

## Van Raalte's Primary Purpose in Coming to America

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I hope the title I have chosen for my presentation today doesn't strike any of you as too presumptuous, for I certainly do not intend to suggest that the other papers presented at this conference have dealt with insignificant topics. We have heard fine lectures on a great variety of topics, including some others on the work and the person of A. C. Van Raalte. He was indeed a great pioneer and civic leader, and, as some of the colleagues put it in a recent publication, "an American patriot." He deserves recognition as the founder of our city and the visionary thinker who established this very college. He was a pretty fair surveyor and real estate agent, an exceptional leader in city planning and land acquisition, an effective politician and diplomat, and an eloquent preacher. Yet, as Gordon Spykman put it some years ago, Van Raalte "was first and foremost minister of the Word and pastor of his flock."<sup>1</sup> I hope to establish in this paper that it was in this role of minister and pastor, and in his particular understanding of that role, that Van Raalte found his primary purpose in leading his congregation to the United States.

This is not to say that there were no other purposes or significant reasons leading to the decision to emigrate, for there can be no doubt that the continuing difficulties between the Dutch Reformed Church and the Secession Movement of 1834 was an important contributing factor in the decision of Van Raalte and his followers, as well as many other groups, to leave that country. My good friend and colleague, Robert Swierenga, has just recently published a fine article<sup>2</sup> on that very subject. These people were very devout and very serious Calvinists, and as Swierenga notes, "Religion permeated every aspect of life, including the rationale for emigrating,"<sup>3</sup> and he proceeds to carefully and convincingly document the degree to which denominational loyalty and church-centered lifestyles contributed to the success of the Dutch settlements in America.

As Swierenga also notes, this focus on the religious motivation in the emigration is not to ignore the significance of political and ecclesiastical persecution in the decade following the Secession. Nor need one overlook the fact that there had been serious crop failures and a severe food shortage in the Netherlands just before these folks decided to leave. In fact, these were considered to be the judgment of God, indicating that the Reformed Church in the Netherlands, and perhaps the entire country, had forfeited the Lord's favor because of the heresies in the church. This was put forward as a message from the Lord, telling the emigrants to leave their homeland and find "refuge," as the Rev. Scholte tended to put it, in the New World. So, Swierenga concludes, "Although most immigrants left their homeland in the hope of economic betterment, the decision to leave was clearly influenced by religious teachers."<sup>4</sup> Van Raalte was one such, and I hope that an examination of his activities as religious teacher, that is preacher and pastor, will allow us to see where his heart was in the great pilgrimage he undertook and led.

At this point, I trust it is already clear that I strongly support Robert Swierenga in his thesis that religious concerns were uppermost in Van Raalte's mind in the decision to leave the Netherlands, and I can hardly hope to improve on his documentation of that fact. Yet, I would

like to look at a slightly different aspect of the ecclesiastical concerns which Swierenga discusses. To do this we need to take a brief look back at Dutch history, and note that Albertus Christian Van Raalte was born into a Christian home caught up in the religious unrest of the first half of the 19th Century. His father was a pastor in the Dutch Reformed Church, and although Napoleon hadn't been a great churchman, his legacy to the Netherlands had quite an impact on the church, as following his withdrawal in 1815 the Dutch Reformed Church had become the official state church of the Netherlands. Needless to say, it had to become a somewhat more inclusive church, and doctrinal standards were relaxed. As far as many of the more conservative members of this church were concerned, this expanded the corrosive influence of the Enlightenment, and made the church much too liberal. A movement protesting this development and calling for renewal in the church became known as the "Reveil", a French term the Dutch had incorporated into their language to mean "a revival of religious feeling", which is clearly what these zealous people felt was needed. Although thoroughly Calvinist in doctrine, these people also had a decidedly pietistic leaning, and this comes through in all of their writings and propaganda.

A. C. Van Raalte's father wasn't actually a part of the "Reveil," but he was clearly sympathetic to its aims, which were probably much discussed in Albertus's childhood home, and quite naturally became part of A. C. Van Raalte's thinking and his belief system, even though young Albertus wasn't immediately impressed by the faith. So, it was no real surprise that Albertus sought the companionship of like-minded friends after his conversion experience at the University of Leiden. Nor was it altogether unexpected that Van Raalte would be denied candidacy for ministry in the state Reformed Church in 1834, although he had successfully completed his theological training at Seminary. He failed his examination for candidacy as he expressed reservations about the church order of the state church. It was small wonder that Van Raalte turned to the Secessionist "free church" in which so many of his former colleagues and friends were already active, and he achieved ordination in that church in 1836.

Clearly this "free church" saw itself as the ecclesiastical articulation of "Reveil" principles, and its pastors preached spiritual renewal through deep personal piety and focused Christian living. D. Van Dijk in his analysis of Secessionist preaching<sup>5</sup>, suggests that these pietistic themes predominated in their pulpits. He writes, "In almost all of these sermons there is that pietistic strain: our piety is the focal point and goal of our religious life and the ground of our hope" (p. 27). He also detects a distinctive evangelistic emphasis in this preaching, and notes that the Secessionist pastors "viewed the congregation, not as 'the people of God reconciled in Christ,' but as a mixed multitude" (p. 15). "In the sermon the table is decked, the food is dished up, and then there is always the question: 'Do you indeed share in it?'" (p. 23). As far as these preachers and many of their parishioners were concerned, living a pious Christian life was the best possible way of demonstrating that one did in fact share in that meal. Van Dijk concludes his study with the following summary: "The Secessionist ministers brought the Gospel of God's free grace in Jesus Christ. The form of their sermons had its shortcomings. Often the precise meaning of the text was not set forth clearly. Their preaching did not escape a certain monotony. But one note which was constantly sounded was this: the blood of Jesus Christ alone cleanses us from all sin. In this way God preserved and built his church" (p. 32).

To what extent Van Raalte's preaching is accurately captured in this description is hard to say, but it would seem likely that his sermons shared many of these features, and Gordon

Spykman's study of Van Raalte's sermon notes seems to confirm this. Early in the study Spykman notes: "His sermons are so strongly oriented to the need for personal salvation and sanctification"(p. 37). Later he makes this telling comment: "There is something spiritually unsettling about Van Raalte's accent on inner piety, which seeks the signs of salvation by engaging in strenuous self-examination. Nevertheless, he seeks to lead his flock into a deep sense of certainty and assurance of salvation. Such surety can and must be made real in this life. It cannot wait until the end. Either we live in the assurance of God's acquittal here and now, or else it will be lacking in eternity too"(p. 57).

It was clear that Van Raalte and other Secessionist preachers were convinced that the Netherlands of the 1840s no longer offered a good environment in which to practice this kind of pious Christian living, or to promote such sanctification and renewal in the church. There were too many polluting and corrupting influences about. It was felt that the unpolluted, isolated landscapes of the Midwestern US offered a much better setting in which to carry out such a program of renewal, and in some sense, the further from established civilization the better. It seemed obvious that both to carry out such renewal and to maintain the benefits—a renewed and holy church—isolation was desirable. This was achieved by means of the site Van Raalte selected for his settlement and by the retention of the Dutch language as the medium of exchange for many years to come. In fact, the resistance to switching to English, when that move finally came, can be seen as a residual effect of the conviction that isolation was a safeguard against corruption and erosion of the faith.

We can well imagine what Van Raalte said to his congregation in planning their departure, and how this vision of renewal in the New World must have colored his preaching and his conversation with his followers along the way. We might wonder just how "mixed" the group of followers who went with him may have been. It is surely unlikely that persons of little or no faith were willing to take such a risk, although it is possible that the prospect of better jobs and a brighter economic future was at least as important to some of the emigrants, and may well have carried those who were not quite as interested in spiritual renewal as Van Raalte was. In any case, by the time they had crossed the ocean and established their new home in Holland, Michigan, Van Raalte must have had some idea of just how many of the different kinds of parishoners he had in the group, but it seems that his messages did not change appreciably after his arrival in the States. In fact, his interest in bringing about spiritual renewal in the new "Kolonie" intensified, and we can well imagine how the tendency for infighting and bickering among the various interest groups discouraged him, for he had a very strong sense of how unity and harmony should characterize the true church. Yet, as we all know, there was often little evidence of such unity and harmony among the early settlers of Holland, Michigan.

However, Van Raalte's vision for spiritual renewal and devout Christian living never really changed. His notes for a message on Lord's Day XXXI of the Heidelberg Catechism, which he appears to have given on a number of different occasions, are revealing. Speaking on the importance of the proclamation of the Word for believers, he writes: "It must be our daily food. It must be continually received, again and again, if we are to enjoy its blessings experientially. Steady proclamation promotes such constant acceptance, for faith comes by hearing the proclamation of God's Word. Our persistent miseries and troubles press us to constantly keep an open eye to who God is and what he gives us in the Gospel, so that by a renewed faith we may unceasingly long for cleansing from sin, calmness, and the awakening of

love.”<sup>6</sup> On the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Holland, celebrated on Sept. 17, 1872, Van Raalte says to the audience, “Beloved, we now turn over to you this inheritance, this nursery of God, this workshop of God’s kingdom, where we experience His help, and which we received prayerfully from His hand . . .” (page 128). This is what Van Raalte had always seen in the Holland settlement “a nursery of God, this workshop of God’s kingdom.”

The following year, reflecting on the tremendous losses incurred in the great fire, Van Raalte notes that, “All our possessions are a gift from God, and we are to be stewards of these for His service. They are only temporarily ours” (p. 106). In 1875, shortly before his death, Van Raalte addresses the following words to the students and faculty of Hope College: “In the first place, find refuge for your souls. Flee the wrath of God. Sin dwells in you. Waves of sin sweep over you. There is nothing in you which is whole. But in the midst of it all, God had this thought of peace: He gave himself as an atonement for you. He says, Be reconciled. Draw near your Maker and He will draw near to you . . .” (p. 122). Essentially the same message that had sprung from the lips of this preacher when he was a young rebel in the Netherlands.

Such messages and such features had always been part of the pietistic message. Pietism has been around as long as the church itself, and had a very rich tradition in post-Reformation Europe, particularly in Germany and the Netherlands. An analysis of Pietism finds it flourishing whenever the established church falls prey to formalism or liberalism, or is perceived to be suffering from inroads of this kind. When I read the complaints of the “Reveil” movement or these Secessionist ministers, it always strikes me that they are exposing and combating some kind of “dead orthodoxy,” not unlike that referred to in the second chapter of Revelations, as Christ addresses the church in Ephesus: “I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary. Yet, I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did first” (vs. 2-5). I think also of Paul’s comments in Romans 12:11 “Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord.”

There is every reason to believe that Van Raalte clung to this vision of a renewed and vibrant Christian church because of his own conversion experience. He wanted each of his parishioners to have the same kind of encounter with Christ, and felt that one couldn’t be a Christian without it. I think it goes a long ways toward explaining why Van Raalte was always more concerned about personal piety than doctrinal correctness. I know, for instance, that Van Raalte is sometimes criticized in this community because he didn’t remain true to his Secessionist roots. People wonder how he could so easily have gone back to the Dutch Reformed Church which had treated him so shabbily in the Netherlands. Clearly he never really favored the split and did not actually consider it permanent, nor did it so much matter to him in which denomination one served or worshipped, as long as that worship was sincere, Scriptural, and was part of one’s devoted service of God. This vision of a renewed church also clarifies Van Raalte’s deep pain, when the believers in this community could not remain united and live in harmony. Which church was not the issue, but Van Raalte hoped very much that it might be one church. To be sure, some of this was idealism and not very realistic, but it was always consistent with his vision for a church filled with devout servants of Jesus Christ.

## Endnotes

1. *Pioneer Preacher*, p. 18.
2. Swierenga, "Pioneers for Jesus Christ": Dutch Protestant Colonization in North America as an Act of Faith in *Sharing the Reformed Tradition: The Dutch-North American Exchange, 1846-1996*, pp. 35-55.
3. Swierenga, p. 35.
4. Swierenga, p. 36.
5. Van Dijk, *De Preektrant van de Dominees in de Kerken der Afscheiding in de Jaren 1834-1869*, Alten, Nederland, 1935.
6. Spykman, p. 80.

