

**Divided by a Common Heritage: The Christian Reformed Church in America at the Beginning of the New Millennium** by Corwin Smidt, Donald Luidens, James Penning, and Roger Nemeth. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Mich. 2006. Paperback 240 pp. Reviewed by Johan D. Tangelder

## Review article

Our "free-market," religious environment has fostered thousands of denominations of all theological stripes and cultural backgrounds competing with one another. It is a tragedy to see the Church so terribly divided. Surely, we are all agreed that the Lord intended to have one Church. But having said that, we must also acknowledge the great confusion, and the disagreements as to what constitutes unity, and how unity is maintained and preserved. In *Divided by a Common Heritage*, Calvin College political scientists, Corwin Smidt and Jim Penning, and Hope College sociologists Donald Luidens and Roger Nemeth, explore the possibility that the Reformed Church of America (RCA) and the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) which split more than a century ago, could reunite someday.

## The Reformed Church of America

The RCA holds the distinction of being the oldest denomination with a continuous ministry in the USA. In 1628 the Dutch Reformed Church was begun in what is now New York City. In 1867 the Dutch Reformed Church dropped the word Dutch from its name and began to call itself the RCA. With the introduction of the English language in the RCA, Americanization was inevitable. Although the RCA holds a Reformed stance, the Americanization of the church also saw liberal, fundamentalist and evangelical elements take root in the denomination, with evangelicalism making its greatest impact. Perhaps surprisingly, the contemporary positive thinking movement has been most visibly represented by two prominent Reformed ministers, Norman Vincent Peale (1898-1993), who preached a combination of psychological themes and therapeutic prescriptions drawn loosely from Scripture. Robert H. Schuller of Crystal Cathedral fame, influenced by Peale, recast the gospel into possibility thinking as a modern restatement of the biblical principle of living by faith. But there is also a call for a back to the basics. Recently a group of RCA ministers and members out of concern for their denomination pledged themselves to a *Covenant of Integrity in the RCA*. Their stated goal is to raise up and bring together hundreds of *Integrity* churches, ministers, missionaries, and members in the RCA. In a letter addressed to the denomination they express a spirit of concern and hope. They are concerned "by the creeping moral relativism, theological compromise, and doctrinal ambiguity" they find in part of the RCA. But they also are full of hope. They point to the "many wonderful missionaries, godly lay people, committed staff members, thriving churches." That's why they are "praying for reformation and revival in the RCA." They state, " We believe in the power of the Holy Spirit to show us our sin, bring us to repentance, and lead us into all truth. We want to be a denomination that boldly stands for lavish grace in the context of unswerving truth."

## **The Christian Reformed Church**

The CRC became a separate ecclesiastical entity as a result of the secessions of 1834 in the Netherlands and of 1857 in the United States. From this early secession in the Netherlands, the CRC inherited Reformed orthodoxy and a strict pattern of Reformed government and discipline. In the judgment of the seceders, they had to separate for the sake of the truth, and loyalty to Christ and His Church. In *To Be or Not to Be Reformed* (1959) R. B. Kuiper stated that the CRC stands in the great and glorious tradition of Warfield and Hodge, Bavinck and Kuyper, the Westminster Assembly and the Synod of Dort, Calvin, Augustine, and Paul. Kuiper also noted that by and large the Canadian immigrants, by abiding by their strong conviction concerning the kingship of Christ, with the blessing of God, became an inestimable blessing to the CRC, as well as a great boon to the cause of the Lord Christ on this continent and throughout the world.

CRC church historian, Dr. Henry Zwaanstra, has a different opinion. He says in *Catholicity and Secession* (1991) that in the secessions of 1834 and 1857, the catholicity and the unity of all believers in the one body of Christ suffered severe blows. He states, "The propriety, right, and necessity of secession and separation were affirmed virtually without qualification. No real distinctions were made between essential and nonessential or less essential matters in church's doctrine, polity, and life." And in a less than charitable assessment of the secessionists, Zwaanstra charges that they "produced a staunchly conservative, traditional, rigid, and unimaginative mentality. Separation and the defence of it nurtured parochialism, elitism, and social cohesiveness. Attitudes of superiority and, at times, smugness and blatant arrogance came to characterize the secessionists and their descendants in matters pertaining to church and theology."

## **Christian Education**

The *Divided by A Common Heritage* researchers note that the biggest difference that divides CRC and RCA pastors concerns educational policy. The CRC has long supported the creation and maintenance of distinctively Christian schools at all levels, while RCA clergy are "far more supportive of public, rather than private or religious, schools." R.B. Kuiper states that Christian schools are a powerful witness to the universal kingship of Christ. He says that the CRC requires parents to do their utmost to rear children in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and strongly advocates the establishment of, and "generously lends its support for the maintenance of, parent controlled Christian day schools." Officially, the CRC position on Christian education has not changed.

### **Does Doctrine Matter?**

Should we strive for unity at the expense of doctrine? In fact, among most clergy and laity, issues of political and social importance may have greater unifying power than theological or creedal tradition." The researchers state that within both denominations there has been a driving force to avoid things that are seen as the most encumbering elements of the Reformed legacy in favour of the expediency of contemporary popular

appeal. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of RCA members and a sizable number of their CRC counterparts are unaware of the tenets and the content of the confessions and creeds. But there are still important differences between the CRC and RCA. The researchers found that while the Midwestern members are similar in outlook in many ways, the denominations differ significantly in other parts of North America. For example, their surveys show that the RCA segment based in the East is generally more liberal than the CRC membership in the Midwest. While the CRC has historically placed greater emphasis on doctrinal purity, the RCA has focussed more on sustaining church unity. The CRC has placed importance on fidelity to theological standards, while the RCA has tended to affirm personal piety and evangelism as hallmarks of its members' Christian faith.

Should the CRC and RCA seek unity at all cost? Some say the way to produce unity is not to discuss and consider doctrine, but rather seek to work together and pray together. But they seem to forget that practice and behaviour are the result of the application of doctrine. We can't be all things to all people. We cannot comprise the sound doctrine of Scripture and our Reformed heritage. Nothing is so opposed to biblical teaching as the modern idea that numbers and a powerful organization alone count. The late Dr. John Kromminga rightly noted that liberty of doctrine in teaching, results in divisions and brings confusion; it destroys the solidarity of the church, whose hallmark it is to follow her Head, Christ, in obedience to His Word. And R.B Kuiper argues, " No peace at the expense of truth and holiness. Scripture commands us to "love truth and peace" (Zech. 8:19). He states, "The order is significant. Truth comes before peace. Peace presupposes truth. Truth is prerequisite to peace. Only peace that is based on truth is peace at all. Elsewhere Scripture tells us: 'To be spiritually minded is life and peace'" (Rom. 8:6).

### **Reasons for possible merger**

Can the RCA and CRC "afford" not to merge? The researchers show that the futures of the RCA and CRC look rather grim as separate and distinctive denominations. They note that with some former CRC and RCA members departing for more individualistic forms of religious expression and others finding their faith in conventional evangelicalism, the viability of the two denominations becomes very problematic. They point to the RCA's membership decline. From a peak of nearly 235,000 "active" members in 1966, the RCA has dropped to around 180,000 today. The liberal East of the RCA, especially has lost many members. The researchers state: "It is true that most of the decline in the RCA, and the beginnings of membership decrease within sections of the CRC, are found in those regions which are the most 'liberal' in their theological perspective."

Why the loss of members? The reasons are varied. Both denominations suffer from the broader national trends of an aging population, declining birth rates, increasing geographical mobility, and the difficulty in recruiting ethnic/racial minorities as new members. Former members of RCA and CRC claim the traditions and confessions of the Reformed community have lost their importance for them. And the inroads of highly

privatized (individualized) Christianity is clearly evident in the USA and Canada. The contentious "worship wars" caused hurt feelings and contributed to the decline of membership.

The researchers believe the current situation has led to a growing recognition that what divides the two denominations may be less crucial than what unites them. Common characteristics, the scholars note, make the idea of merging tempting. They are both relatively small numerically, "Presbyterian" in ecclesiastical structure, primarily Dutch in their ethnic base. In addition to sharing a Dutch heritage and Reformed theology, the RCA and CRC approach political issues in comparable ways, with pastors using their pulpits to emphasize personal and collective morality rather than to promote specific candidates or causes. Both denominations are undergoing major transitions; they are increasingly challenged by forces that threaten to erode their religious distinctiveness and, perhaps, endanger their very existence. In both, there is a growing distance from, perhaps even disillusionment with denominational bureaucracies and agencies. Coupled with their own increased fiscal needs, it has led congregations increasingly to withhold funding from their parent denominations.

Since the late 20th century, steps have been taken to reach out to each other. In 1975 the synods of both churches designated Reformation Day Sunday as a day for denomination-wide pulpit exchange and joined worship. Participation was by local option and local arrangement. In 2004, RCA and CRC entered into a new relationship establishing *Faith Alive Christian Resources* to support the ministry of both denominations. And the CRC 2005 Synod approved the "orderly exchange of ordained ministers between the CRC and the RCA."

The researchers conclude that, while there may be a growing sense that the historic split between the CRC and RCA is unfortunate, it is abundantly clear that any route taken to merge the two denominations would be extremely difficult. They argue that merging for survival has "a note of desperation about it. In this model, all efforts would be focussed on finding a common bound of spirit and practice which can help bridge existing differences. A "forced" merger for survival would lead to individuals or congregations to look elsewhere for their affiliation. By merging such volatile issues involving the differing roles accorded to women in the CRC and RCA won't automatically go away. Virtually every classis in the RCA has female elders and deacons, and the vast majority has female pastors as well.

The researchers hope that their work will enable members of each denomination to understand the other better, to recognize their similarities and differences, and to be better equipped to address the challenges they face today. They also argue it will aid the RCA and CRC to find ways to cooperate, often through individuals, denominational agencies and local churches, for their mutual benefit even while remaining independent. Perhaps short of formal merger, individual members seeking like-minded brothers and sisters from across the historical divide will reach out and join together. Specific congregations, the life-blood of the church today, may find common causes which will contribute to loosening their ties with denominational headquarters. I cannot speak for

the RCA, but I believe the CRC should carefully reflect on R. B. Kuiper's statement made in 1959, which is still relevant for today. "If the CRC expects to influence its surrounding, it must, as men are wont to say in this age of commercialism, have something to *sell*. In Christian terminology, it must have something to *give*. And that which it offers must be of great value, of greater value than what is offered by other churches. If we can make no such offer, then at best we are duplicating other denominations."

Johan D. Tangelder  
May, 2007