

Johannes Cornelis Sikkel (1855 - 1920)

“The Lion of Hylaard”

by Johan D.Tangelder

Why are Reformed Christians, who immigrated from the Netherlands to North America, strong advocates of Christian organizations? Why do we send our children to Christian schools? Why do we work and vote for a Christian political party? Why do we long for a Christian daily newspaper?

To understand our support for Christian involvement in every sphere of life, we should let the spotlight shine on the “Dutch Connection.” When the Dutch immigrants of Reformed persuasion left their land of birth, they took with them their spirituality, their theology, and their neo-Calvinist tradition. Their convictions led to actions. And especially in Canada they made their presence felt. What made these Reformed immigrants “tick?” Our next generation will never know unless they learn their history. Knowledge of the past is useful for understanding the present and it serves as a guide to lead us into the future.

Rev. J.C. Sikkel was a prominent trailblazer in the Christian Reformed Churches (GKN), founder of the independent weekly *Hollandia*, which ceased publishing in 1916, and was greatly indebted to Dr. A. Kuyper’s thought while not slavishly following him, giving his own nuances to the theology of Kuyper. Sikkel was his own man. He was a visionary, far ahead of his times when virtually nothing had come of ground as yet as far as Christian social action was concerned. The time for the fruition of his ideals was not ripe. He was co-founder and president of the sanatorium *Sonnevanck* and a member of a number of government commissions. This multifaceted and productive pastor, theologian, social prophet, and prolific author is hardly known in North American Reformed circles. Sikkel’s insights, analyses, and solutions regarding social issues and many theological questions were remarkable for his times and are still useful for our own. Although many years and vast changes separate our times from Sikkel’s, we still have to contend with the same issues.

Personal History

Johannes Cornelis Sikkel was born on the November 18, 1855, in Utrecht, the Netherlands, to parents in financial straits. And so their son learned from first hand experience about social needs. He studied and obtained his teaching certificate, becoming a teacher first at the Christian school at Voorschoten, and later at Zeist. His friend Rev. Th. Nahuys noticed the natural talents and gifts of the fiery schoolteacher and made it possible for him to study for the ministry. Sikkel earned his way through his years of study at the University of Utrecht, which meant he was not able to participate in any student social activities. This put a stamp on his personal development. He became a candidate for the ministry in November 1882. When Sikkel accepted a call to Biezeling in Zeeland, he preached his installation sermon on 1 Cor. 2:2, "For I am resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." He did not stay long in his first pastorate, leaving in 1885 for Hylaard, Friesland. His first sermon there was based on 1 Cor. 3: 11, "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ." This text set the course for his ministry in his new congregation. On January 17, 1886, Sikkel and his congregation joined the Doleantie (a secession movement from the Dutch Reformed Church [NHK] under the leadership of Abraham Kuyper). Sikkel soon became one of its provincial leaders. On November 18, 1888, he became pastor of the Doleantie Church in the Hague, where he was able to develop his immense talents. He was very active in promoting Christian schools, his articles in *Zuid-Hollandsche Kerkbode* (South-Holland Church Magazine) were widely read. In this paper he also wrote a series of stories under the pseudonym Guido Filius. His fiery temperament and courageous defense of the Reformed faith often led to conflict, but no one questioned his motives. In 1899 he accepted a call to Amsterdam, where he remained until his death. After his death on August 17, 1920, the Johannes Cornelis Sikkel Fund was established to publish or republish the writings of the late Rev. Sikkel, and if possible, his popularly written commentaries of larger or smaller portions of the Sacred Scriptures. His Bible studies, meditations, and sermons were thoroughly Christo-centric. He was no learned theologian in the formal sense of the word. He never completely overcame his lack of knowledge of the original Biblical languages. But all of his Bible studies and

sermons reflected his prophetic vision of life and the world. Even today his writings are relevant, stimulating, and thought provoking.

Social Unrest

The social conditions in 19th century Holland were appalling for the poor. Industrial development was late in coming so agriculture and commerce were the main sources of income. Wages were low, the cost of living high and working hours long. Child labor was common. The powerful rich were devouring the weaker poor. *De Heraut* (The Herald) of July 12, 1867, reported that young children were found “in the arms of Moloch of factories.” Housing for the poor was totally inadequate. A disproportionately high number of people from the working classes had become estranged from the church and the Christian faith. There was growing working-class unrest. The winter of 1890-91 was unusually severe and the poor, especially in the northern provinces, were especially hard hit. Laborers were exploited by farmers. Dr. L. Wagenaar, pastor of a Doleantie church in Leeuwarden, wrote a letter to his former professor at the Free University about the news that was reaching him from the Frisian countryside. The danger is real, he wrote, that “Irish conditions” will come to prevail in our clay belt. The farmers are forbidding the laborers to organize themselves and are trying to provoke violence “so they can shoot them.” “Some of our best workmen”, he continued, “both in the cities and in the country, are near starvation.”

Sikkel was deeply moved by the horrible living circumstances of the poor. He cried out against the unjust social conditions, In 1902, he pleaded: “Stop locking up the Gospel in your church.” Christianity is more than charitable giving. We must do more than preach sermons about the poor, provide homes and food for the poor. They do not meet the demands of the Gospel. Sikkel called for public Christian social justice.

The Spirit of Modernism

In Sikkel’s time the spirit of modernism, based on naturalistic and humanistic principles of the

Enlightenment, waged war against Biblical Christianity, especially in its Calvinist expression. Sikkel believed that he lived in remarkable and dangerous times. For many Christians the old certainties which gave meaning to life, an account of the origins and purpose of the world, and an explanation of history were gone. Multitudes no longer believed in divine revelation. They had no light to show them the way they should go. This is the only world they had left.

This sounds very much like the 1990s, doesn't it?

Modernists strongly resisted the claims of the uniqueness of Christ. They formed a powerful faction in the Dutch Reformed Church; liberalism reigned in the State. Sikkel wrote that wherever in pulpits God's Word is pushed aside by the word of man, even denied or opposed, it leads to apostasy and the death of the soul and life itself. In a sermon on Mark 14: 8-20, Sikkel said that time and again the lie attempts to cast out the truth from the covenant community and tempts the very elect of God. Satan wants the elect of God because without them the Kingdom of the Father will be no more. Sikkel believed that the Anti-Christ will arise in the church, and the false prophet lives on its premises. Yet he was convinced that Christ's triumph is certain. In a meditation on Isaiah 41: 5-13 he asks, "Where is the victory of those who seek to rob the Church of her confession, work hard to take away the Word of God? Where is the victory of modern theology? Where are you enemies of my faith?" And Sikkel answers, "Thanks be unto God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!"

Sikkel 's prophetic nature showed in his critique of the socialist-liberal concept of the state. He exposed its anti-Christian, neo-Marxist, nanny-state absolutism. Political liberalism is intolerant of minority values. It imposes its own and makes it nearly impossible to live according to one's own convictions in the public square. Liberalism has no place for the special relations people have with family, friends, society, schools, church, etc. The individual has become king. He does not need God. Man can determine for himself what is right and wrong. He does not need a divine revelation to tell him how to behave. You can do whatever you want as long as you don't harm anyone in the process or obstruct the freedom of others. Everything is allowed, unless it is strictly forbidden. Everyone has the right to the pursuit of happiness and defines his own view of goodness. Autonomous man is the only authority.

Sikkel was convinced that these anti-Christian views pose a dire threat to our freedom. True

tolerance does not mean accepting all views. Sikkel believed that socialist-liberalism would eventually lead to anarchism. Considering the powerful socialist-liberal Canadian state, his critique is still relevant today!

Darwin's Folly

Sikkel also pointed to the negative influence of Darwin's theory of evolution in society. He called this theory godless as it gives honor to the creature rather than the Creator. Thomas Huxley (1825-95), a strong defender of Darwin, believed that a blind force directed the evolutionary process from the nonliving to the living and from the non-intelligent to intelligent beings. And atheists can be as zealous as the most ardent religious fundamentalist. Atheism can be ruthlessly militant and fanatical. Communism is a classical example. Karl Marx proudly announced, "nowadays, in our evolutionary conception of the universe, there is *absolutely no room* for either a Creator or a ruler." But a naturalistic understanding of the universe without God cannot provide moral absolutes. How can you define goodness when morality is merely a biological adaptation like hands and feet? If values do not come from God then we must create them ourselves. But man is not able to create his own values. This is why the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-81) wrote in *The Brothers Karamazov*, "If God does not exist, then everything is permitted." Sikkel agreed with Kuyper, who declared, "Darwin's theory is purely atheistic." And this was the general assessment of all orthodox Reformed scholars. In 1878, Charles Hodge, a noted Reformed scholar, wrote, "What is Darwinianism? It is atheism. This does not mean as before said that Mr. Darwin himself and all who adopt his views are atheists; but it means that this theory is atheistic; that the exclusion of design from nature is....tantamount to atheism." Sikkel and Kuyper were right in declaring war against Darwinianism. Today the public school system from kindergarten to university is permeated by this materialistic philosophy, the view that this physical world is the only world there is and ever will be. Evolutionists have become dictatorial rulers of public education, without any dissenting voice allowed. The public school flatly refuses the possibility of even considering, let alone teaching supernatural Creation. And many Christians have allowed this atheistic worldview to take over without challenging its validity.

The Bible the Only Norm

Sikkel was squarely in the orthodox Calvinist tradition in his confession that the Bible is the only norm for faith and life. The Bible is not the invention of man. It is the written inerrant Word of God. It is factually true in all that it asserts. And Sikkel's view of Genesis is worth noting in our age of doubt and compromise. He emphatically states that with the historicity of the book of Genesis the Bible stands or falls. It is the key to the Gospel. Without Abraham and Adam, Jesus is not the Christ and the Bible is not the Word of God. The Bible is Christo-centric. Our Lord was a descendant of Abraham. He was in the covenant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The New Testament goes back to Genesis – the root, the foundation of Scripture. Without Genesis there is no justification by faith and the second Adam disappears with the first Adam. In other words, if Genesis is rejected, the Bible is rejected. The Lord gave His Word to His Church. This Word is the word of Christ, the anointed prophet of God, who reveals the full counsel of God for the benefit of our salvation. But this Word must speak also to all of life. It illuminates us like the sun in heaven. The God of the Bible is involved in the world for the sake of the world. Through His Word He lays claim to all of life. He demands obedience to His Word in every societal sphere. The Bible is, therefore, the basis for Christian morality and provides direction for life. Through Biblical revelation we gain true understanding of ourselves, the world around us, and how we must live and work in it. Although we live in a pluralistic society, the Christian goal is to move society from its sinful habits and unjust practices to obedience to God's laws, which are constant and universal.

The Crucifixion and the Resurrection

Sikkel was an original thinker. This is seen especially in his Christo-centric world and life view. He approached the social questions more from the perspective of the Scriptures than did Kuyper, and especially from the Gospel of the crucified and risen Lord. Christ was nailed to the cross for the sins of the elect. His death was an act of obedience, and act of submission to the demands of the Law. He came to earth to die. But the Lord did not remain on the cross. The grave could not hold Him. He

triumphantly rose from the dead. Sikkel wrote in *Hollandia* (Febr.17, 1906) that the world is liberated from the old fleshly bonds of death, through the resurrection and ascension of Christ, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and through the spread of God's Word throughout the world. Christ is the heir of all things: all kingdoms of the earth are given to Him. Mankind must decide for or against Christ, and therefore for or against the free and joyous God honoring subjection to the Word of God. In a meditation on Isaiah 40: 27-31, Sikkel said that the resurrection life, the life of the redeemed Church (Gemeente) in and with her glorified Head Jesus Christ, is a hidden life. Its power is revealed in faith, in love, in struggle, which the world does not see nor knows. The resurrection life is a life of hope. In his meditation on Isaiah 43: 1-7 Sikkel said that the Church will suffer fiery persecution, will be attacked and tempted, and will experience sorrow and hardship. But the Lord's Church will not disappear! There will always be the Church.

A Confessional Christian

Prophets usually make enemies. Sikkel was no exception. He didn't get excited about small things, but when it came to the principles of the Reformed faith, he stood steadfast. He was a fearless defender of the Three Forms of Unity. Hylaard was a turning point in his ministry. Sikkel quickly learned that all his neighboring colleagues opposed the Three Forms of Unity, while he spoke for the confessions as a common basis for church fellowship. After his first meeting with them, he withdrew from their fellowship, declaring that because of their unbelief he couldn't recognize them as ministers of the Gospel. In 1885 he joined the Frisian Reformed Ministers Association. When Sikkel became a pastor in Hylaard, he soon discovered a few members who did not believe in divine revelation. When he visited these members, he had no response. They told him, "We don't believe what you believe... But we will attend the Lord's Supper." This presented to Sikkel a serious dilemma. He couldn't and wouldn't serve the Lord's Supper to church members who openly declared their unbelief. He pleaded with these people not to come. But when the Sunday for the Lord's Supper celebration had come, they were present and went forward to the table. But Sikkel took the white cloth which had covered the bread and the cup, and which he had just removed, and covered once again the symbols of the body

and blood of Jesus Christ. He said, “I cannot and may not serve the Lord’s Supper.” For this strong unwavering stance for the Gospel, people at times referred to him as “ the lion of Hylaard.”

Sikkel recognized modernism for what is: a hollow philosophy which leads to empty churches, the disappearance of youth, and the gathering of nice people who desire to become nicer. Sikkel longed for a national spiritual revival and a reawakening and renewal of Calvinism. Sikkel’s ministry bore fruit in Hylaard. His congregation urged the Hylaard consistory to break with those who deny the Word of God and to have the church once again live according to her Confessions, the Forms for Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and be governed by the church order of the Synod of Dordt.

Sikkel never departed from his confessional stance. He was not a man willing to compromise his convictions. He wrote that the Confession (Three forms of Unity) is the confession of the Church. Church members must test their lives by it. Budding faith must be led into the truth of the confession. Its content must be made clear and become a solid part of the consciousness of the congregation. The congregation must be strengthened in her confession. The meaning of the Confession for all of life must be clearly demonstrated and the confession must be lived. When some Reformed theologians spoke about a broad basis for the new paper *De Reformatie* (The Reformation), Sikkel wrote to F.W.Grosheide on October 14, 1919, that the contributors to the new paper should give conscious, determined, and forceful direction and teachings based on the Reformed Confessions. These are the kind of people we need, and these *alone*. For God and the people a paper is a witness.

Conclusion

The state of Christianity is worse today than it was in Sikkel’s time. In our contemporary society God has become irrelevant to the business of everyday life. It is simply indifferent to the existence and reality of God. It is even hostile when an attempt is made to speak from a Christian perspective in the public square.

Christians have not escaped the powerful influence of secularism. Too many seem to accept the postmodern view that their Christian faith is just a personal preference. Consequently, they have privatized their faith and go about their daily tasks without giving God much thought. I believe that a

study of the holistic Biblically formed world and life taught by the “Lion of Hylaard” provides a thoroughly Reformed counter cultural antidote. It furnishes fresh insights on how to live in a society steeped in practical atheism before the face of our Sovereign God