

Interview with Terry Elzinga

Mark Hoeksema

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Mr. Terry Elzinga, Zeeland, Michigan

MHH: Mr. Elzinga, where and when were you born?

TE: I was born in September of 1940, in Borculo, Michigan.

MHH: Who were your parents?

TE: My parents were Tom and Edith Elzinga.

MHH: Where did you grow up?

TE: When I was about four months old, my parents moved from Borculo to Holland, Michigan, in the Tunnel Park area (that would be west of Holland).

MHH: Why did they move there?

TE: My dad had a farm in Borculo, Michigan. But then he took a job in town at the Holland Furnace Company. And they had become members at Holland Church in about 1938. They moved in January of 1941. So, the draw was to Holland for them as a family.

MHH: Prior to that time, where was their church membership?

TE: Originally my parents were members of Borculo Christian Reformed Church. My father was excommunicated from Borculo Church because he opposed the three points of common grace. Then their membership moved to Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church, I think, shortly after Hudsonville was organized. I'm not sure whether they were charter members, but it was right in that time frame.

MHH: So he was excommunicated over the issue of common grace.

TE: Yes, that's correct. He opposed that. My uncle, who lived in Grand Rapids, was a member, I believe, of Eastern Avenue Christian Reformed Church, and he was a follower of Rev. Hoeksema. And he was quite an influence upon my father, and, I think, convinced him of the error of common grace. And my dad, being quite a feisty individual (laughter), opposed that pretty strenuously in his congregation in the Christian Reformed Church.

Then he was disciplined for that. and eventually was put out.

MHH: So, by way of Hudsonville, they eventually made their way to Holland. So he was a long-time member at Holland?

TE: From 1938 on, until he passed away in '81.

MHH: Tell me a little bit about your childhood and your youth. What do you remember as far as growing up was concerned, in general, but also in the context of the church? I'm sure you have some memories.

TE: I'm from a large family. I'm the tenth of eleven, so consequently, material things we didn't have much of. My dad had quite a way with making things stretch. I recall that we went to the Dutch Boy Bakery that was in our neighborhood and got day-old bread. He also went to the Holland Co-op and he got the corn cobs from there. As kids, we would take the few kernels of corn that were left on the cobs to feed the chickens and then burn the corn cobs in the furnace (laughter).

MHH: He was definitely frugal then. Probably had to be.

TE: Had to be, I think, with a family the size he had. And, of course, my folks lived through the depression. My folks lost a farm in the depression and had to stretch to make things go, I guess.

MHH: Where were you educated?

TE: I went to Holland Christian schools all but one year. In 1954 Holland began sending their kids to Hope Protestant Reformed School, so I went to Hope School in the ninth grade. But I graduated from Holland Christian High School. So I spent all but one year in the Holland Christian School system.

MHH: You were born into the Protestant Reformed Church. What are your earliest memories? Where did the church meet at that time?

TE: The Holland Church, when I was born and when I was growing up, had their own building on 20th and Maple. Prior to that I think they met in a bakery at one time. And there was a little chapel on North River in Holland. As a matter of fact, when my folks became members of Holland Church, they went to that little chapel. But that's where I recall going to church—in the building on 20th and Maple. We lived, as I said, in the Tunnel Park area, which was probably a mile and a half west of the church. So consequently, we rode our bikes to catechism for the most part, and lived fairly close to the church, then.

MHH: Do you recall any of the pastors? Or, do you have any memories in connection with growing up in the church?

TE: The first pastor of Holland Church was Rev. [M.] Gritters. And I was baptized by Rev. [P.] DeBoer. I don't recall either one of those. But I do remember Rev. [W.] Hofman, the first pastor that I have a recollection of. I remember Rev. Bernard Kok quite well. I had catechism under him. He was the minister in Holland at the time of the split in '53.

MHH: Speaking of the split, you would have been about 13 years old at that time. What are your memories of that time period, perhaps preceding and even post-dating the split? And what were the effects that it had as far as your family was concerned, as far as the church was concerned?

TE: Yes, I have some memories. Like you say, I was just a lad at the time. I remember my dad being quite involved in the discussions and maybe even the arguments at the time. And I recall Mr. Kortering

being the sole consistory member who was, as we called it, on [*Herman*] Hoeksema's side. And, of course, the majority of the congregation did go the other direction with Rev. [*Hubert*] DeWolf. That's how we always separated the two—the Hoeksemas and those that were behind DeWolf. But I recall some very heated discussions, and I can remember listening one-sidedly to my father on the telephone with a member of the church and debating and discussing the issues. And I do recall one time in particular when, after church, we were in the car getting ready to go home. My father noted that the consistory hadn't left the church at all yet. And he said, "My Kortering is down there doing battle alone." He said, "I have to go and help him." And he left us sitting in the car for some time. And he went back in church. I don't know exactly what transpired, but I guess you can almost imagine.

As far as my family is concerned, I'm the tenth of eleven, so towards the bottom. And at that time I had several of my siblings were married already and had families. And they all were of the same bent, I guess, as my father and my parents. So there was no disruption in the family at that time over the split of '53.

MHH: What about the church? What do you remember as far as the effects on the church—property questions, location questions, numbers? You say most of them went with the DeWolf faction.

TE: I think it was approximately 2/3 to 1/3. And I recall that we lost our building. We had to find a different place to worship. I recall distinctly the first worship service we had on our own—it was, at that time, called the Federal School building on East 8th Street in Holland. And I remember looking around to see what faces would be in the congregation—who moved in one direction and who didn't.

So, it was quite an interesting period of history as far as our church is concerned.

MHH: Was there continuing fall-out from the split in the years afterwards?

TE: Not that I recall. I don't know how much you personally are aware of the difficulties that followed closely on the heels of the split of '53. But there was a big controversy in our congregation in which my family was quite involved. I think, prior to that controversy, our family (that would be my brothers and sisters and their families), probably constituted at last a third of the congregation, probably more. But there was a real controversy in which, once again, our congregation was diminished in numbers. I think we went down to about 13 families by 1960.

MHH: That is not large. Could you describe and speak about the controversy to which you alluded? I think that's an important part of history that needs to be recorded, certainly from your perspective. I am not all that familiar, but I would very much like to hear what you have to say about that. What were the issues? What happened?

TE: Interestingly enough, after fifty years, on the next classis the same issue going to come up again. It came up, I think, in September, but it was ruled out of order because it was not finished in the lower assembly, I believe. But I don't know what classis will do with it. It started this way. It's so involved, I

can't provide you with all the details, but... My brother-in-law, my oldest sister's husband was nominated to the office of deacon and was elected.

After the election, there was a member who had just transferred to Holland Church who approached the consistory with a protest, you might say, because he was a conscientious objector to the union. He worked in a union shop, but he was a conscientious objector. Consequently, the amount of dues that would be required from a union member were taken from his check and given to a charity. And this individual protested against that. The consistory basically dropped him from the office of deacon, even though he had been elected.

Several of my brothers and sisters protested that action. That was the beginning of the controversy. And it went to classis and synod. Classis and synod, at least in the beginning, pretty much upheld the protestants (that would be my brothers and sisters, who were protesting the action of Holland Consistory). From there it escalated, from my perspective, I would say it became more a matter of personalities. The end result was that several of them were excommunicated from Holland Church.

MHH: Several of the protestants—your brothers and brother-in-law?

TE: Yes, I think two of my brothers and at least two of my sisters and at least one brother-in-law. I don't know the exact number, but, several of them.

MHH: On what grounds were they excommunicated, or first disciplined and then excommunicated?

TE: Well, originally, they were disciplined for neglecting the means of grace because they went to other congregations. They went to Grand Haven, quite a few of them at that time. My brother Louie eventually ended up in Hope Church. But then they were reprovved by the synod for that discipline because they were going to a Protestant Reformed Church. That, to their mind, did not constitute neglecting the means of grace. But it came down to the grounds for excommunication was not being willing, I guess, to being reconciled to the consistory.

MHH: And perhaps not being submissive?

TE: I think that certainly would be part of it. From my perspective, they were wronged. Classis and synod agreed with that in the beginning. But from my perspective, I would say that the Lord brought them through a severe trial and they failed. They became very hardened. There, again, I was a lad at the time. But I know that they did not receive the committees that were sent to them, that worked with them, at least not in a brotherly way. And I know your grandpa [*Herman Hoeksema*] was involved as a member of the classical committee that met with them, because classis, of course, had to concur with the excommunication. From what I understand, they said some very harsh things about the consistory, even calling some of the members reprobate. So that's where it got to be.

MHH: Subsequently, what happened to those of your brothers and sisters who had the problem?

TE: Well, that's quite interesting to consider. Some of those moved en mass to California. Six of my siblings moved to California (to Redlands), because there was a member there that they got to know and, I guess you might say, sympathize with. It was one of the Feenstra twins—there were two of yhem. It fails me which one it was.

MHH: Was it Kryn Feenstra?

TE: I think it might have been Kryn. Who was the other one, do you recall?

MHH: I know, but I can't recall.

TE: It was one of those brothers that had also been put out of Redlands Church. So they moved to California. I still have a brother and sister in California who are basically non-church, I guess you'd say. I would say hardened in their way, too. I had a brother Jim who was (that's my oldest brother), his wife, as a matter of fact, is a member at Hope Church. And he's going to be the subject of the matter that is brought to classis this month. My brother Pete has made reconciliation with the Holland Consistory and is a member in an independent Reformed church at present.

MHH: So this whole episode obviously had great consequences for your family. What I'm curious about is your understanding of why an individual protested against the deacon in the first place? Because he was a conscientious objector and his dues went to charity?

TE: Pine Rest, at that time.

MHH: Do you have any understanding or any knowledge what were the grounds or the motivation behind a protest such as this? My understanding is that they way you described it is pretty much the way the situation was handled in other cases.

TE: I guess I can't get in the individual's mind and know what motivated him to do that. I know it was dealt with on a classical basis and classis did rule that it was acceptable to be a conscientious objector working in a union shop. I know that the argument was that it was a forced contribution. But that argument was refuted, I know, on the floor of classis. And classis did rule that that was an acceptable thing to do.

MHH: Yes, that was my understanding of the situation as well. So you say the consequences, as far as Holland congregation was concerned, was that it was greatly reduced in size. What happened from there? Where did Holland meet and what was the history that followed what you just described?

TE: Well, at the time Holland was meeting in temporary building,—after the split. Like I said, we first met in the Federal School. From there we moved to various vacant store buildings, just small Mom and Pop old store buildings. That is where we were meeting at the time of all this controversy. So the meeting place really wasn't affected by that. But obviously the numbers and the support of the congregation was diminished. Yes, Holland struggled quite a bit at that time.

MHH: For quite a long time? This would have been, perhaps, in the early '60s?

TE: The controversy began at the election in 1955. So that's in the latter part of '55. I think that excommunication occurred for most of them in '58, I think. So by 1960, the Holland congregation was depleted considerably.

MHH: Who served Holland in those years? Obviously you were older by that time and you would have knowledge of some of the history there.

TE: Rev. James McCollam was the minister at the time. As a result of the difficulties that he had, he came from outside of our churches. There were three ministers who came at that time: McCollam, Harbach, and Emmanuel. He left in '59. Part of it was because of the grief that he went through, although, I personally don't think he was ever truly Protestant Reformed.

MHH: What happened after that?

TE: Eventually we called Rev. [George] Lanting, from Grand Haven Church. Grand Haven was in the process of disbanding at that time, and Rev. Lanting came and served us for seven years.

MHH: When was it that you were able to build your own facility? I believe it might have been off 16th?

TE: Yes, off of 16th. Actually on 18th Street, just off from Hazel Avenue. We moved in in 1965. We began construction in '64. That's kind of an interesting history. Holland congregation was struggling financially in those years. But when Grand Haven disbanded, they gave Holland their church building. And Holland, not being able to use that in the location where it was, sold the building and with a good share of those funds we were able to build a building of our own.

MHH: Great. I had never heard that before about Grand Haven. That certainly was an appropriate gesture on their part.

TE: Yees, we appreciated it.

MHH: I'll bet you did. More recently, you outgrew that facility and you're obviously in a much newer building today.

TE: Yeea. After Rev. Lanting received the call from Edgerton, he accepted the call. Then we called Rev. [John] Heys from South Holland. He came to Holland and during his ministry there, Holland grew considerably. We really outgrew the building that we had. In the late '70s we added on to that building and continued to grow. Eventually we outgrew even the addition that we put on. Then the decision was made rather than try to add on again, to relocate. I happened to be on that building committee at that time. I think I served, about seven years from the time we decided to relocate to when it really came to fruition, by the time we build our present facility and moved in.

MHH: A lot of work. I want to switch gears here just a little bit. What has been important to you in your church life?

TE: First, I think what did make an impression on me in my formative years, being a member of the Protestant Reformed Church, is that I felt quite different from the other friends that I had. I went to the

Christian School, so I had a little different perspective, I think, from most of my fellow students. One interesting incident that occurred in high school. At that time we had a class in Reformed Doctrine, which was taught by a Mr. Bratt. He knew that I was PR, and he would single me out. I remember one particular incident where in the textbook it made a point of saying that when the word “all” appears in scripture, that it does not necessarily mean everyone head for head. And he posed the question to me in 2 Peter 3:9, where it says, “God is not slack concerning his promise as some men count slackness, but is longsuffering to usward, not willing that any should perish, but that *all* should come to repentance.” His question to me was, “Who is that all?” And I tried as best I could to explain that from a PR perspective. But what was interesting to me, he posed that question to the entire class. But he also singled me out, knowing that I was PR.

But every other member of the class differed from me as far as their perspective was concerned, except for one individual who was a member of the Reformed church, which was kind of unusual in the Christian school. He eventually became a Reformed minister. But that was kind of an interesting experience for me. But I think the distinctives of the PR churches were quite impressed upon me, especially being in the situation that I was going to a non-PR school. In our neighborhood there were not many PRs—probably no other Protestant Reformed people in our neighborhood.

So from that perspective I felt a little different from those that I dealt with.

MHH: Mr. Elzinga, how would you compare the church of today with the church of your youth?

TE: Oh, I think in many ways it has not changed dramatically, especially when you view other churches how much other churches around us have changed. I’m convinced that the Protestant Reformed churches substantially have remained the same in doctrine. I think that in some of the practical matters, as I recall growing up, were probably more restrictive than they are today. For instance, when the television came out, my parents never had a television set. I think it was for the most part viewed as an evil in itself. And we all know that there are things that can be said about many things that can be used in the wrong way. But I think that we have to remember that the evil is not found in the object. I think that’s the main difference that I would recall growing up in the Protestant Reformed Church.

It does seem that the pendulum may have swung too far the other way—being too permissive, I would say, in our walk of life and, maybe what has become quite commonplace in our practices today. But I do believe that, from what I’ve experienced from the pulpit, we’ve been warned against worldly-mindedness and conforming to the world and have been admonished to be transformed by the spirit. I think that has remained consistent in the Protestant Reformed churches.

MHH: Thank you very much, Mr. Elzinga, for talking to me and for the thoughts and ideas that you’ve expressed and the history that you’ve given. This concludes the interview with Mr. Elzinga.

*Mr. Elzinga is a member of First Protestant Reformed Church of Holland, MI.

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