

The spirituality of Hendrik de Cock (1801-1842)

Introduction

In the 19th century the Netherlands Reformed Church was confronted with two secessions. The first one started with a pastor at Ulrum in the province Groningen. His name is Hendrick de Cock (1801-1842), an initially liberal-minded minister who converted to an orthodox pietism in which the Canons of Dort played an important role.¹ Soon he was the leader of a movement of churches in the north of the country turning against the degradation of the Calvinist character of the church, the enlightened hymnal *Evangelische gezangen* - which in his opinion had too much about virtue and too little about sin-, and the administrative organization of 1816. These objections already existed previously, but De Cock was the catalyst for the confrontation with the ecclesiastical authorities. When he was suspended and dismissed because of his protests, he turned with almost all his congregation against the Netherlands Reformed Church and in 1834 declared in a Act of Separation or Return (*Wederkeering*) a break with the Church, 'until it returns to the true service of the Lord'. This action brought him even in prison. The second secessionist movement was that of Abraham Kuyper, who in 1886 left the Netherlands Reformed Church also in complaint of the liberal theology in that church. Both secessionist denominations merged in 1892. Not only has Kuyper become more wellknown and because of his works for more influential than De Cock, also these two differ in spirituality. Kuyper was more focussed on sanctification, De Cock more in justification. Kuyper was more a scholastic theologian, De Cock more puritan and pietistic. De Cock's spirituality therefore is very interesting for the church today as it combines doctrine and life, head and heart in a very inspiring and relevant way.

To get a glimpse of De Cock-s spirituality, here is a quote from a letter to his wife.

Beloved housewife in the Lord Jesus Christ, with and in me called to suffer for His name and cause; grace and peace are multiplied as you are as I am, so that we may be comforted by Him, whose property to be is the true comfort in living and dying!

It is now 9 hours, Beloved, now that I may take the pen to make known to you my condition, in which by the Lord's grace I may still be very comforted, tidied up and rejoiced, rejoiced that I was deemed worthy to suffer for the sake of the Lord's name and cause, assured that the Lord Jesus will make the King His Church and Church cooperate for the good of us as well as for His Church and Church, yes, assured that the Lord will not leave what His hand began and that He, the Source of Life, wants to send assistance...'

In the opening and beginning of this letter, which De Cock writes to his wife from the prison in Groningen, his spirituality is in fact contained in a nutshell. Below, however, the elements of this spirituality will be presented in a more detailed and somewhat orderly manner, in which, incidentally, no other matters will be found than those contained in the letter. His spirituality is interwoven with his own course of life and with the time in which he lived. The biographical dimension of this spirituality, the salvific interpretation, the confessional framework, the ecclesiological orientation and finally the practical elaboration are now discussed.

¹ For more information on De Cock and the Secession of 1834 see:

Biographical Dimension

De Cock's spirituality is impossible to understand without involving his life path. Quite immediately after his confirmation as minister of Ulrum in 1829, De Cock became acquainted with the spirituality of the so-called 'old writers', pastoral literature from the seventeenth-century movement of the *Nadere Reformatie* (*Further Reformation*). This acquaintance mainly takes place through the personal library of one of De Cock's elders, namely J.J. Beukema, and is reinforced by the conversations with precisely those members in the congregation who spiritually nourish themselves with these writers and who are regarded in a negative sense as 'pious', 'fine' or even 'bigots'. According to the biography of De Cock's son, Helenius, De Cock was still unfamiliar with the way in which faith was spoken about in these circles. However, De Cock must not have been completely unknown because he also came into contact with it in his youth in the little town of Wildervank. His studies and his first two places of residence, Eppenhuizen and Noordlaren, had then led him to focus more on current theology than on that of the seventeenth century.

Decisive in this new process is the contact with Klaas Pieters Kuipenga, an elder member of the congregation who, like so many church members in the northern provinces at the time, only came to make public confessions of faith at a later age. The background of this practice lies in the vision on the order of salvation as it came into being in the later phase of the *Nadere Reformatie*. It is the conviction that a conscious, if possible clearly dated conversion has to take place, which is preceded by a preparatory period of the experience of sin and guilt. This vision caused fierce struggles of faith and doubt on the part of many people and therefore were obstacles with respect to taking part in the Lord's Supper. De Cock's personal catechesis and the conversations with Kuipenga in that context caused him to reconsider his own state of faith. This reconsideration was accompanied by the insistence of his wife - who was already a bit more at home in this world of faith - to emphasize the necessity of conversion and rebirth in his preaching. Furthermore it is the writings of C. Baron van Zuylen van Nijvelt which stimulate De Cock in this process, as will be further indicated below.

In this process of personal change De Cock starts studying the confessions, like Belgic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism and Canons of Dordt, which were hitherto unknown to him, and into the Institution of Calvin, which he got to know in the abridged edition of Launeus and then published again. He is particularly impressed by the Reformation's doctrine of grace and with the doctrine of election and rejection. What this discovery contains is still best characterized by the much quoted word of Kuipenga 'if I had to contribute even one sigh to my salvation, I would be lost forever'. That Helenius, De Cock's son, passed this on many years later as a quote from Kuipenga, can only be because Hendrik de Cock will have quoted this statement - and possibly more than once - because he appears to have been affected by it.

Not only does reading the confessions and Calvin's Institutes lead De Cock to see the deplorable situation of church and theology in the Netherlands, but even more so it leads him to preach differently and to stand in a different way in life. For De Cock it means that the church has to go back to the old reformed doctrine and for the church members this means that they have to live in the awareness that heaven or hell awaits them after this life. This discovery has consequences for his spirituality. This reorientation towards the doctrine of the confessional writings and how these were experienced in the tradition of the seventeenth century, has become

decisive for the way in which De Cock experiences his faith and shapes it in his ecclesiastical action.

The confessional framework

With the rediscovery of the reformed confessions and especially of the Canons of Dordt, De Cock's spirituality is placed in a confessional framework. Not only does he provide new editions of the Canons and of the Kort Begrip (Brief Understanding), the simple summary of the Heidelberg Catechism, but his own work is also full of references to the three confessions adopted by the Dutch churches.

Within this confessional framework the doctrine of election and rejection receives proportionately the most attention. But, not only the doctrine of election but also the doctrine of God's providence is central for De Cock. Although providence and election are closely related, they must also be distinguished here. De Cock not only speaks a lot about God's providential action, it is also clear from his writings how he sees and experiences God's guidance in his own life. De Cock's opponents attack him on the point of the election, and so he is forced to answer the question: 'Why do we still have to believe as much as we did in 1618/19? For De Cock the case is clear: if the churches then confirmed that the Canons are based on God's Word, they still apply today.

De Cock does make a clear distinction between Scripture and confession and emphatically sees the confession as derived from the Bible. The reproach that is made to him and his supporters is that they 'base their faith on synods and synodical decisions'. De Cock's answer to this is that they base their faith only on God's Word, but that their faith can be found in our forms of unity, all of which are 'founded in everything on God's Word and confirmed by the persecution of the blood of the saints'. Precisely for this reason he assumes that the confession is entirely scriptural. What is expressed in Lord's Day 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism is, according to De Cock, the same confession as that of Asaf, David, Paul and Moses. This starting point, connected with the thorough knowledge of the contents of the confessions, leads De Cock to using many phrases from the confession in his writings, without mentioning them as such.

Remarkable in this respect is De Cock's appreciation of the Lutheran confession. Even though the Lutherans still err in minor points, De Cock clearly mentions the confession of the Lutheran Church as a document in which the ground of the true faith is well represented. He not only quotes the Augsburg confession but also Luther with approval.

De Cock's spirituality is also confessional in the sense that it does not degenerate into individualism but has a clear eye for the Church as a covenant community. As already mentioned, it is precisely the act of Secession that shows this ecclesiological perspective where De Cock, for example, does not opt for the conventicle but for secession as a return to a reformed church. In the spirituality of De Cock, the doctrine of the church is not burdened by the doctrine of election, but is in equal harmony with the confession itself. However, at De Cock it took reflection and conflict to see this harmony as well.

Existential character

For De Cock, holding on to Dordt does imply conservatism or confessionalism, but is for him aimed at the salvation of people. This can be seen, for example, in the title of his 'Open Protest' where he speaks of 'soul-devastating errors'. It is not the error itself, but the consequence of it that De Cock has in mind. De Cock is therefore not concerned with the doctrine of predestination in itself, but with the associated attitude of faith and lifestyle. In this context his notorious book against the liberal preachers Meijer Brouwer and Benthem Reddingius also deserves attention. In his introduction De Cock wants to make it immediately clear that his aim is not to disturb the cherished peace in the church, but to defend the sheep of Christ's flock against certain wolves. In the booklet he says that he hopes that *'my weak attempts may be blessed by the Lord, and that they may still lead to the discovery of the blind and the lost; to the strengthening of the common believers and those with fragile faith; to the joy of the faithful, and to the expansion of the Kingdom of Heaven, this is my heartfelt wish and fervent prayer'*.¹

Therefore he speaks about certain absolutely necessary experiences of faith, such as a thorough knowledge of one's own sin and guilt. De Cock states that it is

In order to be saved, by virtue of God's true word, which man must surely know, he will be happy once, with a sanctified knowledge wrought by God's Spirit, how great his sins and wretches are, that he is dead in sins, and that he is a slave of sins, impotent and reluctant by nature to redemption, and must therefore find salvation and salvation with Jesus alone.

Quite extensively and accurately De Cock describes what goes on in a human being in that phase. The grace of God proceeds a man first in a state in which he realizes that he is 'damned before God, by nature a child of wrath'. At first he tries to get out of that by appealing to his own righteousness, but in the end this man has to give in and covets Jesus continually as his only High Priest'.

Guide on this road of conversion is the Bible. De Cock rejects the idea that believers need the scholars to be able to read the Bible. The Bible is not a closed book for the simple. What those believers do need, however, is that the Bible is opened for them by God's Spirit.

Nevertheless, this path of conversion and the associated knowledge of sin is little discussed in De Cock's works. Apparently this is a phase in which a person comes to faith and does not mean that after this conversion much needs to be said about the knowledge of sin and guilt. The emphasis is not so much on the knowledge of guilt from the life before conversion or in the life of repentance, but on the awareness that a person has to live from the certainty that one day there will be a day of accountability. With this, the emphasis lies on the sanctification that results from the election and not on the sense of guilt that arises from the path to faith.

The interpretation in light of salvation history

The spirituality of Hendrik de Cock has a specific dimension related to salvation history. This interpretation becomes especially visible after the Secession has taken place and strongly deals with the reactions that came from the side of the church and of politics. De Cock interprets these developments in the light of the history of Israel in the Old Testament and of the first Christians in the New Testament. This salvation history-interpretation has a long, reformatory tradition and it is quite natural in De Cock's situation that he would make use of it.

In the period before the Separation De Cock sees himself mainly as a prophet according to the Old Testament. His personal conversion led him to the conviction that things were not going well in the church and in society. Especially the writings of C. Baron van Zuylen van Nijvelt (1777-1831), who in clear language called for the strict adherence to the Reformed doctrine, brought him to that insight. Directly related to this is that he was not only strongly convinced that he himself would have to appear before God on Judgment Day, but also that a judgment of God on the Netherlands is imminent if there is no quick ecclesiastical and national conversion. As a result, De Cock sees himself strongly as a 'prophet of the old covenant' who must call upon country and people to return to the Lord.

After the Secession there are other events from the Bible that De Cock sees as parallel. The Secession, for example, in analogy with the Exodus, is seen as a liberation from the slavehouse of error. De Cock's sees his personal situation also in the light of the apostles who, with their proclamation, also encountered a lot of resistance from the church representatives at that time. This vision is of course confirmed when he ends up in prison. De Cock connects his own history very directly with the history of salvation and sees himself connected with Paul and Silas in his fate. The measures against the secessionists are seen in line with the persecution that the first Christians had to endure. When De Cock visits several congregations, he also sees this as an apostolic journey. In one of his letters he writes:

As far as my persecution is concerned, dear brothers, I experienced in my last Apostolic Journey, that the Lord is all-sufficient and that He keeps the enemies in check according to art. 13 of our Confession, and that He makes that for His people and children all things work for the good, including the persecutions of a wicked and godless world. In short time I have been able to ordain ten congregations and have been powerfully jumped upon by Satan three times'.

More examples could be mentioned but this salvation history-interpretation means that an objective assessment of one's own situation is not possible. However, for De Cock it is clear who belongs to the church of the Lord and who belongs to the synagogue of satan. It is also clear who belongs to the Pharisees and who can count themselves among the true disciples of Jesus. Inevitably, certain events in the life of De Cock and the first secessionists are seen in the light of, for example, the history of the first Christian congregation, and as a result these events gain a weight that they did not have in reality

The practical elaboration

We have only been informed to a limited extent about the practical elaboration of De Cock's spirituality in his own life, because he hardly speaks about his own experience of faith and the way in which he gives shape to it. Nevertheless, it may be sufficient to take the correspondence between De Cock and his wife as it took place during De Cock's time in prison in Groningen. In one of those letters he mentions the end of his first day in prison. After having sung the whole of Psalm 138, he still sang

... Psalm 68:1-6; next, at an interval, Psalm 2:1-5; then after dinner the evening song and finally Psalm 2:6 and 7. After which I went to bed, and had a good night, with peace of mind. This morning I could wake up refreshed and began with prayer and Psalm 3.

Only then, says De Cock, did he continue with the letter he had started the night before.

Insight into De Cock's spirituality also gives his account of the first Sunday in prison. He tried to maintain the order of a normal Sunday as much as possible by reading a sermon both in the morning and in the afternoon. In doing so he read in the confessions of faith and in the writings of among others Herman Witsius, a well-known representative of the *Nadere Reformatie*. This reading was alternated with Scripture reading, prayer and the singing of Psalms.

Faith in God's providence and in God's election has, as far as the testimonies show, in De Cock's life as a result that he has had no doubt about his eternal salvation, nor about God's daily care. A good example of the latter is given by his son Helenius in the biography about his father. When a detachment of 150 soldiers arrived in Ulrum in October 1834, De Cock was forbidden to preach and he was placed under house arrest and three soldiers were posted in the presbytery, according to Helenius' report, De Cock's reaction was as follows:

Father was encouraged in the Lord our God under all this. Mother, however, seemed to be discouraged for a moment; but she too soon found that the Lord confirms His promise, and does not allow his people to be tempted beyond ability. Father raised to read the 37th Psalm, she was so strengthened that she began to sing that Psalm with him'.

In the letters to his wife and family we meet, as it were, a completely different De Cock than the man of the battle writings, noting that the tone in those battle writings has become a bit less sharp after the Secession and after his time in prison. De Cock's spirituality has a natural form in the sense that it is artlessly mixed with the things of everyday life. A quote from the end of a letter to his wife may demonstrate this:

"... but dear wife, so far I am so richly refreshed by God's goodness, that first of all I need nothing but your and all God-fearing intercessors to pray that the Lord will help me as poor and wretched sinner and yet rich, in all needs, dangers and objections, just as He has so far done so richly and manifoldly through His grace.

I send for you and our children here another piece of cake, give them all a kiss from and for me, and admonish the, to fear the Lord. Helenius love the teaching of the catechism, better than I have unfortunately done, and you children be mother in all things obedient in the Lord's mercy, that when the Lord may bring us together again, I may rejoice in the testimony that also for you my time in prison for Christ's sake has worked for you salvation and blessing.

Now dearly beloved, the Lord be with you in all things Amen.

Where the rhythm of the day at De Cock was determined by reading Scripture, prayer and singing, his spirituality is not limited to the circle of his own inner room, family and church. Helenius reports on a trip to his family in Wildervank that De Cock made a few months before his death in 1842, shortly after he had recovered from a serious illness.

As he was still very weak, he had put himself in a corner of the boat, with the intention of keeping himself out of the conversations. Barely seated, however, he heard someone, who stepped into the boat, abuse the name of the Lord, making it impossible for him to keep silent. Although that man had been heated by drink and aroused so much anger that he threatened to beat father and throw him out of the boat, father did not lose his composure for a moment, but persisted in speaking, admonishing him and all the other passengers to the faith in Christ.

Although at first it seemed to Helenius and others that pearls were being thrown fort he swine, according to Helenius' testimony afterwards this very testimony proved to have been a means of conversion for the son of the cursing man.

Conclusion

De Cock's spirituality is governed by the question: 'Men, what do we have to do to be saved? The central role of this question results in a spirituality in which the relationship between the church and the individual believer, and that between covenant and election, remains balanced, but in which the attention for life after death is somewhat at the expense of Christianity in the church and society that precedes it. Where Christianity does receive attention in this life, it is strongly seen in the light of God's providence. Thus the two focal points of De Cock's spirituality can be indicated as the certainty of eternal salvation and the certainty of God's guidance in this life. In spite of these observations, De Cock's spirituality can be characterized as that of Lord's Day 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism.

De Cock and Kuyper were both secessionist. Both fought against liberal theology. Both were faithful to the reformed confessions. Both were influential in their churches and served these with all energy. Yet, they were different in spirituality, Kuyper being more the active Calvinist, De Cock being more the pietist Puritan, but it is the combination of both that can serve the church best.