THE PRACTICE OF PIETY

The Theology of the Midwestern Reformed Church in America, 1866-1966

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Dedicated to
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Dedicated Servant of the Church
Esteemed Mentor and Friend
Faithful Disciple of Jesus Christ
The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America

The series was inaugurated in 1968 by the General Synod of the Reformed Church in America acting through the Commission on History to communicate the church’s heritage and collective memory and to reflect on our identity and mission, encouraging historical scholarship which informs both church and academy.

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Preface

From the earliest days of the church of Jesus Christ, the ark has been a symbol of its presence in the world. As in the days of Noah, God has gathered into the church all those who are being saved from the floods of destruction threatening a corrupt and wicked humanity. The World Council of Churches has adopted the symbol of the ark, portrayed as a single-hulled sailing ship, as a reminder of its mission in the present age.

Reformed and Lutheran denominations in America sail more as twin-hulled catamarans than as single-hulled arks. They have maintained their distinctive roles in American Christianity by resting on their confessional statements on the one side and their ethnicity on the other. The Reformed Church in America claims to be one of the oldest ethnic-confessional denominations in the New World. It has maintained a continuous existence in Manhattan since 1628. It became an ethnic denomination under the Classis of Amsterdam in the Netherlands following the English capture of Manhattan in 1664. Its Dutch ethnicity was officially recognized in May 1696, when William the Third of England granted a charter to the Netherlands Reformed
Congregation in New York under the English title, “Reformed Protestant Dutch Church.” The name of the denomination underwent several changes over time. Since 1867, its name has been “Reformed Church in America.” That designation is used throughout this book, including the time before 1867.

Throughout its history in America, the Reformed Church in America has accepted the three Reformed confessions adopted by the Dutch National Synod of Dort in 1618-1619: the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort. Its church order has been based on the one adopted at that synod, with modifications to suit American conditions. The Dutch language was used in worship in some congregations even after the Revolutionary War.

By 1847, when a new wave of Dutch immigrants was arriving in the United States, the Reformed Church in America was accepted as one American denomination among others that made up American Protestantism. It cooperated with Presbyterian, Congregational, German Reformed, and other Protestant denominations in the great adventure of building and evangelizing a Christian America. Almost all of its congregations were located in the eastern states of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania. A few new congregations were being organized in Michigan, Ohio, and Illinois, in what was then known as the “West.” Their membership was composed of Dutch descendants who migrated primarily from New York and New Jersey to take advantage of new land that was being made available by the federal government.

The new wave of Dutch immigration to the midwestern United States began in the 1840s as a result of widespread poverty in the Netherlands. Most of those who settled in colonies in the Midwest were part of a Pietist movement that had spread across Europe and Great Britain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Pietism of the Dutch who came to America was characterized by a consciousness of human sin and depravity, the call to live a holy life through participation in Sunday worship, a personal experience of salvation, and living to the glory of God in daily practice.

In 1847, Dutch Reformed congregations had come together to form the Classis of Holland, which had its center in Holland, Michigan. In 1850, under the leading of the Reverend Albertus C. Van Raalte, the classis united with the Reformed Church in America, and thereby it reinforced the old ethnic base of the denomination. The decision to unite with an American denomination was greeted with suspicion by

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some in the Midwest who feared that the old loyalty to the confessions and the church order had eroded in the American climate in the eastern United States. However, the majority of congregations approved of the action of the classis and became loyal participants in the life of the Reformed Church in America. They also came to know the tensions that arise in an ethnic-confessional denomination when its people face decisions about the extent to which they should cooperate with or isolate themselves from the surrounding culture.

The title and subtitle of this book point up its purposes. The title, *The Practice of Piety*, reflects the concern of Dutch pietists to live a holy life. Attention is given to the nature of the piety that the immigrant members of the midwestern Reformed Church in America practiced after arriving in America. It will be seen that the leaders in the Dutch enclaves were aware of the danger that their piety could slip over into an unhealthy “pietism” that is associated with narrow-minded bigotry, prudery, censoriousness, and ignorance. It will contend that James D. Bratt classified the mentality of the leaders of the midwestern Reformed Church correctly as “outgoing optimistic pietists.”

As practiced by the midwestern Reformed Church people, their piety must be distinguished from today’s popular concept of “spirituality.” “Spirituality” is often described as the “relationship of human beings with the divine and the shape which that relationship gives to human life.” One can be “spiritual” without having any clear concept of God or even whether God exists, but Reformed piety has its focus on God rather than on the development of one’s self. Modern discussions of spirituality tend to interpret spirituality in individualistic terms, while the practice of piety by the Dutch Reformed immigrants had a strong emphasis upon the church gathered for worship on Sunday and upon the corporate devotional life of the family centered on Bible reading and prayer. Their understanding of Christian piety was part of a long tradition that looked back to John Calvin, who wrote,

I call “piety” that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces. For until men recognize that

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2 James D. Bratt, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 47. Bratt applies the classification for that mentality specifically to the twentieth century, but the seeds of that attitude can be found in the immigrant leaders’ view of “Christian” America almost from the time of their arrival in America.

they owe everything to God, that they are nourished by his fatherly care, that he is the Author of their every good, that they should seek nothing beyond him—they will never yield him willing service. Nay, unless they establish their complete happiness in him, they will never give themselves truly and sincerely to him.  

I. John Hesselink has pointed out the important role played by “piety” in Calvin’s *Catechism*. Piety is

> “reverence joined with love”; it is sometimes equated with the true worship of God; it is “a sincere feeling which loves God as Father” and “fears and reverences him as Lord”; it is the origin of and gives birth to true religion and the right knowledge of God.  

In Calvin, piety entails the duties of carrying out God’s command. “Godliness is the beginning, middle and end of Christian living, and where it is complete, there is nothing lacking.”

The practice of piety among the Dutch Reformed was as concerned for theological integrity as for personal devotion to God. For that reason, this book will set forth a history of theological thought in the midwestern Reformed Church in America during the century from 1866 to 1966. That history provides insight into the ways in which the leaders of the midwestern Reformed Church sought to remain faithful to their theological and ethnic heritage while adjusting to the new demands of modernity and American culture. Special attention is paid to the writings of the leading pastors and theological professors who taught at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan. The goal is to enable members of the Reformed Church in America and people in other denominations to have access to the course of theological discussion that took place during the period when Dutch immigrants in the Reformed Church in America were coming to terms with their calling to live a life to the glory of God in the New World.

My writing of the history could not be separated from reflection on my own personal journey of faith. It has led me to a greater appreciation of what midwestern leaders accomplished in articulating in America the Dutch Reformed piety and theology that they had brought with them to America. They were pastors and teachers who

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6 *Commentary on Acts, 10:2*, quoted in Hesselink, *Calvin’s First Catechism*, 47.
knew that they were called to nurture the faith of those who had to adjust to the customs, enticements, and philosophical underpinnings of democracy in America. They did their work well and thereby enabled the Dutch Reformed immigrant communities in which they served to enjoy peace and prosperity while sustaining their faith as the people of God. Because what they wrote has been neglected to such a great extent—even their names have been forgotten—in this book I have tried to present the history more from their perspective than my own and have avoided the temptation to carry out a rigorous criticism of their efforts.

The intersection of my personal history with Reformed Church history results in the fact that in this book provincial ethnic history intersects with ecumenical history. It begins with concern about issues of personal faith, worship, and church order, and ends with the challenge to live in a pluralistic world with confidence and hope in God, who remains sovereign in that world.

This book is by no means a complete history of midwestern Reformed Church in America theology. Very little space is given to what was happening theologically in the eastern region of the denomination. The theological history of the East Fresian German language Reformed Church congregations in the Midwest is not covered at all. The theological dialogue with the Christian Reformed Church is but briefly discussed. It is my hope that this book will inspire others to deal in greater depth with what is covered here and that those areas not given space will be filled in by further research and publications.

I want to thank Donald J. Bruggink and Elton J. Bruins not only for encouraging me to write this book but also for the expert assistance and deep knowledge of the Reformed Church that they have constantly made available to me. Earl Wm. and Cornelia B. Kennedy have helped me understand Dutch vocabulary and idioms and checked Dutch spelling. They have provided as yet unpublished information about the individuals who led the churches and served in the Classis of Holland during the two decades from 1847-1866. I am indebted to those who work in the A.C. Van Raalte Institute for the way they welcomed me to join in their morning coffee times and for sharing with me their great knowledge of the life and theology of the Dutch in America since 1847. I am grateful for the help of others, including I. John Hesselink, Eugene Vander Well, Dennis Voskuil, Christopher Kaiser, and the members of the Reformed Church’s Commission on History, who have read and made valuable suggestions for all or parts of early drafts. Lynn Japinga’s comments have been especially detailed and helpful. The staff of the
Beardslee Library at Western Theological Seminary has always been ready to help locate materials and books. Jeffrey Reynolds and Lori Trethewey have faithfully provided materials from the collections in the Joint Archives of Holland and assisted in making copies whenever requested. Karen Schakel has provided assistance in working through the intricacies of putting footnotes and bibliographical references in proper form. Laurie Baron deserves special thanks for doing the final editing of the book.

Finally, the talented and long-suffering Russell Gasero deserves especial thanks for formatting the book, including typesetting, layout, and page formatting, and for taking extra care to make the numerous long photo captions both attractive and readable.

No one has worked harder in the process than my wife, Mary. She has read every page aloud to herself in order to discover the typing and other errors in the manuscript. She has insisted on eliminating the professorial passive voice and theological jargon.

I have been admonished not to write convoluted sentences that contain up to one hundred words. Although she would not claim to be a theologian, I have learned to listen to her when she raises theological issues. I am grateful to her not only for her help in writing this book, but especially for the fifty-seven years of her life that she has shared with me.

Eugene P. Heideman