



## **A review of James DeJong's book on H. J. Kuiper:**

### ***Shaping the Christian Reformed Church, 1907-1962***

The church of Jesus Christ owes its existence to the saving purpose and work of the Triune God. The Father has purposed to give to His Son a people chosen unto everlasting life. The Son gathers this church to Himself by His Spirit and Word. And the Holy Spirit makes the Word and sacraments effective in the lives of those who are being called into the fellowship of the church. For this reason, the Apostle's Creed includes an article regarding the church ("*I believe a holy catholic church*"). As an article of faith, what we believe about the church focuses our attention upon what we believe concerning the Triune God.

Though the church of Jesus Christ is entirely the fruit of the work of the Triune God, this does not mean that its story may be told without taking note of those human instruments God uses in building and gathering His people to Himself. In the history of the Christian Reformed Church in North America, for example, it is not difficult to identify the names of those whom the Lord used in an extraordinary way to write the story of this denomination. I was reminded of this again as I read James A. DeJong's recent biography of H. J. Kuiper, one of the most remarkable and influential ministers in the Christian Reformed Church, who served at a particularly important time in its history. Perhaps more than any other figure in the first half of the twentieth century, H. J. Kuiper provides us a window into the CRCNA that illumines the history of this denomination, not only in the past but also in the present.

In the opening acknowledgments to his biography, DeJong gratefully notes the generous support that was provided for the building of the fifth floor of the Hekman library at Calvin College and the establishment of the H. J. Kuiper chair in the Calvin Seminary doctoral program. Since H. J. Kuiper's daughter, Claire, and her husband, Edsko Hekman, were major contributors to these causes, DeJong's volume constitutes a kind of tribute to H. J. Kuiper written in gratitude to the Hekman's and in the awareness of his importance to an interpretation of the history of the CRCNA.

For the purpose of this review of DeJong's book, I will closely follow the sequence of DeJong's account of H. J. Kuiper's life and ministry. DeJong divides his study into three parts, which roughly follow the chronology of Kuiper's life. In the first two chapters, he treats Kuiper's early life and pastorates. In the second section, which consists of chapters 3 through 8, he details Kuiper's involvements in a number of "extradenominational projects." And then in the third section, he focuses exclusively upon Kuiper's principal work as the editor of *The Banner*. After this review of the main findings of DeJong's biography, I will conclude with a few observations regarding DeJong's interpretation and the significance of this biography for our evaluation of more recent developments in the CRCNA.

### **Early life and ministry**

After an introductory chapter, which offers a rationale for a study of the life and influence of H. J. Kuiper upon the CRCNA, the first two chapters of DeJong's book are devoted to Kuiper's early life, education and pastorates.

H. J. Kuiper was born December 22, 1885, and with his parents (Jacob Kuiper, a blacksmith, and Hilligje Franken) was a member of the Spring Street Holland Christian Reformed Church (the name of the denomination at the time). The congregation was pastored by Rev. J. H. Vos, father of the well-known biblical theologian, Geerhardus Vos. At the time the CRCNA had a total membership of 21,156 souls and was divided into five classes. During the period of H. J. Kuiper's life, the denomination would

grow rapidly, primarily through immigration from the Netherlands, so that it numbered some 86,779 souls by the end of WWI and 250,934 by the end of Kuiper's life.

When conducting his research on Kuiper's family and youth, DeJong observes that he was unable to find much information in the record. The only information on the Kuiper home of Kuiper's youth is provided through the testimony of his brother-in-law, Reverend Harry Bultema, who married his younger sister Dena. Almost all the sources that were available to DeJong for the purpose of writing his biography, detail aspects of Kuiper's official ministry and public engagements. DeJong plausibly surmises that the absence of such material may be the result of Kuiper's own desire. But it means that the story of Kuiper's life that DeJong tells focuses almost entirely upon Kuiper's public ministry.

After attending a Christian grammar school and Grand Rapids High, Kuiper enrolled in the preparatory program of the theological school of the CRC in 1901. Kuiper's years of study at Calvin Theological Seminary were not without turmoil and controversy, which was prophetic of later battles in the CRC in which he would play a prominent role. Kuiper's abilities as a student are attested by the fact that he graduated at the young age of twenty-one-and-a-half years, perhaps the youngest candidate in the history of the CRC. Shortly after graduation Kuiper married Cornelia Freyling and took the call to the CRC congregation in Luctor, Kansas.

The bulk of DeJong's treatment of Kuiper's early life and ministry focuses upon his service as a minister in four different congregations. During these early years of Kuiper's ministry, many of the interests that would preoccupy him throughout his years as editor of *The Banner* began to surface. The extraordinary reach of Kuiper's involvement in many facets of the denomination's life commenced in this period as well, especially his service as editor of the denominational periodical, *The Banner*. In addition to his formal training at Calvin Seminary, Kuiper's ministry in these congregations served him well as a platform on which to build throughout the remainder of his life.

Already in his first charge in Luctor, DeJong observes that Kuiper exhibited patterns of "*hard work, spiritual sensitivity, and discipline that would characterize his subsequent endeavors*" (p. 23). Whether it was teaching all the catechism classes, working with the young people of the congregation, instituting a special consistory meeting each month to study the church order, or starting a choral society, Kuiper proved to be a hard-working, gifted, and effective pastor in Luctor, Kansas, and in all of his charges. He also began to participate in a number of denominational debates regarding Christian day-school education, which he zealously promoted, and the question of the responsibility of the church to provide for the education of its ministers by means of a denominational seminary. After his first pastorate in Luctor, Kuiper served briefly in the Prospect Park congregation in Holland, MI, from 1910-1913. Thereafter, he served the Second Englewood, Chicago, IL, congregation for a period of six years (1913-1919), the Broadway congregation of Grand Rapids, MI, for a period of ten years (1919-29), and the Neland Avenue congregation of the same city for a period of fifteen years (1929-1944). According to DeJong, Kuiper's pastorates at Broadway and Neland Avenue were marked by his increasing involvements in denominational matters, whether doctrinal disputes, synodical assignments, or other areas of ministry. During his Neland Avenue pastorate, Kuiper began his service as the editor of *The Banner* (1928), a position that became full-time in 1944.

DeJong interprets Kuiper's pastorates at Broadway and Neland Avenue as "*the making of an editor.*" The nature and extent of Kuiper's participation in the denominational fights and other projects during this period made him a natural choice for the special responsibility to edit the denomination's official English-language periodical (*De Wachter* was the older, Dutch-language periodical). During this period, Kuiper played a leading role in advocating a uniform order of worship for all CRC congregations as a member of a synodically-appointed study committee, was a zealous advocate of evangelism and missions, led in the push to have professor Ralph Janssen removed from his teaching position at Calvin Seminary due to his embracing certain higher-critical views of Scripture, and defended the synodical decisions on common grace in 1924 and worldly amusements in 1928. Kuiper's position and influence on these and other denominational debates made him a familiar and respected minister in the denomination, and a natural choice for editor of *The Banner*.

### **Extradenominational projects**

The second major section of DeJong's biography addresses what he terms Kuiper's "extradenominational projects." Employing Abraham Kuyper's distinction between the church as

"institute" and as "organism," which H. J. also embraced, DeJong treats in several chapters a variety of projects that were dear to Kuiper throughout his ministry.

First on the list of Kuiper's extradenominational projects was his life-long advocacy of Christian schools. In the early history of the CRC, Christian schools, where established, were often parochial schools that were owned and governed by local congregations. Kuiper was an advocate of Christian schools that were owned and administered by a Christian school society, composed of parents and others in the community who supported the cause of Christian education. In his pastorates in Chicago and Grand Rapids, he was instrumental in initiating the push for the establishment of Christian high Schools, even serving for a time on the school boards of these respective institutions.

Both as a pastor and as the editor of *The Banner*, Kuiper invested his time, energy, and money, in the cause of providing the children of believing, Reformed parents with Christian schools. Not only did Kuiper write his first editorial as editor on the subject of Christian education, but he wrote on this subject more than any other throughout the lengthy tenure of his editorship. For Kuiper such schools were not simply an option or a luxury. They were a necessary expression of the covenant obligations that Christian parents have to train their children in a way that would prepare them to serve Christ as King in all areas of life and in whatever legitimate vocation they might pursue. In his advocacy of Christian schools, Kuiper illustrated the extent of the influence of Kuiper upon CRC developments, especially in the area of Christian education. In the sphere of education, Christ's kingship and the obligations of the covenant must be honored.

Though Kuiper is best known as editor of the denominational periodical, *The Banner*, DeJong also documents his contributions as a writer and author in other settings as well. In addition to his work as a contributing author and editor of several denominational study committee reports, Kuiper served early in his life as an associate editor and writer for the *Witness*. The *Witness* first made its appearance in 1921 with Louis Berkhof as its editor. This periodical was only published for five years, and aimed to apply the confessional Reformed faith to issues of the day and to emphasize the central importance of the work of the instituted church. In his articles for the *Witness*, Kuiper opposed the views of Ralph Janssen and sounded many themes that would later preoccupy him on the pages of *The Banner*. Unlike a contemporary periodical that was also published by CRC authors, *Religion and Culture*, the *Witness* emphasized the antithesis more than common grace, and aimed to reach a general rather than academic audience.

One of Kuiper's life-long interests, Christian hymnody, led him to spearhead the publication of the *New Christian Hymnal*, a collection of "popular sacred song" in 1929. The publication of this *Hymnal* was a significant milestone that prepared the way for the publication of the Centennial Psalter Hymnal (the "red" book) of 1957. After his many years of service as editor of *The Banner*, Kuiper continued to write, but for the *Torch and Trumpet* (now *The Outlook*). The *Torch and Trumpet* began publication in 1951 and represented a more confessionally Reformed viewpoint than its rival, *The Reformed Journal*, which represented a more progressive and accommodating viewpoint. Initially a contributing editor in 1957, Kuiper eventually assumed the role of editor of the *Torch and Trumpet* until his death in 1962.

The last of Kuiper's "extra-denominational projects" that DeJong treats was his life-long interest in missions and evangelism. In all of his pastorates and during his tenure as editor of *The Banner*, Kuiper was an energetic proponent of the cause of reaching out into the community and to the ends of the earth with the gospel of Jesus Christ. During his pastorates in Chicago and Grand Rapids, he was keenly interested in the establishment of "chapels" that would enfold new members through evangelism. Though Kuiper acknowledged some of the weaknesses of this "chapel" method of evangelism, he also lamented the fact that many CRCs were "too cold and indifferent" to be able to reach others effectively with the gospel. To illustrate Kuiper's emphasis in this area, DeJong quotes his remarkable insistence that "(n)early every church or group of churches has a mission field in its own community and not until every one of these fields is occupied by a salaried missionary or volunteer workers or both are we able to say we are making serious business of our missionary task" (p. 134, italics Kuiper's).

Recognizing the danger of approaching this missionary task in a non-biblical or un-Reformed manner, Kuiper was a leading proponent of the establishment of a distinctively Reformed Bible Institute, which would prepare its students for this task. Despite considerable resistance from other denominational figures, Kuiper fought hard to see to it that such an institution be founded. DeJong concludes a chapter

on Kuiper's commitment to RBI (now Kuyper College) by observing that "(t)he school remained his cherished cause, and he its esteemed board president until his dying day" (p. 152).

### **Editor of *The Banner***

No doubt the greatest contribution of H. J. Kuiper to the CRC was his service for many years as editor of *The Banner*. During Kuiper's tenure, *The Banner* was arguably the most influential instrument for cultivating a common mind on the calling and challenges facing a confessionally Reformed communion of churches in North America. As DeJong observes, "(t)he paper achieved a level of denominational prominence and influence under his leadership unknown before or since his tenure" (p. 153). In the concluding section of his biography, DeJong manages in several chapters to provide his readers with a thorough examination of the themes and emphases that characterized Kuiper's editorials through the many years of his editorship. These chapters offer the clearest portrait of Kuiper's convictions and also include the most explicit commentary by DeJong on what he regards to be his greatest contributions and most significant weaknesses.

In the first of the chapters in this section of his biography, DeJong offers a general sketch of Kuiper's editorship of *The Banner*. This chapter is perhaps the most revealing of the book, at least in terms of DeJong's own view of Kuiper's weaknesses. Though DeJong credits Kuiper with greatly expanding the content and enhancing the quality of *The Banner* during his editorship, he also emphasizes some of what to him were weaknesses in Kuiper's handling of his responsibilities.

For example, Kuiper could be fierce in his criticism of those whose views he opposed, and he was not above using his influence as editor to his own advantage. De Jong cites as evidence Kuiper's use of his editorial position to oppose the teaching of Rev. Wezeman, principal of Chicago Christian High School whose views on Scripture were similar to those of professor Ralph Janssen. He also maintains that Kuiper contributed significantly and needlessly to the creation of a climate of suspicion in the denomination regarding Calvin College and Seminary. According to DeJong, "(i)f H. J. Kuiper is appropriately credited with the many positive contributions he made to Christian Reformed life and institutions, he must also be assigned responsibility for contributing to an unhealthy mood of suspicion and to growing polarization within the denomination" (p. 185).

The other chapters in this third section of DeJong's work describe Kuiper's editorials on the subjects of Reformed spirituality, ecumenical relations with other churches, and the calling of the believer in human society. Prominent themes in Kuiper's view of the Christian life were: the cultivation of personal piety and devotion, the development of a healthy covenant home environment with meaningful family devotions, a Reformed world view that embraces all of life, a rigorous but joyful use of the Sabbath for Christian worship and service, a diaconal interest in the needs of recent Canadian immigrants, the cultivation of a healthy and vigorous church life and ministry, and the promotion of a proper kind of denominational loyalty and self-awareness.

When it came to relationships with other church communions, Kuiper opposed inappropriate alliances with liberal churches and cautioned against ecumenical contacts that would compromise the confessional character of the CRC. Kuiper was an advocate, however, of membership in the National Association of Evangelicals and welcomed enthusiastically the formation of the Reformed Ecumenical Synod (now Council). He also viewed positively and exhibited a keen interest in the formation of Westminster Theological Seminary and the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Though it is sometimes reported that the CRC failed to address carefully the split that occurred in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands in the 1940's, Kuiper offered at the time a *Banner* editorial that presented a concise, informed critique of the covenant conception of Klaas Schilder, which played an important role in the division that occurred among the Dutch churches (February 22, 1946).

In the last chapter of this section of his biography, DeJong also summarizes Kuiper's views on contemporary social, economic and political developments. In his commentary on broadly social and cultural subjects, DeJong interprets Kuiper as, in general, a follower of Abraham Kuyper, though his emphasis is more upon Kuyper's doctrine of the antithesis than of common grace.

## **Concluding observations**

Though I have offered only a brief sketch of the main findings of DeJong's study, it provides a basis for a few concluding observations that I would like to offer for further reflection.

First, students of CRC history are in DeJong's debt for writing a thoroughly researched, clear, and helpful account of one of the most influential figures in the denomination during a critical period of its history. In preparation for his biography, DeJong painstakingly researched the available material on Kuiper's life and ministry. This material included consistory minutes, synodical documents, editorials, and other writings. In his biography, DeJong has managed to offer a well-written narrative of Kuiper's life, and at the same time an evaluation of his contributions to and importance for an interpretation of this period of CRC history. For the most part, DeJong resists the temptation to camouflage Kuiper with his interpretive commentary and analysis. Kuiper is permitted to speak for himself throughout the biography. Even though DeJong acknowledges that we have few sources on Kuiper's personal life, the reader of his biography will find that Kuiper's life and thought are in the foreground, while DeJong remains, in the proper sense of the term, only the biographer. Anyone who has an interest in the history of the CRC (and that includes members of churches that stand in the same tradition) should obtain a copy of this volume and read it carefully.

Second, DeJong's biography of Kuiper is more than a biography. It tells through the lens of Kuiper's life and ministry the story of the CRC in the first half of the twentieth century. Perhaps in this respect it is well that Kuiper did not leave much material on his personal life and family. More than his predecessor as editor of *The Banner*, Rev. Henry Beets, Kuiper deserves to be described as "Mr. CRC." The character of the CRC, the challenges confronting a confessionally Reformed and immigrant church in North America, the great theological debates that preoccupied the early decades of the twentieth century, the extraordinary institutional development of the CRC, the common convictions of denominational members during this period — all of these and more are embodied in the person of Kuiper. In this respect, DeJong's biography confirms the assessment of James Bratt, the author of another important work on CRC history, *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America*: "*Indeed, as his tenure lengthened it became increasingly difficult to distinguish between the man, the periodical, and the group they served.*" No one person before or after Kuiper quite so accurately captures the spirit and forms of denominational life.

Third, in the interpretation of CRC history, writers have often distinguished three broad "points of view" among its members. Though the terminology varies, these views are most commonly referred to as "confessional Reformed," "antithetical Calvinist," and "positive (common grace) Calvinist." The conflict between the different perspectives on the identity and calling of the CRC in the first half of the twentieth century are regarded, accordingly, as expressions of the competing emphases of these three minds.

While DeJong does not challenge the legitimacy of identifying these distinct points of view within the CRC during this period, he demonstrates through Kuiper that they do not represent positions that are wholly incompatible or incapable of expression through the life and ministry of the same person. Kuiper himself exhibits elements that belong to all three minds. Though Kuiper might be viewed as a spokesman for the confessional Reformed mind, who was only interested in the well-being of the instituted church and its faithful adherence to the Reformed confessions, it is evident that he shared many of the cherished tenets of the antithetical Calvinists and even some of the concerns of the positive Calvinists. Kuiper opposed Janssen's views on Scripture because they blurred the lines of the antithesis between believing and unbelieving biblical scholarship. But he also opposed Herman Hoeksema's denial of the legitimacy of common grace as a theme in Reformed theology and life. By acknowledging the complexity of Kuiper's positions, DeJong advances the traditional categories of interpretation that have governed the study of CRC history for a long time.

And fourth, DeJong's biography of Kuiper also provides insight into the background for subsequent developments in the CRC after his death. During Kuiper's lifetime (due in part to his influence and role) the CRC was often embroiled in pitched battles and debates, all of which in some way were related to the denomination's sense of its identity and calling in North America. These battles never led, however, to any significant division or parting of ways (with the possible exception of the formation of the Protestant Reformed Churches in 1924). The denomination held together remarkably well during Kuiper's lifetime and enjoyed a considerable measure of apparent unity and peace. No one who is acquainted with the subsequent history of the CRC will likely want to challenge my observation that this

is no longer true. A number of painful divisions have surfaced in more recent decades, which have reversed a century of rapid growth by the denomination. For example, the CRC grew by 1000% during Kuiper's lifetime (if my math is correct), but it has hardly grown in the sixty years after his death. The obvious question this raises, and it is one that DeJong hints at only obliquely in his biography, is: what happened? Or: what changed?

If I may be permitted an interpretive hypothesis, the answer to this question is actually provided in Kuiper's last official editorial for *The Banner* (August 31, 1956). In this editorial, Kuiper observed with dismay that, in every theological controversy in the CRC during his tenure as editor, there were always CRC leaders who were prepared to defend the position of those who he believed were departing from biblical and confessional orthodoxy. His comments are sufficiently important to require quoting them at length:

*One thing in particular, however, makes us very apprehensive. With all the emphasis in our Church on purity of doctrine, we expected in our younger days that our people would be quick to recognize false teachings and prompt to disavow them. But in this matter we have been disillusioned. We have learned that whenever any one of our leaders strikes a false note, especially if he is popular and well schooled, he will soon get a following.*

In his editorial, Kuiper went on to rue the lack of discernment among members of the denomination that was often exhibited in the midst of controversy and debate.

I believe Kuiper's observation here was almost prescient (knowing in advance). In subsequent battles in the CRC, unity within and loyalty to the denomination and its institutions proved to be the more powerful "glue" that held things together than loyalty to the distinctive confessional identity of the CRC. So long as the denomination had leaders who were loyal to the confessions, as Kuiper undoubtedly was, it managed to retain its identity as a confessional Reformed church.

In the one significant critical comment on Kuiper's ministry in his biography, DeJong criticizes him for contributing to a climate of suspicion and growing polarization in the denomination. In my view, this criticism is misdirected. Kuiper, who was only defending the historic position of the CRC against those whom he judged to be its detractors, should hardly be criticized for doing so. Kuiper's concerns only illustrate that the seeds of the CRC's troubles in more recent decades were already germinating during his lifetime. They also demonstrate that lack of real enthusiasm for confessional Reformed Christianity was already present in the CRC during the "good old days" of Kuiper's influence. Perhaps already during Kuiper's lifetime, the real unifying force in the CRC was more sub-cultural, ethnic, and institutional, than we have believed until now. If I may use the controversial image of "burning the wooden shoes," perhaps the CRC eventually burned the wrong shoes, namely, the confessional Reformed identity that Kuiper worked so hard to promote. The "wooden shoes" that should have been burned — but at no great risk of losing something of ultimate importance — were the shoes that were retained, namely, sub-cultural, ethnic, and institutional identities.

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