

88. THE REFORMATION IN THE NETHERLANDS

A QUICK SUMMARY

We have now looked at the leading countries of Europe. We have seen how the Reformation spread, despite the desperate attempts of the Roman Catholic Church to stop it. It was a constant, relentless struggle, causing much upheaval. The persecutors shed streams of blood. Rome stopped at nothing.

Germany was devastated and ravaged at the end of the bitter Thirty-Year War. That war had almost depopulated entire provinces.

We learnt about the cruelty and misery inflicted on the French Huguenots. We only have to look at the Huguenots to see that the woman who was drunk with the blood of the saints, as described in Revelation 17, can be none other than Rome.

We also discussed the struggle in England and Scotland. There too, much blood and many tears were shed. There too, was war and destruction, although not as bad as in Germany and France. Naturally, we cannot discuss everything that happened in other countries like Sweden, Poland, and Hungary. If we do that, we will never get done. It was the same story everywhere: the same scenes, the same beastly cruelties. One day God will judge the Roman Catholic Church for all that spilt blood.

But we must still learn about one more country: The Netherlands. The Dutch soil has also been drenched with the blood of the martyrs. If there is one country where God has shown His grace, it is that one. If there is one country where God has demonstrated His almighty power with numerous miracles, it is The Netherlands. The desperate struggle in the Low Lands, and the many rescues God provided because of His eternal faithfulness, have caused many to compare The Netherlands with Palestine. Many have observed and described the resemblance between the Dutch people and the Israelites. From the earliest times, God blessed that land and people. We have not forgotten how Christendom, after a severe

struggle, conquered and how paganism had to yield. Just think of the missionaries Wilfrid, Willibrord, Boniface and many others. But as the centuries passed, the light of God's Word was increasingly obscured again through the false doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church, also in The Netherlands. But in God's time, the light of the Reformation would also push its way powerfully through that country.

The Dutch people are known to be diligent. Under God's blessing, industry, commerce, and fishing have made that country great and prosperous—strong commercial cities developed in both south and north of The Netherlands, and many people became wealthy. Especially in the Northern Netherlands, a tough generation of fishermen emerged, hardened by the never-ending struggle with water and wind. The enterprising Dutch spirit was world-famous. Those people belonged to the most educated people on earth. Many books were printed and read at the end of the Middle Ages. They realised the importance of education and encouraged it. Through this, God prepared the way for the Reformation, just like in other European countries.

Just think of Gerhart Groote and his followers, 'The Brethren of the Common Life', who had done much valuable work in this area. True, they were not forerunners of the Reformation, but they paved the way for the Reformation.

The writings of John Wycliffe from England also came to The Netherlands and were eagerly read.

Erasmus, too, had exerted enormous influence. His work opened many Dutch eyes to the deep corruptness of the Roman Catholic Church, even though he did not join The Reformation himself. When danger threatened, Erasmus withdrew and deliberately chose the side of the Roman Catholic Church. He said he was not prepared to give his life for the truth. But God used him. He was scaffolding. God often uses people to benefit His Church, even when they don't belong to it themselves.

REHETORICIANS

We must still mention the *Rhetoricians*. Do you know who they were? At the end of the Middle Ages, groups of people arose who practised public speaking and the art of debate. Rhetorician means rich in oratory, able speakers. They wrote and recited beautiful poems. They also presented public stage performances. They would erect a wooden stage in a prominent marketplace where they would appear. When they performed, that marketplace would be full of curious people who had come together to see what was happening.

Sometimes they studied a part of the Bible and performed on that. That way, the people received visible instruction from the Bible.

By searching through and studying God's Word, the Rhetoricians soon noticed that the doctrine of Rome did not agree with what they read in the Bible. The errors of the Roman Catholic Church became very clear to them. They highlighted those errors in their performances and ridiculed the false doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church. We'll give you one example.



Rhetoricians at the window. Painting by Jan Steen.
<https://www.tripimprover.com/blog/>

A SKIT BY THE RHETORICIANS

One day the Rhetoricians performed a play called: 'The Converted Merchant'.

A merchant was worried about his sins. Finally, he was at his wits' end, and in his anguish, he visited a clergyman to find peace. This cleric pointed him to the many means of grace the Roman Catholic Church provided. However, it did not help because his anguish and anxiety remained. So, he sought help from a monk. This monk also tried to help, but he still found no rest for his soul. Then the unhappy merchant met the two apostles, Paul and Luke. Immediately he asked them for help and support. The apostles asked him what he had done so far to obtain peace. The merchant told them that he had already been to a clergyman and a monk but that they had been unable to help him. The apostles exchanged a meaningful look, shook their heads thoughtfully and whispered: "That man has taken the wrong medicine."

Immediately they gave him something to make him vomit, and soon after, the merchant spat out many indulgences and pilgrimages.

"That's it," said the two apostles, "*that* gives relief, doesn't it?"

Then they proclaimed the gospel to that merchant and directed him to the Lord Jesus as the only ground for salvation. The merchant received the so-fervently desired peace for his soul and eternal life through that preaching.

We all understand the aim of that skit. Indulgences and pilgrimages cannot deliver a person from sin nor give peace to his soul. You can only receive the forgiveness of sin and guilt through the blood of Christ. Because the Rhetoricians playfully presented this truth, the general public immediately understood and quickly remembered it. The Rhetoricians made many skits like that. Erasmus did something similar. The Roman Catholic clergy were furious. They complained to the authorities about the Rhetoricians. When persecution erupted, they arrested many rhetoricians, and some died at the stake.

Their work opened many people's eyes and paved the way for the Reformation.

PERSECUTION IN THE NETHERLANDS BEGINS IN EARNEST

When Luther began his public battle with the Roman Catholic Church in Germany, his writings were also translated into Dutch, printed by the thousands, and eagerly read throughout the land. Those writings resonated in the hearts of many. The Reformation quickly spread.

In 1515 Charles V became the ruler of the Netherlands.

After the Diet of Worms in 1521, Charles V issued laws against the 'heretics'. These laws were called *placards*.

One of the first placards declared that the printing, distribution and reading of Luther's writings were strictly forbidden. The authorities must arrest anyone caught doing those things and put them to death. The following year, in 1522, the Inquisition, that dreaded Roman Catholic 'court of justice', came to the Netherlands.

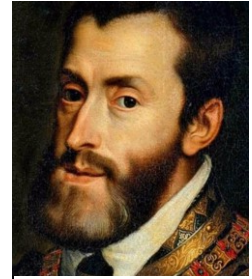
That same year a second placard appeared. This one declared that the Roman Catholics would

confiscate all the possessions of the 'transgressors'. This meant that whenever the Inquisition arrested a 'heretic', they would take ownership of all his possessions. So, when they killed that 'heretic', the family was left with nothing. They disinherited his wife and children if he was married, immediately reducing them to extreme poverty. The accuser who had betrayed them received half of the dead man's goods, and the government took the other half. The result of that law was that everyone began hunting the heretics.

There have always been traitors, but *this* law made them appear in droves! Neighbours, who had peacefully lived next to each other for many years and were even friends, helping each other when necessary, now lodged complaints against each other because they could earn something from it. Wouldn't they receive half of all the confiscated possessions? Especially the rich were no longer safe at all. Greed, envy and jealousy of people are so great. Nobody trusted each other anymore. Everyone lived in constant fear. Persecution raged terribly in the Netherlands - the Roman Catholic Inquisition killed true believers by the thousands. They showed no mercy. More about that later.

Charles V could not achieve anything against the Reformation in Germany. There, the emperor needed the help of the Protestant electors. He depended on their soldiers in the severe struggle with France and against the intrusive Turks.

However, that was not the case in the Netherlands, for that country was Charles' *hereditary* land. There he was complete lord and master, and he could do as he pleased. True, laws existed in the Netherlands, and former monarchs had granted various privileges to the Dutch cities and provinces, but Charles V did not worry about that. So, on the one side of the border, in



Emperor Charles V, (1500-1558) who inherited The Netherlands
<https://historiek.net/karel-v-koning>.



The Rhetoricians. Painting by Jan Steen
https://www.wga.hu/html_m/s/steen

Germany, the people could go to church unmolested and unpunished, while on the other side, in the Netherlands, the prisons were full of the faithful. There they cruelly tortured innocent citizens, and the stakes smoked everywhere. Some textbooks show that Charles V was a good emperor and loved the Dutch people so much. But that is a big lie. Charles V was a bitter enemy of God's people and a bold persecutor of the Church of the Lord.

The number of martyrs is much higher than many suppose. Some writers tell us that during the reign of Charles V in the Netherlands, he caused fifty thousand people to be killed. Other writers tell us that this number is greatly exaggerated. We do not know. God only knows how many lost their life. But we can say with certainty that many thousands were cruelly tortured and killed.

They were buried alive.

They were hanged.

They were publicly burned.

They were tortured to death in the torture chambers.

They were drowned in large tubs of water.

They were sewn into bags and tossed into the water, where they perished helplessly.

One day God will bring justice, and all that blood will be required from the hand of the Roman Catholic Church and Charles V.

The worst is: they thought they were performing a good deed by doing those things! The Roman Catholic Inquisition made the people believe they could earn salvation if they informed them of who was a heretic.

The suffering and grief of the faithful in the Netherlands are indescribable. Thousands left everything they had and fled abroad. They crossed the dangerous and turbulent North Sea in open row boats and fled to England. Others moved to Germany, where there was no persecution.

The refugees established a congregation in London, the capital of England. The many refugees also formed congregations in the German cities of



Believers leaving for England. <https://newsela.com/>

Wezel and Emden. And the Dutch refugees formed a congregation in Danzig, on the German/Dutch border. There they came together to hear the Word of God. Despite the bitter persecution, the Reformation continued to grow in the Netherlands. It was unstoppable because it was *God's* work. The desperate attempts of Rome to squash the Reformation failed. Through blood and tears, God established His Church there. First, the writings of Luther came to the Netherlands. Soon after, the pamphlets of Calvin, the great reformer in Geneva, also arrived in the Netherlands. The Dutch became Calvinistic. But do you know what *really* promoted the Reformation? The people had the Bible!

THE LIESVELDT BIBLE

In 1525, there was a complete Bible in the Dutch language. More translations of the Bible followed. The "Liesveldt Bible" became the most well-known Dutch Bible.

Jacob van Liesveldt lived in Antwerp, South Netherlands, and he printed and distributed these Bibles. He did not publish this Bible in one thick volume as we have it today but in multiple smaller sections. Van Liesveldt did this on purpose. One large book was too clumsy! The people could hide those small booklets much easier whenever danger threatened. It was strictly forbidden to have a Bible in the house! A Bible in your home

meant certain death if discovered! The placards were very strict about that.



Title Page of the Van Liesveldt Bible. 1526.
Wikipedia.

And yet, despite the danger, thousands bought God's Word. Behind closed shutters and locked doors, the people read God's Word by the dim light of a smoky oil lamp. They jumped at every suspicious noise, quickly closed 'the forbidden book' and carefully hid it. They knew many were ready to betray them for the reward. Those traitors snuck around

the houses, peering through small cracks in the curtains to see if they could discover something 'wrong'. What terrible times they were! But the hunger for that spiritual food exceeded the fear of threatening danger.

We are so privileged that we may freely read God's Word undisturbed. Do we appreciate that? How many families neglect the reading of the Bible? Are *we* ready to sacrifice our *life* for that? We ought to be ashamed of ourselves. Look at our forefathers! They defied great dangers. Many times, van Liesveldt had to print another edition of the Bible.

Van Liesveldt also printed Bibles with pictures in them. This made it more attractive and helped the general population understand the contents better.

In Matthew 4, we read about the devil tempting the Lord Jesus after He had been in the wilderness for forty days. Jacob van Liesveldt printed a picture of the devil in a monk's frock with that chapter. The meaning was clear! But it was a very dangerous picture and cost him his life!

The Inquisition arrested him, and in 1543 he was beheaded in Antwerp. It would have been wiser if he had not printed that picture!

Yet the work of God kept spreading throughout the Netherlands. Though it was extremely dangerous, others continued van Liesveldt's work. The printing and distribution of the Bible continued. Rome raged. They *must* exterminate the Reformation in the Netherlands! More and more placards appeared. They became even stricter. The punishments they threatened the heretics with became more severe, but it didn't help. Rome clenched its fist in impotent rage but could not win this battle.

The blood of the martyrs was also the seed of the church in the Netherlands.

It is impossible to tell the stories of all those martyrs. We do not even know the names of most of them.

In the following chapters, we will mention something about a few of the well-known martyrs.

QUESTIONS

1. Who is the woman described to us in Revelation 17? How is she described?
2. List the benefits the Lord bestowed on the Netherlands.
3. Who were the Rhetoricians?
4. Explain the meaning of the 'wrong medicine' taken by the merchant.
5. What is the meaning of the term 'placard'?
6. How did the Inquisition operate in the Netherlands?
7. What is meant by a 'hereditary land'?
8. How did Charles V deal with the Reformation in the Netherlands?
9. Did the Netherlands follow the teachings of Luther or Calvin?
10. What was the 'Liesveldt Bible'?
11. Why was Mr Liesveldt killed?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Read Revelation 6:9-11. When will the blood of the martyrs be avenged?