

1834

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HENDRIK DE COCK'S *Return to the True Church*

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MARVIN KAMPS



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616-457-5970

[www.rfpa.org](http://www.rfpa.org)

[mail@rfpa.org](mailto:mail@rfpa.org)

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*My wife, Nancy Ellen, and I dedicate  
this volume to our five children, our grandchildren,  
and our many nephews and nieces.  
May it serve for the strengthening of their faith  
in Christ Jesus our Lord  
according to the sacred scriptures.*





Again the word of the LORD came unto me, saying,

Son of man, speak to the children of thy people, and say unto them, When I bring the sword upon a land, if the people of the land take a man of their coasts, and set him for their watchman:

If when he seeth the sword come upon the land, he blow the trumpet, and warn the people;

Then whosoever heareth the sound of the trumpet, and taketh not warning; if the sword come, and take him away, his blood shall be upon his own head.

He heard the sound of the trumpet, and took not warning; his blood shall be upon him. But he that taketh warning shall deliver his soul.

But if the watchman see the sword come, and blow not the trumpet, and the people be not warned; if the sword come, and take any person from among them, he is taken away in his iniquity; but his blood will I require at the watchman's hand.

—EZEKIEL 33:1–6



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## Preface

God is ever faithful throughout history to preserve his church in the truth of his word. October 31, 1517, marks the great Reformation of the church by Martin Luther. This is significant for all Protestants and Roman Catholics. The sixteenth-century Reformation restored to the church of Christ the truths of the sole authority of God's word and of justification by faith alone. The first was the formal principle of the Reformation; the second was the material principle. If one denies either of these principles, he stands with Rome in opposition to the Christian church.

The year 1834 marks the reformation of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands. In that year those who separated from the apostate *Hervormde* (Reformed) Church in the Netherlands returned to these Reformation principles and to the truth of sacred scripture as set forth in the Reformed creeds: the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dordrecht.

Although this volume is a recounting of that struggle for the truth, it would be a serious error to present this material in the abstract and as of no consequence to us who live in a different age and era and who speak another language. We who live in the early twenty-first century are called to live in a different time and culture indeed; yet we are to live by faith in the truth of scripture and therefore by the same principles, applying the same truths to our circumstances. If not, the church of Christ is not one in all ages, does not have one Lord, and does not serve one God and Father.

It would be easy to reject the importance of the events of 1834 if one has no awareness of and no commitment to the Reformed church. In a large measure the discussion of the history of 1834 is a family discussion. Yet not all in North America who call themselves Reformed Christians have Hendrik de Cock as their spiritual forefather, even though he preached to and taught many, if not most, of the founding fathers of the Reformed churches in North America, although not personally. He truly is the spiritual father of Reformed churches

in North America. We have our spiritual roots in the village of Ulrum, in the province of Groningen, the Netherlands, because located there was the first congregation that seceded from the state Reformed church in 1834. We all are spiritual children of those Reformed believers.

Of whom am I speaking? Who are those people in North America who have their roots in Ulrum and have De Cock as their spiritual father? I am not interested in asserting that he is *exclusively* the spiritual father of the Protestant Reformed Churches and that he is not the spiritual father of other Reformed churches. Each reader will have to assess for himself whether or not the confession of the Secession Reformed Church of Ulrum and that of its pastor is his confession. Each will have to determine for himself whether the Secession of 1834 was faithful to scripture and therefore was a God-glorifying endeavor. The question will arise, am I truly a spiritual son of this reformer of the Reformed church?

In answering this question, we must take note of the many tens of thousands of Reformed believers who immigrated to North America and established themselves ecclesiastically as Reformed churches by adopting the Reformed creeds and the Formula of Subscription of the Synod of Dordt. The years 1846–47 mark the beginning of this immigration of Christian Secession Reformed believers to North America. More than two hundred years earlier the first Reformed believers from the Netherlands had established the Reformed Church of America, but this church experienced only indirect influence from the Secession Church of the Netherlands established in 1834. The first immigrants of 1846–47, after having spent some time in the fellowship of the Reformed Church of America, established the True Reformed Church, which is now called the Christian Reformed Church. This Reformed church is the mother of both the Protestant Reformed Churches and the United Reformed Churches. We all trace our roots back to De Cock as our spiritual father and therefore to the congregation in Ulrum.

Other Reformed churches in North America also trace their roots to De Cock but were never members of the Christian Reformed Church. These are the American Reformed and Canadian Reformed churches, which trace their history back to De Cock through the *Gereformeerde Kerken* (Reformed Churches) of the Netherlands (GKN), which no longer exists. Generally speaking, the membership of these Reformed churches readily acknowledges

De Cock as their common spiritual father. Although several other Reformed denominations in North America also can claim to be the spiritual descendants of the Secession, the above churches are the most direct spiritual descendants. In addition, the spiritual descendants of De Cock immigrated to South Africa, Australia, and elsewhere.

My concern with the expression *descendants* is not of a mere biological or cultural nature. This is often emphasized, but it has little significance for the church and for the confession of the truth of God's word. One need not be of Dutch descent and culture to be received into the Reformed church and to confess and live the Reformed faith. I am emphasizing the spiritual character of the relationship between De Cock and his spiritual descendants. His confession, spiritual witness, struggle for the truth, and walk with God were echoed by Reformed believers in the villages and settlements in the Netherlands and across the globe, wherever God led them.

Among all these Reformed churches, there were serious doctrinal differences; nonetheless, they all held to the infallibility and authority of sacred scripture. There was no other authority in the members' homes and in the churches. They all inquired earnestly what the testimony of scripture is. They all held to the Reformed creeds of the church, which had binding authority over the preaching and the work of elders and deacons, for they believed that the creeds were faithful interpretations of the Bible that systematically express the saving truth of the gospel. All the members of the church confessed that the doctrines of the creeds fully agree with the Old and New Testaments. Where this was not true and where men opposed biblical doctrine as set forth in the creeds, they were disciplined. If need be they were excommunicated and declared to stand outside of the kingdom of heaven as long as they were impenitent.

Nor did these saints forget or neglect the call to do mission work at home and abroad. The Christian Reformed Church already in the 1880s established missions to the Native Americans, to the Jews, and to others. The churches labored for the eternal salvation of all the elect of God.

In the homes of the members of all these denominations, daily prayers were offered seeking above all the glory of God's name in the lives of the family members and the salvation of the covenant children. Men toiled long, hard hours as stewards of the gifts and opportunities provided by their heavenly

Father. Fathers led their children in family devotions daily, with a sense of joy and thanksgiving to God. Fathers exercised godly discipline, not sparing the rod if it was needed. Women were mothers in a spiritual Israel. Freely and willingly they gave of themselves for the physical and spiritual care of their covenant children. Parents made profound sacrifices in every regard to establish and maintain covenant homes.

These families were generally happy and united, and they established devoted Christian homes. They faithfully took their places twice on the Lord's day in God's house. They placed themselves thankfully and regularly under the authority of Christ Jesus, who in the worship services preached the holy gospel to them through his appointed officebearers.

Parents in the Christian Reformed Church sacrificed to establish Christian grade schools, high schools, and even colleges for the training of covenant children. From New York to California and throughout the United States, Christian teachers taught the children the entire curriculum in the light of scripture. It was a labor of love for God and for their Lord Jesus Christ. Parents saw their commitment to Christian education as a solemn duty. No sacrifice was too great. One reality characterized the parents' rearing of their children: they were focused on and aimed at the glory of God's name in the lives of their children. They possessed a covenantal, generational perspective in all their teaching and guiding of their redeemed and sanctified children according to God's purpose of election; they knew they were laying the foundation for the rearing of their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. They were Reformed, that is, they cherished a covenantal perspective in the care of their children; they were the spiritual descendants of De Cock and the church of Ulrum.

One could continue to extol the godliness and faithfulness of the Secession Reformed people who immigrated to the United States, but the above is sufficient to establish that they were consciously spiritual descendants of the congregation in Ulrum, which separated from the apostate state Reformed church of the Netherlands in order to return to the service of Christ Jesus.

However, it should not be imagined that sin and imperfection did not mar the immigrants' every endeavor. They would have been the first to admit it, and they surely confessed it before God's throne of grace in prayers of repentance. These were spiritually healthy saints. They did not legalistically seek their righteousness in their own works, even though the whole of their lives

was devoted to doing the work of the Lord. They sought their righteousness in the cross of Christ alone. They came faithfully and longingly to church each Lord's day to hear the gospel of grace in Christ Jesus. The principle of the great Reformation of the church was their joy, for it taught them that their justification was by faith in Christ alone, and through faith in Christ Jesus their salvation was certain.

The Reformed churches today that are faithful to their name are the continuation of the reformations of 1517 and 1834. These reformations of the church were a return to the Bible. Often it is said that the significance of 1834 is that it constituted a return to the Canons of Dordt. Although this is true, it is an incomplete statement. My thesis is that in 1834 De Cock and his congregation returned to the Bible and therefore to the Reformed creeds. Many will disagree with this understanding of 1834. Let the reader judge.

Do we share in the Secession fathers' confession, witness, struggle, and walk before God? Do we today treasure De Cock's spiritual legacy as our spiritual father? Are the Reformed creeds still our heartfelt confession? Or have we consciously rejected that confession of the fathers and returned to the apostate teachings and way of life championed by the false church? De Cock and all who signed the document of secession regarded the state Reformed church in 1834 as the false church identified in article 29 of the Belgic Confession. To secede from it was for them a duty before God, in order to live a life of obedience to sacred scripture. The authority of the Bible governed their thinking, willing, and doing.

Is our religious life a mere addendum to our autobiography? Then one's faith is not this book's contents. Do our confession and the implications of that confession characterize the reality and story of our lives? Do we merely attend a Reformed church, or do we live ecclesiastically? That is, do we honor Christ's office and ministry by taking personal responsibility for the local church's preaching and witness? One who conscientiously is a member of the church exercises the duties and responsibilities of the office of all believers. He is not merely an attendee at the worship service. He prays for and supports the faithful ministry of the word. He honors the office of elder, through which Jesus Christ exercises rule in his church.

Does the word of God govern our life? Or do we do as we please in the church, in the home, in marriage, and in society? Is our life characterized by

spiritual arbitrariness, or are we governed by the rule of Christ Jesus? Have we dethroned God and enthroned ourselves by an eclectic, unbelieving attitude toward scripture, picking and choosing for ourselves and our children what is well pleasing to our carnal interests? Do we foolishly try to wed rationalistic concepts of humanism, which are a rejection of the absolute authority of scripture, with certain statements of the Bible to form a religious conception not offensive to unbelieving humanity? This has been done again and again in the history of the church.

In my recounting of the Secession of 1834 and the reformation of the Reformed church by Hendrik de Cock on the basis of the sole authority of the Bible, I will limit myself to the doctrinal issues of that reformation. There are many anecdotal aspects of the lives of the men and women involved in this history that I will not relate because they are not of lasting significance. My interest is in their recovery of the Reformed faith and their return to a committed faith in the divine inspiration of the Bible and its absolute authority as expressed in the Reformed creeds.

In this volume my focus is on the labors and witness of one man, Rev. Hendrik de Cock. The other Secession pastors, deeply committed and involved in the events after October 14, 1834, that is, after the Secession from the state church was already accomplished, I will discuss primarily in one chapter. They had nothing to do with De Cock's struggle in his reformational witness before and at the time of the separation from the state church. These all, with one minor exception, were students in Leiden University and uninvolved in the events prior to October 14, 1834.

Frequently when this history is recounted, much effort is expended to analyze the psychological character of the primary individuals involved. Assertions are made about their strengths and weaknesses of character. I studiously avoided that endeavor, for it attempts to explain why men did what they did. I will limit myself to the objective record of what these persons believed, preached, wrote, and decided, and leave the heart and motivations to God alone to know and judge.

Further, I have included in seven appendices my translations of original documents authored by individuals directly involved in this controversy. These are vital to understanding the witness of the reformer. I offer these appendices not only as embodying the content of the controversy, but also as evidence for

my evaluation of the struggle for the truth in 1834. I include as well introductions to each document to explain to the reader who these authors were and their relationships to the Secession. These documents should be carefully read and evaluated. They will give the flavor of the controversy and testify to the serious nature of the apostasy in the state church, while describing the determined, godly witness and pleas of the humble Secessionists.





## Acknowledgments

I thank other laborers in God's vineyard for what I have received in God's gracious goodness to me. Forgive me the personal character of these remarks. I was born to dedicated, faithful parents, whose baptized names were Geert Kamps and Pietronella Jappje Nobel, who reared me in the Secession-*Doleantie* (grieving) tradition. The memory of my father is dear to me. My father was a genuine Secession father (*echte Afscheidene vader*) who was born January 25, 1891, and baptized in early February of that year, one and one-half years before the merger of the Secession churches and the *Doleantie* churches of Abraham Kuyper to form the *Gereformeerden Kerken* (Reformed Churches) of the Netherlands (GKN) into the communion of a Secession church. My father confessed and lived joyfully and thankfully the Reformed faith. He, with his godly and doctrinally insistent wife, reared all their twelve children in that godly tradition.

I must thank as well the Protestant Reformed Churches, who zealously have maintained and proclaimed the gospel of sovereign grace to all who would hear and who instructed their children through the preaching and catechism classes in the truth that is Christ Jesus our Lord. In particular I want to thank these churches for the faithful seminary training I received from the late Prof. Homer C. Hoeksema and from Prof. Herman Hanko, to whom I owe a huge debt of gratitude. Professor Hanko taught his students to appreciate church history and urged them to be faithful students of it. He labored tirelessly and faithfully, day after day, through many years, giving the seminarians excellent training through his course lectures in the church history classes. Having finished my work on this volume, I stand utterly amazed at the excellence of his work in church history in light of his extremely heavy course load. Only he, his loyal wife, and our God know the many hours he toiled each day to prepare young men for the sacred ministry of the word.

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Finally, I must give all thanks to our heavenly Father, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, for the forgiveness of sins and for preserving me in the faith and sustaining me in this endeavor. May he see fit to use it to the blessing of his beloved church, chosen in Christ unto eternal salvation.

## *Chapter 1*

# Hendrik de Cock, a Son of the State Reformed Church

**E**ach of us is born into an inherited set of circumstances. These circumstances are controlled by God's sovereign, providential rule. Whether these realities are favorable or unfavorable from our perspective is not of our choosing. Some are born to wealthy parents; others are born into poverty. Some children are born to highly educated parents who enjoy a measure of sophistication and culture; others are born to the uneducated and unsophisticated. Some are born into a godly family; others are the sons and daughters of impenitent drunkards and adulterers. Many are born in the church but to nominally Reformed parents; others are born to dedicated Reformed fathers and mothers. We all recognize this reality. These circumstances God employs in his infinite wisdom to form and fashion his people under the ministry of his word.

The Reformed believer confesses:

What dost thou understand by the Providence of God?

The almighty and every where present power of God, whereby, as it were by his hand, he still upholds heaven and earth, with all creatures, and so governs them that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches

and poverty, yea, all things, come not by chance, but by his fatherly hand.<sup>1</sup>

This confession is of central importance for a proper understanding of the reformation of the church in 1834. Hendrik de Cock's world was inherited. He did not choose it. Before he was born others had made decisions and created circumstances in every aspect of his life that were his to deal with in the light of God's word. This is true for all of us. God calls us to be obedient to him in the circumstances we have inherited. For the man who in 1829 would become the pastor of the Reformed congregation of Ulrum, the Netherlands, this was especially significant in several areas of his life: national, political, social, ecclesiastical, educational, and familial.

The ecclesiastical circumstances of the state Reformed church were the most significant occasion for his life's work and witness. But the other aspects of his inherited world had a profound impact on all that he was, said, and did. One cannot have a correct understanding of the reformation in 1834 without some understanding of these realities and how they affected De Cock and his supporters. In addition, De Cock's opponents were highly influenced by these same realities, and they used these political realities against De Cock and his congregation. They ridiculed the social circumstances of the members of his congregation and his supporters throughout the country, attempting thereby to intimidate and discourage. Therefore we must establish the terrain of conflict and activity as it pertained to De Cock and his congregation.

## De Cock's National Circumstances

First, we consider the national situation. Holland emerged from the war with Spain in the 1580s as a loosely confederated nation of many nearly autonomous provinces. It had thrown off the murderous reign of Philip II of Spain, who was the son of Charles V, the last of the holy Roman emperors. Thus the political implications of the great Reformation of the sixteenth century resulted in

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1 Heidelberg Catechism Q&A 27, in Philip Schaff, ed., *Creeeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes*, 6<sup>th</sup> ed., 3 vols. (New York: Harper and Row, 1931; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), 3:316.

the establishment of a nation of Reformed believers under the governance of their own ruler, Prince William the Silent, of the House of Orange. Reformed believers at the Synod of Antwerp in 1566 adopted the Belgic Confession of Guido de Bres<sup>2</sup> and a few years later the Heidelberg Catechism, which has its origin among German believers.

From approximately 1580 until 1795, Holland was a self-governing nation free of foreign domination. Wars were fought, but the Dutch remained their own masters. In addition, Holland was officially a Reformed state, as evidenced by the national Synod of Dordt in 1618–19, which for several decades the government would not allow to convene but finally did grant through the authority of Prince Maurice.

In 1795 Holland came under the rule of the French consul Napoleon Bonaparte. The French had been requested to enter Holland by the Patriot political faction that was resisting Holland's Prince William V, who ruled the nation under the protectorate of England. Will and Ariel Durant present a concise account of the historical background to the rise of the Patriot party and the involvement of England on Dutch soil that so angered this political faction:

In the war between England and the American colonies Holland protested British interference with Dutch shipping, and joined Russia in the "Armed Neutrality" of 1780; England declared war, and captured nearly all Dutch shipping. In the treaty of Paris (1783) the interests of Holland were almost ignored; she surrendered Negapatam (in south India) to England, and allowed the English free navigation through the Moluccas. Holland ceased to play a part among the powers.

These disasters destroyed the popularity of William V (ruled from 1766 till 1795). Moreover, the success of the revolt in America stimulated democratic ideas in the Netherlands, and led to the rise of the party of "patriots" hostile to the ruling family...In 1787 the Patriots seized power, but William V was restored by armed intervention

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2 The letter introducing this Confession, which was written for the instruction of Phillip II, is available to the English reader. This introduction is significant as it relates the spiritual struggle and sacrifice of believers in the Lowlands for the Reformed faith. Cf. Russell J. Dykstra, "Historical Introduction to Guido de Brès' Letter to King Philip II of Spain," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 42 no. 2 (April 2009): 77–88.

from Prussia. The French revolution revived the ardor of the patriots; they invited France to come to their aid. In 1794 French troops invaded Holland; the Dutch army was overwhelmed; William V fled to England; and the Dutch revolutionists joined with the French in organizing the Batavian Republic (1795-1806).<sup>3</sup>

On February 18, 1795, William V and his family fled Holland to reside in England. When, in response to the urging of the Patriot party, the French soldiers streamed into Holland, many of the Dutch welcomed the French with music and song and danced enthusiastically, because now the “trees” of freedom were planted throughout the land.<sup>4</sup> The Dutch sang the song of the French Revolution that exalted in the overthrow of the French monarchy and the establishment of the principles of democracy. The authority of God’s word lost all significance in civil matters. Society would be ruled by the will of the majority. The Dutch sang and danced the *Carmagnole* in the streets of Holland. The free rights of man were restored. The chains of slavery were broken. The domination of Calvinistic principles as these affected social and political life was broken.

Separation of church and state was established. The Reformed church would no longer be the state church, with all the privileges of prestige and civil resources and money that this church had enjoyed for centuries. The Reformed churches were required to meet in provincial synodical meetings at their own expense. The salaries of Reformed pastors would have to be paid largely by the people of the churches and not any longer fully from the national treasury. Sabbath laws were repealed.<sup>5</sup>

Toleration and equality were the principles that would now govern Dutch society. Relativistic principles of rationalism were the governing principles of society and government. What many considered best for society would prevail and particular religious differences would be set aside. What was common

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3 Will and Ariel Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, part X, *Rousseau and Revolution: A History of Civilization in France, England, and Germany from 1756, and in the Remainder of Europe from 1715, to 1789* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), 648–49.

4 H. Te Merwe, *Der Vaderen Pand, Geschiedenis van Ons Volk en Vaderland* [Our fathers pledge, history of our people and nation], 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Delft: W. D. Meinema, n.d.), 2:434.

5 J. Kuiper, *Geschiedenis van het Godsdienstig En Kerkelijk Leven in Nederland* [History of the religious and ecclesiastical life in the Netherlands] (Utrecht: A. H. Ten Bokkel, 1900), 342–43.

to all religious people, whether Reformed, Roman Catholic, or Lutheran, and useful and helpful to all members of society would be emphasized. The majority of the leadership, the ecclesiastics and administrators of the Reformed church, were not offended by these changes.

Dutch society in large measure was infatuated with everything French—the language, literature, philosophy, music, and other aspects of its culture. The Dutch rejoiced in “freedom, equality, and brotherhood.”<sup>6</sup> This infatuation with French culture can only be explained by the fact that most state church leaders had abandoned the principles of the Reformed faith in preference for Arminianism and Pelagianism, which had come to dominate the pulpits of the national church and the lecterns of the national universities. I will deal with this historical fact in more detail later, but it needs to be asserted here in order to understand the Patriot party’s invitation to France to involve itself in Dutch politics.

For a time the Patriot party administered the affairs of the new Batavian Republic,<sup>7</sup> established March 1, 1796, in Holland under the rule of Napoleon. In 1804 Napoleon annexed Holland, declared himself emperor, and made Amsterdam one of three imperial cities with Rome and Paris. In 1806 he appointed his younger brother Louis Napoleon king of Holland. Louis Napoleon bore the name Lodewijk Napoleon among the Dutch.

For our purpose of recounting the witness of De Cock and the Secession, it is important to note that what King William I of the House of Orange attempted in 1815–16 by establishing a department of religion had been attempted earlier by Lodewijk Napoleon; he had tried to create one church institution that would unite all the separate churches, whether Reformed, Lutheran, Arminian, or Roman Catholic, into one church of the Netherlands.<sup>8</sup> Louis Napoleon’s benevolent and tolerant rule in Holland came to an abrupt end, however, when he left Holland under the cover of darkness on July 1, 1810. He had fallen into disfavor with his brother the emperor because he wanted to govern Holland according to his own desires and will. The emperor put an end to his resistance by sending troops into Holland to force the rebel from the throne.

Napoleon Bonaparte’s rule in Holland came to an end in 1813. On

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6 Ibid., 339–41.

7 Te Merwe, *Der Vaderen Pand*, 2:442.

8 J. C. Rullmann, *Een Nagel in de Heilige Plaats* [A nail in the holy place] (Amsterdam: W. Kirchner, 1912), 46.



November 30 the prince of Orange, oldest son of William V, who had been living in England, returned to rule the Netherlands. This son became William I (Willem I), king of Holland. The nation was whole again. The beloved House of Orange, which from 1618 and throughout the decades had been perceived as truly supportive of the Reformed church and faith, was restored.<sup>9</sup>

Significantly, although the French emperor was gone, his Napoleonic Code, or the laws governing civil order, was left behind and was still valid in Holland. This code of civil law contained three laws that were later appealed to by the state church Synod of 1835 against De Cock and the newly established Secession church.<sup>10</sup> These three read as follows:

Article 291: No association of more than twenty persons, whose aim is to convene daily or on certain days in order to be engaged in matters of religion, literature, politics, or other subjects, may be organized except by approbation of the High Government and under such conditions as the public authority will impose upon the association. Those who live in the house where the association congregates shall not be included in the number of persons meant in this article.

Article 292: Every association, as meant above, that has been organized without due authorization or that has violated the conditions as imposed upon it when being authorized, shall be disbanded. The heads, directors, or administrators of such association shall be punished by a fine of 16 to 200 francs.

Article 294: Everyone who without permission from the municipality permits or allows the use of his house or room, or a portion thereof, for the meeting of members of an association, even if authorized by the government, or for a religious exercise, shall be punished by a fine of 16 to 200 francs.<sup>11</sup>

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9 Kuiper, *Geschiedenis*, 375–84.

10 J. C. Rullmann, *De Afscheiding*, In *De Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk Der Negentiende Eeuw* [The Secession, in the Reformed Church of the Netherlands in the nineteenth century] (Amsterdam: W. Kirchner, 1916), 219.

11 Gerrit J. tenZythoff, *Sources of Secession: The Netherlands Hervormde Kerk on the Eve of the Dutch Immigration to the Midwest* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 49.

Also, the department of religion had adopted in 1816 ecclesiastical regulations for the government of the state church. These too were extensive, even declaring the qualifications (from the viewpoint of the state's interests) for nomination to the office of elder. This document, prepared by the department of religion, was approved by William I and entitled General Regulations for the Administration of the Reformed Church.<sup>12</sup> In order to rule the church, the state had to possess a body of regulations that would define its agenda and differentiate right from wrong. How the elders of the local church would rule the body of Christ was not to be according to the principles of sacred scripture as expressed in the Church Order of Dordt, but according to these ecclesiastical regulations imposed to preserve the peace and unity of the state church as these were defined by the king's department of religion. These regulations were so numerous they filled several books.

When later a candidate for the ministry was told he had to study, know, and subscribe to these regulations before he would be admitted into the ministry, he responded by "point[ing] out that there were regulations stating that the consistory was not allowed to hire a layman over thirty years old to instruct catechumens. [He] protested that he would never exclude a good man who was over thirty from teaching and instruction. In addition, he objected to intercommunion with the Remonstrants, the Arminians, on the ground that this practice 'refuted what our Forefathers had accomplished.'"<sup>13</sup> This candidate for the ministry later wrote, "I looked into the great stack of regulations in my father's library, but to me those books had neither soul nor life. I did not live in that atmosphere."<sup>14</sup>

The ecclesiastical regulations became more important than what the Bible declared. These regulations became law on January 7, 1816, as a consequence of royal approval.<sup>15</sup> These became the all-important issue regarding the legitimacy of the baptism of children from other congregations and the refusal to sing hymns in the church service. Secession ministers claimed the regulations did not approve or forbid the baptism of these children from other congregations. I will address this when I treat the attempt of De Cock and others to reform the church. But the

12. Kuiper, *Geschiedenis*, 391. In Dutch the title of the adopted document is *Algemeen reglement voor de Bestuur der Hervormde Kerk*.

13. TenZythoff, *Sources of Secession*, 134.

14. *Ibid.*, 133. Who was this candidate? Albertus C. van Raalte.

15. A. Janse, *Van Dordt tot '34* [From Dordt to 1834] (Kampen: J.H. Kok, 1934), 46.

reader must keep in mind that both the Napoleonic Code and the Regulations of the department of religion are important in understanding the government's involvement in Secession history.

Third, Roman Catholic teachers were permitted to teach the Dutch youth in the public or state schools in the southern provinces in 1798 per article 61. Ever since the time of the great Reformation, the schools had been under the control and supervision of the Reformed people and church (cf. article 21 of the Church Order of Dordrecht).<sup>16</sup>

## De Cock's Ecclesiastical Circumstances

The second element in the providential circumstances De Cock inherited consisted of changes in the governing of the state church institute made by William I, the restored king of Holland. These changes regarding doctrine and discipline had a devastating effect on the spiritual life of the church, although that did not become obvious immediately. The Reformed people were undoubtedly thrilled to have the House of Orange returned to power, but the new king immediately set about making drastic changes. It must not be imagined that he did this without the cooperation and connivance of the state church's leading clergy and most influential representatives.

### *Church Government*

William I appointed a state department of religion<sup>17</sup> (today what we would call a cabinet post.) He appointed one person to oversee all the activities of the state church. This person would report to King William and be responsible to him. This royal act aimed at a centralization of power over the people. He appointed through his department of religion a commission of eleven pastors and professors to advise him regarding how to implement this centralization of power directly into the life and activities of the state church. From this commission the king received counsel to appoint a national synod. This synod, consisting of sixteen members, was assembled in 1816 on behalf of the king.<sup>18</sup>

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16 Kuiper, *Geschiedenis*, 359.

17 Rullman, *Een Nagel*, 45–47.

18 J. S. van Weerden, *Spanningen en Konflikten, Verkenningen Rondom de Afscheiding van 1834* [Tension

In addition to the department of religion and the members of a national synod, the king also appointed, through the department of religion, provincial administrators (provincial *Bestuur*) for each province and classical administrators (classical *Bestuur*) for the various classes in each province. These would from now on decide controversial doctrinal matters and supervise appointment to office of all pastors in the various churches. The spiritual care of the people was therefore put in the hands of fair-minded, calm, deliberate overseers who would preserve toleration and unity in the state church.

The king seized control of the church, although all these governmental agencies had peculiar titles that misled the people and raised little alarm. The provincial synods and classes, which had always been held according to the Church Order of Dordt, now were stripped of decisive authority in matters of doctrine and life. The national synod members of 1816 and in the future and the various provincial administrators and classical administrators were not delegates chosen by the membership of the churches. The eldership had been emasculated, and the royal rule of Christ was removed from the local church.

The office of all believers is the spiritual fountain of all the church's organic activity and its instituted form. The special offices of pastor, elder, and deacon arise in the church through the office of all believers, and by these special offices the true king of the church, Christ Jesus, exercises his royal rule according to his word and by his Spirit. The office of all believers stimulates and causes the special offices to come into being.

This precious right of the office of all believers was pushed aside and ignored. King William I, with the aid of unfaithful pastors, displaced Christ's government in the state church. The king simply *imposed* an entirely unbiblical system of church government. The Church Order of Dordt was completely set aside.

One church historian writes:

When our country was liberated in 1813 from the rule of the dictator Napoleon, through a prince of the House of Orange in the person of William I, for the first time we received a situation in which the sovereign prince seriously intended to transform his religious ideals into a

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and conflicts, investigations concerning the Secession of 1834] (Groningen: Sasland, 1967), 7.

new policy. What we would today regard as very strange, yes as emphatically improper—a king who meddles very intensively in the internal matters of the church—many in 1816 found completely acceptable. Through a kind of state coup d'état of the Reformed church in 1816, King William I imposed a new ecclesiastical order. The church had not requested it, but the king and a few highly placed officebearers were thoroughly convinced that the church needed restructuring and modernization. The king saw himself as “father of the church.” His subjects were to see his palace as the focal point where all political and ecclesiastical lines converged. Under the leadership of J. D. Janssen, secretary of the ministry of Reformed worship (as a ministry inherited from the French rule), plans were developed that led to the introduction of the General Regulations for the state Reformed Church of the Netherlands. Janssen, as a royal official, now and then held conferences with eleven preachers concerning the proposed regulations, in order not to raise the fearful specter that the church was completely excluded from this process. What was the result? The old church was revamped with an order that was clearly different from the Dordrecht Church Order (which was still valid). From then on the general synod regulated the church. This synod had a number of provincial administrators subordinate to it, and subordinate to them were the classical administrators, and finally the local church consistories. Such a system is a clear example of hierarchy, literally translated as “sacerdotalism.”<sup>19</sup> People call this model collegialistic, derived from the term *college*, which is a council of administrators.

This new order is precisely the opposite of the Church Order of Dordrecht, in which the church consistory forms the highest (derived from Christ) authority. A national synod has been from ancient times one of the lower assemblies, although it is called “the broadest,” because all (almost all) the churches are drawn together there. In 1816 the national synod was the chief administrator, over which the king held superior rule. This reality the people identify as ceasar-papism,

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19 This means the clergy rule the church at their own whim, while ignoring the office of all believers and especially the chosen elders.

literally translated as “the ceasar [king] rules as a father over the church.”<sup>20</sup>

These events took place two hundred years after the great Synod of Dordt. No national synod had been assembled after 1618, because the various administrations of the House of Orange would not permit or require it. Throughout these two centuries many provincial synods assembled to deal with doctrinal issues as they arose in the churches. But no national synod convened to settle various doctrinal and confessional controversies. Unfaithful pastors and professors were not prevented from moving from one province to another where their teachings were more acceptable. Issues were not resolved for all the Reformed churches. Doctrinal division was allowed to proceed unabated, not settled on the basis of God’s word and the Reformed creeds. Thus the vast majority of the clergy in the Reformed church in 1816 despised the Reformed creeds and the office of all believers. Because of this spiritual reality within the church, the grossly unbiblical state of affairs described above was tolerated, if not encouraged.

This was the new structure of church government that William I imposed with the aid and connivance of the clergy. It effectively annulled the provisions of Reformed church government, but it was not a direct intrusion on the doctrines and the official major creeds of the church. To do that was the agenda of the national synod of sixteen men, not delegated by the churches, who were making decisions for a church of more than a million members. These members did not ask for the convening of this synod, did not present it with its agenda, and had no real knowledge of its purposes.

### *Formula of Subscription*

The national Synod of 1816, although leaving the impression that it honored the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism, took a decision that removed the binding character of these creeds by substituting a new Formula of Subscription for the form adopted by the Synod of Dordt in 1618–19, which always had been honored until this time in the state church. Historically, the

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20 H. Veldman, *Hendrik de Cock, Afgescheiden en toch Betrokken* [Hendrik de Cock, seceded and nonetheless concerned] (Bedum: Cedrus Uitgeverij, 2004), 31–32. Cf. also Janse, *Van Dordt tot '34*, 46.

creeds had binding authority over the preaching, teaching, public writing, and speaking of the ministers of the word. The creeds have binding authority in faithful Reformed churches because they fully agree with the word of God. This is the belief and conviction of a Reformed man. The Bible has sole authority in the church, yet matters once decided after much prayerful study, deliberation, and adoption of biblical principles and doctrines are settled and binding.<sup>21</sup>

This does not mean that these doctrinal statements cannot be reconsidered, disproved, and rejected. But the process for this is not public agitation and personal rejection of standing decisions. One is required to state his private opinions to the consistory, classis, and synod. Otherwise he works unrest and disharmony in the churches and becomes guilty of schism. One who opposes the creeds according to his understanding of the Bible has every right to do so, even the duty to do so, but his appeal may not be to the ordinary members of the church but to the chosen officebearers, who have the responsibility to hear him out in the light of the sole authority of scripture.

The purpose of the national Synod of 1816 was to be rid of that binding character of the creeds. The cry of the day was “doctrinal freedom” (*leervrijheid*) and “prophetic freedom.” The synod wanted to give Reformed pastors permission to preach whatever they wished with the restriction that they at least had to believe it was based on the Bible. Objectively, what one preached might be contrary to God’s word, but the preacher at least believed he preached the truth. If this notion is joined with the establishment of the new collegial system of church government, the administrators could arbitrarily approve almost any pulpit pronouncements.

But the Reformed church throughout the previous two centuries had a regulatory form that every new pastor, professor, elder, and deacon was required to sign, stating thereby his personal conviction that the creeds fully agree with God’s word and that he promised to teach and defend these doctrines against all heresy. This document is the Formula of Subscription adopted in 1618. This form was not a mere ecclesiastical formality. It was a tool to prevent, if possible, unnecessary unrest and dissension in the churches. As such, it was a most significant instrument of true peace. The Reformed

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21 Church Order 31, in *The Confessions and the Church Order of the Protestant Reformed Churches* (Grandville, MI: Protestant Reformed Churches in America, 2005), 390.

church places a very high premium on the confession of the truth as it is in Christ Jesus. If the truth is in Christ Jesus, according to the scriptures, and this truth alone is the word unto eternal salvation, it must be highly valued and preserved. The creeds declare the corporate response of the Reformed church to past attempts to introduce into the churches manmade doctrines and theories presented as the truth of scripture, but which in fact contradict divine revelation as recorded infallibly in the Bible.

The Synod of Dordt did not impose this Formula of Subscription on the Reformed churches, as is often alleged. Many classes and provincial synods requested this synod to prepare a form for all the churches. The earliest synod of the Reformed church, the Synod of Emden 1568, had already employed the governing principle of this Formula of Subscription when it requested pastors to sign the creeds. In 1608 a Formula of Subscription existed in one of the provinces, and several more provinces prepared forms of subscription for the pastors to sign. These different forms existing at that time in the various classes and provinces evidenced some minor and some not-so-minor differences, although all had in common an attempt to preserve creedal truth in the churches.

The Synod of Dordt in 1618–19 was asked to prepare one form for all the provinces, so that there might be unity of practice. The Formula of Subscription that has come down to us through the ages is not a document produced through self-willed imposition or happenstance, but is the result of requests that arose out of the bosom of the churches, or out of the office of all believers.<sup>22</sup>

Because subscription to the creeds and what this meant for a Reformed minister of the gospel was the basic issue in the reformation of the church in 1834, I quote both the old form, still in use in the Reformed churches, and the form adopted by William I's appointed representatives at the national Synod of 1816.

The Formula of Subscription adopted by the Reformed church in 1618 reads as follows:

We, the undersigned, professors of...ministers of the gospel, elders and deacons of the [Reformed] congregation of \_\_\_\_\_, of Classis \_\_\_\_\_ do hereby sincerely and in good conscience before the

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22 Cf. H. H. Kuyper, *Post-Acta* [Post-acts] (Amsterdam: Hoveker & Wormser, n. d.), 133–34.



Lord declare by this, our subscription, that we heartily believe and are persuaded that all the articles and points of doctrine contained in the Confession and Catechism of the Reformed Churches, together with the explanation of some points of the aforesaid doctrine made by the National Synod of Dordrecht, 1618–19, do fully agree with the Word of God.

We promise therefore diligently to teach and faithfully to defend the aforesaid doctrine, without either directly or indirectly contradicting the same, by our public preaching or writing.

We declare, moreover, that we not only reject all errors that militate against this doctrine, and particularly those which were condemned by the above mentioned synod, but that we are disposed to refute and contradict these, and to exert ourselves in keeping the church free from such errors. And if hereafter any difficulties or different sentiments respecting the aforesaid doctrines should arise in our minds, we promise that we will neither publicly nor privately propose, teach, or defend the same, either by preaching or writing, until we have first revealed such sentiments to the consistory, classis, and synod, that the same may be there examined, being ready always cheerfully to submit to the judgment of the consistory, classis, and synod, under the penalty in case of refusal to be, by that very fact, suspended from our office.

And further, if at any time the consistory, classis, or synod, upon sufficient grounds of suspicion and to preserve the uniformity and purity of doctrine, may deem it proper to require of us a further explanation of our sentiments respecting any particular article of the Confession of Faith, the Catechism, or the explanation of the national synod, we do hereby promise to be always willing and ready to comply with such requisition, under the penalty above mentioned, reserving for ourselves, however, the right of an appeal, whenever we shall believe ourselves aggrieved by the sentence of the consistory, the classis, or the synod, and until a decision is made upon such an appeal, we will acquiesce in the determination and judgment already passed.<sup>23</sup>

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23 Formula of Subscription, in *Confessions and Church Order*, 326.

This Formula of Subscription, adopted by the Synod of Dordt in 1618–19, is still used in most Reformed churches throughout the world that are the spiritual children of the Secession of 1834. It should be clearly evident that this form does not bind an officebearer's conscience. He subscribes only to what he, after many years of training and prayerful reflection, states is his personal conviction regarding the truth of God's word. There is no coercion, no lack of freedom to refuse to sign and to take one's learning and interests elsewhere.

What is bound by the creeds is an officebearer's preaching and writing. In contrast to the binding authority of the creeds, the binding authority of scripture is much broader and all inclusive, for it binds one's conscience. No believer before God may even entertain with the mind, or cherish in his heart, much less publicly advocate any position contrary to God's word. The Reformed creeds have only a limited sphere of binding authority in the church, for only one's public preaching is bound by the creeds. Scripture binds the heart and conscience; the creeds only rule the mouth and pen of the officebearer! The Reformed pastor not only preaches *to* the church, but also *on behalf of* the church and *at the will of* the church of Christ. He is not free publicly to advocate whatever idea he deems edifying and saving.

Yet the officebearer has the right and duty to study contrary positions and understandings of scripture not shared by the Reformed church, for his private study and reflection and his personal convictions are not bound. Provision is made for the real possibility of change in one's understanding and convictions on the basis of God's word; but then one is asked to acknowledge one's debt to the unity and peace of the church in that he is required to submit such a change of convictions not only to the officebearers of his congregation, but also to the classis and synod of the churches to which he and his congregation belong. He is bound by the creeds regarding his public preaching and teaching. Are not similar arrangements common in any institution interested in preserving itself and promoting its cause?

Nearly two hundred years later the state church national Synod of 1816 adopted an entirely different form, although its differences were subtly expressed. That form reads as follows:

We, the undersigned, who have been admitted to the public ministry of the word in the Netherlands Reformed Church by the provincial

church administrators of \_\_\_\_\_ (or by the commission for matters pertaining to the Walloon churches), sincerely declare that we will earnestly promote in both doctrine and life the interests of Christianity in general as well as of the Netherlands Reformed Church community in particular; that we accept in good faith and heartily believe the doctrine that is in agreement with God's word, and which is contained in the adopted forms of unity of the Netherlands Reformed Church; that we will diligently teach and uphold the same, and we will zealously apply ourselves to the advancement of religious knowledge, Christian morals, order and concord; we obligate ourselves by our signature to all the prescriptions, and if we are found to have gone contrary to any part of this declaration and promise, to be willing to submit ourselves on that account to the pronounced judgment of authorized ecclesiastical assemblies.<sup>24</sup>

Let us examine the two forms to discover how they differ, and thereby to discern the intent of the Synod of 1816. If they are basically the same in content, there was no need to write the new form. But they are not at all the same. The second displaces the basic principle of the first, which was to establish the binding character of the three Reformed forms of unity.

First, the 1816 form does not explicitly mention the three creeds, as does the first. Second, it speaks of *adopted* forms of unity, by which is meant the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism to the exclusion of the Canons of Dordt. Third, the ecclesiastical authorities who admit persons to the ministry of the word and sacraments are not the classis and synod but the administrators, appointed by the department of religion, of the various provinces and classes. The classes and provincial synods convened under the authority of the Church

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24 Carel Marie van der Kemp, *De Beschuldiging tegen de Leeraars Der Nederlandsche Hervormde Kerk, dat zy hunnen eed breken, door af te wyken van de leer hunner Kerk, die zy beloofd hebben te zullen houden, Gestaaft; en de Gedachten van P. Hofstede de Groot, Hoogleeraar Te Groningen, Over Die Beschuldiging Wederlegd* [The charge against the pastors of the Netherlands Reformed Church that they are breaking their oath by deviating from the doctrine of their church, which they had promised to maintain, supported; and the opinions of P. Hofstede de Groot, professor at Groningen, concerning this charge, refuted] (Rotterdam: the widows van der Meer and Verbruggen, 1834), 17. This document of Van der Kemp is found in appendix F. It is a significant and able defense of the basic charge made by De Cock.

Order of Dordt would no longer judge the faithfulness of a minister or a professor, but the governmental administrators would judge.

Fourth, the signatories merely declare that they “accept in good faith and heartily believe the doctrine that is in agreement with God’s word.” The 1618 form states that these doctrines “do fully agree with the Word of God.” Therefore, after careful study and prayer, the signer of this form affixes his signature because he is convicted that the Reformed creeds fully agree with the Bible. The major change in 1816 is that the signer promises to uphold only those doctrines of the creeds that *in his judgment* agree with God’s word. Whether all the doctrines do or do not agree is not stated by his signature. As the Secession men pointed out, a Muslim, a Jew, or a Roman Catholic could sign the 1816 form without any difficulty because he would not be saying that the doctrines of the creeds “*fully* agree with the Word of God.”

A. Janse, a Christian school teacher writing on the history of the Reformed church, sets forth the seriousness of the changes made in 1816 to the Formula of Subscription. He first declares that the old form of 1618 was often insincerely signed. The new pastors promised in good faith to promote, preach, and defend the doctrine of the three forms of unity, but many did this dishonestly, or as they would say, “with mental reservations.” They never intended to preach and defend the truth of God’s word according to the confession of the church where they sought to be pastor.

But the committee of 1816 found a way out. They made some changes in the Formula of Subscription. They made a substitution for the words that the creeds do “fully” agree with the Bible, by use of other words, whereby a simple Christian who did not suspect the deceit could read with the best of intentions nothing other than what the old form stated. The preachers declared by this new form that they would accept in *good faith*, *heartily* believe, and *diligently* teach and proclaim the doctrine that is in agreement with God’s word that is contained in the adopted creeds of unity of the Netherlands Reformed church.

Therefore, people would be inclined to say, “Well and good.”

Yet in the words “in agreement with” and “adopted” is found the means by which the thieves, with a “show of sincerity,” made a different opening into the sheep pen (cf. John 10:1ff.).

They thought to themselves in connection with the public reading of the Form: I will in good faith accept *what* in these creeds is in agreement with God's word according to my own conception.

And they deceived themselves into believing that the Canons of Dordt did not "properly" belong to the "adopted creeds," claiming that the Canons were never "adopted." That was a historical church error; nonetheless, this error has now been approved.<sup>25</sup>

Church historian and Reformed pastor J. C. Rullmann, in reflecting on this history, observes concerning the words "in agreement with" in the new Formula of Subscription of 1816:

In these words...there is equivocality. After all, in this document men declare to accept the well-known creeds not *because (quia)* they are agree with God's word, but *insofar as (quantenus)* they agree with God's word. If the synod had used *insofar as*, the change would have been obvious. Instead of doing their work straightforwardly and honestly, they subtly and craftily undermined official church doctrine.<sup>26</sup>

Notice how aggrieved Janse and Rullmann were when they wrote about these historical facts, which had occurred a hundred years earlier. Janse speaks of "thieves," and Rullmann speaks of their subtlety and craftiness. They were aggrieved, even so many years later, because the men of the state church had stealthily employed carnal measures to gain their unholy objective. God's people had been deceived for over a decade.

When the trickery was pointed out by Dirk Molenaar (1785–1865), a minister of the state church in The Hague who in 1827 published anonymously his *Address to All My Reformed Fellow Believers*,<sup>27</sup> the church leaders still would not retract what they had done. Instead, the department of religion hunted Molenaar down and forced him by threats to recant. He meekly said he meant no harm and promised not to write that critically again. This is evidence

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25 Janse, *Van Dordt tot '34*, 57.

26 Rullmann, *Een Nagel*, 71. In this quotation Rullmann refers to and really quotes from the *Address* (1827) of Dirk Molenaar, one of the pastors in the state church.

27 TenZythoff, *Sources of Secession*, 111. The title in Dutch is *Adress Aan Alle Mijne Geloofsgenooten*.

that the apostate church institute never repents but always finds new ways to appear godly, when in fact they walk deceitfully in regard to the most sacred interests of God's people in Christ Jesus.

These changes in the Formula of Subscription opened the way for the approval of all manner of unfaithful preaching in the churches. We will specifically examine this later, but let it be said here that in the state church preachers were permitted to deny total depravity, sovereign election, the eternal divinity of Christ, the reality of hell, and even the doctrine of the Trinity. All these denials of the truth were prevalent in 1834 because the new promise of allegiance to the Formula of Subscription allowed for all manner of doctrinal freedom, and the form promoted, under pious terminology, toleration and broadmindedness.

Simon van Velzen (1809–96), one of six founding pastors of the Secession churches of 1834, addressed in 1848 the unfaithfulness of the state church and its practice regarding the creeds and admittance of pastors to the ministry in his *Apology of the Ecclesiastical Secession in the Netherlands*. After quoting an account of the practice of one of the classes of the state church, he writes:

From these lines it appears that throughout the twenty years [in the province of Gelderland] no one was admitted to the office of the ministry who strongly maintained and was fundamentally experienced in the old theological system, in which formerly the aspiring ministerial students had been taught in the seminaries. Van den Willigen says, "Not that such persons would have been turned away, but such persons never applied." The ruling body unanimously was indifferent to that confession. However, it is well-known that the old theological system was in complete agreement with the confessions of the Reformed church. Consequently, all the persons who the ruling body advanced to the office of the ministry held positions contrary to the confessions, as did the ruling body itself. The authority of the creeds has for a long time been abolished there, and under the guise of biblical slogans, unbelief's false doctrines have been declared legal.<sup>28</sup>

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28 Simon van Velzen, *Apologie der Kerkelijke Afscheiding in Nederland of brief aan Mr. Groen van Prinsterer betreffende Zijn gevoelen over De Afscheiding en de Afgescheidenen* [Apology of the ecclesiastical Secession in the Netherlands or a letter to Mr. Groen van Prinsterer concerning his

Another quotation on this all-important issue should be made. The following is from Prof. Dr. A. G. Honig of Kampen University, who could speak to this issue as a representative of the Reformed theologians of his day.

The Synod in 1816 had craftily framed the new candidates' formula in two matters. First, it finally fulfilled the passionate wish to eliminate the hated Canons of Dordt as one of the forms of unity. Already in 1722 the Canons were omitted from the Ecclesiastical Laws in the province of Friesland. Consequently the thought arose that the Dordrecht Canons were not accepted in all the provinces. Therefore, the proposal could be propagated that the Canons were not included in the agreement of ecclesiastical fellowship. This representation received an official stamp of approval in the expression the *adopted* forms of unity, which meant only the Belgic Confession and the Catechism.

Second, the words "the doctrine that is in agreement with God's word" could mean that men signed the Formula because (*quia*) the entire doctrine contained in the two forms of unity is in agreement with the Holy Bible. But people could also be of the opinion that one's endorsement granted approval of the doctrine insofar as (*quantenus*) it agrees with the Holy Bible. Clearly the latter was intended. Thus each preacher could decide for himself what in Reformed doctrine is in agreement with God's holy word.<sup>29</sup>

Church leaders who impenitently act as dishonestly as did the sixteen men of the national Synod of 1816 in regard to the faith and the souls of men bring upon themselves and their children the all-consuming wrath of God.

De Cock, who became an ordained minister in the state church in 1824, inherited both a new form of church government, the collegial system, and a new Formula of Subscription that opened the way for men to proclaim every heresy with impunity. But he did not understand this dreadful fact until much

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opinions about the Secession and the secessionists] (Amsterdam: Hoogkamer & Compe, 1848), 6. A translation of this most significant pamphlet is found in appendix G.

29 A. G. Honig, *Van Comrie tot De Cock, of Het Credo der Afscheiding* [From Comrie to De Cock, or the credo of the Secession] (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1934), 9.

later in his ministry. The elders did not rule the church, but royally appointed clerics were the administrators; the office of all believers was pushed aside and really denied in principle, for the Reformed believers' united confession and their office would not be honored as it had been from the time of the great Reformation. De Cock naively signed the new Formula of Subscription and took up his office in an apostate, false church, without knowing what he had actually done.

### De Cock's Social Circumstances

Third, as part of the reality inherited by De Cock, we should note briefly the social situation in the Netherlands in 1834. The population of Holland was approximately 1.8 million people in 1811, of whom 1,126,000 were Reformed, 370,000 were Roman Catholic, 155,000 were Lutheran, 45,000 were Jews, and 40,000 were of other religious affiliation.<sup>30</sup> In 1809 the statistics of the royal government were summarized as: four-sevenths of Holland was Reformed; two-sevenths was Roman Catholic; one-seventh belonged to other fellowships. The number of Roman Catholics diminished enormously by 1834 because the southern provinces, which were heavily Roman Catholic, revolted in 1830–31 against the perceived anti-Roman Catholic policies of William I and established the country of Belgium.

Dutch society was sharply divided between the haves and have-nots. The upper crust were more educated and held positions of self-determination as land owners, businessmen, and professionals. These were the *beschaafd* or cultured populace. The church highly honored these cultured members.

While there was a middle class, the majority of the others were financially poor, uneducated, ordinary laborers or day laborers. The poverty was not relative, but a grinding poverty that caused the poor to look daily to their heavenly Father. The overwhelming majority of the Secession people who came to America in 1846 and 1847 and the years following were of this lower class of *arbeiders* or laborers. They were conservative, hardworking, self-denying men and women. Of such were the forefathers of the Christian Reformed Church, Protestant Reformed Churches, and United Reformed Churches.

Pervasive among the Hollanders was a fearfully low estimation of these

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<sup>30</sup> Kuiper, *Geschiedenis*, 377.



poor folk. They were to have nothing to say. They were to know their place, lest they be viewed as presumptuous; they were taught to show deference. Wealthy landowners often exploited these people.

Sickness and death were everywhere. Society was troubled with the cholera plague. Thousands died. De Cock was no stranger to this agony of the Dutch people, for one of his daughters died as a child on October 8, 1834, due to cholera. Another child died young as well, whether from this plague or from other causes. Life was harsh. These poor souls lived consciously on the threshold of eternity. Thus the revelation of God's word was most precious to them.

### *The Reveil Movement*

Also, there were two movements in Dutch Reformed society that played a not-unimportant role in the events of the day. The first was the *Reveil* movement. "People called this movement the *Reveil* [Awakening], a term that causes us to think of an act from without, from above, by which whatever is collapsed and dead is brought back to life."<sup>31</sup> These were men within the state church who labored for a revival of spiritual awareness and even commitment to the creeds. They sought national and political reform as well. The outstanding leaders of the movement were William Bilderdijk (1756–1831), Isaac da Costa, and Groen van Prinsterer. But they wanted nothing to do with separation from the state church. The best that can be said of them was that they sought revival from within the church, for they knew the doctrinal evils pervasive in the state church. These men were able, articulate, and among the most learned of the day.

Already in 1810 (although it was not published until after his death), Bilderdijk wrote a scathing denunciation of the unfaithfulness of the state church that was intended to encourage the faithful believer:

Can you, O kind Christian, make use of the seals of the covenant with those who (it is said without bitterness) defile them from your perspective and according to your principles? Must you deny yourself the use of these seals and live your whole life abstaining from them? Must you rear your children outside of all Christian fellowship, bringing up

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31 B. Wielenga, *De Reformatie van '34* [The reformation of 1834] (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1933), 23.

your children in a church that no more is a church, but a disorderly convergence of God-dishonoring errors? Seek to know God's word, ask your conscience for counsel, and preserve what is pure.

Take care, O my companions in the faith, that you ascertain who among you cleaves to the old doctrines of grace and who among your pastors is inclined to remain faithful to this doctrine. We dare to believe that the number of them will not be small. Yet however that may be, although the priest has become like the Levite, if we bend the knee before those who in our day so wickedly dishonor Jesus, take care, O my companions in the faith, each one for himself, and he will raise up pastors and leaders for us.

We say farewell to a fellowship where Jesus is not present, but instead human wisdom, which is foolishness before God, directs the word preached.<sup>32</sup>

Neither Bilderdijk, the father of the Reveil, nor Da Costa, his disciple, was willing to honor the binding character of the creeds as grounds for discipline against those who preached heresy in the state church. This failure to honor the binding character of the creeds betrayed their lack of appreciation for proper church government and the rights of the office of all believers that must be guarded by the officebearers of the church. In a letter to another of his disciples, the medical doctor Capadose, Bilderdijk wrote in 1810 "that it was not appropriate to lock out of the church as un-Christian the adherents of Socinianism and Deism." A few years later Bilderdijk wrote that he felt no calling to step up as a reformer. "Even if the visible church fades away in errors, sleepiness, and the deterioration of doctrine and morals Christ still lives and rules, and the gates of hell will not overpower his church." He compared the sinful unity (and therefore the latitudinarianism) to a swelling boil in the body that one must let ripen.<sup>33</sup>

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32 Rullmann, *Een Nagel*, 68. Bilderdijk in this quotation uses symbolic language, based on Luke 10:30–37, the parable of the Samaritan. Bilderdijk is assuring the faithful saints of the state church that God will provide truly compassionate pastors who will come to the aid of the battered and betrayed Reformed believers in that day, even though the present preachers look upon them with hardened hearts of indifference concerning their plight, as did the Levite in the parable.

33 Wielenga, *De Reformatie*, 28.

Da Costa took the same tack and spoke of the necessity of the church's letting the sickness in the church work itself out of the church (*uitzielen*).

Many of the sons of the Secession in Holland and America highly praised the Reveil movement for having great influence on the Secession of 1834. But the truth is that the Reveil did not. Its founding principles, methods, and goals were different from those of the Secession.<sup>34</sup> De Cock seldom, if ever, cited the Reveil men. He did not seek strength in their witness. They held to an entirely different concept of church reformation. As men of their time, they could not conceive of a Reformed church that existed independently of the state church, which had existed for centuries. The concept of the state, or established, church dominated their thinking.

The state church concept was born naturally of civic realities in the various domains of the kings and princes of Europe. In order to exist for all the citizens, it *demand*s a corruption of the basic biblical provisions for church membership.<sup>35</sup> There had been developing for decades in the state church the notion and practice that personal faith was not required for membership in the church. If one were a citizen of Holland, he could be baptized and become a member of the state church and have his children baptized. Consequently, the doctrines of the covenant and of infant baptism were corrupted. More will have to be said about this issue later, but here it is applicable to the leading Reveil men, who labored for an awakening in the state church but never left it because they were committed to the state church concept. This error in regard to the doctrine of the covenant, rooted in the state church concept, also

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34 G. Keizer, *De Afscheiding van 1834* [The Secession of 1834] (Kampen: J. H. Kok, c. 1934), 29. Keizer claims Van der Does in his work on the *Afscheiding* took the same position (cf. *De Afscheiding*, 33n5).

35 *Demand*s is a strong term, but not too strong. Throughout Europe immediately after the great Reformation of the sixteenth century, the particular confession of the prince or king by royal decree became the established religion throughout his domain, expressed in Latin as *cuius regio, eius religio*. If the king or prince was Roman Catholic, Catholicism was imposed on all his subjects; if the royal house was Reformed or Lutheran, the subjects of his rule were not to be Roman Catholic, but Lutheran or Reformed. Thus the religious wars. In a Reformed domain, as was Holland after 1580, the citizens were to be members of the Reformed church by baptism and viewed as a holy people by virtue of mere membership among the covenant people. They were viewed as at least externally and outwardly holy because they were the objects of the promises of God administered through baptism, and they lived in the church even if they were unbelieving. Many joined the church and remained members of the church because of social advantage.

troubled De Cock initially, and he had to be delivered from it by the other five founding pastors in the years immediately after the Secession.

It would be wrong to demonstrate no appreciation for the men of the Reveil regarding the Secession of 1834. T. F. de Haan, one of the disciples of Bilderdijk, later joined the Secession churches, and very early in the history of the Secession he and De Cock gave “parsonage training” to would-be pastors. In 1854 De Haan became a highly qualified professor of Hebrew in the Secession seminary at Kampen. In addition, Groen van Prinsterer, at the time of the fierce persecution of the Secession people, rebuked the state government for its unjust actions by means of a publicly circulated pamphlet. Finally, among those of the Reveil who gave aid to the humble saints of the Secession was the lawyer Carel Marie van der Kemp, who had been a student of Bilderdijk. In an extensive pamphlet, Van der Kemp supported and made his own De Cock’s charge against the ministers of the state church for violating their sacred oath when they signed the Formula of Subscription.<sup>36</sup>

### *The Conventicles*

A second movement of protest against the state church that existed long before 1834 was the conventicle or house church movement among the poor and uneducated believers. To say that it was a movement probably implies too much, for it was not something organized with a strong leadership and agenda. Rather, it was fragmented and without centralization. Nonetheless, throughout Holland, but mainly in the northern provinces of Groningen and Drenthe, there were believers who protested the state church apostasy. This is plain from Bilderdijk’s 1810 statement, “Can you, O kind Christian, make use of the seals of the covenant with those who (it is said without bitterness) defile them from your perspective and according to your principles? Must you deny yourself the use of these seals and live your whole life in abstaining from them? Must you rear your children outside of all Christian fellowship?” These protest groups worshiped in their homes as a family and with others of the same convictions. They remained members of the state church, but they did not attend its worship services.

In response to a pamphlet critical of the people of the conventicles written

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36 Van der Kemp’s pamphlet is a significant document in the history of the Secession and can be found in appendix F.