

61. GERHART GROOTE AND HIS FOLLOWERS

In previous chapters, we saw how men in different European countries fought against the terrible conditions that were developing in the Roman Catholic Church. They raised their voices in protest against this development. Bishop Claudius of Turin worked in Italy. Peter Waldo laboured in France. John Wycliffe let his warning voice sound in England. John Huss led the struggle in Bohemia.

Those men experienced hatred and opposition from the Roman clergy. The Roman Catholic Church did not want to listen to their warnings. They stubbornly continued on the wrong path and opposed these men wherever possible. But through their labour, these men gradually prepared the way for the great Reformation. That's why their work has been vital.

Perhaps you think:

"Have there been any men in the Netherlands who fought the false doctrines accepted in the church of Rome?"

Then we answer:

"Yes, God has also raised men in the Netherlands who opened many people's eyes to the heresies." God also prepared the Dutch people for the great Reformation. We wish to tell you something about that in this chapter.

GERHART GROWS UP

There is a large crowd at one of the plazas in the German city of Cologne. They are all watching some public entertainment. A few actors are performing a play. At times there is a burst of laughter.

Everyone is happy and enjoying themselves.

In the audience is a man with a broad smile, attentively watching the show. That man is born Dutch. His name is *Gerhart Groote*.

Suddenly a stranger addresses him.

"What are you seeking here?" the stranger asks and then adds:

"You must become another person."

Before Gerhart Groote recovers from his astonishment, the stranger disappears. But those few simple words make a deep impression on Gerhart.

"You must become another person!"

Yes, that is true because he does not take anything in life seriously.

He does not make himself directly guilty of gross sins, but he is worldly and frivolous, looking only for the bright side of life.

"What are you seeking here?"

Yes, what is he doing here? He has no business here. Suddenly the fun has gone out of it for Gerhart Groote. He leaves the plaza with a bowed head, reflecting on the few words he had heard. Gerhart Groote!

Who is he, and why is he in Cologne?

Gerhart Groote was born in 1340 at Deventer.

He came from a prominent family.

His father was mayor and councillor. Since his parents were wealthy, Gerhart was able to study. He attended schools at Aachen, Cologne and then continued studying at the university in Paris. The Lord had given him a clear mind. In Paris, he studied theology, law and medical science. When Gerhart finished his studies, he returned to Deventer.

Since he came from a well-to-do family, and now that he was a learned man, he received two ecclesiastical offices, one in Utrecht and one in Aachen. He did not have to work in either place but earned lots. His were two honorary posts. Now he could live a carefree and luxurious life, which he did! He was always dressed in expensive clothes and thoroughly enjoyed the world's pleasures.

But that changed when he stood watching that public entertainment in Cologne and an unknown man spoke to him. From that moment, Gerhart's life changed completely. Those simple words had made him think.



*Gerhart Groote
1340-1384.
Prabook.com*

GERHART BECOMES A DEACON

Sometime later, he met the prior (Father Superior) of a monastery in Arnhem. The prior spoke seriously to him and pointed out the responsibility of life, death and eternity.

Those conversations caused Gerhart Groote to reflect even more.



*Book of hours of the virgin Mary.
Part of a manuscript
copy. Gerhart established a
centre for manuscript copiers and
led the formation of the Brethren
of the Common Life 1470
<https://www.lot-art.com/>*

He entered that monastery at Arnhem and remained there for three years. He often locked himself up in his cell to do penance for his sins. Yet he did not become a monk by taking the monastic vow. He lived there as a guest. After three years, he left the monastery and returned to public life. However, he had become a different man. He

declined the income which he received from his two posts of honour. He no longer wanted to receive that money. He gave a large part of his wealth to the poor. He rejected his expensive clothes and dressed in simple garments. It became his sincere desire to go out and preach. The bishop of Utrecht said:

"Well, that's possible. Have yourself ordained as a priest!" However, Gerhart Groote firmly shook his head.

"No," he answered, "never! I won't become a priest for a hat full of gold!" Well, what then? The bishop of Utrecht found a solution.

He proposed:

"I can ordain you as a deacon; then you may go out and preach."

Gerhart Groote eagerly accepted that suggestion. So, he was appointed and ordained as a deacon, and then he was allowed to go and preach.

About 1375, he began travelling through the country as a preacher. He preached in many Dutch cities. Since he lived in Deventer, he started there. But he also ascended the pulpits in Zwolle and Kampen. From there, he travelled to the western part of the country, to Utrecht, Gouda, Delft, Leiden, and Amsterdam; all these cities heard him preach.

I could mention many more places he visited.

Whenever he intended to visit a city, he announced his coming in advance. His followers attached large posters to the church doors or other conspicuous places. He did not have to complain about lack of interest.

Most of the time, the church building could not hold the crowds. So, when it was nice weather, he often spoke at open-air meetings, in the marketplace or on open fields. And what was most important, he preached in the mother tongue so that *everyone* could understand him. That was the idea! The people flocked from far and near to hear him. His church services lasted a lot longer than we are used to. Sometimes his services could last for three hours! On such days he usually spoke twice. Many people who had secured a good spot in the morning did not go home between services but remained seated in the church, where they even ate their lunch because they were afraid they would lose their good spot! They were willing to sacrifice something to hear Gerhart preach.

Gerhart did not go outside either. Between the services, he would not eat but walked to and fro, meditating on what he would preach that afternoon. He was a penitential preacher. He showed the people where they sinned and preached the necessity of repentance. He was



*Gerhart Grote.
<https://alchetron.com/>*

honest and upright and spared no one. He did not differentiate between rich and poor. He publicly reprimanded the clergy and the monks about their wicked way of life.

His own blameless life showed that he meant what he said. That gave him lots of influence on the general public. Sadly, he remained Catholic in his doctrine. He did not attack the errors of the church. That's why Gerhart Groote has not been a forerunner of the Reformation like, for instance, John Wycliffe. He remained a faithful and obedient servant of the Roman Catholic church.

Although he was a severe penitence preacher, he still had a cheerful and pleasant disposition. He had a friendly word for everyone he met. In his actions, he was cool, calm and collected, except when he exposed the wicked conduct of the clergy. Then he indignantly admonished them in no uncertain terms!

As already stated, Gerhart always dressed very soberly. His lifestyle was sensible, modest, and very different from the licentious lives of other monks and clergy members. Such a man must surely command respect and reverence from the people in the pew.

Do you know who was not so happy with the preaching of Gerhart Groote? The clergy and monks, especially the mendicant monks. Through the preaching of Gerhart Groote, their influence on the people dropped considerably. That's why their enmity erupted against him. They spied on him, wanting to accuse him of heresy. That was not so easy. Since Gerhart Groote wished to remain an obedient member of the Church, his lawyer always accompanied him, who accurately wrote down everything he said. He did this on purpose, for if others accused him of heresy, he would be better able to defend himself. That was very sensible of him.

Yet the mendicant monks still complained about him to the bishop of Utrecht and later even to the pope. In 1383 the pope forbade him to preach and, as an obedient member of the Church, Gerhart Groote obeyed. Do you see that we

cannot consider him among the forerunners of the Reformation? Since then, he spent his time studying.

A year later, in 1384, he died of the plague that swept through Deventer. Gerhart Groote had visited one of his followers suffering from the epidemic and was lying in bed, very sick. Soon after, he also became ill and died. His influence on ordinary people has been significant because he did much more than preach during his life.

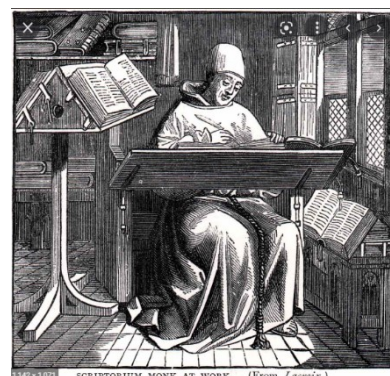
GERHART'S OTHER ACTIVITIES

In those days, there was a well-known ecclesiastical school in Deventer. When Gerhart Groote was home, he often received students in his home. Most of those students were poor. Gerhart Groote helped them as much as possible. He had them copy books and parts of the Bible in their spare time and paid them for it. In that way, those poor students could earn something. It was not long before he had various scribes working for him. That work of copying parts of the Bible and the works of the church fathers was very beneficial. When finished, the students distributed them among the people.

That was the value of this remarkable man.

He acquainted the people with the Bible and the writings of the church fathers. That labour bore blessed fruits.

One day his followers came to him with a friendly request. They asked him if they would be allowed to live together in one house, so they could combine their resources and live more cheaply. Gerhart Groote pulled a doubtful face. He feared the opposition of the mendicant monks. However,



SCRIPTORIUM MONK AT WORK. (From *Laurels*.)
Student doing copy-work in Scriptorium. World history encyclopedia

they persisted, and finally Gerhart Groote agreed. He said:

"OK then, go ahead, and I shall try to be a father to you as long as I live." He promised that he would protect them and seek their welfare. That's how they established a fraternal home where they now lived together. These brothers did not form a new monastic order.

These brothers consisted of a mixture of clergy and laymen. They did not take a monastic vow. Everyone was free to join but also to leave again. Because the clergy could write, their work consisted of copying books. The others kept busy farming and gardening. They cultivated vegetables and even grew the grain they needed. Because they did not want to join a monastic order, they called themselves *Brethren of the Common Life*.

GERHART GROOTE'S FOLLOWERS

The first fraternity home was in Deventer, but soon others followed. Not only male fraternities were established, but also female fraternities in which unmarried women lived together. Those fraternities performed useful work.

Besides copying books and parts of the Bible, they also functioned as preachers. Especially after the death of Gerhart Groote in 1384, many of his followers continued to establish male and female fraternities. And, like Gerhart Groote, many travelled through the country preaching and bringing the Gospel to the people. True, they remained Catholic, but if we listen to their words, we stand amazed. They mention striking, pointed things.

Come, let's listen in.

A preacher stands in the pulpit, *a Brother of the Common Life*. The church is full. A great crowd listens attentively to the sermon.

"He who dies in his sins is condemned, though our loving Lady and all the saints prayed for him."

"Our loving Lady" refers to Mary, the mother of the Lord. He continues to speak calmly, and then we suddenly hear:

"Where there is no repentance, an indulgence is of no value, and where we *do* find repentance, an indulgence is unnecessary."

Undoubtedly, the Roman Catholic Church disagreed with *that* sentence!



One of the schools Gerhart started <https://alchetron.com/>

A moment later, these words ring through the large church: "Instead of trusting Mary, you must hold on to Christ, who so kindly invites all the weary to Himself." These words are the pure Gospel!

"Where there is no repentance, an indulgence is of no value, and where we do find repentance, an indulgence is unnecessary."

Those *Brothers of the Common Life* also did much to relieve the poor. They provided many poor people with the necessities of life.

At the same time, other brothers devoted themselves to education. They instructed boys from the general population. They established schools in 's Hertogenbosch, Deventer and Zwolle (all Dutch cities). The school in 's Hertogenbosch alone counted twelve hundred students at times. That national education bore rich fruit. Later, when the printing press was invented, copying books became unnecessary since printing was much faster and cheaper. So they began to apply themselves more to national education.

There have been some famous men among those *Brethren of the Common Life*. We cannot write about all those people.

The name of one of them was Thomas a Kempis. He is the author of a world-famous booklet: 'The imitation of Christ.' At the council of Constance, where the church hierarchy condemned Wycliffe and burnt John Huss, the pope protected these brethren

against the hostile mendicant monks. That is also why we cannot count *those Brethren of the Common Life* among the forerunners of the Reformation, though their work prepared the people for the Great Reformation. God used them to provide His Word to the general population.



Thomas a Kempis.
1380-1471
Wikipedia

Later many *Brethren* did join the Reformation. The Lord did not forget the Netherlands!

QUESTIONS

1. Summarise the early life of Gerhart Groote before the events in Cologne.
2. What happened in Cologne while Groote was watching a play?
3. What changes occurred in his life? Why did he enter a monastery?
4. Why did he become a deacon?
5. What type of preacher was Groote?
6. Why wasn't he called a forerunner of the Reformation?
7. Who opposed his work? What was the result?
8. How did a fraternal home differ from a monastic order?
9. Describe the activities of the fraternal group.
10. List the points made in the preaching of the *Brethren of the Common Life*. Show how they differed from the teachings of the Church.
11. How did the brethren assist the poor?
12. How did they promote education?
13. Identify Thomas a Kempis.

FURTHER STUDY

1. Why do you suppose that Groote had no desire to become a priest?