

## Theologians Lead the Way.

[ first in a series ]

When Dutch immigrants from Reformed Churches in the Netherlands [GKN] background visit the "old country," they often find it hard to understand the liberal trends and the many changes in their once solid and strict Reformed denomination. And in turn family and friends find the immigrants here very conservative. As an immigrant myself I can identify with these feelings. And as a graduate of the Free University, having stayed in close touch with the GKN developments, I am deeply saddened by their new theology and its negative impact. Yet, the story of the dismantling of the GKN needs to be told as a reminder that no denomination is immune to liberal infiltration. The Reformed scene in the Netherlands is not rosy. On the one hand, some outsiders equate the Reformed faith with "black stockings and legalism". On the other hand, other outsiders think of Kuitert, declining church attendance, and modernism. And the younger generation of GKN members of orthodox persuasion say "I am a Christian" rather than "I am Reformed." In the late sixties a GKN housewife complained, "I do not wish to hear from the pulpit that we must learn love from the hippies and about the left oriented degenerating infiltration of the P. v. d. A. (the Dutch Labour Party)." Rev. A. W. W. de Ruiter, president of the conservative Reformed Confessional Council in the GKN recently protested Prof. C. J. den Heyer's denial of the classical doctrine of the atonement (reconciliation with God through the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ on the cross). De Ruiter asked, "How is it possible for a church to have two totally different views on the Lord Jesus Christ?" To add insult to injury, Prof. Dr. H. M. Kuitert argues that mature Christians do not need church membership or church attendance! Prof. Dr. G. Dekker said that "we should not so stubbornly cling to the church service. In the past this was the only way to hear the Word of God. Today radio and T. V. can fill the need. "It seems that the gathering of the communion of saints is not important anymore. These attitudes are certainly different from what I was taught and experienced in my youth. I remember walking for more than an hour in the early 1950s to attend a youth service with Rev. J. Overduin as the guest minister in the Nassau church in Amsterdam, the city where I was born and raised. The church was packed, standing room only! Compare this experience with a relatively recent one. Dr. Hans Reinders describes in 's Zondags ga ik naar de kerk (On Sunday I go to church) twenty services he attended in different churches in Amsterdam. On September 26, 1993, he went to the Keizersgracht church, the church where my parents were married in 1928 by Rev. S. G. de Graaf (1889-1955), the well known author of the monumental work, Promise and Deliverance with its central unifying theme the unfolding of covenant history. The service Dr. Reinders attended had less than one hundred worshippers. A banner on one of the walls featured the Brazilian bishop Helder Camara and archbishop Romero of El Salvador and Daniel Ortega, the leader of the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, surrounded by a large group of poor Indians. The theme of the service was that the God of yesterday must be explained differently today. Everyone can find his own way to God. Faith does not begin with tradition but

with experience. The candidate who preached was apprehensive about the recurring interest in Christian tradition and identity. When you want to believe you dare to doubt. When you want to save the church, you must lose her. The celebration of the Lord's Supper is the sign that the man Jesus is restlessly searching for a place where people can find justice. In other words, the 1993 Keizersgracht service is a far cry from the orthodox GKN church in my parents' time.

### **Membership Losses**

Until the 1960s GKN membership increased yearly by 10 to 12 thousand. By 1973 the increase was only four souls. On the first of January 1975, the first decline was noted, a total of 1000; afterwards the decline became a flood of departures. In 1993 Prof. Dr. A. P. Bos of the Free University states that ten thousand leave the GKN yearly for other pastures, some as sheep who no longer have shepherds in their own denomination and no longer view their church as mother but as stepmother. In 1997 the GKN suffered a loss of 13,031 members out of a membership of 708,814. Many former GKN have not joined any church. They believe that they have better things to do than to keep themselves busy with outdated "timebound" stories of primitive authors. Others have left for other denominations. They did not secede like their forebearers in 1834 and 1896. Rev. A. M. Lindeboom reports that the weekly exodus of faithful GKN members to Pentecostal, Baptist, Free Evangelical, Free Reformed and other churches continues unhindered. He also observes that as far as evangelism is concerned, the positive developments are seen outside the official established churches. Fifty to sixty mission organizations are actively ministering in the Netherlands. Hundreds of Dutch Christians are also involved in missions work world wide. One would think that there would be more cooperation between the Reformed and the evangelicals. The Dutch Evangelical Alliance notes that in the Dutch post-Christian society both evangelicals and Reformed are thrown back to the last fundamentals of the faith. But sadly, many Reformed churches still consider evangelicalism as a threat instead of a wake-up call.

### **The Dismantling Process**

The dismantling of the GKN did not happen overnight. It was such a slow and quiet process that many scarcely realized what was happening in their denomination. It did not become public until the Synod of Sneek (1970-71), which did not discipline Kuitert and his followers who denied Adam's fall into sin. This synod opened the door to complete freedom from confessional commitments. And in the year 2000 even the substitutionary atonement of Christ has become a topic for debate and controversy. How sad! When a church permits theologians to question this fundamental Gospel truth, how can she lead sinners to the foot of the cross to find their forgiveness, reconciliation with God the Father, and peace and rest?

Where did the ruin of the GKN originate? Many point to intellectualism. Of course intellectualism can be combined with a deep personal relationship with Jesus Christ. And often it is so. A classical example is Dr. Abraham Kuyper. This great theologian, author, and Christian statesman was also a humble child of God. His devotional articles are spiritual gems. When Kuyper's contemporary the Christian statesman and nobleman A. F. De Savornin Lohman died in 1924, his last words were, "I wish to see Him, Whom I have loved all my life". However, it has been noted that in the process of time intellectualism progressed and faith in Jesus became more a matter of the mind than of the heart. The result was the gradual estrangement from true Biblical piety. Catechism classes concentrated on doctrine and rightly so, but piety did not get sufficient attention. In practise, this piety means to accept Jesus as your Saviour, Lord, and Guide in your life, to pray for your parents, brothers and sisters, family and friends, to have a quiet time, to get together with fellow believers for prayer and Bible study, to know what to expect from the Lord's Supper attendance, to be involved in church and kingdom activities.

### **The Theologians Led the Way**

Who is to blame for the changed moral climate in the Netherlands? The Dutch Reformed (NHK) Drs. K. Exalto blames the theologians. Filled with indignation he exclaimed, "The theologians are the main culprits. All insights and conceptions can be traced to theologians." And already before the World War II, Dr. H. Colyn told theologians at a meeting of the Free University that theologians should have their discussion in Latin so that the churches won't become bewildered. Prof. dr. K. J. Popma (1903-1986) once told GKN's prominent theologian Dr. G. Berkouwer that according to him, it would be better to return from complicated theology to the simplicity of faith and of the confessions - a path upon which the church could walk without confusion.

In his lengthy and insightful book, *De Theologen gingen voorop: Eenvoudig verhaal van de ontmanteling van de Gereformeerde Kerken* (The Theologians led the way: A simple story of the dismantling of the Reformed Churches), retired GKN Rev. A. M. Lindeboom states that through the many irresponsible and at times reckless statements made by theologians, pluralism in the GKN greatly increased. He says the GKN has become not only a dialogue church but also a pluralistic church, which means that every viewpoint receives equal treatment and acceptance. Some theologians promote feminist, black, liberation, or homosexual theology. Lindeboom notes that a new theology, filled with old heresies, conquered hearts; a bureaucratic development arose; doctrinal latitude became widespread; local congregations came under pressure -the fundamentals of the faith were undermined. He comments that that he can't escape the impression that with all the theologizing and preoccupation with church affairs, and also in many sermons, the contact with Jesus Himself has vanished. His greatest wish is to have his church back - a church which does not permit heresy, but teaches sound doctrine; a church which stops confusing

youth; a church which is one in the Christ of the Scriptures and which builds on that foundation. But Rev. A. M. Lindeboom believes that the liberals have won the battle. The binding to the confessions is gone. In many important cases the authority of Scripture has been pushed aside. Discipline is no longer exercised. Some churches allow non-baptized children to partake of the Lord's Supper etc..

## Conclusion

Proponents of the new theology in the GKN call those who resist the new trends - "believers in the traditional way". Of course, the Bible clearly teaches that we should believe in this traditional manner. The apostle Paul urges the church of Christ "to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned" (Rom 16:17). And Jude calls upon the church "to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (vs. 3). But all is not gloom and doom. There are still thousands in the GKN, who with heart and soul, long for a truly Reformed Church, a church which has learned her lessons from the past, a church which bows before the authority of the Scripture and recognizes and honours the creeds and the confessions. They yearn for a Sunday when they can attend church with joy, singing:

How lovely, Lord of hosts, to me the tabernacles of Thy grace!  
O how I long, yes, faint to see Jehovah's courts, His dwelling place!  
My heart and flesh with joy draw nigh  
As to the living God I cry (Ps. 84:1).