

The Influence of Kuyper on the Americanization of the Christian Reformed Church

by G. Hopman¹

As indicated in the previous sections of this book, the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) was a closed community from the beginning. The break with the Reformed Church of America (RCA) did not lead to seeking support from potentially related American denominations. Instead, the CRC turned to kindred spirits in the Netherlands from where it drew its preachers. When the church established a theological school in Grand Rapids, Michigan, in 1876, they appointed a docent from the Netherlands. From its beginning, Calvin Theological Seminary (CTS) was dominated by teachers who had studied there. This situation continued throughout the period covered by this book, 1890-1950. Studying at Princeton Theological Seminary was also attractive to CRC students because Gerardus Vos, a disciple of Kuyper and a member of the CRC, taught there from 1904-1932. An interesting feature of this development was that this Dutch character of the church constituted a reason for new immigrants to join it. These new arrivals placed an additional Dutch stamp on the CRC, so that it remained a closed community with respect to its Americanization.

During the last decade of the nineteenth century, the influence of the stream of new immigrants and of preachers who had studied in The Netherlands was so strong that it changed the character of the church from internal preoccupation to a more global vision. This took place under the influence of Kuyper. Romein, a Dutch historian, in his book *Erflaters van onze beschaving*, called him “the chimer”² of the common people. He did play that role also among the farmers and craftsmen who had settled in Michigan and joined the CRC. Through his doctrine of common grace, Kuyper expanded this brand of Calvinism from a one-sided emphasis on ecclesiastical dogma into a total world view. Romein calls this doctrine the valve through which Kuyper pumped fresh air into this community.³

Kuyper was given the opportunity to carry his vision to America when he was

¹ An excerpt and translation by Jan H. Boer from G. Hopman, *Be an American!: De invloed van de godsdienst op het proces van Amerikanisering van de Nederlandse immigranten aangesloten bij de Christian Reformed Church in Amerika (Michigan) in de periode 1890-1950*. A thesis written for the Rijksuniversiteit, Leiden, the Netherlands,, March 1989, pp. 21-24.

² “Chimer” or “klokkenist” was the church bell player who would wake up the community in the morning.

³ Even most of this website constitutes a continuation and expansion of this freshly pumping air.

invited in 1898 to present his famous six Stone Lectures at Princeton. At that occasion he proposed an organization that would strengthen the bond among the global Dutch diaspora. It was called “General Netherlands Union.” The Board of Directors, appointed by Kuyper, included a number of prominent members of the CRC. Henry Zwaanstra, a CRC church historian, points out that the idea behind this move was that the Dutch have a global calling and should not be swallowed up by the nations where they had settled. One of the main goals was the promotion of the use of the Dutch language. In Michigan this movement soon collapsed.

The CRC has supported Kuyper’s vision with varied levels of success. Kuyper’s call would echo far and wide, “Calvinism is the only decisive, lawful and consistent defense for Protestant nations against encroaching and overwhelming Modernism.” We find this theme regularly in the columns of the newspapers and magazines within the CRC.

An important consequence of Kuyper’s influence was that it strengthened the isolation of this group within America. Over against that stood the fact that the church began to preoccupy itself with cultural developments. This, in turn, had the result that it pricked the curiosity for American culture. This led to the establishment of a liberal arts college during the 1920s as a complement to the existing flourishing system of Christian elementary schools. The inspiration for this development, according to historian Brinks, came solely from the Netherlands. All the organizations established during this period were typical Dutch in nature. They attracted no one from the outside world. The immigrants who had joined the RCA did not participate and condemned it all as un-American. The RCA had already gone far in being absorbed into American culture and indicated not a bit of interest in the “Neo-Calvinism” as Kuyper’s vision came to be called.

The pillarization of Dutch society was more or less a natural development. However, the attempts of the CRC to erect its own pillars were unnatural. It created a kind of ghetto—or was it a city on the mountain, a beacon of light in the jungle of secularism?⁴

The commemoration of the centennial of Kuyper’s birth in 1937 how influential Kuyper’s name remain active in the CRC. Professor Clarence Bouma, chief editor of *The Calvin Forum*, a magazine established in 1935, compared him to earlier giants in church history such as the African Berber Augustine and John Calvin.

⁴ This last phrase is added by the translator.

With this comparison, he pointed out that Kuyper's vision retained its golden value for future generations.⁵

⁵ I repeat that this website is a fulfillment of Bouma's prediction—an influence across the globe and found in many languages and cultures. The visitation record of this website includes reference to many nations, many of them multiple times. In Canada, some of these pillars have become highly influential national institutions right up to now, 2022, while their adherents serve in many prominent capacities.