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Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church: Studies in its History, Theology, and Ecumenicity (Book Review)

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Book Reviews

by Russell Maatman

Perspectives on the Christian Reformed Church: Studies in its History, Theology, and Ecumenicity, by Peter De Klerk and Richard R. De Ridder, Editors, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Bakers Book House, 1983. Reviewed by Kornelis J. Boot, Associate Professor of Linguistics.

This Festschrift is published as tribute to Dr. John H. Kromminga on his retirement as President of Calvin Theological Seminary. This book will give any sincere church member hours of interesting reading. The appearance of the book is rather tasteful and colorful. The book will not easily escape the attention of someone browsing for a valuable present. On the book cover, a row of Christian Reformed triangle and cross symbols are strung from the back to the front, depicting a metamorphosis from darker to lighter colors, representing the various historical stages of the Christian Reformed Church. On the front cover are brownish triangle and cross symbols juxtaposed to an illuminate golden one: the reality of the history of the Christian Reformed Church being compared with the ideal image of Christ's Church, the church militant and the church triumphant.

The content of the book corresponds to the message on the cover. Nowhere in this Festschrift has an attempt been made to conceal the darker areas of the Christian Reformed Church history, but the authors address the issues and problems fairly and honestly. The reader may weep over the shortcomings of the Christian Reformed Church but can also rejoice about the faithfulness of the King of the Church. The book is divided into three parts. Part one consists of six studies in history; part two is largely a theological study; and part three is a study in ecumenicity. The editors state in the foreword that each of these three parts of the book "is intended to address issues in these areas of specialty because John Kromminga's interests and contributions find their focus in all of them."

The very first chapter is devoted to the history of the two Ost Frieslands. The Kromminga family and many

other Reformed families emigrated from the German Ost Friesland to a part of the United States which was later called Classis Ost Friesland of the Christian Reformed denomination. The German Ost Friesland has been of significance in the history of Calvinism. As early as 1540 the exiled Polish reformer 'a Lasco founded a center of Calvinist influence in the Ostfrisian city of Emden. More than three centuries later Abraham Kuyper was greatly influenced by the views of 'a Lasco. In 1571 the important General Synod of Emden laid the basis of the church structure for the Dutch and Walloon Reformed churches. The Reformed churches of Ost Friesland were also represented at the Synod of Dordrecht in the beginning of the seventeenth century. For centuries the Reformed people in Emden preferred to speak the Dutch language and identified the German language with the Lutheran church. In spite of the nationalistic attempts of Otto von Bismarck, the Ostfrisians continued to use the Dutch language until about 1880. After the Ostfrisians emigrated to the United States, the Christian Reformed Church was burdened with a three-fold linguistic problem: Dutch-German-English. This linguistic issue had partially contributed to the erection of the Christian Reformed College and Seminary, Grundy Center, Iowa (1916-1934). Diedrich Kromminga, the father of John H. Kromminga, was one of the pillars of the teaching staff at Grundy Center. Grundy College, as it was called, was known for its strict discipline: the dormitory residents had to observe a seven o'clock curfew, the basketball suits had to extend to the knees, and the jerseys covered most of the body. The Ostfrisians were strict not only in their way of life but also in their theological views. In this respect they did not differ from the life styles of

those who had emigrated from the Netherlands in the nineteenth century.

Christian Reformed Churches in Iowa and other parts of the United States countered the influences of the Americanization of the church. Lubbertus Oostendorp relates that some Christian Reformed leaders, e.g., H.P. Scholte of Pella, allowed the American way of life to enter the Reformed communities. Some of these influences of Americanization are demonstrated in the architecture of Christian Reformed edifices. Donald J. Bruggink points out very eloquently that the Christian Reformed Church adapted to the American liturgy for the celebration of the Lord's Supper, yet most churches resisted for many years the participation of choirs in the worship services. Today very few Christian Reformed Churches have a choir loft, which is part of the regular church furniture of other churches. One of the issues of the Secession of 1834 was, of course, the singing of the hymns. This is probably one of the reasons why the Christian Reformed Church maintained a high degree of musical control. Choirs and hymns were considered a threat to good Calvinistic theology.

Anthony A. Hoekema indicates in a fine article on Christian Reformed views on the covenant that "the children of believers are not to be considered religiously neutral," but that they must be "considered as covenant children." He makes a strong claim for Christian education when he states that "the child should constantly be surrounded by a covenant atmosphere, and should be taught to view all of life from a Christian point of view."

Fred H. Klooster continues in a similar vein in his article "The Kingdom of God in the History of the Christian Reformed Church." Klooster mentions the three distinguishable viewpoints which were present in the Christian Reformed Church prior to World War I. The first group is called the Confessional Reformed: the origin of this group can be traced to the leaders of the Secession of 1834. The second group finds its roots with Abraham Kuyper and is called the Separatist Calvinists, because they favored separate Christian organizations. The third group is the American Calvinists, who favored the theological views of Kuyper but who rejected its implementation in separate organizations. These groups held to distinguishable viewpoints of the Kingdom and even today one can find these viewpoints represented in local congregations. The second group was strengthened by a flood of immigrants who came to the United States and Canada after World War II. Soon Professor H. Evan Runner from Calvin College provided this group with prophetic perspectives. Runner propounded new and deeper Kuyperian philosophical

insights which inspired the Separatist Calvinists but which also led to sharp conflicts within the Christian Reformed Church.

After having listed significant Kingdom views by Geerhardus Vos, Louis Berkhof, and Samuel Volbeda, Klooster asks, "Is the Christian Reformed Church today ready to move forward to promoting the biblical vision of the kingdom of God?" If the Christian Reformed Church is ready to move on, then it ought to return to the biblical teachings of the Kingdom.

Part three deals with ecumenicity. Clearly the authors show that there is a willingness on the part of the members of the Christian Reformed Church "to burn the wooden shoes." True, most of the American Churches have become completely alienated from the Dutch language but we can not claim that Dutch (and German) ethnicity is completely erased. On the other hand the Christian Reformed Church has taken its place in the main stream of North American society and in some cases it even has become a source of influence. The process of acculturation was much more rapid in the post-World War II period in Canada than it had ever been in the United States. Whether this can be ascribed to the Kingdom view of the post-World War II immigrants which were more numerous in Canada than in the United States or to the more rapid speed of modern living is an interesting question which has not been answered yet. Paul G. Schrottenboer observes that the Christian Reformed Church "has a stronger sense of having been reformed than of the continuing need to be reformed." This, indeed, is a warning we must take seriously.

As far as the participation of the Christian Reformed Church with the World Council of Churches is concerned, the Dutch theologian Klaas Runia cautions that the best course of action would be to continue careful observation of the direction of the World Council. Runia concludes his article by stating that the Calvinist heritage is among the benefits of God's favor, and the part of that heritage is the example of John Calvin, who was ready to cross ten seas to advance the unity of the church. This is also the challenge of the Christian Reformed Church in the eighties. Are the descendants of the children of the Secession and Doleantie who crossed the ocean prepared to strive for unity of the church or do they choose to follow schismatic ways?

I do cordially recommend that you read this book. It has helped me once more to understand the real struggles of God's people on this earth but at the same time it has taught me to look forward to the Church triumphant.