

The Early Christian Reformed Church in Her Own Words--Volume 2

A Man of the People  
The Life of  
Professor Geert Egberts Boer



by

Geert E. Boer with G. K. Hemkes

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Dr. Jan H. Boer, General Editor

**A Man of the People**

**The Life of  
Professor Geert Egberts Boer**

**Compiled from His Notes**

**By**

**Professor G. K. Hemkes**

**Translated by**

**Dr. Jan Harm Boer  
Frances A. Boer-Prins**

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*A Man of the People: The Life of Professor Geert Egberts Boer*

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**Rev. G. E. Boer\*\***

**Pastor of the**

**Spring Street Christian Reformed Church**

None of us were present the day Rev. Geert Egberts Boer began his ministry as the founding faculty member of Calvin Seminary. Boer was appointed to this position in February, 1876, and was installed on March 15, 1876.

While we were not present on that day, we do know that Rev. Boer turned to the five students present at the conclusion of his installation address and said:

“I now stand in a special, specific relation to you. This tie will be drawn ever tighter in a communion of true faith; henceforth I hope to work at your training and development; to point out your needs according to the requirements of the times, to warn you of dangerous shoals upon which you could easily be shipwrecked, to teach you and to pray with and for you – this is the task that awaits us.”

–Professor Geert Egberts Boer, March 15, 1876.

At the end of his installation as the first ever Professor for the new theological school that we now know as Calvin Theological Seminary, Rev. Geert Egberts Boer spoke the words printed above to make a commitment to the five students that were at this special service. These words were read by me at the 2016 Calvin Seminary Convocation.

Jul Medenblik, President of Calvin Theological Seminary

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<http://www.calvinseminary.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017-Spring-Testament-final-.pdf>

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015071167574;view=1up;seq=1>

**DEDICATION**

**This (auto)biography is dedicated to the  
“Author” and Subject of This Book Himself:**

**Geert Egberts Boer**

**First President of Calvin College & Seminary**

**First Professor at the Above**

**Cousin to Harm Jan Boer,**

**Who Was the Great Great Uncle to**

**Jan Harm Boer, the Translator.**







*Notes from Translator:*

Though the Boer clan historically belonged to the peasantry in the Netherlands, they did spawn at least one prominent leader, who became one of the first pastors in the Christian Reformed Church in the USA and, in 1876, the first professor of what became Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary in Grand Rapids, MI, which is scheduled to be re-classified as Calvin University in 2019. He was President of Calvin College from 1876-1902.

The name of this august ancestor was Geert Egberts Boer, born on March 1, 1832, in Roderwolde, Drenthe, the Netherlands. He was a cousin to Harm Jan Boer, my great grandfather. Close enough to be proud of him for his role in the Alma Mater of both my wife Fran and myself as well as of all three of our children and their spouses along with Fran's sisters Jane and Trena and husband Francis along with many of Fran's nephews and nieces. We are a Calvin clan—educational incest, if you like. I entered Calvin College 54 years after Geert Egberts died and graduated from the Seminary seven years later (1965). All of this is not to say that I have been a dedicated Calvin fan, though my respect for the place increases as I get older and Calvin leaves its pietistic heritage behind.

(Jan Harm Boer and Frances Ann Boer-Prins, *Every Square Inch*, vol. 1, p. 20. See [www.SocialTheology.com/boeriana.htm](http://www.SocialTheology.com/boeriana.htm). My brother Harry calls him our great great uncle in his footnote 440.)

The book treats of some interesting historical details for those interested in West Michigan and Grand Rapids. There was the great flood that probably was the reason for engineering the cataracts of the Grand River out of existence as well as a fierce cyclone around the same time. That's how we got a Grand Rapids without rapids, let alone *grand* rapids! Then there was the underground gypsum mine in the south of the city with its kilometers of underground tunnels that were turned into mushroom farms after the gypsum was depleted.

And if you're a graduate of either Calvin College or Calvin Theological Seminary or both, as I am, then it is interesting to follow the early historical development of their locations and facilities—five of them, beginning in downtown, then moving Franklin @ Madison SE, at the time a beautiful middle class community, but now more like a ghetto. Eventually, along with most of the CRC community, it moved to the tranquility of the East Beltline and does indeed seem like the proverbial “haven of rest.”

Or, if you are/were a member of what is now First Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in Grand Rapids, it is interesting to see how it developed from the time it was the only CRC congregation in town and Boer's ministry in that church extended 35 miles around. It

started in the centre of the city's downtown and then moved into that same beautiful section of the South-East, where it is still located, but where it is now part of a ghetto community. And all of this compacted in a mere 128 pages.

One chosen peculiarity of this book is that, though it is a translation from the original Dutch, in addition to their English translations, I have left the ancient versions of the many quoted versified Dutch Psalms alongside their English parallels. I even provide links to many of them, in so far as they are available, so readers can listen to these old melodies from which your spiritual ancestors, including Professor Boer, drew such emotional strength and inspiration—as do I even in this 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*One stylistic matter.* The language level of the original Dutch version is very simple, probably because the notes on which it is based were not meant for publication. Also, probably, because of Boer's simple background; he was not brought up in a sophisticated environment, though he did graduate from a full seminary in Kampen. I have chosen to retain the simple style in this translation. The language used is more Tutonic in vocabulary than it is rooted in the more complicated Romance side of English.

*Format of the book.* The book is full of surprises. It was compiled by G. K. Hemkes from the private notes of Geert Boer. Most of the book is written in first person Boer, but quite frequently Hemkes intrudes with his own comments, not infrequently without indicating a transition. In most cases I have drawn your attention to it. In some cases, as translator I was left guessing, but did my best to cover up the difficulty or simply omitted the offending phrase or sentence. Paragraphs range from a few lines—not so unusual—to one five pages long. I took the liberty of combining some and dividing others into shorter paragraphs. Another peculiarity is that the chapter headings in the text do not align with the Table of Contents. So, we are indeed treating you to a unique book!

*One household matter.* Each chapter heading includes an asterisk (\*) to make it easier to move from chapter to chapter. Each photograph is accompanied by two asterisks (\*\*), though, for technical reasons, sometimes a few spaces or a line removed.

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

**G. K. Hemkes\***

In this little work the reader is presented with the biography of Professor Geert Egberts Boer, who by way of the gracious disposition of the Lord, has contributed much to the blossoming of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC).<sup>2</sup> The Great Sender used him for this purpose as a means in His hand, both through the abundance of his preaching and through his teaching of future preachers of the Gospel.

He would have loved more time on earth in his family and in the midst of God's militant church, while we and many others were desirous for more of his time among us, but the Lord of life and death took him when and how it pleased Him.

How deeply our emotions were shocked in the evening of March 26, 1904, when Brother J. B. Hulst came to our house with the question, "Have you heard how Professor Boer is doing?" We responded, "No, except that he seems to be considerably better than a few days ago." "He passed away," Hulst said. "What? Professor Boer passed away?!" "Yes, this afternoon, very unexpectedly."

Mrs. Boer and her children, who were not present, were deeply moved in their hearts at this unexpected happening, along with all their friends.

The following obituary is found in *De Wachter*:<sup>3</sup>

The Reverend left home on the afternoon of Saturday, March 26, in good health, to go to nearby Holland to preach on Sunday, March 27, and to administer Communion in the Central Avenue CRC there. However, due to flooding, the trains could not leave Grand Rapids, so that he was forced to return home. When he arrived there, he found the place locked up. After he had left, his family had gone to town and had not yet returned.

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<sup>1</sup> All footnotes in this translation are the translator's unless indicated otherwise. The Dutch original of this book can be accessed at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015071167574;view=1up;seq=9>. It is still for sale online.

<sup>2</sup>Though it has had different names, the popular name for the denomination today is "Christian Reformed Church" (CRC); the full *official* name is "Christian Reformed Church in North America" (CRCNA), reflecting its binational character. In this book I will mostly use the "CRC" acronym.

<sup>3</sup>*De Wachter* was the Dutch-language denominational magazine. Possible translation: "*The Watchman*" or "*The Guardian*."

Professor Boer then went to his neighbours to await their return. And that's when it happened. While he was waiting there, his Lord came to relieve him of his post, to take him to Himself and to give him the reward that awaits every faithful servant of the Lord. According to the medical doctors, the cause of his sudden departure was an intense pressure on the brain. Most likely he hardly noticed that he was transported with an Elijah-type coach to his eternal home, to be filled there with God's image.

There are many similarities between the passing of Professor Boer and that of Professor H. Beuker. On May 17, 1900, Beuker walked from his house to the Theological School, because he was planning to start working again now that his health had revived. On the afternoon of May 18, he was going to take an hour's nap, while his wife did the housework. Mrs. Vos, his sister, sat by his bed, chatting with him. She asked him a question. He turned his face to the wall and failed to answer. She said, "But my brother, why do you not answer?"—and he was gone!

Amazing! There is no place for words in such cases. One can only feel how deeply the family was wounded in their souls. Both brothers were men of the people. They were popular preachers in their congregations and both taught young men to serve as pastors and preachers. How friendly, generous and warm-hearted both were in their social life! How happy many of us would have been with an autobiography of the Professor. With the lack of such a document, may the bundle of sermons he left behind be appreciated the more.

Years ago, Professor Boer had already worked on a short autobiography and that is where we find notes that extend right up to January 17, 1904. Those notes are the source from which the compiler of this book has drawn. At first we intended to write in the third person, as did Caesar and Frederick the Great, who wrote their own histories, but we changed our mind to let him speak for himself to avoid giving the wrong impressions.

Now we know from his life and his notes that our Brother Boer was not a reticent person who might withdraw into a corner with a book. He participated and showed much interest in everything that came his way in the broad terrain of his church and school work. He was a good conversationalist and pleasant, not only within his family, but with all who came in contact with him. That is the reason his passing is such a heavy blow to his family.

It is the desire of a brother who loved the late Professor that this biography may not only serve to keep the memory of this righteous child of God alive as a blessing, but also that through the grace of God it may generate a powerful wake up call for us to work while it is day, before the night comes during which no one can work.

G. K. Hemkes  
April 18, 1904  
Grand Rapids, MI



## CHAPTER 1\*

### His Parents, Childhood and Youth

Our brother, Geert Egberts Boer, was born on March 1, 1832, at Roderwolde in the province of Drente, the Netherlands. His father's name was Egbert Geerts Boer and his mother Roelfien Boer, nee Bronsema. Pastor Christoffel Schooneveld of the Reformed congregation of Rodewolde baptized him in 1832, the village where his father was a farmer. He could clearly remember his maternal grandfather, Piers Wolters Bronsema, since Geert was already fourteen years of age when the former died. He also remembered that he would sleep with his grandfather, who would offer his evening prayer in bed very noisily. Thus the seed of the Kingdom of Heaven was sowed in his heart at a youthful age. His father was born in 1793 and died in 1860. Our brother did not feel qualified to determine his eternal condition. His mother was a converted woman who now rejoices before the throne of grace.

In his notes he wrote, “<sup>4</sup>As to my personal condition with respect to eternity, I can say that from my childhood on I have always had an open conscience, so that I avoided many sins through the common grace of God. My mother would frequently speak to me about death and eternity and about saving faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. I am retroactively very grateful for that, for through this I kept a sensitive conscience and was stimulated to serious reflection. The impressions I gained have remained with me ever since. It is the sacred calling of parents to speak early in their children's lives about spiritual and eternal issues. This practice can serve as a blessed means in God's hand to bring about conversion. They need to point out to their children the deep decay of sin within us as well as the richness of the grace of God in Christ revealed to poor sinners. Such instruction ought to necessarily be accompanied by prayer. Church history tells us that the mother of the pious church father Augustine would not release her son in prayer, not even when he turned to the slime of sin and despised her loving advice. When she wept bitterly and had reached the end of her wits, Bishop Ambrose of Milan, author of *Looking unto Jesus*,<sup>5</sup> comforted her with these words, “A child of so much prayer cannot get lost.” Augustine was eventually converted and became a very useful instrument for the coming of God's Kingdom. We have known mothers who never laid one of their children in the crib without their lips moving in prayer. These parental prayers and instructions in love spoken for and to the children are fruitful seed. In my pastoral work in the congregation, I have noticed that God often knocks on the conscience of young people whom He would later convert.

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<sup>4</sup>This is the beginning of Boer's own story that basically constitutes the rest of this book prior to his death, with occasional interruptions by Hemkes to which I will draw your attention *in loco*.

<sup>5</sup>Though the authorship of this book is popularly ascribed to Bishop Ambrose, according to A. R. Deelen, the actual author was an English clergyman with the same name 1300 years later.

<https://www.digibron.nl/search/detail/52927f9483893fa76595ecd707ba04d1/isa-c-ambrosius-het-zien-op-jezus>. Accessed April 20, 2018.)

“Sow your seed in the morning,  
And at evening let not your hands be idle.  
Thus God’s high and holy counsel...”<sup>6</sup>

In his childhood and youth he was, as that is sometimes called, a virtuous boy who could not go along with others who were more prone to follow the ways of sin and the world. “I still remember,” so he wrote, “a special life experience that revealed my inner spiritual life at that time quite clearly. It was in the winter of 1846, when I attended catechism class with the Reformed preacher E. Van Bolhuis in Tolbert. It was announced in a serious tone to the youthful catechumens that a young girl by the name of Hendrikje, died. I did not know the girl, for it was only a short time since my parents moved from Roden to Tolbert to start farming there. That death announcement made me very restless about my own situation with respect to eternity. I thought, it can easily be my turn before long and how will that go? On my way home from catechism, I stopped halfway to reflect on the law of God and my adherence to it. Commandment after commandment drew my attention. I decided to live another and better life. Death seemed imminent and I felt so unprepared to appear before the holy and righteous God that it would be a most terrible experience. Unfortunately, my subsequent life revealed little change in both my spiritual life as well as behavior. I remained the same restless, virtuous and sinner counting on my good works.”

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<sup>6</sup>Ecclesiastes 11:6. This is my translation of the text as it appears on this page: “*Zaai in den morgenstond uw zaad, en trek uw hand niet af. Zoo is God’s hooge en heilige raad.*” Newer Dutch translations vary.

## CHAPTER 2\*

### Grenadier in Royal Service

In 1851, I had to participate in the lottery for the national militia. I drew a low number and thus was drafted into the army. During the first year, I did not have to bear arms, but the following year I was recruited into the Regiment of Grenadiers that was stationed in The Hague.

When I arrived in The Hague in May and exchanged my civilian clothes for a soldier's uniform, I did not particularly feel at ease. To be in the company of other soldiers that would curse and swear and rage, that would eat and drink without prayer or thanksgiving, was not only strange to me but also offended me tremendously. Nevertheless, I did not experience the resistance and scoffing that some others suffered.

It has happened, according to the reports of some, that a godly young man just new to the service, would kneel at his bed in the evening to give thanks and to pray. Such was his established habit at his parental home, but it was a strange phenomenon for most in the barracks. Some soldiers saw this during the first evening and immediately began to curse and yell, while it rained uniform caps on the poor fellow's head. They pulled him by his hair, pushed and pulled him hither and yon and cursed into his ears—but he persevered and let it all happen. The second evening the same scenario occurred with the same scoffing, but it seemed as if it did not concern him a bit. The third day, the same. The fourth evening he continued his habit. One soldier noticed and tried to humiliate him again, but others said,

Leave him alone. He is so fine and pious that your scoffing does not bother him at all. He is serious about it all. If we go to war and he comes along, he would be a brave hero. You can bet on that. But remember our Pete who also wanted to be that pious at first? He tried, but after one such an attack, it was enough for him. He could not take it and lacked the guts.

Although I did not in any way play along with them and even admonished some, they let me be. In July I became sick and was taken to the hospital. This was not an improvement for me. I became seriously ill and felt deprived of all the relative freedom that I enjoyed in the barrack. First, to be bedridden and then, after my health somewhat improved, to be confined to the walls of the hospital or the garden was something else. It was then that I realized more than ever before what a precious privilege it is to be free to move about and not to be forced to stay in an enclosed place as, for example, criminals who are confined to prison for years on end.

But the Lord soon brought relief so that I stayed in the hospital for a mere thirteen days. When I returned to the barracks, I was still so weak that I could not walk upright on the street. However,

my strength revived soon, so that I could complete the drills with my comrades. This led to great happiness and thanksgiving on my part, for I was eager to return to my parental home.

In those days, after a person had been in the army for four months, he might again by lottery be allowed to go home or be assigned to continue for another fifteen months. I again drew a low number and thus had to stay, but I bought out someone who filled that period for me. Oh, it was such a happy day for me when I was allowed to leave. The day I met my parents and only sister, Wemeltje, in good health, was no less a happy one.

Now I could work on the farm again till the fall of 1854, when I was once again recruited into the army. A war had just started between Russia on the one side and Turkey, England and France on the other. This war was waged in the Crimea, which gave it the name of the Crimean War. There was at the time serious talk going around as to whether we, the recruits, would have to go abroad. This, however, did not happen. I was placed in the barracks near Leiden for only one month, after which I returned to my parental home.

In 1855, I was called up again and left for The Hague, but could return home after only a month. In 1856, I received my release from military service by passport.

My life experiences increased along this way so that I could say with Jurriaan:

When someone goes on long journeys  
Then he can tell us stories....<sup>7</sup>

The Lord has graciously blessed me as a soldier. I was popular with my superiors and enjoyed many privileges. He has mercifully protected me during threatening dangers. In all of His leadings, the Lord has a purpose and, as long as we follow His ways, yes, then He takes care of us. His Name be praised for all the blessings He has poured over me. May my heart and life remain dedicated to Him.

In the spring of 1857, my parents stopped working the farm and rented the farm out for the annual sum of 386 florins. They lived a quiet life from there on.

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<sup>7</sup>Reference is to a popular nineteenth-century song by author C. F. Zelter called "*De reis van Jurriaan*" or "The Travels of Jurriaan."

## CHAPTER 3\*

### Conversion and Transition to the Church of the Secession

*From the hands of Hemkes:*

In the notes of our Brother Boer we read that in 1843 he heard a preacher, Jan Huisman, in someone's home in Roden. He listened with full attention and amazement. He had never heard anyone who could explain the ways of the Lord so simply and clearly. That discussion stayed moored in his memory. Until then neither he nor his family knew anything about the so-called "Cocksian Church." Especially in the northern provinces of the Netherlands, the Seceders, were at the time called "Cocksians, after the first secessionist preacher and founder of the new church, Rev. H. de Cock of Ulrum, Groningen.<sup>8</sup>

At the time the Seceders were nicknamed "Cocksians" after the founder and their first ordained pastor Reverend Hendrik de Cock of Ulrum, especially in the northern provinces. When the Church of the Secession in Leek, a village in Groningen, had obtained Rev. H. Knol of Marrum, in the province of Friesland, as their pastor in 1847, Geert thought it was time to hear this Cocksian preacher. So, one Sunday he attended church there, but returned home very dissatisfied, not so much about the content of the sermon, but more about its format. He did not return there for the foreseeable future, but then had second thoughts, "I should go and listen once more." At that time his mind appeared to be more open to the Word of God, so that now the sermon made a very deep impression on him. It was like the voice of a totally different preacher. He heard in that voice that of the Great Shepherd.

From that time on Geert and his sister attended Secessionist services regularly till it reached the point they finally left the long-established Reformed Church. Again, not so much because this church had wandered away from the foundation of Truth and thus had lost the basic characteristics of the true Church, but, rather because Pastor Knol presented the two ways of life so clearly and convincingly, especially the way of righteousness via which he would flourish, while he equally warned the godless of the woe betiding them and of the evil awaiting them. In the Reformed Church this was not presented in such a clear-cut way.

Geert wrote in his diary that he attended church three times every Sunday. But in addition there was also at the time a voice academy in the village of Zevenhuizen under the leadership of the headmaster of the local public school. He thought to himself that it would also be necessary to take singing lessons. Hence, he enrolled at this school, but then his conscience would accuse him that he had skipped the third sermon. He sought fig leaves to assuage his conscience and found

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<sup>8</sup>For information about the Church of the Secession, the so-called "Cocksians" and Hendrik de Cock himself see their story in Janet Sjaarda Sheeres, *Son of the Secession: Douwe J. Vander Werp*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006. Sjaarda-Sheeres calls the church "Seceder Church" (p. 49).

them. He once read in Brakel's book, *Redelijke Godsdienst*,<sup>9</sup> that it was legitimate on the Sabbath to look upon the fruit in the fields along the way as indications of the caring goodness and greatness of God and thus to glorify His Name.

Here Geert continues. One Sabbath, on my way to the voice academy, I noticed delicious fruits at various places. I walked in between the grain fields and attributed those fruits to the praise and glory of His Name. But later I came to recognize that I misled myself and that such an attitude was nothing but a kind of antidote to my God. It came down to this: Lord, I did indeed skip that third sermon and went to that liberal voice academy, but I did attribute those fruits to Your honour. So, now You've got both! What a working-for-salvation fool I still was. And when subsequently I would hear those Seceder preachers again, they would constantly emphasize how deeply we are fallen in Adam and how unclean, wretched and miserable our hearts are. We would only be saved by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. I believed that last bit, but I could not understand that humans are that wretched and miserable. Nevertheless, I began to search myself more as to whether I was also *that* miserable, but did not find myself that bad, for, so I thought, I attend church three times on Sundays and twice during the week for catechism. I am generous, do not swear, am no adulterer and don't get drunk, something from which God had spared me. Wherein, then, I asked, is my wretchedness and misery? Still, such preaching caused restlessness and worry within me, even though I had respect for the preacher, for, I thought, he is a pious man and knows it all much better than I do.

It pleased the Lord through the working of His Spirit to gradually make me aware of the break in my heart. With all the fullness of His eternal love, He would show me all the dead ends I was following, thus opening my eyes wider to the richness of grace in Christ. I gained clear insight into the way of deliverance and finally realized that it all depends mostly on the choice one makes in his heart: Jesus or the world. To serve two masters is not possible. We are so little and puny on our own that whatever we are before the Lord must necessarily be total: Jesus alone and Jesus wholly. I could feel the necessity of all this and my prayer was with the ancient poet of Psalm 106:5—"That I may see the good of Your chosen, that I may rejoice in the gladness of Your nation, that I may glory with Your inheritance" (King James Version).

Thus I had become hungry and thirsty after the righteousness that is in Christ and was so eager to serve the Lord, who for His own sake was so worthy. I desired to do profession of my faith and become member of the church. When I came to the Elders in their meeting and told them of my intention, I requested them to deal truthfully with me and not to accept me as a confessing member if they had any suspicion that my work was not truthful. I did not trust myself. They

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<sup>9</sup>For up-to-date information on this book access <https://www.heritagebooks.org/products/the-christians-reasonable-service-4-vols-brakel.html>.

accepted me and I was admitted to the Table of the Lord. Thus it was that the Lord led me spiritually along paths I had not known until it reached its climax of comfort:

Gij hebt, o Heer! In 't doodlijkst tijdgewricht,  
Mijn ziel gered, mijn tranen willen drogen,  
Mkijn voet geschraagd; dies zalik, voor God's oogen  
Steeds wandelen in 't vroolijk levenslicht.

Thou, O Jehovah, in Thy sovereign grace,  
Hast saved my soul from death and woe appalling,  
Dried all my tears, secured my feet from falling.  
Lo, I shall live and walk before Thy face.<sup>10</sup>

Now I began to expect that I would progress from virtue to virtue and from strength to strength, for the Lord had secured my mountain through His graciousness. But I also experienced that I would be terrified whenever He would hide His face from me. At times there was strong love, faith and courage, but I have to confess that I deceived no one more than myself. Through the uncovering of God's mercy, for which we have great need at all times, my need and misery, the necessity of rescue and deliverance through Christ became increasingly clear to me as time went on. I became more familiar with the practice of piety and have never felt remorse at having confessed my faithful Saviour. I seriously counsel all who have interest in Jesus as the only Deliverer: Confess your faith and proclaim along with the congregation the death of the Lord.

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<sup>10</sup>Boer frequently quotes from the traditional Dutch versification of the Psalms. I will search for an English equivalent in the CRC's superseded hymnbook, *Psalter Hymnal* (Grand Rapids: Publication Committee of the Christian Reformed Church, 1959). Sometimes I will also refer you to the later edition of 2013 that is renamed *Lift up Your Hearts: Psalms, Hymns, and Spiritual Songs* (Grand Rapids: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 2013). This particular quote is from William Kuipers' versification of Psalm 116:8-9, "I Love the Lord, the Fount of Life," the music for which can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1IS4RjYxOCw>. *Psalter Hymnal* no. 228:5, p. 273 (1959). Please note that this footnote is the "mother footnote" of many later ones below and will be referred to almost every time Boer quotes a Psalm.

## CHAPTER 4\*

### Labouring in the Region of Nienoord

At this time I began to work as a day-labourer at the hand of Esquire U. W. F. van Panhuis, at that time living in fortress Nienoord, a large castle with extensive landholdings near Leek, for whom I had worked occasionally before. In the winter of 1856, I worked for this lord as a secretary in his office. He liked my handwriting and one day said to me, "It could well be that you will become my right-hand man permanently."

This flattered me immensely. During the autumn such a servant would accompany this highly-placed employer on hunting expeditions, accompany him on horseback trips and look after his finances. Such a servant was highly respected in the fortress. I already imagined myself dressed in prestigious livery as a kind of assistant commander on this extensive country estate. But my conscience was really set on keeping Christian feast days holy. If I were to become Panhuis' right hand man, I might have to work on those days as well. When I let him know in no uncertain terms that I preferred to have those days off and refused to work on a Christmas day, his highness removed me from my desk and sent me out to work with the others in the barn or out on the field. That's how that imaginary daydream collapsed on me. Had I become his fulltime secretary, I would attract a high salary.

The collapse of my daydream was a wise move by the Lord, for I would have faced the great danger of misjudging my God and King, to a certain extent deny my Saviour and to wound my conscience by desecrating not only the feast days but especially the Sabbath. I really did want that job, but was not allowed to buy it at such a high price. "Those who honour me, I will honour, but those who despise me will be despised" (I Samuel 2:30). Our Master's declaration is very powerful: "But whoever disowns Me before men, I will disown him before My Father in Heaven" (Matthew 10:33).



## CHAPTER 5\*

### Desire to Study—A Wavering Posture

I was interested in studying and so was my bosom friend, Pastor H. Van Hoogen, who lived in with his grandfather, the respected lay preacher and elder Karst Vossema, and worked in his bakery as well as in his windmill. So, one night at one o'clock, we went to Groningen City, about three hours north-east of Leek. From there we continued in the morning with a tow barge on to Uithuister Meeden, where one Mr. Wijle was the director of the Christian National School. We told him of our desire to take an education course with a view to becoming school teachers and asked whether he would give us some information about this. He looked us over and asked of our age. Van Hoogen was 21 and I, 25. He shook his head and said, "You are too old for such a course." Just in that year 1857, a new strict education law had been passed under Minister Thorbecke. We were much disappointed.

Later, I consulted with one Nieuwhuis, who was a teacher at the Christian School at Wildervank. He thought I might be able to reach my goal, but, to be sure, he referred me to Professor Vaeton in Groningen to get more information. This gentleman said that at 25 I was too old and that my plan would not succeed. Discouraged, I went home and continued working on the farm, until Pastor Knol informed me in June that the Finance Committee would soon hold a meeting in Groningen in order to choose two candidates who wanted to be trained as preachers. This was an answer to my prayer. I had indeed for years entertained a desire to become a pastor, but I was in doubt as to whether the Lord was calling me or whether I might be entertaining some other unconscious agenda. I had no difficulty thinking about becoming a school teacher if that were possible, but for pastor, I thought, you need a special calling. At the time I did not so clearly understand the matter of internal calling as I did later. I prayed to God that in case He was not calling me to the pastorate, that he would so direct things that the Commission would disqualify me. Or, in case He *was* calling me, they would accept me. That would be a sign to me.

So, I traveled to Groningen and found there were six applicants. Two brothers were accepted, namely J. Kremer, later a pastor in Grand Rapids, and J. Nederhoed, later preacher in Middelstum, the Netherlands. Three others and myself were disqualified. I went home quite content, for I had followed the middle of the road and had come to the conclusion that the Lord had not called me to the pastorate. I subjected myself in quiet worship: Your will be done.

A circumstance arose that would later open my way to study after all. At the time a certain Jurrien Graslander died. His widow, Antje, sent me a letter soon afterwards enquiring whether I would be interested in working for her. I went to see her and hired myself out from July 1860-May 1861. I soon moved and immediately felt at home. She had a housemaid by the name of Trijntje who had recently converted. During the summer of 1860, we had a pleasant homey atmosphere. We observed our religious traditions at both home and church. After finishing our daily work, we would spend much time in the evening talking about God, service to Him and the

experience of believers. I lived a very pleasant life here. After all, so I thought, I will never become a preacher, for the Lord, by way of His divine providence, had made it clear that He had not so appointed me. All who loved the Lord, were welcomed in this house by that widow.

At that time, around August 1860 and later, it pleased the Lord to work His Spirit powerfully in Grootegast and surroundings, especially among younger people. The first young man to become restless in the municipality of Grootegast and worried over his status with respect to eternity, was a certain Marten Dijkstra, a farmer's son around 25 years of age. I remember how he would visit the house of widow Graslander and how he would immediately complain about his corrupt heart, his misery and dangerous circumstance with respect to eternity. I would begin listening with close attention and then join the discussion. In this way we soon got to know each other. About four weeks later, we heard that a certain Dirk Van der Schors, a hired blacksmith in Doezum, near Grootegast, had become restless about his eternal condition. The Spirit of God was working in an ever-widening circle. Many were concerned about their sins. The use of the means of grace such as church and catechism attendance was observed with greater seriousness and faithfulness.

Soon home fellowship groups were organized, especially for the youth. People would gather Sunday evenings, usually after the third sermon, at the home of Reverend E. Van de Berekamp. During the week, on Wednesday evenings, we would have fellowship at the home of one of the church members in Grootegast, Doezum, 't Zand or Oldekerk. These fellowship groups were very popular and well attended. The conversations were about little else than our own misery, hope of delivery and in general about God and serving Him.

During the summers of 1860 and 1861, very many youths were converted to God, also another farmer's son who previously led an offensive life. His brother was a deacon and an unusually irreproachable member of the congregation. But the aforementioned brother, the younger of the two, had the habit of going to the tavern on Sunday evenings to drink and play cards. The elder brother, the deacon, heard that other youths were planning to beat up his wayward brother for whatever reason. That Sunday evening the deacon went to his brother to warn him, but he absolutely refused to listen. He finally said, "I will come home from the tavern on one condition: You have to come with me and drink one single glass. I will treat you and demonstrate to these guys that I am not afraid." Since he insisted on this condition, the deacon allowed himself to be persuaded and went along. They drank a glass. "Now come along," said the deacon. "I won't," said the unfaithful brother. "You must first drink another glass." And it went from two to three, or, possibly to four glasses, and—it turned into a fight! The two fought each other. Terrible!

The following Sunday the congregation was scheduled to celebrate the Lord's Supper. However, the rumour of this fight spread through the congregation like wild fire. Pastor Berekamp and his congregation were deeply saddened. The preacher went to the deacon to discuss this with him and to deny him the Lord's Supper. The deacon was very sad and wanted so badly to celebrate the Supper with the congregation. "I will be happy to make a public confession in the congregation," he pleaded. In view of the high respect he enjoyed in the church council and in

the congregation, the preacher advised him to do that, as long as he felt actual and deep contrition, confessed his sin to the Lord and really desired to celebrate the Supper with the congregation and then would inform the church council of his intention. This he did and the brothers approved his request.

The younger brother heard of it and said, "Even though I seldom darken the door of the church, this time I will. Man alive, my brother will preach." He went and the church was full. The pastor asked the deacon some questions after which the latter humbly confessed his sin and promised never to do this kind of thing again. By now his brother could no longer endure the situation. He went outside and raised his hands to Heaven in fear and exclaimed, "Oh God, my brother has done confession of his sin so seriously, but I am the cause!" A few days later he lay on his knees, caught in the "cords of death," terrified by the fears of hell. But God's Spirit worked mightily and in a moment of mysterious provision a new life arose in his heart, a new life of faith, love and sense of freedom. A short time later, he did confession and became an adorning member of the church. Both brothers were elated with the final outcome. The congregation was also happy and this event generated much seriousness in the hearts of both young and old. It is understandable that there was much life and happiness. When they gathered in their fellowship groups, they heard about the deeds of God.

No wonder therefore that these fellowship meetings would sometimes drag on for a long time. Now at the time there was a book seller, a converted Jew named Ornee. He said to us that our meetings were too long. The meetings must be shortened and become more orderly in that someone should read a portion from the Bible and explain it as well as he could and ask questions about it. He offered to come sometime and did so.

That evening the meeting was in the home of H. Bots. The book seller entered, greeted us and sat down. He took leadership and prayed. Then he read a portion from God's Word, explained and spoke briefly while we all listened. He thanked God and left. Someone admonished us to leave, for that was the orderly thing to do. But it soon appeared that this advice was not taken to heart. They stayed till about midnight.

I don't want to defend that, but I do believe that the Lord in Heaven looks more upon the essence than on the format. True, there was, as I later realized, a degree of Methodism at work, but that is normal in times of revival. There was love and devotion to the Lord, enthusiasm of spirit and the new life revealed itself in a powerful way. I do prefer that to those cold and stiff objective explanations. That's when one can say that the Spirit of God works in the silence. Yes, I realize that, but when it is so quiet that no one notices it, then nothing comes of it. Where there is life, there is movement. Life reveals itself from the inside to the outside and can there be light without it being noticed? Can a city on a hill be hidden? Those fellowship meetings were held weekly throughout the entire fall and winter and were fruitful. The Lord blessed them and gave grace from above. Every Sunday the church was almost full to the rafters, catechism classes were well

attended, the preaching had fruit and many hardnosed sinners were vigorously converted. We sang with great joy:

Komt, luistert toe gij Godgezinden!  
Gij die den Heer van harte vreest!  
Hooft, wat mij God deed ondervinden;  
    What Hij gedaan heeft aan mijn geest.  
'k Sloeg, heilbegeerig 't oog naar boven;  
    Ik riep den Heer ootmoedig aan;  
Ik mocht met mond en hart Hem loven,  
    Hem, die alleen mij bij kan staan

Come, hear, all ye that fear the Lord,  
While I with grateful heart record  
What God has done for me;  
I cried to Him in deep distress,  
And now His wondrous grace I bless,  
For He has set me free.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>See "mother footnote" 10. Boer quotes the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 66:8, which can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NnuZEy0ItYQ>. A close partial English-language parallel is found in Psalter Hymnal no. 120:3 (1959) and in hymn no. 495:1 (2013).

## Chapter 6\*

### Solution, Decisiveness

After I was disappointed in my diligent attempts and no longer had any hope of becoming a pastor, it was as if the Lord said: “Now I am about to begin. Your time is always, but My time is not always. Sit still and see the way of the Lord!” The Lord arranged a circumstance that in itself was a daily occurrence, but the outcome of which had a very deep meaning, especially for me.

At the time, Rev. Van der Vegte was the preacher at Oldekerk, a neighbouring congregation about one hour north-east of Grootegast. He preached one Sunday evening in Grootegast. Widow Graslander sent me early Monday morning to Pastor Van de Berekamp, at whose place Van der Vegte was lodging, to request both preachers to come and have a cup of coffee. The latter replied he could not since he had to be home quickly. But the honourable pastor added, “I would love to see you pay a visit to Oldekerk one day.” I accepted the invitation. When I brought this message home, Trijntje, the maid, said, “Then I know what Pastor Van der Vegte wants with you. He wants you to become a preacher.” I responded, “How do you know when I don’t? He has said nothing about that. So, how then can you know?” I said nothing further, for I myself also started to think that way about it.

Shortly thereafter, I paid Rev. Van der Vegte a visit and the suspicion of Trijntje turned out to be right. He soon began to discuss with me my desire to become a pastor. I responded that I long entertained a deep desire and still did, but that I had come to the conclusion that God has not called me. He asked, “Why not?” I shared all my experience in this regard with him. I should not desire what God wanted to deny me and that I was relatively content with that decision.

The main thing the pastor said, “Yes, it is commendable that you, thinking that God has not called you, are prepared to acquiesce, but do you have sufficient proof that God is not calling you? It is true that that Finance Committee has disqualified you, but does that really prove that God has shut the door for you? If He wants to lead you to His purpose for you via another route, then you should not carp at it. Besides, even if you were to gradually begin this study, you would still not become a preacher immediately.” I fully understood his advice and was not able to counter his proposal. The final decision was that I would once a week take lessons in the Dutch, Latin and Greek languages with Van der Vegte together with a couple of other young men, including Pastor H. Van Hoogen, provided Mrs. Graslander approved. I was after all her hired man and could not embark on this course without her permission.

I came home and shared with her what Van der Vegte had said. She was a pious and understanding person and an outspoken confessor of her beloved Saviour. She immediately gave me permission to begin this study.

I purchased a number of books, but Latin and Greek struck me so strange that I was afraid that learning them would be difficult for me, indeed, impossible. Others might perhaps be able, but I might not. But even though I was hesitant, I took a crack at it and it soon became clear to me that the Lord reigns and when He opens the door, no one can close it. Weekly I, together with Van Hoogen and another young man, would go for lessons to Van der Vegte.

Now, for many who begin to study it is very difficult to become aware that they actually know nothing. One Rev. L. J. Hulst once said in a lecture he delivered at the convocation of our Theological School<sup>12</sup> that it had cost him time and effort to learn, that he was simple and ignorant. Fortunately, we understood all this fairly rapidly.

I did my studies at Mrs. Graslander's home and would sometimes take my textbook to the threshing floor to take an occasional peek in order to have useful ideas to reflect upon in reference to my goal while threshing. At first I did not feel great about it, not because I thought to be outside of God's will, but more because the study was difficult for me and could end up being fruitless. When someone moves from the plough to books without real preparation, mountains of difficulties can arise. But, said the Reformer Luther to his son Hans, serious prayer is half of the work, which describes my study well. After some time, the state of my emotions was such that, because of my fear of the Lord, I did not dare stop. Whenever such thoughts would come to me, it felt as if I were on an extremely sinful track against the Lord. I became so determined about going forward, that one day I said to Mrs. Graslander, "Even if you were to give me your entire farm along with all the animals and all the machinery on condition that I would leave my studies, I would neither be able nor willing to do so."

After the threshing was done in the late winter, she said to me, "Now you may study in the mornings till eight o'clock, while Hendrik, the other labourer, can do the work in the barn. And so it happened. Trijntje re-arranged breakfast time while Hendrik worked in the barn and I studied diligently. For me that was a signal of divine providence. I made satisfactory progress in my studies.

In 1861, Mrs. Graslander left her place and went to live in Grootegast, next to the church. I went along with her, but once she was fairly settled in, I moved in with my mother, who lived in Leek. From then on, I took lessons from Rev. Marcus Brouwer in Enumatil three times a week. The

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<sup>12</sup>The reference is to the school in Kampen that today is a flourishing Theological University. That University developed from the Theological Seminary that was founded on 6 December, 1854, by a group of believers who separated from the traditional national Reformed Church in 1834 and formed a new 'covenant of churches', the *Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerk* – the Christian Reformed Church (not the CRC in North America).

<https://en.tukampen.nl/portal-informatiepagina/history>, -- accessed May 2, 2018.

plan was to go to the Theological School in Kampen in September, 1861. But I could not go and study without money. My father passed away on October 16, 1860, a fact that did change my financial circumstances somewhat, for I would be able to draw from my father's estate if necessary. However, that inheritance had not yet been disbursed, for it consisted of the family's real estate.

So I asked widow Graslander whether she would be willing to give me an interest-bearing loan every year during my study. She asked how much I needed. I answered that I did not know the exact amount, but thought that an annual three hundred would suffice. She agreed and loaned me that amount every year from 1861 till 1865. Later, after I completed my study, I repaid that debt after my mother died.

I have often retroactively reflected how wondrous the ways of the Lord are in both the spiritual and natural aspects of life. Everything can look dark at the beginning; we recognize God's leading hand only afterwards. God's ways are like a Hebrew book, where we do not begin to read at the beginning, but have to start from the back. It is then that the faithfulness of the divine promises appears as it is said in the Psalm:

Stel op den Heer in alles uw betrouwen,  
Betracht uw plicht; bewoon het aardrijk; leer  
Uw welvaart op God's trouw volstandig bouwen;  
Verlustig u met blijdschap in den Heer!  
Dan zal Hij u in liefd' en gunst aanschouwen,  
U schenken wat uw hart van Hem begeerd.

Trust in the Lord and still do well,  
Within the land securely dwell,  
Feed on His faithfulness;  
Delight thee also in the Lord,  
And to thy heart He will accord  
The good it would possess.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>See "mother footnote" 10. Boer quotes the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 37:3-4, which can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jAMWVXZolP4>. A close partial English-language parallel is found in Psalter Hymnal no. 63:2 (1959) and at no. 850:1 (2013).

## Chapter 7\*

### Studying at Kampen

In September 1861, I left for Kampen together with H. Van Hoogen and his wife. He moved into a rental, while I, along with more students, took board and room at the home of Karel Van den Berg and his wife. This was a noble family that treated us well.

Van Hoogen and I commenced our studies in all seriousness. During that first year we immediately began studying Dutch, Latin, Greek and Hebrew languages. In addition there were Dutch History, General History, Rhetorica, Empirical Psychology and Logic, while we took catechism once a week from lecturer H. de Cock.

I remember that Van Hoogen once suggested that we should postpone Hebrew for the time being, because we had too much on our fork. I answered, “No! If we can’t keep up with the other students, we can do that later. We persevered and, after one year, moved into third year Latin.



\*\* It took a lot of courage, diligence and perseverance to take so many courses fruitfully. I did not always possess those three virtues in equal measure, but I was encouraged by what James said, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, Who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him” (James 1:5).

One evening I was permitted to experience God’s merciful love in this way: I just could not get my Greek translation in good order. I turned to the Lord and when I lay on my knees, it was as if something within me said, “You better ask another person for help, for the Lord can also help via other students. You can’t find it in your book.” But when I rose from my knees, I saw exactly what followed those difficult sentences I had to translate. That succeeding text was so similar to the previous one, that I could deduce from it how I should translate. I found this experience so striking that I will not forget it for the rest of my life. It became clear that the Lord had taken pity on me. He leads and directs everything. For Him nothing is either too big or too small. This experience strengthened my trust in the Lord and I was thankful. Oh, Lord, grant that with all your gifts my efforts will end in You.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Note from Hemkes: “We found this paragraph in a special journal recorded in Kampen under the title ‘Gedachtenis’ (Memories), dated February 13, 1862.”



We were successful in all our studies. The Lord blessed us. After two years at Kampen, we took our exams in the literary subjects. Fortunately, we passed and, together with our comrades, moved on into Theology. Right after the exam I ran into Rev. J. H. Donner, who asked me how I felt about it all. I answered, "Very well, Pastor." "Yes," he said, "the Lord has given us more than we expected." We were happy and had many reasons for gratitude.

On February 9, 1862, I preached for the first time in my life ever at Wilrum near Kampen. In the morning I preached on Genesis 49:18 and in the afternoon on Luke 18:9-14, about which I preached frankly and freely. It was then that I experienced in a special way that the Lord hears our prayers and is true to His promises, for He has said, "Open wide your mouth and I will fill it" (Psalm 81:10). During the week prior to this sermon, I hesitated much, but I did not dare to withdraw, fearing that I would bring God's displeasure on myself. I turned to the Lord and He heard me. His Name be praised!

During my stay in Kampen, I also spoke at Wilrum in a room of Kamphof. The people living there were simple farmers—a pious people. They came to the meeting not to argue but to eat of the spiritual food that was set before them. Other students also came there to speak an edifying word. It was a place to learn for beginners. During the winter vacation I also spoke at Oldekerk, Grootegast and Roden.

Sometimes I would be depressed on the pulpit; at other times I would be free and happy. I remember that in August 1862 I was with Van Hoogen in Burum and went into the church for a moment on a Wednesday evening together with him and Van Dellen. I stood on the pulpit and felt so depressed and fearful that I did not even dare to recite one verse before the brothers. I experienced how the Lord can take away fear when I preached in Leek one Sunday evening in 1862 about Isaiah 43:21, "The people I formed for Myself that they may proclaim My praise." During the week prior to that Sunday I felt quite ill at ease. I would have attacks so that when I climbed on the pulpit, I could not utter a single word. And then, at another time I would be tempted to pride. The sighs of my soul this week climbed up to God in a special way and He did not fail to demonstrate His sympathy. When we went to church that Sunday evening all fear was gone. During the first hymn, a low degree of fear attacked me, but once I began to speak, I got courage and throughout the following week I experienced God's approval. That Sunday evening it was stipulated that I was to pray especially for Willem Schuil, a friend of mine, for the Lord to bring him to repentance. That Monday it felt as if I was to pray for him constantly.

And what happened! In that evening it appeared to us that the Lord had extended His mercy to him. This was a special delight to me and gave me reason to praise, because I could chalk up this conversion to an answer to my prayers. I know from experience what a privilege it is when one is placed on the pulpit by God Himself and what a wonderful work it is to preach the Gospel to sinners and to win souls for Christ. Yes, I said to myself:

Prijs den Heer met blijde galmen;  
Gij mijn ziel hebt rijke stof.  
'k Zal, zoo lang ik leef, mijn psalmen  
Vrolijk wijden aan Zijn lof;  
'k Zal, zoo lang ik 't licht geniet,  
Hem verhoogen in mijn lied.

Halleluiah, praise Jehovah,  
O my soul, Jehovah praise;  
I will sing the glorious praises  
Of my God through all my days.  
I will as long as there is light  
Elevate Him in my song.<sup>15</sup>

On the second Christmas Day<sup>16</sup> in 1862, I was requested by Rev. Knol to preach at Leek. In the afternoon service, I spoke of the Queen of Sheba<sup>17</sup> in my introduction, namely that when she saw the splendour of Solomon, she said, “The half has not been told” (I Kings 7:10). I applied that to the soul, who seeking and finding finally comes into heaven, affirming, “The half has never been told.” A few days later, I heard it said that someone in the audience had said, “The half has not been told me about Geert Boer!” That pricked my vanity; I elevated myself in my imagination above the pious local preacher, Pastor H. Knol. To be sure, he was a pious person, but surely I could preach a lot better than him. That’s kind of what my corrupt heart told me. However, the Lord humbled me.

A few days into the new year, Pastor Knol and his pious wife invited my mother, my sister, brother-in-law Wiebe Liere and myself to pay them a visit before I returned to Kampen. Knol told us how God taught him when he was preparing for the pastorate, how he frequently sought

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<sup>15</sup> See “mother footnote” 10. Boer quotes the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 146:1, which can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=obetrEUUlfS>. For a close partial English-language parallel see 301:1 (1959). The last two lines are my own translation.

<sup>16</sup>What the Dutch call “Tweeden Kerstdag” (Second Christmas Day), is “Boxing Day” in some English-speaking countries.

<sup>17</sup>A note from Prof. Hemkes: In connection with this sermon, we find the following from Boer in “Memories:” “In the afternoon I felt especially very buoyed up when I spoke about the Queen of Sheba during the introduction. I enjoyed preaching the sermon and proclaimed the Gospel in simplicity with joy in my heart. I was eagerly longing that one day I would come so far as a emissary of Jesus to make known to sinners the joyful message of the salvation of souls. I constantly experienced so much joy in that work that I would not trade it for anything in the world.” Hemkes continues, “‘Memories’ makes clear to us the inner piety of our brother. We find in it the sighing of the soul, prayers, pleas and the hearing of prayers. He did not flaunt his piety; only the Lord knew the simplicity, the earnestness and the uprightness of his humble heart. We frequently come across sighing such as ‘Oh, may the Lord soon equip me to preach only Jesus and Him fully as the only Saviour;’ ‘May our heart always be filled with His praise and our tongues all day long with His glory!’”

God on his knees, sometimes in some old dry ditch and then again behind some undergrowth, with the ardent desire as expressed by the poet:

O God! Gij zijt mijn toeverlaat.  
Mijn God! U zoek ik met verlangen,  
Zoo ras wij 't morgenlicht ontvangen,  
Bij 't kriecken van den dageraad.  
O Heer! Mijn ziel en lichaam hijgen,  
En dorsten naar U, in een land,  
Dat dor, en mat, van droogte brand,  
Waar niemand lafenis kan krijgen.

O Lord, my God, most earnestly  
My heart would seek Thy face,  
Within Thy holy house once more  
To see Thy glorious grace.  
Apart from Thee, I long and thirst,  
And nought can satisfy;  
I wander in a desert land  
Where all the streams are dry.<sup>18</sup>

When the pastor told us this, I became deeply ashamed and thought, “Yes, this man is truly learned of God.” His words made on me, a proud midget, a deep impression. How much higher this old preacher stood above me! In my private quietness, I did confession to God and thanked Him that he had taught me to see my foolishness. This visit turned out to be very useful to me and kept me closer to the ground. A proud preacher or student is a horror to the Lord. We do not realize to what we all expose ourselves and which seeds of depravity reside in our evil hearts. This circumstance led me to this prayer:

Weerhoud, o Heer! Uw knecht,  
Dat hij zijn hart niet hecht'  
Aan dwaze hoovaardij;  
Heerscht die in mij niet meer,  
Dan leef ik tot uw eer,  
Van groote zonden vrij.

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<sup>18</sup>See “mother footnote” 10. Boer quotes the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 63:1, which can be heard at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hw2wIMhMt\\_0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hw2wIMhMt_0). For a close partial English-language parallel see no. 111:1 (1959) and no. 367:1 (2013).

(His errors who can know?)  
 Cleanse me from hidden stain;  
 Keep me from willful sins,  
 Nor let them o'er me reign;  
 And then I upright shall appear  
 And be from great transgressions clear.<sup>19</sup>

Hemkes interrupts. Later, with an eye to the aforementioned self-elevation, he told Prof. Hemkes how deeply ashamed he was when he read the following writing of an (unnamed) preacher, a writing that Hemkes later placed in the 1901 Yearbook of the Christian Reformed Church.<sup>20</sup> He read that that preacher, when he thought too highly of his diligence for the Lord and His Kingdom, became very ashamed when he dreamt that an angel gave him a scrap of paper, while he compassionately said to him, “May God have mercy on you and save you.” The preacher in question—so he dreamt—opened the paper and read the following:

Analysis of the diligence of a candidate for a crown of glory. Weights expressed in units of 100 pounds (lbs.). Of these we accord the following weights:

Idolatry	=====	10 parts
Personal ambition	=====	23 “
Love of self and self-glory	=====	10 “
Churchly pride	=====	15 “
Proud of talents	=====	14 “
Desire to dominate	=====	12 “
Genuine Diligence:		
Love of God	=====	4 “
Love for neighbour	=====	3 “

That night, the preacher wrote, was a turning point in my work as preacher, and I have thanked God many times for that dream. Ach, how much unholy stuff is mixed with “serving God,” that, when it is weighed, is found too light. May God help all His servants! Amen.

Just have God’s finger of accusation pointed at you. That’s how it was with me. What a foolishness on my part and what a terrible sin! Perhaps there are some congregations and

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<sup>19</sup>See “mother footnote” 10. Boer quotes the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 19:7. The music can be accessed at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOgj5r\\_t9cg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xOgj5r_t9cg). For a close partial English-language parallel see no. 29:4 (1959) and no. 719:3 (2013).

<sup>20</sup>Hemkes suddenly starts writing about Boer as well as himself in the third person. The transition back to the main format of the text occurs near the extended footnote below.

theological schools that would deem it desirable for their preachers and some students to have such dreams with such useful results.<sup>21</sup>

Then our brother continued to write in his Diary:

After our literary exams in 1863, we had to commence with theological studies and related disciplines. Van Hoogen, I and the other students returned to Kampen after our vacation in September 1863. *Groote Marck* was our textbook.

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<sup>21</sup>A footnote from Hemkes: Now that we are talking about a sermon, the boasting about which led a brother astray on the God-insulting cliff of pride and then confessed such humility, we feel compelled also to add something of a moré positive nature. In "Memories" we hardly find any mention of gaining souls for Jesus to the glorification of the Kingdom of God's grace. Perhaps the brother hesitated writing about it because of modesty, even though we would have considered a few of such reports desirable. Every time God converted sinners by means of his preaching, our brother was fully convinced that he had not contributed anything of his own but that all the honour and glory belonged only to the Lord.

When I, Pastor Hemkes, was pastoring in Leek for eight years, I had a deacon, a great brother, a young man who lived with his brother and sisters on their own farm near Leek, under Tolbert. He did not tell me of the high praise Boer deserved—"The half has not been told me about Geert Boer." But I am reminded of the old Roman proverb, "*Ex ungue leonem*," or "One can recognize the lion by his claws," a saying for which I credit Jan Hazenberg. My wife and I frequently visited the Hazenbergs, for that family, though larger, looked much like that of Lazarus, Mary and Martha. This Hazenberg, as I remember the situation, told me that in the past he, Jan, had the bad habit of going to church very seldom. Instead, Sunday evenings he was accustomed to visit the pub for the purpose of drinking a glass or two and play pool in the company of other youths. Because he had known Geert Boer well for so long, he wanted to absolutely hear him when he would preach in Leek for the first time. He heard Boer and his sermons made a deep impression on him. He began to get somewhat of a sense of his sin and misery. His belief began to change and he felt the necessity of converting to God. His ambitions changed also. But to make a total break with the pub and his comrades became a big struggle for him. With a disturbed conscience he continued in this sinful company. The struggle between his natural tendency and his conscience became more pronounced.

When on a certain Sunday evening he again visited the pub, his conscience accused him so strongly that he could no longer stand it. He told me that he said to the widow to whom the pub belonged and who sometimes served as bartender, "Tell me how much I owe you and I'll pay up." "Well, Jan," she said, "what's your rush? It's still early. Stick around a while longer." His comrades said the same thing. But he answered something like, "If I continue with my godless activity by coming here Sunday evenings, oh, I will be lost forever. The same for you. If you continue with your way then you will also be lost for eternity. And you, friends, be aware that all of us together are serving sin and the devil. I don't want to do that anymore. Hell and eternal damnation await us, as I recently heard Geert Boer say. Woman, how much do you need? I want to pay you and go home, never to return here to drink and to play."

Then Jan's entire life changed and continues his story. I developed a desire to attend church and to serve the Lord. I developed a need for Jesus as my security for my guilt and sought the Lord in my prayers to that end. These changes also led to a deeper seriousness in the hearts of my brother and sisters. Now I know clearly and certainly that a great change of life was overcoming me; I know this as sure as the sun shines that I have converted from sin to virtue, but sometimes I still have attacks and struggles about whether I have made enough progress or whether I have truly converted to God." But regardless of those attacks, my dear reader, I do believe that Jan Hazenberg, the courageous and direct preacher in the pub, is now in heaven.

The old generation said, "Only God can use a crooked stick to draw a straight line. That was the case here. Though the student was guilty of foolish pride, his preaching was nevertheless a tool in the hand of the Spirit to rescue a soul from death to the praise and renown of the glory of God's mercy.

The time finally came for me to deliver my first class sermon. I had chosen for my text Romans 8:1—“Therefore now there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit.” My theme was: “The blessedness of the Children of God:

1. The nature of this blessedness;
2. The recipients of this blessedness;
3. The recognition of this blessedness.

After the sermon proposal had been subjected to analysis by the students, Lecturer Van Velzen presented his critique. His main thrust was, “I do not accept all the comments made by the students. When I heard the speaker give us his theme and major points, I thought: That is good; you’ve done this before. But I have some other comments, namely, that he has promised us much, but gave us little. The various parts of the text have not been developed. When I thought, here it is, it didn’t; it was finished. So little came of it. My short comment is: Delve deeper! Delve deeper! Delve deeper!” I thought, “Fine, if you lend me your spade, I will happily do that.”

A bit later I delivered my second class sermon. This time the critic was Lecturer Brummelkamp. If my memory serves me right, I preached about John 14:18. The main thrust of my critics was that I did not even touch the text. This criticism discouraged me considerably. I thought that if that is true and I do the same kind of preaching in the future, what will be the use of my preaching? After a few days, I got a grip on myself again, continued my studies and preached in various places around Kampen.

On Thanksgiving Day in November, I preached in Wilrum about Psalm 147:12-14. This time I took real pleasure in my preaching. Since then, I follow the rule that when the sermon also touches the preacher, then the congregation will also be edified; he who waters others does not remain dry himself. Shortly thereafter, I preached there twice on one day. In the morning I did not feel well, but, since I had promised, I went anyway. I arrived late; the chimes were already sounding upon my arrival in Wilrum. How surprised I was when I opened the door and saw such a large crowd. There were even various members from Kampen. I preached here with great pleasure and it seemed to me that the Lord was in our midst. In the evening seven people had stayed behind to accompany me to Kampen. Thus the Lord demonstrated that He wants to glorify Himself through the weak. Oh, that I may be the means in God’s hand to be used to win many souls for Christ.

Comment by Hemke: The above prayer was the burning desire in Boer’s life. We still remember that our brother already at that time was a popular preacher in the churches. Then he continued with Boer’s diary:

And so I preached in various places during our vacation, including Sappemeer. The trip there turned out to be somewhat unusual. The President of the Student Council had asked me rather late whether I would preach there on the two Pentecost days<sup>22</sup> and I had accepted the request. It had been decided that I would travel from Kampen to Groningen by coach, because there was no train as yet. The trip took long. Someone was to meet me in Groningen to take me to Sappemeer. But when I arrived at the designated hotel, there was no one from Sappemeer. I waited and waited till Saturday evening 10 pm. It was only then that a deacon by the name of Kreps, showed up. A misunderstanding had arisen. We proceeded on to Sappemeer and arrived there at midnight.

This kind of thing is not a good way to prepare sermons for Pentecost. I preached four times, after which Elder Maathuis and teacher Nieuwhuis brought me back to Groningen. From there I walked to my family in Leek that same evening.

After a few days I returned to Kampen again to complete my studies. In July, 1865, I did exams together with eighteen other students. We each had to hand in a written sermon. We also had to improvise a sermon within fifteen minutes. One hour before we were called to this, each of us was assigned a text on basis of which we were to improvise. As soon as we received our text, we ran home to give ourselves time for reflection. For anyone having steel nerves it would work out. I remember one brother who was so nervous that he stood on the pulpit like a small windmill. That was painful, but the curators simply thought that if there was a sermon in someone, a sermon would also come out. If something was lacking in the sermon, then the curators could, it was thought, better judge the person in everything, not only in his sermon. We all handed in a written sermon; we all did an improvisation; we all did our exams and, fortunately, we all passed and were thankfully admitted to the ordained ministry,

Before the exam, I was exceptionally tense. When I began, I became calm and during the exam I basically lost my fear. The Lord gave presence of spirit, a clear judgment and not infrequently presented the issues so clearly to my mind that even today I must still confess, “This has come from the Lord. He has not rejected my cries. That’s why my heart rejoices.”<sup>23</sup>

The brothers J. Kremer and G. K. Hemkes, the editor of this book, were among us students. Van Hoogen was not well; the next day he caught the smallpox. The Lord healed him, and he might well have sung with the ancient poet:

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<sup>22</sup>Like Christmas, the Dutch reserve two days for Easter and Pentecost as well.

<sup>23</sup>I suspect this to be a quote from either a Dutch Bible or a versified Psalm. However, the internet did not identify it for me.

'k Roep God niet vruchtloos aan;  
Hij wil mij niet versmaan,  
In al mijn tegenheden;  
Hij zag van Zion neer,  
De woonplaats van Zijn eer,  
En hoorde mijn gebeden.

I called God not in vain;  
He will not despise me  
In all my trials;  
He looked down from Zion,  
The residence of His glory,  
And heard my cries.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Boer quotes half a verse from the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 3. This translation is by the translator.



## Chapter 8\*

### From Kampen to Sappemeer

Rev. B. Van den Berg, son of our landlord and, at the time, pastor in Zuidbroek, was the advisor to the church of Sappemeer. During the very evening that we had passed our exams, Van den Berg handed me a call letter from Sappemeer. They had voted on this a few weeks earlier and the Lord had so directed it that I would be called by them.

Of course, I was happy that I was called to such a large and beautiful place. The congregation was fairly large and they promised me a salary of seven hundred guilders along with a free house and garden for me to enjoy. There was a Christian school with a headmaster and an assistant teacher. There was an organ in the church. All this led me to smile.

I had received requests from several congregations to come and preach, but I responded that I already received a call and did not desire further invitations. Soon thereafter, my future wife, Jetsche Holtrop, and I went to Sappemeer. After a visit there, and a discussion with the church council, we returned to Leek. It was there that, after prayerfully looking unto the Lord, I accepted that call.

Subsequently, we were married on September 6, 1865, in a civic ceremony by Mayor Fokkens of Leek and, after that in the evening the Christian ceremony in the Christian Reformed Church by Pastor M. Brouwer of Enumatil, the advisor to the vacant congregation.

We did this not only because my mother, but also Jetsche's mother was going to live with us in Sappemeer. For that reason, it was best to sell the house and everything else my mother-in-law would no longer use.<sup>25</sup>

Now it was a bit risky to marry before the classical exam.<sup>26</sup> There is always the possibility of not passing, but in that case, we decided, we would do another year at Kampen with our entire family.

The time came that I was to take that classical exam in Groningen on October 10, 1865. It was established procedure that the President of the previous classis meeting would assign a candidate a text a few weeks earlier on which the latter would deliver a sermon to the classis before the actual meeting would begin. But in my case, the President had forgotten to do this. I received my

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<sup>25</sup>It would appear that there is some information missing between this paragraph and the one before.

<sup>26</sup>In the Netherlands Reformed tradition, a "classis" is a regional group of churches into which the entire denomination is organized. It is at classical level that candidates are examined to be admitted into the pastoral ministry of the entire denomination.

text on that Sunday evening, a mere two days before. I informed the meeting of this situation and the previous President, Reverend De Wind of Thesinge, received a classical admonition—and sent me to the pulpit. That admonition did not help me much. Perhaps it helped me somewhat in that the critique of my sermon would be a bit milder. Well, I preached as well as I could, after which the exam was conducted. I fortunately passed the exam, so that I was admitted. That same evening I returned to Leek.

Now we went, all four of us, to Sappemeer. On Sunday morning, October 22, 1865, I was ordained to the ministry by the church's Advisor, Rev. B. Van der Berg of Zuidbroek. He preached on Matthew 28:18-20. I preached my inaugural sermon during the afternoon on basis of 2 Corinthians 4:5—"For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."

The Church Council had requested members of the City Council to attend this inaugural, and some of the honourable gentlemen did indeed attend, along with Mayor Venema.

As a young preacher I did feel a bit troubled to deliver a speech to those Council members after my sermon, not so much to preach the Gospel to them, even though they needed it as much as everyone else, but I was especially concerned to do this in an appropriate way that would be pleasing to the Lord. Well, I managed. The Lord enabled me to preach with frankness and supported me. In addition to the sermon and that speech to the City Council and the teachers of the Christian School, I had also to address my beloved aged mother. I was moved during that address and the next few days within the family circle of my parents, received much of my attention.

That evening, after my afternoon inaugural, the members of the Church Council along with teacher Nieuwhuis joined us in our little house. I was grateful and we all chatted and sang with joyful hearts. Now I was employed and the pastor of my congregation. What an undeserved privilege that the Lord had heard my prayer so graciously to serve Him with the Gospel! But how great a responsibility now rested on my shoulders to point people to the way to Heaven and to warn them against eternal doom. With only darkness in my soul, I was to proclaim the eternal Word of the Lord, teach the youth of the congregation and minister to the sick and those on their deathbed. But the Lord was good and mild, so that I was enabled by His mercy to go about my work with joy.

I already mentioned that the Church Council along with the teacher paid us a visit in our small house. The Council had rented that house for us temporarily, after the old parsonage, located at a beautiful location along the canal, was confiscated to make room for a railway line from Nieuwe Schans to Harlingen and the new parsonage was not yet completed. We lived in that little place for eleven months. In October, 1866, we had the privileged of moving into the new parsonage.

My work was not without blessing in the congregation. Sinners repented and God's children were built up in the most holy faith. And, despite various shortcomings in my performance of the holiest services, the Lord fulfilled in the midst of the congregation the prayer of the God-fearing poet:

Dat vreed' en aangename rust,  
En milde zegen u verblij.

That peace and pleasant rest  
And gentle blessing joyful make<sup>27</sup>

*Hemkes takes over again:* We can add to the above that our late brother as a man of the people had a soft, peaceful and humble character, something that is a great blessing to a preacher himself as well as to the congregation. It used to often be said at the occasion of interviews of candidates for scholarships to study for the ministry, "We must not only pay attention to heart and head, but also to character." If they suffer from noticeable pride, or a strong tendency to aggression, or they are stubborn, don't accept them, for if they are that way as students, what will they be like as pastors? Imitate farmers when they prepare onions for the market. Those they call "stiff necked" they throw away as unsuitable for the market. We have had brothers who did not lack for talent, but they still had troubles in all their congregations. When such is the case with a pastor in all his congregations, then we conclude that the fault is not with the congregation but with themselves. They want to rule over the heritage of the Lord or they have other shortcoming in their character. "For where there is envy and selfish ambition..., there you find disorder and every evil practice" (James 3:16). Professor Boer was easy to get along with, whether he was student, pastor or, later professor. While he sought everyone's wellbeing, he would have a consoling word for the distressed; a word of admonition and correction for backsliders and a heart for all. Where necessary, he would be the hand and foot to lead and keep everyone on the straight path. With an eye to his leadership in the worship services we are reminded of the words from Psalm 37.

Let toch, en zie op vromen en oprechten:  
Want wat men denk' van d' uitkomst hunner paan,  
God kroont met vree het einde zijner knechten.

Pay attention and watch the pious and the upright:  
For whatever one thinks of the result of their paths,  
God crowns with peace the end of His servants.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>My own translation of the author's quote from the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 122:3 according to various websites.

<sup>28</sup>See "mother footnote" 10. Boer quotes the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 37. For a close partial English-language parallel see no. 65:8 (1959) and no. 850:4 (2013). Some websites consider Boer's words here the versification of Psalm 37:19, but to me it looks more like 37:37 in the NIV. Since I cannot find any English passage close to this in neither the Biblical Psalms nor in their versification, I decided to treat you with the original Boer quote along with a translation of my own.

*At this point we continue with Boer's own writing:*

In the fall of 1867 I received an invitation from the Church Council of Houwerzijl and Zoutkamp to preach there one Sunday. My Church Council did not give me permission. So, then I preached there on a Wednesday evening. On September 7, I received a call. After weighing this call for a few days, I declined and stayed at Sappemeer.

A few days later we had the privilege of taking a short vacation trip. First, we went to Burum, where H. Van Hoogen was the pastor. Near Burum someone met us on the way who asked whether I was going to preach in Burum that evening. I said I knew nothing about this. "Now, Pastor Van Hoogen announced it yesterday!" And so it was that I preached at Burum that Monday evening on Romans 3:24.

That evening some members of the Church Council of the Niezijl congregation came to request that I preach to their congregation and whether I would be willing to preach there on Wednesday evening. At first I was not strongly inclined, but at the end I agreed to their request. The congregation at Niezijl was vacant at the time. I preached about Revelation 22:17. Next we traveled to Leek and, if my memory serves me right, stayed there one Sunday and visited our family, after which we returned to my own congregation.

Newlyweds have various expenses for procuring furniture, while a preacher, in addition, needs books, etc. The month was not yet finished. My wife said, "With our vacation trip, our drawer has become empty. Now what?" I said, "The Lord will take care of us!" Preaching for Brother Van Hoogen brought a love offering; the Council of Niezijl adhered to the word of Scripture, "The labourer is worthy of his hire." I gave that money to my wife and said, "Do you see now that the Lord takes care of us?" She responded, "Yes," and was ashamed and wept.

We were home only about two hours, when the doorbell rung. One Ms. Boerman entered and after we chatted for a few moments, she said, "Well, Pastor, I attend your church, but am not a member and do not pay my share regularly. I thought to give you a small present." She put her hand in her purse and gave me twenty-five guilders. I gave the money to Jetsche, for it was as safe with her as with me, and said, "See, Jetsche, has the Lord not taken care?" Oh, yes, obviously—and we were ashamed.

Another day about that time the postman brought us a letter. When I opened it, I found another twenty-five guilders with a note, "A gift from me." I have never found out the identity of the giver. It was all too clear: The Lord cares.

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A pastor Huntington wrote a book entitled “*God de kassier der armen: of de geloofs bank van Jezus Christus*,”<sup>29</sup> in which he reported several cases of answered prayer and assistance also in the natural realm of life. It is a treasure of a book.

At this time we were so poor that we had no money in our house, but also not so poor that we could not borrow something. But the Lord helped in His own way. This was for me an obvious and very meaningful life experience that would later often stand me in good stead on my pilgrim’s journey. Indeed, experience is a good teacher.

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<sup>29</sup>A possible translation: *God the Cashier of the Poor: Or the Faith Bank of Jesus Christ.*

## Chapter 9\*

### From Sappemeer to Niezijl

A few days after the afore-mentioned, I conducted a family visitation with my elder. In the late morning, I received the news that I had to come home, for there were some people to see me. When I arrived home, I saw two brothers from the Church Council of Niezijl who extended a call letter to me.

This call hit me. I took some weeks to think about it and received many serious letters in which I was urgently petitioned to accept that call. It was very difficult for me to decide. It became a matter of prayer for me. I finally came to a decision and accepted the call. We stayed in our Sappemeer congregation a few more weeks. On January 12, 1868, I delivered my farewell sermon and used as text 2 Corinthians 13:11.

On January 15 we left for Niezijl, where we were generously and heartily received on our arrival. The parsonage was ready for us. The following Sunday, January 19, Rev. Van Hoogen, pastor of the Burum church, installed me in the Niezijl congregation. He had as text Acts 18:27a. That afternoon, I delivered my inaugural sermon on Colossians 4:3.

Thus I commenced my work at Niezijl, a fairly large congregation that included the villages of Grijpskerk, Noordhorn and Kommerzijl. Before long, I started teaching catechism on Wednesday evenings at Kommerzijl and then would deliver a short sermon afterwards, first in a barn<sup>30</sup> and, later in a little satellite church. I also began to conduct catechism classes in Noordhorn and Grijpskerk in the evenings every second week. Along with that, there was the work in my local church of Niezijl, so that I led a busy life. But the Lord supported me and gave enthusiasm and strength for my work.

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<sup>30</sup>Preaching in a barn and other non-church building settings was a common occurrence, since Boer's denomination was denied official recognition by the Government and experienced much persecution at the hands of government, the main Reformed Church and even from the members of that church. Books about this persecution are many and include Alie van der Wel-Prins, *Ds. Theunis Doekes Prins (1862-1929): Een Dienend Leven*. Self-published, n.d. Pastor Prins was a member of the first class of the Free University of Amsterdam and was ordained on July 24, 1887, in the denomination founded by Abraham Kuyper, in a carpenter's workshop (p. 81). He was my wife Frances' great uncle. Another great uncle of hers was evicted from the house they rented from the traditional established church, because they sided with Kuyper's church, referred to above. Then there is Harry Boer and Barbara Boer-Van Haitsema's *God's Deacon*, still in the editing stage. See also G. J. Kok, *Vele geestelijke en stoffelijke zegeningen: 100 jaar geschiedenis van de Gereformeerde Kerk van Lutjegast (1893-1993)*, Lutjegast (Groningen, The Netherlands): Kerkeraad Gereformeerde Kerk Lutjegast, 1993, Ch. 1. Also Janet Sjaarda Sheeres, *Son of Secession: Douwe J. Vander Werp*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006. This is a random selection out of dozens of books on the subject, some of which I have read, but these are on my shelf right now. Geert Boer, the basic author of this book, was an irenic person who did not refer to the persecution of his people beyond a mere hint—unless it was Hemkes who chose to bypass such stories.

At that time, many left the Netherlands for America. My congregation also contributed to this movement annually. During my first years of service in Niezijl, I was somewhat anti-American; I was very unhappy that so many of my members left for America.

In the spring of 1872, the news reached us in Niezijl that Rev. R. Duiker, who in 1867 had left Niezijl for Grand Rapids, Michigan, had now left the Grand Rapids congregation for the congregation of Danforth, Illinois. Soon the news made the rounds that a delegation from Grand Rapids was coming to the Netherlands to attend the Synod of our church<sup>31</sup> that would be held in Groningen. They were also to come to Niezijl, so the story went, in order to extend a call to me from Grand Rapids. Though I was definitely no “Ameraphile,” I began to inadvertently think more about it. In May, 1872, the news had it that there was a delegation from Grand Rapids on its way that could arrive any day.

On a certain Thursday afternoon, as we were sitting in the living room of our parsonage, I saw two people standing on the street. I said, “There they are, the Americans!” They rang the bell and entered the house. They were brothers Jan Gelock and Jakobus De Jonge. After the customary introductions, Gelock asked me my opinion about the secession among the Dutch churches in America. I responded, “Well, brothers, I have no opinion, for I am not sufficiently familiar with it to judge. The brothers stayed with us from Thursday till Tuesday. On Sunday they joined us in church; on Tuesday they left to go to Synod. My wife, Jetsche, and I also went to Synod just to see it in operation.<sup>32</sup> The American brothers subsequently returned home after they had visited many other places throughout the Netherlands. Once they arrived back home, they wrote us a letter—and that was pretty well it.

Soon thereafter, we read in the magazine *De Bazuin* that the Spring Street congregation in Grand Rapids had called Rev. J. Bavinck.<sup>33</sup> When he declined, they called Rev. Littooi, who also declined.

When on January 15, 1873, at ten a.m., I came home, I found a letter from America on the table. It turned out to be a call letter from the Grand Rapids church. From the outset, this call made a deep impression on me. My unceasing prayer was: “Lord, show me Your will; I want to do Your will! Pour out Your merciful light so that I know Your will.” Five weeks passed and I still had not come to a decision. Constantly I thought, “Must I go to America?” But I did not dare. And so I struggled along till finally I came to decline. On Sunday morning before the service I read my letter of rejection to the Church Council and asked whether anyone wanted to comment.

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<sup>31</sup>“Synod” is the assembly, often held annually, where delegates from all the classes or regions of the church meet to consider affairs that affect the entire denomination. It is not the *highest* assembly, but the *broadest*. In the Netherlands Reformed churches the highest assembly is that of the local Church Council; the Synod is the broadest because it represents the entire denomination.

<sup>32</sup>Reformed Synods are generally open meetings.

Their answer was that it was a good letter. Then on February 22, I announced to the congregation that I had declined the call to Grand Rapids. The congregation was happy as was I, though I could not tell them that, but I had peace in my heart. A few weeks passed. More than once I was asked whether I had peace with my decision. My answer was, "Yes!" But on the seventh of April the postman delivered a message that there was a telegramme for me at the post office in Grijpskerk that I should go and pick up. I went and immediately opened the telegramme and read, "Posted in Grand Rapids, Mich., 'You are called again.'—Gelock."

This second call made an even stronger impression on me than the first. I reflected on this for three and a half weeks, all the while praying about what I should do, till on May 4, 1873, I announced to the congregation that I had accepted the call to Grand Rapids. After I descended from the pulpit, a deacon, J. Van der Molen, said "Now the Lord Jesus has one church in the Netherlands and two in America." This good brother was apparently a bit upset, but eventually he got over it.

But in the evening of the same day, after I had announced my acceptance of the call, I became troubled in my soul, something that became increasingly worse right up to the succeeding Friday.

My wife had a nightmare during that same week. She saw me in her dream, lying on a chair in the room with my elder P. Prins standing at my side. She was already aware of my spiritual struggle and asked in her dream whether I was dead. The elder said, "No, but he's out of his mind." She then began to seriously pray and, among other things, said, "Lord, You must help my husband! You have called and sent him and so it is necessary that You save him."

During the same hour that she had her dream, while my elder G. Hoeksema and I were traveling, my depression dissipated, a feeling that stayed with me the entire day. When in the evening we approached Niezijl, I said to Hoeksema, who died in 1902 while he was preacher in Oakland, Michigan, "You know what I'm thinking?" He responded, "Absolutely not, pastor." I said, "I will go to Grand Rapids and preach as from the roofs that the devil is a murderer and liar from the beginning." Once we were home, the first question was, "How is it with Pastor?" The answer was, "He is better," and so I was indeed.

This Sunday I preached on Luke 22:31, "Simon, Simon, satan was asked to sift you as wheat, But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail." I preached on this text with complete abandon and really thought that satan had sought to sift me that week, but that the Lord Jesus had saved and rescued me.

Soon afterwards my mood changed again. I became very depressed and troubled. I could not give myself an explanation as to the actual *how* of it. During the period I was considering the call, I had prayed many times to the Lord, asking Him to graciously show me the way to go.



Since I had felt compelled to accept the call to Grand Rapids and had thus acted righteously, I could in no way understand why I should now be so troubled. This struggle became increasingly vehement during the next few weeks and various soul-depressing thoughts flung me back and forth. In spite of these difficulties, the Lord was good enough that I was able to preach every Sunday, even though I could hardly prepare by studying. The rumour about my spiritual struggle soon spread far and wide.

During June, the annual church visitors<sup>34</sup> came to the meeting in which my struggle was also on the agenda. Though the Council preferred to have me stay, they did not dare to try to persuade me not to accept that Grand Rapids call, for they feared that this would amount to working against God's will. On the one hand, I would be happy to free myself from my pastoral office in order that I would not have to leave for Grand Rapids. On the other hand, I did not dare do so, for I knew the Lord had called me to this office. I feared to bring God's displeasure around my neck.

After that meeting, my wife asked, "What are you going to do now?" I answered, "I'm going to Kampen to consult with my professors there, namely, Van Velzen, Brummelkamp and De Cock. In this respect they are my fathers."

When I arrived at Kampen, I first met De Cock and discussed my heaviness of heart with him. Three weeks earlier I had already written him. He appeared to have a listening ear and took me to a meeting of the faculty, where Professor Van Velzen was the first to interview me. He asked me what had motivated me to accept that call to Grand Rapids. I answered that I had felt an inclination to go there and that the need for preachers, especially in the True Holland Reformed Church, was much greater than in the Christian Reformed Church in the Netherlands. Furthermore, humanly speaking, it would be much easier for Niezijl to find a replacement than it would be for Grand Rapids. Besides, I had a clear voice that would be a great asset for a large congregation.

Van Velzen responded, "That by itself is enough, brother. Go there in peace and if we take a vacation, we may well come to visit you," to which he smilingly added, "if you pay for our ticket." He also said that he would prefer to go to the True Holland Reformed Church than to the Reformed Church of America (RCA). Professor Brummelkamp said, "I would rather join the RCA, but I advise brother Boer to go to the church that is calling him."

This professorial advice, with which De Cock also agreed, completely turned me off. I would much rather that they had said, "We will attempt to motivate the Grand Rapids church to annul

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<sup>34</sup>It is tradition in at least some of the Dutch Reformed churches for the local classis or regional group of churches to annually assign church visitors to the Council of each congregation to check out their overall spiritual welfare. If there are serious problem, it may be reported and discussed at the next classis meeting. This tradition is adhered to even today, at least in the CRC in North America.

your call and to leave you here in the Netherlands. In other words, all three professors advised me to go to Grand Rapids.

From Kampen I returned to my congregation and experienced a calming of my emotions. For some weeks I regularly went about my work again. On August 22, 1873, we held an auction. Two days later I preached my farewell sermon at Niezijl about Hebrews 13:20-21. The spacious church was chuck full, so full that ladders were brought and set against the outside walls for people to stand on. Some panes were even shattered! By God's grace I was enabled to conclude my work there. Pastor Van Hoogen, who had already accepted a call to Niezijl and took my place almost immediately, along with Pastor Hemkes, who was the preacher in Leek, both gave short speeches.

The personal farewells to the families went very smoothly. I was in no way emotional, even though I saw some weeping. I was surprised. It was clear to us that we were in God's will. Our deacon, J. Van der Molen, brought us to Groningen. Later, I wrote him that we arrived safely in Grand Rapids, whereupon he responded some time later and, among other things, wrote, "I felt so somber when I saw you and your family leave Groningen in the train! I will never again accompany a pastor and his family who are leaving for America from Groningen. No, never again!"

## Chapter 10\*

### From Niezijl to Grand Rapids (p. 80)

We arrived in Rotterdam on Thursday evening, August 27, 1873. We spent the night in a hotel and shopped for some more provisions on Friday. That evening we boarded the steamship *Rotterdam*, with Captain Huss at the helm. There were many passengers. Among others, there were Dr. Huizoon from Paterson with his wife, and Dr. Cohen Stuart with his family. He was a former pastor at the Remonstrant Congregation of Rotterdam, who had broken with that tradition and left that congregation. That Saturday we followed a canal to Hellevoetsluis, where the ship was moored for the evening, but we continued the journey that night. When we woke up Sunday morning, we were already so far out on the North Sea that we could no longer see the coast of the Netherlands.

There was a ban on formal preaching on this ship. At 3:30 p.m. that day, I led in a short prayer; Dr. Stuart held a short speech and Pastor Huizoon offered a prayer of thanksgiving.

We had four children by this time: Egbertus Henderikus, who was seven years old; Jetsche, who was five; Hendrik, almost three; en Roelfina, a good one year.

That Sunday we had beautiful, clear weather, while during the night we enjoyed a lovely moonlight. That evening I spent some time in the saloon, while wife Jetsche was with the children in the bedroom. A certain lady came down the stairs and said, "Pastor have you noticed that we were in great danger just a moment ago?" I said, "No, Madam, I did notice a change in the movement of the ship, but did not give it any further thought."

The lady said, "The captain just saw a boat from the UK going straight across the English Channel. He immediately ordered a steam reduction on our ship. That ship passed us, but so close that our prow touched its ropes. Thus we were indeed in grave danger! That is how the Lord mercifully saved us on that first day at sea.

Doch riepen z' in ellenden  
Den Heer ootmoedig aan,  
Hij deed hun angsten enden,  
Enhen 't gevaar ontgaan.

To Jehovah then they cried  
In their trouble, and He saves....  
Rescues them with gracious aid

From the snares their folly laid.<sup>35</sup>

Yes, God takes care when danger approaches.

This evening we passed near Dover, the southernmost town in England. From the ship we could see the city's lights. Soon we retired again for the night. The following morning we passed the so-called *Bishop*, a large light tower on the south-west coast of the UK. Though the sea was calm, the ship occasionally would roll vehemently. At that time I recorded the following: "I do not have a sense of being outside of God's will, but I am nevertheless not as lively as I would like to be. Oh Lord, quicken our souls for Jesus' sake."

And then I became very seasick. "Oh Lord," I prayed, "restore me to the praise of Your goodness." I was nervous and felt somewhat homesick, but for the rest I felt peace between God and my heart. My wife Jetsche and children were doing fairly well.

That Friday we had exceptionally beautiful weather. As good as no wind, a calm sea almost level and smooth like a great flat mirror and a clear sky. When we imagined that huge water surface of which we could see very little, then that huge, wide liquid plain from both poles to the equator, from east to west, this wide and endless sea appeared to us as a delightful miracle in God's creation. And though at the surface everything looked monotonous and dull, beneath it there is a great deal of variety. There are mountains and valleys, cliffs, forests and plains, flower and fruit gardens, including food for the innumerable number of creatures that live beneath the surface and in the chasms and abysses. As Spurgeon said about Psalm 107, the seas are populated everywhere. These forests and gigantic plants serve as places of refuge for the millions of sea creatures and feed them, those that crawl, walk or swim in these immeasurable depths. They seek or shun each other; they accompany or fight each other, while many of the smaller are captured by the giants and devoured. So it was and is and will be on the land we left behind, and so it is in the unfathomable depths beneath the surface where we find ourselves. In heaven there will be no such strife!

Generally speaking, the ancient peoples were not fond of the sea because of the multiplicity of dangers connected to the life of a sailor. Among the things even the wise Solomon could not understand was "the way of a ship on the high seas" (Proverbs 30:18-19). In those days, people stayed close to the coast. Neither the astrolabe nor even the compass existed in those days.

When we then have a clear sky above us, full of millions of glittering stars, and a depth beneath full of innumerable sea creature of all shapes and sizes, then we can also think of the beautiful

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<sup>35</sup>See "mother footnote" 10. Boer quotes the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 107, which can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NnuZEy0ItYQ>. A close partial English-language parallel is found at 212:4, 2 (1959).

verse of the poet in Psalm 104:25-26: “There is the sea, vast and spacious, teeming with creatures beyond number—living things both large and small. There the ships go to and fro, and the leviathan which you formed to frolic there.”<sup>36</sup>

Basically, we had a happy sea journey. Well, yes, there were some who contracted seasickness. And there were several passengers who said some formula prayers. Occasionally I would also be seasick when, for example, the ship rolled violently. The same was true for my entire family. No one would eat; people would get nauseous even from the most delicious foods. We longed for land.

It was Sunday, September 14. In the afternoon Dr. Stuart held a German lecture for the Germans, while I held a short speech for the Dutch about “A Review of Our Voyage” that should move us to happy gratitude and to deep humility, a humility that should reveal itself in confession at the foot of the cross of our Saviour. May the Lord have blessed these speeches in retrospect to the salvation of souls and the glory of His Name.

Not long after these speeches, the sailors yelled, “Land!” Oh, how deep an impression of blessing did seeing the trees and land have on all of us. For a full fourteen days we had seen nothing but water. It was so fortunate that all of us made it across, especially for our daughter Jetsche, who was very sick and weak, had suffered so much, but was restored by the Lord, who till now is still in our midst.

That evening we passed by the lighthouse near New York and at around 10 p.m. we moored at New York City. On Monday morning, September 15<sup>th</sup>, we were ferried in a small boat from the *Rotterdam* for processing in the Custom House, where all our papers and cases were checked out. Once that was done, we had ourselves brought to a hotel, where we could eat and drink.

Later that morning Rev. Reederus and his elder, Mr. Van der Meulen, the agent for the Netherlands Steamship Company, came to visit us in the hotel. That visit was a real blessing to

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<sup>36</sup>I use the quoted Bible verse in place of Psalm 104:13 as sung from the traditional Dutch Book of Psalms and quoted here by the author. I could find no parallel version in English and, not being a poet, I restrain myself from translating this hymn with its complicated poetic Dutch. But I do treat you to the original Dutch version in Boer’s text.:

D’ onpeilbare zee bergt in haar ruimen schoot  
Een talloos tal van scheps’len, klein en groot,  
Die in haar diept’ al weemlend zich vergaren.  
Het golvend ruim der rustelooze baren  
Wordt steeds doorkruist van schepen, wijd en zijd;  
Dan zwemt en duikt het schubbig heir om strijd,  
Daar laat Gij zelfs den leviathan spelen,  
Den schrik der zee in hare vreugde deelen.

us. We could speak Dutch with them so that they were of great service to us. True, we had two maids, Froukje Leegstra and Cornelia Heemstra, but we had our hands more than full with the small children and our baggage. Our lack of English made things even more difficult.<sup>37</sup> Those two brothers came to help us in an excellent way. They helped us bring our goods to the train with which we departed to the West that evening at 8:30. After taking our farewell from them, we continued on our journey.

We traveled inland by train from that Monday evening till Wednesday 2:30 p.m. We had to transfer a couple of times along the way. It was very difficult for us to obtain the necessary food and drinks. At times we found ourselves in difficult situations. We understood “yes” and “no,” but that was about all. When the train would stop occasionally, we didn’t dare to go out, fearing that the train might take off without us. At Pittsburgh or Harrisburg the train stopped for a few minutes so that my wife and I went out for a cup of coffee, but we could not find any. It is for sure that ignorance can lead to straying. We experienced then that because of ignorance we were suffering from stomach pain. We had to go to the counter and could have obtained there more than we needed, but we had to leave it all there, fearing we might be left behind. Maid Cornelia<sup>38</sup> was in the train with our four children. Thus, without enjoying our cup of coffee, my wife and I had to go back to them and that’s how it went all along the trip.

A few times we went through some dark tunnels, where it was very dark and unpleasant. Sometime later, we read about a little girl in a train sitting next to her father with her hand in his. The train was traveling through a long, dark tunnel with many passengers afraid. Once they were out of the tunnel back into the light, someone asked that girl, “Were you afraid?” She responded, “No, I felt the hand of my Dad!” Sometimes a Christian pilgrim here on earth has to endure long and dark tunnels, but as long as we feel the hand of our Father in Christ, we will be comforted. The poet enjoyed that privilege when he wrote:

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Ik vrees niet, neen; schoon ik door duistre dalen,  
In doodsgevaar, bekommerd om moest dwalen,  
Gij blijft mij bij in alle tegenspoeden!  
Uw stok en staf zal mij altoos behoeden,  
Gij troost mijn ziel....

Yea, though I walk through death’s dark vale,  
Yet will I fear no ill,  
For Though are with me, and Thy rod  
And staff me comfort still.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>A graduate of a theological school did not know English?!

<sup>38</sup>This is the first we hear of Cornelia traveling with them. She apparently did not deserve much mention or attention, at least not in Hemkes’ selections of Boer’s notes.

<sup>39</sup>See “mother footnote” 10. Boer quotes the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 23, which can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWr0DrDewGM>. A close partial English-language parallel is found at 38:3 (1959) and no. 456:3 (2013) .

Wednesday at 3:30 a.m. we arrived at Fort Wayne, IN. We had to stay here till 8 a.m. It was especially helpful that there was someone in the station's refreshment room who spoke German. We got along well with him and we had coffee and everything else we desired. We also had the facility to brush the dust off our clothes and to wash ourselves. At 8 a.m. we stepped into the train to "Grand Rapids & Indiana." This train still goes through Grand Rapids daily even now. We longed for our destination fervently. More than once the question whether we were in the right train worried me. Will we actually arrive in Grand Rapids? Ignorance, uncertainty and fear can be painful, especially when traveling. Just imagine that we had landed in a wrong train, what terrible difficulties we would have had, especially since our oldest daughter was still sick. However, even then everything could still be straightened out.<sup>40</sup> But when we are on our journey to eternity it is necessary to keep asking the question whether we are on the straight and narrow, for if we make a mistake here, there will be no restoration there of any kind.

What actually consoled me in the midst of my doubt was, as I remember it, that a certain lady entered the train with us who also was heading for Grand Rapids. I constantly looked up to see if she was still on board, for I thought that she was likely more familiar with the area and would not make a mistake in this regard.

At 2:30 p.m. that day, the brakeman announced with a clear voice, "Grand Rapids, Union Depot!" That surely sounded good in our ears. Finally we have reached our place of destination!<sup>41</sup>

A few members of my future congregation were waiting for us at the station. They had come to meet us upon our arrival and to welcome us. Mr. W. Brink and his wife entered the train and greeted us. How pleasant that feels after such a long journey in a foreign country and amidst people whose language we did not understand.

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<sup>40</sup>Later, we read in the *Holland City News* that a mature young lady during the winter of 1847 in the course of transferring to another train in Fort Wayne was separated from her company. That group went West but she ended up in Grand Rapids and cried, for she missed her friends. She could understand no one, and there was no one who understood her. People talked to her in English, French, Swedish and German, but she shook her head and kept crying. A professor from Detroit came on the scene and asked her, according to the *News*, in Greek, even in Russian, but it was all in vain. Someone noticed that a while earlier a preacher named C. Van Raalte, from Holland MI had arrived. He was called in and saw immediately from her clothes that she was Dutch. He spoke to her in that language and she was so happy to hear her language spoken that she embraced him. Now everything fell into place as she was helped. Regardless of the difficult circumstances this girl found herself in, the solution finally was found. Not every traveler can help herself that easily.

<sup>41</sup>That was the same station where I alighted in 1958 when I came to Calvin College 85 years later by Greyhound bus.

After we had exited from the train and had greeted many members of the church, they took us to the parsonage on Commerce Street, but at that time called Spring Street. There also there were people waiting for us, who soon had a meal prepared for us. We ate and drank with joy in humbleness of heart, were soon satisfied and even had leftovers. It was a royal table that reminded us of the abundance in the land of "Uncle Sam." The first few days we had many visitors, people we knew and did not know.



## Chapter 11\*

### The Scope of Our Work in Grand Rapids (p. 93)

We soon were visited by fellow preachers. Rev. J. Noordewier, formerly pastor in Holland MI, came on Thursday and took us to show the city.<sup>42</sup> The friendly and faithful brother Pastor L. Rietdijk also visited us. His passing on to the Home of Eternal Light in 1889 was gain for Heaven, but a sad loss to the church, especially for the Muskegon First Christian Reformed Church, in which congregation Rev. Fles is now working for some years.

On Sunday morning, September 21, I was installed by Rev. Noordewier, who used as his text Philippians 2:29. I preached my inaugural that afternoon on basis of 1 Corinthians 2:2, while Noordewier preached another sermon in the evening on Philippians 1:29.

All this gave us material for humble gratitude, but family circumstances kept us sad, for our oldest daughter was still sick. Shortly after our arrival, Dr. Hazlewood came, but his medicines did not help. After three weeks, the doctor prescribed washing her with lukewarm salt water. What a simple means; it was a miracle for us how effectively that worked, for her pores opened and she soon was restored. The Name of the Lord be praised! The means that the Lord blesses are undoubtedly the best.

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<sup>42</sup>Hemkes' footnote: This city was at that time far from what it now is. In terms of area, number of factories, streets and buildings, there is a great difference. At the time even along Canal and Monroe streets, most buildings were wooden, whereas now we have tall, beautiful brick buildings, built high and airy, full of goods for every need and purpose. An old settler shared with us that Canal Street used to be a mud pool and that a large section was offered for sale to someone for the princely sum of \$45! Now there are tremendous buildings. There are neatly paved streets for every possible kind of vehicle and widely paved sidewalks. This all reminds us of that ancient proverb, "No city so handsome and so old, that was not built of huts untold." (In the original: "*Geen stad zoo prachtig en zoo oud, die niet uit hutten werd gebouwd.*")

It is possible that many of our fellow residents, who perform their daily tasks in this city, are not aware that many of their neighbours do their work underneath the city, but that is actually the case. From 60 to 90 feet beneath the surface within and around the city there is a crowd of workers who burrow and dig in the earth like moles. Daily they are busy digging for gypsum that is of great use for all types of masonry. When you go to the southern part of the city, a short distance from the city limits, you will find the entrance of the gypsum mine. Many people cannot find that entrance, but it is there, the entrance to tunnels of several miles in every direction from which workers have dug out this product for forty years or more with which our walls are built. These mines have gained Grand Rapids a famous reputation in America. There is even a state law to which the company of these mines have to strictly adhere. This law requires that pillars of 25 square feet must remain standing at regular intervals to ensure that the ground cannot collapse.

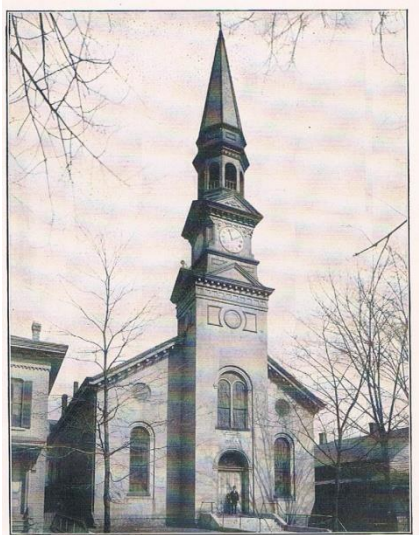
By the flickering of lanterns without glass, even less than the light of a torch, many people bring the plaster from the depth to the surface with the help of mules. It is worth your while to visit these mines.

As a unique example of how the Yankee can make use of all circumstances to make money, they grow edible mushrooms in the tunnels that are exhausted and otherwise not of any further use. The even temperature in these mines, something necessary for these plants, make this lucrative occupation possible. The operator of these mines plants around 200 pounds a week at 75 cents a pound, something that delivers him a neat profit of \$150 a week.

And so I was once again installed in my working environment and again had responsibility for a large congregation. I was happy to be here and believed that we were in God's will in that He had brought us to Grand Rapids in His grace. *There was at that time only one congregation of our denomination in this city.* Soon two furnaces were built under the church, while the stoves that used to be in the church were sold.

After some time there was a need for more space and so the galleries on both sides in the church were lengthened along the walls. When they were completed, there was room for about 1300 people! Every Sunday there would be a large crowd. The Lord gave His blessing so that I worked with great pleasure in this large congregation that covered the entire city.

The name of our denomination at that time was still "True Holland Reformed Church." In a synodical meeting in Chicago, this name was changed to "Holland Christian Reformed Church."



The church of the Christian Reformed Congregation at Spring Street  
(now Commerce St.)\*\*

\*\* Usually I would preach twice a Sunday; in the morning, on texts of my choosing; in the afternoon, on basis of the Heidelberg Catechism. At around 5 p.m., during the Catechism hour with the young people, I would treat the 37 articles of the Belgic Confession written by Guido de Bres and both approved and adopted by the Synod of Dordt.

On New Year's Eve, 1875, I preached about James 4:14. I did not feel well as I climbed the pulpit; at the end of the sermon I felt sick. The next day, New Year's morning, I felt so sick that I could not get up. I sent our maid to Mr. J. Gelock, who lived across the street from us, to tell him I was sick and would not be able to preach. One of the elders read a sermon.

I had contracted gall fever and became extremely sick. I could not preach for three successive Sundays. At the beginning of my sickness, my spirit was definitely not satisfied with God's will. I had so much to do in the Lord's work. I could not approve of my sickness. Poor fool that I was, as if the Lord needed me. In my mind I knew better. But praise to the Lord! I was led to recognize my foolishness and to confess before God, ask Him to forgive me my foolishness and to release me from it.

My prayer was heard and, since I continued to pray, the Lord caused the following mood to rise in my soul: Lord, I thank You that You made me sick. At that point I saw that the Lord had no need of me to do His work. And if He wanted to use me for that purpose, it was only due to the free goodness and grace of God that I was enabled. The Lord humbled me and once my soul arrived at that place and the Lord gave me the proper attitude of heart, I began to improve. God had accomplished His purpose and for me it was a good lesson. Thus the Lord knows how to lead His people to the most beneficial state, both now and in the distant past when David said in II Samuel 22:36, “You stoop down to make me great.” What appears to be to the disadvantage of His people, the Lord turns finally to their good, as Paul put it in Romans 8:28, “And we know that God works for the good of those who love Him.”

This life experience was a good preparation for me for my further work—to incline me to humbleness and meekness. How the Lord cares for His people to promote their essential well-being! When His people run the danger to rise up in pride, then the Lord sends them a thorn in the flesh, in order that His children remain small in their own eyes and God’s Name receive the honour. Such life experiences have deep meaning, especially for preachers of the Word to keep them more fruitful for the Lord in the midst of the congregation. Doesn’t pressure on milk produce butter? Does the vine suffer loss when it bleeds a little?

On July 14, 1874, a son was born to us, who received the name Gerard. The child was weak at birth and died 30 days later. When we lower one of our children down into the grave, it may appear that the distance from the present to the border of eternity becomes shorter for us. Once we have the children, no matter how small, we long to keep them, for they are of our flesh and blood, as Rev. P. Huet once put it in an emotional verse in his Afrikaner poetry under the title, “Small Children’s Shoes.”

Lovable little tikes	Kleine lieve telgen
Soothed on the lap,	Op den schoot gesust,
And by mothers’ lips	En door moederlippen
Kissed warm and red....	Warm en rood gekust....
Deeply saddened mothers,	Diep bedroefde moeders,
Turn your eyes away	Wendt uwe oogen af
From those children’s shoes,	Van die kinderschoentjes
From that somber grave.	Van het somber graf.
Lift your head to heaven;	Heft het hoofd naar boven;
Turn it to the Lord;	Wendt het naar den Heer;
He who to you had given	Hij die ‘t had gegeven
Again took what’s His away.... <sup>43</sup>	Name het Zijne weer....

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<sup>43</sup>Translation from Afrikaans by Jan H. Boer.

In those days, we had few congregations, even fewer preachers and still fewer students. The last were four in number: C. Bode, G. Broene, J. Van der Werp and C. Vorst. They were being taught by the respected brother Rev. D. J. Vander Werp of Muskegon.<sup>44</sup> In 1874, two students were under his tutelage, namely, B. Mollema and E. Van der Vries. They were examined and declared eligible for a call to the holy office.

Unfortunately, in the spring of 1875 Vander Werp contracted cancer of the mouth,<sup>45</sup> so that during the summer of that year he had great difficulty with the performance of his work. The cancer progressed so aggressively that by the fall he had become totally incapable for any work. In consultation with the sick brother, Classis Michigan decided it was best that the students move to Grand Rapids, where Boer would become their teacher.<sup>46</sup> And so the above four brothers came to Grand Rapids.

Mr. G. Hoeksema had already been my elder in Niezijl, the Netherlands and had come to Grand Rapids in May, 1874, together with his wife and two daughters, in order, with the will of God, to be trained here as preacher of the Gospel. I had already given him a year of training by the time the students came from Muskegon. He was now enrolled together with those other four.

When I arrived here in Grand Rapids in 1873, Douwe Vander Werp was editor of *De Wachter*, a publication of our church that appeared every two weeks. This changed in 1875, when Pastor J. Noordewier and I were appointed as co-editors to help the suffering brother. But as his cancer progressed, he withdrew himself and the two of us now had to care for *De Wachter* together for the first time. From now on the magazine would be printed in Grand Rapids and, since I lived there, I was to serve as chief editor as well as proofreader. In this way the range of my responsibilities increased greatly. But the Lord gave me joy, light and strength for all the work. Nevertheless, over time my responsibilities became too taxing. I made a declaration to that extent to the Classis meeting held in Grand Rapids in December, 1875. They recognized that my load was too heavy and impossible for one person to carry by himself. Just think: I was the pastor of the large Spring Street congregation where I preached three times each Sunday, then there was visiting the sick and conducting funerals, teaching students and serving as editor, etc., etc. Classis Michigan decided then that at the Synod in February, 1876, in Chicago they would pay attention to this and take steps to ameliorate this situation.

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<sup>44</sup>For the full story of Douwe J. Vander Werp, see Janet Sjaarda Sheeres, *Son of Secession: Douwe J. Vander Werp*. The Historical Series of the Reformed Church in America, in cooperation with Origins Studies in Dutch-American History, No. 52. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2006. For reference to his role as trainer of pastors, see pp. 148, 154-155. He also features in Harry H. Boer, *God's Deacon*, pp. 240, 259, 260, 301.

<sup>45</sup>Sjaardema, pp. 158-164.

<sup>46</sup>For references to Boer as professor of theology, see Sjaarda Sheeres, pp. 148 (footnote 10), 161, 162, 164.



## Chapter 12\*

### The Scope of My Work in Grand Rapids (continued) (p. 103)

That meeting of the Synod, at that time called “General Meeting,” was held in February, 1876, in Chicago. Though this was my first time to attend this meeting, they chose me to serve as President. After all the preparatory items on the agenda such as handing in the letter of mandate and reading of the minutes had come to their end, the question was raised about who should be appointed teacher of the theological students. After some discussion, a vote was taken, the result of which was that I was appointed professor with an annual salary of \$1300, with the stipulation that I would arrange my own living quarters. In consultation with the representatives from Grand Rapids, it was decided that, should I accept this appointment, I could stay in the parsonage along with my family till the congregation had gotten a replacement, but that I would preach to the congregation twice every Sunday, while the congregation would contribute \$400 to the salary the meeting had promised me, as long as they were vacant. This was in accordance with the wish of the congregation. Thus, I returned from Chicago with the brothers as a Professorial appointee.

This appointment was a most important issue for me. My prayer was: Lord, what is Your will? Shall I accept this appointment or decline? No one can tell me Your will infallibly. Give me some hints. Left to myself, I am in darkness and it is a question of whether I am qualified. In everything I am in need of Your enlightening grace.

After prayerful consideration for two weeks, paying attention to the hints from divine Providence, I reached the decision to accept the call. There was a need for a professor; the students were eager; the church desired one, brother Vander Werp was disabled, while there was little chance of healing after the cancer under his tongue deteriorated and his strength ebbed away. On April 1, 1876, the Lord freed him from his suffering and, we firmly believe, he received the reward of grace reserved for faithful servants.

The first three months of 1876 were highly significant for me. I was sick in January, but the Lord healed me. Internally, my soul was far from empty after the Lord was near me with His fellowship and refreshed my soul. That is how things stood at the beginning of another period in my career—most weighty and highly responsible.

In March, I commenced my work at the Theological School about to be established. Here, too, the word of the Lord in Isaiah 42:16 was fulfilled with respect to my person.

On the afternoon of Sunday, March 12, 1876, I preached my farewell sermon on basis of Ephesians 6:14. A huge crowd was in attendance. In this manner I terminated my official service

in the Spring Street Church, now called Commerce Street, in the hope that they would soon receive another brother to care for the needs of the congregation.

On Wednesday, March 15, I was installed in the morning as Professor by Rev. S. Baron, at that time the pastor in Niekerk MI. My entry into this position that evening was marked by my lecture, "The Education of the Future Servant of the Gospel." We analyzed this training as:

1. Absolutely necessary
2. Extremely difficult
3. Very economical

Thus I commenced with the education of the students. It is true, my work was limited in scope. I faced a wide field of scholarship, but there I was, all alone, expected to cover all the literary and theological disciplines! But I carry within me the conviction that, looking at all the consequences, my work in the Lord has not been in vain. Eternity will reveal this and time has already demonstrated that the Lord wants to be glorified by small things and even by that which is nothing, so that our praise be in Him alone.

How deep are the ways of God! When I was a student and, later, pastor, it had never occurred to me that the Lord would one day send me to North America to work in His vineyard there and, still later, to train young men in the service of the Word. Retrospectively looking at the way God led me even with my unworthy attitude, I must affirm it: My Father has blessed me in every way. He has kept His word and confirmed His faithfulness. It is fitting that I acknowledge His Name gratefully and I may declare in faith: My expectation is from Him. I know from experience that for those who love God, all things will work for their good.

Thus I performed my tasks in the school which at that time was housed upstairs in the School for Christian Education of the youth of the Williams Street congregation, whose property it was. They made these upstairs rooms available free of charge to the denomination for the training of our students, whereby the latter was obligated to them as they freely acknowledged.

We lived in the parsonage, while on Sundays I would preach twice to the congregation and even accepted some responsibilities for teaching catechism classes.

In the spring of 1877, Rev. J. Kremer, then the pastor in Wansewerd, Friesland, the Netherlands, was called by the Spring Street congregation. The pastor declined the first call, but the congregation would not let him go and called him a second time. Fortunately, this time he accepted the call and arrived on May 30, 1877 along with his wife and three children in the company of Rev. G. K. Hemkes and his family. The latter had accepted a call to the Vriesland, Michigan congregation and moved there.

A few days earlier we had moved to 156 South Division Street and Kremer moved into the parsonage. On Sunday, June 3, I installed him in his congregation. That afternoon Kremer delivered his inaugural sermon with the words of I Samuel 3:16. From there on, I usually preached only once a Sunday, whether in the Spring Street church or in the church the congregation had newly built on East Street. Already at the time we arrived in Grand Rapids, many Dutchmen lived there, especially from Groningen, who were members of my church there. In consultation with our Church Council, one of the elders had already begun a catechism class there, a project that was so blessed that the Council decided to buy a number of plots in the area where the large church of East Street stands today, to build a small church there. We were convinced that in the near future a congregation would arise there. That church was built and one of our students would preach there for the time being.

Reverend Kremer served the Spring Street church a little over two years. In August, 1879, he preached his farewell sermon after he had accepted a call from the church at South Holland, Illinois, and moved there. Now the congregation was once again vacant, with the result that I would preach twice a Sunday.

From the beginning of 1875, I had served as chief editor of *De Wachter*, together with Rev. J. Noordewier, who was co-editor. But because I had so many responsibilities and many hands make light work, Reverend Hemkes was appointed chief editor in 1878, a task he performed for six years. That lightened my load considerably.

As far as my responsibilities at the small Theological School were concerned, they were not without blessing. At the General Meeting of the denomination in 1877, two students, G. Broene and G. Hoeksema, were examined and declared eligible for a call. Shortly thereafter, Brother Broene received a call from the congregation of Noordeloos and Brother Hoeksema, from Zeeland. Both accepted their calls. On August 5, I installed candidate Broen at Noordeloos with the text II Timothy 6:20. The following Sunday, August 12, I installed candidate Hoeksema in Zeeland, using as text I Timothy 4:16. Thus, the first two students of our school were sent out into the vineyard.

At the beginning of the establishment of our School, I was quite often worried about what would become of our institution. Our denomination was so small and limited; the School, such a tender plant; and I, the only teacher. But it has pleased the Lord not to leave our efforts without blessing.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup>At the very moment I am doing the first draft translation of this very paragraph, on June 1, 2018, 9 p.m., I learn that Calvin College is scheduled soon to take on the status of Calvin University! (Marian Van Til, *Christian Courier*, May 28, 2018, p. 16.) It currently has 3800 students from 45 US states, 5 Canadian provinces and 60 other countries.



THE FIRST CLASS OF THE NEWLY ESTABLISHED THEOLOGICAL SCHOOL \*\*



G. Hoeksema  
J. Van der Werp

G. Broene  
Prof. Boer

H. Tempel  
C. Bode

H. Douwstra  
C. Vorst

In 1879, students C. Bode and T. Van den Bosch were examined and admitted to the service of the Word. Bode was called by Niekerk, where I installed him with the text I Peter 5:1-4. Candidate Van den Bosch was appointed missionary and was installed as such.

During the first years of my work at the School, I preached quite often in various congregations. After Kremer left for South Holland, I again preached twice every Sunday at Spring Street. That continued till August 1881, when Reverend J. H. Vos of Ommen in The Netherlands accepted the call and soon arrived along with his wife, two sons and two daughters.

There was a great need for preachers in those days, so that the churches would not allow me to rest. The Lord blessed all the efforts; several congregations were established so that the denomination spread out. The congregation at East Street was officially established in 1879, while in November, 1882, the third church in the city was founded, namely Alpine Avenue.

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We also had more brothers who desired to be trained as preachers. They were H. Douwstra, J. Post, P. Schut, H. Tempel and H. Bode.

In 1880, student Douwstra passed his final exam, was accepted as candidate, called to Collendoorn and installed. After he had preached his inaugural, we all went to the parsonage, where many friends had gathered, including Mr. and Mrs. Ter Keurs from Hamilton, Michigan. This brother said to me, "Pastor, you should come and preach at our place." I responded, "Yes, fine, but then you will have to give me a date for when this will be convenient for you." In due time that letter came and I went and preached in the Ter Keurs home. Later, when I reflected on this preach-and-visit event, it occurred to me that this was the first instigation for the establishment of a congregation at Overijssel, near Hamilton.

In June 1881, students H. Bode, J. Post, P. Schut and H. Tempel were examined and declared available for a call. They all soon received a call. I installed Post in the East Street congregation. Bode became the preacher at Steamboat Rock, now called Wellsburg, Iowa; Schut at Kelloggsville, Michigan and Tempel at Rochester, New York.

During 1882, Reverend L. J. Hulst transferred with his entire congregation in Grand Rapids from the Reformed Church to our denomination.

Gerhardus, the oldest son of Reverend J. H. Vos, was appointed to our School as assistant teacher in Greek and Latin. This youthful brother had already received scholarly training in The Netherlands. After his examination in 1883, as candidate for our denomination he went to Princeton to continue his studies.

The year 1883 was richly blessed both for me and for the Church, for after brother Gerhardus Vos was examined and ordained, others followed: E. Broene, R. Drukker, P. Ekster and Joh. Van der Werp.

After the congregation of Holland MI had been vacant during 1883, they requested that I with my family would move into their parsonage during the summer vacation and serve as their pastor. We agreed to that request. In the fall of the same year, Reverend J. De Bruin had been called by this church and arrived from Niezijl, The Netherlands. I installed him there. After scarcely two years in Holland, De Bruin moved over to the Reformed Church in Paterson, New Jersey.

Thus Holland was once again vacant. They again requested us to spend the summer vacation with them. We accepted and so I once again worked in that congregation. It was a deep joy for me to live with my family for a few months in another place and there to do pastoral work, for to preach and to serve the congregation was my greatest joy. Generally speaking, the pulpit was a

most pleasant place for me. Often I have said, “When I am on the pulpit, it is as if I breathe a different atmosphere. It happened several times that I would climb the pulpit not feeling so well, but afterwards would descend feeling chipper again. Preaching affected me as a kind of medicine.

As to my calling to the office of teacher, I am quite conscious that the Lord has called me to this service and this consciousness has strengthened me much now and then in my work whenever I experienced difficulties. To believe firmly that God had called me and placed me in this service in general constituted great comfort for me and often spared me from discouragement. Whenever I would reflect on how the Lord obviously had opened the way in His providence to the service of the Gospel, or how the Lord had brought me as farmhand to Mrs. Graslander and that this then became the means to open the way for me to study, I would feel so thankful. It became retroactively clear in every way that the Lord had done all this for the purpose of having me work in His vineyard. I was increasingly confirmed in this conviction through my experience and the state of my emotions.

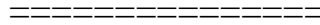
I believe that anyone who thinks he must become a minister, must seriously search himself whether he has a taste for that work and whether it is really to lead sinners to Christ. He should especially pay attention at hints and leadings of divine providence and place himself constantly with holy earnestness before the face of God with complete subjection to His will. I believe that the sentiment, “Search yourself carefully, yes, very carefully,” holds definitely also in this context: whether you love Jesus and out of love for the Triune God and for the salvation of sinners wish to serve the Lord Jesus Christ with the Gospel. When the Lord truly calls someone, then He will certainly prepare the way.

Because the workload at the School kept increasing, because more subjects had to be taught than before and because brother Gerhardus Vos left and my strength to teach all these courses was insufficient, Reverend Hemkes, at the time minister in Vriesland, was appointed in 1883 as Assistant Lecturer.

In the Synod of June 1884, held in Grand Rapids, Hemkes was appointed as full Lecturer at our School, an appointment he accepted. In September, 1884, he was installed at the Convocation by the President of the Curatorium, Reverend L. J. Hulst. His text was Matthew 28:20. The main theme was “The Anchor of Our Hope.” Hemkes accepted his new task that very evening with a lecture about “The Propaedeutic Disciplines in Relation to Theology.”

We had ample reasons to thank the Lord for His mercies, especially because during the summer of the same year the following brothers were examined with positive results: J. Gulker, P. Kosten, J. Riemersma and F. Wilandt. In 1885, brother Heyns, who had already studied at Kampen, was examined and accepted into the ministry of the Word. In 1886, we rejoiced that the

students H. Huizingh, G. De Jong, A. Keizer and M. Markusse passed their finals. The last three had also studied for some time in The Netherlands.



After we left the parsonage on Commerce Street, we lived about two years on South Division. Later, we bought a house on La Grave for \$2100. In order to make it homey for us, we spent several hundred dollars on renovation. We were thankful and believed it to be in God's way for us to obtain this house. In the expectation of His blessing, we moved there on May 1, 1879.

It is a blessing to have your own *house* and an even greater blessing to have a *home*. We enjoyed both of these privileges. \*\*



Our House at 124 La Grave Avenue

The ancients had it right with their pithy sayings, "Your own hearth is worth gold," as well as "East, West; home best."<sup>48</sup> Also for our material blessings we could hardly be thankful enough and among them the foremost was:

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<sup>48</sup> Original sayings: "*Eigen haard is geld waard*" and "*Oost, west; thuis best.*" My personal experience is that home ownership may be worth gold, especially in the Vancouver of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, but gold is not life. It is not worth the restless nights and worries that come with maintenance, at least, not for me. The five years we have lived in our own house were full of stress. We have been very happy as tenants by choice for seventeen years ever since, even though we missed out on the gold of appreciation. That ancient saying has been overtaken for me in Vancouver.

A house that protect us can  
From hail, snow and wind;  
There any poor and virtuous man  
Hardly can bread and shelter find.

Een huis, dat ons beschutten kan  
Voor hagel, sneeuw en wind;  
Daar menig arm en deugzaam man  
Nauw brood en schuilplaats vindt.<sup>49</sup>

Love, suffering, pleasure and pain—we have experienced them all in this our home. Serious trials came, but at other times we were encircled with mild streams of God’s compassion. The more I pay attention to God’s leading of me and my family, the clearer it becomes for me that the Lord has turned threatening dangers away from us so many times. Yes, in truth, blessed is the person who sits in the shelter of the Most High and overnights in the shadow of the Almighty! When the Lord gives us something in His grace, then we are to gratefully acknowledge such with all our heart!

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<sup>49</sup>“*Winter Avondlied*, stanza 2, from the section “*Geestelijke Liederen*” in *Leeuwarder Almanac*, n. p.; n. d. English translation mine.

## Chapter 13\*

### Sick in Zeeland

In November, 1886, I went to Zeeland to preach there on Thanksgiving Day, November 25. I did not feel well when I alighted from the train at Zeeland and was taken to the house of Mr. de Jager. I had caught a fever that became so bad during the night that a doctor had to come. They sent news to my family that I was sick. My wife and my oldest son, Egbertus, came. I did not preach and became *very* ill. So we make our plans, but God directs His ways. Dr. Huizinga checked me over and the following day, in consultation with him, Dr. Van den Berg of Zeeland was also called in. Both of them examined me. I received different medicines along with the warning to be careful, since my sickness was dangerous. My prayer was:

Bewijs, o Heer! Uw mededoogen;  
Verhoed mijn ondergang;  
Ik ben beklemd en bang;  
Het zwaar verdriet doorknaagt mijn oogen,  
Het does mijn ziel bezwijken,  
En 's lichaam's krachten wijken.

Show mercy, Lord, to me distressed,  
And send my soul relief;  
My life is spent with bitterness,  
My strength consumed with grief.<sup>50</sup>

And the Lord proved His compassion. He made my suffering bearable. A change for the good soon came to me and, according to the riches of His mercy, I experienced what Israel's singer testified:<sup>51</sup>

When once bitter adversity presses	Perst eens de bitter tegenspoed
The fearful soul in the evening,	Des avonds, het benauwd gemoed
And brings it to moaning and complaint ;	Tot naar gejammer and geklag;

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<sup>50</sup>See "mother footnote" 10. Boer quotes the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 31:9-10. A close partial English-language parallel is found at no. 53:7-8 (1959).

<sup>51</sup>See "mother footnote" 10. Boer quotes the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 30:4, according to online information, but I see no similarity between the quote and that Psalm. Neither do I see a close English parallel anywhere. What follows is my own loose translation.

Hardly does the morning early call  
up the day,  
Or God grants, in place of suffering,  
Reasons for cheer and joyfulness.

Nauw rijst des morgens vroeg  
de dag,  
Of God verleent in plaats van lijden  
Weer stof tot juichen en verblijden.

I improved enough that after some time I could leave my bed for a few moments and would sometimes lay on the sofa wrapped in a blanket. Many friends paid me visits and the communion of the saints cheered me up. My wife stayed with me continuously, while our children visited me by turns. I improved so much that by December 11 we could return home. Definitely, I was weak, but strong enough to be transported. I was thankful and could sing to the Lord with joy in my heart:

Mijn God! Gij hebt mij op mijn klacht,  
Genezen, en mijn smart verzacht;  
Gij hebt mijn ziel, door angst beroerd,  
Als van uit het graf weer opgevoerd;  
Gij hebt het leven mij geschonken.

I worship you, O Lord,  
for you have raised me up;  
I cried to you for help  
and you restored my life.  
You brought me back from death  
and saved me from the grave.  
(2013 edition)

O Lord, by Thee delivered,  
I Thee with songs extol;  
My foes Thou hast not suffered  
To glory o'er my fall.  
O Lord, my God, I sought Thee,  
And Thou didst heal and save;  
Thou, Lord, from death didst ransom  
And keep me from the grave.<sup>52</sup>  
(1959 edition)

Thus the Lord once again led us through the way of trial, but His chastisement was fatherly. O, how good it is that when He chastises us, honey still clings to the rod. Once again He had a goal in this visitation in the way of His divine disposition. Nothing happens to us accidentally. But when He visits us with sickness, then we do well to turn into ourselves and realize that He has something to say to us in our healing. But we also realize that when we experience oppression, it

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<sup>52</sup>See "mother footnote" 10. Boer quotes the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 30:2-3. A close partial English-language parallel is found at no. 52:1 (1959) and 668:1 (2013).

is no cause for joy, but, rather more of sadness. Through that it can bring about a peaceful harvest of righteousness for those who accept the lesson.

We read the story of a little boy who had to deliver a parcel from a freighter to a grocer. He was assigned to this task by his father, who was a shipper. A friend of his father met the boy and said to him, "My boy, this parcel is way too heavy for you to carry." The boy answered, "Not really. My Dad put it on my shoulder and he knows exactly what I can carry." So it is with the Lord in Heaven, who weighs all that happens to us in our lives. He gives strength according to the weight of our cross and we may believe that He makes no mistakes. Ah, if only we were more child-like in our soul.

My elderly hosts, the de Jagers, were very friendly to us and treated us as their own children, for which we are greatly indebted to them.

After we returned home, I was still weak for quite a number of days, but healing took place as the morning light and as the Lord strengthened me. For a long time I did not go to school to teach, but the students came to our place to take lessons.

On December 26, I preached again in Spring Street and shortly thereafter I resumed my work on a regular basis.

### **Increase in Congregations**

The preaching of the Gospel was blessed. The number of congregations increased. In 1886, a little church was built along Grandville Avenue. At first, professors and theological students would lead the services, and on March 8, 1887, a congregation was established and Rev. W. R. Smidt was called. He accepted that call and was installed on December 23, 1887. He served there with fruitfulness. Many joined the congregation, so that the building soon was too small. They first added a gallery, but the congregation continued to expand, so that by the summer of 1889 it became necessary to enlarge the building.

Because the Alpine Avenue church also became too small, a new congregation was established on May 26, 1889, along Crosby Street with Rev. G. Broene as their first pastor.

### **Increase in Pastors**

As the number of congregations increased, the need for more ministers grew also. To the degree that the work in the Lord's vineyard increased, the Lord of the harvest provided also more labourers. When in 1865 in Kampen eighteen of us students were admitted to the ministry of the Word and sacraments, there were some who said, "If all the students presently at our School have passed their exams and been admitted to the ministry, then some will have to wait a long time for the market to absorb them, for there are not that many congregations. And you know



what actually happened? Every year we were still short and even now there are vacant congregations, even though there are now two schools: the one at Kampen and another at the Free University in Amsterdam.

In America we have the same history: every year there is a shortage. But the lord keeps increasing the number of preachers. So we had the privilege in the summer of 1887 that J. B. Hoekstra and M. Van Vessen successfully passed their exams and in 1888, A. Meyer, E. Van den Berge, P. Van Vliet and J. Trompen. In view of the many courses to be taken, *it was decided that year to extend the theological course by one year, thus lengthening it to three years.*<sup>53</sup> In 1889, the brothers E. Breen and J. Manni were examined and admitted to the ministry and in 1890, A. Van den Heuvel, J. de Vries and J. Wijngaarden were declared eligible for a call after passing their examinations.

In 1889, our School lost a promising student, namely the youthful Van der Meer, in a painful way. He arrived by train from Holland, Michigan, on a dark evening. He was so desperate to come home that he did not wait till he arrived at Union Depot, but at Fifth Avenue he jumped off the train while it was still moving, so that he had to be brought home in a coach. What a painful circumstance for him, his parents and his friends! He lived only a few more days, during which he accused himself of carelessness. But he rested in the providence of God, without Whose will no swallow falls off the roof and no hair from our head. When we visited him, it occurred to us that his pattern of suffering imaged the pulpit of admonition and consolation. He passed away in the joyous confidence of faith in Christ his Saviour. This especially consoled those who bore the agony of this painful loss.

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<sup>53</sup>Italics by translator. That was the situation during my time there and yielded a mere BA after three years of postgraduate studies! It has since been upgraded to four years and yields various degrees, the basic one being M. Div.

## Chapter 14\*

### Family Trials

In 1888, our son Henry was ailing and in general bad health. At first it did not look all that serious, but his sickness did undermine his strength. The doctor came, examined him and gave him medicine. That appeared to restore his strength for some time, but the basic problem did not go away. He had for some time taken art lessons to learn how to draw. It seemed he enjoyed it and might have had an exceptional inclination for this. Therefore we encouraged him to really concentrate on it. He had drawn a number of portraits as well as some landscapes for our family, which till this day are proof of how advanced he was. He did not yet know what kind of work would become his life occupation. But suppose the Lord would one day call him to the ministry, even then the art of drawing would not be superfluous, for that could generate a sense of the beauty of God's creation. Even though many do not realize it, it remains true that in the midst of so much study, the reading of beautiful poems and the drawing of natural objects civilizes, ennobles the spirit, softens and refines. But his teacher left for Paris and so for a long time he had no work.

Soon it appeared that a change took place in his weak health. It seemed that he was healed all the way to January, 1889. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of that month there was a public meeting of the Young Men's Association. Representatives from other such associations were also to come and present various readings and speeches. Since Henry was curious and interested, he wanted to attend this occasion. With the doctor's permission he went, but when he returned home he felt himself sick again. That was at the same time that our oldest daughter and my wife also were sick. Thus I had three sick people at home: son Henry, daughter Jetsche and wife Jetsche.

One evening I sent our Gerard to the pharmacy, but since it was dark, he did not feel like it and said with a sad voice, "Everybody is sick here!" I said, "Be careful, my boy, who knows how soon you yourself will be sick also!" It was not long afterwards that Gerard did become sick. Now I had four sick patients at home. The place was like a hospital.

Another evening later, around eleven o'clock, I went to the kitchen to prepare something for my patients. My spirit was calm and I was perfectly at ease with the will of the Lord. I kissed the rod with which my Father chastised us. I said, "It is good, Lord! It is good." I was learning to accept suffering and felt patient and subject to Him, I had difficulty finding help and asked Elsjé Starkenburg to come and help me taking care of the sick. She agreed and came. She carried out her tasks extremely seriously. She was the best ever caregiver for us. May the Lord graciously reward her for her generous helpfulness to us!

The Lord blessed the means we employed. We all thought that our sick were on the mend. We had reason for gratitude and felt something of what also is found in the Psalms:

Uw krankheen kent en liefderijk geneest;  
Die van 't verderf uw leven wil verschoonen,  
Met goedheid en barmhartigheen u kronen,  
Die in den nood uw Redder is geweest.<sup>54</sup>

(Who) knows your sickness and heals lovingly;  
Who wants to save your life from perdition,  
To crown you with goodness and compassion,  
Who in distress has been your Saviour.

Soon thereafter Henry became sick again, but after some time he recovered to such an extent that he was able to work again. But at first he could not walk at all. I bought him crutches on which he leaned. He was crippled and that did not improve. Apart from that, he felt himself better than was the case earlier.

On May 12, 1889, I preached in the Spring Street church on Malachi 3:3-4. I selected this text especially with an eye to our Henry's sickness and his initial healing. The Lord had undoubtedly something to say to us.

Later, Henry became very sick again and weak. He was exhausted. We consulted a number of physicians. The one advised us to send him to New Mexico; the other, for a long time to Montana. But the great obstacle here was that Henry was too weak and could not help himself. No way.

During our vacation in the summer of 1890, we left with him to Graafschap, Michigan, and rented a cottage on Lake Michigan, where our children lived with Henry. At the time we still had a horse and coach and often visited our children. On Sundays they would all come to the parsonage in Graafschap, where we lived during the vacation. There we consulted with the local physicians, Doctors Manting and Lendring, but nothing helped our patient. Early September we all returned to Grand Rapids.

Our patient's sickness gradually intensified. He suffered much and was sorely tested. At first, the physicians talked of rheumatism; later, about heart pain. He also suffered in his glands. Subsequently, his spinal cord was attacked. At times he bore unbearable pain. At one time we were awakened in the middle of the night with a fierce shock caused by his loud scream of pain. It was a terrible stabbing pain in his back that caused this yell. I walked to the doctor immediately, who gave him some pain pills. At another time, on the advice of the doctor we applied a special kind of plaster to his back that caused him acute pain. For a long time we had him in a bed in our living room, but his back was so painful that he often could not stand it when

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<sup>54</sup>See "mother footnote" 10. Boer quotes the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 103:3-4. A very slow version can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pRLOCF0ZPpY>. I have not been able to identify an English parallel to the above, but English versions of the Psalm as a whole can be found at no.'s 200-205 (1959). The translation is mine.

with the three of us we would turn him over. His suffering was severe and long-standing. And there we stood as parents and siblings around the sickbed of our beloved patient, watching his suffering and hearing his cries of agony, with deep, deep compassion in our hearts, but all the same totally powerless to render him the help he needed and we were so eager to give. Oh, how puny and helpless we human beings are!

We recently read of a pious woman who reflected about Malachi 3:2-3. As Reverend H. H. D. Langerei told the story in a Yearbook of our Church, the text deals with the trials the Lord inflicted on His people and the glorious consequences that would result. However, one thing there remained unclear to her, namely *why* it read, "He shall sit." She went to a pious goldsmith and asked him why the text said that the Lord *sits* as "a refiner and purifier of silver." Why not "He *stands*," purifying the children of Levi! The pious man set a container with silver on the fire and requested the woman to sit and to observe the melting mass. The silver moved about restlessly and became turbid and cloudy. Suddenly a film seemed to pull away from it and the mass became still and began to glitter, so that both saw their faces reflected on the surface. The goldsmith then removed the container and said, "You see, Mina, this is what we call the "sparkle" of melted silver. As soon as that appears, the silver must *immediately* be removed for otherwise it will again become turbid. As we goldsmiths sit down during the smelting process to observe the precise moment, so the Lord waits carefully when His children are in the heat of their trial, for the moment at which the restless turbulence subsides, peace returns and *He again sees His image in their hearts*. Once that happens, the trial has achieved its goal and the Lord pulls him out of the fire. That's why it says, "He *sits* as He refines!"

We firmly believe that this is how the Lord worked with Henry. He brought him into the heat of trials till He saw His image in him. Henry was very patient in his suffering and worked seriously on his eternal future. I do not remember hearing even one single word of complaint from his lips. Often I, along with others, would speak with him about the way of salvation and he loved to hear and speak about it. Once I asked him, "Henry, my dear boy, if you are going to die, on which basis would you enter eternity?" He answered, "Only on the all-sufficient righteousness of Christ, Dad." My joy was complete.

His sickness became more serious and his end was near. On Sunday evening, October 19, we all gathered around Henry's bed. Egbertus stood closest to him and Henry slung his arms around his neck and said, "Oh, Bert! Pray for a new heart, for then you will come to our Aunt and to me." As we stood around his bed, I began to weep. He said, "Oh, Dad, do not weep because of me, for it will be much better for me there than I have it here." On October 20, 1890, he passed away quietly and blessedly in the Lord, at the age of twenty years and ten days.

On the one hand, his passing was very painful. I was touched deeply, but we were comforted strongly in our loss because we did not have to mourn as those without hope.

A few weeks before his death he did profession of his faith. During his last few weeks he was very eager to profess his Lord and Saviour publicly. Pastor J. Y. DeBaun and his elder C. Verburg interviewed him at our house and admitted him as confessing member of the congregation. He was too weak to go and do this before the Church Council.

Though our hearts were bleeding and our eyes shed tears, the Lord saved us from rebelling against Him. We hope for the time, already determined in His eternal counsel, to meet our Henry again in Heaven in order never to be separated again. In Heaven, God will wipe away all tears from the eyes of those who have totally loved Him here on earth. Death shall be no more, nor mourning, crying or pain, “for the old order of things has passed away” (Revelation 21:4). How blessed it is for a poor sinner to have a God for his heart, a Surety for his guilt and an infallible Guide who leads him not only *to*, but also *over* the Jordan of death to the eternal rest of the saints in order to glorify the Triune God perfectly and eternally in the great company where God will be all in all.

Comment by compiler Professor Hemkes: In this fairly long description of domestic circumstances, disease and worries, and then Henry’s final passing away, we see how loving and caring a father our brother was among his family and what a heart full of love he had for his wife and children.

#### Work at School

In the year 1891, students J. Groen and Gerrit A. Haan were examined and declared candidates for holy service. Groen was called to Zeeland and Haan to Oakdale Park. I ordained both of them.

In the summer of 1891, student G. Jansen became ill. He received careful nursing at the Heyboer home in Grand Rapids. Had it pleased God, he would later be married to Maria Heyboer, but the Lord took him in October, 1891, before he had completed his studies.

Thus we people can make all the plans we want and imagine beautiful ideals as we stand on the threshold with a full, rich life ahead of us, but the Lord can unexpectedly come in between and say, “Come back, you human children!” At that point the expression of the poet is confirmed:

Verbergt G’o God! Uw glansrijk aangezicht,  
Dan sidd’ren zij, op ‘t missen van dat licht.  
Dat troostrijk licht, waardoor zij ‘t licht verwerven.  
Neemt Uwe hand hun adem weg, zij sterven,  
Zij worden stof gelijk zij ijn geweest.<sup>55</sup>

When You, oh God, hide Your glorious face,  
They tremble upon the missing of that light,  
That consoling light from which *they* obtain *their* light.  
Your hand takes away their breath, they die,  
They return to the dust from where they came.

In the spring of 1892 we received the sad news that Mr. Huberts, also one of our students, died in Dakota.

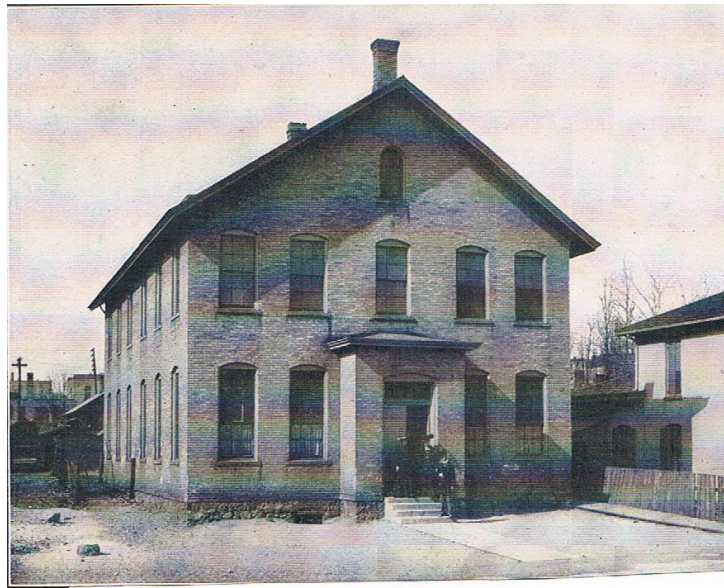
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<sup>55</sup>See “mother footnote” 10. Boer quotes the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 104:29. I have identified a partial English parallel at 207:4 (1959). The translation is mine.

## Chapter 15\*

### The Williams Street School Building \*\*

The following is a short description of the schoolhouse that served as Theological School from 1876- 1892, and of which we have many memories.



The School Building on Williams Street

During the time there were few students and the denomination did not have its own building to serve as Theological School, It was a great blessing to have access to part of such a school building that the Spring Street (now Commerce Street) congregation graciously provided free of charge for the training of our students. The rooms on the main floor were used to teach young people. The upstairs was used for two purposes as will soon become clear.

There was a fairly large room at the north end that I used daily to give my lectures. Besides a long table, there were many chairs and even a platform with a sort of pulpit. Friday evenings we held our “Circle” meetings there.

In the south-eastern corner of the building was a room for the second lecturer (since 1984), Rev. Hemkes. He would sit at the table during his lectures, while the students sat in a row of chairs along the wall. They all tried in their own way to make it as comfortable as they could, often with their heads against the wall. Once the school year was over and it was time for a cleanup, it was possible for anyone who entered the room to easily determine the number of students, since each of them left a dark mark on the wall with their heads.

And since those upstairs rooms were not only used for the school but also served as residence for the custodian and his family, they were assigned three rooms at the west side of the building. The south-western room was used as a study for any student who might be boarding with the Van Rijn family.

That south-eastern room of the second lecturer was not used only for that purpose but also served as lunch room from noon to 1 pm. Should it happen that the lecture spilled over into lunch time, an alert was given by a soft knock on the door, which would mean, "Time's up." That was faithfully carried out.

Since that south-eastern room was small, it often happened that in the afternoon various students would complain of headache, but the room was not blamed for this. There was an atmosphere of satisfaction, seriousness, interest and diligence.

The luxury of a large library was not part of the scene. In the south-eastern part of the large room was a cupboard with the most necessary dictionaries etc. for communal use. The lecturers tried as much as possible to have books in their home libraries that would deal with all sorts of questions raised out of mere curiosity or necessity. But when, for example, questions arose about how the ancient manuscripts of the Bible looked originally before the art of printing was discovered, or about the appearance of a polyglot or a hexapla, a critical edition of the Hebrew Bible in six versions, students would have to be satisfied with verbal descriptions. There were no books with illustrations in the library. We did find a few examples of manuscripts of Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Alexandrinus. We would copy them with copy-ink, and laid that on a hectograph so that we could form some kind of an idea. It took amazing effort and much money to copy the Bible so beautifully back in ancient times. That's why we blessed in our discussions the patience and the courage of medieval monks. Neither did we have even a single copy of the Church Fathers, of the Apocryphal Gospels, about Jesus' childhood or of the Talmud as we have now. We gathered courage from the inscription on the old coat of arms of the Dutch province of Zeeland, "*Luctor et emergo*—I struggle and emerge."

The brothers who received their training and now find themselves useful in various congregations, may console themselves that as far as the main goal of preaching the Gospel is concerned, namely to win souls for Jesus, they did not suffer serious lack from never having seen an original manuscript of the Bible or read even a single line from the Talmud. Some of these brothers currently display in their preaching that they continue to study the principles they gained at school, while in their studies at home and in the congregation they have built further on those foundation stones. And that is the most important issue that must be kept in view after graduation.

In view of the many subjects, it is best to have small textbooks and to study these critically in order that one gain a clear oversight of the whole and of the special sub-topics in their relationship to the whole. It is best that one sticks to that one book during the entire course of studies at school, since it is better to read one textbook ten times than ten textbooks only once. If a student is to have success, he must process the materials for himself. If our heads were like kettles with a cover that teachers could open and then pour in knowledge, or our brains were like the receiver of a phonograph, or we could manage to do as some superstitious people do by

laying a book under their head pillows to sleep on it, expecting that this will be helpful to them, it would be a different story. But none of this happens to be the case. Thus unbearable exertion at school, repetition and expansion in the study hall remain characteristic of life at school.

As far as the great aim of preaching the Gospel goes, it is crucial that the important question that Charles Spurgeon put to his friend Dr. Cuyler be always kept in clear view: To what extent is the conversion of souls the focus of your prominent American preachers? To what extent is the focus on the salvation of souls? What you are not set on in your work, according to established wisdom, you cannot expect to harvest. If your first desire in the depth of your heart is not to win souls by your preaching through the re-creating power of God, you will not receive souls as your reward.

And just like presently people study hard, so it was then. In general in the Williams Street schoolhouse, little if any thought went into what is called “fun” in this country. However, at one time something of that spirit came into our midst when a brother student “M” returned from a trip to the Netherlands and had shaved off his ring beard there. This so changed his appearance that he was hardly recognized at first. He sat in Professor Hemkes’ room. A certain student who enjoyed minor diversions, said to another student who had not yet learned of M’s return, “Look, in Hemkes’ room there is His Excellency Lord Constein.<sup>56</sup> You want to see and greet him? This does not happen every day.” The other student enters the room and in full seriousness makes a deep and stately bow and says, “Good morning, Your Excellency Lord Constein, how are you?” “Very well, my friend.” “Have you come to visit this country?” “Yes.” Other students were watching and said, “Don’t you see that this is brother M.?” General laughter arose, making the other student somewhat angry because of the deception.

Another case showed us how nervous we could sometimes become. As per custom, a student was to present a sermon on Friday evening. The profs would usually take turns to open the meeting with the singing of a psalm and then lead in prayer. The speaker would then ascend the pulpit. This particular time he was to preach about a text from the book of Jonah. If only he had memorized the list of Bible books according to an old popular rhyme on the subject, then everything would have ended well. It did not work for him. He paged throughout the Bible, near the beginning, in the middle, towards the end; he paged and he paged. He became thoroughly frustrated and nervous and finally admitted, “The book of Jonah is not there!” Professor Hemkes came up to the platform, found Jonah and softly said, “Here it is.” Now the speaker could proceed. In such circumstances, a speaker would do well to look up the text ahead of time before others enter the room. Then confusion will not arise so easily.

Another situation tells us how easily thoughtlessness can lead to misstep. Since the upstairs was not used only for the school but also for a family living there, occasionally someone would place a pail half filled with water on the floor at the bottom of the stairs. A brother came down the stairs. His eyes were somewhat tired and he held a pile of books under his one arm, while he held on to the banister with the other. Thus, with his eyes closed, he stepped in the pail with one foot but withdrew it immediately; the water was even faster!

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<sup>56</sup>By either Boer or Hemkes: Lord Constein deeded his entire estate to the Bible press in Halle, Germany, and died already in 1719. Thus the student combined several falsities in his joke.



What made this location most unsuitable for a Theological School was the proximity of seventeen railway tracks to the west. When trains would arrive or they would engage in multiple switchings, this might cause so much noise that for some moments the speaker could not be heard.

While we accord much praise and recognition to the Williams' Street congregation for the use of the school, the new location for the school at Franklin and Madison is a great improvement. We moved with great pleasure to the new school in 1892.

## Chapter 16 \*

### Our Theological School Building

Our Theological School was built during the summer of 1892. It is sufficient for us to copy what brother Reverend J. Noordewier, the fund raiser for the school, wrote summarily and completely. He announced that the Synod of 1890 had decided to build a facility that was suitable to be used as a Theological School. The execution of this decision was assigned and entrusted to the Trustees of this institution. Members were: R. T. Kuiper, J. H. Vos, L. J. Hulst, J. Post, E. Bos, J. Noordewier, J. W. Garvelink and A. Van Bree.

On June 23, 1890, the Trustees held a meeting to begin taking steps towards this project. That called for the election of a President as well as a Secretary and Treasurer. That same day they began to look around for a suitable location for this building.

Two days later we held another meeting where the reporter wrote that attention was focused especially on the corner of Madison and Fifth Avenues<sup>57</sup> as the best place for this building. No one had any objections, provided it be available at a reasonable price. We had not been able to determine that, since the owner was not in the city. The Trustees now appointed a commission for research consisting of B. De Graaf Sr., J. Smitter and L. Benjamins, who would later serve us. In the meantime, the issue had first to be left to the favourable control of God.

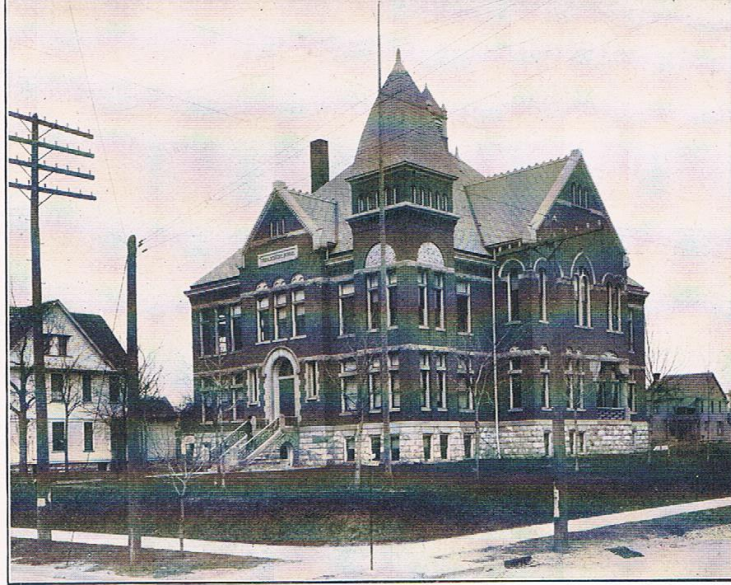
The result of that research was such that in a meeting on July 21, we took possession of this desirable location. It consisted of two lots along Madison Avenue for \$1200; three lots plus 21 feet along Fifth Avenue for \$800 a lot. Altogether for a sum of \$5150.

To everyone's great joy, a building committee was appointed with as members, Reverend J. H. Vos, Reverend J. Noordewier and A. Van Bree. With the approval of the Trustees, they also elected L. Benjamins. To these four brothers the difficult task was assigned to function as building committee. In the meantime, fundraiser Noordewier traveled hither and yon to gather the necessary funds for this project. He was assisted by Reverend H. H. Diepering Langereis, who undertook to work in Classis Holland.

By September 1891, we had made so much progress that we thought it time to begin with the actual construction. A contract was drawn up with architect J. H. Daverman, after which various details were outsourced and the construction begun. To the praise of God's goodness, the building was ready around September, 1892. On the seventh of that month the building was dedicated with prayer, speeches and song, and commissioned to God's protection and care.

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<sup>57</sup>Somewhere along the line, Fifth Avenue was renamed "Franklin Street," where we lived during our honeymoon years at Calvin College and Calvin Seminary, at the foot of Paris Ave. SE, and almost across from Bates Street CRC, later renamed First CRC to reflect it was the location to which the Spring Street congregation, the first in Grand Rapids, moved eventually. Thus we found ourselves both neighbours and members of the congregation of which my "uncle" was an early pastor.



The Theological School of the Christian Reformed Church

\*\* For many of us, and not the least for the Trustees and the Building Committee, it was a true pleasure that it all happened so quickly and that we saw the building completed without any obstacles. The building was such that we could only speak of it with praise; it met everyone's satisfaction.

It did cost more than we had expected or even wanted, but that should not sadden us. In general we judged that, all put together, the ground and building should not go beyond \$20,000, but it rose to \$25,000. We were of the opinion that we should be pleased enough that this facility would take us well into the future.

The visitor to the city of Grand Rapids will find the building, as said before, on the corner of Madison and Fifth Avenues, a neighbourhood of quiet middle-class culture; not near a factory or railway, but in one of the most beautiful parts of this flourishing city, where there live no fewer than 25,000 Dutchmen and where the Holland Christian Reformed Church has ten congregations. The school is surrounded by six of them and thus stands nicely in the centre of our people.

The property on which the building stands sits elevated above the streets and has enough room for an additional two or three fair-sized houses should this ever be needed or desired. It has a massive appearance and splendid, built as it is with red bricks and surrounded by carved stone. It is a jewel to the eye, especially to those who know of the beginning of our denomination and now see this.

The sturdy foundation of chopped stone is nine feet high, of which two feet are in the ground and seven above. This gives ample room for the furnace placed there that serves to warm the entire building, while it also leaves space for the storage of fuel, etc.

The square dimension of the building is 90 by 84 feet. As you can see from the photo, at the left you see the main door along Madison Avenue. From the sidewalk you follow a few stair steps and a cement footpath six feet wide and forty-five feet long to the building, from where you then climb a stone staircase into the building.

After you pass through the door, you see a spacious vestibule from where a fancy stair case leads you upstairs to the second floor. However, let's first check out the downstairs, where we go through an interior door that leads into a roomy hallway that divides this floor into two. On the right side, you find first a tastefully furnished room for the professors, some 19 by 20 feet. Further on, there is a waiting room for the students 18 by 27 feet. The entry into this room is the side door you see at your right hand.

The young people come to this door from Fifth Avenue along that same foot path and up that stone staircase to wait for the class to begin. Next to this waiting room is the double sliding door into a 19 by 34 feet lecture hall. In this room all gather to pray and sing before starting lectures. At the left side there are three rooms, all arranged and designed for giving lectures, furnished with lectern and chair for the professor or other teacher, along with sturdy benches with movable seats for the students and blackboards of slate on the walls.

We will lead you further. At the end of the hallway is a door on the right that leads into a small washroom and one on the left that leads you downstairs. There you will also find a double stairway to the upstairs. Once upstairs, you will find a room for the library on the north side and a reading room with table and chairs on the south. From there through two doors you enter a large hall, 31 by 69 feet, that is used as lecture hall or practice preaching. The hall is nicely decorated and contains 192 chairs that are arranged like a half moon with 25 paths in between them, as well as a beautiful organ donated to the school by Mr. Campman, a beautiful gift indeed. But the main entrance to this lecture hall is from the front where one enters the building from Madison Avenue.

There are on this second floor two more rooms that await the expansion of the institution and which, we hope, will be put to use later. The entire building is supplied with gas lamps. The building is, according to many testimonies, tidy, trim and functional. The Building Committee is especially pleased; it feels itself rewarded in its work and care.

I hope not to have bored you with all these dull facts. To the contrary, I hope to have done a small but useful service to many. Both lecturers and students feel very much at home here, something that makes us very happy, especially when we take a retrospect view to the past.

In 1862 we began to provide for the need for our own teachers by means of private arrangements. Is this not enough to shout, "The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy?" (Psalm 126:3).

We could easily add a lot more to this history, but it would become too long. But allow me this: Let us appreciate the training for the ministry with all of our hearts and support it with prayer and gifts. May our prayer be for our professors and students. And may this always remain true: "The

Lord is our King; The Lord is our Lawgiver.” From here many go out to preach the Gospel of the cross. Be this our desire and prayer.

### **Church and School Experiences**

The years 1893 and 1894 were rich in variety. It was the year of the World Exposition. At the request of the Englewood congregation, we went there with some of our family during the vacation. I preached there for nine Sundays consecutively. We met friends who visited the Exposition from East and West, South and North.

During this year we had visitors from the Netherlands, the brother preachers H. Beuker from Leiden and K. Van Goor from Gorichem. Beuker became the pastor of the third congregation in Muskegon, while Van Goor went to Holland MI. Their arrival was an asset to our denomination.<sup>58</sup>

In 1886, Dr. Geerhardus Vos was appointed by our Synod to our Theological School. He had studied at Strassburgh in Germany. He accepted the appointment on condition that he could stay two more years in Germany. In September, 1888, he started his work. Later, he was called as Professor at Princeton Seminary, but, to our joy, he declined. In 1893, he received a second call from Princeton and this time, regardless of the many requests to stay, he accepted and went there.

Now our School had to make provisions to fill that empty position. Rev. H. Beuker was appointed but declined. To keep the school from suffering, our staff was temporarily strengthened by the brothers Reverends J. H. Vos, L. J. Hulst, K. Kuiper en G. De Jong, who were appointed assistant lecturers for one year. In 1894, steps were taken with a view to the expansion of the school.

Beuker was appointed by Synod as Professor of Theology, and Messrs. G. Berkhof, Candidate in Theology, and A. J. Rooks (A. B.) to the Literary Department. Both Rooks and Berkhof accepted the appointment, but the latter requested a three-month's postponement, because he felt himself sick and weak. For healing purposes, he went to Maxwell City, NM. After his sickness had progressed too far and the change of climate proved too much for his condition, his journey and stay there sped him towards his end. Soon afterward his remains were transferred to Grand Rapids, where he was buried at the Greenwood Cemetery.

Our Theological School community mourned, for Berkhof was a young man of whom much was expected. However, here, too, it became clear that the Lord reigns and as high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are God's thoughts above ours.

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<sup>58</sup>If Deacon Johannes in Harry's book had read this seemingly innocuous sentence, it might have raised his dander. According to Johannes, it was the imported preachers from the Netherlands and those trained by Geert and Hemkes c.s. in Grand Rapids that were bringing in deviations from the traditional creeds of Dordt that were causing restlessness and dissatisfaction among the early CRC members. This sentence touched the core of Johannes' contention.

In 1888, Synod decided to once again associate the magazine *De Wachter* to the School and appointed me its Chief Editor. I carried out that work for six years, from 1888-1894.

### **Personal Trial**

The year 1894 was a year of trial and disappointment for me and my family. After Dr. Vos had left our School for Princeton, some students wrote a request to the Curators to be free from taking lectures in Theology from Reverend Boer. At first, I was unaware of this, but soon found out. Synod of 1894 discussed my case with the result that Professor Boer would stay at the School, but his workload was to be reduced and his salary went down to \$1,000. This proposal was put to me and I accepted it in this sense that I would continue working there, but I told Synod it must understand that it remains responsible for her deeds and decisions.

I surrendered the affairs and direction of my wellbeing into the hands of the Lord, trusting that my Father will regulate my life and, provided I stay in God's way, He will take care of my welfare. I was calm and at peace and was able in faith to leave my worries to my Father.

### **A Journey to the East Coast**

Rev. E. Haan, at the time the minister of the Midland Park congregation near Paterson NJ, was in Grand Rapids to attend Synod. He paid us a visit and strongly urged us to visit him and his family. We accepted the invitation and promised to make that visit, provided we are all well. We departed to the East in August, 1895, with the Michigan Central Railway. One morning we arrived at Niagara Falls.

For someone who has never watched that majestic layout, it is truly worth the effort to travel there from wherever you are in the United States. For if you have not seen those Falls, then you can read all the descriptions of it you want, but it is and remains, as Dr. Harnish tells it in his book, *Wereldbol*, "One can only present a weak sketch of it. The reader can only conjure up that majestic natural tableau with the power of creative imagination; words are simply powerless to describe it accurately."<sup>59</sup> This waterfall connects Lake Erie with that of Lake Ontario and separates English Canada from New York. This is surely the largest fall in the entire world. The central whirlpool is a magical place down in the deep abyss. The roaring sound of that immense mass of water, which violently tumbles down into that abyss, can be heard from afar, sometimes as far as a distance of eight miles. It is said that in the early morning one can observe the Fall in a sea of mist, that, as it slowly evaporates, leaves behind it a gigantic cloud. In the afternoon, it often displays a rainbow with a thousand colours. During storms and downpours, it can become invisible. At that point it is as if heaven and earth melt together in an indescribable whole. When one sees that, it remains in one's spirit a completely unique miracle in God's creation.

As I watched it, I reflected on the boundless majesty of God—and that great and almighty God is my Father in Christ! How petty I felt, how small and puny! Oh, if only we humans would be more aware of our puniness over against that boundless majesty of God and in this awareness,

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<sup>59</sup>*De wereldbol: De jongste zee en landreizen volgens Dr. W. Harnisch*, 1890.

along with our sin and guilt, out of the deep need of our hearts, would flee to Jesus to find eternal salvation in His blood.

After the Niagara Falls, we finally arrived in the afternoon at Rochester, NY, where friends welcomed us heartily. After I preached there in the basement of the Reformed Church on Wednesday evening, we left for Albany. There we met the aged gentleman Donner, brother of Reverend J. H. Donner of Leiden. This brother and his wife were very friendly. In a discussion with him about the Reformed and the Christian Reformed denominations in this country, he expressed a deep longing for the unification of these two churches.

The next phase of our journey was in a beautiful steamboat in wonderful weather along the picturesque Hudson River to New York. As soon as one arrives in this mighty world city, one gets a deep impression of the diligence and persistence of Americans and of their inclination towards variegated architecture.

From New York, we moved on to Paterson. Reverends R. Drukker and E. Haan met us. During our visits in the East we visited many places, met many friends and preached frequently. We had many reasons to testify to the blessings from the Lord.

During this time, Reverend G. A. de Haan, who was the minister at Oakdale Park church in Grand Rapids, constantly felt ill. It turned out that he could not be healed from his sickness in this country. In the hope that a trip across the Atlantic and a short stay in the Netherlands would have a favourable effect on him, he traveled there in the company of Reverend F. M. Ten Hoor. Brother Ten Hoor had made a vacation trip to America and returned home in the company of de Haan. We expected him to return home during our stay in Paterson and it was arranged that he would preach there on his way home. But the way of the Lord is different. In place of meeting de Haan in Paterson, we were disappointed in that expectation not only, but to our deep sadness we also got a telegramme from Grand Rapids with this message: "Professor G. E. Boer, Reverend G. A. de Haan returned home from the Netherlands and—died. Can you come to conduct the funeral?" I sent a telegramme that I was not able, even though under different circumstances I would have loved to demonstrate my sharing in this painful loss to the widow, the surviving family and friends by acceding to this request.

I had ordained this brother in 1891 at Oakdale Park. Who would have thought that such a youthful healthy person would have a career of only four years and already then go through the ports of death? This loss was shattering for the widow, the congregation, the family and friends! Here the words of Isaiah 55:8 were confirmed: "For My thoughts are not your thoughts; neither are your ways My ways, declares the Lord." Such happenings serve to remind us of the words of our Saviour, "Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning" (Luke 12:35).

After having visited the brothers in the East with great pleasure, according to the riches of His grace, the Lord brought us safely home.

## Journey to the Western United States

In the summer of 1896, the brothers in the Western State of Iowa invited me to take a trip their way. But seeing that traveling is tiring, I decided to decline and not go. But when I again received a friendly and urgent request to come, I allowed myself to be persuaded and decided to go. When I arrived at Leighton and needed to transfer to a train to Pella, brother H. Bode met me and invited me to spend the rest of the day under his roof. What I find so delightful throughout the West is that our people there are friendly, generous and free. I met many brothers there and everywhere I was asked to preach— to the congregation of Reverend Manni at Pella, at Leighton, Peoria, where Reverend Broekstra was the minister at the time, but who unfortunately was taken away from us in his youth through death. Mr. J. Vos took me to New Sharon on Friday. That Saturday a terrible thunderstorm broke loose. The heavens were dark with turbulent clouds; lightning and thunder, wind and rain all came in such heavy measure as can happen in the West. I admit that I was afraid. Oh, how miniscule we people are when our Father in the heavens gives those terrible powers of nature free reign! It made me think of the poet who versified Psalm 77:17 in these words:

Dikke wolken goten water;  
Hooger zwerk gaf fel geklater;  
Uwe pijlen, zoo geducht,  
Vlogen vlammdend door de lucht.  
't Zwaar geluid der donderslagen  
Deed het al in 't ronde wagen;  
En de wereld werd verlicht  
Door herhaalden bliksemschicht.<sup>60</sup>

O God, from Thee the waters fled,  
The depths were moved with mighty dread,  
The swelling clouds their torrents poured,  
And o'er the earth the tempest roared;  
'Mid lightning's flash and thunder's sound  
Great trembling shook the solid ground.

That Sunday I preached three times for Rev. Breen in Orange City. I also spoke there at a meeting of the Mission Society. Now preaching was always my passion, something that stood me in good stead, for, brother preachers in Grand Rapids, when you go West, they will put you to work. I also spoke at the following places: in the Sioux City congregation of Rev. Beets; in

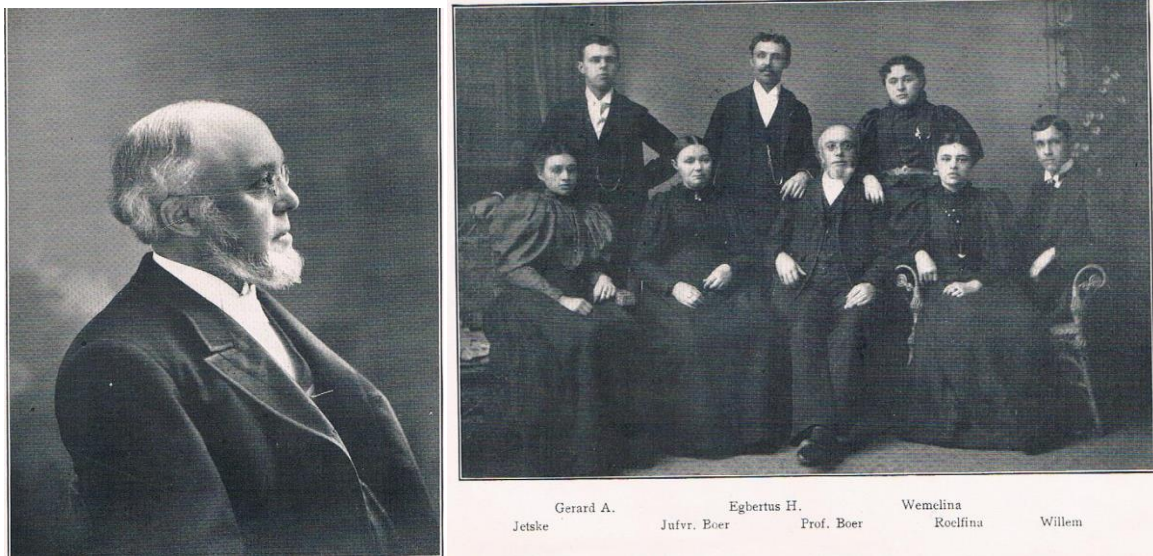
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<sup>60</sup>See "mother footnote" 10. Boer quotes the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 77:10. A close partial English-language parallel is found at no. 146:2 (1959).



Rock Valley; at Hull where Rev. Gulker was the minister; at Ackley in the congregation of Rev. C. Bode; at Parkersburg, etc., etc.

### Photos of Prof. Geert Egberts Boer and his Family \*\*



At the end of that journey I had the great privilege of meeting my better half at home in good health.

### An Evening that Witnesses to God's Special Grace

On March 15, 1896, it was the twentieth anniversary of my work as lecturer at the Theological School, while it was some thirty years plus since my wife and I were married. That evening I preached at Spring Street, where a large crowd had gathered. My text was Acts 26:22-23—

But God has helped me to this very day; so I stand here and testify to small and great alike. I am saying nothing beyond what the prophets and Moses said would happen—<sup>23</sup> that the Messiah would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would bring the message of light to his own people and to the Gentiles.

After the sermon, Professors Beuker and Hemkes along with Rev. Vos addressed me.

The Lord gave me light and strength so that preaching was easy for me. With joy and thanksgiving I was allowed to reflect about the way the Lord led me and my family. With an eye to all this I could say from the bottom of my heart: "To the Triune God alone be the honour for all those blessings."

When I first went to Kampen to study and later became a preacher, never, no, never could I have thought that the Lord in the riches of His compassion would lead me and my family along such a route. But in the way God leads His people, we frequently see that He wants to glorify Himself

through the small and that which is nothing. May my expectation for the future come only from Him. He has proven and we may undoubtedly trust that He will never put to shame those who wait on Him.

Want Gij zijt mijn heil o Heer!  
'k Blijf U al den dag verwachten.<sup>61</sup>

Thou alone my Saviour art,  
All the day I wait for Thee.

### **The Lord Provides When there Is a Need**

I have long believed that the Lord provides at the hour of need, but through His grace I had the privilege of also consciously experiencing this several times. It was confirmed anew at the occasion of putting the remains of the respected wife of Rev. Van Goor in the grave. I came to know her way back in the Kampen days, when she was only fourteen years old.

During the last years of her life in Holland MI, she was sickly and weak. She passed away on December 28, 1897. On Friday the 31<sup>st</sup> I went to Holland to attend the funeral. Rev. J. Kremer and his wife, who was a sister to Mrs. Van Goor, were there as well. The Van Goor family expected that Professor Beuker would come, but he was prevented. Then Van Goor requested me to deliver a sermon in the church. I did, but only after Rev. Kremer spoke first. Before returning home, I wanted to take leave of the family. "You see," said Van Goor, "It is good that you came. Rev. Kremer was to preach in my place this evening, but he had to leave and is already gone. Now you need to preach in my place." I did and the Lord provided me with all I needed in this unexpected circumstance. As long as we do the Lord's work in His way, yes, then He constantly provides, as per this Psalm:

Hij laat in tijd van nood hem niet verlegen,  
Die op Zijn macht een vast vertrouwen stelt.<sup>62</sup>

In times of need He does not forsake  
Those who firmly trust His power....

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<sup>61</sup>See "mother footnote" 10. Boer quotes the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 25:2, which can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-yNLUGrD-6o>. A close partial English-language parallel is found at no. 44:2 (1959) and at no. 354:1 (2013).

<sup>62</sup>See "mother footnote" 10. Boer quotes the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 37:20. I could not locate a close English parallel. Translation is mine—if my memory serves me right!

On May 4, 1900, as I was on my way home from our Theological School, I was informed that Rev. S. B. Sevensma was sick. I visited him immediately and recognized that his sickness was serious. On May 6, I preached in the church along Fifth Avenue, but before I preached, elder Wieringa informed me that Sevensma had passed away. Wow, that went quick. The family and friends mourned. On Wednesday, May 9, the corpse of Rev. Sevensma was buried. The brothers L. J. Hulst, J. H. Vos and G. K. Hemkes spoke in the church, while I spoke at the graveside.

Professor H. Beuker preached on Sunday, May 6, in the Drenthe, Michigan, church. The church was full and it was very hot inside. Immediately after the sermon, he boarded a coach and, though wet with perspiration, it had turned cold again, while he was still at some distance from his lodging. He caught a cold and fell ill. I visited him on May 8. He asked me to take his turn at preaching at East Street on May 13. The Church Council had invited him, but he could not. So I preached in his place about Job 40:4—"I am unworthy—how can I reply to You? I put my hand over my mouth."<sup>63</sup>

On Saturday, May 12, I again visited brother Beuker. It appeared he was almost healed. Together we sat in his front room for half an hour pleasantly chatting about current affairs. That Sunday evening, Hemkes and his wife visited him. They knocked and to their surprise, the patient whom they had come to visit, himself opened the door for them. Beuker and his wife were friendly and generous people. We can safely say that they were focused on God's Kingdom with their whole heart. They were together for an hour of spiritual pleasure and thanksgiving. When the visitors wanted to leave to make sure the patient would not get overly tired, the Professor said, "What's this? Sit down and stay a while longer; I am not tired at all."

The following Thursday, brother Beuker walked to the Theological School, for he intended to start his work again on Friday. We had expected him at our customary Friday evening fellowship group, but three students came to our house on Friday. Student Berkhof asked me, "Professor, have you heard from Professor Beuker?" I told him that I was expecting him at our meeting after a while. Berkhof then responded, "Professor Beuker is dead"!

How deeply shocked we were in our hearts. To lose a beloved colleague so unexpectedly was painful. Under the circumstances, on the afternoon of May 18 he felt himself relatively well. He wanted to take a rest in his bed for an hour. After I had done some work, Beuker's wife said, "Let's have a cup of coffee together." All was fine. Mrs. Vos, his sister, sat by his bed and chatted with him. He turned his head to the wall. Mrs. Vos continued talking, but he said nothing. "My brother, why don't you answer?" The Professor was gone. In an Elijah chariot<sup>64</sup> he entered into his eternal rest. Such circumstances are better felt than discussed.

The Lord reigns! We lost loved ones. In January it was Rev. H. Bode, but his was only shortly after colleague Stad. Then brother Sevensma and now Beuker. They had completed their assignments and the Lord gave them the reward promised His faithful servants.

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<sup>63</sup>The Boer/Hemkes' reference to Job 39:37 is in fact Job 40:4 in my NIV. I have no explanation for the discrepancy.

<sup>64</sup>See II Kings 2:3-9.

The following Tuesday, May 22, Rev. A. Keizer and I spoke in the Spring Street Church. Hemkes and others spoke in the Graafschap church, while still others spoke at lowering the corpse of our late beloved brother. A large crowd attended this serious ceremony.

In 1898 our church lost Rev. E. R. Haan, a much beloved preacher. His going during the flowering of his ministry and out of his blessed circle of colleagues caused a deep wound in the hearts of the family and of the Grandville Ave. congregation.

On November 25, 1900, I preached in Spring Street and had chosen Luke 18:1-10 for the afternoon service. Elder William Brink read a section of the chapter. He read in his normal way, but when he reached verse nine, he began to stutter and became unintelligible. I feared he would fall. Mr. Drukker, another elder, led him from behind the lectern. Our brother had fallen sick and passed away on December 3. At his funeral, Prof. Hemkes spoke at the funeral home, while I delivered the oration in the church about "And He died."

Shortly thereafter the wife of Rev. Noordewier of Jenison CRC was taken from the midst of her family and community for the home of eternal peace.

## Chapter 17\*

### The School's Twenty-fifth Anniversary (1876-1901)

On Wednesday, March 20, 1901, the twenty-fifth anniversary of our Theological School was celebrated festively. Rev. A. Keizer wrote the following in *De Wachter*:

We had a richly blessed day in Grand Rapids on Wednesday March 20. Happy faces everywhere. With cheerful hearts the Lord was offered praise for His blessings, this time especially for our school, for the disposition among us, to the training of servants of the Word, all of it so richly bestowed. The various speakers had grasped their subjects well, even if the way of treating the subjects indicated considerable variation in taste.

At the appointed hour in the morning, the large auditorium was fully occupied; in the afternoon, even in the remotest nooks and crannies. Numerous ministers, church councils and other interested ladies and gentlemen from Grand Rapids and other places in Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin and Ohio were in attendance. Everyone wore a decorative badge on their chest.

After Rev. K. Van Goor, the Master of Ceremonies for the morning event, had opened the meeting, he began as follows: My brothers and sisters, on the morning of this celebration I heartily welcome you to this place. In the midst of the turbulence of our time, God invites us to this jubilee, to celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of our Theological School in a festive way.

The basic attitude for this day should be that God glorifies Himself in the small and little of life! So it has always been. This is the history of the entire Church of God on earth. So it was with Israel, so with Christ Himself as well as with His Apostles. So also with the Church of Christ in every nation, also in America, also with our church, and so with our institution.

God delights Himself in the small in order to magnify Himself. All pride is excluded. We have not become what we are through the influence of the dollar, nor through the social positions of our members, but He who achieved all this without those factors just mentioned, is none other than God. To Him alone be the glory!

Hemkes' comment?--After all this, various ministers spoke a few words, which we would love to place on these pages, but since these speeches had no relationship to the life of our late brother, we will pass them by. We restrict ourselves to the speech Prof. Boer delivered in the church on Commerce Street.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup>Remember this used to be called "Spring Street." This "late brother" is probably Rev. Beuker. See Introduction, p. 11 and Chapter 16, p. 86.

## The History of the Founding of Our Theological School

Worthy Friends and Beloved Celebrants:

Thus we are gathered here in this for us a very solemn and meaningful hour with an eye to the jubilee of our Theological School. We are gathered in the house of prayer. Where would we find a better and more suitable place at this time to offer our thankfulness to the Lord in united fashion for the exceptional founding, preservation and expansion of the theological institution given to us?

We certainly have exceptional reasons to acknowledge the Lord, to raise the *Soli Deo Gloria* only to the praise of God alone.

What a great difference between our ecclesiastical circumstances of twenty-five years ago and today! *Then* we had no Theological School and *now*, though in the area of education we are not very significant for the world at large, we have a very functional building with a number of professors and students. *Then*, with an eye to our ecclesiastical circumstances, we might have asked, “Now what?”<sup>66</sup> But *now* we may say, “The Lord has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering.”<sup>67</sup>

No, twenty-five years ago we could not have surmised at the origin of our Theological School that we would celebrate our school jubilee under these circumstances. What we *then* could not have expected, God has done for us and others, and that is the reason we repeat emphatically, “*Soli Deo Gloria.*”

And now back to the business at hand. The Commission that organized this celebration has assigned me to address you on the subject, “The History of the Founding of Our Theological School.” They could hardly have assigned me a more appropriate topic.

The subject shifts our attention twenty-five years back and makes our history pass by us like a gallery of images, not only of its foundation, but also of the subsequent events associated with our institution. When we consider in this context that God has done all this in spite of the manifold sins that cling even to our best works, then this jubilee provides the perfect motive to move us to humility, confession of sins and gratitude.

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<sup>66</sup>In the original, this short quote allegedly comes from I Kings 14:14, but a check in the NIV hardly verifies this. My brief translation of this “Biblical” quote is very free, according to its cultural equivalence.

<sup>67</sup>The original reads, “*De Heere heeft ons doen wassen in een voor velen onzer oorspronkelijk vreemd land*” (Genesis 41:52). I would have preferred “increase” for *doen wassen*” instead of “fruitful” as in the NIV. The “land” refers to the Egypt of Joseph, while the “increase” or “fruitful” refers to Joseph’s two sons. The text is located in the upbeat part of the later Joseph story. Hence I prefer the more positive Dutch version, which, translated into English, would become “in a for... us originally foreign land” instead of the NIV’s “land of my suffering.” My preferences here are based on the context rather than a study of the Hebrew.

With an eye on our topic, it is clear that the Theological School itself is the centre of the history of her beginning. After all, its beginning would have no history if it did not exist and it were not the central point around which our entire overview moves. The history of the beginning of our institution naturally presents itself if we place both the midpoint and endpoint of the school in our review.

Thus we will focus successively on the following issues:

### The Theological School

1. Was needed by our denomination;
  2. Was given to us by God;
  3. Was scant in its rise;
  4. Was founded on a Biblical foundation;
  5. Opened a perspective on the wellbeing of the Church.
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1. That our theological institution that was to be founded twenty-five years ago, was needed by our denomination is clear from the following circumstances:
    - a. We had an ecclesiastical organization;
    - b. We needed ministers of the Word;
    - c. We experienced disappointment from elsewhere.<sup>68</sup>

With a view to the circumstances of our denomination at the time, allow me to clarify:

After being called twice by the Spring Street congregation, I arrived with my family on September 17, 1873, and was installed on Sunday, September 21, by Rev. J. Noordewier. That afternoon I did my inauguration into the office of the Word and commenced my work. At that time, there was only one congregation of our denomination in Grand Rapids. Even the present congregations of Jenison, Kelloggsville and Fisher Station did not yet exist, so that my congregation was not only spread over all of Grand Rapids but also beyond for a total circumference of more than 35 miles.

In 1875, I was appointed co-editor with Rev. J. Noordewier of *De Wachter*, as if I did not have enough on my plate.

In the summer of 1875, the late Rev. D. J. Van der Werp fell ill. God visited him with oral cancer, to which he succumbed on April 1, 1876. He had been teaching students already for some years in Muskegon. They were G. Broene, C. Bode, C. Vorst and J. Van der Werp. Student G. Hoeksema was already in Grand Rapids since May, 1875, and received instruction from me. All this serves as a summary report on the circumstances of the training for ministry at that time in our denomination.

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<sup>68</sup> I assume the reference here is to what was the (Dutch) Reformed Church, which is now known as the Reformed Church of America, the first and oldest Protestant Church in the USA. This may well refer to Boer's arguments with De Bey in *De Wachter*. See p. 93, including footnote 69.

When I say “*our church*” or “*our denomination*,” I am not implying that we are the only Church of Christ, but I am talking about that part of God’s church wherein we find ourselves.

We said, “We have an organized church,” and with a view to that we had a foundation on which we could build, also for the training of future servants of the Word.

Our denomination existed already since 1857. I do not intend to expand on the question whether or not our secession from the (Dutch) Reformed was lawful or not. I have done that fairly extensively earlier in my correspondence with the late Rev. B. de Bey in *De Wachter*.<sup>69</sup>

Since we had an organized denomination, it was quite natural that we *needed servants of the Word*. After all, God wants all things to be done honestly and in good order, also in the church. We remind you here of the words of Paul in Romans 10:14-15: “How can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?” We might want to add, “How shall they be sent by the church, if they are not formed and trained in an established way?” The question here is not whether God could not have done this differently without existing means and qualify His servants without these means. We know very well that God does not need our assistance. However, God usually follows established ways. Already in the Old Testament there were schools for the prophets, while the Apostles undoubtedly did not associate with their Master for three and a half years in vain.

We needed an increase in the number of ministers. For one thing, because not all congregations were provided a minister, but especially because the number of congregations steadily increased. The last fact arose especially because every year many emigrants came from the Netherlands. Constantly new congregations were established, church councils appointed, while the need for their own ministers was felt acutely and without delay.

Furthermore, after our arrival in the Spring Street congregation in Grand Rapids, we soon attempted to get assistance from the Netherlands. We first called congregational teachers, since the local congregation here was much too large for only one minister and sometimes increased by the day due to emigration. We were disappointed in our efforts, since one after the other declined. We also tried in those days to call a lecturer from the Netherlands, but constantly the response was, “I have the honour of declining your call.”

Our ecclesiastical circumstances were, it must be admitted, kind of unique. Our organization was very young; as a denomination we were very small and had little power. Also, when it came to rank, position or wealth, we belonged neither to the noble nor to the wise or wealthy. From various points of view we were ecclesiastically in need of aid. However, though we were not discouraged, we did recognize that, if our denomination were to expand and settle, then the first priority would be to obtain more ministers.

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<sup>69</sup>This “extensive” correspondence may have been more aggressive than Boer lets on, so extensive and so aggressive that it was strongly criticized by Deacon Johannes in *God’s Deacon*, footnote 392, p. 255. The Boer/Hemkes book throughout advocates a mild and generous picture of Professor Boer, but that passage in *God’s Deacon seems* to portray another, more aggressive side of him.



Twice we called the late Professor S. Van Velzen Sr. as lecturer and once Rev. Vissink. The latter was one of my classmates at Kampen. The result of these attempts was once again, “We were disappointed from elsewhere.” Undoubtedly, the Great King of His Church had His own wise reasons and He is almighty.

But now that the late D. J. Van der Werp became sick in the summer of 1875 and was no longer capable of training future ministers and we experienced disappointment from the Netherlands, we now confronted a problem that was difficult to solve.

In the fall of 1875, the current students of the late Van der Werp, under orders of Classis Michigan, were sent to Grand Rapids. I was appointed to the task of temporarily teaching the students. What a task! But the circumstances demanded it and we had to make do. That things could not remain thus for long was obvious.

## Chapter 18\*

### Librarian and Archivist

In June, 1902, the Curators made the temporary decision to relieve me from my teaching responsibilities at the Theological School, and to remain at the School as librarian and archivist for an annual salary of \$600. Synod had to approve this temporary decision in a subsequent meeting and did. I was quite satisfied with it, for I recognized in it the good providence of God, since I was now 70 years of age.

When a person has the privilege of becoming old, then it is good to withdraw himself and leave the work to the next generation. That's what Rev. Dr. W. M. Paxton, the oldest professor at Princeton Seminary, did in 1901. Because of his decreasing strength—he was 78 at the time—he laid down his office. And though it was only because it was necessary, as the media explained, the Board accepted his resignation and he had his wish. He had served the institution for 20 years.

Well, I was not yet 78, but I no longer enjoyed leaving home every Friday evening at 7:30 to go to School to attend the meetings of the Circle, or hearing the orations, recitations and sermon proposals from the students and co-critiquing their content and delivery, or in the winter, sometimes during vehement snow storms, going home through all this at 9:30 pm, as I did before. Besides, the Church relieved me of my responsibilities at the School. Now I could have peace by saying that I had not withdrawn myself willy-nilly.

At this point I have been Lecturer Emeritus for over a year and almost every Sunday I preach the Word. I enjoy this very much and must confess that in this matter also the Lord does well and gives me many reasons for gratitude.<sup>70</sup>

### Accident at Harderwijk

On January 18, in the winter of 1903, I was to preach and administer Communion at Harderwijk, near Holland. There was much snow on the ground. After I had preached and administered Communion in the morning, Mrs. Dijkgraaf, my hostess, and I returned to her home in the “cutter.”<sup>71</sup> We had almost arrived, when the cutter overturned. My forehead bled; my right arm

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<sup>70</sup>I consider this sentence the end of Boer's anniversary oration, though Hemkes gives no such indication.

Hemkes *does* insert a footnote about Boer's work ethic. I pass on to you only that part of the footnote that deals directly with Boer himself. I refer Interested Dutch readers to the long, mostly irrelevant and unnumbered footnote on Boer/Hemkes, pp. 183-185.

Hemkes' addition: It was a wonderful privilege that our brother still had joy and strength to officiate in one church after another to preach the Word and to administer Communion. It was the joy of his life to proclaim the unsearchable love of God and the riches of grace in Christ for eternal salvation to poor and in themselves lost sinners. He always wanted to avoid having nothing to do, and be completely idle, which he regarded as a burden for someone accustomed to working since his youth. He had observed more than once from old people that being idle was disappointing.

<sup>71</sup>The “cutter” must have been a well-known vehicle, but whether it was a coach, sled or a coach sled, I cannot make out from the context.

was bruised from shoulder to elbow; my shoulder was dislocated. I was forced to call in the help of a doctor as soon as possible. A son of Marten Waterweg took me to Holland. Here my shoulder was reset, made moist and wrapped in linen. That is how the doctor took me in the “cutter” to the Interurban. After Dr. Mercer of Holland telephoned to Grand Rapids, my oldest son came to meet me in a coach to take me home.

When I left our house the previous day, I could not have expected that the following day this accident would hit me and I would return home with a wounded body. We humans make our plans, but the Lord governs our coming and going. The Lord had a message for me. He hit me, but He did so with compassion as a Father does, softly and mercifully. He led me into the school of testing, but He tempered the suffering and made the cross bearable. I cannot deny it: This test has been good for me. I received plenty of help through my housemates and others. By mid-February I was again capable of delivering a speech at the funeral of the mother of Mrs. T. Dijkstra. Soon I could preach again and from May on I preached almost every Sunday. As I am writing, I have more invitations than I can handle.

I am especially happy that the Lord has given me the privilege that I am not idle, but that I can still work on behalf of His Kingdom. I still can and may preach God’s Word every Sunday. Also the Board of our Christian primary schools is of great significance. That education demands our attention and interest. As member of this school board I am able to co-operate in the advancement of God’s Kingdom among the youth and help see to it that our children receive Christian instruction in the school of our Commerce Street congregation.

### **Holland Home\*\***

I have also been chosen to serve as vice-president of the board for “Holland Home.” This



is a home for elderly men and women. It was opened in 1892 and is located on the corner of College Avenue and East Bridge Street. The folks in charge as housefather and housemother are Mr. and Mrs. H. Zuidersma. Our late brother <sup>72</sup> promoted the interests of Holland Home both materially and spiritually. He wrote his last article in the *Holland Home News* of March, 1904:

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<sup>72</sup>Suddenly, in the middle of a paragraph, Hemkes switches to the third person with reference to Boer.

## **The Elderly**

By Prof. G.E. Boer

People are considered old when they have lived 60, 70 or even 80 years on earth. Their strength is reduced, their senses weaken and their bodily organs more or less start to give up. The freshness of youth is a thing of the past; even the strength of middle age is no more. The sun of life descends to the horizon and will soon set.

Old age calls with increasing urgency to holy earnestness. One has little time left. Eternity knocks on the door. Elderly people have a great responsibility before God. The Lord has granted them a long life; given them many blessings in the area of nature and grace; carried them patiently and treated them with mercy. In His providence the Lord has cared for them physically, while He did not deny their souls the means of grace. We mean here those who live in the light of the Gospel. Continuously He has been calling them, “Turn to Me and be saved..., for I am God and there is no other” (Isaiah 45:22).<sup>73</sup> In addition, the Lord said, “What more could have been done for My vineyard than I have done for it? (Isaiah 5:4).

The elderly—and these are the ones we are specifically speaking about—cannot say, “We have had no *time* to bother ourselves with things eternal,” or “We were not in a *position* to first seek the Kingdom of God and His righteousness.” Neither of these is true and the conscience of those who, though they enjoyed all those privileges that God gave them, have become lost, will in due time testify loudly and in fact testify already: “God has continually and loudly called, but I refused; the Lord stretched out His hands all day, but I did not want Him.”

The elderly have had a wonderful opportunity during their long life’s journey to think about a certain question which it is in their own interest to pose and to be answered between God and their own hearts, namely, “What has been the purpose of my life and how have I lived it? Have I learned to recognize that I am a sinner, not merely in the vague and superficial sense in which many understand it and agree with, namely that they are not perfect, but in the sense in which Paul understood it, when he wrote, ‘I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature’ (Romans 7:18). Have I come to realize that I was doomed before God and have I looked upon the richness of God’s grace that He revealed in Christ for the salvation of sinners? Has this awareness of my sins and misery along with that of God’s compassionate love for sinners served as an instigation to find refuge in Jesus through God’s covenant of grace and the operation of the Holy Spirit? May I, poor pilgrim that I am, at the evening of my life, believe on solid ground that my sins are forgiven and that I am washed in the blood of the Lamb?”

See here, my fellow seniors, you are reminded of some questions that you will have to answer soon between God and your heart, before you move on to your eternal destination, to the place from which there is no return.

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<sup>73</sup>The reference to Isaiah 45:2 in the original Dutch is a typo.

Oh, how blessed that old man was who, while on his death bed, was asked where he stood with respect to eternity and answered, “Reasonably well. It is true,” he said, “that satan has been let loose on me during the night, but not with respect to my justification. He did not get hold of me at that point. I told him, ‘You come now? You’re too late. Get lost.’”

This elderly brother went to Jesus. Jesus Himself declared, “Where I am, My servant also will be” (John 12:26. See also John 14:3, 17:24). This is His will and His promise. It is much too dangerous to go by an uncertain “maybe,” that is, *possibly* I will be saved and enter eternity. Peter wrote, “Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure” (2 Peter 1:10).

When I write in this vein about the elderly, we do not mean that younger people do not have to concern themselves about their highest interest, because they still have the time to go there later. In no way. This word of Scripture holds for everyone: “Today, if you hear My voice, do not harden your hearts as they did...” (Psalm 95:7-8). Death is inevitable. Before long our grave will be dug—and the Judge is at your door. Can we expect Him without emotion and in faith?

### **In Retrospect**

As I look back upon my life’s journey, then I may and, indeed, *must* say this:

Gij hebt mij, van mijn kindsche dagen,  
Geleid en onderricht;  
Nog blijf ik naar mijn plicht  
Van Uwe wondren blij gewagen.  
O God, wil mij bewaren  
Bij ‘t klimmen mijner jaren.

.....

From youth Thou art my trust.  
Thou hast upheld me in Thy grace,  
From childhood’s early days;  
To Thee from whom I life received  
Will I give constant praise.

Though troubles great o’er-shadow me,  
Thou art my refuge strong;  
My mouth shall praise Thee all the day,  
Thine honour be my song.  
Cast me not off when hoary age

Becomes my weary lot,  
And in the days of failing strength  
Do Thou forsake me not.<sup>74</sup>

Though I emerged out of the lower class, it has pleased the Lord to give me a place of honour in His Church. I do not say this to boast of myself but to the honour and praise of the great mercy of God, who wanted to glorify His high status through my low status. True, my way was not always strewn with roses, but even where the thorns were prickly, the Lord kept me standing and protected me from straying into the cunning ways of sin. Nevertheless, I needed to continually repeat with my family the prayer of the publican, “Oh, Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner! But the Lord has spared me from more scandalous sins.”<sup>75</sup> I hope and pray that He will continue to so protect me.

In general, I have performed my work with joy. The manifold responsibilities I had at the School, especially in the earlier period, would sometimes make it less enjoyable. When one has too much work and lacks the time for sufficient preparation, his satisfaction gets reduced. Nevertheless, the Lord has not deprived my work of blessing and has given ample reasons for thanksgiving. And when I detect weaknesses and shortcomings in my work, I have reason to humble myself deeply before the Lord. Back then, when I was a small school boy or was working for others, it did not occur to me that the Lord intended to use me in His vineyard; that I would preach the riches of God’s grace in Christ Jesus in two continents; that I would be called to train youthful Nazarenes for preaching the Word—and yet, all that has happened. I am now 72 years old; I have already been in office for 39 years, 26 of which I had the privilege of helping in the training of youths. I readily admit that I have definitely not excelled in my erudition, but in retrospect it is clear to me also that I have not laboured in vain. The fruit of my labour is for me a reward of grace.

I now face an unknown future and do not know how much longer I will live, but I *do* know that my lot and my way are in good hands and that the Lord will not forsake the work of His hands. He honours those who honour Him, and whoever follows His way, He will bless.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>See “mother footnote” 10. Boer quotes the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 71:12. The melody can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juq6jkIxoM>. A close partial English-language parallel is found at no. 131:2-3 (1959) and a looser version at no. 319 (2013).

<sup>75</sup>Did Boer espouse a hierarchy of sins? Are some sins more heinous than others by Biblical standards? This seems to be a popular view even in 2018 in the more matured CRC. In a research project of CRC pastors, one “mentioned how we have a functional hierarchy of sins and ‘only seem to apply discipline to certain things that fit our hierarchy—even if it doesn’t match God’s.’” Jul Medenblik and Sarah Schreider, “Practicing Church Discipline: Wisdom from the Field.” *Forum: Calvin Theological Seminary*, Summer 2018, p. 13.

<sup>76</sup>This appears to be the end of the Professor’s last published article. There is no clear indication of the change—no change in formatting, no new heading, no extra spacing.



**Photo of Professors and Students  
at the Theological School in 1903**

77

\*\*It is now March 15, 1904, and I continue the resume of my life history.

It has been a good two years since I first felt pressure in my chest. This remains especially the case when I am walking. When the pressure begins, it soon becomes so strong that I have to rest. Then it becomes less and I can move on. During preaching it does not bother me. But since January 17, 1904, it has become worse, sometimes so bad that I can hardly walk one or two blocks and I have to take a rest again. The doctor ascribes all this to poor digestion and the presence of gas in the stomach. The nervous system is affected as well, so that I often think that the earthly home of this tabernacle appears to be breaking down slowly.

I have experienced very different emotions during these tests of the Lord. Sometimes I feel myself at one with God's will and I pray that the Lord give me grace to bear the cross that He lays upon me, willingly and patiently.

Blijf mij in mijne grijsheid sterken;  
Verkwik mijn ouderdom;  
Bewaak mij van rondom.

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<sup>77</sup>I assume that the ladies in the photograph are the wives of the students. The time for the CRC's Theological School to accept women in courses aimed at ordination was not yet!

O gracious God, forsake me not  
When I am old and gray,

O turn again and comfort me,  
My waning strength increase....<sup>78</sup>

At other times I have experienced joy when the Lord chastises me, because this is evidence that I am a legitimate son and not an illegitimate one (Hebrews 12:7-8). And at yet other times I would feel rebellious and become sad. But then the Lord would usually convict me of my foolishness and sin and I would have the privilege of seeking forgiveness. Generally speaking, I may entrust my way and destiny to the Lord and realize that He chastises us so that we may share in His holiness. Teach us, oh Lord, to kiss the rod and to feel the pain as You chastise us.

On the evening of March 7, after I had returned home from Borculo, where I had preached that Sunday, I developed blood pressure on my brain. I could hardly use my tongue, but that soon reversed itself.

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*Comments from Professor Hemkes:*

This retrospective view on his life is part of the end of what Professor Boer wrote in his notes (“aantekeningen”). He did not write so much with the intention of publishing it in the press for all to read, but more for his family to reflect. But now that it *has* been distributed in the press, it is our privilege to look into his heart. He shares the various emotions that he experienced during his times of testing, and he does so in a way easily understood by Christians.

The life history of our brother makes it clear to us that in the deepest depth of his soul there was this inclination to say with Paul, “Lord! What do You want me to do?” This was an inclination not born of flesh and blood, but from God, to be working, to live and walk in consonance with the will of God. His notes make it clear to us that his whole heart longed for the coming of God’s Kingdom, for the preaching of the Word and for the welfare of all who love the Lord. They also demonstrate to us that he was thankful and humble in prosperity and patient in adversity and sickness. How very different from worldly people!

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<sup>78</sup>See “mother footnote” 10. Boer quotes the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 71:13. The melody can be heard at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=juq6jkIxoM>. A close partial English-language parallel is found at no. 132:2, 5 (1959).



According to Abraham Kuyper,

The life of a Christian takes on a different shape than that of worldly people. It has its own stamp. It is governed by other motives. This is the result of regeneration and of the power that emits from God's Word to the personal life of the Christian. Thanks to the revealed knowledge of God, the blessed consciousness of being reconciled to Him in Christ has come over him. He knows he is justified before his God. Through faith he is able to allow the full reality of the Divine Being to penetrate his inner being. Thanks to this totally different relation to his God, a metamorphosis takes place in his consciousness and inclinations. Since the Christian is now an elect member of the Body of Christ, something of that Body becomes public in his personal life. The knowledge of this personal life of Christians stretches far enough to make the Church of Christ intelligible for us.<sup>79</sup>

It does us good to notice frequently in Boer's notes his tone of gratitude and to discover the child-like joy that he could work for the Lord in his preaching, in being a member of the board of the Christian School and of Holland Home. Into all of this we read about the disposition of his soul: "I am of a status lower than all these benefits and all the faithfulness you have bestowed on Your servant."

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<sup>79</sup>*Encyclopaedie der Heilige Godgeleerdheid*, III, pp. 312-313. Amsterdam: J. A. Wormser, 1894. It is quite amazing that, while Abraham Kuyper was at his heyday at this time, strengthening the very people from whom Boer emerged, building up a Christian community into a full-orbed political entity, creating the first Dutch modern political party, this is the only time he receives mention in this book. The same is true for this book's twin, *God's Deacon*, which similarly makes short thrift of him.

## Chapter 19:<sup>80</sup>

### Birthday Celebration of the Theological School

March 15, 1904

*G. K. Hemkes:*

In the evening of the above birthday, we held a festive celebration with many people in the Theological School. The platform was decorated with beautiful flowers and large fresh tropical plants from local nurseries. An American flag hung behind speakers with the Dutch “three-colour” next to it. Everything had a festive look. Between the flags there hung a very elegant large portrait of Professor Boer that had been loaned for the occasion.

But the Professor himself was absent. A light discomfort kept him home that evening. This left people free to speak more laudable words about everything he had done for School and Church.

Professor Hemkes, the writer of these paragraphs, was in Byron Center in January, 1904. He went to church in the company of his hosts. The hostess said to her husband, “You should not walk so fast, for that is too difficult for the Professor.” The latter said, “Just keep going; I am doing alright.” “So,” she said, “we had Professor Boer last Sunday, but when my husband went too fast, the Professor said, ‘Gas rises in my stomach and then I must necessarily stop.’” Well, I had never heard of such a thing before. But when our brother could not attend this school celebration, I felt it my calling to pay him a visit soon. The following morning, I asked a student, “How is it with Professor Boer?” He answered, “Oh, he is much better now.” And so I postponed my visit for a few days.

But, totally unexpectedly, on Saturday March 26, students came to us with the message, “Professor Boer passed away!” How suddenly! We were shocked in the depth of our souls.

Gedenk, o HEER! hoe zwak ik ben, hoe kort van duur;  
Het leven is een damp; de dood wenkt ieder uur.  
Zou 't menschdom dan vergeefs op aarde zijn geschapen?  
Wie leeft er, die den slaap des doods niet eens zal slapen?  
Wie redt zijn ziel van 't graf?....

Think on my life; O Lord, take thought;  
Hast Thou created man for nought?  
What man that lives has power to save  
His soul from death, and from the grave?<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>80</sup>Though in the original, this is a separate section within and thus a continuation of Chapter 18, according to the Table of Contents, this is the beginning of Chapter 19, which is how I treat it.

However, the voice out of heaven that said to the Apostle John on Patmos, “Write: ‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord,’” consoled us.

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<sup>81</sup>See “mother footnote” 10. Boer quotes the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 89:19. The melody can be accessed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sn0DomGz-lk>. A close partial English-language parallel is found at no. 171:7 (1959).

## Chapter 20\*

### The Passing of Professor Boer

In *De Wachter* of Wednesday, April 6, 1904, we read the following:

#### The Late Professor Geert E. Boer 1832-1904

*G. K. Hemkes:*

As we reflect on the sudden passing of Professor Boer, we automatically remember the way Professor Beuker passed away on May 18, 1900. How unexpectedly both left us. And how it stimulates us all, not the least the professors and students at our Theological School, to work with all our strength within us while we can. Our time is short and uncertain, while there is so much to do.

I discovered that the Professor's personal notes that he had started years ago, remarkably ended only a few weeks ago. I requested student Bruinooge, who enjoyed a special relationship with the family, to provide me with a short report on this point and received the following with appreciation for his efforts:

On the evening of March 26, the news spread that Prof. Boer had very unexpectedly exchanged the temporal with the eternal. He had left home during the afternoon of Sunday, March 27, in good health, to preach at the Central Avenue congregation and officiate at their Communion service. Due to the flood waters in Grand Rapids, the trains could not leave the city and he was forced to return home.<sup>82</sup> Upon arrival home, he found

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<sup>82</sup>Hemke's footnote: At the end of April and beginning of May, our city became the victim of a terrible flood. More than a thousand families of the West side were driven from their homes. During the night of Saturday, March 26, the flood waters reached almost twenty feet. 8,000 people became temporarily unemployed. The damage in real estate was very great; in the media it was estimated to reach one million dollars. Due to God's mercy no human life was lost, but besides that, misery was widespread. We report only the following case: Brother S. S. Postma, Treasurer of our Theological School, living on Broadway, told us that in his street and further south and west, the water rose to higher than five feet. His own house was built on a fairly elevated lot, but the water reached up to his window sills. Everything movable was carried upstairs. Seventeen persons escaped to his upstairs. Once they were there, they heard a man wail, calling for help. They hurried downstairs and found a man near their stoop who with his one hand held the head of his wife above water and with the other desperately held on to an overturned boat to keep from being swept away by the powerful currents. They helped; they fished out the woman, apparently dead. But after half an hour of measures to revive her spirit, she recovered. What a blessing in the midst of all this misery! On Sunday, April 3, sixteen churches were closed on the West side, among them that of our brother Rev. M. J. Bosma on Broadway and that of Rev. T. Hagar on Turner Street. In addition, Grand Rapids has never been hit by a cyclone as that of Thursday evening, March 24. It ravaged the city for a moment and caused many thousands of dollars of damage. We were in a Circle meeting at the Theological School. The wind gusts were so strong and the turbulence in the air so loud that for a moment we could not hear the speaker. The following morning we learned that the southern part of the city had been hit by a cyclone. The church building of the Oakdale Christian Reformed Church was lifted off its

the place locked. After his departure, his wife and daughters had gone into the city and had not yet returned home. Boer went to his neighbours to wait there for the return of wife and daughters. And suddenly, he was at these neighbours only a few moments, the Master came to relieve him of his post. He took him to Himself to give him the reward that awaits every faithful servant of the Lord.<sup>83</sup>

I am happy to respond to the friendly request of the editor of *De Wachter* to write a short sketch of the late Professor Boer for our denominational magazine:

Geert Egberts Boer was born on March 1, 1832, at Roderwolde in Drente, the Netherlands. According to his own words, his mother was a serious, pious woman. His father appears not to have been very religious. Already as a young boy, Geert's loving mother pointed him to Jesus as the only Saviour, so that the seed of the Word was sowed early in his youthful heart. He attended the local primary school till age fourteen, after which he worked for some time on the farm of his parents. But this kind of work did not satisfy him; he preferred other work. It is not clear to us whether he already then aspired to the service of the Word. What *is* clear from this time that, though he was by no means indifferent, he was not conscious of being the Lord's possession. According to his own word, he had not yet achieved a clear idea about the way of salvation. He reached that point some years later, when he started to attend services regularly where the pure teaching of the Scripture was presented.

In 1857, Geert, his mother and his sister transferred from the Reformed Church to the Christian Reformed Church (CRC).<sup>84</sup> In that same year, he did profession of his faith. By the grace of God, he made a definite choice for God and His service. At this time, he also developed a stronger desire to be trained for the ministry. As per the advice of Rev. Van der Vegte, he soon started with preparatory studies and in 1861 left for the Theological School at Kampen. In 1863, he passed his literary exams and in 1865 he was declared eligible for a call to the ministry of the Word.

He soon received a call from the congregation at Sappemeer, which he accepted. But before he started his work, he married Jetsche Holtrop, in whom he found a faithful spouse. In 1868, he moved from Sappemeer to Niezijl, where he laboured with great blessing till 1873. Then he received a call from the congregation in Grand Rapids, which he felt compelled to accept after much struggle. On September 21, 1873, he was installed in this congregation by Rev. J. Noordewier. Here, too, he worked with many blessings.

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foundation, moved forward four feet and then collapsed. A two-story store near the church was hit so that the bottom part of the structure was pulled from underneath, while the higher part was neatly placed next to it without incurring extensive damage. We went to view the ruins. Currently, the Oakdale congregation holds its Sunday services in the Theological School. They are making good progress with building the new church that will cost them \$10,000.

<sup>83</sup>The end of the Bruinooge report.

<sup>84</sup>Respectively the Hervormde Kerk and Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerk, not to be confused with the denominations of similar English names in North America.

In 1876, he was appointed Lecturer at the Theological School by the Synod of the CRC. He accepted the appointment and began his task with a lecture about “The Training of the Future Preacher of the Gospel.” He has devoted most of his greatest strengths to this institution. When you consider the workload at the school and how he executed it, one is forced to admire his enormous energies. He had to teach so many disciplines in addition to which other tasks were piled on his shoulders. He labored with great intensity and all his powers at the school till July, 1902, when he was granted emeritus status due to old age.

It would go far beyond the parameters of a short life sketch if even a little of the Professor’s great significance for the CRC in this land were to be described. Then there are his media work and his philanthropic work, which were of more than minimal effect. However, we hope that a more proficient pen than ours will soon bring it all to light. It is enough here to say that the CRC has lost in him one of her most prominent men. He was a man full of zeal for God and His Kingdom; full of love for the Church of Jesus Christ; one who has used all the gifts and strengths given to him by God, to give embodiment to the second item of the most perfect prayer in every area of life. The Church has lost much in him, but she has received much more from him than she lost. A large group of his students are now working with zeal and dedication in that part of the Church to which he dedicated his strength. He now lives on in his students, who will never forget their faithful teacher, while he himself jubilates before the throne. He has received the palm branch of victory and is in possession of the glory that God in His infinite mercy has promised to all his faithful servants.

### **The Funeral**

Tuesday we traveled to Grand Rapids to attend the funeral of the remains of Professor Boer. When we met the grieving family at the funeral home, we discovered that they were clearly strengthened by the Lord, the widow as well as the children. They were mourning bitterly but also very comforted by the Lord.

Professor Ten Hoor, after having prayed, read from I Samuel 2:2-10, and on basis of this passage spoke about the divine authority of God to do with His own as He Himself determines. He reminded us then how the late Professor had been a rich blessing for our Church, working especially in a wide variety of functions for which God had specially equipped him as very few others, being so much at ease in his work. Ter Hoor ended with the assurance that the Lord had given him a long, happy and blessed life and had prepared him for a quiet and blessed passing. He reminded the sad family of the words used so frequently by the late Professor, “The Lord makes no mistakes”—and He did not make one now either.

Rev. Beets spoke in English on basis of the words of King David to his servants about his son Abner. “Do you not realize that a prince and a great man has fallen in Israel this day” (II Samuel 3:38)? The speaker demonstrated with several examples how these words are applicable in this case. A prince, a great prince, is also fallen among us today. We cannot think about the history of our Church without him or about the organization of any of our congregations in and around Grand Rapids with which his name is not associated in one way or another. A man with great energy in the areas of preaching, media and school, especially during the first decades of his presence among us, so versatile and many sided. And all this to the very end, literally dying in the harness of a servant of the Word. Not only a great one *in* Israel, but also a great one *of* Israel. Truly, an Israelite in whom there was no guile has departed from us.

Professor Heyns closed with a prayer of thanksgiving.

We now moved into the church building of the Commerce Street congregation, of which our late brother was a member. The building was full to the rafters. Rev. T. Van der Ark, the local pastor, opened with the singing of Psalm 103:8, the reading of Isaiah 40 and a prayer, whereupon Rev. J. Noordewier occupied the pulpit and first read I Corinthians 15:36-57, succeeded by a section from the last chapter of Deuteronomy. He began by expressing his gratitude for being allowed to speak because of the peculiar relationship which he had maintained with the late Professor. During his visit to the Netherlands thirty-one years ago, this church had called him. The church witnessed the well-known struggle that this call cost him, but then installed him, only to appoint him in 1876 also as Lecturer in our Theological School. He further reminded the audience how he had worked with patience and energy not unlike that of Moses, the servant of the Lord, and also, again like Moses, died as the mouthpiece of the Lord.

Rev. K. Kuiper, President of the Curatorium, gave a speech in their name and began by saying how this hour was a sad and somber one, but also encouraging and uplifting. It was sad and somber for the family, who now miss a loving husband and father; for the Church in which he had been a rich blessing to so many; for the school, whose father he was, while many younger clergy had sat at his feet; for the older brothers of the cloth and members of the congregation to whom Boer’s passing reminds them of their own turn.

But it was also an encouraging and uplifting hour, explaining this with the words of II Chronicles 24:15-16—“Now Jehoiada was old and full of years, and he died at the age of 130. He was buried with the kings in the City of David, because of the good he had done in Israel for God and His temple.” The speaker drew a parallel between Jehoiada and the late Boer and showed how both died at a blessed age; both died after a well-spent life and both were buried with honour. During the first point, especial emphasis was laid on how the advanced age of both constituted a blessing, not only in the number of years, but also in the nature of their old age.

The second point was by far the most profound. Emphasis was laid on how both the life and labour of the Professor had been very broad and versatile and how he had been equipped for this

extensive work sphere, while his significance for the extension of our Church cannot easily be overvalued. Still, he did not consider his work completed, even though the Church had given him rest and a place of honour among the personnel of our Theological School.

He still was prepared once again to go out to preach the Word. But the Lord, who does not require from us that we complete our work, but only that He will find us faithful in our work, said to this faithful ambassador: “It is enough!” And He suddenly called him Home.

As to the third point, the speaker said that this was not the most important point, but that Scripture does take it into account, while there is no need to further shed light on this thought, for the very large crowd in the church itself provides enough proof of it, and there are for sure many in our midst for whom he has been a blessing. The speaker ended by pointing out that as we are reminded of Christ’s death these days, upon which follows the Gospel of His resurrection, now also this body is laid to rest till the morning of the resurrection.

The next speaker was Professor Hemkes, who represented the college of professors. He pointed to the broad circle of friends the late Boer had developed by his friendly and loving character. He remembered how he got to know him in 1863 at Kampen and had since then enjoyed his warm friendship. Hemkes had for eight years served as preacher of the Word and Sacrament next to the place where Boer was born. And when the latter went to America, Hemkes was sent to Niezijl by Classis Enumatil to thank him for the many services he performed for the Classis and to wish him blessing upon his departure. Then he extended to him the wish Laban extended to Rebecca in Genesis 24:60—“May you increase to thousands upon thousands.” And this indeed became true.

When Boer arrived here in 1873, our denomination had 26 congregations, now 161; then only 15 ministers, now 112; our School had 4 students, now 107; membership stood at 8065 souls, now 60,446. There were, of course, others who helped him, but the Lord had equipped him with very exceptional relevant gifts for the extension of our denomination. He tolerated the heat of the day and the cold of the night; had to endure much. But he tolerated it all in patience and laboured on at all sorts of fronts with strength and rich blessing, all the while edifying others through his pious walk. Through his preaching and teaching since 1876 in the Theological School he was a manifold blessing to the Church. He stood alone, at first totally alone up there for all the disciplines that at the time constituted the literary and theological departments.

And now he has crossed over to that great heavenly gathering so unexpectedly. He fell asleep, as it sometimes is put, in the harness of the Gospel and worked as long as there was life and breath in him. The Lord who gave him to us, took him away at the age of 72. The mouth that spoke so many friendly words to us closed permanently for this present dispensation. But he has crossed over to that great gathering of the saints in Heaven. While our hearts and those of the family bleed and our eyes shed tears, he jubilates before the throne of the Triune God.



He will not return to you, honoured family! May we all together one day meet him in the realm of glory. From now on, you, sister Jetsche, as a widow, you, in the midst of your children, will continue your life's journey, but you, too, will one day enter the house of eternal joy, where God Himself will wipe away all tears from our eyes. And how much have the children lost a pious and loving father. He has left for you on your life's path positive and wise maxims. May those wise maxims stand you in good stead as eternal blessings through the Spirit of God. Many of us have heard his admonitions, corrections and awakenings to the Gospels. Similarly, the first word in the preaching of Jesus and His Apostles was, "Repent!" So Professor Boer constantly insisted on faith and repentance. May his testimony not one day witness against us, but may his warnings and now his unexpected passing serve as a means to us today to pray for the grace of the Lord: "Prepare me also, oh Lord, for Your coming and teach me to live eternally to Your glory for Jesus' sake."

Rev. J. W. Brink spoke in English. He turned to Mark 12:37 for his text: "The large crowd listened to Him with delight." This was the witness given regarding Jesus; it was also appropriate with respect to Boer. This was so especially because he preached the Gospel of Christ and Christ alone--faithfully, without fear and with definite conviction. He believed and therefore he preached, preferably every Sabbath. It was not a case of doing what I say but not according to what I do; as he preached, so he lived.

Brink remembered how as a youth he would be captivated by Boer's preaching in this church building. Every Sunday this spacious church would be packed with attentive listeners. The entire Church mourns his passing. There is hardly a CRC congregation in this widespread country where there are none who know him face to face or who have not heard him preach the Gospel of Christ and Him crucified.

All the speakers ended with warm consoling words for the family that bore witness to genuine sympathy. We left while singing Psalm 68:2.<sup>85</sup> At the graveside, Brother De Leeuw, the Praetor, spoke on behalf of the students.

Herewith this task is completed and everything returns to the normal routine. While the Professor and so many other beloved dead are resting in the rest that remains for the people of God, we are still in the midst of the struggle.

The Professor had definitely not counted on such a sudden death. Twelve days before his passing, he sent us a comforting letter in our sadness, certainly one of his last. In it he encouraged us and himself to keep before our eyes and in our hearts the word of the Lord, "You also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come when you do not expect Him" (Luke 12:40). He ended his writing as follows: "If we regard our life in the light of Scripture and fulfill

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<sup>85</sup>This could be Hymn 68:2 in the 1959 edition, for it lends itself to the occasion. However, in 1904 an earlier version of the Psalter was in vogue to which I have no access in Vancouver.

the task that God has assigned us here in fellowship with Him to the glorification of His Name, for the salvation of ourselves and others, then, through the grace of God, our life will fulfill the right purposes.

Direct your eye and heart heavenward, brother Keizer and children!<sup>86</sup> Jesus lives! He has said it and will do it: “Where I am, there my servant will be also” (John 12:26). The pilgrim staff is picked up again, the journey continues till we have reached the last milepost and may we then have our final peace.”

Direct your eye and heart heavenward, brother Keizer and family! Jesus lives! He has said it and will do it: “Where I am, there my servant will be also” (John 12:26). The pilgrim staff is picked up again, the journey continues till we have reached the last milepost and may we then have our final peace.”

And that milepost was almost within reach and its end was peace. May his unexpected passing be a blessing as was his life, and may his memory be a rich blessing for all of us, when we reflect on the grace that God has given our Church through him.

At the funeral of Rev. S. Postma from Middelburg, according to our respected editor of *De Wachter*, one of the preachers reminded us of the words of Abraham’s servant to Laban. Were he to see our tears and could speak to us, he would have quoted from Eliezer,<sup>87</sup> who said, “Do not detain me, now that the Lord has granted success to my journey. Send me on my way so I can go to my master” (Genesis 24:56).

Now then, let us release our beloved dead who died in the Lord and may they be faithfully laboring in the Lord....<sup>88</sup>

We returned to our homes under the impression that we have lost one of our greatest men, whose significance for our Church has a broad scope. With deep sympathy demonstrated to the family do we once more lay down a loved one with the prayer that God may console them with His grace and strength through His mighty arm.

–A. Keizer

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<sup>86</sup>There are two references here to “A. Keizer,” but without any context. From earlier in the book, we know he was a CRC minister.

<sup>87</sup>Eliezer from Damascus—Genesis 15:2.

<sup>88</sup>The ellipsis replaces “*ons aller wandel in de hemelen*,” a phrase not clear in this context.

We borrow the following from *De Wachter* of April 6, 1904:

#### IN MEMORIAM

Our Theological School was cast in deep mourning. Last Saturday, March 26, our highly respected brother, Professor-emeritus Geert E. Boer, was most unexpectedly taken from among us. He was on his way to Holland, Michigan, to preach the Gospel, but had to return home because the train could not get through. He sat in a chair, collapsed...and was no more.

The passing of Professor Boer is a heavy blow especially for the aged widow and her children. But even though Boer was no longer employed by the School due to advanced age, his passing is a heavy blow to the School and to the entire denomination.

Professor Boer personally represented as it were the entire history of our Theological School and a large part of the history of the CRC in North America. The full energy of his very active life was dedicated to the interests of God's Kingdom in Church and School for nearly forty years. What God intended to achieve through him among us cannot easily be estimated.

The faculty feels the need publicly to praise the work of God through and with Professor Boer with thankfulness and joy that is tempered only by our loss, in the firm confidence that our brother is now receiving the reward of grace from his Lord in eternal rest.

May the grieving widow and her children be strengthened through faith in our trustworthy God and Saviour, consoled by the awareness that his Lord and Master relieved and took him to Himself in such a gentle way. "God did not make a mistake here either," according to the words we so frequently heard from his lips.

The sudden passing of our brother emphatically calls upon us all, "Be prepared *at all times*."

On behalf of the Faculty of the Theological School,  
K. Schoolland, Secretary

## IN MEMORIAM

The Corps "*Credimus ut Intelligamus*" of the Theological School of the CRC, holding an extraordinary meeting on March 28, to reflect the sad loss suffered by the unexpected departure of Professor Geert E. Boer, Professor Emeritus at the School, decides the following:

- A. To declare that in Prof. G. E. Boer the students have been deprived of an honourable, highly-learned and beloved professor, whose work yielded rich fruits, whose example encouraged imitation, whose memory will be blessed.
- B. To declare that the Corps, though looking back upon the Professor with holy jealousy, does not begrudge him the rest in the new Jerusalem after so much hard labour.
- C. To declare its sincere participation with the family of the late Professor now cast in deep sorrow.

On behalf of the Corps,  
F. De Leeuw, Praetor,  
H. Tuls, Recorder,  
J. De Jonge, President,  
H. Guikema, Secretary.

## IN MEMORIAM

During the special meeting of the Board of Trustees of Holland Home, held on March 28, 1904, the following motions of participating in the passing of our Vice-President Prof G. E. Boer were adopted:

The sad and sudden passing of Professor Boer brought not only sadness in the circle of his family, where he was recognized as a loving husband and caring father, but also in the larger circles of friends and brothers, who had been in touch with his blessed life, especially in the important position that he held among us as Vice-President of the Board. His uprightness, his care and Christian advice to the clients always flowed as a pure wellspring out of his sympathetic heart. We, whose privilege it has been for so many years to carry out the work entrusted to us together with him, are sad, because we will no longer see his friendly face and will miss his help and counsel.

The example of love, dependability and self-sacrifice so worthy of imitation remains with us. And because it pleased God to take our brother to Himself, we bow in subjection to His will, while also

giving expression to our earnest sympathy for the deep grief of the widow and her children. May the Lord console and support them and through His grace lead them out of this night of sadness unto that blessed day of His promise when they, once again united, will always be with Him....

On behalf of the Board  
J. A. Brummeler  
Wm. Bommeltje  
J. C. Hertstein, Secretary

### Conclusion<sup>89</sup>

“And he died.” This is the sad and meaningful repeated statement after each life on earth among the millions and billions of people who have ever lived, still live and will live. Our earthly life, all that we do and see in the wide world comes to an end. This repetition is sad, because it is the result of the fall. The ancients used to say, “Were there no sins, there would be no wounds.”<sup>90</sup>

Eleven years ago, an American lady came to this city from Detroit to spend a few weeks with her friend and then to return. While here, she fell sick and suffered severe pain. She was taken to the hospital and operated upon. She developed blood poisoning and was dying. A Catholic priest was called in. She felt that she would live no longer and groaned, “Oh, I don’t dare to die; I cannot die; I don’t want to die. Oh, help me.” She repeated these sentiments continuously. The priest, who felt deep compassion for her, tried to console her and said, “Yes, we must all one day die.” She moaned with despair till she was no longer capable of moaning—and she died. The *Evening Press* featured a moving article about the incident.

This repetition after each life is immensely meaningful. It is at that time that the decision is made whether we will be eternally with the Lord in the paradise of light and live in heaven—or in the regions of eternal despair with the devils and evil spirits, in hell. How wretched it is to have to die and then to have no God in your heart, no security for your guilt and thus no Comforter, who comforts and wipes away the tears in the midst of life’s suffering.

In the deepest pains  
Our heart remains

In de grootste smarten  
Blijven onze harten

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<sup>89</sup>A little sleuthing brings me to the conclusion that the original writer of this chapter is Prof. G. K. Hemkes.

<sup>90</sup>“Waren er geen zonden, dan waren er geen wonden.”

Indeed, “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord” (Revelation 14:13). With reference to our late brother and on basis of his confession and life, we may trust fully that he has fallen asleep in the Lord. His life was Christ and his death, gain. His companionship was pleasant for us, much like that of our unforgettable and friendly Professor Beuker, who is also missed by us. Since 1884 we were together at the Theological School and never have I heard from him even one single angry word. Could I do anything but respect and love him? I esteemed him and considered him of higher status than myself. We consulted each other in love in everything that concerned the School.

He passed on. We all will pass on. May the Lord bring us into the great company where he is, and where all are who love the Triune God with incorruptible love. That is, with *Jesus’ Sheep*.

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About this subject there follows here a sermon from Boer’s hand that his wife and children desired to see at the end of this biography. It was delivered in 1884 and goes as follows:<sup>92</sup>

## **Jesus’ Sheep**

### Introduction

The announcement by the prophet Isaiah concerning the Lord’s Anointed who would come as the Good Shepherd was striking and highly significant: “He tends His flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in His arms and carries them close to His heart; He gently leads those that have young” (Isaiah 40:11).

Which striking qualities are here introduced and acknowledged? He has one flock that is His possession. He has bought her at a high price, not with gold or silver, but with His own blood, and He has freed her through His Spirit from all the devil’s violence.

It is for this flock that the Good Shepherd practices the most tender care according to the prophecy of Isaiah. In general, He provides her with the necessary food and takes care of her according to her needs. Not a single one of His are forgotten by Him or neglected. Especially does He take into consideration the various circumstances of His beloved. If there are lambs among His flock that are still young and tender, He takes their condition into consideration. Like

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<sup>91</sup>See “mother footnote” 10. These three original lines are a segment of the traditional Dutch versification of Psalm 33:10 for which I have found no English parallel. The translation is mine. The traditional melody can be heard at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nJy3vQKn\\_6Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nJy3vQKn_6Q).

<sup>92</sup>Twenty years passed between sermon and death. This suggests they treasured this sermon in a special way as one of his best.

the first Jacob, He adjusts Himself to the flow of the work. He does not lay burdens too heavy on them and does not drive them too hard. Oh, what a humble goodness from this excellent Shepherd! As a caring shepherd takes the lamb that cannot keep up with the flock, in his arms or lays it on his lap, so does this Good Shepherd treat all his youthful and weak children. They are still like newborn babies; so often they have little light to guide them on their way and in the work of the Lord, and so little experience on the path of righteousness.

The Saviour takes all of this into account. He is cautious, careful and gentle. As among the sheep the mothers of lambs can be considered among the weak of the flock, so there are among believers those who really do not belong among the strong. These have not yet brought it as far as the poet put it: "With Your help I can advance against a troop; with my God I can scale a wall" (Psalm 18:29). Not all are heroes like Paul, who declared, "Therefore we are always confident," or "I thank God, whom I serve... with a clear conscience...." (II Corinthians 5:6 and II Timothy 1:3).

A shepherd usually does not carry the mothers in a flock, but he leads them gently. So the Lord Jesus also knows how to lead the weak of faith gently according to their needs. As Peter walks on the sea and sinks, Jesus grabs him by the hand. And as the disciples forsake the arrested Saviour, He re-gathers them in His own time. He allows His to fall due to their own guilt, but before long He picks them up again. He chastises, but does so with a mildness that attracts. The poet had good reason to say: "Blessed are the people whose God is the Lord" (Psalm 144:15).

And you, beloved here present in the house of prayer, do you already belong to this flock of the Lord? This is certainly a most important question, because it touches upon our temporal and eternal happiness. It is our purpose at this hour to speak about that flock of the Lord's sheep. However, if we are not to work for you and ourselves in an unfruitful way, then we have right now special need for the light and operation of the Holy Spirit. Let us therefore unite ourselves in congregational prayer to the Triune Covenant God.

#### Prayer

Text: "My sheep listen to My voice; I know them, and they follow Me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of My hand" (John 10:27-28).

In the parable of the Good Shepherd Jesus introduces Himself in this our text. In the first five verses, Jesus tells the parable itself. In verse six we are told that His hearers did not understand it and thus could not fathom His message. From verse seven on, Jesus speaks more directly of Himself as the Good Shepherd, who came to gather His sheep for them to become "one flock and one Shepherd."

But the Jews refused to rejoice in the glorious privilege that was theirs, namely, that they could see Jesus in person and in His social life. His pleasant words, such as among others, "If anyone is

thirsty, let him drink” (John 7:38), turned into discord. Some said, “He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to Him?” Others declared the very opposite (John 10:19-21). Thereupon the Jews insisted that Jesus tell them straight out whether or not He is the Christ. Had He not told them already? Well, yes, He had and clearly enough. Among others, there is John 8:24—“If you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be (the true Messiah), you will indeed die in your sins.”

The Saviour let the Jews know this and appealed to the works which He did in His Father’s Name as so many uncontestable witnesses to Him. The Jews, however, did not believe. Their unbelief blinded and hardened them. Thus they gave clear evidence that they did not belong to the flock of the Lord. With Christ’s flock, the situation was totally different. They did not reject Him because of unbelief, but they believed in Him. “They heard His voice and followed Him. This is what the Saviour propounds in our text, about which we intend to speak to you this hour.

### Jesus’ Sheep

We will consider them in these successive points:

1. Their peculiar characteristic
2. Their blessed privilege
3. Their costly calling

And You, oh good Shepherd! Lead us into Your truth, bring us to Your flock and feed us in Your green pastures. Amen.

The Saviour explains in our text that His sheep are characterized by:

- a. Hearing His voice
- b. Following in His steps.

a. We certainly do not need an extensive argument that Jesus did not mean with “*Hearing His voice*” that all His children received a personal and audible voice from heaven. He usually speaks through His Word and Spirit and to our minds and hearts. In His Word Jesus has clearly expressed and revealed the will of God with respect to the salvation of sinners.

True, the Jews of Jesus’ time had the special privilege of seeing Jesus in person and to hear His words, but Jesus’ words to Thomas, “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed” (John 20:29) reminds us clearly that the normal way of faith is to believe and trust the Saviour on basis of His testimony and declaration in His Word.

However, the eye of the soul of the natural person is closed to true salvation. He cannot see it and her spiritual ear is closed to the voice of the Word of the Saviour. But where Jesus brings



sinners to repentance and turns them into His sheep, there He opens the spiritual ear and unlocks the spiritual eye so that they can hear and see what God reveals to them in His Word.

If previously they were under the delusion of being spiritually rich, now they learn to understand the meaning of, “Miserable, poor, blind and naked.” If previously they thoughtlessly followed the way to perdition, now they are seriously admonished. If they previously thought to be following the way to the grave safely, now they become familiar with the danger that threatens them. This bears restlessness and pain in the hearts of those who have discovered the truth through God’s Spirit and Word. Think of those who came under the influence of Pentecost through the preaching of the Apostle Peter.

The invitation to “Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” is no longer an idle sound as before, but, after a shorter or longer period of restlessness and searching, a drink of cold water for an exhausted soul. There is never a solution for the guilty sinner outside of Jesus, but there *is* complete deliverance through the blood of God’s Son. As a dove flies back to his window, so the soul flees to Christ, for the sheep hear His voice. She who comes to Jesus in uprightness of heart finds the place of her rest there and gives her heart to Jesus, while she embraces and accepts Him with a believing heart. Now they have rejected obedience to all foreign masters and have sworn eternal faithfulness to Jesus. *That* is the choice of all who have ever borne the name of Jesus’ sheep in truth.

Hearing Jesus’ voice is not only the characteristic of those who have crossed over from the world to Jesus’ sheep’s pen, but also of those who throughout life remain faithful to the Lord. They learn to pay attention to the will of their Master, to His loving invitation to remain in Him, so that they become one with Him in faith, or rise up in His strength when they have stumbled and fallen. “Return, faithless people; I will cure you of backsliding” (Jeremiah 3:22). This word is not merely an empty phrase for the Davids, the Peters and everyone who through their own experience more or less know what stumbling and falling means. And when the heart is burdened because of transgressions and the emotions under guilt, then the word from the Master, “Let him turn to the Lord..., for He will freely pardon” (Isaiah 55:7) is a loving voice.

The sheep of Jesus find themselves frequently in trouble here in the desert of this life, and sometimes in threatening danger. Where then turn to a counselor and rescuer? There the loving voice of the Good Shepherd responds like a harmonious trumpet blast, “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you and watch over you” (Psalm 32:8). They hear Jesus’ voice, and the prayer, “Teach me Your way, o Lord, and I will walk in Your truth,” rises up from their hearts. The work is confirmed, “My sheep hear My voice.” Once the will of the Father has become the choice of His sheep, then they also learn with an enlightened understanding to pay attention to the will of the Master. Their conscience accuses them according to the extent their understanding is enlightened and they pay attention to the command of the Master, by transgression of that holy commandment, peace retreats and the heart becomes restless. The word of the Shepherd calls anew to humility and vigilance, for “The blood of Jesus,

His Son, purifies us from all sin” (I John 1:7), and His “Wake up!” is not spoken in vain by the Master.

- b. *Following in His steps* is the second characteristic that differentiates God’s beloved from the world.

Just as especially in the East, the shepherd’s sheep follow to the grassy meadows, or to wherever the shepherd leads them, so also does the flock of this single and emphatically Good Shepherd. The believers love Jesus and the prevailing tone of their heart is as Peter once put it, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love you” (John 21:17). That love for the Saviour, inserted in the soul by God’s Spirit, makes them choose the fellowship with Jesus and with Asaph they say, “But as for me, it is good to be near God” (Psalm 73:28).

As sheep are sometimes scattered by predators and driven helter skelter, so this happens with the flock of the Lord. When persecution and oppression result from confessing the Lord and following His footsteps, sometimes believers lose their courage and trust to remain faithful to the Lord.

You can see this in Jesus’ Apostles when He was arrested. All the disciples ran away, leaving Him by Himself. Indeed, it can go so far that to a certain extent and for a time they say with Peter, “I don’t know the man.” That, however, is not an expression or revelation of their inmost hearts. There it is, “Take me away with you—let us hurry” (Song of Songs 1:4). The good Shepherd looks for them again and then it becomes public: They follow Him. Experience teaches them how necessary it is for them to constantly fix the eye of faith on the Shepherd and to seek light, joy and strength from Him and to follow His steps. That is where their happiness lies.

The sheep of a flock can sometimes fall behind or wander off, perhaps overpowered because of weakness or bewitched by fake green colours. This is not foreign to Jesus’ sheep either when they allow their eyes to wander off toward the enjoyment of this world, or are slow in carrying out God’s law. They find no peace there for their hearts, and when the good Shepherd discovers them again in their sluggishness in His service, in their wandering from the way of faith and their defection to the world, then God’s children do not find themselves at ease. They become emaciated because of lack of viable spiritual food and if the Lord Jesus would allow His sheep, those believers, to stay where they brought themselves, would perish because of hunger.

The good Shepherd lets them once again hear His voice through the working of His Word and Spirit through the use of the ways of providence and the sheep learn once again to follow the footsteps of their Shepherd. The poet’s acknowledgement and prayer: “I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek Your servant, for I have not forgotten Your commands” (Psalm 119:176), then becomes theirs. With Jesus they learn then to go through honour and dishonor, through bad and good rumours, through evangelized and unevangelized nations. The more they may follow the footsteps of the Shepherd with a firm pace along the way of sanctification, in humility, lowliness

and self-denial, the better God's beneficiaries feel themselves growing up in the knowledge and grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

These spiritual sheep experience an attraction to their Shepherd, something that is quite understandable. The believers are called "sheep" in the text and Jesus calls Himself the Good Shepherd. There is much that the sheep and believers have in common: They are both defenceless in themselves and share a tendency towards gentleness and wandering off. On the other hand, believers are closely related to the Saviour. Both have the Spirit of God. Believers have the anointing of the Holy (I John 2:20) and Jesus Himself is anointed with that Spirit without measure by the Father (Isaiah 11:2; Hebrews 1:9).

In principle, believers share in the divine nature and thus feel themselves attracted to their spiritual Leader. If believers are mild, Jesus even more so; if they are humble, Jesus is their example; if holiness is their passion, Jesus is emphatically the Holy Himself.

Thus, there is a relationship between the believers with Jesus and the language of the Bride in the Song of Songs. "He is altogether lovely" (5:16) reveals their attitude towards their most Beloved. Thus, united with the Saviour in the way of faith and inspired and led by the Spirit, the acknowledged character of Jesus' sheep is revealed: *They follow Him*.

This following is and remains defective and imperfect on this side of the grave, but it is nevertheless upright and true. It is here that believers characteristically differentiate themselves from their worldly neighbours. While the latter can choose their own way, the former follow their Saviour and Lord. However, note well here that to a certain extent unbelievers sometimes also appear to follow the Lord Jesus, but theirs is noticeably different from those who follow the Saviour.

The true sheep of Jesus' flock follow Him because they love Him, acknowledge Him as their Leader, feel attracted to Him and enjoy being with Him. The worldly folk copy the appearance of this manner of following to make God indebted to them, to silence their conscience, to develop a reputation or some other secondary goal. But it is not to have fellowship with Jesus.

The spiritual sheep love being with their Shepherd; that is their desire. The Saviour points this out and we hope it will also become clear to us as we now point you to these sheep.

### *1. A Blessed Privilege*

The Saviour shows this in our text by pointing that *He knows, equips and protects them*. "I know them," says the Good Shepherd. Jesus knows His sheep because He has loved them since eternity. True, election is generally ascribed to the Father in God's Word, as in: "... chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father" (I Peter 1:2) and "Yes, Father, for this was Your good pleasure" (Matthew 11:26). However, this does not deny that, according to His divine nature, Jesus has loved His sheep from eternity. All elect are elected *in Christ* (Ephesians

1:4). Jesus Himself declares His voluntary love for His sheep: “The Good Shepherd lays down His life for His sheep” (John 10:11).

On basis of the strength of His omniscience, He knows exactly to whom He has given His Spirit, and who, as a result of that, have accepted Him through their saving faith. He pointed out a Judas exactly among His Apostles, even before the betrayal took place. Jesus had no need for someone to explain human beings to Him, for He Himself knew what humans really are: “He did not need man’s testimony about man, for He knew what was in man” (John 2:25). Jesus knew His as *believers* in the practice of sanctification and in that sense approved their relationship *to* Him and their life *for* Him. This may justifiably be considered a blessed privilege that they stood in such a close and loving relationship to this Good Shepherd.

However, all this does not yet exhaust our text. The believers were given a great gift: “*I give them eternal life.*” Humans are dead in trespasses and sins. In relation to those born again, this means the Lord has made you alive. The Lord gives His elect here the beginning of eternal life in fellowship with God, maintains and strengthens it as He moves here on earth, and in eternity it is a perfect, blessed and eternal life. In the course of His work of re-creating the sinner, He pours out His Spirit; then He takes away the initial seed of death in the sinner and creates a new spiritual life in the soul. The Bible calls that “...has been born of God” (I John 4:7). The Spirit of God convinces the sinner of his need *for* Christ, teaches him to come *to* Jesus in truth and in the true faith to accept the Him as his Surety and Saviour, to whom he voluntarily gives and dedicates himself. Here arises a living fellowship with Jesus so that Jesus is now the vine and they the branches (John 15:5). This is a supernatural spiritual and eternal life. There is nothing natural at the bottom of this new life, nothing: no human effort, no diligence, nor is any good quality or tendency in any way the origin or cause of this life. The Lord even gives it to the least of us all. He causes a Manasseh in the thorns and a murderer on the cross to repent. The Lord said, *I give it to them.* And that He does according to His own authority. “God has mercy on whom He wants..., and He hardens whom He wants...” (Romans 9:18).

It is not a temporal or natural life, but absolutely eternal. Here on earth it is developed under the cross and struggle, and maintained by Him who gave it and, once perfected in heaven, forever! As the natural life of people is maintained with food and drink, so also is life given through Jesus maintained by means of Word and Sacrament and through them fed and strengthened. Once death has set in and we are in eternity, this mediate or indirect dispensation ends, after which all God’s people will live in immediate or direct fellowship with God. In that new Jerusalem, the city that needs neither sun nor moon, the glory of God will light it and the Lamb will be its candle. The faithful will no longer need instruction in God’s Word or in the Sacraments of Baptism and Communion as we do here. They will have and enjoy an eternal life. And we have all this thanks to the Lord Jesus, the Good Shepherd. He gave and gives *eternal life* to His.

Here on earth, the life that Jesus gives to His followers, is a *militant life*. God’s children have many enemies that plan their destruction and downfall. The world is of the evil one: satan, who

occasionally disguises himself as an angel of light but then transforms himself into a roaring lion, and in addition to all that, those archenemies of God's Church, of Jesus' sheep. How can these sheep persevere in their struggle and overcome? Definitely not through the strength of wisdom or prudence. In this regard, it is fitting for them to say, "For we have no power to face this vast army that is attacking us."

It is a happy situation when the believer can truthfully say, "We do not know what to do, but our eyes are upon You" (II Chronicles 20:12). Then they will not be ashamed, for Jesus *saves* those who are His. They will not get lost in eternity. God's gifts of grace and His calling are irresistible, and "the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord" (Romans 6:23). Jesus' flock will not perish. If God's free love is the source from which flow all the waters of grace, Jesus' reward is the way, while the Spirit of Christ, Who lives in the believers, is the security for the received deliverance. If Jesus' sheep were to perish, then the Saviour would have to either reduce His love for them or His work would have to be declared worthless, or an enemy would have to come stronger than He or—His faithfulness would have to fail. None of these dangers, however, can nor will happen. His love is unchangeable like Himself; His work is approved by the Father and sealed; the Father has elevated His Son and made Him to be a Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). His arm is almighty, for "the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work" (I John 3:8). Neither can His faithfulness fail, for He has promised, "Where I am, My servant also will be" (John 12:26) and "that you also might be where I am" (John 14:3). Thus the mouth speaks the *truth*. The Saviour is not disappointed with or in His sheep. He knew what they were made of even before He poured His blood and sent His Spirit to them.

However, it is true that often God's children do not live up to their costly obligations. All too often they fall back into love for the world and then become ashamed about their faithlessness with respect to the Lord and their lack of zeal in His service. Then they will experience in their cycle of turning to and from the Lord that their soul withers and becomes weary and they are to mortify themselves before the Lord. The Saviour knew all of this, before He transferred them into His fellowship. At that time, He brings all His into the valley of humility before Him, and the prayer of David "Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me" (Psalm 51:12), becomes theirs, even if they have not fallen as deeply as did David, just before he wrote Psalm 51.

Paul declares emphatically the impossibility of the Shepherd's sheep getting lost, when he writes, "For if, when we were *God's enemies*, we were reconciled through the death of His Son, *how much more*, having been reconciled, shall we *be saved* through His life (Romans 5:10)! *Through His life*. Yes, indeed! Jesus lives up there above at the Father's right hand, but He *is* there; He *lives* there, for the benefit and in the interest of His sheep. *There* He promotes their interests, *there* He prays for them, and from there He continually pours out His Spirit over sinners. Even as they make progress, He gives more gifts of grace to His followers. They will not go to perdition in eternity. "Though the mountains be shaken and the hills be removed, yet My

unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor My covenant of peace be removed,” says the Lord, who has compassion on you (Isaiah 54:10).

John, the Beloved Apostle, warns emphatically against sin, but where his children—that is how he refers to believers—unexpectedly have fallen into sin, *there* he points them to the ascended Saviour and says, " My children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have One who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (I John 2:1). True, we do not lack enemies who are planning to snatch this flock from the hands of this Good Shepherd. Satan either disguises himself into “an angel of light” or “prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (II Corinthians 11:14; I Peter 5:8). Also the dangers that threaten God’s children from the side of the world, especially with an eye to the inherent decay, are not to be underestimated. John warns against that hostile and dangerous power, “Do not love the world or anything in this world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world—the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does—comes not from the Father but from the world” (I John 2: 15-16). It is fortunate for Jesus’ flock that it stands under the protection of her Shepherd. He, her caregiver and protector, has all the attributes of a perfect and good shepherd. His love for His sheep is unlimited; His care for His is as faithful as He Himself; His power is omnipotent and hence the word, “No one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand” (John 10:29) stands firm. There is no apostasy among the holy; Jesus will make sure that not a scratch will remain on His flock; He brings them all safely into the fatherland of eternal rest. There is the congregation bought by Jesus’ blood and saved by His Spirit from dangers that threatened them, now beyond these threats. The faith struggle currently here is exchanged there with eternal victory and the celestial song of praise, “...with Your blood You purchased men for God...” (Revelations 5:9) is sung by the saved saints with jubilant tones. That these saved ones have also a costly calling here over against their Saviour cannot reasonably be doubted. It is to this calling that we finally draw our attention.

2. It is a calling of *thankful love, complete obedience and faithful trust.*

It is an irrefutable truth that benefits received oblige us to gratitude. To the extent these favours increase in frequency or in value, they oblige us all the more to acknowledgement. The blessings believers have received from Jesus, still receive and will receive from Him, are too many to count and their value can never be acknowledged equally. What was that poor sinner, who now through grace has been saved in hope, but originally outside of Jesus! A guilty, a lost child of Adam, had nothing in him that could please God. And yet, the Lord loved him voluntarily. Jesus poured His blood for him out of free grace and granted him His Spirit, Who recreated and converted him? Here it could emphatically be said, “It is not for your sake..., but for the sake of My holy Name...” (Ezekiel 36:22). That is how the Lord could speak and the sinner be rescued and saved. Every sheep of Jesus’ flock may well repeat the poet of Psalm 116, “How can I repay the Lord for all His goodness to me” (:12)? Besides the benefits in nature, the Lord has also given the believers a special gift by bringing them into fellowship with Jesus. That life-long

communion with Jesus is so painfully earned through Jesus, so freely given, so surely secured and is from the Lord's side so faithfully preserved. Acknowledgement and thankfulness for the benefits, especially those of grace in Christ, in the Trinitarian Covenant God—see there the calling of the congregation so preciously purchased.

If this gratitude is genuine, then it should be, “faith expressing itself in love” (Galatians 5:6). No force, but voluntary dedication of themselves to Jesus, fully and undivided, that is the right way of the fulfillment of the costly calling of believers with respect to the Saviour, Who has done so much for them, gave so much to them and opened such glorious vistas for them?

If we spoke just now of thankful love as the first calling of the believer, we may rightly refer to the second as absolute obedience. If it is naturally of great interest for a sheep what kind of shepherd it has, it is no less important for such a sheep that it follow the footsteps of the shepherd, namely one who promotes her welfare and hears his voice. This is especially important for the sheep of *this Good Shepherd*. Jesus gave His life for His sheep. He provides them with the best of foods; He knows all the dangers; He is familiar with all the diseases and knows their every need precisely. Now it is quite possible that Jesus leads His sheep along unknown paths or that the believers sometimes think or say, “What is the purpose of this experience?” Not a problem, even though they know they will not arrive at an answer soon. The Lord follows His own way and knows their needs much better than they themselves do. There is one issue they need especially to watch, namely, they must absolutely subject themselves to the leading of the Lord. If they follow the path of their own choosing, then they will soon have to blame themselves when they experience the sad consequences. If they stay in the footsteps into which He leads them, then it is possible that it sometimes leads them through deep valleys, but not that it eventually turns into a dead end. “...it will be for those who walk in that way; wicked fools will not go about on it” (Isaiah 35:8). Paul himself had to experience it—“... there was given me a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of satan, to torment me,” but its purpose was “to keep me from becoming conceited” (II Corinthians 12: 7). Abraham was sent to Mount Moriah in order to sacrifice his son Isaac, but the purpose was to test his faith.

*Complete or absolute obedience* to the leading and the command of the Lord is the main condition to see the salvation of the Lord. The subject here must not be a king; the labourer not a lord and the sheep no shepherd. In fact, the very opposite. May the sheep follow the footsteps of the Shepherd so that the jubilation of Psalm 23 may soon be repeated in faith.

This subject, namely whether I am subject to the Lord and whether I walk in the way of my Master, should be searched daily by believers, earnestly and prayerfully. It is upon this that the comfort and joy of life depends. The Lord has promised nowhere that He will bless those who do not submit themselves to Him, but He *has* promised the opposite: Those who deviate from His law live an arid life. The attributes of Jesus constitute so many forcible reasons to attend the great master's school as His pupils. Absolutely perfect—that is the summary of all His attributes, and the *first*, but also the *last* main lesson in the school of Jesus is this: “If anyone

would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me” (Mark 8:34). Jesus shares His goodness but not His honour with His followers. The sheep of Jesus’ flock must know that following their Shepherd is one of their characteristics, given purely through grace, but also that it is their costly calling to practice this voluntarily and that with a view to God’s honour, goodness and to the trustworthiness of the Saviour and Lord with an eye to their own well-understood interest and welfare.

Believer! What has Jesus done *for* you? What has He given *to* you? And what blessing has He *promised* you? Then understand your calling, promote your wellbeing and submit yourself absolutely and willfully to the authority and leading of your glorious Master, who has a claim on you to demand, “My son or daughter, give Me your heart.”

At the end, it is the task of Jesus’ flock *to depend believably on the Lord*. Faith does not involve accounting; it leaves the result to the Master. If the believers are in God’s way, then the Lord’s promises are for them. Those are innumerable and are based on such sure a foundation that their fulfillment cannot fail. “For He who promised is faithful” (Hebrews 10:23). It is certainly a great evil and in general it speaks dishonourably of God and especially of the Saviour, when His children do not trust Him. Then they make things complicated that He is not that trustworthy, that His work does not mean much and that you can’t depend too much on His promises. If the believer does not want to dishonour his Lord or piteously shortchange himself, then he must pay attention to the word in our text, how Jesus reveals Himself as the Good Shepherd, who will definitely take care of His sheep, save and lead them. May he then primarily watch His footsteps and follow Him in faithful obedience. For the rest, he may cast all his worries on the Lord and rely on his God with an unrestricted faith. He must above all watch out for the deception of his still divided unbelieving heart and depend on the strength of his Saviour, and understand by his own experience the word of the poet, who says, “Those who trust in the Lord are like Mount Zion, which cannot be shaken but endures forever” (Psalm 125:1).

In this way their suffering may at times be painful, the cross sometimes heavy and the way sometimes difficult, but it will not result in failure. The good Shepherd is trustworthy and His word will definitely be fulfilled—“*My sheep ... will not be lost.*”

A glorious prospect for those who belong in truth to Jesus’ flock. This, however, is for you and me the greatest question of life that finally decides everything. If we do not belong to the flock of this Good Shepherd, what will all His excellent attributes profit us? They will not benefit us in any way, for Jesus Himself has restricted His promises to His sheep. And those sheep identify themselves by paying attention to Jesus’ voice and by following Him in His footsteps.

Do you know this for yourself, congregation? Do you see yourself outside of the care and fellowship of this Shepherd? Have you understood His voice, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28)? Have you turned to Him to place yourself in the care of this Shepherd? Have you received any desire to follow this Shepherd



with His flock through both sowed and unsowed lands, in paths along which your Shepherd leads you? And are you blessed in the circle of the godly?

What is your heart-felt answer to these questions? If you miss all this, do not for a moment think that you will be saved in this way, but still turn to this only Master before it is too late. He still invites you as a friend (John 7:37). If you have those attributes, then acknowledge the grace offered you, you who are so blessed by the Lord. You do not have to make yourself worthy, but it is only due to His free compassion that you may be counted among this flock. Give much careful consideration to these attributes of our Good Shepherd, for they will stand you in good stead. You have not yet outgrown your heart so prone to wander. You are blessed to be led by a trustworthy Shepherd.

Make use of the meadow, that meadow He offers you through the service of Word and Sacraments. Allow yourselves to be led gently along the still waters of all the Lord's promises for Him to refreshen your soul.

Do you feel sick or weak? Oh, go boldly to Him with your needs. He gives balm to the wounded and provides means of strengthening the weak who are unable to proceed with His flock, whom He gathers up in His arms and carries in His lap.

In conclusion: "You My sheep, the sheep of My pasture, are *humans*, but I am your *God*, declares the sovereign Lord" (Ezekiel 34:31). Go forth then, encouraged on your journey to the grave with the outpouring of faith: "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not be in want."

