

Interview with Mr. Harold Schipper

Mark Hoeksema

It is January 6, 2009, and I am at the residence of Mr. and Mrs. Harold Schipper in Holland, Michigan.

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

HS: I was born in Holland, Michigan, on 236 East 11th Street.

MHH: And when was this?

HS: January 14, 1926.

MHH: Who were your parents?

HS: Mr. and Mrs. Peter and Grace Schipper.

MHH: Can you tell me a little bit about your family: where did you grow up, what did your father do for a living, how many siblings did you have? What was your family like?

HS: My father worked at the Holland DePrie Chemical Company. He was a stock-cutter. He cut for for all the labels to go on medicine bottles. We had eight in the family: four boys and four girls. My mother's name was Grace.

MHH: What was your position in the list of siblings?

HS: I was the youngest, the baby.

MHH: Did you live most or all of your life in Holland, then?

HS: Yes, I was born and raised in Holland.

MHH: What was the church affiliation of your family?

HS: My folks at that time belonged to the Christian Reformed Church of Fourteenth Street. That's where HH [*Herman Hoeksema*] was at that time (I call it the blitz of 1924), from which they went out because of the schism of common grace. So, I was born, like I say, in 1926. When they built the church, my dad and a good group helped, like digging out with horse and scoop. And they got the church taken care of. Well, then, of course, when '53 came, then it was different, you know.

MHH: But you were essentially then born into the Protestant Reformed Church.

HS: Absolutely.

MHH: You've been a member all your life.

HS: I'm the only confessing member of the church right now from that time.

MHH: Really? And have you been a member of Holland congregation all your life?

HS: Absolutely.

MHH: What are your earliest memories of church life?

HS: Well, you came out from Sunday School, and then as you got older, you got into things—what things were, and how things developed. It was a good education.

MHH: You had good catechism instruction?

HS: Yes.

MHH: Do you remember any of the pastors; does anything stand out in your mind as far as the ministers were concerned?

HS: Sure. We had good ministers until the time of the split, of course. I had good catechetical instruction from the elders and the ministers. We had Rev. [M.] Gritters at that time. We started out in the bakery, that is, the first starting was in a bakery. And then we had different ministers as we went along.

MHH: What are your recollections of the Protestant Reformed Church prior to the split of 1953? Were things on a pretty even keel in Holland for most of those years?

HS: They were. We were only about 25 families.

MHH: But nothing particularly remarkable or anything that really stands out in your mind?

HS: Not really. I thought everything went all right.

MHH: But it must have become apparent somewhere along the line that not everything was going all right? What do you remember about those days?

HS: I can remember quite a bit. We were only with nine families after that split, and we started out again in a house—Henry VanPutten's. In fact, I gave the history of our church, I've got it on paper—meeting in store buildings and back and forth in store buildings. We were only nine families when HH (Hoeksema) came and re-organized us again. We were in a house of Henry VanPutten on East State Street in Holland. Most went the other way.

MHH: If you had approximately 25 families prior to the split, and you ended up with nine—about a third.

HS: That's right.

MHH: Did the division of '53 have any effect on your family?

HS: Yes, it did. We had ones that left—one family. And that hurt. That really hurt.

MHH: Was there conflict and animosity?

HS: Yes, I think so. But I think most of this here in '53 was personality. And what has personality got to do with the truth, with the word?

MHH: It's interesting that you say that. Could you elaborate on that or maybe give me some evidence. You say personalities were heavily involved. What is your reason? I'd like to hear your thoughts on that.

HS: Well, I just think that they swung at random on things. I don't think that they really thought thoroughly about it—those who left. I say again, I had good catechetical instruction from those elders. And how can they do that?

How can one not give God the glory when he's turned from a hottentot in Africa to him? That's tremendous, isn't it? That's really the heart and core of what's given to us.

MHH: That's what we fought for in 1953 without doubt.

HS: Yes! I can say that.

MHH: But you feel that personalities got too tangled up in it?

HS: No, I know it had to go the way it went, because the Lord did it. He had a reason for doing that. And I can say this too: we had better behave ourselves and know that he speaks and all those things can change. I believe that whole-heartedly.

MHH: What has been important to you in your church life? Earlier you mentioned catechetical instruction when you were younger. Now you talked a little bit about going through the division of 1953. Is there anything else that stands out in your mind?

HS: First of all, I'd like to say that in 1946 I came back from the service—May 1, 1946. And I had quite a deal with it. But I also know that the Lord was with me because at one time I took out my Bible. When I was reading it I had twenty guys around me. I know that a lot of those twenty guys didn't know what I knew. And that helped. It helped me all the way. In fact he brought me home, which it could have been the other way. So, quite an experience.

When I came back, I made confession of faith. I had been highly blessed. I had a brother who was a minister too. He was the oldest. He could have been my father, he was twenty years older than me.

In my last work that I had, the teamsters' union got in, and I had to deal with it. I didn't have to belong, because I was there before it got in.

MHH: You were grandfathered in, then?

HS: Two of us. The other was Christian Reformed. But I stuck to my guns. I told them, "No. I must not have it." And I gave my reasons. And so, as life went on, they bucked you, Why aren't you... Why? They kept pestering you. Even had my car on blocks. Even opened the hood of my car. That's was OK. Finally three guys come to me: "Skip, why aren't you one of us?" I said, "I told you why in the beginning. But you want a letter from my consistory to let you know why?" They said, "No, we won't go that far." I said, "Then keep your mouths shut and leave me alone."

MHH: I don't blame you.

HS: That's what I said. And they did leave me alone. *[Later]* I had one of them come up to me while I was working at the park—I had Centennial park downtown—seven acres, across from City Hall, beautiful with nature. Before that I had a garbage route where you had maggots and all that. What a history. And

he wanted to take my place when I retired. But he came to me before that and put his arms around my neck and said, “Skip, you were right. We didn’t get nothing.”

But see, they were mad because you get a slip that you could take off on your income tax of the premiums that you have to pay. And I was glad that it didn’t get to that flower fund too, because the flower fund is just the same. And Christian Labor Union is the same thing.

MHH: But you definitely stood your ground.

HS: Yes. Stood my ground.

MHH: I want to ask you also about your recollections or your views on a controversy that happened in the mid and late fifties in the congregation of Holland. It had to do with the whole question of labor unions that you were just talking about, with various members of the Elzinga family. I would like to know your recollections and your thoughts on that. What happened?

HS: We just have two of the Elzings left in the church (Al Elzinga and Terry). At the very last, the parents were there. But there was a group that left. It was over perfectionism—that we are all ready, it doesn’t make any difference how we act now. We’re perfect in the eyes of God, so it was perfectionism.

MHH: That was the issue?

HS: Yes, that was the issue at that time. Where they ever got that is beyond me. The parents weren’t that way. Allen and Terry weren’t that way. But it was the others who were left. A lot of them went to California. They split all over the place.

MHH: How did this issue of perfectionism come up? What prompted it?

HS: I don’t know. I have no idea.

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

HS: Well, the word of truth that’s given today is solid. It was solid then and it’s solid now. I do say that I can be very thankful that others came from the outside in. But it’s to a point now, I think, that you’re going to grow within instead of much from the outside, because I don’t believe that many are really interested anymore in the word. Now, I say that with all respect, because I’m only saved by grace alone.

MHH: But, perhaps, the differences between various denominations are getting large enough that they are so different from us that we are not likely to get a lot of growth from outside?

HS: Absolutely. A good share of it is that way, yes.

MHH: Now you mentioned that we have stayed strong doctrinally. Do you see any significant changes in our walk of life?

HS: We’ve got to check ourselves always in our walk of life. And that means that we’ll sin to our dying day. And we hate it. That’s why we pray, “Lord, forgive!” in the night when we go to bed on our knees. You know, another nice thing about that is our death comes too. And we don’t know the day and the hour. He’s got a reason for that too, because if I knew the day and the hour of my death right now, I don’t

think I could talk to you like this. That's a wonder, isn't it? You can shed tears over that. And I'm quick to shed tears over that. I really am. Normally I'm kind of hard-boiled in a way. But I can be glad that I can shed tears over that. 'Cause when I go to the [church] service, I get the word, so that I can say when I walk out of there, "It was good."

I want to say something else that hit me. Your dad [*Prof. Homer C. Hoeksema*] was out there in Tasmania. Two ministers—one that you got, and the one we got—were out there (the Kleyns). He did a wonderful work out there, your dad did.

MHH: So I hear.

HS: Well, I'm glad you're hearing it, because it's true. And you know what I said to ours when he came here from Minnesota when we called him? I told him that. I said, "You had a nice education, didn't you?" And he said, "Yes, I did."

MHH: We got two ministers, two Kleyns out of there.

HS: Yes, two Kleyns out of there. You may be happy you got that one. And I know I'm happy that we got this one.

I've been highly brought up, I tell you. And I got discipline in the Marines too. They taught me. I became a man when I got out of there. I was a boy when I went in—just 18. The officer said to me, "Is that a little fuzz under your nose?"

RBH: Did you get drafted?

HS: I got drafted. I waited for that. Otherwise it would be my fault to go in—when you enlist.

MHH: Your responsibility.

HS: That's right.

MHH: But in those days, it was almost the inevitable that you would get drafted, right?

HS: Sure. Not like today. We've got a highly different war today.

MHH: And a different military.

HS: And a different military, yes.

MHH: You had some experiences along the way.

HS: I had good experience, when God took my first wife too. Thirty-eight years old, right in the prime of life. I had five kids to bring up after she went. And, you know what words she said to me before she couldn't anymore? "I can't see you staying single the rest of your life. But get one that loves God!" Isn't that terrific?

MHH: Certainly the right perspective.

HS: And I got one!

MHH: How many years later did you marry?

HS: We both waited eight years. We didn't know each other till we met. Our spouses passed away a month apart the same year, with cancer.

MHH: Mr. Schipper, thank you very much for your time. Thank you for your thoughts, your memories, your recollections, your opinions. They are much appreciated.

Originally Published in:

Vol 77 No 2 February 2018