THE PREACHER AND THE PITCHFORK: REFLECTIONS ON CHURCH DISCIPLINE

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What I shall say tonight belongs to no category of rhetoric or scholarship that I know of. It's a mixture of reminiscence, research, theology, history, church polity, sociology, and religion, with a little opinion, imagination, and speculation tossed in. For this scholarly company I have concluded that the better part of valor is to be as adroit as I can as a hit-and-run scholar.

So this is to be an account of my own personal stroll through some historical aspects of church discipline. My remarks will be centered in two places, New Hampshire and Michigan, and I'm going to yank your attention back and forth between them. My worst fear is that the historians among you may be alarmed at the casualness of my learning; and that the non-historians may be distressed at all the scholarly noises I make. For myself, I'm just going to try to be cheerful about that.

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In January of this year I received a letter from Mr. Larry Wagenaar inviting me to address your society. But yours is a group devoted to history, and I do not have a license in that discipline, but only in philosophy. True, I have been found guilty of commiting public acts of historiography, but these efforts have been decently confined to my own backyard in New England history, and not addressed to "the Dutch and their faith." (In my part of rural New Hampshire Dutchmen are as thinly scattered as Democrats, now an endangered species.) Still, I didn't answer your invitation immediately, but waited for something to happen.

Which it did. The pastor of our Congregational Church in Washington, New Hampshire, was on vacation, and the visiting preacher, Baptist by affiliation, was one whom we knew from past experience had a certain propensity for liturgical tampering. Sure enough, he called me to make an unusual request. "Next Sunday," he said, "just after the reading of the Scripture I'd like you, Ron, to stand and read from your book, *Eight Acres*, the main paragraph on page 206." That's exactly what he said.

I am not accustomed to standing during divine worship and reading from my own prose just after the reading of the Holy Scripture, and I explained this to him. He acknowledged that that might be true; and he went on to suggest that doing it once would probably not be habit-forming. On this we concurred. So would I do it, he asked, thus providing him with just the double-barrelled text, ancient and modern, sacred and profane, that he needed for his sermon. Obviously he was one of those preachers--unheard of, of course, in the Dutch churches who concocts his sermon first and then strikes out to find the text to palm it off on. (No wonder they teach in seminary that that's a bad practice: you see what it can come to!)

His primary text, from Luke 6, finds Jesus recommending to his followers a higher morality than that of their inherited culture: not only to do good to those who do good to you, for even publicans do that, but to do good to those from whom you have no chance to be repaid. This visiting preacher wanted to address the fact that we hear such lofty ideals from the safe remove of 2000 years, and are thus inclined to assent to these distant, noble standards of higher Christian morality without really attending to them. He wanted to strike closer to home by using a more contempory source as well. So before he launched his sermon on the Biblical standards of Christian behavior he had me stand and read this passsage from a chapter called "The Long Arm of John Calvin." You can picture the ecumenical scene: worshipers included Lutherans and Episcopalians, the preacher was Baptist, the church was Congregational, the target was Christian Reformed. This is what I read.

> Ours was a rather muscular Calvinism, emotionally somewhat reticent, perhaps even lacking in warmth; it was not the sweaty fundamentalism one easily associates with groups wherein religion is so prominent. But some of what we in this community of churches did in the name of religion was adverse to the higher sentiments. We often confused mores with morals, as when we imposed a very strict taboo on women smoking. And mores got mistaken for religion: all dancing was regarded as flatly unchristian, movie attendance was forbidden, and card playing (Rook and Flinch usually excepted) disapproved of. A more serious breach, such as pregnancy outside of marriage, required confession to the ruling Consistory of the Church of

"sinning against the Seventh Commandment," and the confession was announced to the entire congregation. And so on. Selectively condemning some activities (through an inherited list of "worldly pleasures") and simultaneously overlooking more subtle slippages (lovelessness, exploitation, gluttony, pride, spite, avarice) produced some peculiar stresses. It intensified but didn't focus the vague sense of guilt that always hovered in our background. From such or similar contortions of the spirit Mencken fashioned his famous quip about Puritanism: it is the haunting suspicion that someone somewhere might be happy.

Of course in Calvinism, you start out guilty; but it was discouraging to be reminded, or to observe, that you are probably going downhilll from there. (*Eighty Acres*, p. 206)

Do we find the world there depicted slightly unrealistic or repellent? asked the preacher, reminding us that it too was safely remote because already forty or fifty years in the past. How easily--how innocently!--we smile (he said) at its insensitivities, its obsessions, its pervasive ironies, assuring ourselves that we are successfully beyond all that. . .Then he wondered: maybe we have similarly skewed obsessions today, which our bland acceptance of some abstract remote ideals renders us incapable of seeing for what they are. His point was: Maybe that Dutch community had too much guilt; but our current problem may be the reverse--too much innocence.

Well, I'm guilty of some forms of innocence all right. Somehow I drew from that experience, and from the invitation on my desk, the spectacularly unwarranted conclusion that I should come here in September to talk about church discipline.

For I fell to thinking about the many forms and expressions of discipline, that is, of "disciple-making" (for these words have the same root), including the kinds described in the paragraph I read. There is official church discipline, and there are unofficial mores surrounding it, expressing it, communicating it, sometimes restraining it, a network of complex public interaction and behavior: social mechanisms unspokenly conferring guilt and innocence.

To use an obvious figure of speech, church discipline is the body language of. . . well, of course, of the Church-as-the-body-of-Christ.

Historically and officially, church discipline in the Reformed churches began with prescribed "steps." Everything else that happened, unofficially, before and after, was the body language. Sometimes a lot of it: there are many ways of rapping knuckles, pointing a finger, raising an eyebrow, lending a hand. Historians reconstruct the transcript of those unofficial expressions, recreate the eloquence of their many languages, and thereby they help us to understand, to feel and to remember, what else was being communicated when the body of Christ offered or withheld the right hand of fellowship. That is the poignant nexus of social history that I invite attention to--and expecially the attention of the next cohort of immigrant historians.

As we know, the Church Order of the Reformed Churches, inherited from the Synod of Dort (1619), presents a schema of official steps for church discipline. I recall that I first heard of the "'steps' of church discipline"--a truly awesome-sounding piece of body language lingo to my young ears - as part of a family tradition, specifically the saga which supplies this lecture with its leading example and metaphor. I wrote down the elements of that story and included it in *Eighty Acres*. I'm going to read a fragment of it now, and then deliberately dwell upon it.

In our culture, family lore handed from one generation to the next was sparse, highly selective, and purposive; therefore, what my mother told me about her father had my moral education clearly in view. Grandpa Albert Schepers, who immigrated to this country with a wife and three children in the year 1900, was a man of many passions, likable, a devoted father, capable of great warmth and affection, but also possessed of a legendary, sometimes self-destructive stubbornness. If one must have intimate connections with that sort of man, it is doubtless easier to confront him aloft in an ancestral tree, where he may be an object of curiosity, than, for example, next door as a neighbor, where he might be a subject of controversy. Periodically, Grandpa Albert had had his problems with the neighbors.

Time was when he had been a favorite in the community of Hollanders, a founder and pillar of the local West Branch Christian Reformed Church, an elder in its ruling body, or consistory. But one year--it was about 1915--he was not voted back into office, and he blamed

another elder, hs neighbor and friend, for voting against him. True or not, warm friendship turned to warm enmity, which soon disturbed the peace of the whole church. When the pastor made a call to try to patch things up, Grandpa, who happened to be haying at the time, chased him off the premises with a pitchfork. Here was something to set the tongues awag! In a biblical community such as that, Grandpa's extraordinary gesture gave him instant notoriety; it was approximately the moral and religious equivalent of stoning the prophets.

As prescribed by the rules of the church, the consistory initiated censorship. The first step was simply that the pastor made an impersonal public announcement, soliciting prayers for an erring member of the congregation. Within the very stiff formality of the church services of that time, and within a culture where the church was the only significant social organization, one to which all immigrant families belonged and in which every member had known everyone else for years, that announcement was a terrifying reproach in its own right. My mother, a girl of about thirteen, was encircled after the service by her friends, jabbering the news: "We gotta pray for your pa, don't we?" This humiliation, together with the episodes that preceded and followed, devastated her--as was evident to me both from the tale itself and from the pain of retelling it, a generation later.

My grandfather was not a man to be humbled by a few prayers; and he was not only unrepentant, he was defiant. Of course, it was unthinkable to stay home from church, but it was eloquent to go conspicuously to another church of a different denomination. That would show them! So a scenario unfolded: each Sunday, Grandma and her children twice walked two miles to the West Branch Christian Reformed Church, and Grandpa took the horse and buggy six miles to the Falmouth Reformed Church. He had found a potent weapon: he could nurse his grudge and his religion at the same time. For years, while his family and friends ached for him, he kept warm his quarrel with the neighbor and the pastor and the church. "Oh, what peace we often forfeit / Oh, what needless pains we bear" was my mother's summary, quoting a hymn they often sang, one that I suppose he too sang, alienated, alone, and in another town. It was the great grief of my mother's youth.

He held out through seven years and ten thousand family prayers. The old pastor died and a new one came and gently, patiently intervened, and eventually the old man mellowed. Grandpa confessed his fault and was reconciled to his neighbors, family, church, and God. The whole community rejoiced, marveling at what an extraordinary miracle it was. But the experience had seared the edges of my mother's memory, leaving scars of hypersensitivity. (pp. 20-22)

It is perhaps relevant to insert here that my grandfather died shortly before I was born. When I was baptised in that same church, by that same minister who had led him to repentence, I was given his name--Albert. Not to burden me over much my parents called me by my middle name, Ronald; but my baptized first name, Albert, remains. Family legend affirms that much more than Albert Scheper's name descended upon me . . . But let me return to the text for one more paragraph:

Now and then my mother's scars became inflamed. There were times when she gazed at me when I was at a young and tender age, and she saw her father--saw his affections and personality and passions, saw him in my reddish hair and fiery temper. Name, hair, looks, temperament--of course she glowed with pride; of course she cringed with apprehension. Didn't she hear every week in church from the Old Testament that the sins of the fathers might be visited upon "the third and fourth generation"? Whatever that meant precisely, it sounded like a solemn warning. No doubt all children throw a tantrum now and then, but mine were regularly regarded in the special light of my name and looks and ancestry, and it wasn't unusual for a blast of willfulness from me to send my mother careening back to the fields of pain in her own youth. (p. 22)

Well, the story goes on. But we'll have to leave the rest as a homework assignment.
The book, *Eighty Acres*, was not researched; it was remembered. After the book was published last

year, I thought about doing some research. (Some people research books before they write them; some do it afterword.) It was my grandfather's use of the pitchfork that interested me. Ah! Such a stroke of eloquent body language! What, I wondered, might the church records reveal? And what was there in the traditions and the doctrines of the church that might illuminate the context of the whole event? What might a deeper investigation teach? The amateur historian within me began to assert himself against the writer of memoirs. I got interested in the church's body language.

This impulse to situate that piece of oral family tradition within a documentary, theological, and historical context came to me from a certain background preparation. To explain that I have to take you to New England.

About a dozen years ago my wife and I undertook the writing of the history of our town, Washington, New Hampshire, subsequently published as a book of five hundred pages (*Portrait of a Hill Town*), covering about a hundred years of social history 1875 to 1975. A large component of that research and writing concerned the churches in the town, for which we had extensive church and society records. At the center of our effort, and of the town, was the Congregational Church, founded in 1780. Yes, the same one which has the occasional Baptist minister with his creative liturgy.

As we studied the copious records of this church, as well as those of two or three other chuches in town, and read other town histories, I was astonished at the number and variety of discipline cases, and how revelatory they were of the fine texture of the community's common life. What was illuminating was not the offenses themselves, but the nuances of the church's handling of them. Instances had to do with dancing and theater attendance, with money and mischief and skipping church, with fights and drinking-- the usual suspects. Certainly the churches were much more interesting than the granges and the schools.

How to put this into local perspective, into historical perspective? Pondering this, I reflected as follows. Surely others--real historians--have been here before us. Surely, in addition to the books on New England theology, preaching, revival, denominations, devotion and schisms, and excellent scholarship on 17th and 18th century New England generally, there must be secondary works, essays, monographs, which take up the texture of the religious life of 19th century New England, of Congregationalism especially, but also of Baptists and Presbyterians and others, books which have assimilated some of this richly piled-up primary source material stacked away in the musty basements of hundreds of New England towns, like my town of Washington, books which have researched and interpreted the story, especially the story of church discipline, in a way that will give me a handle on my task in writing the history of our town.

And that's when I discovered that those books don't exist; that that research hasn't been done; that the essays remain unwritten; that there are tons of church record source material, scattered, most of it not microfilmed, still to be exploited in the most obvious way. The shelf of books on church discipline, historically considered, is as good as empty. All I wanted was the book or even essays that would recreate for me the social/religious fabric of New England communities, and would illustrate the way in which the disciplinary procedures of the church, as exhibited in the kind of copious primary records I had before me, was infused into the life of the community. I just wanted an exposition of the body language of the church at discipline. But for 19th century New England that is virgin territory for a generation of social historians not yet on the horizon.

Not to go too far afield. . .but I must linger to illustrate why I think this is not just interesting, but important, why this kind of "bottom up" historical research, directed at the social idiom of church discipline, is inevitably of general significance. Two absolutely crucial ideas were struggling to be born, and were born, in the rural New England religious contexts I'm referring to. One was the idea of separation of church and state, and the other was the idea of a plurality of denominations. When the Washington Congregational Church was founded in 1780, there was neither. Congregationalism was as good as established. The minister was hired by the town, paid out of town taxes. Volunteers built the meetinghouse (which was both church and town hall), but it was painted and furnished with money drawn from property tax. When the Baptists and the Unitarians came to town they could take care of themselves, or try to persuade the town to treat them equally with the Congregationalists in terms of tax money. As to the first amendment to the federal constitution ("Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of a religion. . ."), everybody knew exactly what it meant. It meant that if New Hampshire, or any town in it, wanted to have Congregationalism as its established religion, Congress was not to interfere--and certainly not the courts. (In our century those words have been turned on their head, but that is another story.)

Eventually, all the eastern seaboard states passed a law, like New Hampshire's of 1819, which made

illegal what had previously been mandatory, namely, paying for the expenses of the church out of the coffers of the public tax. And though historians may chart the legal and ideological path which led to that separation of church and state, we cannot grasp its human meaning unless we also struggle our way, from the bottom up, through the details of church discipline cases that often epitomized the issue.

For example: Abraham Powers is in trouble with his church because he has been leaving town on Sunday to go to the upstart Presbyterian church in another town. So the Preysbyterians claim him as a member, though he isn't, and use that to expand their membership roles so they can demand a larger share of their town tax money for their church. This angers their town officers who are Unitarian Congregationalists; so they complain to the officers of Abe Powers' town, who in turn admonish the minister to keep Powers in town and in the Congregational Church on Sunday mornings. Powers is creating a disturbance and may have to be disciplined.

You like that scene? That's a terrible scene. But that's where the church/state issue was in early 19th century New England. Every third town had issues similar to that. This tangle of problems, often crystalizing as discipline problems, is also the very body language of the church, working out its salvation. It was while I was thinking about these things that I formed the opinion, which I am here with today, that church discipline historically considered and socially expressed may be the great neglected theme that another generation of historians must eventually find and develop. And not only in New England.

At any rate, you can see that it was with a fair amount of intellectual baggage and experience that I belatedly bethought myself to wonder about the other dimensions of Grandpa Albert Schepers' story. Which takes us back to Michigan.

Obviously, I had some initial questions. Were there other discipline cases at that time? What were they like? Could this family tale be verified from the consistory record at all? Could I get access to the records? Would I in my amateur way be able to spot from even so fragmentary a record as that of one typical church any interesting contrasts or similarities between our Dutch Calvinistic practice and that of the New England Calvinists of the 19th century? (For a host of reasons too complex to detail, I see the mid 19th-century Congregationalists as nearly exact social contempories of my grandparents, though a half-century earlier in time.) Could I go to the sources and dig a little posthole through the fertile soil of one congregation down to its foundation in 1912, and from there peer into the larger ideological and personal and social and theological strata that are buried there? Could I do that?

Well, not well enough to write a book about it. But maybe, if lucky, well enough to enlist the momentary attention of a small group of Dutch-loving strangers and friends like yourselves: conference hor d'oeurves, maybe, before your real course of work is served tomorrow, when I can take a comfortable back seat.

So I did. First, I secured the appropriate permission from the present-day consistory of my native church. (This was easy. You write one book about a community and after that they will do whatever you ask - perhaps for fear that you may strike again.) Then I enlisted the generous assistance of Herbert Brinks, especially, and of Conrad Bolt and other members of the Calvin archives and library staff. Soon I was able to confront the subjective oral tradition, which I had boldly committed to writing in *Eighty Acres*, with the objective record as shown in the consistory minutes.

Here is a summary of the first part of what the consistory record shows.

The church was founded in June of 1912 as the West Branch of the Vogel Center Christian Reformed Church. Albert Schepers was not only the very first name on the list of charter members, he was also one of the first two elders chosen. He was elected for one year, the other elder for two years. Then he was named president of the consistory. But that November, five months later, a decision was made to have three instead of just two elders and to hold a congregational meeting and election on Thanksgiving Day. A new slate of four, including Albert Schepers, was then formed, two of them to be elected and to join the other, continuing, incumbent, thus making three elders. In this Thanksgiving Day election Albert Schepers lost out.

Presumably he could have said: "No fair; less than six months ago, I was elected for a year." I don't know if he said that: the oral tradition is that he said something more, to wit: "A conspiracy was hatched by my neighbors, George Baas and Fester De Jong, fellow consistory members. They schemed to stay <u>in</u> the new enlarged consistory and to get me rotated out." That's the oral tradition.

When I look at the cold record, its dates and numbers, I am duly impressed that at least the lost election part of the family tradition can be so readily mapped onto the recorded facts. Considering the data, one might

think, Well, maybe he was right: perhaps there was a plan to get him out. Whereupon scholarly honesty compels me to go a step farther and to speculate: Maybe, knowing Albert Schepers, they had excellent reasons for wanting to get him out, and chose the best available route, a slight ecclesiastical manipulation of the democratic process: body language. Indeed, that they wanted him out of the consistory for very good reasons is my dark and melancholy suspicion though the record does not say.

I turn now to what happened after the lost election, and I shall read some relevant entries from the consistory minutes. They are not in English, but I shall render them by my lights, hoping you will pardon my Dutch, which I did not learn at my mother's knee or at similar low joints where some of you may have picked it up. In my youth, Dutch was the shield which kept adult confidences from children. I picked mine up hurriedly in Amsterdam as a student thirty years ago and I don't use it on a daily basis now in New England. But I want you to get the flavor of the record. So here goes.

June 25, 1913, just six months after the lost election: "Beslooten om een lidmaat te bezoeken...weegens ergernis maaken in de gemeente." They 'decided to visit a church member because of the disturbance, or scandal, he was creating in the community.' And the committee was named, the home missionary pastor and a consistory member.

"July 24, 1913: Art 2: The committee reported "dat A H Schepers vol hard en niet naar rede wil luisteren" - 'Schepers was stubborn and wouldn't listen to them.' So the consistory made two further decisions: "het eerste trap van Sensuur anhem toe te passen Om niet. . .aan het Avond maaal to komen," that is, 'to apply the first step of censure by forbidding him to participate in the Communion.' And they also decided "om er nogmaals een Commisi heen te Zenden," that is, 'to send another delegation to meet with him.'

So this response was a swift and stern, coming on July 24, just a month after the first delegation. What do farmers do during July? They haul hay, using a pitchfork. What was Albert Schepers probably doing when the first delegation, the minister and the elder, arrived at his yard? Thus the body language of oral tradition dovetails perfectly into the documentary record.

The committee reported the following month, but this is merely received as information--"voor keningsgeving aangenoomen." For twelve months and twelve consistory meetings, there is nothing recorded on the case. After one year, in August 1914, the consistory decided to name another committee to admonish ("vermaanen") Schepers: "En indien hij weer zegt dat DeJong en Baas koomen moet, dat Ze bereid zijn te koomen." 'If he demands that DeJong and Bass--the alleged offenders--come, they are ready to do so.' Here was expressed willingness to meet him more than halfway, surely a generous offer. What more could he ask? But the next month (Sept. 24, 1914) the committee reports that "A Schepers zegt teegen de Commisi, dat hij voortaan geen Commisi meer Ontvanger wil." 'No more delegations, period!'

The consistory decided at the very next meeting (October 29, 1914) to proceed. Since he would not recieve a delegation, they chose "hem per brief te laaten weeten dat hij zich Schuldig gemaakt heeft"--'to inform him by letter that he was guilty of'--"Optand en Laster." Call that 'insubordination (rebellion) and slander (back-biting).'

Then they made another decision, namely, to announce to the church the following Sunday that a memberwas guilty of "Opstand en Laster," and to implore the church to pray for him: ". . .om voorhem te bidden Opdat God hemmooge genadig zijn, en hij met berouw en Schuldbelijdenis tot de gemeente van Christus moge terugkeeren." Here in the record were the tracks of that most traumatic Sunday of my mother's memory, with the terrible words ("We gotta pray for your Pa, don't we?"), sharper than any two-edged sword, that pierced her heart. Pierced too, undoubtedly, the heart of the whole family, the whole congregation.

The Church Order makes clear that no one is to be excommunicated without the advice and consent of the classis, and this young consistory followed that procedure. Within six months they did appeal to classis, and did receive an answer: that much is clear. What is less clear is, what the question was, and what the answer was. If they were not expecting to excommunicate him, it is unlikely that they would have gone to classis. At any rate, by July of 1915, precisely two years after the pitchfork incident, the record shows that the consistory made its final decision and its final entry in the minutes: ". . .het aan Staande Zondag aan de gemeente bekend te maaken Dat Schepers niet meer tot de gemeente behoort,"--'to announce that Schepers no longer belongs to this church.'

It appears that he was not finally excommunicated after all: that his membership was simply terminated. Why not excommunicated? I shall come to that, but first I must back off again a thousand miles for perspective.

Suppose that the Albert Schepers problem had occurred, let's say, a century ago in Washington, New Hampshire, under the protocols of New England's Congregational Calvinists. How would it have been handled? Although I cannot be certain, I can make a fair estimate. While studying Washington church records I found the standard form for discipline cases. Called a "Citation," it was a form to be filled in and delivered to the offending member. The Citation, with a few blanks filled in, reads as follows:

> This certifes that the Church of Christ in Washington cite and warn Albert Schepers to appear before said church on the 10th day of June at two of the clock in the afternoon, then and there to answer to such questions as shall be proposed to you relative to your conduct for the sin of. . .(fill in the blank). . .and give satisfaction to the church.
>
> Signed in the name, and on behalf of said church. . .etc., etc.

That's how those Congregational Calvinists did it. They did it a number of times in Washington, New Hampshire.

Here a question intrigues me: If I turn back the clock a hundred years, and suppose that I am in trouble with the church, would I rather be at the mercy of the Calvinist Church in Washington, New Hampshire, or the Calvinist Church in West Branch, Michigan? Well, in New Hampshire I am summoned to appear before the church. (Evidently, any other members of the church might attend as well, if they liked that sort of thing. This is a world where local government is executed in a town meeting.) But if I were Christian Reformed--and also, I think, if I were Reformed--I was not summoned; I was sent a delegation. Maybe two or three delegations. At first glance, then, it is easy for me to prefer the Dutch system as somehow closer to the spirit of Christ.

If you were summoned with a citation, as in New England, and stubborn, such as Albert Schepers, you could just not appear. Judgment might then be swift, beginning with another citation. Evidently, you were guilty until you came to prove yourself innocent--though of course, and this is important, not every sin cited was such as could lead to excommunication. On the other hand, if you were sent a delegation, as in West Branch, you might not receive them; you might even chase them away with such weapons as came to hand. Then the church has to have a flexible system of responses: it may have to take incremental "steps." But all of these are steps on a path pointed directly toward excommunication.

Let's look farther. The Congregational form of citation had a blank to fill in: ". . .to answer questions relative to your conduct for the sin of ----." A typical way to fill in the blank was "covenant-breaking" (sometimes with specifications), and it certainly would have been so designated in a case like that of Albert Schepers. So, in West Branch he was charged with "opstand en laster," insubordination and slander, but in New England, I suggest, the same offence would have been "covenant breaking."

There is a tinge of irony here for someone like me, a Congregationalist now, but reared within the folds of Dutch Calvinism. For although our Dutch churches often talk a good covenant theology line, they don't put it to work in quite the way the New Englanders always did. For example, when I became a member of the Christian Reformed Church many years ago it was not formally characterized as my "covenanting" with God and my church; at best I acknowledged that there was, somehow, a covenant that God had designed. But when I became a member of the Congregational Church I did formally "covenant" with God and my fellow church members. "Covenant" is a verb in New England, a noun in Michigan.

To Albert Schepers it was made clear that he had slandered the church, disturbed its peace, refused its admonition; but this wasn't expressed as his having broken a solemn covenant with God and his neighbors which he had voluntarily entered upon. So here is a nice question for theology and polity: Is Albert Scheper' kind of offense to be properly understood as (a) insubordination before the authority of the church, or (b) the breaking of his covenant with his fellow-members and his God? Two different ideas. Two different theological understandings. The difference might not strike one if one didn't suspect, what is in fact the case, namely, that they reflect somewhat different traditions of Church Polity, and that each of them is firmly rooted far back, separately but quite explicitely, in early 17th century Calvinist soil: respectively, the *Church Order* of Dort for the Dutch (not an overtly covenantal document), and the very covenantal New England *Cambridge Platform* of 1648 for the Congregationalists. Two very tempting historical bypaths in their own right. . .but not for now.[1]

For now, I'm going to race back one last time to West Branch, Michigan, where we lately took note that the consistory evidently did not excommunicate this insubordinate member. Why not?

To understand that, I first read again the official form for excommunication, as I had it available in the English version. I presume that it follows closely the text already in use at the time of the Synod of Dordrecht.[2] Quite a document, even in English. Quite a body of heavy, heavy language. Full of solemn gloom about the ruin of a member, its accents are breathy with righteousness, less so with compassion. Its tone of voice is entirely consistent with its theology, for one notices that it effectively treats excommunication as exclusion, not only from the local church membership (as would have been the case in New England), but also from the Kingdom of Christ as well (as would not have been the case in New England). Exactly where did that sombre theological plank come from, I wondered? And of course it didn't take me long to discover again that it came from the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), which minces no words in equating discipline with excommunication and defining excommunication as excluding the unbeliever from the church and from "the Kingdom of Christ." Evidently, it was in the shadow of Heidelberg that the form for excommunication took shape. The next thing I did was an exercise in reconstructive imagination.

It is a summer Sunday in 1915 in the West Branch Christian Reformed Church. There in the center pew, as for every other Sunday, sits the wife of Albert Schepers together with their five children: Piet 18, Henk 16, Geesje 13, Margareet 8, and little Jan 6. All the other families have two parents present. Everybody knows that Albert Schepers is a stubborn dummkop, and they have heard about his "laster," and they love to shake their heads over one more retelling of the saga of the pitchfork. The body of Christ speaks a various language, and from Albert there is still the eloquence of his absence. The neighbors know that at this very moment he is at worship too, singing Dutch Psalms in that mellow tenor of his--but that is four miles north and three miles east at the Falmouth Reformed Church, where there are, incidentally, quite a few Hollanders, though some of them speak a lot of English at home.

And the question is, reverend consistory, are you this morning going to have the minister preach a sermon on Lords Day XXXI of the Catechism and then open that frightening form for excommunication and here before his family and neighbors read that man not only out of the West Branch congregation but out of the very Kingdom of Christ?

And the answer is: No; they are not going to do that. They are going to blink and dodge. This part of the body of Christ is going to take evasive action. They are saying a lot--by what they decided not to say. And they are going to hope--aren't they?--that somehow just dropping him from the rolls is okay in terms of the Church Order. Of course, they are in a bind. It is the Catechism and the Church Order that have put them in a bind. Are they groping, perhaps, for a higher New Testament morality?

And the next thing I did was to begin to wonder: This piece of body language, just dropping him from membership, was it okay in terms of the Church Order?

Oh dear! Oh joy! Another research question. Of course I now had to go to J. L. Shaver's famous volumes *The Polity of the Churches* with its version of the Dort Church Order, its summaries of Synodical interpretations of the Order, and Shaver's opinionated editorial comments - a wonderfully rich and slightly untidy assembly, chock-a-block with historical tidbits, good enough to waylay me for a full day. Incidentally, I had no such distractions when I went to the Constitution of the Reformed Church, for that church clearly prefers a more orderly display of its church order. The RCA periodically adapts and rewrites the old Dort Order, modernizing it, and then adopting it as a Constitution to supersede the older versions. Great for the life of the church, I suppose. Terrible for the life of historians, I fear, for they love the distractions.

Anyway, there among the footnotes in Shaver's *Polity* I found a ruling that throws another flicker of light upon the action of the West Branch consistory. Here is a decision of the Christian Reformed Church in 1867, when the denomination is at the advanced age of ten years old.

> One holding unfounded grievances, making. unproven charges, neglecting divine worship, and giving the consistory no opportunity to deal with him is to be informed simply by letter of the severance of his membership. (Shaver, *Polity*, p. 176)

Right on target. Made to order. But Rev. Shaver is quick to stick in a comment: "But it does not follow that Synod would approve of such a procedure today." "Today" is in the 1930s. I put that comment aside, recognizing that of course it opens up an entirely new line of historical interpretation of church polity,

which is for another time.[3] Taking the 1867 decision that I just read at face value, it sounds like an interpretation designed for the Albert Schepers case.

For here was a consistory, and indeed a whole church, caught between: (a) the fact that the Dort Church Order does not recognize a process of simply dropping members from the church; and (b) the fact that the Catechism and the Form embody a view of excommunication which they must have found, in this case, when they looked it and their neighbors squarely in the face, to be simply intolerable. Albert Schepers, obnoxious as he was, was not hell-bent, and they knew that, and so they weren't going to say he was. Face to face with their dilemma, they blinked, and glanced about for a loophole. And there was one. What I don't know is this: Whether they used this old one that I found, or fashioned one for themselves.

Of course, there is more to the story, including, as we must not forget, the eventual return of Albert Schepers to the fold. But I must hurry to conclude.

As some of us know only too well, when discipline has to be exercised in concrete cases in our own time and in our own churches, it may be an extremely painful business, which we approach with fear and prayer and trembling. Because it is so intense, so fraught with implications, public and private, so important for people, it may also, when studied at a distance, be wonderfully revealing of the heart and nerve of our traditions.

Earlier I noted, and regretted, that even the resourceful armies of New England historians had not adequately followed up the path of church discipline into the heart of their community studies. So it may not be much of a surprise, and certainly isn't a reproach, that the historians of recent Dutch-American culture haven't yet focused sharply on church discipline either. Voluminous records still patiently await this line of inquiry.

So I admit, finally, that I would not have led you into the raw tangles of this narrative if I had thought it were a story utterly unique, interesting if at all, only for its own sake. Let it rather be a metaphor for certain larger expressions, be they ever so clumsy or graceful, of the body of Christ in action: or at least a symbol for myriad other stories which, if they are retrieved and gathered together and studied collectively, may provide yet another perspective on the Dutch and their faith.

Endnotes

1. The Cambridge Platform begins with explicit and detailed exposition of the idea that it is the covenant which alone makes a group of believers into a particular church and congregation. Accordingly, when the Platform comes to discipline, the idea of the covenant and covenant-breaking is at the heart of the matter. It is worth noting that both the Dordrecht (1619) and the Cambridge (1648) Calvinists were under pressure to draft a church polity that their respective secular governments would subsequently accept.

Professor James Bratt had reminded me of the interesting fact that the Cambridge, Massachusetts, Puritans came from East Anglia, the area near Cambridge, England--the same area which had imported Dutch engineers to help drain the fens. Whether ideas on church polity or the covenant were imported with them is an interesting question. Was there a connection, in England, between the Synod of Dordrecht and the meeting in Cambridge, Massachusetts just a generation later? When I began thinking about this lecture, I did not expect that its two components, lodged in Michigan and New Hampshire, might be joined at the roots in the swamps of East Anglia, England. But they might be.

2. I have not studied the derivation of the text of the traditional Christian Reformed "Form for Excommunication"--the one replaced in 1982 with new forms for the purpose. The Church Order approved by the Synod of Dordrecht (1618-19) says (in translation, of course) that excommunication shall be conducted "agreeably to the Form adopted for that purpose according to the Word of God." 'Adopted' by whom? Dort? Is the Church Order recommending a particular form, or only that there be a suitable one? Whether the form or forms in use during the subsequent centuries in the Reformed Churches in the Netherlands and in the United States, and which are rendered into English by decision of the 1913 Christian Reformed Synod predate, in language or in substance, the Synod of Dordrecht--this would be worth

investigating. Several things relevant to this lecture might be illuminated thereby, including the role of covenant thinking in the process, as well as the role of the stern teaching on excommunication of the Heidelberg Catechism.

3. In 1867 there was not a Christian Reformed Synod. The highest authority was the single classis, Graafschap, whose minutes are the source of the text quoted from Shaver. The Reverend Shaver is writing 70 years later and he, more knowledgable than anyone of his time, is uncertain what Synod would say. Is he--and perhaps his whole denomination--caught between the unspoken assumptions of the Church Order and the realities of church life?