

1834: Hendrik De Cock's Return to the True Church, by Marvin Kamps. Jenison, MI: RFP, 2014. Pp. xx + 490. \$43.95 hard. [Reviewed by David J. Engelsma.]

Prof. Engelsma is professor emeritus of Dogmatics and Old Testament in the Protestant Reformed Seminary.

This is a book about a spiritual hero. One day, God will honor him before all humans, especially before his contemptible enemies—ostensibly colleagues in a Reformed church—who persecuted him, and before the scarcely less contemptible “friends,” who nevertheless refused to join him in his separation from the false church, which would have meant sharing his reproach—the reproach of Christ.

The hero was an otherwise very ordinary preacher in the Reformed Church in the Netherlands in the early 1800s, Hendrik De Cock.

His heroism was his lonely act of separating from the state Reformed Church, which had become apostate, and with his loyal congregation in Ulrum returning to the true church manifesting the marks of the true church as delineated in Article 29 of the Belgic Confession of Faith. Emphatically, as the instrument of the act declared and as the title of Kamps' book expresses, the act of De Cock and his congregation was *return*, not only or even mainly separation, but *return*—return to the truth of the gospel, return to the true church, return to Christ Jesus the head of the church.

This was the everlastingly worthy heroism of the reformation of the church in the Netherlands in 1834, as it is wherever and whenever reformation takes place.

For this act of courage in the fear of God, a courage that despises the fear of man, the hero suffered greatly, as such heroes always do. He was fined, abused, and imprisoned by the state. He was maligned, disciplined, and deposed from office by the church. By all, he was defamed. By avowed friends in high places in the state church he was abandoned.

Reading this penetrating account of a chapter in the history of the Reformed church in the world that every Reformed and Presbyterian Christian should know, especially every officebearer, with particular reference to the abandonment of De Cock by colleagues who knew full-well that the church was apostate and who shared his doctrinal convictions, I was reminded of the incident concerning the German Lutheran preacher Martin Niemoeller. For his brave opposition to Adolf Hitler, in the matter of the Nazifying of the Protestant church, Niemoeller was imprisoned at Dachau. Soon after his incarceration, he was noticed in the prison by a colleague who was visiting other prisoners. “Martin,” the visiting preacher exclaimed, “Why are

you here?" "That's not the question," Niemoeller replied, "The question is, why are you *not* here."

1834 relates the history of this reformation of the church in the Netherlands in the early 1800s, and does so movingly and incisively. The handsome volume indicates the issues—issues weighty with eternity: the government of the church by Jesus Christ, rather than by the state and a committee of apostate clergymen, and the grand doctrines of the Reformed, Christian faith, including the Godhead of Jesus; the total depravity of the natural man; predestination, prominently, *predestination*; and the saving of the elect sinner by the sovereign grace of God regenerating him.

The fruit of De Cock's reforming act, lonely and seemingly doomed to failure as it was at the beginning, was the gathering of large numbers of Reformed believers and their children in the Netherlands to form a sizable denomination of soundly Reformed churches. These "Secession" Reformed churches merged in 1892 with the churches that also broke with the state church in 1886, under the leadership of Abraham Kuyper, forming the denomination known as the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands.

Haunting the reader as he glories in the history of *1834* is the knowledge that these churches have recently rejoined the state church of the Netherlands to form the thoroughly apostate church known as the Protestant Church in the Netherlands. "The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire" (II Pet. 2:22).

Many Reformed churches in all the world are indebted to De Cock's and his congregation's "act of secession or return." Many owe their origins, under God, to the act. All will benefit from this stirring account of the act of faith that was their birth and is their heritage. Speaking for myself, I breathed a prayer of thanksgiving that the churches of which I and my family are members are highly privileged to be related, ecclesiastically, doctrinally, and spiritually to such a man of God as Hendrik De Cock and then also to the faithful few, including the marvelous Van Velzen, who soon bound themselves with him in the labor. And a petition that God will preserve us in this tradition, not in name only, but also in spirit and in truth.

The book is not, and is not intended by its author to be, the mere telling of history. Books that merely relate past events in the history of the Reformed churches litter the Reformed landscape. The scholarship of such books is often impressive. With copious footnotes, the books inform how the main character's hair was parted and what he had for breakfast. But there is nothing in them or about them of the passion and urgency of the struggle of men of God, and women too, often the wives of the reforming heroes, as with Mrs. De Cock, on behalf of the glory of God; the preservation, or regaining, of the truth of the Word of God; and the salvation of the church of Christ in the world.

1834 is different.

It shares and is informed by the love of God in His truth that moved De Cock.

It brings to light the vitally important way of Reformed Christianity in the world, indicates the fundamental doctrines that constitute this Reformed way, and, more by implication than explicitly, calls Reformed churches and members to resist apostasy from these doctrines at all cost or, if the churches and their members are already departing, to return to the true church that loves and confesses the Reformed creeds.

About half the book, the latter half (although translation of important documents is found throughout), is Kamps' translation from the Dutch of documents that were of great importance to the reformation of 1834, including the document that announced the return of the Ulrum congregation to the true church and, therefore, aroused the fury of the false church and her minions. The documents are timeless in their content and value. Although the statement does not occur in the translated documents at the end of the book, consider this quotation of a predecessor of reformer De Cock: "The principle of the Reformed faith, which is to exalt and to glorify God to the very highest, and to humble man to the deepest depths" (88). This expresses the motivation of De Cock, as of all genuinely Reformed believers in every age, and especially of those Reformed men who battle for the reformation of apostate or apostatizing churches. I distinctly recall the statement of an old, uneducated elder in Hope Protestant Reformed Church many years ago, when I was a mere boy, "God must be all, man, nothing."

And consider this typical plea for peace and unity at all cost against the reformers: Having denied that Christianity is "doctrine," the influential Petrus Hofstede de Groot resisted De Cock and the reformation with appeal to the "whole, gentle, lovely *spirit* of Christianity" (293). The siren-song that lures the churches on to the rock of destruction is ever the same.

The response by God's champions to this seductive song about the "gentle, lovely *spirit* of Christianity" is also always the same: blunt condemnation, and insistence on sound doctrine. De Cock responded to de Groot:

You err in this grievously, and you follow only what pleases your heart and your darkened understanding. That darkened mind prefers a broad way; it wants to be king itself and to rob the Lord Jesus of his throne and crown. But truly this false doctrine is not found in the gospel. This is the truth: the way is narrow and the gate is strait that leads to life; and our corruption is of ourselves, but our salvation is from the Lord our God (298).

In opposition to the subversion of the Reformed faith and church by de Groot's "gentle, lovely *spirit* of Christianity," De Cock called Reformed Christians of his day—and ours—to the genuine spirit of Christianity:

Show spiritual nobility in that you are afraid of nothing except sinning against God; you must show that you despise everything that would hinder you in this regard. Let the worldly, civil, and conforming (that is, adapting to everything in society) Christian, who is that lazy, lukewarm Reformed person, who is that Christian who treads softly, accommodates, and makes a fine display, who is the pious advocate of virtue, the spirit who deceives through sweet words—let such people mock you and characterize you as intolerant, burdensome, impudent, haughty, and stubborn dictators. What does it matter? Jesus was called Beelzebub. Would his family members go unscathed? A Christian must be able to be despised and be able to despise (125).

The sound doctrine on which De Cock especially insisted was predestination, about which most of the ministers were silent, because they detested it. To a broken reed of a Reformed minister, De Cock wrote: “The preachers are also of the opinion that they should not preach the whole counsel of God, but only half of it, and be silent about God’s eternal decree and election” (252). Against the smooth, influential, but heretical ecclesiastic de Groot, who, unable to preserve his suavity when predestination was confessed, “screamed that the preaching of it [election] was an unheard-of and unallowable novelty” (288, 289), De Cock declared that predestination must be preached, including reprobation, and that predestination is “the expressed doctrine of God’s word” (275-291).

A main instrument in God’s reformation of the Dutch church in the early 1800s was De Cock’s republishing of the Canons of Dordt, which had been so neglected by the church that it had become virtually unknown. Some ministers who did know about the Canons cursed the confession.

Reformed Christians today can, and must, judge among the churches claiming to be the spiritual heirs of 1834 by ascertaining which of them love, readily confess, preach, and defend the Canons of Dordt. This is a sure test. Similarly, apostasy among these churches is evident from the silence concerning Dordt (at least with regard to Dordt’s being more than a historical curiosity), the appalling ignorance of Dordt, the outright criticism of Dordt, the bold contradiction of Dordt, e.g., by the confession of the “well-meant offer,” and in certain instances the official relegation of the Canons of Dordt to a nonbinding status.

1834 is a bombshell on the vast choir of Reformed churches sweetly singing the “gentle, lovely *spirit* of Christianity,” in 2014, especially the Reformed churches with a connection to the Reformation in the Netherlands.

With the publication of the book, the RFPA continues firmly to establish itself as a unique, necessary Reformed publisher. It produces books addressing issues, current developments, and history that are critical for the maintenance, recovery, and promotion of historic, creedal, doctrinal, Reformed Christianity in our time.

The *real* issues, the *significant* developments, and the *vital* history!

Strange and discordant pieces of music in an age when many nominally Reformed publishers devote themselves to contributing scores for the wider, louder singing of the “gentle, lovely *spirit* of Christianity”!