

*WATCHMAN*

*ON THE*

*WALLS*

*OF ZION*



*WATCHMAN*

*ON THE*

*WALLS*

*The Life and Influence of Simon van Velzen*

*OF ZION*

**JOSHUA ENGELSMAN**



REFORMED  
FREE PUBLISHING  
ASSOCIATION  
Jenison, Michigan

© 2021 Reformed Free Publishing Association

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without the prior written permission of the publisher. The only exception is brief quotations in printed reviews.

All Bible quotations are taken from the King James [Authorized] Version

Reformed Free Publishing Association  
1894 Georgetown Center Drive  
Jenison MI 49428  
616-457-5970  
[www.rfpa.org](http://www.rfpa.org)  
[mail@rfpa.org](mailto:mail@rfpa.org)

Cover design by Christopher Tobias / Tobias Design  
Interior design by Katherine Lloyd / theDESKonline.com

ISBN: 978-1-944555-73-3  
ISBN: 978-1-944555-74-0 (ebook)  
LCCN: 2020950423

To my parents, Kenneth and Pamela Engelsma,  
with deep gratitude for their love and support  
and for instilling in me a love for the faith of the fathers  
by their faithful instruction and example.



# CONTENTS

Preface . . . . .	1
-------------------	---

## **PART 1: YOUTH (1809–34)**

Chapter 1 <i>HOME</i> . . . . .	9
Chapter 2 <i>IN THE KING'S SERVICE</i> . . . . .	23
Chapter 3 <i>THE CLUB</i> . . . . .	33

## **PART 2: REFORMER (1834–35)**

Chapter 4 <i>MARRIAGE AND MINISTRY</i> . . . . .	47
Chapter 5 <i>WATCHMAN ON THE WALLS OF ZION</i> . . . . .	59
Chapter 6 <i>SECESSION</i> . . . . .	77

## **PART 3: CHURCHMAN (1836–54)**

Chapter 7 <i>EARLY YEARS OF THE AFSCHIEDING</i> . . . . .	89
Chapter 8 <i>THE CRISIS OF YOUTH</i> . . . . .	105
Chapter 9 <i>THE AMSTERDAM TWIST</i> . . . . .	119
Chapter 10 <i>THE ROBBERS SYNOD</i> . . . . .	135

## **PART 4: PROFESSOR (1854–96)**

Chapter 11	<i>A NEW BEGINNING</i> . . . . .	151
Chapter 12	<i>THE PROFESSOR</i> . . . . .	163
Chapter 13	<i>WAR AND PEACE</i> . . . . .	177
Chapter 14	<i>UNION</i> . . . . .	193
Chapter 15	<i>THE SWORD FOR THE SCEPTER</i> . . . . .	203
	<i>Bibliography</i> . . . . .	213
	<i>Index</i> . . . . .	221



# *PREFACE*

*M*y journey with Simon van Velzen began during my seminary days. I was nudged in his direction by my dear grandmother, Dena Engelsma. I had the privilege as a child and teenager of living under the same roof as my grandmother, and even after I married and moved out, we still talked frequently. Her interests were mine: God's word, the church, and good books. During one of our visits, she mentioned reading the name of Simon van Velzen but not knowing anything about him. She expressed a desire to know more about the man. Did he have a wife? Children? Interests? I promised her I would do some digging, doubting I would find much.

Shortly thereafter, the seminary faculty licensed me to speak a word of edification in the churches and sent me to Edgerton, Minnesota, for part of the summer. There I did a bit of research and managed to cobble together seven pages of biographical information. Satisfied that I had upheld my promise, I mailed my grandmother the work, including a grainy black-and-white picture of Van Velzen for good measure. As always, Grandma was gracious and thanked me for what I had uncovered.

But the thought of that incomplete sketch ate away at me. I was intrigued by Van Velzen and wanted to know more. My interest was further piqued by a class I took at Calvin Seminary on the theology of Herman Bavinck, a later contemporary of Van Velzen. While there, I dug around in Calvin's immense library

and unearthed a few more books on Van Velzen. Slowly, the piece began to develop into an article of respectable length, which was later published in the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal*.<sup>1</sup>

Satisfied that the journey was over, I buried the project in my filing cabinet. But when I have opened that file through the intervening years, I have been struck again and again by two things: how interesting this man's life was and how little justice I had done to it in the past. So, by bits and pieces over many years, the project has grown into its present form.



The driving force behind this journey has always been my conviction that Simon van Velzen occupies an important place in the history of the church of Christ in the nineteenth century. True, he also has a fascinating life. But fascinating details aside, his significance lies in his unswerving conviction for the gospel of grace and the boldness with which he stood for it.

What also amazes me is the fact that his life is essentially a history of the Afscheiding churches. In almost every major event from their beginning in 1834 until their union with Abraham Kuyper's Doleantie in 1892, Van Velzen was involved. The history of these churches needs telling. Surprisingly, there is a dearth of material in English on this history. Most of the available literature ends with the emigrations to America in the 1840s or deals primarily with the social and economic circumstances. Little is written about the ecclesiastical and theological state of affairs. But the importance of knowing this history in order to understand

---

1 Joshua Engelsma, "Father' van Velzen: The Significance of Simon van Velzen for the Reformation of 1834," *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal* 46, no. 2 (April 2013): 3–47. Without noting every instance, I've adapted parts of that article into this book.

## PREFACE

events both in the Netherlands and in America in the twentieth century can hardly be overestimated. And the simple fact that most Reformed churches trace their spiritual heritage back to this reformation makes this history worth reading.

It seems strange, then, that Van Velzen remains largely unknown today. Most works on the Afscheiding mention him only briefly, and almost nothing has appeared in English on his life and work.<sup>2</sup> Where he is mentioned, his influence is largely discredited by an appeal to his forceful character.

I contend that these negative evaluations of Van Velzen's life and influence are incorrect. I intend to demonstrate that, despite his faults, Van Velzen was one of the most significant fathers of the Afscheiding. He 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 this reformation movement. At best Van Velzen has been largely ignored; at worst his character has been called into question and his influence has been minimized. Both are mistakes.

My sympathies as a biographer are probably obvious. I am not ashamed to say that I view Van Velzen as a spiritual father and do not pretend to approach the subject as an unbiased observer (if such a thing is even possible). George Marsden, in his acclaimed biography of Jonathan Edwards, writes, "Even the fairest observers have biases and blind spots. They have (and they ought to have) interests. The best way to deal with these universal

---

2 One reason why Van Velzen remains largely unknown may be that toward the end of his life he destroyed almost all his personal papers and correspondence. What was left after Van Velzen's death was destroyed by his son-in-law on his orders. Cf. C. Smits, *De Afscheiding van 1834* [The Secession of 1834] (Dordrecht: J. P. van den Tol, 1977), 3:132–33.

WATCHMAN ON THE WALLS OF ZION

phenomena is to acknowledge one's point of view rather than posing as a neutral observer. That way readers can take an author's viewpoint into account, discount it if they wish, and learn from it to the extent they can."<sup>3</sup> I heartily agree.

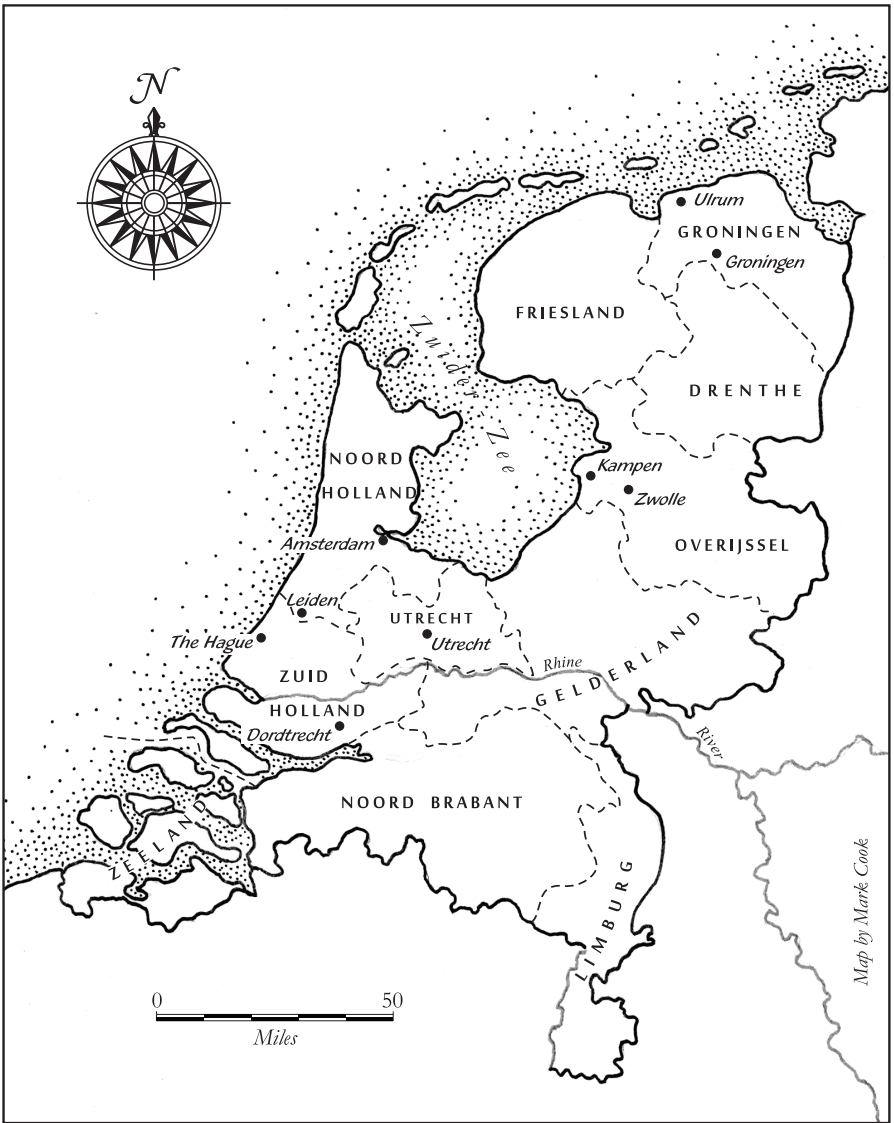
While biased, I intend to present an accurate portrait of Van Velzen. It was written once of biographers (I paraphrase): "When writing the biography of a man, you first grow to love and respect that person. Then, once you get to know that man's life and character, you despise and detest him. But finally, when you get to the very end, you neither overly love nor overly despise the man, but you begin to understand him and what makes him who he is." I've found this to be the case in my study of Van Velzen, and I believe the perspective I give on his life is accurate.

As you now take up the story of this intriguing individual, I hope you're as fascinated and convicted in reading it as I was in writing it.

---

3 George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003), 5.

PREFACE



The Netherlands in 1900  
(courtesy of the A. C. Van Raalte Institute, Hope College, Holland, Michigan)



**PART 1**

***YOUTH***

***(1809–34)***





## Chapter 1



# HOME

Simon van Velzen stood gazing up at a large, familiar building. It was the summer of 1839, and he was in Amsterdam. The building that drew his attention was tucked in among a row of others in an old neighborhood of the capital, the *Jordaan* region, a bit north and west of the city center. Across the threshold of this building ran the *Bloemgracht*, the flower canal, considered by some to be the best and most beautiful of the many navigable waterways that zigzagged through the city like life-giving arteries. From the doorway one was within a stone's throw of the *Westerkerk*, the old Protestant cathedral whose nearly three-hundred-foot spire dominated the skyline and cast a long shadow over the area. Interestingly, it was in another building just a few doors down that a young Jewish girl named Anne Frank hid with her family many years later.

The building of interest to him was a church. A casual observer would have had a hard time recognizing it as such. It looked exactly like all the other buildings on the street, and it certainly did not bear any resemblance to the large, imposing *Westerkerk*. But it was a church nonetheless—the church, in fact, of which Van Velzen was the new pastor. Although to some Van

*WATCHMAN ON THE WALLS OF ZION*

Velzen might have appeared an inexperienced young man not yet out of his twenties, he was, in reality, a man with a great deal of wisdom and experience who was highly respected by many in his denomination of churches.

On this particular day Van Velzen was not alone. He was accompanied by his wife—his second, to be precise—and his young son from his first, now-deceased wife. The building interested them too since it was to be their new home. The edifice doubled as a parsonage; in one half of the building Van Velzen would be found on Sundays preaching the gospel to his flock, while in the other half he could be found during the week living with his family.

While the thoughts of wife and child may have strayed to the future, Van Velzen undoubtedly recalled the past. This building had not always been a church. At one point it had been a home. His home. He was born in that building. He had slept in its rooms. He had pressed his face against its windows to see the traffic on street and canal. He had romped through its halls with siblings and friends. On Sundays he had passed solemnly through its door on his way to church and back. Now, after having been gone for a number of years, he would again take up residence there.

Simon van Velzen had come back home.



Van Velzen family lore laid claim to ancient nobility and intrigue. The story was told that they were descendants of the Dutch lord Gerard van Velzen (d. 1296). Gerard was involved with several other nobles in a plot to kidnap Count Floris V (1254–96), the beloved “God of the peasants.” It was Gerard who finally killed Floris, stabbing him twenty times. His bloody rage was supposedly due to the fact that Floris had raped Gerard’s wife, after

which the poor woman had committed suicide. Gerard himself was captured, tortured, and quartered as punishment for his part in Floris's death.

If the claims of lineage were indeed true (which they most likely were not), there was little that remained of the wealth and honor of the Van Velzen name in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Simon van Velzen's father, also named Simon van Velzen (1768–1833), was not born to wealth and privilege at some grand, old estate, but in obscurity in a small, out-of-the-way village called Nigtevecht. This quiet hamlet was located ten miles south and east of Amsterdam, nestled into a crook of the Vecht River in the scenic *Vechtstreek* region of the province of Utrecht. The elder Simon was baptized in the Reformed Church there on June 5, 1768. At some point later in life he left that rural setting and moved to the hustle and bustle of Amsterdam.

If the younger Simon was born into any earthly privilege and honor, he had his mother to thank for it, not his father. Johanna Neeltje Geselschap (1776–1865)<sup>1</sup> was born and raised in Amsterdam, but her heritage was German. Her family hailed from the

---

1 Most sources give her name as Neeltje Johanna (cf. Elton J. Bruins, Karen G. Schakel, Sara Fredrickson Simmons, and Marie N. Zingle, *Albertus and Christina: The Van Raalte Family, Home and Roots* [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004], 208n58; Jaap van Gelderen, *Simon van Velzen: Capita selecta* [Simon van Velzen: Select topics] [Kampen: Vereniging van Oud-Studenten van de Theologische Universiteit Kampen, 1999], 7). But it appears that her name was really Johanna Neeltje. Her son dedicated a book of his collected sermons (*Feeststoffen* [Festival-day themes] [Kampen: S. Van Velzen Jr., 1863]) to his beloved mother “J. N. Geselschap” (cf. C. Trimp, “S. van Velzen als prediker en homileet” [“S. van Velzen as preacher and homiletician”] in *Afscheiding-Wederkeer: Opstellen over de Afscheiding van 1834* [Secession-return: essays on the Secession of 1834], eds. D. Deddens and J. Kamphuis [Haarlem: Vijlbrief, 1984], 224). In addition, Simon named his oldest daughter Johanna Neeltje, undoubtedly after his beloved mother (cf. Van Gelderen, *Simon van Velzen*, 32).

German region of Cleves, where they were well respected by their fellow citizens and consistently occupied public office. Johanna's father emigrated from Germany and established himself as a master painter and glazier in the city of Amsterdam, and in 1777 he became a burgher of the city. Already in Germany the Geselschap family were known adherents to the Reformed faith, so when Johanna's father moved to Amsterdam, he and his family attended the Reformed congregation at the towering Westerkerk. In the fall of 1776, Johanna was born, and she was baptized in the Westerkerk on September 20.

How and when Simon and Johanna met is unknown, but at some point their God-ordained paths crossed. They were joined together as husband and wife in a civil service on April 5, 1799, with the confirmation of their marriage in the church taking place on April 28. They made their home in the building overlooking the Bloemgracht, where together they operated a boarding school. Simon provided the instruction, and Johanna cared for the physical needs of the live-in pupils.

But it was not long before this middle-class couple had their own children to care for and instruct. In all, the Lord would give to Simon and Johanna six children. On December 14, 1809,<sup>2</sup>

---

2 J. A. Wormser, *Karakter en Genade: Het Leven van Simon van Velzen* [Character and grace: the life of Simon van Velzen], vol. 4 of *Een schat in aarden vaten* [A treasure in earthen vessels] (Nijverdal: E. J. Bosch, 1916), 5. J. C. Rullmann mistakenly gives the year of the younger Simon Van Velzen's birth as 1819 (*Christelijke Encyclopaedie voor het Nederlandsche Volk* [Christian encyclopedia for the Dutch people], s.v. "Velzen [Van]"), an error repeated by Ron Gleason in *Herman Bavinck: Pastor, Churchman, Statesman, and Theologian* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2010), 22. F. L. Bos gives the day of his birth as December 25 (*Biografisch lexicon voor de geschiedenis van het Nederlands protestantisme* [Biographical lexicon for the history of Dutch Protestantism], (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1983), s.v. "Velzen, Simon Van").

## HOME

Johanna gave birth to the couple's fourth child and second son, whom they named Simon after his father. At that time they were attending one of the local Reformed churches (the *Noorderkerk*), and it was there that young Simon was baptized on December 26 by Rev. Johannes Visch.<sup>3</sup>



Young Simon was born at a critical juncture in the history of the Netherlands.

The country into which he was born had its origins in the Eighty Years' War, which was waged, with a few intermissions, from 1568 to 1648. The war pitted Spain against seventeen loosely confederated provinces of the Lowlands (modern-day Luxembourg, Belgium, the Netherlands, and northern France). Provoked by persecution from King Philip II of Spain, William of Orange led the provinces in revolt. Although some of the southern provinces fell back into Philip's hands, the seven northernmost provinces (Holland, Zeeland, Friesland, Groningen, Gelderland, Utrecht, and Overijssel) formed the Union of Utrecht in 1579, in which they promised to support one another against Spain. This event is generally regarded as the beginning of the Dutch Republic. In 1609 a truce was reached between the two sides (which permitted the venerable Synod of Dordt to convene), but it was only with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 that Spain officially recognized the Netherlands as an independent country. Although each liberated province maintained its autonomy, they sent representatives to a national body (called the States General) and recognized an honorary head of state descended from William of Orange (called the Stadtholder). Over the next nearly 150 years,

---

3 At least this is the claim of <https://www.genealogieonline.nl/stamboom-hobers/I2547.php#> (accessed June 16, 2020).

*WATCHMAN ON THE WALLS OF ZION*

the Dutch enjoyed under the House of Orange a period of peace and great economic prosperity known as the “Golden Age.”

In 1795, the Dutch Republic had fallen prey to the French Revolution. Around this time, patriots who were influenced by the revolution to the south came to power in the Netherlands. Disgruntled with the present Stadtholder, William V, whom they viewed as a mere puppet of the English, the revolutionaries forcibly removed William from power and sent him and his family into exile in England. With the House of Orange out of the picture, the Batavian Republic was formed, and the country embraced all things French. In 1806, French dictator Napoleon Bonaparte took control of the Netherlands and placed his brother Louis Napoleon as ruler there. Four years later, Louis Napoleon fell out of favor with his brother and was removed, at which point Napoleon simply annexed the Netherlands as part of France.

Finally, with the defeat of Napoleon in 1813, the Netherlands was liberated. The country recalled the House of Orange from exile and placed William V’s son in charge. The Dutch Republic was rechristened the Kingdom of the Netherlands, and William V’s son became King William I, the first Dutch monarch.

In time the young boy growing up in the home on the Bloemgracht would come face to face with this heir of the prestigious House of Orange.



It was a wonder that Simon lived to see that day.

Conditions in much of the country at the time of his birth were appalling. Disease and poor health were commonplace. The death of family members, though painful, was not altogether unexpected. The infant mortality rate was such that it was not uncommon for parents to have to bury one or more of their own

children, something that Simon himself later experienced as a parent.

Matters did not improve with William's accession to the Dutch throne. The disruption of trade during the Napoleonic wars made for an already stagnant economy, but conditions worsened under William's ineptitude. Not all suffered; the rich capitalized on opportunities to become even richer. But the lot of the commoners steadily declined, and more and more could be found roaming the streets and countrysides, homeless and destitute.

Although they too undoubtedly felt a pinch because of the downturn in the economy, the Van Velzens were better off than most. Three identifiable classes existed at that time in Dutch society. The upper class were the wealthy landowners and aristocracy, and the lower class consisted of the destitute. But a strong middle class also existed which was made up of hired hands, poorer farmers, and small tradesmen. The Van Velzens were part of this group. While not fabulously wealthy, they had sufficient means to provide for their daily needs as well as for the education of their children. For instance, many young men who attended university needed outside support to fund their education, but such was not the case with the young Simon. His parents paid 3500 guilders to send their son to university, a sizable sum in that day.<sup>4</sup>

Through these means God was preparing the way for his future calling. Without the financial means to receive a higher education, Simon may never have pursued the gospel ministry at all. But with the funds available to his family, he was able to be prepared for his future labors in the church.



---

4 Van Gelderen, *Simon van Velzen*, 9.

Because Simon's life and labors were so closely tied to the church, it is important that the reader know something about the history of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands. This was the church of the Reformation in the Lowlands.

It is generally acknowledged that the Reformation entered this region in four basic stages.<sup>5</sup> First on the scene was Lutheranism. As early as 1518, the teachings of Luther were disseminated among the people of the Lowlands. In fact, the first martyrs of the Reformation were two Dutchmen who were burned at the stake in 1523 for advocating the teachings of the great German reformer. Lutheranism, however, failed to take hold among the Dutch people and never became a popular movement.

The second stage of the Reformation in the Lowlands is often referred to as the "Sacramentarian phase." The "Sacramentarians" were generally a group of educated, upper-class individuals who were dissatisfied with conditions in the Roman Catholic Church. They often gathered in private groups to read and hear the word of God. However, this movement never organized and never established itself in the Netherlands.

Third, the Low Countries were heavily influenced by the Anabaptist movement. Especially during the 1530s and 1540s, the

---

5 For this and what follows, cf. W. Robert Godfrey, "Calvin and Calvinism in the Netherlands," in *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World*, ed. W. Stanford Reid (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1982), 95–120; Peter Y. De Jong, "The Rise of the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands," in *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the Great Synod of Dort, 1618–1619*, ed. Peter Y. De Jong (Grandville, MI: Reformed Fellowship Inc., 2008), 17–37; Joel R. Beeke, "The Dutch Second Reformation (*Nadere Reformatie*)," *Calvin Theological Journal* 28, no. 2 (November 1993): 298–327; Walter Lagerwey, "The History of Calvinism in the Netherlands," in *The Rise and Development of Calvinism: A Concise History*, ed. John H. Bratt (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1959), 63–102.



Anabaptists gained a large following among the Dutch people. But its members soon descended into radicalism and internal quarrels, leaving many Dutchmen disenchanted with the movement.

The growing unpopularity of Anabaptism prepared the way in the providence of God for the establishment of Calvinism, the fourth and final stage of the Reformation in the Lowlands. The teachings of Calvin took root in the southern part of the Lowlands (present-day Belgium) around 1545, and it was in this region that Reformed churches first sprung up and that the Netherlands (Belgic) Confession was written. A decade or so later, Calvinism spread from there into the northern regions, where it became more firmly established. Thus, the Dutch Reformed church was born.

However, after her conception and subsequent trial-by-fire at the hands of the persecuting Spaniards, the Reformed church in the Lowlands was shaken by the Arminian controversy. Jacobus Arminius (1559–1609) and his followers, often referred to as Remonstrants, wreaked havoc in the churches with their doctrines of conditional election and the freedom of the will. But by the grace of God, the Reformed faith was preserved, and an outstanding victory was won at the great Synod of Dordt (1618–19). With the Canons of Dordt now in place alongside the Confession and the beloved Heidelberg Catechism, the Reformed faith and the truth of salvation by sovereign, particular grace was firmly established in the Netherlands.

Sadly, on the heels of this great victory came a period of doctrinal and moral decay in the church that coincided with her financial and material gains. The winds of the Enlightenment blew powerfully through the church in the later 1700s with devastating effect, so that by the early 1800s she had succumbed almost entirely to wave after wave of modernism and rationalism.

WATCHMAN ON THE WALLS OF ZION

The precious Reformed truths contained in the confessions were forgotten or cast deliberately aside and made a laughingstock.

This sad decay was never more evident than in 1819, the two hundredth anniversary of the Synod of Dordt. The date was almost completely forgotten in the *Hervormde Kerk* (the Dutch name for the state Reformed Church), except by one faithful old preacher,



Nicholas Schotsman

Nicholas Schotsman. He published a work at this time commemorating the great synod and called for the church to return to her Reformed moorings. But rather than provoking shame and repentance, Schotsman's work stirred up hatred and mockery among many in the *Hervormde Kerk*.<sup>6</sup>

Matters in the church were only made worse when William became king. The details of his meddling in the church will be recounted in a later chapter, but suffice it to say that under his watch the church slid even farther down the road of apostasy.

It was into the bosom of this church that Van Velzen was born. And it was this church that he was specially prepared by God to reform.



God's preparation of Van Velzen for the work of reformation began in the home. Simon was born to parents who were characterized by a deep, sincere piety. Proof of this is the fact that

---

<sup>6</sup> Peter Y. De Jong, "A Darkness over the Land," in *The Reformation of 1834*, ed. Peter Y. De Jong and Nelson D. Kloosterman (Orange City, IA: Plum Publishing Inc., 1984), 18–19.

Simon's mother (and presumably his father, before his death) belonged to a conventicle in Amsterdam.<sup>7</sup>

Because of the dead orthodoxy that characterized the Reformed church at that time, many hungry souls were left unsatisfied by the preaching Sunday after Sunday. To supplement their spiritual diet, a number of interested persons would meet together in a small group called a conventicle (*gezelschap*), usually at a time on Sunday that did not conflict with the worship services of the church. Together these pious saints would read the scriptures, sing Psalms, and encourage and exhort one another in their godly walk. Frequently they would read selections from the writings of the *oude schrijvers*, older Reformed theologians such as Herman Witsius and Wilhelmus à Brakel. Often a more capable man (called an *oefenaar* or exhorter) would take the lead of the group and read a sermon of an *oude schrijver* or give his own meditation upon a text. The conventicles played an important part in the life of the church at that time: they were the means by which believers were fed and the Reformed faith preserved through decades of spiritual darkness. They were, however, not without their weaknesses. Many conventicles overemphasized the individual's experience and promoted an unhealthy introspection and sickly mysticism. A further danger was that, since believers sought refuge in these unofficial gatherings, the attendees might develop a dim view of the instituted church.

Even while recognizing these dangers, it is safe to see in Simon's parents belonging to a conventicle an indication of their devotion to the Lord—a devotion that could not help but influence their son.

---

7 Eugene P. Heideman, *Hendrik P. Scholte: His Legacy in the Netherlands and in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2015), 130.

Not only was young Simon prepared spiritually in the home, he was also prepared intellectually. He and his siblings received their first years of formal education in their father's boarding school. Through this instruction, Simon's parents soon recognized that God had given exceptional intellectual gifts to their son. Although sharply critical of Van Velzen, Harm Bouwman, a church historian and younger contemporary, grudgingly acknowledged those gifts: "Van Velzen was a man of great gifts and abilities, a man of broad classical education, of great learning, of knowledge and study."<sup>8</sup>

Recognizing these gifts, Simon's parents destined him for the gospel ministry. Knowing that the education in the boarding school would not be sufficient, they provided him with the best education possible. First, they sent their teenage son to the local *gymnasium* (called the *Latijnse School*), a secondary school which trained gifted students for higher education at the university level. The curriculum in these schools was prescribed by royal decree in 1815 and included such subjects as history, geography, mathematics, and mythology. But the primary subject in the curriculum was Latin, since all the instruction in the universities was given in Latin.

After Van Velzen completed his work at the gymnasium in 1827, he was enrolled as one of about 110 students at the *Atheneum Illustre*. This prestigious preparatory school in the heart of Amsterdam boasted a fine liberal arts curriculum and an exceptional faculty of eleven teachers. Van Velzen sat under men

---

8 Harm Bouwman, *De crisis der jeugd: Eenige bladzijden uit de geschiedenis van de kerken der Afscheiding* [The crisis of youth: Some pages out of the history of the churches of the Secession] (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1914), 39. All translations from the Dutch in the book are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

such as D. J. van Lennep, J. P. E. Voûte, T. Roorda, and N. G. van Kampen, all renowned scholars in their day. From them, he received instruction in history, mathematics, philosophy, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Dutch.

These early years were formative ones for Van Velzen. By the means of a godly upbringing in the home and a solid liberal arts education, Van Velzen was prepared by God for his future labors in the church of Jesus Christ.

But something critical was missing. Without question, Van Velzen had the necessary intellectual abilities, but he was lacking the necessary spiritual qualifications: the close walk with God, the depth of spirituality. What he understood with his mind had not sunk deeply into his heart.

It is unknown whether Van Velzen himself actually felt the call at this time to prepare for the ministry. It was not at all uncommon in those days for young men who aspired to the ministry to be devoid of a vibrant spiritual life. Such men saw the office of minister simply as another way of making a living or of pursuing scholarly interests, and nothing more.<sup>9</sup>

This assumed lack in Van Velzen was also evident at the Athenaeum. While the education there was excellent, the moral climate that prevailed was quite the opposite. Many of Van Velzen's fellow students lived riotous, godless lives, and it appears that Van Velzen may have been party to some of their sins at this time. He was acquainted with a handful of other students, including Hendrik Pieter Scholte and Anthony Brummelkamp, who opposed this wickedness and lived upright, God-fearing lives. They were mocked by the other students for their antithetical stance and

---

9 One such young man was Abraham Kuypers, who entered the ministry of the Hervormde Kerk in 1863. Cf. Frank Vanden Berg, *Abraham Kuypers: A Biography* (St. Catherines, Ontario: Paideia Press, 1978), 17–18, 31.

scorned as “Dordtians.”<sup>10</sup> Although Scholte and Brummelkamp would play a crucial role in Van Velzen’s immediate future, at this time he was not close to them and may have even participated in heaping ridicule upon them.

A significant change was desperately needed. And it would come, in an unexpected time and place.

---

10 Anthony Brummelkamp Jr., *Levensbeschrijving van wijlen Prof. A. Brummelkamp* [Biography of the late Prof. A. Brummelkamp] (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1910), 21.