions. . . . So we settled down to life in Grand Rapids. No income. No job. Yet I don't recall that we were worried. . . . but we still had some loyal friends in Jamestown. They visited us and each time they brought food with them--vegetables, potatoes, eggs. And I remember one big chunk of dried beef. Within a short time I received invitations to preach in Presbyterian churches . . . these preaching engagements did give me some cash and helped keep the wolf from the door. We paid our rent and somehow kept out of debt.

Meanwhile I kept looking through the want ads for a job. I spotted one for a job working in a store--also office work. . . . the sign in the store was "the Grand Rapids Maytag Company." I went in to make application and was told the job was taken (it was a come-on ad) but they offered me a salesman's job working on commission only. My territory extended from Wealthy to Hall Street and everything east of Division Street.

After first considering this yet another fruitless effort, "Mom said, why not try it. You are out nothing but shoe leather." Henry canvassed his territory for six solid weeks without results. Finally a lead in his territory came when a client visited the store and consented to having a demonstration. That led to his first sale and his first \$18.00 commission. During the next three months (August-October) he sold another twenty-one Maytags and in the best of those months he earned \$198.00.

While visiting relatives in Grand Haven Wierenga noticed that the local Maytag franchise was rather inactive and contacted Michigan's factory representative to discuss the acquisition of that franchise. It was agreed that if Wierenga could raise enough capital he could acquire the dealership. Henry recalls,

I had to pay cash to the factory for a stock of washers. I think I bought ten washers the first time. Where to get the money? I made a trip to Jamestown, contacted the Van Rhee, Kloostra and Zagers families and put my cards on the table. The result was that each of those families loaned me \$500 without security. That gave me \$1,500 working capital. Needless to say I paid them back as soon as possible.

The next problem was locating my new business. I knew that Uncle Andrew had plenty room in his harness store and he was doing very little business. Besides I needed someone to watch the store while I was away and to help me deliver. Consequently I made a deal with Uncle Andrew-- \$5.00 to him for every washer I sold but no additional rent. He had a good deal because I soon sold ten washers every month Before moving to Grand Haven I bought a used (very much used) truck for \$50.00. It was a Model T with side curtains. So then I was in business.

My first effort was to canvass all the homes in town. That, I knew, was the only way to get prospects and make sales. First I would get permission to demonstrate the washer in the home. Uncle Andrew and I would deliver it one day and I would return at whatever time the housewife was set up to do the washing. As you can imagine it was generally early in the morning. Then I would have to go back in the evening to sell the man of the house. I'm sure I didn't miss contacting more than twenty-five homes in Grand Haven. All the others I canvassed. And I made sales. Before long I was buying washers by the [railroad] carload and getting them financed through the bank. The profit was substantial. As I recall I paid \$105.00 per washer and sold them for \$165.00. The business prospered until the Depression came in 1929 and it got really bad in 1930-31.

Along with tending his business Henry Wierenga continued to preach and conduct worship services. Although he affiliated with the Grand Haven RCA he was also a frequent guest preacher in the local Presbyterian church. During vacation seasons, June-August, he led

worship services at the Lakewood Resort Chapel. Meanwhile his appliance business flourished, particularly after World War II when the "Appliance Center" on Main Street provided an expanded inventory of major and small appliances including radios and television sets.

Until his death in 1978 Henry Wierenga provided pastoral counseling to a wide range of Grand Haven's citizens. He was active in both civic and cultural affairs including contributions to the "Wranglers" a local group which met to discuss world and local issues such as "The Problems and Possibilities of Lasting Peace." When he was forty-five Henry addressed the "Wranglers" on the topic, "My Life and My Job". He reported, I have learned that I must guard my individual freedom zealously but I have also discovered that that goal is only possible if I spend time and effort assisting someone else to be free. To help others involves all the actions covered by words such as kindness, helpfulness, understanding and tolerance--and to be of service to others without any thought of remuneration. But I must also keep my own soul in touch with the good and beautiful things in the world round about me by acquainting myself with the worlds past and present. That, to me, is living a full rich life.

"Keeping in touch with the good and beautiful" involved a number of friendships which persisted throughout Wierenga's long life. Of these none was stronger nor more persistent than his relationship with Quirinus Breen. They had together been the leading students of their 1920 class of Calvin Seminary graduates. There, too, they grew to be fast friends of Dr. William Harry Jellema who often addressed the Fortnightly Club, a group which discussed topics much like those which engaged the attention of Grand Haven's "Wranglers".

During the mid 1960s these three friends were reunited when Quirinus Breen and William H. Jellema (both then emeritated) joined the faculty of Grand Valley State University. Henry Wierenga's Grand Haven residence, about fifteen minutes away from the Grand Valley campus, facilitated his participation in frequent meetings. They recalled the times of their youth and the separate paths their lives had taken. They remembered especially the 1920s, a crucial decade for each of them--years when Rev. Breen became a historian, when Rev. Wierenga became a businessman, and Dr. Jellema left Calvin College to study in Berlin.* In the CRC's theological debates of that decade, they were the losers. Had it been otherwise their lives and the history of the CRC would have been vastly different.

In 1921, before Dr. Ralph Janssen's expulsion, optimism dominated Janssen's followers. Speaking for them in a letter to Henry Wierenga, Frederick Wezeman wrote,

We are getting up a strong invincible organization at school [Calvin Seminary] and elsewhere. This to counteract the other side. Have you any suggestions or can you give me a list of our men--especially recent graduates who are on our side--who you personally know are on our side.

Further we are going to have a banquet of the Fortnightly Club at the Pantlind Hotel in a few weeks. Guests of honor--Dr. and Mrs. Janssen. Harry [W.H. Jellema] of course will be there. You and Mrs. Wierenga must plan on coming too.

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Undoubtedly, we'll have Synod this year. Let it come. Our side will have a "hard Job" but our strength may surprise the others. They have no ammunition except falsehoods, misrepresentations, prejudice and ignorance. That stuff fills no one on our side. But can our ammunition of truth pierce the "domes" of so many of our preachers and the good elders? The ignorance of our preachers is lamentable. Another defeat at next Synod ought to educate them.

As most of you know Wezeman's hopeful expectations were spattered. Janssen was deposed and with that the teaching of "strictly scientific methods of exegetical study" evaporated at Calvin Theological School. Until the 1960s any pastor in the CRC with a serious scholarly interest in biblical studies has had to look elsewhere for literature and instruction.

* Dr. W.H. Jellema was associated with Calvin College from 1920-1935 and then, after teaching at the University of Indiana from 1935-1947, he returned to Calvin in 1947 and retired from the faculty in 1963. Thereafter for more than a decade after his seventieth birthday, he taught philosophy at Grand Valley State University.