

The Early Christian Reformed Church

In Its Own Words

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First, a disclaimer. There is no book with the above title, including this document. The above “title” is merely a caption or umbrella under which I subsume two books about the early Christian Reformed Church (CRC).

Like so many North American denominations, the CRC has an ethnic background, hers being that of Dutch Calvinism. The church is consciously and aggressively working hard to broaden its membership to include other ethnicities, but the stage of which these two books speak is still completely enveloped in a largely isolated Reformed Dutch culture in America, with the possible exception of the historical denomination now known as the Reformed Church of America. The two books in this “series” cover the pre-immigration period in the Netherlands and the early CRC history in West Michigan of the second half of the nineteenth century.

The umbrella caption above includes the phrase “In Its Own Words.” The first of the two books, that of my late brother Reverend Harry Hendrik Boer¹ and his wife, Dr. Barbara van Haitsma, called *God’s Deacon*, is so closely tied to their resource materials, which they studied for some thirty years, as to closely represent the actual words, oral or written, of the characters. I consider them the words and minds of the personalities involved, especially that of the Deacon himself. These are the actions and words of people who have experienced that history and helped shape it. This is the case even more so of the second book, most of which constitutes the very writings of its “author,” another Boer, Geert Egberts by name.

¹Please do not confuse Harry Hendrik with the more famous and controversial CRC writer Dr. Harry Reinder Boer, missionary to Nigeria and author of several books and many published articles. The frequent confusion of the two has more than once led to serious identity problems for Harry Hendrik, while in Nigeria, I as a Boer often profited from living under Harry R.’s shadow.

Harry and Barb dug patiently and deeply. When you peruse their footnotes and bibliography, you will be very impressed with the variety and number of their sources. Unfortunately, they did not follow my advice over the years not to wait with writing up their findings until they had exhausted their sources. They both had been seriously ill and he more than once had found himself at the edge of his grave. Being an experienced researcher and writer myself, I encouraged them to start writing, for one never finds he has exhausted the resources; there are always more to be explored and it's all so exciting. Three months before his death, when he sensed his end was near, Harry wrote feverishly and managed to complete the first draft. He passed away on March 30, 2018, in Hawai of all places, where the couple had planned a peaceful but productive retirement. All the while, wife Barbara stood by him as a faithful partner, though she does not wish to be considered co-writer, even though the Deacon himself and many of the characters in the book are *her* people, Van Haitsmas.

Before Harry passed away, Fran and I promised him we would spruce up the book for him. He gratefully responded, "I was hoping someone would." These are the last words we heard from him. The very last words *anyone* heard from him was the faltering prayer, "Lord Jesus, take me home"—and He did. But Harry left us with a manuscript that needed more than mere tinkering. With Barb's approval, Fran took the task upon herself and worked at it for weeks. She concentrated much of her efforts on punctuation and, especially, on what were then end notes. Harry and Barb had had no time for the niceties required to complete or firm them up. Fran did the best she could with the information at hand and invites you to use them with patience and respect for all the time and effort it took Harry and Barb to locate, research and organize them. Had they had more time, I'm sure they would have bequeathed us with a more standard set of notes.

God's Deacon is interesting from various perspectives. There is the whole scenario in the Netherlands showing how the working class fared in its poor economy. From the religious point of view, there is the struggle between the liberal Government-supported Reformed establishment and the people who rejected that establishment with its dry and rationalistic theology, in favour of a more inward piety that preferred worship in small home groups or conventicles. There was serious persecution being waged by the establishment during which Abraham Kuyper became a strong advocate for the small people, the so-called "*kleine luyden*," or, as

they are called in *God's Deacon*, the “*kleine luy.*”, a more northern variation. Both the economic and spiritual conditions led many of the adherents to immigrate to the USA, including a large colony in West Michigan, where this book takes place.

That struggle takes on a different colouration in Michigan. Now it is *within* that same group between the lay people and the clergy. It is difficult to say whether most people were aware of this struggle, but certainly our Deacon Johannes was and participated in it, mostly by building awareness. The focus is on Johannes as a central figure among the people, who resents the domination of the clergy who impose new ways on the people. In the Netherlands it was the liberal clergy together with the government who were imposing new ways; in Michigan it was the Secession preachers who immigrated from the Netherlands and subsequent locally-trained generations of clergy who were trained by Geert and his colleagues; it was an in-house affair. In this book, the “*kleine luy.*” represented by Johannes, form the centre, with the clergy playing a subsidiary and often negative role. Even the best of them do not go unscathed.

Like Harry and Barb's *God's Deacon* plays out during the second half of the nineteenth century, beginning with the religious persecution in the Netherlands and then moving via immigration to Michigan, so does Professor Geert Egberts Boer's book take us through the same places, times and movement. But now the writer himself is also the main persona, Geert Egberts himself. The main title is *Een Man des Volks*, meaning *A Man of the People*, who is Geert himself as compiled by colleague Professor G. K. Hemkes. It describes the life of Geert as sourced from his diary by his colleague. Though the cover sports Geert as the author, the title page features Hemkes as the compiler. Yes, most of the text is Geert's, but here and there Hemkes' words intrude, often without proper indication. He just kind of sneaks in and out of the text.

One problem with this book is that it leaves us with the question whether this is a biography or an autobiography. To be sure, most of it is the latter, but we are given no indication as to the principle of selection Hemkes has used. The pre-ordination period is fairly representative of Geert's early life, but once one begins to read about his life as pastor and, later, professor, one cannot suppress the question whether this was all that Geert wrote about or was concerned with or were

there other topics of interests and non-pastoral aspects that Hemkes ignored? In other words, are we given a rounded figure here or a partial persona?

There is no reference at all in this book to Johannes or to the dissatisfaction Johannes *c.s.* had with the clergy. In fact, the lay people hardly play a role except as supporters of the clergy. Geert is presented as a popular preacher loved by all. It can be said that the two books represent two sides of one coin, the coin being that of this Christian community.

Geert is occasionally referred to in *God's Deacon*, a few times sympathetically as a respected preacher. He preaches occasionally in Johannes' church, after which he would be invited to dinner at Johannes' house. There seemed to be a healthy positive relationship. A couple of times he is associated with the graduates and professors of both Kampen Seminary in the Netherlands and with those of the Grand Rapids school, with an aura of suspicion. There are some hints that he is among those responsible for the problems Johannes struggles with in the early CRC. He is never accused of anything specific, but neither does he receive the praise Hemkes, his students and others allot him at the time of his death in the back of "his" book. In fact, he is a very minor figure in *God's Deacon*, something that might surprise the reader of the Geert book—as Hemkes has compiled it.

Geert judged that the arrival of Dutch preachers, of which he was one, "was an asset to our denomination" (p. 79), a far cry from the opinion of Johannes, who was deeply suspicious of them and often considered them spoilers of the budding Dutch-American denomination. Johannes felt they were messing around with the most precious legacy of Dordt. Johannes complains about an unknown writer in *De Wachter* who keeps arguing extensively with a certain De Bleij on issues with the Reformed Church that, as far as Johannes was concerned, were overtaken and should be forgotten. However, Geert, in his book, refers to his extensive correspondence with De Bleij, which can only refer to the same writings that Johannes resented. This seems to present a side of Geert that Hemkes avoided or did not recognize it as cantankerous as did Johannes.

In a private conversation, Barb expressed her pleasure that the Van Haitisma and Boer families crossed paths close to a century before the same families crossed paths through her and Harry. On the personal side, this was amicable crossing, but

on the more anonymous, impersonal side, especially on Johannes' side, there was some ideological distance between the laity and the clergy—and not little annoyance on the part of the *kleine luy*.”

Then there is the question of the reputation and effect of Abraham Kuyper among the people of both books. If you peruse the Kuyperiana page of this same website, you will notice his large presence in the Netherlands as a whole and his prominent leadership of the *kleine luyden*. Yet he hardly appears in either book. That should surprise readers of both books as it has me.

In Harry and Barb's book, Kuyper is referred to in a synod as “the famous Dr. Abraham Kuyper,” but the Synod disagreed with him on the issue of the Masonic Lodge. At another time we read of “the influence of that Dr. Kuyper in the Netherlands who has become very influential in both church and government,” hardly an indication of familiarity or closeness. But, then, that may have been characteristic of Johannes, not of the people in general—or perhaps this is due to brother Harry's selection due to *his* prejudice. He did allow for a degree of prejudice on his part.

Kuyper fared no better in Geert's book—one single mention in the form of a lengthy quotation from Kuyper's *Encyclopaedie*. And even that was not Geert's but an insertion from Hemke's hand (pp. 195-196). Again, since most of the book consists of Hemkes' selections from Geert, one cannot tell whether this Kuyperian scarcity is due to Geert or Hemkes. However, it does leave the impression that Kuyper played little or no role in the life of this young church as per Johannes or in the life and ministry of the church's first professor. This goes far in explaining the differences and tensions between the American CRC and the post- World War II CRC in Canada, which was strongly influenced by Kuyper.

In closing, one thing that must be made clear: The spirituality of Johannes and Geert was very similar. They were children of the Secession in the Netherlands, pietistic,² intensely spiritual, while many of the members tended to be uneasy about

²Pietism, it must be emphasized, is no synonym of either “piety” or “pious.” While Pietism includes both, the reverse does not hold. Pietism is dualistic in that it emphasizes personal piety but de-emphasizes social affairs. I refer you to the Kuyperiana page of this website, where you will detect the strong and deeply personal piety of

their own standing before the Lord, suspicious of their own spirituality, deeply aware of their own sinfulness, but acutely thankful for forgiveness.

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These two books have been translated and are about to be published in a new era when the legitimacy of the CRC's secession from the Reformed Church of America (RCA) is being doubted. Gayla Postma, news editor for what is now the CRC's monthly, *The Banner*, in reporting on various actions taken by the denomination's 2018 Synod, writes,

Such actions increasingly undo the damage caused more than 160 years ago when the CRC was created by four congregations splitting away from the RCA. The denominations now act on the basis of the Pella Accord struck in 2014 that requires them to “act together in all matters except those in which deep differences of conviction compel them to act separately.”³

The magazine's editor-in-chief, who has rejected an article submitted by one baptized by this denomination as being outside the scope of interest of his readers, allowed this provocative comment to stand. I take it that this comment is thought to be within the scope of the interest of CRC members. Does that mean the very legitimacy of the CRC is now in doubt? Frances, my wife, for one, expressed shock that this was found in the denomination's official magazine. Within the scope? Really? Whose scope? No wonder members feel free to join other denominations in droves. If the very establishment of this denomination was destructive, Of course, in the larger ecumenical sense, *all* denominations are wrong and damaging, but in the context of that day...?

Abraham Kuyper interwoven with his intense social concerns that had strong structural and social aspects. He published many meditational books, a translated example on the Kuyperiana page being *The Ascent of the Son—The Descent of the Spirit*. Pietists may have social concerns, but it is more of a personal and individualistic type. As to my own writings on the Boeriana page, my *The Prophet Moses for Today* is a typical example of piety expressed in deep social concerns, including the structural. Pietism tends to reduce the scope of Christianity to the personal, family and church, while the Reformed variety is wholistic, i.e., covering all of life and culture—in theory, at least! As important as piety is, all of life is religion. Religion is not an “area” of life, a mere segment or realm; it underlies all of life, including the social and economic structures. I emphasize this, for I have observed that even some Kuyperian Reformed leaders use the term “pietism” to describe the Reformed tradition. Kuyper complained about the lack of political interest on the part of the people he was leading, the children of the Secession, the very people Johannes and Geert represented. No wonder, he did not feature prominently in these two books. Kuyper's influence in America was not yet; This is all pre-Kuyper stuff as far as the Seceders in America were concerned.

³Gayla R. Postma, “Practicing Unity, One Step, One Synod at a Time.” *The Banner*, July/August 2018, p.. 17.

So, you are about to embark on a reading project that is largely dominated by Boers by birth: Professor Geert Egberts, Pastor Harry Hendrik and yours truly, Dr. Jan Harm. And then there are the two lady editors: Dr. Barbara Jean and Frances Anne-- Boers by choice! Welcome to this Boer party! Read away....!