

Baptists in the Netherlands

I. Background and beginnings (1845-1860)

“The Dutch Baptist Movement is a plant of our own soil”. With this statement the Dutch Reformed church historian Dr. G. A. Wumkes begins his book on the rise and establishment of the Baptist movement. His words need further clarification and qualification. In the first place there is no direct connection between the Baptists and the Dutch branch of the Anabaptist movement of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, called after their leader Menno Simons. In the nineteenth century the Mennonites had entered “the century of Modernism”, according to one of their own historians, and there was little left of the zeal of their fathers for a church of believers. Furthermore the Mennonites lived on a higher social and cultural level than the Baptists. In the second place the rise of Baptists was not due to the impact of the so called “Reveil” movement, a revival movement among the well to do and educated, which exercised a profound influence on the spiritual life in the Western provinces. Thirdly there is no material connexion with the Separation of 1834 which led to the establishment of the Reformed churches, the first major separation from the former state church.

The first Baptist church in the Netherlands was the result of a conflict between a Dutch Reformed minister, Dr. Johannes Elias Feisser, and his local presbytery in the village of Gasselternijveen in the province of Drente. Like most churches in that province the church was very liberal and very traditional. Feisser, originally a moderate liberal, had been led to a fuller experience of the life in Christ through personal conversion. He attempted to lead his church in the same direction, but found very little response. A conflict arose when Feisser refused to baptize the child of a church member who did not take the slightest interest in the church and in the faith. This refusal led to Feisser’s suspension and, in the end, removal from his ministry.

In the mean time Feisser’s thoughts on baptism developed and he discovered that the only legitimate New Testament baptism was believers’ baptism. When Julius Köbner came from Hamburg to Gasselternijveen in order to inquire about Feisser and his views (since news about him had reached Germany), he in his turn informed Feisser about the Baptists of whom the latter had never heard, and about their congregational life. This led Feisser to the decision to seek baptism and after consultations with his handful of faithful followers the decision to make a completely new start was made. When Köbner returned to Gasselternijveen in the spring of 1845 seven people were baptized on 15th May. Among the seven were Feisser and Roelof Reiling and his wife (the present writer’s great-grandparents). The first Baptist church in the Netherlands had come into being. Soon the church moved to the neighbouring village of Stadskanaal in the

province of Groningen. For many decades this church has been one of the most vital centres of Baptist life in the North Eastern part of the Netherlands. Today there are four churches in the area.

The second place where a Baptist church came into being was the small town of Zutphen on the border of the river IJssel in the province of Gelderland. A Mennonite minister, Jan de Liefde, turned away from the Socinianism then prevailing in the Mennonite community, to a living and personal faith in Christ who had died for his sins. When he started to preach this newly discovered gospel to his congregation a severe conflict arose. Contacts with Feisser and Köbner brought him to the verge of rejecting the baptism by sprinkling which he had received at the age of twenty in the Mennonite church, and accepting baptism by immersion. But when De Liefde did not succeed in winning the others for his millennialist views, he declined to be baptized. In the summer of 1845, however, when De Liefde was away for reasons of health, some of his close friends in Zutphen took the step and were baptized on 24th June 1845. When De Liefde returned, he did not join the new church and soon left Zutphen. The young church went through difficult vicissitudes and after a number of years disappeared altogether.

The third Baptist church was formed in the capital Amsterdam. Around 1840 a small group of friends began to meet regularly in order to read and study the Bible. Soon they touched upon the subject of baptism and discovered that believers' baptism was the only biblical way of administering and accepting baptism. When in May 1845 Köbner and Feisser visited them (after their visit to Zutphen), four members of the group were baptized and two years later a Baptist church was established. In 1849 none other than De Liefde joined them and was baptized. After a short time, however, he left the church when he started to preach in places outside Amsterdam and to advocate admission into church membership without baptism. The small Baptist church continued to exist, but did not attract the attention of the public and for several years was torn apart by controversy over the teachings of Darby. In 1866 it received royal recognition and counted this year as the year of its official beginning.

The story of the first three Baptist churches in the Netherlands is in many ways typical. It is characterized by a rediscovery of the meaning of the gospel of salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, of the necessity of personal appropriation of that salvation, regenerate church membership and church life, and believers' baptism, in that order. Baptism always comes last, however much it signifies separation from other churches. Secondly, the Baptist churches rise in a period when many Protestants are deeply dissatisfied with the preaching in the churches of their day and are attracted by revival movements within the country or introduced from without. In the third place it is due to the German Baptists and to Julius Köbner particularly that the step to undergo baptism and to form a Baptist church is taken.

II. Growth and union (1860-1914)

The sixties brought new impulses to the Baptist movement in the Netherlands. In 1865 Peter Johannes de Neui left Germany and settled in the small town of Franeker in the province of Friesland. He was a zealous evangelist who attracted many people, not only in Franeker but in various places in the province, and this led to the founding of several Baptist churches. De Neui was a Calvinist at heart and the churches which owed their beginning to his evangelistic endeavours showed the marks of Calvinism, to the extent that some of them declined membership of the Union in 1881.

In many respects H. Z. Kloekers and De Neui were at opposite poles. Kloekers had served as a missionary in China where he met Baptist missionaries. In 1858 at the age of thirty he was baptized by one of them and joined the Baptist Missionary Society. When he returned to his native country he came into contact with the Dutch Baptists of whose existence he had been unaware. In 1866 he accepted a call from Stadskanaal and became the minister of the oldest Baptist church. From Stadskanaal Kloekers, faithful to his missionary call, started or promoted evangelistic work in the region. From this work three new churches resulted. He also came into contact with a few scattered Baptists in the city of Groningen and encouraged them to found a Baptist church. The church was established in 1880, six months before the Union of Baptist Churches came into being.

Already in the late sixties and throughout the seventies several attempts were made to bring the scattered churches together but without lasting success. When in 1880 and 1881 a new attempt was made Kloekers was one of the leading personalities. This time the attempt was successful and seven churches became charter members of the new Union. Franeker and Amsterdam did not join the Union, probably because the Calvinistic spirit which prevailed in their constituencies was an obstacle to entry into fellowship with the more Arminian spirit represented by Kloekers (who became the first president of the Union) and the churches which followed him. After ten years Amsterdam applied for membership of the Union but Franeker never did. One of the most far-reaching results of the founding of the Union was the decision to publish a paper, *De Christen* (The Christian). The first issue appeared on 15th January 1882. Kloekers was one of the editors. This paper, which still exists under the same name, proved to be an important instrument in forging a sense of identity and fellowship among the Dutch Baptists. Yet it occasioned the one really serious doctrinal controversy which the Dutch Baptists had to go through. In 1884 Kloekers wrote an article on Romans 3:25 which he interpreted as a challenge to follow the example set forth by Christ in his suffering. His co-editor J. Horn who happened to live near the printer blocked its publication and the ensuing conflict between the two editors was brought before a special assembly of the Union in November 1884. Opinion was strongly divided, and in the end Kloekers resigned as president of the Union and two churches left the Union.

The majority of the churches followed Horn who represented the orthodox view. The two churches returned into the fellowship of the Union in the eighteen nineties.

The remaining years of the century and the first decade of the next were a period of steady growth. In some places, however, the growth was almost spectacular due to the influence of revivals in Great Britain which swept over to the Netherlands, particularly in the early years of the twentieth century. Around the turn of the century the membership of the churches in the Union was about one thousand, ten years later it was close to 1400 and at the beginning of World War I it was 1700 members in twenty-one churches.

III. Two wars and between (1914-1946)

World War I did not affect Baptist life beyond the average. The country remained neutral and, apart from shortage of food and fuel, distribution and mobilisation, no disaster happened. Baptists did not participate actively in social and political life but concentrated on church growth and evangelism. Membership rose from 1700 in 1914 to 2100 in 1918, the number of churches from 21 to 24. The post-war years witnessed the strongest growth of Baptist history. This was in part due to migration from the Baptist strongholds in the North to other parts of the country, which led to the founding of new fast growing churches, in part also to continued evangelistic work. From 1918 to 1932 membership increased to over 4000, i.e. 91 per cent! The number of churches climbed from 24 to 31.

The twenties and thirties of this century were also a period of organic growth. It was the period in which Jan Willem Weenink, Jan Louw and Koop Reiling were the leading personalities. Weenink, originally trained for a business career, studied at Spurgeon's College and became minister of the church of Stadskanaal in 1911. He stayed there for thirty-six years. He was a great preacher and no less an entrepreneur in church life. He started and built the Baptist Young People's Movement. He took the initiative in establishing a Baptist Ministers' Fellowship in 1923 and was for many years its inspiring leader. He was one of the pioneers of the Deaconesses' House in Scheveningen and of the Union's Building Foundation. He promoted the new hymn book in 1940. Under his chairmanship the Union's Assembly accepted a proposal to explore the possibilities of establishing a national theological seminary in 1945. Though the first attempt to begin a seminary turned out to be abortive, the seed which Weenink had sown bore fruit in 1958 when the present seminary at "De Vinkenhof" opened its doors. Compared to Weenink, Louw was much less spectacular, yet his influence on Baptist thought and life was profound. He was a born teacher. For many years he taught the Dutch Baptists through *De Christen* of which he was an editor. Had the seminary been founded twenty-five years earlier Louw would have been its natural principal. Besides his teaching gifts he was a wise administrator and for many three-year periods chairman of the

Union's Council. Koop Reiling was a different man altogether. He was a little man, hardly noticed between the two tall men with their prominent gifts. Reiling was in the first place a shepherd, not only of individuals but of the church as a whole and not less of the fellowship of churches. If Weenink won admiration and Louw adherence, Reiling gained trust. During the thirties and the forties Reiling and Louw almost alternated as chairman of the Union.

The service of these three men, different though they were, was a blessing for the Dutch Baptists. The time of their leadership was a time of both inner and outward growth. The former cannot be measured in statistics, the latter shows an increase in membership from 2,172 in 1920 to 3,692 in 1930 then to 5,231 in 1940. The number of churches rose from 23 in 1920 to 36 in 1940.

The Second World War did not leave the Netherlands untouched. Soon after the occupation the Dutch Baptists came to experience what it means to live under oppression. Several ministers were arrested, some even deported. Yet on the whole they did not suffer severe losses. Only one church building was destroyed in 1945. Spiritually, however, the years of the war were tremendously important because many barriers between the Baptists (usually considered a sect) and the historic churches were overcome. This paved the way for an emancipation of the hitherto isolated Baptists.

IV. Expansion and growth (1946-1978)

When the nightmare of World War II was over the Dutch Baptists soon found the way to recovery. About one third of the churches lacked a minister but in the first years after the war a steady stream of new ministers came to the churches, most of them students of the universities of Utrecht and Groningen. Ten years after the war membership was near 7,000, an increase of a thousand, and the churches numbered 51 (compared with 39 in 1945). After another decade membership had risen to 9,100 and the number of churches to 64. Today total membership is 11,600 and the number of churches is 79. The post-war years show a picture of continuous growth. In thirty-three years membership has been doubled, an annual increase of three per cent. In those years there has been only one year which showed a (slight) decline in membership.

There is no satisfactory explanation for this steady growth. In the first decade after the war a new wave of migrations contributed greatly to the spread of the Baptist witness. But growth continued long after this wave had lost its momentum. It is true that in the last ten years several members of the older denominations came over to join the Baptist ranks because in their own church they did not find the response and the nurture they were eager to receive. For Christian people convinced of the truth of a believers' church and believers' baptism, the Baptist church is the most appealing fellowship to be part of. But this is at best part of the explanation. Perhaps a more important factor is the strength and vitality of youth work in most

of the churches. There are no reliable statistics as to the provenance of the baptismal candidates but it is certain that a considerable part comes from the families of the churches.

The post war period was also a period of strengthened cooperative activities. The reorganization of the Union in 1952-53 made the commissions on evangelism, foreign mission and ministerial education directly responsible to the General Assembly and this contributed greatly to the expansion of their work. The commission on evangelism had previously concentrated on giving financial assistance to developing churches but in recent years the emphasis shifted to helping all churches in local and regional programmes of evangelism and to the training of evangelistic lay workers. A part-time evangelism consultant was appointed in 1975. Since 1st January 1979, he has been in full time service.

The commission on ministerial education participated in a large project to set up a national Baptist centre which would also house a seminary. In September 1957 the centre was opened at "De Vinken-*hof*" near Utrecht, and a year later the seminary began its first session. Of all the programmes of the centre the seminary was the most successful. Some twenty ministers, nearly forty per cent of the whole body, are Vinken-*hof*-trained men. Started as a full curriculum seminary the school sought cooperation with the Theological Faculty of the University of Utrecht in the early seventies. It has one part-time teacher (the principal who is also professor in the Theological Faculty) and one full-time teacher (the vice-principal). Its enrolment rose from ten in 1960 to twenty-eight in 1978.

Foreign mission work had not been neglected in the years before the war. There was one woman missionary who worked with the B.M.S. in former Belgian Congo. After the war more missionaries were sent to that country but the turmoil following the independence put an end to this. A new area was found in Cameroun, now within the framework of the European Baptist Mission. Recently participation in the work in Sierra Leone has been effected.

The thirty-three years since the end of the war have been on the whole a peaceful time. The only serious controversy that occurred was over participation in the ecumenical movement. In 1945 the Union joined the Ecumenical Council of Churches in the Netherlands and in 1948 the World Council of Churches. In the early sixties, however, a growing number became dissatisfied with both memberships because of the alleged modernism of leading personalities in the W.C.C. When a few churches threatened to leave the Union if membership was maintained, the General Assembly of 1963 voted to discontinue its connexions with the W.C.C. and the E.C.C. Only the participation in the Ecumenical Relief Service was continued. In 1968 the Ecumenical Council was replaced by a new body, the Dutch Council of Churches. The aim was to make conditions for membership such that the Roman Catholic Church Province and the Reformed Churches could enter. To many friends of the ecumenical movement this suggested that the

Baptist Union could also join the council, since it did not require mutual recognition of its members as churches of Christ. But when it was suggested unofficially that membership implied that no member church would do on its own what could be done by two or more churches together, the Baptists shrank back. Though the matter was discussed several times in the General Assembly no decision was made and the subject was dropped in the early seventies.

The story of the Dutch Baptists is a story of courageous witness, expansion, growth, emancipation and isolation.

JANNES REILING.

The Baptist Witness in Eastern Europe

IN his recent book *Turning East*, Baptist theologian Harvey Cox directed our eyes to the Eastern religions of Asia. Baptists throughout the world need "to turn East", not to Asia but to Eastern Europe, for it is there that we can again grasp our roots and the dynamic concept of the believers' church.

Two-thirds of the 1,177,362 Baptists in Europe live and work in the socialist countries of Eastern Europe. If there is significant church growth among European Baptists it is to be found in Eastern Europe, particularly in Romania and the USSR. Baptists there as in Europe generally, are a minority movement, having suffered in the past from the large state churches, Lutheran, Reformed, Roman Catholic, or Orthodox. In order to understand the present situation, a consideration of the past church-state relationship is necessary.

The Old Situation

Before World War II and before the Socialist governments came to power, most of the countries in Eastern Europe had systems which tied church and state very closely to one another. In fact, sometimes church leaders were prime ministers! Because the churches were so closely aligned with the state there was usually a monopoly in religion. Thus Romanians were naturally considered to be Orthodox, Poles were Catholics, Germans were Lutherans, etc. This, of course, was and is true throughout Europe. For the Free Churches, and particularly for Baptists, it meant a singular lack of religious freedom. Baptists were persecuted in the nineteenth century in Hungary, for example, not only by the Catholics, but also by the Reformed and Lutherans. Or again, in 1935 the Baptist World Alliance had to protest to the Romanian