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Divided by a Common Heritage: The Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America at the Beginning of the New Millennium (Book Review)

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Til finds Walzer's simplification and use of contemporary language around human rights and social justice very useful, Van Til also insists on infusing this understanding with Christian theology—namely, Kuyperian theology. As image-bearers, people cannot be viewed as only individuals, but rather, they are part of something larger. The image-bearers live in community and in relationship with others. A system of just distribution as called for by Van Til certainly has an individual component that rewards contributions made by those able to participate in the market, but it also includes a component in which citizens are treated equally and all image-bearers have their basic needs met.

In the final chapter, Van Til comes to a conclusion similar to those drawn by other leading development economists and antipoverty advocates: there are enough resources in the world to provide basic sustenance for all people at a relatively small cost, but what is lacking is the political or moral will to distribute goods in such a way that provides for all people. The nuance and value that Van Til brings to the discussion, however, is an articulate and deliberate theological and biblical discussion about poverty, theories of distributive justice, and systems of distribution. His conclusions clearly support and justify not only an alternative system of distribution that takes into account human need, but also the responsibility of Christians to be involved in providing for the basic sustenance of those made in God's image. Another asset of this book is the comprehensive discussion of the various contemporary theologies on poverty and economic distribution, both Catholic and Protestant.

Two Dollars a Day is bound to appeal to a wide audience, especially to those in the fields of economics, development, political science and theology. Van Til includes an extensive but accessible review of both economic and political theory as well as theology, and this book could serve as a valuable primer for readers not well-versed in these fields.

Although the book provides a convincing argument for an alternative system of distribution, little is offered in terms of what the alternative might actually look like.

Smidt, Corwin, Donald Luidens, James Penning, and Roger Nemeth. *Divided by a Common Heritage: The Christian Reformed Church and the Reformed Church in America at the Beginning of the New Millennium*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007, 226 pp. ISBN 0-8028-0385-7. Reviewed by James C. Schaap, Professor of English at Dordt College.

Good evangelical brothers and sisters of mine have, in the past, approached me rather quizzically and asked me to explain, in a line or two, the difference between “that college where you teach and that other one—the one that's right there down the road from you.” That college down the road is Northwestern College, a century-old institution created and sustained by, basically, members of the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Dordt College's founding—and its majority constituency—comes from a denomination that shares similar creeds and history, the

Van Til points out that providing basic sustenance for the world's poor costs relatively little, but what steps can or should an individual, church or community be taking to move towards a more just system? Also, what might be the main mechanisms that would move the current free market system to a more just system? Van Til also states,

In most contemporary societies, the claim to basic sustenance is either not recognized as a political right at all, or it is seen only as a moral option....The moral right to basic sustenance is thus a political orphan. (156)

Van Til's observation is, in some ways, very true. However, since the United Nations' Millennium Summit in 2000, where substantial promises were made by 189 countries to eradicate extreme poverty by 2015, there has been substantial movement by citizens within developed and developing countries alike to hold governments accountable to these promises. In addition to urging countries, organizations and individuals for more financial aid, these citizens' movements call for changes to the rules that govern the global market. For example, a global citizens' campaign called the Jubilee Debt Campaign argued for and achieved debt relief for the world's poorest countries. The debt relief allowed the countries to be released from crushing debt repayments to the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to instead invest in basic infrastructure and needs like education and healthcare. The name of the campaign alludes to the Jubilee year as described in the Old Testament. Such movements and the surrounding activities are significant enough to be mentioned in this final chapter; these would have offered the readers a tangible example of what really can be accomplished in moving closer to an alternative system of distributive justice.

Two Dollars a Day is a valuable contribution to the ongoing discussions around poverty and to the growing realization, particularly by people of faith, that the world in which we live is not the world as it ought to be.

Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC).

The question people ask me is not an easy question, and were one to ask many people—even many who live in our own neighborhood--I am not sure one would hear very clear definitions. The differences between Northwestern and Dordt (or of the RCA and the CRC)—if there are differences at all—can likely best be understood by way of some rudimentary understanding of Dutch-American (and Dutch Reformed) history.

That history is crucial, say Corwin Smidt, Donald

Luidens, James Penning, and Roger Nemeth (two political scientists from Calvin College—a traditionally CRC institution—and two sociologists from Hope College, which is traditionally RCA), authors of a fascinating new study, *Divided by a Common Heritage*. Their new and important look at the two seemingly similar denominations bountifully illustrates the relative historical, theological, and sociological likenesses between the RCA and the CRC, as well as those differences that, significantly, separate the fellowships.

The question that compels their study is whether or not the two might ever merge. Chapter after chapter of the book clearly establishes how very similar the still largely Dutch-American denominations are in every way: similarly pious, similarly orthodox, similar in worship styles, and even similar in propensity to change worship styles. Historically, the strong Midwestern segments of the RCA are clearly linked to the CRC; both locate their North American roots in the same immigration waves of the mid to late nineteenth century. In the United States today, especially in the George W. Bush era, the RCA and CRC, both clergy and lay people, show very similar sympathies in both politics and theology (although those two areas, the authors argue convincingly, are far more closely—and dangerously—linked than they ever have been in the respective histories of the denominations).

Much of the collective pasts of the two denominations argue for a merger, it seems; and yet, or so say the authors, “it is abundantly clear that any route taken to merge the two communions would be extremely difficult” (193).

There are, as the researchers clearly explain, appreciably different approaches to church life. The CRC, born from a series of separations from larger bodies, sharpens its own instincts on theological orthodoxy. On the other hand, the RCA, bifurcated by two completely differing histories under one roof (its Eastern churches nearly 400 years old; its Midwestern and Western congregations far, far younger), has had to work very hard at a contrary objective: holding itself together to avoid simply disintegrating. Those impulses, completely contrary, make any merger appear quite difficult.

The authors also make clear that, logistically, merging an abundance of well-established CRC and RCA institutions (denominational missions and educational institutions) would be nearly impossible inasmuch as many of those ministries have been and continue to be very successful. From almost anywhere in the neighborhood of Northwestern and Dordt Colleges, it may seem impossible to think of a merger between the two, given their continuing individual commitments, their relative health, the nature of their rivalry, and their long-range goals. Who knows? Competition may well be good for them.

But there is more in this very helpful book than a well-researched argument about the possibility of denominational merger. *Divided by a Common Heritage* offers readers a compendium of fascinating material about each

of the fellowships in question. A similar percentage of individual congregations in both denominations indicates major or significant problems in their fellowships; for instance, CRC's do not fight any more often or rabidly than RCA's. I was surprised to read that studies indicate CR churches have been more willing to accommodate significant worship changes than their RCA friends. A similar percentage of clergy in both denominations feel that their congregations do not speak to the social issues of the day with enough vehemence, even though the CRC is more “ideological conservative,” but only “somewhat” so. In both fellowships, congregationalism is growing while a corresponding weakening of denominationalism is also occurring. There is more—much more.

Divided by a Common Heritage is the kind of book one can read in shifts. It contains a wealth of information about both denominations. What seems all too painfully clear, however, is that both the RCA and CRC are in significant trouble. Neither denomination has been growing, both have geographical strengths in areas of the continent (at least in the US) that are not attracting newcomers, and both are overwhelmingly white and European on a continent slowly changing color. Both also suffer at the hands of cultural forces that place just about every denomination in jeopardy: increasing mobility, the significant rise in educational level of its members (education frequently works against denominationalism), and the effects of global Christianity. One factor the authors do not mention is overall rising affluence. There is more money in the CRC today than ever. Has that been good for the denomination? Certainly—in some ways. But in other ways, because churches and individuals and even institutions can do more and be more, they frequently want more.

Perhaps the most startling of the summary evaluations at the conclusion of this revealing and honest assessment of denominational life is the notion that nothing has done more “to undermine the rich confessional legacy of Reformed Christianity” than “popular evangelicalism” (184). Oddly enough, no single human being may draw CRC people back to their RCA friends in the church from which they resigned 150 years ago than someone like the popular evangelical Dr. James Dobson, who now links many of us both theologically and politically.

It is virtually impossible to read this book and not ask some questions about this “rich confessional legacy of Reformed Christianity” (184). What this essentially sociological study does more vividly than anything else is offer a picture of two churches in significant transition. Neither fellowship—CRC or RCA—is what it was. What they will be is not at all clear, but then neither is the question of whether or not they will “be” at all.

An impressive and haunting read, *Divided by a Common Heritage* is a gift to those of us who care about both denominations, but, even more, to those who care about what it means to be “Reformed.” In fifty years, will there still be a Dordt and a Northwestern? The authors

of *Divided by a Common Heritage* would likely argue yes—if their constituencies survive. Throughout this study, the research is extensive and impressive, the arguments

convincing. The authors have done exceedingly fine work here, offering those of us who are interested an immensely thoughtful analysis.