

Introduction to This Issue

Each of the three essays included in this issue of *Reformed Review* stand independent of the other two; we did not prescribe to our authors a theme around which to organize their subject matter. But when we read them together, we saw that they could very well be presented under a common theme. We became convinced that each, indirectly or directly, invites us to reflect on the problem of cultural homogeneity and the other.

We begin with Peter Ester's fascinating study of the oldest generation of Calvinist Dutch-Americans. Ester gives us a profile of a generation whose cultural homogeneity was maintained and reinforced by the customs, beliefs, and practices that were essential to being Dutch and Reformed (or Christian Reformed) in Holland, Michigan. The most extensive section of Ester's essay consists in "oral histories," brief transcripts of face-to-face interviews he conducted with the twenty-one participants in his study. One hears them in their own words reflect on what "Dutch" and "Reformed" meant to them as they moved through the stages in the life cycle. Perhaps not surprisingly, most of them see this cultural and religious heritage fading irretrievably into the past. About the younger generations of Dutch-Americans, a wise 92-year old woman perceptively remarked, "[to them] the world has become so small, we're in touch with all kinds of nationalities. They look to the world as the world. We never talk about being Dutch anymore."

Nationalities in touch with each other form the subject of the familiar Tower of Babel story in Genesis 11:1-9. In her essay, Tiffany Houck-Loomis challenges the traditional interpretation of this story according to which the desire of the peoples of the world to unite constitutes a sin of pride that incurs God's wrath. Houck-Loomis argues that this interpretation is morally destructive, because it serves to legitimate policies of exclusion. The object lesson of the story seems to be that homogeneous groups ought to remain in their self-enclosed enclaves; to go out to meet their other, to live in solidarity with him, is contrary to what God wills. Houck-Loomis proposes an alternative reading that turns the denouement of the story on its head. To be sure, God does shatter the unity of the peoples. But it is not the desire for unity itself that provokes the divine wrath. The dispersal of the peoples creates the condition for the possibility of genuine unity, a differentiated unity of peoples who come to accept one another in their mutual differences. Viewed from this perspective, God's act of judgment is really God's act of grace, through which God drives the people out to fulfill the original creational mandate—to be "fruitful" as they fill the whole earth (cf. Genesis 1:28). Houck-Loomis interprets this mandate as the divine summons to go out and to embrace our other, that is, the one with whom we do not have a natural affinity.

We may ask what kind of man and woman can respond to such a summons. Here it is appropriate to conclude our issue with Allan Janssen's study of the Dutch theologian A.A. Van Ruler. From Janssen we learn that for Van Ruler, creation is the object of God's saving work. God desires to be in relationship with this created man, this created woman. Through the Holy Spirit, in virtue of Christ's atoning work, God constitutes them as full partners, enabling them each to stand on their own two feet. Salvation is the restoration of man and woman as God's creatures. Thus restored, they are freed to live as God intended from the beginning: to give their love to their Other, and invariably to their others.

– Christopher Dorn