

I. Dr. De Haan and the Reformed Church in America

For the sake of readers to whom the facts may be unknown, as well as to explain the tone of this reply, it will be well to recount what has happened. Some years ago Dr. Martin R. De Haan was a practicing physician in Byron Center, Mich. He was converted, and decided to enter the ministry. He took the regular course at the Western Theological Seminary, of the Reformed Church in America, at Holland, Mich., and graduated in May, 1925. Having received a call from Calvary Reformed Church, Grand Rapids, he was examined, ordained, and installed by the Classis (Presbytery) of Grand Rapids.

His work was successful to a remarkable degree. Many were converted, and the audiences crowded the church; so that very soon, under Dr. De Haan's direction, extensive (and expensive) alterations were made to the church property. This involved the congregation in a large debt, but one that it seemed reasonable to assume, in view of its prosperous condition.

Presently, however, it began to be rumored that all was not well in Calvary Church: that the pastor was privately teaching in opposition to the doctrines of the denomination on infant baptism. Now when he was ordained and installed, he had signed the following pledge, required of all ministers by the constitution of our church. (Article II, Section 18).

"We, the under written, in becoming ministers of the Word of God within the bounds of the Classis of, do, by this our subscription, sincerely and in good conscience before the Lord, declare that we believe the Gospel of the Grace of God in Christ Jesus, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, and as truly set forth in the Standards of the Reformed Church in America, and that we reject all errors which are contrary thereto. We promise that we will exert ourselves to keep the Church free from such errors.

"We promise, that we will with all diligence and faithfulness teach the Gospel and defend the Standards of our faith, without either directly or indirectly contradicting the same, by either preaching or writing; and that we will set forth the Gospel as God may give us grace in our life and conversation, without contradicting the same by word or example."

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Although not in form an oath, this pledge has all the solemnity and force of an oath of office, since it is subscribed "sincerely and in good conscience before the Lord." It is a covenant between the Reformed Church in America and the newly ordained or installed minister that his teaching, both publicly and privately, shall be in harmony with the creed of the church.

Assuming that Dr. De Haan signed this statement in all good faith, he, not very long afterwards, experienced a change of view with regard to infant baptism. That change of view, as such, was not to his discredit. A young man, fresh from the seminary, accepts the doctrines of the church, but has not yet had time to do independent thinking and study upon each one of them. When he does that, it is not surprising that sometimes such study results in the conviction that the Reformed Church is in error on this or that point, especially a point like infant baptism, on which there is such a wide divergence among Christian people.

Nor has the young minister, when promising to teach in accordance with the Standards of the Reformed Church in America and with the Holy Scriptures, set these two side by side as of equal authority: still less has he set the creed above the Bible: The Reformed Church holds very strongly to the supremacy of the Scriptures in all matters of doctrine. Not only that, but she holds also very strongly to the Protestant doctrine of the right of private interpretation. When any man pledges himself to be loyal to the Bible, this means loyal to it, as **he himself understands it**. It can not be otherwise, for no man has any other revelation from God except the revelation that he himself perceives it to be. The Reformed Church expects and demands of its ministers this kind of loyalty to the Holy Scriptures, that each man shall be loyal to his own understanding of them; the best interpretation he can reach by prayerful and diligent study.

This obligation to loyalty, however, rests not only upon the individual minister, but also upon the church in its collective capacity. Hence the church must have a collective understanding of the Holy Scriptures, to which the church must be loyal. This corresponds to the private opinion of the individual minister. This collective interpretation is expressed in the Standards. When, in the pledge required of the minister upon his ordination, the church speaks both

of the Holy Scriptures and the creed, and demands of the candidate a promise that he will be loyal to both, this is not in the least a demand that he shall lay aside his right to differ, but an opportunity for him to declare that, in the exercise of his private judgment, he has arrived at the same conclusions as the church holds collectively. This puts not the least restraint upon his freedom of thought, for in the free exercise of his private judgment, he has already arrived at these results. What the church asks him to do is precisely what he himself desires to do, and thinks he ought to do.

If, however, having in all good conscience taken this pledge, his views later undergo a change, what is the minister to do? Such a possibility has been foreseen and provided for in the constitution. The pledge subscribed by every minister continues as follows:

“We further promise that, should we ever have any doubts as to this Gospel of the Grace of God in Christ Jesus, or as to the Standards of our faith, we will neither propose nor teach the same, but will first communicate our views to the Classis to which we belong.”

Therefore, to an honest man who has suffered a change of view, three courses are open, as follows:

- (1) He may communicate his change of opinion to the Classis, in the hope of convincing his brethren, and later the entire church, that his new views are right, that the creed is not in harmony with the Holy Scriptures, and that it ought to be amended.

This is naturally not a proceeding that can have much hope of success, and I have never heard of any one who tried it, but the method is provided, if any one cares to use it.

- (2) Upon such a communication of his change of opinion, the minister may, in the course of the ensuing discussion, be himself convinced by his brethren, returning then to his original views.

This, also, happens very seldom, for a man who has altered his views generally has considered all the arguments which his brethren can bring forward. If they were not sufficient to convince him before he has taken a public stand, they are not likely to be effective later.

- (3) He may announce his change of opinion and quietly step out of the ministry of the Reformed Church.

This happens from time to time; and when this is done openly and frankly, the dissenting minister leaves with the undiminished respect and affection of his brethren.

Any one of these three things may happen in case of a change of view, and any one of them is an honorable and Christian course; but Dr. De Haan, having come to believe that infant baptism was not scriptural, took a very different method. Saying nothing openly to the Classis, he won over a considerable number of his people to his new convictions, so that, by the time the matter attracted general attention, he had a large backing in his congregation. In so doing he violated his oath of office, and broke the solemn covenant he had made with the Reformed Church.

Dr. De Haan, in his preaching, lays great emphasis upon being scriptural, and that is admirable; but his conduct on this occasion was most unscriptural. One of the things most strongly insisted upon throughout the Bible is the keeping of covenants. It is the glory of God himself that he is a covenant-keeping God. When Joshua made a covenant with the Gibeonites, he was true to it, even though it had been obtained by fraud. When Saul, centuries later, violated that covenant, it brought a curse upon the land. Among the marks of the man who is acceptable to Jehovah is this: "He that sweareth to his own hurt and changeth not." (Ps. 15:4). Among the sins which the prophets denounced most severely, was the breaking of covenants, especially those made in the presence of God. See Jeremiah 34:18, and Ezekiel 17:11-18. Notice especially the following words, which are as applicable to Dr. De Haan as to the wicked king of Judah:

"For he hath despised the oath by breaking the covenant; and, behold, he had given his hand, and yet hath done all these things; he shall not escape." (Ezekiel 17:18).

The New Testament has the same teaching, for we read in Romans 1:31, in a list of terrible sins of which the heathen were guilty, that they were "covenant-breakers."

In due course the matter of Dr. De Haan's teaching on infant baptism was brought to the attention of the ecclesiastical assembly to which he was responsible, the Classis of Grand Rapids. Formal charges were laid before that body, and Dr. De Haan was notified to make his defense at a specified place and time. What did he do? Instead of stand-

ing up and defending himself like a man, he turned tail, deserted his post as minister of Calvary Church, left his congregation in the lurch, and began to hold meetings in a theatre; supported therein by many of his church officers and members.

The childishness and cowardice of this proceeding are so evident as to require no comment, but what needs to be especially pointed out is that in this he was again guilty of deliberate bad faith. The pledge he had subscribed contains the following clause:

"We do further promise to be always ready to comply with a requisition from Consistory or Classis for an explanation of our views respecting any particular article of our Standards, aforesaid."

In addition to this, at the time of his public ordination, he had, in the presence of God and of the congregation, made the following promise, the presiding minister asking the question:

"Do you promise to submit yourself, in case you should become delinquent, either in life or in doctrine, to ecclesiastical admonition, according to the public ordinance of our Church?"

Answer: "Yes, truly, with all my heart."

Yet he did not comply with the demand of the Classis that he defend himself, and he did not submit to the orderly course of ecclesiastical procedure, as he had covenanted to do.

He was, of course, deposed from the ministry. The Classis could do nothing else. In addition to his doctrinal errors, as judged by the creed of the church, his covenant-breaking would have been sufficient reason to declare him unfit upon moral grounds. This case is to be sharply distinguished from such cases as those of the Revs. Bultema and Hoeksema, who were deposed from the ministry of the Christian Reformed Church. These brethren sincerely believed themselves to be teaching in accordance with the creed to which they had sworn allegiance. Although the highest court of their church finally took a different view, this was at the most a difference of opinion in interpreting the Standards, and did not in the least reflect upon the personal integrity of the deposed ministers.

In the case of Dr. De Haan, on the contrary, when he taught privately that infants ought not to be baptized, he

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was under no delusion as to the teaching of the Reformed Church on that subject. He knew perfectly well that his teaching was contrary to that of the church, and contrary to his own solemn ordination pledge, but he continued so to teach, nevertheless. This was an act of deliberate wickedness.

In addition to these offenses against the Reformed Church as a whole, Dr. De Haan grievously betrayed the local congregation that had called him to the pastorate. When he came, it was a prosperous organization, with an adequate church property. Although it had some degree of indebtedness, it was not beyond the reasonable capacity of the church to bear, and eventually to pay off. When Dr. De Haan's course of dishonour and treachery was run, the congregation was nearly ruined; being rent asunder; broken in power and prospects; saddled with an immense debt. The faithful remnant are now, under another pastor, painfully trying to find their way back to prosperity.

All of these facts being well known and beyond dispute (for this was not done in a corner) it is difficult to understand how two ministers, up to that time considered to be men of personal integrity, the Revs. Bultema and Bennink, of Muskegon, Mich., could bring themselves to encourage and support Dr. De Haan in his stand, thus making themselves "accessories after the fact" to his offenses against God and man.

They did so encourage and support him, by associating themselves with him in the publication of a magazine, and by speaking at his meetings; in this way indicating to all the world that they approve of him as a worthy minister of the gospel. They seem to see nothing incongruous about a covenant-breaking minister preaching the gospel of a covenant-keeping God.

The only explanation of this remarkable situation seems to lie in the common bond of pre-millennial views. Against pre-millennialism, as such, there is no official objection in the Reformed Church in America. It is no new thing among us, especially not in the western section of our denomination. Among the pioneers of the Holland immigration, eighty or more years ago, such men as the Revs. Scholte, Betten, and Bolks, were strong adherents of that school of interpretation, as were many of the people, especially in the Pella

settlement. There Dr. Egbert Winter became a pre-millenarian, and many years later, his position on this subject being well known, he was elected Professor of Theology in our seminary, which shows how little hostility there was to such views at that time. To-day, also, one can name a number of ministers among us who are outspoken premillenarians; and their ministerial brethren do not on that account abate one jot of respect and affection for them; for with them these pre-millennial views are associated with loyalty to the Reformed Church and many years of faithful service in the ministry. It is emphatically no discredit to a man, in the Reformed Church in America, to be a pre-millenarian.

And yet, in spite of a long record of peace and brotherly toleration on such subjects, there is growing up among us lately a distinct hostility to this interpretation; and the responsibility for this new attitude lies upon the Revs. Bultema, Bennink, and De Haan. They have made premillenarianism, particularly when associated with the Scofield Bible, a stench in the nostrils of honest Christian men, who can hardly help being hostile to a teaching that is used to condone the breaking of the most solemn vows, to create faction and schism, to produce "undenominational" churches as refuges for those who can not bear the sobriety and restraint of orderly church life, and to build "tabernacles" where there are plenty of churches in which earnest and loyal men are preaching the gospel. It may be somewhat unfair of the average man to lay these things to the charge of the millennial doctrine, but it is scarcely avoidable, under present conditions.

Having thus deserted his duty, betrayed his congregation, and wickedly broken his covenant with the Reformed Church, Dr. De Haan has since that time repeatedly sought occasion to attack our church and its ministers. This is not surprising. When you know you have wronged a man, you just can not help hating him. Hence, when my innocent little lecture on Jonah was delivered, it seemed to him another opportunity for the same kind of attack, and he made use of it, with the result of the publication of the little pamphlet that I now propose to discuss.

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