

# THE Union Seminary Magazine.

---

Vol. XI.

FEBRUARY—MARCH, 1900.

No. 3.

---

## I. Literary.

---

### THE CHARACTERISTIC AND DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF THE REFORMED CHURCH IN AMERICA.

BY REV. DAVID JAMES BURRELL, D. D.

THE *Reformed Church in America* has no noteworthy "characteristic features" to distinguish it from the larger branches of the "Alliance of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System." It is, to all intents and purposes, identical in doctrine and polity with the Northern and Southern Presbyterian Churches.

Nevertheless it holds a separate existence, because of a belief, more or less prevalent among its adherents, that it has a real *raison d'etre*. There are those who aver that its power for good—which is not inconsiderable—would be greatly increased by an alliance with one of the larger Presbyterian bodies. Overtures looking to such a union have been made more than once, but for various reasons have come to naught.

I. The Reformed Church has an honorable history. It is the oldest evangelical organization in America. The first Dutch immigrants came over in the *Half-Moon*, Hendrik Hudson, skipper, in 1609. This was the year of Holland's armistice with Spain after a century of bloody conflict for religious liberty. The *Half-Moon* returned to Holland the following year, reporting an exploration of the Hudson River in vain search for the fabulous open passage to the Orient. An allusion to "fertile lands and fur-bearing animals" tempted the thrifty spirit of the Dutch

merchants, and expeditions westward followed one another in quick succession. Trading posts were established along the Hudson at intervals from the mouth of the Hudson to Albany, and a permanent settlement was effected on Manhattan Island. It is reasonably certain that a religious establishment of some sort was set up at this point prior to 1616; it could not have been later, because the West India Company was organized in the Netherlands in that year, one stipulation of its charter being that all emigrants going forth under its authority should, for the benefit of the savages as well as their own spiritual protection and edification, take with them a suitable number of "zieken-troosters," or lay ministers, to teach the young, visit the sick and conduct divine service.

The first of these *ziekentroosters* of whom we have definite record were Jan Huyck and Sebastian Kroll. They came over in the *Sea Mew* in 1626, and finding a company of believers observing the forms of worship in a room over the horse-mill in "Fort Manhatas," they immediately set about their work of parochial visitation and instruction in the Catechism and Word of God.

The first minister, Domine Jonas Michaelius, arrived in 1628. His coming was an event of vast importance to the humble company of disciples who had thus far encouraged one another in the lay worship of the horse-mill. A letter from Michaelius, announcing his arrival in the New World, was discovered a few years since among the papers of the mother Classis of Amsterdam. It is of sufficient historical importance to warrant a partial quotation:

"The Peace of Christ to You, Reverend Sir, Well-Beloved Brother in Christ, Kind Friend:

"The favorable opportunity which now presents itself of writing to your Reverence I cannot let pass without embracing it, according to my promise.

"The voyage was long, namely, from the 24th of January till the 7th of April, when we first set foot upon land. Of storm and tempest which fell hard upon the good wife and children, though they bore it better as regards sea-sickness and fear than I had expected, we had no lack, particularly in the vicinity of the Bermudas and the rough coasts of this country.

"Our coming here was agreeable to all, and I hope, by the grace of the Lord, that my services will not be unfruitful. The people, for the

most part, are rather rough, and unrestrained, but I find in most all of them both love and respect towards me—two things with which hitherto the Lord has everywhere graciously blessed my labors, and which in our calling, as your Reverence well knows and finds, are especially desirable, in order to make our ministry fruitful.

“From the beginning we established the form of a church; and as Brother Bastien Crol very seldom comes down from Fort Orange, because the directorship of that fort and the trade there is committed to him, it has been thought best to choose two elders for my assistance and for the proper consideration of all such ecclesiastical matters as might occur, intending the coming year, if the Lord permits, to let one of them retire, and to choose another in his place from a double number first lawfully proposed to the congregation. One of those whom we have now chosen is the Honorable Director himself,\* and the other is the storekeeper of the company, Jan Huyghen, his brother-in-law, persons of very good character, as far as I have been able to learn, having both been formerly in office in the Church—the one as deacon, and the other as elder in the Dutch and French churches, respectively, at Wesel.

“At the first administration of the Lord’s Supper which was observed, not without great joy and comfort to many, we had fully fifty communicants—Walloons and Dutch, of whom a portion made their first confession of faith before us, and others exhibited their church certificates. Others had forgotten to bring their certificates with them, not thinking that a church would be formed and established here; and some, who brought them, had lost them unfortunately in a general conflagration, but they were admitted upon the satisfactory testimony of others to whom they were known, and also upon their daily good deportment, since we cannot observe strictly all the usual formalities in making a beginning under such circumstances.

“We administer the Holy Sacrament of the Lord once in four months, provisionally, until a larger number of people shall otherwise require. The Walloons and French have no service on Sundays, otherwise than in the Dutch language, for those who understand no Dutch are very few. A portion of the Walloons are going back to the Fatherland, either because their years here are expired, or else because some are not very serviceable to the company. Some of them live far away, and could not well come in time of heavy rain and storm, so that it is not advisable to appoint any special service in French for so small a number, and that upon an uncertainty. Nevertheless, the Lord’s Supper was administered to them in the French language, and, according to the French mode, with a discourse preceding, which I had before me in writing, as I could not trust myself extemporaneously. If in this and in other matters your Reverence and the Honorable Brethren of the Consistory, who have special superintendence over us here, deem it necessary to administer to us any correction, instruction or good advice, it will be agreeable to us, and we will thank your Reverence therefor;

---

\* Peter Minuit.

since we must have no other object than the glory of God in the building up of his kingdom and the salvation of many souls." \*

It should be remembered that these immigrants from the Low Countries were a very primitive and simple folk. They had brought with them all the necessities and many of the comforts of life, foot-stoves and feather-beds, Bibles and hymn-books, but no wind instruments. It seems never to have occurred to them that they might be called upon to sound their own praises. They eschewed literature, devoting themselves to the more commonplace and practical tasks of colonial life. For two centuries they plodded along without a historian until "Diedrich Knickerbocker" arose to give them a satirical renown. They had no poet. Whether or not "the breaking waves dashed high," or "the woods against the stormy sky their giant branches tossed," when the *Sea Mew* landed her weary passengers somewhere below Bowling Green, deponent saith not. But there they were; tilling the fields, trapping beaver and other fur-bearing animals, bartering, marrying and giving in marriage, rearing children and worshipping God.

The church in the horse-mill, called also "The Church of Saint Nicholas" and "The Church in the Fort," has preserved a continuous existence until the present time.† It had exclusive ecclesiastical rights on Manhattan Island until the English occupation in 1664, when the franchise of "the Establishment" passed over to the Episcopal Church. Meanwhile, for thirty years, the Episcopalians had worshipped, as invited guests, in the Dutch churches.

At the outbreak of the Revolution the Dutch ministers, who throughout remained loyal to the American cause, were driven

\* This letter is of great historical value. It was found among the papers of the Fourth Judicial District of Amsterdam, Holland; and is now deposited in Lenox Library, New York. It may be regarded as the formal beginning of the ministerial records of America, for prior to this date all regular religious services had been conducted by laymen.

† The Collegiate Church of New York is the lineal successor of this Church in the Fort. Its quarter-millennial was celebrated November 21, 1878. The Church at Plymouth, Mass. (now Unitarian), which had no minister until 1629, claims to have existed previously as "a floating church"; but a similar claim and equally valid could be made for the Church in Fort Manhatas as far back certainly as 1618, the date of the East India Company's charter.

from the island, and forced to continue their services among their compatriots in New Jersey and elsewhere. On returning at the close of the war, they found their church edifices, which had been used as hospitals and riding-schools by the British army, in a sad state of dilapidation; but they took possession and resumed the worship of God.

The Reformed Church in America holds a secondary place among the denominations in point of numbers. The shock which it received at the time of the English occupation in 1664, and during the Revolution, arrested its aggressive energies for many years. This was the price paid for its unswerving devotion to the American cause. Its operations for a long time afterward were confined to New York and the country along the Hudson, with certain portions of the West occupied by Dutch settlers. It made way—all too cheerfully—for its sister organization, the Presbyterian Church, which, uncrippled by Revolutionary reverses, presently forged ahead as an ecclesiastical factor in American life.

The celebration of our National Centennial in 1876 seemed to awaken this historic denomination to newness of life. The last two decades have been marked by extraordinary activity in every department of its work. The church received a transfusion of new blood in 1847, through a considerable immigration from Holland under the leadership of the Rev. Dr. Albertus C. Van Raalte. The new comers settled in Michigan and adjacent States, and made their influence felt at once in ecclesiastical and educational affairs. The semi-centennial of this event has just been celebrated in Holland, Mich.

The minutes of the General Synod for 1899 (an off-year among all denominations) make the following showing: Churches, 643; ministers and licentiates, 701; communicants, 111,665; added during the year, 7,631; contributed for benevolences, \$315,985; for congregational support, \$1,058,040.

The doctrinal symbols of the Reformed Church are the Belgic Confession, the Canons of the Synod of Dort and the Heidelberg Catechism. They represent the continental type of Calvinism, and are substantially identical with the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Shorter Catechism, with which symbols they are used interchangeably.

The form of government is Presbyterian; that is, by presby-

ters or elders. Its four courts are as follows: (1) The Consistory, corresponding to the Session of the local church. (2) The Classis, corresponding to presbytery; consisting of ministers and representative elders within certain bounds. (3) The Particular Synod, which corresponds with the Presbyterian Synod, being co-extensive with the boundaries of the State. (4) The General Synod, which corresponds to the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, and consists of representatives from all the American Classes.

The mode of worship is sometimes called "semi-liturgical." In point of fact, there is less liturgy in general use in the Reformed Churches than in the Northern Presbyterian Church. The Constitution says, "Firmly believing that the gifts of the Holy Spirit for the edification of Zion in every age are promised and bestowed, the Reformed Church judges it sufficient to show in a few specimens the general tenor and manner in which public worship is performed, and leaves it to the piety and gifts of her ministers to conduct the ordinary solemnities of the sanctuary in a manner they judge most acceptable to God, and most edifying to his people." The church has a complete liturgy, not unlike that provided by the Westminster Assembly of Divines, but its use is wholly optional except the forms for the administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Usually the "order of service" is very simple.

The boards and agencies of the Reformed Church are these:

1. Board of Foreign Missions. Maintains stations in India, China, Japan and Arabia.
2. Board of Domestic Missions. Aids feeble churches, especially at the West, and seeks to establish new ones where they are needed.
3. Board of Education. Assists young men in obtaining an education to fit them for the ministry.
4. Board of Publication. Issues denominational and other evangelical literature, and maintains an extensive book depository.
5. The Disabled Ministers' Fund. Extends relief to ministers who are laid aside by age or infirmity.
6. The Widows' Fund. Provides for the widows and children of such ministers as have had an interest in it.

7. Woman's Board of Foreign Missions. Carries the gospel to women and children in India, China and Japan.

8. Woman's Executive Committee of the Board of Domestic Missions. Has special charge of work among the Indians, builds parsonages and otherwise forwards the cause.

No other denomination, except the Moravians, has a more honorable record in foreign missions. It is just forty years since the Reformed Church in America withdrew from the American Board, receiving the Arcot (India) and the Amoy (China) Missions. It has since added three: North Japan, South Japan and Arabia. All are prosperous. The eight original stations and out-stations have grown to 259; the 17 missionaries and native ministers to 117; the 22 native helpers to 247. Churches have increased six-fold and communicants twenty-fold. There are 19 boarding schools and 15 day schools, with about 7,000 pupils. There are four theological seminaries for the education of native ministers and helpers. The amount contributed for this work during the year was \$111,111.89. An efficient arm of this service is the Woman's Board, which reports a larger sum total of contributions than in any previous year.

The Board of Domestic Missions has charge of the planting of frontier fields, the sustenance of dependent organizations and church erection. "The Woman's Executive Committee"—an invaluable help to the Board—undertakes, among other things, the building of manses. The work of the Domestic Board was allowed for a long while to lag somewhat behind that of Foreign Missions, but the church has recently awakened to the importance of American evangelization. Its contributions for this cause have about doubled within six years. For 1898 they were \$83,-870.28.

The educational institutions of this church are as follows: Theological Seminary at New Brunswick, N. J.; Theological Seminary at Holland, Mich.; Rutgers College, New Brunswick, N. J.; Hope College, Holland, Mich.; Pleasant Prairie College, German Valley, Ill.; Northwestern Classical Academy, Orange City, Ia. In addition to these mention should be made of the Collegiate School on Seventy-seventh Street, New York City. It is a classical school for boys. Its history is continuous since its foundation in 1633, under Head-master Roelantsen. It is the oldest educational institution in America.

The Reformed Church has always been distinguished for a spirit of conservatism, which has kept it true to the landmarks of evangelical doctrine. It stands pre-eminently for the divine birth and mission of Christ, for the absolute truth of the scriptures, and for the voluntary principle in religion. At the same time it claims to be broadly and truly liberal, its doors being open to all who confess Christ as their Saviour. Its relation to progress may be seen particularly in the growing work of the women's boards, and in the fact that it has a larger percentage of Christian Endeavor Societies than any other denomination. It does not call itself "The American Church," for that claim would be preposterous in any quarter; but it modestly affirms that, since its establishment on Manhattan Island in 1609-1628, it has aimed to keep itself patriotically in line with the American spirit and true to American institutions. It glories in its honorable history, but still more in the possibilities of faithful service. Its motto is *Nisi Dominus frustra*: "Except the Lord build the house, they labor in vain that build it."

In the beginning of this paper a brief reference was made to the suggestion that the usefulness of the Reformed Church would be greatly enhanced by union with one of the larger bodies. The writer is estopped, as a former member of the Presbyterian Church in the North, from advocating a proposition of this character; but should it ever materialize, he ventures the opinion that no two branches of the Presbyterian family have so much to gain mutually from such a movement as "The Reformed Church in America" and "The Presbyterian Church of the United States." The reasons may be stated briefly: (1) The two are alike Calvinistic and equally so. (2) They are identical in form of government, the only difference being in the names of their judicatories. (3) Both bodies are local, with national aspirations. One has no churches north of Mason and Dixon's line, and the other has none south of it. By joining forces they would assume a national character and importance. (4) They are equally loyal to the old landmarks of truth. The conservatism of the Reformed Church is proverbial. It has passed through the Bible controversy thus far without the smell of the smoke of the Higher Criticism on its garments. How could it be otherwise when a candidate for ordination in its ministry must subscribe to this statement, "We receive all these books, and these only, as

holy and canonical, for the regulation, foundation and confirmation of our faith, believing, without any doubt, all things contained in them, not so much because the church receives and approves them as such, but more especially because the Holy Ghost witnesseth in our hearts that they are from God, whereof they carry the evidence in themselves. For the very blind are able to perceive that the things foretold in them are fulfilling.”

And again, “We believe that these Holy Scriptures fully contain the will of God, and that whatsoever man ought to believe, unto salvation, is sufficiently taught therein. For since the whole manner of worship which God requires of us is written in them at large, it is unlawful for any one, though an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are now taught in the Holy Scriptures: Nay, though it were an angel from heaven, as the Apostle Paul saith. For, since it is forbidden to add unto or take away anything from the word of God, it doth thereby evidently appear that the doctrine thereof is most perfect and complete in all respects. Neither may we compare any writings of men, though ever so holy, with those divine Scriptures, nor ought we to compare customs, or the great multitude, or antiquity, or succession of times or persons, or councils, decrees or statutes, with the truth of God, for the truth is above all; for all men are of themselves liars, and more vain than vanity itself. Therefore we reject with all our hearts whatsoever doth not agree with this infallible rule, which the apostles have taught us, saying, ‘Try the spirits whether they are of God;’ likewise, ‘If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house.’”

The minister must attest his adherence to the foregoing and all other doctrines of the Reformed symbols by affixing his name to the following statement:

“We, the underwritten, testify that the Heidelberg Catechism and the Confession of the Netherland churches, as also the Canons of the National Synod of Dordrecht, held in the years 1618 and 1619, are fully conformable to the word of God. We promise, moreover, that, as far as we are able, we will, with all faithfulness, teach and defend, both in public and private, the doctrines established in the aforesaid. And should ever any part of these doctrines appear to us dubious, we will not divulge the same to the people, nor disturb the peace of the church, or of any community; but will communicate our sentiments to the

ecclesiastical judicatories under which we stand, and submit ourselves to the counsel and sentence of the same."

(5) The Reformed Church has ever stood in the forefront of universal evangelization. It has been outranked by the Moravians alone in this particular. It is due, perhaps, to a feeling of restraint in Home Missions that the church has grown out of all proportions in its foreign work. It has unbounded enthusiasm for the spread of Christ's kingdom to the uttermost parts of the earth.

The writer cast in his lot with the Reformed Church nine years ago. His first word of welcome was at the hands of a Congregational minister, who said in a public assemblage, "I perceive that our friend Doctor B. has concluded to join the Reformed Church, which is referred to in scripture as 'that people whose strength is to sit still.'" But had this brother paused to compare the work of the Reformed Church at home and abroad with that of his own denomination, he would have found no occasion for glorying. I have learned to love the Reformed Church for its honorable history, for its devotion to historic truth, for its broad spirit of Christian fellowship, and, above all, for its appreciation of the Master's imperative, "Go ye." It is not one of the largest denominations, but it has a place in the economy of Christ's kingdom, and it has not wholly failed to fill it.