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## Ties that Bind: A Review Essay

James C. Schaap

*Dordt College*

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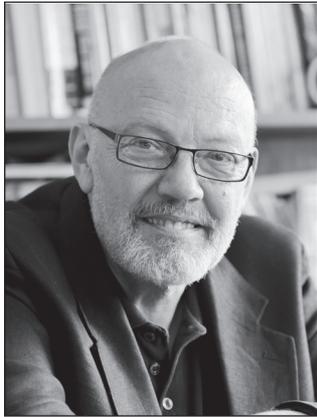
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# Ties that Bind: A Review Essay

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by James Schaap

Lynn Japinga, *Loyalty and Loss: The Reformed Church in America, 1945-1994*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013. 340 pp. ISBN: 9078-0-8028-7068-1.

Historians list five reasons, generally, for the departure of the Christian Reformed Church (The True Dutch Reformed Church) from the Reformed Church in America (The Dutch Reformed Church) way back in 1857, none of which have much currency a century-and-a-half later. These days you might be able to pick a fight about whether or not communicants may be lodge members, but that issue is barely a footnote, since lodges—sometimes called, back then, secret societies—are as much a relic as denominations seem to be.

What angered the dissidents in 1857 was what

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Dr. James Calvin Schaap is Professor of English, emeritus, of Dordt College.

they saw as an abandonment of principles by the old-line Reformed Church, principles of worship and church order established by the Synod of Dordt 200-plus years earlier and half a world away. There was, for instance, “close” communion, the Lord’s Table guarded militantly so that only confessed believers of the correct theological stamp could partake. My forefathers were sure the old-liners had let down their guard.

Neither were the Dutch Reformed preaching the catechism. What’s more, they were being more than a little spotty when it came to house visitation, *huis bezoek*, a Dutch phrase that hasn’t disappeared because there is no English equivalent. The truth is, they might have said, the liberals let just anybody hold public office too.

It’s alarming and embarrassing to realize how little those things mean today. If there’s anything that separates the Reformed Church of America (RCA) from the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC), at least in the Midwest, it’s Christian education at the elementary and secondary levels. But a head count of Christian school pupils across the continent might well turn up as many RCA as CRC kids at those busy grade school tables.

Because so much has changed, it’s hard to indict Dominie Van Raalte, the preacherly potentate of the entire West Michigan Dutch community in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. It was Van Raalte who insisted that all these new immigrants—dozens of whom had died in the first cold lakeshore winter—join forces with the Dutch Reformed Church of New York and New Jersey, a fellowship that had been here in America for 200 years when Van

Raalte himself decided West Michigan would be home for a new, proudly Dutch colony.

The Dutch Reformed people out east would offer generous aid and comfort as the immigrants began life in the new world, he reasoned. The

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Dutch language hadn't entirely evaporated from those churches, and neither had Calvinism, although its American manifestation was probably lower in octane than that which propelled mid-century immigrants, the vast majority of whom were the *Afscheiding*, the breakaways who left the Dutch state church in the 1830s.

Sorry, but if you don't know this history, it can get really confusing.

A theologian might blame doctrine for the 1857 split, but some believe (count me among them) that the real cause for distrust between Van Raalte's immigrant followers in West Michigan and the unruly radical Calvinists who refused to truck with secret societies and would tolerate only the psalm-singing (those who created the CRC), was the perception that the eastern Dutch Reformers hadn't a clue about the suffering that

people had undergone during the separation, the *Afscheiding*, in the Netherlands. And those Yankee Dutch didn't. What they might have said, if they could have put words to their fears and quarrelsomeness, was that if those New York Dutch don't know our suffering, they don't know us.

Whatever the reason, a number of congregations, led by a group from Graafschap, Mich., determined not to go along with Van Raalte's proposed union with the American Dutch church and therefore split. Just for the record, that action birthed this magazine, the college from which it is published, and the churches who've so diligently supported Dordt College through its own first half-century.

Honestly, I've often considered Van Raalte a fine man who wasn't wrong in considering the needs of the immigrants he'd led; all those established brethren out east, not to mention their investments, would likely make Americanization much easier for immigrants, after all. Besides, the truth is, many of those separatists were not the kind of people I'd care to go fishing with.

That they were great theological brawlers, even mean-spirited rascalions, doesn't mean that I don't have them to thank for the words presently appearing on the computer screen in front of me. I think I would have liked Van Raalte; I'm not so sure about a man like Gysbert Haan.

However, Professor Lynn Japinga's new book about the RCA's last fifty years gives cause for me to rethink Gysbert Haan and his ilk, the dissidents. They may not have been wrong. While the eastern wing of the Reformed Church of America would have known this country's ways in a fashion that could and likely did benefit those new immigrants, those old churches have consistently occupied ground on the other side of what has grown into a significant fault line between the RCA's eastern and western branches, creating ties that really do bind and an un-royal gorge which has only widened with Falwell and Dobson and the political religious right.

Lots of observers and historians have attempted to define the separate voices of the CRC, a task which Japinga takes on herself in order to identify the forces arranged on either side in the RCA. In *Dutch Calvinism in America*, James Bratt identi-

fied the differences between believers in the Dutch (American) Reformed world by calling some “confessionalists,” some “positive Calvinists,” and others “Antitheticals.”

Confessionalists were dynamically conservative, believing in and defending “the tradition,” as they saw it, especially in creeds and confessions and church order. CRC confessionalists tended to be excited by the importance of 1928 synodical warnings against worldly things like dancing and movies.

“Positive Calvinists” worked other ground completely, tended to associate culture with the church, saw change and progress wherever they looked, and embraced most of it, if not all. If confessionalists tended to be skeptical of change, positive Calvinists just smiled.

“Antitheticals” were given the name because of the influence of Abraham Kuyper, who tended, in his own “confessionalist” way (ironically) to see secular society as something *antithetical* to Christianity, not necessarily something to be afraid of but something always to oppose.

These “mind-sets” Bratt identifies in the wars which have found their place in the history of the Christian Reformed Church.

When I wrote *Our Family Album: The Unfinished Story of the Christian Reformed Church*, I wanted some easier handles, so, rightly or wrongly, I identified the differences by what I wanted to call “predilections.” Some Christians define their faith by social action, by the Sermon on the Mount; I called them “outward” Christians because their orientation and predilection was to define the Christian life in terms of what their own faith did for people, for society, for the world around us.

Other Christians have an “upward” orientation. They tend to see the Christian life in terms of the separation between the things of the world and the things of the next. “Only one life will soon be past,” an old plaque of my mother’s used to say; “only what’s done for Christ will last.” Upward Christians are sure this world is not their home.

Finally, “inward” Christians are those who measure the assault of change in life as being imminently destructive to all that is claimed by the Christian gospel. What they seek to do more than anything is hold fast to what they’ve been given,

lest it slip away.

All three exist; all three are important. Blessed be those who can accomplish all of them simultaneously, but it seems that few of us can.

In drawing up the battle lines for the fights that have been waged in the Reformed Church in America since 1945, Japinga also has to find ways to identify the forces in the field, and her designations are both interesting and telling. Basically, when the warfare begins, she says there are only two opposing forces—the “purists,” as she calls them, and the “moderates.” As she takes us through the years, a third group appears more and more frequently, a group she refers to as the “conservatives.”

“Purists,” she claims, “wanted congregations to demand a high level of commitment and refuse to compromise their values for the sake of popularity.” Call them ideologues—my-way-or-the-highway people. Bratt would likely have called them “confessionalists”; I tried to call them “inward” believers. My ancestors were “purists” in 1857, when they wouldn’t hear of anything that wasn’t written up forever at Dordrecht. Those who left the CRC—Protestant and United Reformed, in separate movements—would undoubtedly be “purists” as well, had they stayed with Van Raalte and what became the RCA.

“Moderates,” on the other hand, Japinga says, “hoped that the denomination would become much more engaged in and with the broader American culture.” I called them “outward” believers. Moderates inhabit the middle ground by general definition; moderation is even biblical, right?

Were I, in spirit, among the RCA’s purists (and here in Sioux County, Iowa, I’m quite sure I am, demographically-speaking), I’d likely roll my eyes since Japinga rather obviously avoids words which almost necessarily are part of the expected binary: the L-word, “liberal,” or even its softer version, “progressive.” If a reader had little perception about the Reformed Church in America, he or she might wonder whether something might be missing here: all this warfare, and the enemy combatants are just a few degrees apart?—the liberals are really moderates? True?

I’m guessing that Japinga would willingly answer that question in the affirmative because she

obviously refuses to regard any of the disparate voices in the RCA through a half-century of alienation as real, old-fashioned, theological liberals.

And she's probably right. In her defense, she *should* know—educated as she was in the east, first at New Brunswick, home of the eastern wing of the RCA, and then at Princeton. Japinga knows what a theological liberal is in late 20<sup>th</sup>- century America, and quite frankly believes—and she's probably right—there were few, if any, in the denomination.

Still, it seems disingenuous to draw up the battle lines in the way that she does, as if what divides the denomination theologically is pithy but insubstantial. If she's right—and I'm not saying she's wrong—then the bickering itself has to find its source in something other than significant theological differences; and if that's true, then the historical record is even more depressing.

Anyone who's cared at all about denominational life in the RCA or the CRC can list, without reading, the issues that have divided members of both fellowships since the Fifties: (1) communism—and how do we fight it? (2) abortion—does a woman have the right to choose? (3) racial equality—how can we do something about racial injustice? (4) poverty—how can we best help the poor? (5) women in ecclesiastical office—should we or shan't we? (6) and homosexuality (gay marriage was almost unheard of as recently as 1994, when Japinga's study ends)—how best do the rest of us love them?

These hot buttons were and still are incendiary issues when whatever glue held the fellowship together appeared to have dried up. And it's important to remember that all denominations are in trouble today; even the Roman Catholics claim that their kids don't begin to understand the sacramental character of their particular faith. "Nones" are celebrated these days, their numbers growing as more and more people, if they bowl at all, bowl very much alone. Communities change, but so does *community* itself. There was a moment, last Christmas, when our living room was full of family, each of us running a stylus or pointer finger over some kind of tablet or smart phone. Without technology—and more importantly, without the bucks to buy in—that couldn't have happened.

Even here in Sioux County, we aren't what we were in 1955.

In *Loyalty and Loss*, perhaps the most notable change one feels between *what was* in the RCA and *what is*, is the fact that today there is no *Church Herald*. Japinga retells the stories of the fights within the denomination by using endless, colorful quotations from the denomination's magazine that are, in many ways, the foundation for the story. It's tragic to realize that there is no similar public forum within the fellowship, no truly public square. The denominational magazine offered a space for fighting, a commons, a town hall, a place to make war and a place to make peace.

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It's gone. If there is more history to record after 1994—and there is and will be—that clearing house for ideas and opinions is no more, and with it goes a legitimate public record. There are times, honestly, when she marches them out in a fashion that feels almost like death by a thousand paper cuts. Some quotes simply haven't aged well, although they probably never were particularly lovely.

I really liked Professor Japinga's book. Even though I had only a cursory sense of the stories she recounts in this marvelously readable history, it wasn't difficult for me to identify and understand the forces on both sides of troublesome issues, in part because they've played similar roles CRC his-

tory. One can come away from the stories she tells deeply discouraged, as if finding even the narrowest pathway to unity and love is just about sheer nonsense when the sides are so fitfully fortified.

But it's what happened, and someone needs to tell the story.

The real issue that underlies the wars is Scripture—specifically, how do we read it?

Some of the finest biologists and chemists and geologists I know, strong and pious believers, do not disdain evolution.

“But what does the Bible say?—‘six days created he them.’”

“How can it be that women can be presidents and mayors and school superintendents, but for some reason lack whatever is needed to hold church office?”

“You don't know?—don't you read the Bible?”

“How can we not work for racial equality?”

“Don't forget about Ham, banished to Africa, sentenced to serve.”

The world is round.

“Bible says flat.”

The fights we wage don't have to do with the Bible; they have to do with us and how we read it. Co-existence is difficult and invites brawls like the ones so well-documented in *Loyalty and Loss* and any denominational history. We create our fortresses and claim He did, all of us.

All of which reminds me of a story. Once upon a time, a man was stranded on an island in the South Seas. When finally he was found, his rescuers couldn't help but notice that he'd built a whole city of his own. “There's my post office,” he said, pointing down the street, “and there's my hardware store.”

The rescuers went slack-jawed. “And that must be your church?” they said, pointing at a steeple. “But then what on earth is that?” they asked, pointing at yet another.

“Oh,” the straggler said, smiling, “that's the church I used to belong to.”

Perhaps I didn't tell it right, but that, methinks, hits us right in our vulnerability. But here's the punch line. Substitute *synagogue* for *church*, and you've got the telling I first heard. That's right—Jewish folks told me that joke, not Dutch-Americans.

We fight. Comes with territory covered by the spacious human condition. Where two or three are gathered, someone goes home mad. I can't imagine that any Christian believer who makes it to his or her fourscore and ten hasn't been bloodied somewhere along the line. It happens, and Japinga's lively and thoughtful history keeps running score of the battles along the trail, as if RCA history were just another take on the Great Sioux Wars.

If you've ever spent any time reading over centennial books meant to tell the story of individual churches, you know they can be as mechanical as the formula obituaries well-meaning funeral homes crank out daily. You know, “When Rev. O came, we built the narthex and the Sunday School had 89 pupils.” The numbers may be plentiful, but the stories aren't there, the real stories, the human story. Telling the human story, for better or for worse, is what Japinga is attempting here and what she does. She helps us understand and thereby see a bit more clearly, through battlefield smoke and dust, just who we are. That's not pretty, but it's noble work.

One more story. A decade ago, Phillip Yancey, a fine and popular Christian writer, came up to me at a retreat and said, “Jim, there's this other college really close to you out there in Iowa, isn't there?”

“Northwestern,” I said.

“I don't know the name exactly,” he said, “but aren't there two of you really close?”

I nodded.

“What's that about?” he said.

The histories of the CRC and the RCA are pockmarked with conflicts, but also full of triumphs we altogether too easily forget, like what the CRC has done, by grace alone, in New Mexico; and what the RCA has done, by grace alone, in the Middle East. No work groups will ever, ever contribute in such fulsome ways to human neediness, and we have because we've stuck it out. We've persevered. We haven't just bounced in and bounced out, our digital cameras full of pictures for coffee tables scrapbooks.

Denominations like ours have done good things, wonderful things, by grace alone.

Maybe it's time in this long history of separations and divorce for there to be some kind of reconciliation, maybe even a marriage, a resolution

to get along rather than suffer more *afscheidings*, peace in the open fields where there's been far too much war.

I tried to explain to Phillip Yancey how the two colleges were different. I know the stories, after all, and he gave me his time. But when we parted, I'm not sure he caught on at all, as most haven't and wouldn't. Sometimes I'm not sure I do. After all, the academic dean at Northwestern is an ex-Dordt prof, and the president of Dordt was once a board

member at Northwestern, the runner-up for president over there just a year or two before he came on board here. Explain all of that away.

Seems to me we'd all do ourselves and the cause of the Kingdom some real good if we'd sing a few fewer feel-good praise songs and go back to an old favorite, now and then, sung in good old four-part harmony. You know the old hymn, the one about ties that bind, in a good sense, in a blessed, righteous sense.