

## **Johannes Cornelis Sikkel (1855 - 1920)**

### **A Social Prophet.**

by Johan D.Tangelder

Is not the writing of an article on a man like Rev. J.C. Sikkel a desertion from present duty, seeking refuge in the past? How can a voice from the past give direction to a society that is rapidly losing its psychological, social, moral, and religious bearings? Look how different society is today from the days of Sikkel! In the last decade of the twentieth century the new morality - do what you choose, when you choose, without fear of community disapproval or legal obstacles - has become a feature of our modern society. The latter has become obsessed with sex. Liberalism has come to mean sexual freedom, gay rights, denunciation of the family as the seat of all oppression, and a preference for “nonbinding commitments.” In 1993, Supreme Court Justice L’Heureux-Dube said in a dissenting opinion on what constitutes a family that no consensus exists today as to the boundaries of the family and the word many have varied meanings, and “the traditional family is not the only family form and non-traditional family forms may equally advance family values.” Many couples today live together without “the benefit of the clergy.” Divorce is rampant. Marriages are ended when they become inconvenient. The concept of “individual autonomy” has gathered strength. The self is now ultimately what life is all about.

Canada has become virtually anti-Christian in government, the public school system, university humanities faculties, and the entertainment and news media. Christians and Christianity are objects of derision and denounced by all manners of people. This bigotry against Christians has become so commonplace that many Christians accept it as “normal.” The Supreme Court of British Columbia officially marginalized religion in December 1998 with its absurd decision that elected school trustees must not allow their religion to influence their decisions on school policy. This decision also means that any parental influence on school policy is illegal if it’s rooted in religious convictions.

### **A Preacher of the Word.**

Times may have changed, but human nature hasn't. As in previous generations, the only remedy for our sin-sick society is the Gospel. What we need more than ever is the sound preaching of the Word. What is good preaching? The current pastor of the Lutheran scholar James Nuechterlein preaches Sunday after Sunday precisely eleven-minute sermons. Nuechterlein observes that fortunately the high quality of the sermons at his parish is as predictable as their length. Sikkel's sermons were not short. I suppose that after eleven minutes of preaching he started to warm up. His sermons were not always easy to follow. His original style reminded the congregation at times of a diver who has difficulty coming to the surface with the treasure he has found. Sikkel was slow in starting, but once he was gripped by his subject, the words started to flow poetically. He preached with authority - as a man sent by God. Sikkel drew a large crowd of faithful hearers, especially among students, and exercised greater influence than many professors. Although in our "mini-sermon" age his sermons would be considered lengthy, they were always of high quality. He was a student of the Word and of his times. His sermons reflected his prophetic vision on life and the world. J.C. Rullman, who knew him personally, writes, "Each sermon revealed a complete world and life view." Sikkel knew and explained life in the light of the Word of God and through Christ, the Light of the world. He believed that a minister has been given the authority to open the Scriptures, the whole counsel of God, for the congregation. No wonder Sikkel's style was expository. He was no story teller. No jokes, no platitudes, no pleasantries. God's Word alone must be brought. It alone is powerful, "Is not my word like fire," declares the Lord, "and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?" (Jer. 23:29). This Word addresses *all of life*. Sermons have, therefore, political and social implications. Since Enoch and Noah, all preachers of righteousness have the mission to teach, to admonish, and to call to repentance and conversion. Sikkel believed in a heaven to be gained and a hell to be shunned. Sin is horrible in the sight of the holy God, the object of His wrath. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebr. 10:31). The only way to escape our just judgment is by turning to Christ, the Lamb of God, our sinbearer.

## **Labor is God's Domain**

At the second Christian Social Congress held in 1919 in Amsterdam, Sikkel said that Ministers of the Word not only have to preach the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, but also address through the Word social life and especially labor. In a sermon on 1 Kings 18: 20-24, Sikkel said, “Woe the church of the Lord, if she withdraws politically and socially from natural life. And woe the bread movement and the people’s movement when they reject the Lord and His Word.” Social, political, and bread questions are religious questions.

In each sermon the minister preaches to the whole visible congregation of Christ as he is called by the whole congregation and not by a small group within it. He is a servant of Christ to minister the Word alone in the name of the Lord alone. And a living congregation will submit to God’s Word.

## **Missions**

So often I have heard it said that the missionary vision of Reformed Christians in the past was dim. Those who make those accusations are not well acquainted with either the history of missions or Reformed missiology. Among many others, Sikkel had a passion for missions. In his commentary on Genesis 11 he says that Christian missions must find their point of contact not only with the remnant of the law in the heart of man and with the seed of religion, but also with the memory of the Noahite tradition, recognizing the original unity of mankind. In this way the nations of the world must hear the Gospel of grace of the living God. In a sermon on Lord’s Day 50 Sikkel pleads with the congregation not only to look after the physical needs of the poor, but also to give for missions so that the Word of God can travel around the world. He was also a firm believer in word and deed ministry. He writes about the need for medical missions. In this type of ministry, the way medicines are dispensed is more important than the medicines themselves. It must be done in the name of Great Physician. And the Gospel must be proclaimed as well. In a meditation on Isaiah 49:5-6, Sikkel points out that the Church is mandated to bring the Gospel as Christ’s servant. The task is arduous, but we don’t do the work in our own strength. Sikkel encourages the Church to go forward in faith as God is her Strength.

## **Moral Issues.**

Sikkel opposed moral relativism, the natural outgrowth of evolutionary theory. Relativists reject the idea of a universal moral truth. Sikkel did not agree that every belief and opinion has equal value. Morality cannot be based on majority public opinion. The majority voice of the public is not the voice of God. And every shift in morality is not necessarily progress. Sikkel taught moral absolutes derived from the Scriptures.

Sex is an extremely strong desire for most people. Celibacy before marriage requires self-control. Hence, young people need to be taught sexual abstinence before marriage. But many people today say, “Abstinence is not realistic in our society that continually bombards you with sexual images via the media. Cable news and talk shows are prime examples! Young people are going to indulge anyway. How can you tell them to stop their destructive behavior by just telling them not to do it?” But each generation has to make its own moral choices, including our own, despite the relentless coercion to surrender to peer pressure and become part of the crowd. Sikkel strongly advocated sexual abstinence before marriage. In his commentary on Genesis 2: 23 he noted that all sexual sin in and outside of marriage, is a mockery of the sanctity of marriage and of love, and is a desecration of the temple of God (1 Cor. 6:16-20; 3:16-17). In a *Hollandia* article (Febr.11, 1911), Sikkel addressed a young Frisian who had questions about dating and marriage. He wrote that young people ought to remain virgins until marriage. This is what God demands. True love waits. God has given His laws and rules for our protection. Young people must guard their self respect like an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume so that they may give their love to the partner God has given them in a pure marriage. When couples have sexual relations before marriage, they will lose the moral foundation that is necessary for deep personal love and fidelity in marriage. They will also lose self-respect as well as respect for their partner. Sikkel also wrote elsewhere that the choice of a marriage partner, the engagement, the courtship, the wedding day, the relationship between husband and wife must come under the discipline of God’s Word, in faith and in prayer. Sikkel didn’t agree with divorce. The marriage bond may not be broken. That’s why the marriage ceremony must be in the hands of the government and for the Christian within the fellowship of the Church. The only reason for divorce is adultery or malevolent (*kwaadwillig*) desertion (Matt. 19:9; 1 Cor. 7:15). Keep marriage in honor!

Sikkel addressed many issues that are relevant today. He was a strong advocate of Sunday observance as part of the creation order. Violating the weekly day of rest of our neighbor is godless and loveless. Sikkel also recognized that without a workweek, Sunday will not be a real day of rest. That's why he called for full employment as unemployment is man's great misfortune. The highest purpose of the weekly day of rest is sanctification: the sanctification of our life in fellowship with God. On Sunday we rest from our physical labor. We rest in God and in His eternal covenant, in His love and in the finished work of Jesus Christ. We celebrate hope as there remains a rest for the people of God (Ps.91).

### **Cremation**

Sikkel also spoke about the need for Christian burials. He would certainly disagree with those modern Christians who think that cremation is a legitimate choice. In his sermon on John 19: 38 -42, he says that a burial for us is not only a revelation of death; a Christian burial also testifies to life and hope. In Christ we already have life now. We have been buried with Him. We have been raised with Him. That's why a Christian burial has a rich, comforting, and encouraging gospel message. The body is like a seed planted into the ground waiting for the day of the resurrection. And Sikkel refers to apostle Paul's resurrection passage, "So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:42-44).

### **Social and Labor Issues.**

During the last decades of the 19th century Holland was in the throes of labor unrest. Labor groups were calling for better working conditions, fairer wages, and compensation when injured.

Reformed Christians were not slack in their response. In 1871, the first Christian-social paper was published. In 1876, the first Christian-social organization called *Patrimonium* was founded. These Reformed stalwarts rejected both socialism and liberalism. They were strongly influenced by Abraham Kuyper's social thought. There was an awareness that in social relationships the Gospel has a message

for both employee and employer.

On November 9, 1891, Abraham Kuyper opened the first Christian Social Congress in the Netherlands with an address entitled *The Social Problem and the Christian Religion*, which had an enormous influence on the Calvinist revival in the Netherlands. This address has been reissued by James Skillen of the Center for Public Justice in 1991 as *The Problem of Poverty*. One of the keynote speakers of the conference was Sikkel, who introduced the subject: “ Which principles do the Holy Scriptures offer to the family and its members in regards to labor?” This was the first time that Sikkel was in the national limelight. He was thirty-five years old and only a pastor for six years. The fact that he was ranked with Dr.H.Bavinck as one of the speakers shows that he was already then well known for his interest in social questions. In his conference address he outlined his perspectives on labor. He didn’t want to limit it to “manual labor.” Work “belongs to the life of man as the image bearer of God.” Sikkel’s view of work was Christo-centric. God links man and his labor to build and maintain the garden for the completion of God’s work. The curse that came with the fall into sin turned labor into toil. When Christ rose from the dead, He also reconciled labor and renewed it. It is now a means to serve and glorify the Lord. The Gospel does not only comfort the worker, but also frees him from his “slave chains.” Sikkel spoke forthrightly for a just wage. Employers are to pay a fair wage so that a husband can look after his family without his wife having to go out and work. (How different from the two- wage-earners within the family advocacy of Canada’s liberal government!) The wage must make it possible for a man to find time for his family. This was an important suggestion in a time of long working hours. Sikkel also supported the idea that each worker should own his own home as home ownership encourages family life. Sikkel also pleaded for fair compensation in case of an accident or death of the worker. The conclusions of the Social Congress sounded like sweet music in the ears of Christian workers. They came to realize that the Bible has much to say about our task on earth and is against poverty and rampant capitalism.

In 1903, while Abraham Kuyper was prime minister, a sudden railway strike disrupted the nation. The government enacted anti-strike legislation, even the army was called out to maintain order. The socialists supported the strike. The Roman Catholic and Protestant workers supported the government. The strike collapsed. But it did have an impact on the development of the Dutch labor

movement. Between the years 1903 and 1905 Sikkel was busily engaged in the social questions his nation faced. He wrote numerous articles in *Hollandia* and developed his own unique vision on labor relations. The aim of the Marxist class struggle to destroy management is abhorrent. As co-laborers management and workers organize together in an association for their mutual benefit. At that time, there was no room in Sikkel's thinking for separate business and labor organizations. He believed that they would foster the class struggle. He wanted a specific contract between employers and employees in private business. The rights and duties of both employer and employee had to be spelled out in such a contract. Sikkel also called for input from the workers as well as profit sharing. Furthermore, he believed that the government had the task to ensure just labor contracts, which should include pension clauses and compensation clauses. And a labor contract should cover more than wages and benefits. The question of wages is a moral one and not just a financial issue. The key to the contract is the cooperation of people in an organic community of workers and management (*arbeidsgemeenschap*). Sikkel's social struggle was governed by the Biblical commandment to love our neighbor. This love must become concrete in the workplace through consultation between management and labor. Also, in our work and business we are to love our neighbor as ourselves. Through love for our neighbor the class struggle will cease and peace will come between labor and management. Many people thought that Sikkel's views would make labor unions superfluous. His critics accused him of a lack of social realism. Some even said that he intended to create a paradise on earth. But this criticism was totally unwarranted. Sikkel was realistic about fallen human nature. Sinners are unable to usher in a new heaven and earth. When the Lord returns in glory, all God's people will inherit the new heaven and the new earth, the restored paradise of God. Sikkel was aiming for a society where both capital and labor would receive Biblical justice. But his visionary perspectives led to serious misunderstandings. The controversies caused by his remarks were resolved by the end of the 1905 Christian-Social Conference, which was held in Amsterdam. Sikkel was one of the speakers. His address was entitled *The General Task of the Unions*. He explained that he was not opposed to labor unions. He criticized socialist unions and favored a Christian labor union as the ideal. The unanimous concluding statement of that conference is worth noting for Canada's troubled labor situation. It declares: "The Protestant Christian workers ought to unite in separate unions because the Christian worker cannot be a

member of existing neutral unions, which advocate the class struggle.”

At the Second Christian Social Congress Sikkel was not one of the speakers, but he participated in the discussions. The social pioneer called upon his fellow congress members to pay attention to the social injustices rampant in throughout the nation. He pleaded once again for democratic working conditions by way of a labor contract, the old ideal of 1903.

In 1920 the weekly *Patrimonium* asked him to write a series of articles on labor issues, which he did with great enthusiasm. Later that year he spoke about the need to internationalize the Christian social movement. His last article, published on July 24, 1920, concluded with the exclamation: “Until September, Lord willing!” He didn’t live to see September. He died in August 1920 after a brief illness.

Sikkel was no economist. He did not reckon enough with modern-social relations in large corporations and with the growth of labor and business organizations. Yet the Christian social movement owes so much to the visionary thought of Sikkel. He was man of sterling character, motivated by the fear of God, totally committed to the Reformed faith, and had a burden for the well being of the workingman. He analyzed the social problems from the Scriptures and not from a political agenda. Although Sikkel is unknown in Canada, through the immigrant Dutch connection he made his influence felt. The Christian Labor and Christian Business Associations are not innovations. They follow the thought of Kuyper and Sikkel, social prophets and pioneers.

Sikkel knew he was engaged in a spiritual battle. His compass was not the will of man but the will of God. Over against the Revolution the Gospel! This principle dominated his thinking. The Gospel must be the salt and the light in the sciences, government, home, school, and labor. The Lord is Lord over every sphere of life. From the very beginning, the Bible lays out the features of the antithesis (Gen.3: 15), the conflict between the Kingdom of God and the Kingdom of Satan. Sikkel wrote, “idolatrous man creates his god: but the Lord, the living God, creates His people.” Foolish and blind unbelievers seek a solution for the bread question apart from the Word of God. However, also in the social questions we cannot do without this Word. Throughout Scripture and history, the antithesis principle is at work. Every generation has its struggle between the City of God and the City of Man, the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. This struggle between the forces of Christ and the powers of darkness will go on until the end of times. This antithesis language was very much part of

Sikkel's theological vocabulary. Satan will be defeated. The Savior will triumph. He alone saves. He alone is our only hope in life and in death. The love of the Father shines through the Light of His Son in our heart. What a privilege for the ministers of the Gospel, who understand their times, to bring the Gospel, with much supplication, to this century in crisis. To conclude with Sikkell's own words: "We Christians must believe that God is alive, and that His grace is powerful, and will triumph over the spirit of error."