

## Dr. Johannes Elias Feisser: Baptist Pioneer in Holland.

HOLLAND has plenty of imported articles, from coffee to Communism and Christian Science; but the Baptist movement is a plant of her own soil. It germinated under inhospitable circumstances in the east of Drente, her poorest and most barren province, and so sings the praise of the divine law that the loftiest influences for the benefit of mankind often originate in unthought-of places. The man of God whom history honours as the father of the denomination in Holland is Johannes Elias Feisser.

### I. *How he came to Christ.*

He was born at Winsum on the 10th December, 1805, and two years later his parents moved to Veendam, where the father had accepted the post of collector of the Royal taxes. The Feissers belonged to the well-to-do middle classes. They enjoyed life without much restraint, and attended divine services regularly according to the social etiquette of those days. Their favourite desire was a military career for their eldest son, but through the influence of a pious grandmother it was decided to educate him for the ministry of the Dutch Reformed Church.<sup>1</sup>

From the preparatory school at Veendam, young Johannes Elias entered the University of Groningen at the age of seventeen, and studied literature and theology. Five years later he wrote his dissertation "*de vita Basilii Magni Cesareae in Cappadocia Episcopi*," and received the degree of Doctor of Divinity. After marrying Geertruida Elisabeth Barbara Orck, Baroness of Heekeren, he settled as pastor in a village church. In 1833 he accepted the call to Franeker, the Frisian Athens of that time. Preaching was the joy of his heart, and his oratorical gifts drew large congregations; but the Christ he

<sup>1</sup> The Dutch Reformed Church is a product of the Reformation, being in fact the reformed continuation of the Roman Catholic Church. It resembles the Church of Scotland and the Swiss Reformed Church. It is constitutionally Presbyterian, and adheres to the Heidelberg Catechism, but admits all liberty of thought. Though not a State Church—Holland has not such a Church—it derives much support from the State, from 600 to 2,000 gulden or more per living. Besides the Dutch Reformed, the State subsidises the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Jewish, Mennonite and Remonstrant Churches.

commended was not the Saviour of the lost. He was the stainless example and the source of wisdom, in harmony with the prevailing theological notions. Feisser was a welcome guest in the homes of the learned and rich, and popular amongst the masses. In this seeming paradise he had to drink deep draughts of the cup of sorrow. The climate undermined his health; two of his children died; soon afterwards he had to lay the mortal remains of his beloved wife in the grave. And to all this was added an almost total blindness of his right eye.

Broken in body and spirit, he relinquished the shepherd's crook and sought comfort in his parents' home. Restored to health after half a year's rest, he preached his inaugural sermon in the church at the small town of Gasselter-Nyveen on Sunday morning, March 3rd, 1839. Though receiving much "praise of men"—for one reason because the pew-rents and the collections doubled!—he found himself very dissatisfied. His parishioners were good-natured people but spiritually dead. He could open his heart to nobody on spiritual themes. Thus it came about that in the autumn of 1841 Feisser, weary of his superficial popularity and probably under the influence of Newton's *Cardiphonia*, a book which met with a loving welcome in many circles, admitted the Saviour in all His glory.

## II. *How he came to the New Testament conception of the Church.*

The worshippers soon discovered in his preaching that he was a changed man. He no longer leaned on himself and his own wisdom but on the grace of God alone. He saw a sharp dividing line between the elect to whom the grace of conversion is given, and the hardened of heart who are disobedient unto the truth. He proclaimed without fear the absolute sovereignty of God in the whole plan and work of salvation and the great difference between face-Christianity and faith-Christianity.

As long as Feisser confined his change of theology to the pulpit, people did not mind. They liked him much for his kindness, and not a bit less for the monetary prosperity of the church. But real conversion told. He set himself to the task of "reforming the Reformed Church,"<sup>2</sup> and began by

<sup>2</sup> As he states in his *Getrouw Verhaal* (Faithful Account) published in 1844 at Groningen. Feisser wrote several brochures, pamphlets and tracts, in which he revealed his soul at various stages of his life. In one of them he renounces what "he had written or spoken against the truth," praying God to put away the harm and to forgive him. A complete set of his publications is in the possession of the Theological Seminary of the Presbyterian Church at Kampen.

strongly advising the election of pious Christian men to the various offices, otherwise (he declared) he would not ordain those chosen. Next he wanted the presbytery to exclude certain members from the Lord's Table for serious lack of Christian understanding; among them was the headmaster of the elementary school. That noble body of overseers, however, sided with the worldlings. These and similar differences forced him to look into the nature of the Christian Church. We find him in those days lecturing to a meeting of ministerial colleagues on the subject: "What conception we ought to form of the Church of the Lord." When some time later a superior ecclesiastical authority (the consistory<sup>3</sup>) tried to settle the difficulties between pastor and people, Feisser made definite demands: (a) the removal of three elders from office; (b) their censure until God should change their hearts; (c) confirmation of the censure of those members whose names he had laid before the presbytery; (d) exemption from his duty to baptise and preside at the Lord's Table until a worthy presbytery should be entrusted with the care of the church. The deputation of the consistory informed him that it had no power in these matters, whereupon Feisser sent an address to the consistory requesting assent to his last request. In a covering memorandum he explained that it had become quite clear to him that the Church ought to be such a body as is described by the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians xii. 12-30. The faithful in the Church must unite in order to cleanse the body of Christ from all worldly elements. As to his views of baptism, he expressed himself as follows: Paedobaptism crept into the Church long after the apostolic age, contrary to the mind and commandment of Christ. If it pleases God to raise up another Church—founded on the Lord Jesus and the apostles—the first stipulation will doubtless be that believers only may be baptised. The baptism of babies, who are destined to remain in their sins, is a crime against God, because the sign of covenant-grace is given to those with whom He has not entered into covenant, and the baptism of babies who shall be privileged to receive grace is a running ahead of the Lord, which does not become us who have no knowledge of the persons upon whom the Lord will be pleased to bestow His favours.

<sup>3</sup> The local Dutch Reformed Church is governed by:—

- (a) The presbytery composed of the minister or ministers, elders and deacons;
- (b) The consistory composed of five to seven ministers and two or three elders;
- (c) The provincial church governing body composed of five to seven ministers and two or three elders;
- (d) The synod composed of thirteen ministers and six elders.

The following incident sharpened the difficulties. A member wanted his baby to be baptised. Feisser enquired: "Can you accept the formula of baptism?" "No." "Do you think baptism is of some value to your child?" "No, but I want it to be baptised." The pastor refused, and the antagonism against him became intense. One October night the defenders of the babies' rights attacked the parsonage with bricks and smashed all the windows! The report of the minister who refused to baptise went through the whole of Holland and even far beyond. In vain the consistory and the provincial governing body tried to persuade Feisser to reconsider his attitude. He pointed out that it was a vital matter whether unconverted people had the right to the tokens of covenant grace. At last the Reformed Church did with its reformer what Rome had done with hers before. On the evening of December 19th, 1843, Feisser was dismissed as a minister on the ground that he refused to fulfil a part of his duty and caused disorder and scandal. He stood despised and homeless. His friends forsook him; his parents regarded him as a fool and fanatic, and closed the door against him. However, his wife, to whom he had been married three years, shared heroically all his burdens.

### III. *How he came to be baptised.*

At that time the triumvirate Oncken, Köbner and Lehmann were evangelising in Germany with apostolic fire, in spite of the fierce hostility of the States and the bearers of their religion. For about six months Feisser had ministered to a few friendly people meeting in his humble home, when the news of his dismissal reached the Baptist Church at Hamburg, the mother Church of the Baptist movement in central Europe, at that time still only ten years old. The Church and its pastor, J. G. Oncken, decided to seek first-hand information, and accordingly separated Köbner and another to study the situation. Both brethren arrived at Gasselter-Nyveen on a November evening in 1844 and spent a night at the Feissers' home. Discussions on various topics widened Feisser's horizon. He had never before heard of Baptists, and he became convinced that the only right form of baptism was burial in water and that he himself had not been baptised. This visit of Köbner and his friends sowed seeds of destiny.

In the following spring Feisser made personal acquaintance with Oncken and the Church at Hamburg, and returned in company with Köbner to his native land in order there to take the decisive step. On Sunday evening, May 15th, 1845, a few brethren and sisters walked to a shed near a farmhouse and close to the canal. Seven of them had prepared themselves for

the simple ceremony. Feisser followed K bner into the water, and after him five brethren and one sister. All were buried in baptism, and raised. After this solemn rite, the brethren went to the farmhouse for a few moments of fellowship with God and with one another. K bner read Psalm xcii., the song of the Sabbath day, and broke the bread of life from verses 4 and 5: "For Thou, O Lord, hast made me glad through Thy work; I will triumph in the works of Thy hands. O Lord, how great are Thy works! and Thy thoughts are very deep."

After this meditation the brethren elected a deacon, and elected Feisser as pastor. Both were ordained by K bner. Thus came into being the first Church of baptised believers in Holland. Feisser felt—to use his own words—"as if he had entered through the right gate and not as one who had climbed over the wall." In September of the same year, Feisser's faithful wife was baptised by Oncken during a visit to Gasselter-Nyveen.

#### IV. *How it went further with him.*

Scorn from a self-satisfied Church and from a materialistic community, and poverty, were Feisser's portion. But he bore the shame of the Cross in the spirit of one who had conquered the world. He wrote to a brother upon whom his wife had called a few days before, after a very difficult walk of two hours in old, torn boots and with swollen feet: "Oppressions for Christ's sake enable us to bear this also with patience, for if we had remained in the world we could easily afford a new pair of boots and the means to reach you in a more comfortable way. . . ."

He gathers his few remaining family treasures in order to make a little money of them. It is not hunger this time which lashes him. It is a brother, one of the six baptised, who cannot meet his financial obligations, that constrains his generous soul to sacrifice his treasured possessions. For with what shame would the merciless world cover the little company of believers if that one brother were found wanting! He was nevertheless enabled to keep his belongings, for another brother provided the money that was needed. To this noble forbearance and Christlike charity Feisser added an unquenchable hope. He hoped indeed against hope. He had hoped to reform the Reformed Church. Now he hoped to draw many believers together into a Scriptural Church. This hope saw its day, not near, but weakly glimmering on the distant horizon.

Until the end he remained a worker in hope, who refused to be shamed. Moving are the expressions of hope in all his letters. In 1849 he left Gasselter-Nyveen, where everybody

shunned him, for Nieuwe-Pekela, a town about eight miles further east, in the hope of finding there a more responsive people. Here also the soil proved very stubborn.

Already, soon after his censure by the Dutch Reformed Church, his health gave reason for anxiety as a result chiefly of the emotions in the stormy period. From a course of waters, of which Oncken and an unknown friend in Holland bore the expense, he derived much benefit but not complete restoration. Indeed, he never really recovered. Physical weakness often laid him aside for shorter or longer times and brought him eventually to the grave. On the 2nd June, 1865, when not sixty years old, Dr. Johannes Elias Feisser, once the honoured scholar and admired orator, yielded his spirit to God in hope, leaving nothing but the memory of a life full of devotion to his Master and to the truth, a handful of publications appreciated by but few, and a handful of members of two tiny churches to mourn his death.

In his lifetime he reaped very sparingly, yet he lived and laboured not in vain. To-day there are thirty-five flourishing Baptist churches in Holland breathing his spirit, fulfilling his hope, and perfecting his joy.

J. W. WEENINK.

AMSTERDAM has had at least four churches which worshipped in English. The earliest was of Londoners, who settled about 1596; their most famous ministers were Henry Ainsworth and John Canne; in 1701 they vacated their premises on the Bruinistengang, which may still be seen, and joined the next. From the days of Elizabeth, three regiments of Welsh, English, Scots, were in the service of the Dutch, disbanded only in 1796: their chaplain in 1606 was John Paget from Cheshire, and he was appointed by the Dutch Consistory minister of a new church, in full fellowship with and under the jurisdiction of the Dutch Reformed Synod, worshipping in English; it was granted a building in the Bagynhof, where was the hospital of the three regiments: this church still meets. A third church came from Gainsborough in 1608: it soon re-organized as Baptist, then divided: the larger portion, under John Smyth, remained in what is still known after them as English Alley, but later on adopted Dutch, and at length joined with the Mennonite church on the Singel: a portion under Thomas Helwys came to London in 1612, and existed here till 1898. A fourth church, on Episcopal lines, was founded in the days of William and Mary.