

Journalism : The Dutch Reformed Press

"If you confess something on Sunday, confess it also on Monday, and vice versa. Do not make something into a problem of the greatest magnitude on Sunday if you are planning to regard it as secondary on Monday."

Prof. Dr. K. Schilder

The daily press had a great impact on the developments in Reformed churches and national politics in the Netherlands. The industrial revolution in the last half of the 19th century greatly stimulated the growth of the press. New ideas, high expectations and ideals were aroused by the political goals of the French Revolution. New means of communications and transportation changed the way people lived. Workers left the countryside for the big cities. Revolutionary propaganda found ready soil among the toiling masses. More and more people learned to read and write and began to search for information, educational opportunities, inspiration and hope.

The modernization of the printing press, the use of different quality of paper, the abolition of the stamp duty (tax on newspapers), and the discovery of advertising as a new source of revenue vastly lowered the sale price and greatly aided the growth of newspapers. They were now able to publish in larger format and with more pages and feature articles. The daily newspapers became the gatherers and summarizers of the news and the dispensers of the new ideas. The new readers were able to ponder complicated concepts and draw their own conclusions.

The Christian political press has its roots in the great battles waged against the revolutionary spirit of the 19th century. Christian periodicals were not founded for financial gain; they often had a precarious financial position. Before the abolition of the stamp tax on papers, there were a few small Reformed papers, such as the weekly *Nederlandsche Stemmen* (Netherlands Voices), which was published by Isaac da Costa and A. M. C. van Hall from 1834 to 1838, and *De Reformatie* (The Reformation), which was issued by Rev. H.P. Scholte from 1837 to 1847 for the Secessionist circles.

G. Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876)

The first anti-revolutionary daily, **De Nederlander** (The Netherlander) was distributed on July 1, 1850. The editor was G. Groen Van Prinsterer, who clearly outlined the direction of his paper: "the battle against the persistent denial of the Sovereignty of God." He saw the immense importance of the Reformation for all of life. His emphasis was on the struggle to articulate a clear, consistent, and independent Christian viewpoint, based on the unconditional submission to the Word of God in an age of unbelief. Scripture is the basis for law, economics, politics, authority and freedom for church and government.

Groen did not shun controversy, not even when it concerned the church. He declared repeatedly that one cannot leave false teachings undisturbed "for the sake of the persons who are propounding them." He exposed the satanic character of the French Revolution. The really formative power of the 19th century was the insidious spirit of

atheism, men and women living without God. Groen's daily was consequently an "anti-revolutionary, Protestant and Reformed opposition paper." He was a lonely prophet, a voice crying in the wilderness.

Groen did not see much fruit for all his labours. His daily paper's circulation was small, estimated between 240 and 350. In the beginning of 1853 Groen wrote that "we increased subscribers for *De Nederlander*, we lost 19 and gained 20." Since this paper was started while the tax on newspapers was still in force, it was too expensive for the average reader. But when Groen quit his paper in 1855, he wrote Da Costa that finances were not the deciding factor for discontinuing the paper, nor the opposition he received, but the indifference of his own fellow believers. He also found that the editorial work was getting too much for him. He felt that he had become "a slave of the paper."

Groen lacked a broad readership also for another reason. His paper was considered too intellectual, his style too cumbersome. He was not a popular author. He had been trained in law, philosophy and history, and served as secretary first to the king and, later, to the Dutch Cabinet.

Yet his paper was influential. It was frequently quoted. Although he quit his paper, he never stopped writing. He kept it up even when he fell seriously ill, an illness from which he never recovered.

Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920)

During the early years of the Christian press, journalism was part-time work done by teachers and ministers. The latter were the shakers and movers of church and nation. They were in close contact with the public. They educated the people in the schools and in the pews, awakened the Reformed Christians and gave them a public voice.

Abraham Kuyper, who completed his doctoral studies and served as a pastor in the state church, entered journalism, writing both theological and political columns for the weekly *De Heraut* (The Herald). When he started to write for *De Heraut* in 1869, journalism was generally not thought of as an academic subject to be learned, but as a tool to be used.

Some years after Kuyper had become chief editor of *De Heraut*, it turned into a daily newspaper, *De Standaard* (The Standard), the standard-bearer of the emerging Anti-Revolutionary Party (AR) of which Kuyper was the leader. *De Heraut* continued as a supplement of the Saturday edition of *De Standaard*, and some years later again became a separate weekly newspaper, with Kuyper as chief editor of both.

Through his writings he aimed to make an impact on the nation. On September 1, 1875, he wrote in *De Standaard* that the spirit of the nation cannot be changed only through preaching, when the press and the law hinder its betterment. He believed that the Christian press had to withstand its opponents and

strengthen and unite Christ's followers. The press was for him an important means to shape public opinion, a gift of God to Christians, a gift on par with the invention of the printing press. Kuyper was convinced that the press is vitally important as a means to educate Christians on many subjects, not only on Bible and theology, but also on politics, the state, the economy, historical studies, and so on.

He had the gift of being able to provide commentary on daily events and affairs from a clearly Christian perspective, deeply rooted in Scripture. For example, he was not ashamed of God's concrete commandments. He was a strong advocate of the observance of the Lord's Day, opposed Sunday shopping, and pleaded for employers to give their workers a day off during the week so that they could do their shopping. He even criticized the royal family for not showing respect for the Lord's Day in their public actions.

Kuyper was convinced that without the daily press, public opinion in a nation is often like a ship without a rudder, a body without a soul. The press, therefore, has the high calling to show the nation which road it should take. The Christian press has the task to confess the Lord of all life, the healer of the nations. Kuyper's purpose in journalism was: "to carve as it were into the conscience of the nation the ordinances of the Lord, to which Bible and Creation bear witness, until the nation pays homage to God."

The nation took notice of Kuyper, theologian, politician and journalist. His adversaries feared him. For example, during the reformation movement beginning in 1886, the *Algemeen Handelsblad* of Amsterdam complained: "This ex-clergyman threatens our general society, our liberties, and our institutions with infinitely greater dangers than that other ex-clergyman F. Domela Nieuwenhuis [an ex-Lutheran pastor who became the fiery leader of the romantic revolutionary Dutch socialist movement of the eighties]." Kuyper's role in the church reform movement earned him a hatred and animosity which he could not dodge the rest of his life. But when *De Standaard* celebrated its 25th anniversary, it had come to occupy "the place of honour among Dutch dailies," despite the animosity toward controversial Kuyper.

Kuyper had a phenomenal capacity for work. He was not only the editor of the daily *De Standaard* and the weekly *De Heraut* for more than 40 years, honorary president of the Netherlands Press Association, member of parliament, leader of the Anti-Revolutionary Party, Prime Minister, founder of the Free University of Amsterdam, but also the author of 214 published volumes. Many of his books were first published in serial form in his papers. No wonder he was called 'Abraham the Mighty' (*de Geweldige*).

Kuyper knew how to touch the hearts of his readers and caught their imagination. He was their spokesman for Christian education, and he effectively used the press to plead for justice for the Christian school movement. Consequently, the school struggle became incorporated into the political program of the AR. Kuyper had a unique way of turning anti-revolutionary principles into concrete political questions. And he was never dull, even though he wrote day after day on the most diverse subjects. His style was forceful and direct, although wordy. But then all writers of his time were wordy. His

"three-star" editorials were journalistic gems and had a great impact. The Reformed faithful sensed that Kuyper knew how they felt and found in him a powerful expression of what they believed. He carefully laid out the problems they faced and offered solutions.

As Groen's spiritual successor, he combatted the revolutionary spirit of his time. He abhorred everything for which the French revolution stood. In his lecture at the First Christian Social Congress in 1891 he said that the "French Revolution casts out the majesty of the Lord and tries to build up an artificial authority based on the free will of the individual." He never minced words, not even with men who were close to him, but at times disagreed with either his theology or politics. As a journalist he often annoyed both friend and foe.

K. Schilder (1890-1952)

After the Reformation of 1886 and the union with the majority of the 1834 secessionist churches in 1892, the Christian Reformed Churches (synodical) saw healthy numerical growth and experienced a vibrant church life. With Kuyper, Prof. Dr. H. Bavinck (1854-1921) was a leading personage within these churches, which had in 1920 about 570,000 souls and in 1940 about 650,000. The school struggle was won when, in 1917, the Christian schools received equal rights. In politics, the AR was a strong political force.

But in the 1920s the churches no longer had strong men on which they could lean on for support and guidance such as was given in the 19th century. Prof. L. Lindeboom retired in 1917, Prof. Dr. R L. Rutgers died in that year, and Rev. J. C. Sikkel of Amsterdam, influential author and pastor, died in 1920. Yet the churches were in need of good leaders of sound Reformed persuasion.

Shortly after the outbreak of World War I in 1914, some in the Christian Reformed Churches began to wonder whether the Three Forms of Unity should be revised. The liturgy for the regular Sunday services and even the Reformed lifestyle became subjects for discussion. What does it mean to be Reformed? Winds of change were blowing. Youth showed dissatisfaction. A number of concerned men began to raise their voices and warned the churches against the dangerous trends they saw eating away at the foundations of spiritual life. At the Synod of 1914, Dr. J. C. deMoor(1878-1926), a gifted and earnest theologian, spoke about a spiritual laxness which left people "more eager for the favour of men than the good pleasure of the Lord. There are two things we desperately need: more depth and more unity." Another reformation was called for.

In response, a group of concerned Reformed people decided to found a paper to counteract the spiritual downward trend in the church. In 1920 DeMoor became one of the founders of the periodical, appropriately called *De Reformatie* (The Reformation). This Paper was also the work primarily of pastors.

In later years it became inseparably associated with Dr. Klaas Schilder, pastor and later professor at the theological school in Kampen, and the Liberated churches. The contributors to the paper worked hard to overcome confessional indifference. Schilder, who eventually became its dynamic editor, was a man of the Bible, a careful exegete, and a diligent student of the Three Forms of Unity. He built on the thought of Groen and Kuyper, but he critiqued Kuyper's scholastic tendencies.

He also pointed out that the confessions are not for the institutional church only. They are the foundation for all of life. What one confesses on Sunday must also be confessed on Monday. For example, our political confession grows out of our confession of faith. He did not agree, therefore, with Kuyper's idea of sphere sovereignty, in which each sphere of life has its own authoritative norm. His desire was to bring the Church back to the Scripture and its historical confessions.

Schilder was poetic, with an amazing grasp of the Dutch language and a fine journalistic style. I became acquainted with the writings of Dr. Schilder during a visit to the Netherlands when someone gave me some of his books. Since then I have collected more of his works. Schilder's writings had a great impact not only the Christian Reformed Churches but also on the political developments in Holland. However, it is not my intention to deal with Schilder as a theologian. My aim in this article is to highlight his contribution as a journalist not only to the church but also to the Dutch nation. Because of his consequent confessional stance, he came into conflict with National Socialism. He was one of the first Christian journalists who courageously and convincingly exposed the evils and paganism of the Nazi movement. He did not mince words when he warned his readers against it. Right after the capitulation of the Netherlands, Schilder was reminded that *De Reformatie* had been blacklisted in Germany for some years. His friends warned him to be careful. His response was: "I have to go on writing in this vein. We used some loaded words before the war, and the young people expect nothing other than that we will honour those words. Where else could they turn?" In hindsight, it was therefore not surprising that *De Reformatie* was the first paper banned by the Nazis. It also cost Schilder imprisonment and a time in hiding.

His resistance of the Nazis will be remembered for years to come, and it should not be forgotten also by those who are his spiritual heirs in North America, where Reformed Christians also confronted with many spiritual dangers, pitfalls, and anti-Christian philosophies.

Schilder received national recognition during a television broadcast in October 1960. Dr. De Jong, director of the Office War Documentation, spoke during the broadcast with great appreciation for the work of Schilder as journalist. He said:

Nowhere in Reformed (Gereformeerd) circles was sharper and more principial polemicizing published during the first months [of the war] than in the weekly periodical *The Reformation*. Ten [weekly] issues appeared before it was banned. The content of the paper was the work of one of the professors at the Theological School in Kampen - Prof. Dr. K. Schilder.

Schilder's journalistic work has also merited a doctoral thesis, a remarkable testimony to his life and influence as an author. In 1993 George Harinck wrote *De Reformatie weekblad tot ontwikkeling van het gereformeerde leven 1920-1940* (The Reformation weekly for the development of the Reformed life 1920-1940), a tome of 468 pages.

Conclusion

Groen, Kuyper, and Schilder knew the power of the press and realized its importance for the life of church and nation. These godly and gifted men were dedicated to the service of the Lord and rendered inestimable service to the Reformed community. They were men of stature, character, conviction, vision and devotion. They were not ashamed of their Lord in their journalistic work.

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