

Part 3: The Reformation Church (1500-1600)

Week 10: The Reformation in the Netherlands

The Interplay of Church and State

Lutheranism was supported by political leaders in all the places where it spread.

In England, the monarchy took the leadership early in the Reformation.

In France, the monarchy opposed the Reformation, and largely halted its spread.

In Scotland, the monarchy opposed Reformation for a time but was overtaken by it.

In the Netherlands there was a prolonged confrontation between the government and the Reformation.

Formation of the Dutch Republic

Early in the 16th century, the Netherlands were made up of 17 provinces, including what we know today as Holland, parts of northern France, and Belgium. They were not united in language as French was spoken in the south, Dutch in the center, and "Friese" (English + Dutch) in the north. They were different economically as in the north and east it was an agricultural society; in the center it was more commercialized and had textile trade.

These provinces had passed into the hands of Charles V, Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire; but he didn't exercise his authority as much in them and so they continued as quasi-independent countries. He didn't rule them as one political unit, but rather as the Count of each. Eventually each passed into the hands of the Hapsburgs.

The institution that unified them was the States General (parliament)

Charles V was a popular sovereign in the low countries; regarded as "one of them" even though he introduced persecution of Protestants. Protestantism was principally Anabaptist in this area early on. In 1555, Charles abdicated rather than make peace in Germany so Philip II of Spain and Ferdinand split the Holy Roman Empire. Philip took the Netherlands. He was a devout Roman Catholic. He didn't understand the Netherlands and spoke Spanish, not Dutch. He increased taxation, which the Dutch hated! Philip didn't care about local customs and traditions, alienating the local nobility. He was determined to suppress Protestantism, increased level of persecution and tried to introduce ecclesiastical reform in Roman Catholic churches. Wanted to increase the number of bishops giving them more contact with their people. Before these reforms, there were few bishops in Netherlands. Bishops had been founded in early Middle Ages; hadn't kept up with population changes and growth. But these bishops had become wealthy because there were so few of them. Nobility were used to their younger sons moving into the bishoprics, with accompanying wealth and prestige. Wealth and prestige declined with the increase in bishops. Nobility considered this an assault on their way of life. Philip perceived as a foreign oppressor.

In 1566, there was a wave of iconoclasm appearing throughout the Netherlands. Breaking into churches smashing statues, plus a few priests. This was alarming to Philip, who saw society tottering on the brink of chaos (medieval way of thinking). To suppress the uprising and halt the spread of heresy, Philip sent the Duke of Alva in 1567 (the "Iron Duke" who presided over the "Council of Blood") to take charge of things. He was also Spanish, so the people viewed his coming as another act of foreign oppression.

In 1572 (date of revolt against Spain), action taken by nobility to oppose the presence of Philip's troops. This begins the Eighty Years War. Long, difficult struggle (until about 1648, almost 80 years). Leader of the revolt: William of Orange. Curious leader. House of Orange still rules in Netherlands. William was of German blood, son of House of Nassau. Inherited significant holdings in the Netherlands. He was Prince of Orange, thus his title. Most

important nobleman in Netherlands. The principedom of Orange was in the middle of France! William had unusual combination of qualities that make him a hero appreciated by moderns, but mystifying to his own age; smart and clever, shrewd and insightful. Also known as William the Silent; kept quiet in France about a plot to kill Protestants, and later able to help them. Religiously devout, identified with Reformed cause. But William was smart, pious, and tolerant; religious toleration was very rare at this time, tending to infuriate the Calvinist ministers who thought he was far too tolerant. How can you be genuinely religious and tolerant? Some were "politique," tolerant because they didn't care about religion. William was probably genuinely religious, but in a rather modern way saw that toleration was needed for peace.

William's strategy in the revolt: Only way revolt would succeed was to keep nobility and the people united, which they couldn't do on a religious basis. Thus the revolt needed to be a political movement, not a religious movement, to uphold ancient privileges. William sensed that the Netherlands experience was similar to the French--another European effort at decentralization against the advancing forces of centralization (a great issue in Europe).

The Dutch were undertaking an almost impossible effort. Spain was clearly the most powerful country in Europe--richest, most centralized, steady influx of gold. Struggle against Spain was almost certainly doomed. Allies were needed for success:

1. William looked for them, turning first to German princes. Germans agreed to help if they'd subscribe to Augsburg Confession, but this didn't work out.
2. Next he turned to the French, particularly Admiral Coligny, who appealed to Emperor Charles IX, who wanted to see the Spanish embarrassed. Coligny was permitted to raise an army, but they had attend a wedding in Paris in 1572; slaughtered in St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. So there was no help for France.
3. Only one place left to turn: England and Queen Elizabeth. Elizabeth was smart enough to see that the Dutch could never beat Spain. She didn't want the Spanish wrath upon her...but if she could tie Philip up fighting the Dutch, the less he'd think about fighting England. Elizabeth was also cheap and didn't want to spend much money. Primarily an ally as a cheerleader! She occasionally sent a little money and a few troops.

Christians could not revolt against duly constituted monarchy (that would violate Romans 13), so Middle Age revolts were always against the monarch's evil advisors. The revolt was not against Philip, but his evil advisors, supposedly. The revolting Dutch people looked around for a sovereign. William didn't want that position. Elizabeth wasn't interested either, but she had gotten engaged to an English duke. So the Dutch thought maybe he'd be a good choice. But Elizabeth regularly broke engagements, including this one, so they eventually forgot about this guy.

The Netherlands became a republic by default, failing to find a sovereign. Governed by the States General; became known as United Provinces. By 1579, it was clear that Philip intended to split the revolt in half geographically--then he could divide the rebellion and face half at a time. He had gained control of southern half by 1579 (Belgium). So the 7 northern provinces organized a closer defense alliance, the Union of Utrecht, the basic constitution on which they would govern themselves.

In 1584, William was assassinated. Philip had promised wealth to anyone who would become his assassin. Major constitutional crisis in leadership of the movement. In practical terms, a new leader was needed (besides the States General):

1. Jan van Oldenbarneveldt was the one! He possessed the minor office of Advocate of Holland (like Attorney General). Emerged as the main executive of the Dutch state.

2. One other leading figure emerged, William's son, Maurice (pronounced "Maurits"). He became very popular; very effective general. Challenged Spain in the ongoing war. His office was that of stadhouder, an office like "viceroy" of the monarch (rules in monarch's absence). But what is that role when there isn't a king? This was an honorary office with no clearly defined constitutional power.

A couple of strange leaders! No foundation for the influence they're wielding. Ideal situation for lots of problem. The external threat kept internal situation united. But about 1600, their interests began to diverge. Oldenbarneveldt wanted peace with Spain, even if it meant splitting low countries in two. Maurice led the "war party" to liberate the south; greatest support received from Reformed, who saw that area in bondage to Roman Catholicism. Increasing internal division between the two leaders. Neither had clear constitutional power.

Formation of the Dutch Church

Earliest presence of Reformation was Lutheranism. Two martyrs in 1523, monks who had read Luther. Lutheranism dominated in 1520's but never became a popular movement, always small and intellectual. First popular expression of Protestantism was Anabaptists in 1530's, most prominently Menno Simmons, father of Mennonite movement. Not until 1540's did Calvinism spread and become a popular movement. Took root in south (Belgium), probably for linguistic reasons; French was spoken there. Calvinism grew fastest and spread widest in southern provinces; only reached the north in 1560's. Calvinism ultimately suppressed in the south; many fled to the north as refugees.

Growth of Dutch Reformed churches was similar to the French, because they experienced persecution. Difficult to achieve much discipline. Hard to know to what extent the Dutch church was Calvinist rather than a broader evangelicism, Erasmian or humanist.

Many catechisms were written by local preachers, but ultimately the Heidelberg Catechism was dominant. Main confessional standard was in 1561, the Belgic Confession, written by southern pastor Guido de Brès was became a martyr. Distinguished Reformed from both Anabaptist and Roman Catholicism.

First national synod in 1571, just prior to outbreak of revolt. It was held outside Netherlands, in the German city of Wesel in a convent. Decision made there to endorse the Catechism and Confession. Third national synod in 1581 reiterated that decision. Some ministers clearly didn't live up to those doctrines, however. Difficulty struggles over disciplinary authority resulted. Significant internal disagreement:

1. Part of church was Erastian (Thomas Erastus) in government, where the state is ultimately in charge of discipline and the church is a department of the state. A minority group supported this position.

2. Majority wanted church independence, on the Genevan model. All society obligated to Word of God, but under that Word the church has certain direct responsibilities--so does the state. In some areas, the state should take its cue from the church concerning its responsibilities. In other areas, the church takes its cue from the state. Not a radical church-state separation as in America today. Each institution has a legitimate range of operation for which it isn't entirely dependent on the other. It's a church-state cooperation. Primarily medieval vision of society, but greater independence of church from state.

As the state became Protestant, the Reformed church position was ambiguous. Any nationwide decision on any important matter had to be made by unanimous vote of the States General. What about the calling of a national synod? On what basis could such a synod be called? Ecclesiastical organization of Dutch Reformed churches had taken skeleton form prior to Utrecht. On the local scene:

1. The churches were governed by a consistory (ministers, elders, deacons).
2. Local churches organized into regional bodies called a classis (plural, classes).
3. A classis was organized into a provincial synod corresponding to a province (except in Holland, where there were two).
4. Then there was a national synod. Erastians argued that since the national synod could only be held with permission of States General, when unanimous vote occurred.

Polarization occurred:

1. Merchants in Holland wanted peace with Spain, tame and controlled church. Erastian approach to discipline. Wanted infrequent synods. Merchants were challenged about trading with the enemy during war--but that trade provided money for the war!
2. But the "war party" (made up of Calvinists) thought there should never be peace with Spain until there was total liberation.

External Spanish threat held the two together for awhile. Tensions rose dramatically in 1604, when England made peace with Spain. The Dutch were forced to an even more intense debate about their own relationship with Spain. By 1609, the Dutch worked out the Twelve Years Truce, with Spain and Netherlands agreeing to stop the war for 12 years, seeing how they might end the war. The external pressure was removed, so the internal pressures welled up with a vengeance. Focal point of the tensions became a theologian, Jacobus Arminius (who died in 1609--beginning of peace).

The Calvinists openly challenge the authorities: an account of the sermon preached at Boeschepe, Flanders, 12 July 1562

<http://dutchrevolt.leidenuniv.nl/English/default.htm>

Explanatory Comment: In the early 1560s the Calvinists in the Southern Netherlands, and especially in the Westkwartier of Flanders and in the towns of Valenciennes and Tournai grew bolder. Where previously their services had taken place in secret, either in private houses or in the remote countryside, the Calvinist radicals now felt strong enough to challenge the Roman church openly. Since the sermon was planned to coincide with the celebration of the mass and held in the churchyard onlookers can have been in no doubt as to the intentions of the Calvinists. The preaching at Boeschepe about which the inquisitor Pieter Titelmans wrote to the Regent in the summer of 1562 had been carefully orchestrated by Calvinist refugees back in England. The lay preacher and several assistants travelled from England for this purpose and distributed notices in the Flemish towns designed to attract the attention of the curious to what may be counted as the first 'hedge service' in the Low Countries. Predictably the authorities responded to this provocative act by unleashing a fierce persecution.

Text:

Pieter Titelmans, Inquisitor, to Margaret of Parma.
Kortrijk, 17 July 1562

Madame,

As it was Monday I went to Ieper to deal with some business for our most reverend father in God, the bishop of the same, and having heard a rumour about some disorder and scandal, which had taken place in the village of Boeschepe, near Steenvoorde, I went there on Tuesday to discover the truth for myself. From my investigation I learned that on the previous Sunday, at the time of high mass, a certain uneducated layman, who comes from the place, called Gheleyn Damman, had climbed up to a particular spot in the churchyard of the same which was quite suitable for preaching. He had delivered a sermon attacking our holy mother, the Church, the authority of our holy father, the Pope, the holy sacrifice of the mass, the sacrament of the altar and other articles and mysteries of our holy Catholic faith causing great disquiet and scandal to good people and insulting Our Lord Jesus Christ and His Church. This went on for an hour or more. At the sermon there were according to the estimates of those who saw it between 150 and 200 people from nearby places and elsewhere. Some of these carried rusty rapiers and staves, and others pistols to protect and defend their preacher. It was also reported that there were others in the surrounding hills in attendance to give help if this were needed, but we have not been able to establish the truth of this, for we had to return quickly the same day to the aforesaid Ieper.

Some years ago the said preacher Damman was apprehended and did public penance in his shirt in the aforesaid place for his heretical beliefs. He is the brother of Willem Damman, who was recently delivered by force from the bishop's prison in Ieper by some of his followers.

Although I have notified my lords in the Council of Flanders of the above, it nevertheless seemed good and necessary for me to acquit myself by advising Your Highness to provide a remedy. For it is very necessary and more than time that everybody according to his rank shows his concern, as we find daily more and more, although for our part we do not have the means to do as much as we wish.

As for the ordinary forces of law and order, Your Highness will find that every remedy which has been taken until the present is inadequate, given our experience of the situation in the open country and villages and the great extent to which the poor, simple people have been misled by those who go to and fro daily to England and elsewhere; likewise, the Anabaptists, among whom those of Armentières play a part.

Madame, I pray God, Our Creator and Redeemer, to keep Your Highness in prosperity and to grant her always good counsel for the salvation of your good subjects and His Church.
From Kortrijk, 17 July 1562.

Source and Literature: *Troubles religieux du XVI^e siècle dans la Flandre maritime, 1560-1570*, ed. E. de Coussemaker, II (Bruges, 1876) 61-62. M. Backhouse, "The Official Start of Armed Resistance in the Low Countries: Boeschepe, 12 July 1562", *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 71 (1980) 198-226.

Services at Ghendt, June and July 1566

<http://dutchrevolt.leidenuniv.nl/English/default.htm>

Explanatory Comment: The patrician Marcus van Vaernewijck (1518-69) belonged to the intellectual and political elite of Ghent. His strong antiquarian interests prompted him to record, for posterity's sake, the sensational events then occurring in Flanders. He was a loyal, if moderate, Catholic. His political stance was in conformity with his motto 'Leave off Jealousy' and he painted a grim picture of life in Ghent under the Spanish garrison. His curiosity, insight and eye for telling detail make his journal especially memorable. Though van Vaernewijck had no sympathy for the Calvinist cause and disparaged the sermons, he recognized the failings of the Catholic clergy and acknowledged the fervour of their Calvinist opponents. As a result his journal is remarkably dispassionate and historians regard his journal as thoroughly reliable, for he was an eye-witness of much that he reported, whilst he showed a healthy critical sense with regard to some of the wilder stories that then circulated.

Text:

[Sunday 30 June 1566] ... then someone preached, dressed like the other [preacher] in lay attire, with an ermine-trimmed gown and a fine felt hat. [He was] short of stature and aged about thirty, and seemed, to judge from his speech, to hail from Kortrijk. Close to the chapel outside St. Lievenspoort, [he preached] bare-headed and with great modesty, on a small hill surrounded by copses and plantations. He sat on some hoods and cloaks, lent him by those who had come to listen, and he had in front of him a book, from which he read from time to time, before closing it again and continuing with his sermon. Before he preached, he knelt folding his hands together very devoutly. To avoid being arrested or surprised, he was led into the enclosure in a group of six people in such a way that no one knew who out of the six was the preacher until he made ready to speak. He expounded the gospel of the day, reproved sins and prayed for the magistrates, the King and the Pope that God might enlighten their minds so that the Word of God (as they called their doctrine) might go forward peacefully. He had promised to preach at three o'clock in the afternoon, but he began at two o'clock.

Those present sat in three separate, closely-packed small companies made up of men, women and young girls; each of these had about as many members as the preacher had years. Each company had its teacher and the members had small books in their hands and from time to time sang the psalms; you could buy books there in which the psalms were printed in metrical form for a stiver. Many onlookers stood around; they had come to see what was going on there because it was for everyone a strange, unheard of event, especially for those who lived in Flanders. I was told this by my washerwoman with whom I strongly remonstrated. I said to her that we were threatened by a great evil and danger, if it were not quickly stopped, but, like many simple folk, she thought it was quite innocent and even edifying....

On Sunday 7 July [1566] they preached again, in defiance of the authorities, at Stallendriesche1 at high noon. Thousands of people attended from the town and from the surrounding countryside, including many of the common people, who were not very well versed in the holy scriptures and the church fathers. They [the Calvinists] gave these the impression that now for the first time the truth had been revealed and the gospel preached

aright because the preachers especially cited the scriptures most valiantly and stoutly. They let the people check each passage in their Testaments to see whether or not they preached faithfully, [for they said that] the New Testament contained the Word which the Lord had commanded all men to proclaim; not the human inventions and institutions, with which the papists (as they call them) had busied themselves; having raised these above God's Word or allowed these to obscure God's Word, it could not advance as it should and must [instead] be bent and give ground in order to accommodate human invention and contrivance; that it was much more proper that human laws should yield and make way for the sacred and blessed Word of God, for this, not rosaries, pilgrimages, voyages, and many suchlike superstitions, will prevail at the Last Judgement; that we are also under a far greater obligation (as the Apostles tell us) to obey the Word of God than men or magistrates, even though we are forbidden to hear this on pain of death, for the Lord says that we should not be afraid of those who would take the body captive, but only those who would cast the body and the soul into the everlasting fires of Hell; and that He shall be ashamed to confess before His heavenly Father and the angels of God those who are ashamed to confess Him in this world; that also Christ (who cannot lie) has prophesied that those who preach and hear His Word in its naked purity shall be oppressed and persecuted for as long as the world exists.

With these and other similar arguments they struck such a marvellous chord in the hearts of good and uneducated people that many of them declared that they were ready to forfeit both their property and their lives for the Word of God and Christ's name. This sprang, alas, more from a naive fervour than from any judicious circumspection, for if they had heeded and properly understood the counter arguments, they would have come to the opposite conclusion. Not everything that claims to be the Word of God is in fact the Word of God. You must search out what has been the judgement of the Holy Spirit of God, which lies hidden under the letter of God's Word. It was not without good cause that St. Paul said that the letter kills but the Spirit brings life.

Source: Marcus van Vaernewijck, *Van die beroerlicke tijden in de Nederlanden en voornamelijk in Ghendt 1566-1568* I, ed. F. Vanderhaeghen (Gent, 1872) 2-3; 13-14.

1 Stallendries or Vroonstallendries was situated at the centre of the former village of Wondelgem, near Ghent.