

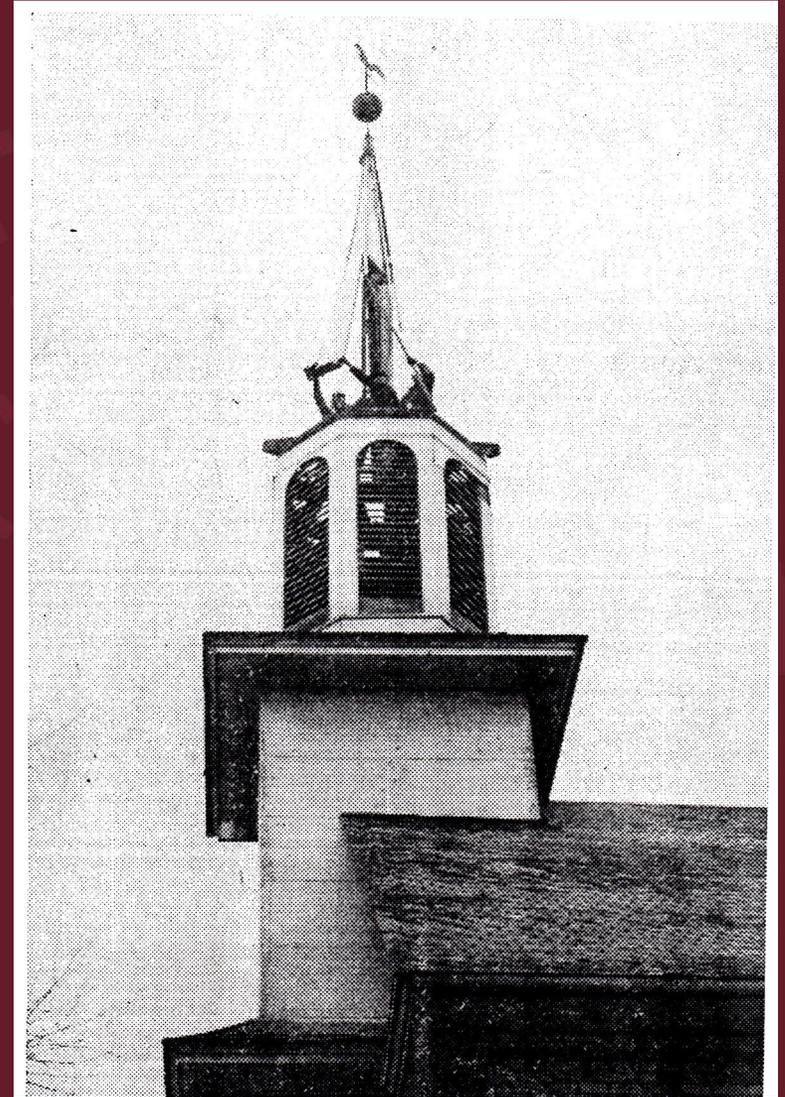


# PACK UP YOUR QUARRELS AND TAKE THEM TO AMERICA

(where they will persist, in one form or another, from generation to generation)

# What Quarrels?

Reformed Church  
Quarrels—begun in the  
Netherlands in 1818 and still  
evident in the tensions within  
Reformed and Christian Reformed  
churches in Zeeland today.



# The Dutch Church Begins in Agreement

1571: Emden Synod—a gathering, convened by the churches, of 29 exiled Dutch Calvinist leaders who founded the Dutch Reformed Church.

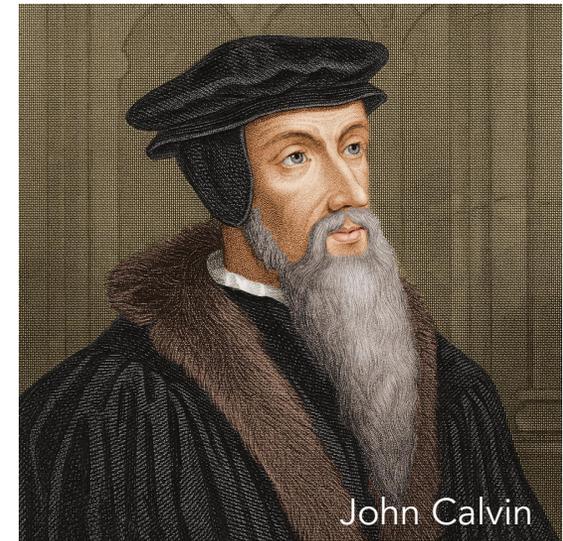
Establishes guidelines for church doctrine (Heidelberg Catechism, Genevan Confession)

Establishes guidelines for church governance (bottom up structure: congregation to classis to synod)

Establishes guidelines for church discipline

Establishes guidelines for the sacraments

1579: Protestant Netherlands declares independence from Catholic Spain—leads to the dominance of Protestant Calvinism as articulated at Emden in Dutch religious life.



John Calvin

# Synod of Dordt (1618-1619): A Victory for Reformed Doctrine

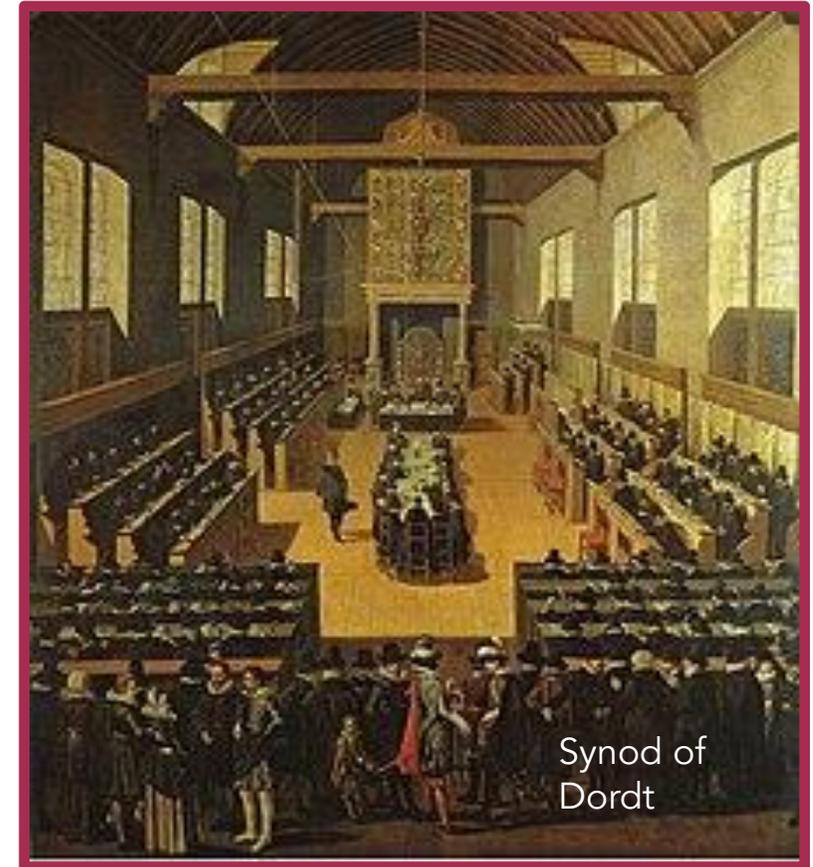
Convened by the STATE to resolve a doctrinal conflict in the Dutch Reformed Church over the Calvinist doctrine of predestination that was spilling over into a political conflict

(There was a rumor that those who challenged predestination were aligned with Catholic Spain.)

Synod accepts 3 forms of doctrinal unity

- Belgic confession (1559)
- Heidelberg Catechism (1563)
- Canons of Dordt (1619)

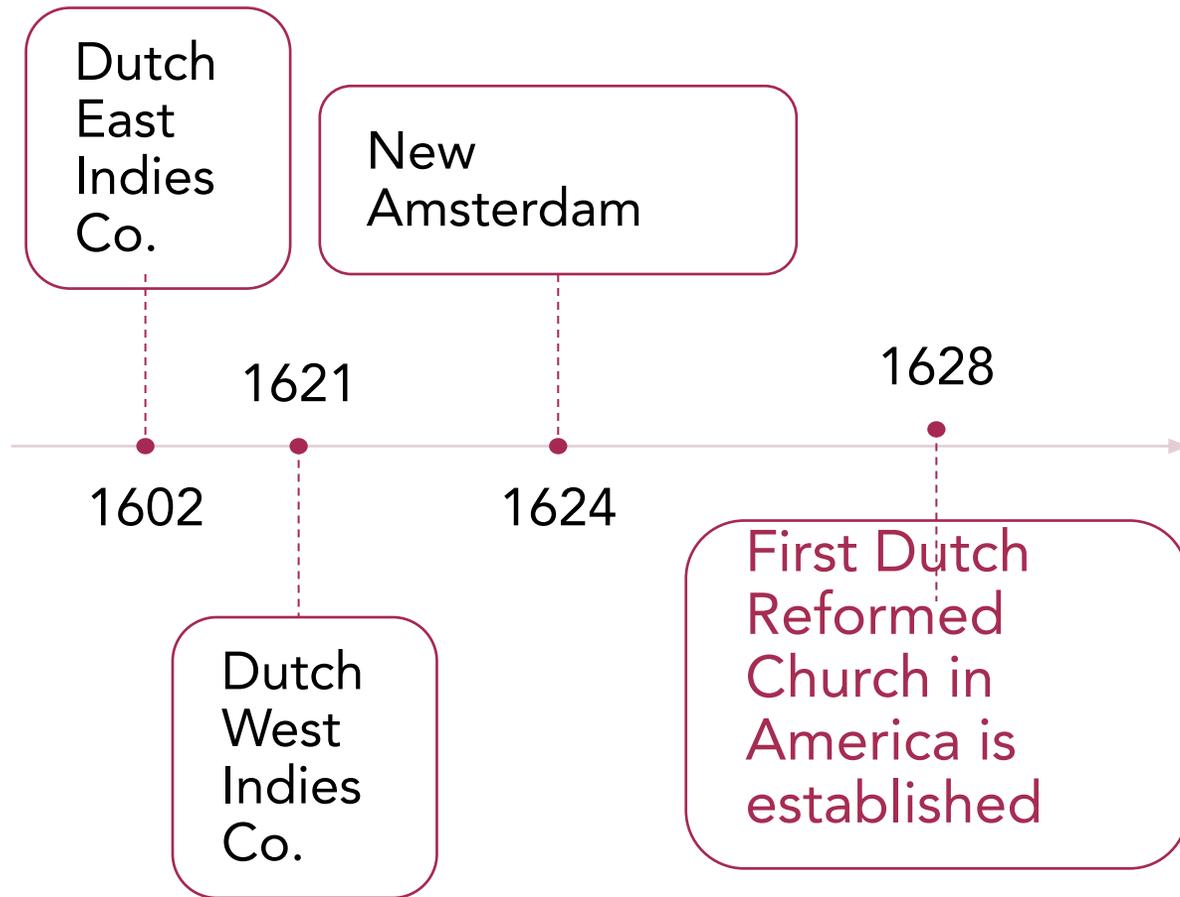
Synod accepts Church Order of Dordt 1619



Synod of Dordt

- ★ Some of the more conservative people thought the decisions at Dordt (including the church order) were close to being divinely inspired, and remaining true to Dordt will loom large in the future of Dutch church conflict.

# Meanwhile, across the ocean....



★ The Dutch Reformed Church—eventually the Reformed Church in America—is mostly unaffected by the events that will unfold in the Netherlands in the next 250 years.

# Church and State Rule Together: 1619-1795

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State sponsors translation of the Bible  
(*Staten Bijbel* 1637)

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State provides funds to churches for care of poor in their parishes.

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Church, not state, performs marriages, records births, etc.



# Church and State Rule Together: 1619-1795

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State provides financial help to study  
for ministry (6 yr. program)

---

State builds/provides lovely  
parsonages.

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State helps pay clergy salaries.



# “Calvinization” of the Netherlands

All civil servants are required to be members of the Reformed Church.  
(Leads to nominal membership)

All children are expected to be baptized in the Reformed Church, regardless of parents’ church membership.

The Sabbath is strictly observed—civil authorities close businesses on Sunday.

All vestiges of Roman Catholicism are removed from churches, Catholics can not hold state offices, and Jews can not take part in civic matters.

# “Calvinization” of the Netherlands cont.

The Heidelberg catechism is taught to adults every Sunday in sermons and to children weekdays in school.

There is stress on Bible and devotional reading at home, but Bible studies are discouraged.

(Too many opinions might surface in a Bible study group, causing quarrels and division.)

Only trained pastors with degrees are allowed to preach and pastor churches.

# ECONOMIC COLLAPSE – FRENCH TAKE OVER: 1795-1813

Immediate separation of church and state  
under Louis Napoleon (brother of Napoleon Bonaparte).

End of government support for Church.

Clergy families face poverty.

Congregations struggle to fund church operations.

Religion no longer allowed in schools

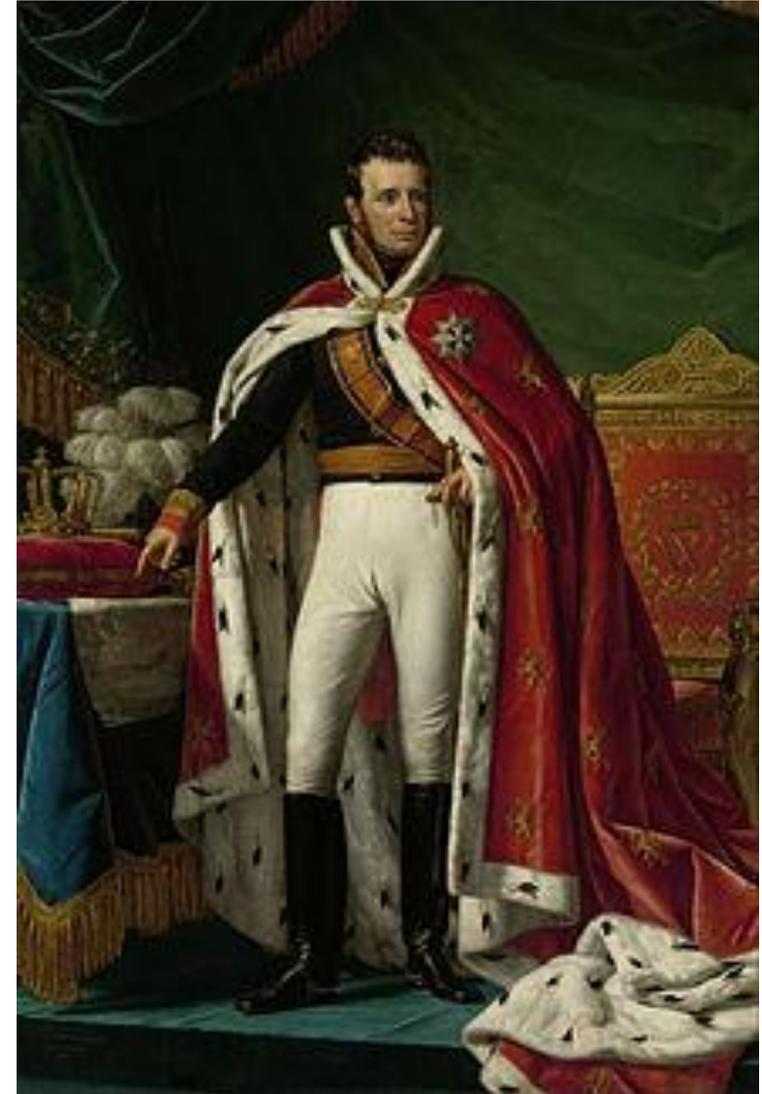
Civil Registry, not parish church, records marriages, births, deaths,



# King Willem I: 1815

During reign of Louis Napoleon, Willem of Orange (future king) had exiled himself to England where the king is the head of the church. That arrangement greatly appealed to the future King.

When the French leave, Willem returns as King Willem I and completely reorganizes the Dutch Reformed Church at a national synod in 1816. Inspired by the English, he shifts ecclesiastical power to the state.





# Changes in the Church

## The Synod of 1816-1818



The king, not churches, convenes the synod (king chooses all delegates himself)

The Synod reorganizes Church Order (previously set at Dordt 1619 )

The Synod requires all clergy to be approved by the king; the government pays their salaries.

The Synod requires the use of hymns in church services

The Synod allows for more leeway in interpreting church doctrine (also set at Dordt in 1619)

# Reaction to the Synod of 1816

Most people are **happy** to have state support of the church back after almost 20 years of French rule when the parish had to pay for all church expenses themselves and ministers lived in poverty.

By this time, the decrees of Dordt are seen by many in the Netherlands as man-made, subject to new understanding, or they are simply ignored in a secularized church. As a result, most people were not bothered by synod's opening the door to different understandings of doctrine.

**MOST PEOPLE—BUT NOT EVERYONE.**

# Reaction

## **There are pockets of strong resistance to the hymns mandate.**

Conservative congregations do not think it is the business of government to select worship music.

Hymns are written by men, as opposed to the sung Psalms which are the words of the Bible.

Some hymns have a nationalist flavor: church is the place to praise God, not king or country.

Some hymns have hints of the free will point of view that was rejected at the Synod of Dordt.

When ministers refuse to add hymns to the usual selection of psalms, they are punished by the government.

## **Resistance is especially strong in the province of Zeeland.**

Some men put on their hats when a hymn is sung.

Some walk out of the service when a hymn is sung.

One congregation even buried the government's shipment of new hymnals in the cemetery.

# Reaction Continued

Some decide church is too corrupt and form conventicles (house churches) which evolve into full-fledged worship services in homes and fields and barns (especially in Friesland and Zeeland provinces)

**In 1834 the die is cast: there is a successful movement to secede from the Reformed Church. It is called the Afscheiding or separation.**

**By mid century, the Seceder or Afscheiding congregations make up 1.3% of the Dutch population (about 40,000 people), and the Reformed Church has lost 5% of its members.**



Artist's rendering of a conventicle or house church.

# King's Response to the Afscheiding: TREASON!



Prison where Rev. Hendrik de Cock served his sentence.

If the church is governed by a state-appointed board, then to leave the church is to reject the state. That is called treason.

Fines for conventical meetings are levied on homeowners, ministers, and elders. (Albertus Van Raalte, later minister in Holland, MI, is fined about \$16,000 for preaching outside of the approved church.)

Soldiers bar the doors of churches whose ministers preach against the "falling away" of the Dutch Reformed Church. Ministers are jailed.

Citizens are expected to boycott businesses owned by people of the Afscheiding and to deny them employment. (Causes real economic hardship.)

Meetings continue despite these sanctions: up to 1,000 people come to hear Vander Meulen in Zeeland and de Cock in Friesland.



Barn in Borssele, Zeeland where Rev. Vander Meulen preached to crowds of 1,000.

# QUARRELS WITHIN THE AFSCHEIDING CHURCH: THREE PERSPECTIVES

1. The North: The church should purify itself and return to the doctrines and church order of Dordt. (One key leader: Rev. Hendrik De Cock of Ulrum, Groningen)
2. The Middle/South: The church should return to Dordt and then adapt it to current cultural circumstances. (Several leaders including Rev. Albertus Van Raalte, later of Holland MI)
3. The church should reject hierarchy and doctrinal standards to focus on evangelism. (Rev. Hendrik Scholte)

# Regional Infighting: The North & de Cock

Leaders in the North want a return to the teachings of Dordt (historic Dutch Calvinism) and strict adherence to the Dordt system of Church Order.

Leaders in the north strongly support Christian schools and catechetical instruction. (Public schools are a "Godless influence.")

When the government relieves Rev. Hendrik De Cock, a prominent church leader in the north, of his church, he becomes an Afscheiding/Seceder church planter in Drenthe, Groningen, and Friesland. (Planted 16 churches in one year alone.)

When De Cock refuses to stop preaching against the humanist tendencies in the Dutch national church, the government sentences him to 18 months in jail for insurrection against the government.

★ Of the north, Dr. Bob Swierenga writes, "They had steel in their bones."



# Regional Infighting: The South and Van Raalte

Rev. Albertus Van Raalte studies for ministry at the University of Leiden in the middle-southern part of the Netherlands and becomes a prominent leader in the southern faction.

He loves the Reformed Church of the Netherlands but sees it as losing its way. He views secession as a necessary evil.

The southern group is generally more broad minded, inclusive—willing to compromise for the sake of unity. “Beloved, love one another for love is of God.”

Van Raalte and the leaders in the middle/south of the Netherlands stress piety and evangelism. They are willing to compromise for the sake of outreach.

★ Of the south, Dr. Bob Swierenga writes, “They had rubber in their bones.”



Note: Immigrants prior to 1857 were predominantly from the Southern Netherlands.

# Regional Infighting: Scholte, a loose canon



Promotes a new church order—congregational independence from classes or synod—viewed by most separatists as ecclesiastical anarchy

Perceived as weak on total depravity.

Promotes an experiential gospel, stresses evangelism

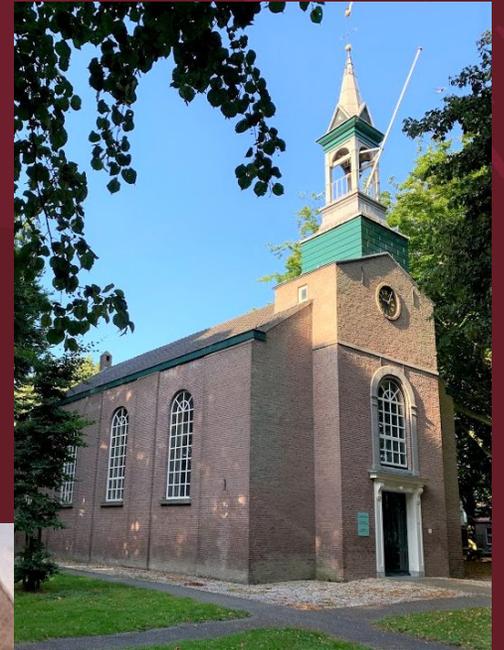
Suspended from ministry in the seceder/Afscheiding church in 1840. Preaches independently and eventually leads a large group to Iowa where they found Central College and the town of Pella.

Goes off on his own with no affiliation to either Reformed or later Christian Reformed churches: "no creed but the Bible"

(maybe a forerunner of the independent mega churches of today)

Around 1838 persecution of Seceders and their ministers begins to ease (though it does not disappear completely).

At right are the small seceder church and the larger state Reformed church in Borssele, Zeeland. The seceders could legally have a church, but it could not be very visible—had to be set back from the road without a steeple. All church expenses usually covered by the state were the full responsibility of the Seceder congregation, including care of the poor.



Emigration is not seen as an option at first.

Emigration is rebelling against/abandoning the civic authority established by God.

Emigration to improve economic status is embracing worldly values.

# A CHANGE IN PERSPECTIVE

Economic hardship persists: lack of work, low wages. increased costs of living, potato famine

Scholte: "In general, according to the Word of God, emigration is allowable. There can be cases where duty calls or even demands it."

Eventually emigration is seen as a God-provided answer to the trials of living in an ever more secular Dutch culture.



And so the seceders left for America, taking their religious baggage with them.

1. Resentment and deep suspicion of the Reformed Church.
2. Worry about losing their faith and Dutch culture (which are closely intertwined) in America.

3. Suspicion of church leaders from a different geographical region of the Netherlands.
4. Differing regional priorities and values when dealing with religious conflict.

At first, church conflict takes a back seat to survival.

In the West Michigan woods, they face disease, death, lack of decent housing, inadequate food, back-breaking labor, poverty.

Still, the immigrants hold fast to their deep piety and faith in God. The woods, said Rev. Vander Meulen of Zeeland, “resounded” with their psalm singing.

# Into the Wilderness Comes the RCA

They had helped the immigrants upon their arrival in New York.

The RCA had been struggling to establish missions in the "west." The new immigrants might just be the ticket to the expansion of the church.

They send a delegate to assess the needs of the colony. Seeing abject need, their Board of Domestic Missions sends money and goods to the churches of the Holland Classis.



They invite the immigrants to join the RCA with the proviso that they can withdraw without penalty at any time.

To join or not to join: that becomes the question.

# Reasons to Join

The RCA had not been affected by the secularism and humanism that undermined the Dutch Reformed Church or by the consequences of being controlled by the state.

The immigrant churches could be a separate Classis of their own. They did not have to (and would not) join the already existing Classis of Michigan which had 8 American churches.

The RCA and the immigrants had a common religious heritage, common doctrines, common church order, and a common cultural heritage.

The RCA had helped the immigrants beyond all expectation when they first arrived in America.

The immigrant leaders had experienced deep and meaningful worship with RCA clergy.

The immigrant churches could withdraw at any time without penalty.



## Reasons NOT to Join:



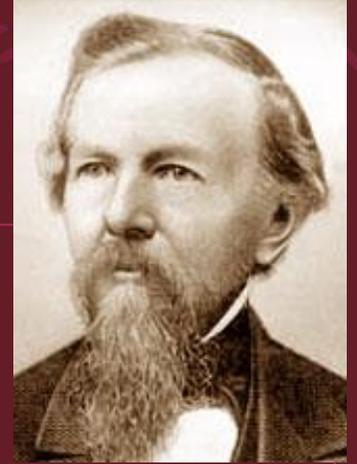
The RCA was too Americanized.

The RCA was still associated with the Dutch church with its doctrinal and moral laxity.

The RCA accepted hymns in worship, practiced open communion, and was less strict.

There was a language barrier and economic disparity between the eastern RCA and the wilderness immigrants, limiting mutual understanding.

## The Dream of Albertus Van Raalte, Influential Minister in Holland, MI



Van Raalte had always dreamed of a reconciliation between a renewed Reformed Church in the Netherlands and the Seceders.

The RCA in America was a purer version of that Dutch church, and he urged his fellow immigrants to join, seeing God's hand in the spiritual fellowship and material aid offered by the RCA.

Van Raalte prevailed, and the immigrants agreed to join the Reformed Church in America in 1850. The union was a "source of joy and gratitude,"

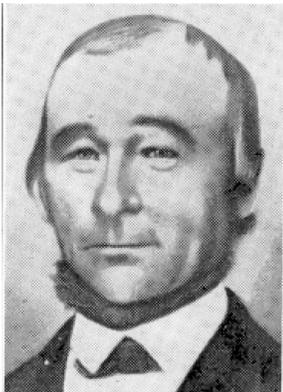
**BUT NOT FOR LONG....**

# Trouble in Drenthe: A Church Divides

1849: Drenthe's first disagreement is over the name of the community. The agreement is settled in favor of "Drenthe," but feelings remain raw.

1851: The community calls a pastor Roelof Smit from the Netherlands, trained in the North and highly suspicious of the Reformed Church. He spreads discontent in the Drenthe RCA congregation.

1852—five Drenthe church members go to Holland Classis with various complaints against Smit including that he



"tried to make the [Drenthe] church secede from the Reformed Church on the pretext that 'we were sold to the Old Dutch Church by Rev. Van Raalte for a good purse of money.'"

All concerned are reprimanded by Classis for being "carnal minded."

Smit calls for secession from Classis and the RCA. With 2/3 of the Drenthe congregation following him, he organizes an independent congregation.

In 1853, Smit and congregation affiliate with the Associate Reformed Church or Schotse Kerk.

(This church had a presence in the Netherlands, and Smit had visited Scotland where he was favorably impressed.)



At left is a sign for the cemetery of Smit's church. Upon his deathbed, he urged his congregation to join the CRC, and most of them did.

# Trouble North of Holland: Distrust

By 1850, the good farmland in around Holland and Zeeland is taken, and new immigrants branch out north and west into what becomes known as North Holland.



Most of the settlers are from Groningen, a **northern** Dutch province, and the town of Noordeloos, a conservative island in the more liberal province of South Holland.

In 1851 the residents of the North Holland area request a church of their own and Classis grants that request. They are not able to get a minister.

In 1855, Jacob Duim settles in North Holland. He brings with him deep distrust of the Reformed Church and sets up a conventicle (house church) with himself as leader, despite having no training in ministry.

He writes, "I have special instructions from the Lord to lead and oversee this flock."

The conventicle siphons off most of the flock from the established North Holland Reformed Church.

# Trouble North of Holland: More Distrust

There is also a church in Noordeloos. In 1855 Classis Holland grants permission for the people in Noordeloos to call a minister.

This church with many families from Groningen, a **northern** province in the Netherlands, attracts those newcomers to Zeeland and Old Groningen who do not speak the Zeeuws dialect spoken by most of the Zeeland people, and they are not part of the original Vander Meulen group.





In 1856, Noordeloos calls Rev. Koene Vanden Bosch from the Netherlands to be their pastor. Vanden Bosch soon begins to denounce the RCA.

He had studied along with Roelof Smit in the Dutch North. Smit had even boarded in the Vanden Bosch home during their seminary years. They were both quick tempered and suspicious of the RCA.

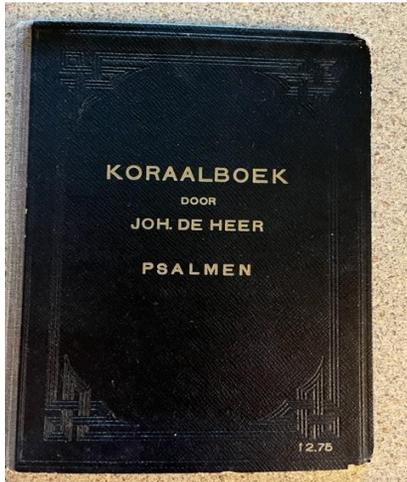
Vanden Bosch had no experience of the critical help from the eastern RCA churches in the first five years and gave minimal value to the fact that the RCA was paying his salary.

He was surrounded by negative voices that distrusted the RCA.

When Classis allows Scholte (a defrocked pastor who had split Vanden Bosch's church in the Netherlands) to preach in Zeeland, Vanden Bosch has had enough.

Along with Rev. Klijn from Grand Rapids and elders from other reformed churches, particularly Graafschap, **Vanden Bosch becomes one of the leaders of an American Secession:**

Grounds: The RCA is not the “true church of Jesus Christ” and full of “extreme wickedness.”



Accuses Van Raalte of being a freemason—not true

Disapproves of hymns and open communion

Accuses the RCA of neglecting catechism teaching and house visitation.

Disapproves of plans for Hope College

“Rev. Vanden Bosch was a man of staunch religious convictions and found it extremely difficult to accept convictions other than his own.”

That secession led to the formation of the Christian Reformed Church. Vanden Bosch had this to say about the RCA:



**“I cannot hold all of you who have joined the Reformed Church to be the true church of Jesus Christ...on account of the abominable and church-corrupting heresy and sins which are rampant among you.”**

# Consequences

Lost members who stayed with the RCA.

Lost his church building and his salary, provided by the RCA.

**Still he says, “I would rather be a woodchopper than be a minister with a guilty conscience in a ruined and unreformed Church.”**

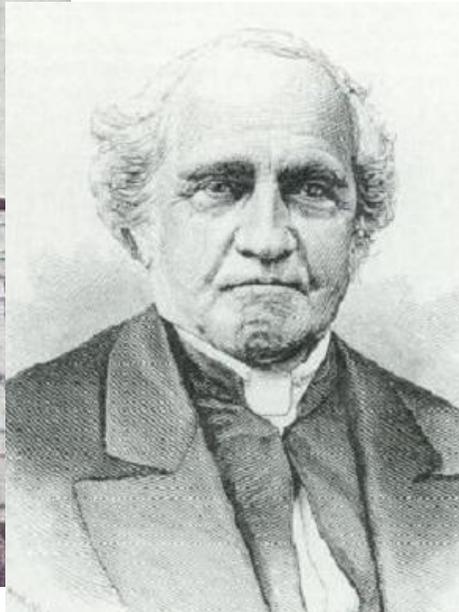
Had an on-going battle with the Zeeland-Groningen contingent in his congregation; at one point he kicked them out of the church. (This group included some of his extended family.)

In 1864 the fledgling CRC Classis stepped in and released the Zeeland-Groningen contingent from Vanden Bosch’s control.

They left to form the nucleus of First CRC of Zeeland (founded in 1864).

# Trouble in Zeeland?

Minimal trouble in Zeeland thanks to the leadership of **Rev. Cornelius Vander Meulen**



He had studied under Scholte in the southern Netherlands.

He had experienced first-hand the kindness of the eastern RCA and was deeply grateful.

He was known for his calm leadership, his deep faith, and his good sense.

“That Rev. Van Raalte and Rev. Vander Meulen always worked in close harmony in the colonial settlement must be largely ascribed to Rev. Vander Meulen’s congenial temperament.” (Dr. Albert Hyma)

Because of Vander Meulen’s kindness, Koene Vanden Bosch’s sister refused to follow her brother and leave the RCA. She wrote, “When we were first in this country, Rev. Vander Meulen frequently visited us. To us he was doctor, pastor, and father. I shall never forget how kind he was.”

## OUTCOME OF THE QUARREL IN ZEELAND: 1857-1864

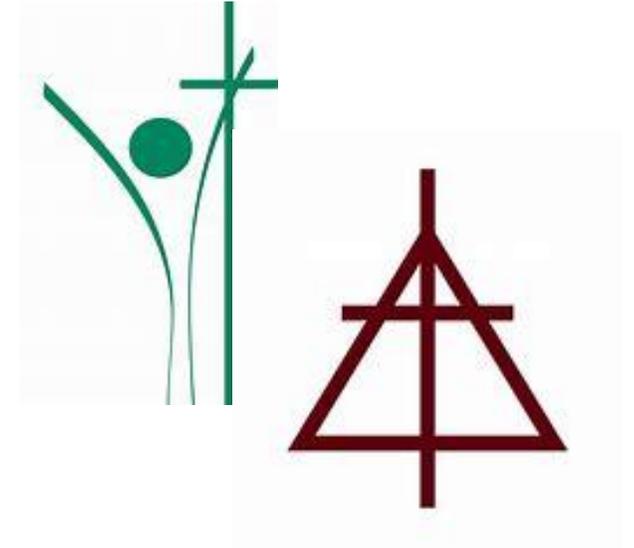
Vander Meulen lost relatively few church members to the new CRC—about 15 families out of a total of nearly 700 members. This is a tribute to his deep faith and skilled leadership in some very stormy years. In Michigan as in the Netherlands, he was well named “The Apostle of Zeeland.” (It should be noted that both he and almost all of his congregation came from the **southern** part of the Netherlands. He is buried in Zeeland Cemetery.)



Zeeland got its first Christian Reformed Church in 1864 when people from Vanden Bosch’s church who lived in Zeeland and Old Groningen were given permission to form their own congregation. Most of them came from **northern** provinces in the Netherlands.

(Vander Meulen is buried on a family farm that is now part of Zeeland Public Schools. His grave site is just off the footpath along the athletic fields behind Creek Side Middle School)

Whether a congregation stayed with the RCA in 1857 or left for the CRC aligns to a strong degree on the part of the Netherlands that they and their minister came from.



|            |               |       |                            |
|------------|---------------|-------|----------------------------|
| Holland    | Van Raalte    | South | RCA                        |
| Zeeland    | Vander Meulen | South | RCA                        |
| Overisel   | Bolks         | South | RCA                        |
| Drenthe    | Smit          | North | Old Scots Presbyterian/CRC |
| Vriesland  | Ypma          | North | CRC                        |
| Noordeloos | Vanden Bosch  | North | CRC                        |
| Graafschap |               | North | CRC                        |

The only real difference between those who left the RCA in 1857 and those who stayed: place of origin in the Netherlands. More ministers and members who left the RCA came from the northern part of the Netherlands

People who joined the CRC had a mindset of isolation: they came to make a little Holland colony where they could continue life as they knew it but with more freedom economically and religiously.



“In our isolation is our strength.”

In 1857, the people in the colony who stayed with the RCA tended to come from the central or southern part of the Netherlands. They were more willing to accommodate theologically, ecclesiastically, and culturally to their new environment. This was true of the southern group in the 1832 secession in the Netherlands, and it was true in America in 1857 as well.

source: Family Quarrels in the Dutch Reformed Churches of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century by Bob Swierenga and Elton Bruins

## LOOKING AHEAD

Immigration from the northern provinces in the Netherlands greatly increased in the years after the 1857 split in the American church, while immigration from the central/southern provinces slowed.

This affected church growth in the USA. The CRC, founded by Dutch ministers and congregations from the northern Dutch provinces, was more attractive to the new immigrants from the north.

From 1873 to 1899 RCA growth: 11%

From 1873 to 1899 CRC growth: 831%

# A THIRD QUARREL AND SECESSION

## THE MASONIC CONTROVERSY: 1882

Could a freemason be a church member? That was the question in 1882.

The question was extension of the 1857 split—worry over becoming Americanized.

The RCA answer: Preferably not, but the choice is local.  
The CRC answer: Absolutely not.

Entire churches—like Drenthe RCA—became CRC in reaction to the RCA's more accommodating position.

New CRC congregations were formed with those leaving RCA churches, including North Street in Zeeland.

(In 1881, **60 families** under the leadership of Elder H. Van Oorden seceded from Zeeland's First Reformed Church over the issue of Freemasonry and worshipped independently. In 1882 they joined the CRC.



The RCA position caused the Seceder church in the Netherlands to cut off the RCA and throw their support to the CRC, a group they had previously been unwilling to legitimize. This was a blow to the RCA and a benefit for the CRC.

# And the quarrels continue...

Human Sexuality: the common doctrinal standards of both churches (were) silent on the matter.

Both the RCA and the CRC have been in fervent prayer, wrestling with the Biblical text. The Holy Spirit has not been clear enough to drive both churches to one conclusion.

People on both sides are sure the Holy Spirit has spoken to them, but what do you do when the Holy Spirit seems to be giving contradictory messages?

The CRC has answered that question in a way more suited to the **Northern** faction in 1834: You do your best to maintain your doctrinal purity (in this case by adding a binding interpretation to the Heidelberg Catechism).



The RCA has taken a way more suited to the **Southern** faction in 1834: they are still engaged in prayer and discernment as they try to work out how they are to reach out to the culture around them while at the same time remaining true to their doctrinal standards and the Bible.

Many RCA churches seceded in 2021-2023, in part because of the slow pace of discernment in the RCA over Human Sexuality, an issue that they understand as clearly addressed in the Bible. Some of them have formed the Alliance of Reformed Churches, a group that would make Scholte proud with its locating of ecclesiastical power in the local congregation.



“An organization of churches exists to encourage, equip, and empower the local congregation, limits its own ministry reach, and steps in only when there is no local option.”

“Biblical Congregations Joined Together Under Christ Engaging in Mission”

(quotations from Alliance website)

The religious quarrels of 1832 and 1857 were painful, dividing families and churches and communities. Quarrels today are equally painful.

**Yet we should not forget that they are also a testament to people on both sides of the quarrels who care deeply about their faith, the church, and their witness in the world.**

**Presented on January 24, 2023**

**New Groningen Schoolhouse Schoolbell Series**

**By Linda Karsten Kolk**

**lbspoelman@gmail.com**

This presentation drew heavily from the book *Family Quarrels: The Dutch Reformed Churches in the 19th Century* by Elton Bruns and Robert P. Swierenga.

Other books consulted include:

*For Better For Worse: Stories of the Wives of Early Pastors of the Christian Reformed Church* by Janet Sjaarda Sheeres  
*Legends of the Dutch* by Adrian Van Koevering

**Postscript:** We do not know why Rev. Koene Vanden Bosch was so short tempered and stubborn. We do know he had a complicated early life, and that may have contributed to his suspicion of others and his unwillingness to compromise.

I had the privilege of attending the RCA classical exam of Rev. Erin Koster, pictured below, a great, great (and maybe more greats) grand niece of Koene. She is now an ordained minister of worship at North Holland Reformed Church. In temperament she is her ancestor's direct opposite. Her classical exam showed one of her many strengths to be peace making.



The North Holland Reformed Church recovered from the exodus of its congregation to Jacob Duim's conventicle when RCA pastor Englebert Oogle came to North Holland in 1866. Duim had believed the people of North Holland were spiritually immature and so refused to baptise children. When Oogle came, he found 75 unbaptised children in the small community. He revived the church which continues to grow and thrive today.