

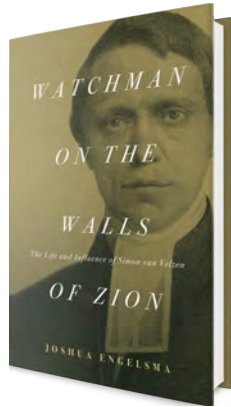


Bring the books...

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Watchman on the Walls of Zion: The Life and Influence of Simon vanVelzen, by Rev. Joshua Engelsma. Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2021. 224 pages. \$26.50, hardcover. [Reviewed by Rev. Stephen Ragnerus]

Simon vanVelzen. Who is the man? Many readers likely are unfamiliar with him, for the name Simon vanVelzen is not a household name. And if we should know the man, then how are we to view him?



Many historians consider him to be an imbalanced, even radical man, while few hold him up as a wise and balanced warrior. What ought our assessment to be? Was vanVelzen a courageous servant who is to be commended for his unbending defense of the truth, or was he a stubborn fellow who is to be criticized for continually arguing and refusing to heed advice from those around him?

Such are some of the difficulties one faces when writing a biography on a controversial historical figure; such difficulties Rev. Engelsma is to be commended for capably handling in his biography, *Watchman on the Walls of Zion: The Life and Influence of Simon vanVelzen*. The reader who was previously unaware of vanVelzen

should not be afraid to pick up and read the book; the book is neither daunting nor boring. You will find that Engelsma's recounting of vanVelzen's history is clear, engaging, and even moving at points. You will rejoice with vanVelzen as he graduates from seminary, receives a call into the ministry, and marries the love of his life. And you will weep with the man as he endures persecution, is rejected of his friends, and buries his wife after only a few years of marriage. You will become acquainted with a renowned preacher and affectionate seminary professor, and you will stand in awe of God's work of defending and developing the truth through the work of this Dutch patriarch.

Perhaps you are one who is already familiar with Simon vanVelzen, but who has dismissed the man as having an "inborn lust for polemics" and being "unyielding, obstinate, and domineering" (207). Then I encourage you to read the book with a spirit of humility and hear Engelsma's detailed and careful portrayal of this church father. The author recognizes that church history is oftentimes complex and controversial; it is not as "clear cut" as we might want it to be. But at the same time, Engelsma makes a compelling case that vanVelzen "was more balanced than most assume, and when he did enter the polemical arena, he did so out of a conviction for the truth and a love for the churches that he served. He was one of the most,

if not *the* most, influential leaders in [the] reformation movement" of the Netherlands (3).

I encourage you to read Engelsma's book, for it is a recounting of *your* history. If you are Dutch, this is your history because it is the story of what happened in the Netherlands. If you are Reformed, this is your history because it is the story of Calvinism as it was defended over against Arminianism. And if you are Protestant Reformed, this is your history because this is the story of the Afscheiding, from which you trace your spiritual heritage.

Finally, I urge you to read *Watchman on the Walls of Zion* because it is encouraging. I do not know that it was the specific purpose of the author to encourage the flock as he wrote this book, but it was my experience that I was nurtured and encouraged as I read through it. God's church is always reforming, and reformation can be painful, especially as God prunes sinfulness from among us. Engelsma's vivid retelling of the trials, persecution, and personal losses of Simon vanVelzen serves as a gentle reminder to us that this is not the first time that God's people have suffered for the sake of the truth. We suffer, but we suffer not alone. "Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses...let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith" (Heb. 12:1-2).