

My farewell to the church

Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis

1879

Contents

I. Explanation of principles	3
II. Farewell speech	10

At the express request of several listeners I have proceeded to publish these two speeches. They are therefore dedicated to my listeners, as a reminder of a time that has ended. May they contribute to strengthening their principles, and above all to translating them into actions.

September 5, 1879

D. N.

I. Explanation of principles

My decision to say farewell to the position I held in the church is known to you. Some may have been surprised by it, others delighted, but you, who are accustomed to come to this place under my audience, you certainly wish to know the reasons which led me to that decision. In a sense you have a right to it. I will comply with that desire and will therefore first read to you the letter addressed by me to the church council of this congregation, insofar as it contains the reasons which I unfolded there. The letter reads as follows: "I always lived in the illusion that the church could be filled with new life, that it could once again inspire society, the community, but I have increasingly come to see that the church as such is not capable of accepting that task, that it stands and will increasingly stand next to society as a remnant from the past without strength and glory, dragging on a languishing existence only through routine and habit. Because I have noticed that, it is impossible to continue working on that church, because nothing kills all enthusiasm more, works more demoralizing than working on a dead body, which can be somewhat prolonged in existence by artificial means, but cannot possibly become healthy and strong.

The existence of religious communities is an obstacle to humanism, which is my holy conviction the highest. For me, it is not being a Christian, but being human that is the main thing. For a religious community, the opposite is the case. That is perhaps why the idea of the church remained far from Jesus, for whom humanity transcended the boundaries of faith and nationality, of rank and race. Thus the church is too narrow, too narrow-minded. Thus the church stands in principle against humanity. To the extent that humanity is considered by me to be the highest, the church loses its value for me and the day must be blessed by me on which that church is buried with thanksgiving for the services rendered. I always thought that its boundaries could be set out, but it has always appeared to me that it could not allow that unless it lost its own character, in other words, pronounced its own death sentence.

... As a servant of the church and paid by it, I may not regard the church building as the public speaking place where, through my preaching, I undermine what precisely constitutes the essence of the church. To demolish with one hand what one builds with the other is a task as sad as it is impossible. Well, to work on the promotion of humanism and to do so as a leader in a church that is in principle opposed to humanism, I cannot and may not do that, now that it has become clear to me. My conscience therefore forbids me to continue to be at the head of the congregation."

I know very well, Gentlemen!, that these reasons are not shared by everyone. I know how those who think: you have a useful sphere of work, in which you can spread your principles, you have a public speaking place in the church, where you can speak freely and unhindered as the spirit prompts you, without others being able to prevent you from doing so, why do you give that up? Can you not work more usefully within the church for your principles than outside? Certainly, if I had been bound by restrictive regulations, I would have given up my place long

ago, but in the church we actually live in a state of apathy, in which everyone does what he wants and where higher church authorities always find a way out in the event of complaints, so as not to be forced to play the master of heretics. You are also my witnesses that I have proclaimed my opinions freely and frankly, leaving everyone the freedom to accuse me, where he thought that I had transgressed the limits of the law. Even this has been tried, but the elasticity and vagueness of the regulations had to silence the accusers. Yet there are limits, and a church with complete freedom of doctrine abolishes itself. Now everyone must decide for himself to what extent he remains within the limits. No one can be the judge of another's conscience in this. Moreover, one of two things must happen: either the church must progress and thus be inspired with a new spirit, but then it works on its own destruction as a church, in order to dissolve itself in society, or it must maintain the old concept of church, albeit in modern forms, but then it increasingly comes to stand opposite and alongside society, which wants nothing more to do with narrow-minded churchmanship, which for many is nothing other than church stupidity. What is a church? Or rather, because we Protestants can no longer really speak of the church, that is good from a Catholic point of view, I mean, what is a church community? Is it not an association of people who seek to find the path of salvation in a certain way? I am Lutheran or Calvinist, which means: I seek to obtain salvation along the path indicated by Luther or Calvin. But that is no longer what is meant by it. I admit that, but why do people still call themselves Lutheran or Calvinist? That is a historical distinction from the past. It is true for me, but if it no longer has any meaning, then it is done for. I no longer use the coin that was once current, although it used to distinguish between the types of money, I put it in a coin cabinet, where it can be seen by all lovers of old coins. The same goes for me here. As a minister of the Lutheran Church, nothing should be dearer to me than that many, if not all, inhabitants of our city join that church; my highest wish, my aim must be to catch as many as possible in the nets of Lutheranism; over every soul that is brought to the congregation through my agency, the church council must rejoice more than over those others who stand outside. As soon as someone tells me that he is Lutheran, it must do me good in my heart, a feeling of kinship immediately arises, as if we were old acquaintances, brothers. If a child is born, I must try to incorporate it into that church in advance through baptism, so that the baptismal register will indicate the names of many; if it advances in age, I must try to get it into my teaching, so that it can be introduced from an early age to the best, in fact the only way to salvation. Although I admit that good and good people can also be found in other denominations, they will still be better if they belong to the Lutheran church. It is known that the Augsburg confession of faith does not excel in a loving and oppressive spirit towards those who think differently, it simply condemns them. Only the Lutherans can be blessed. This reminds me of a sincere Lutheran of our day, who was once asked: but would you really think that all the Reformed were damned? and to that he replied: Yes, certainly, provided that they first become Lutheran. You see, he had a Lutheran heaven just as the Reformed have a Reformed heaven and the Mennonites have a Mennonite heaven, surpassing all in glory.

The deacons of our congregation may not ask, when a poor person applies for support: Are you poor? Do you deserve support? No, their first question must be: Are you Lutheran? Show me your certificate. Again the same thing, they must reject man, because being Lutheran is higher than man. Look, my friends! I feel far, very far from all that. To be honest, I feel no more for a Lutheran than for any other person, and therefore the striving to make the Lutheran church an ark of salvation, in which only those who are saved live in the midst of the great flood, that striving has always been foreign to me. I have turned to man, not to the Lutheran. In Christ

there is neither Jew nor Greek, but equally neither Lutheran nor Reformed — When some hear this, they will say: you are making a caricature of a church community. I tell you: not at all. The majority have indeed outgrown this concept and are surprised when they hear the obligations that they have taken on as a member of a church community, but that only proves that they themselves no longer really belong in that church community, they have outgrown it. If they noticed any burden from it, many would have left long ago, but they stay in precisely because it means nothing, because it imposes no losses; yet they never look at it. Let the church levy a per capita tax — and it has the right to do so, after all how can the costs be covered for the maintenance of buildings and salaries of ministers if there is no money? No money, no Swiss! — Then you will see how many will resign their membership and have nothing more to do with it. No, I have not designed a caricature. but a church that calls itself Lutheran aims, or at least must aim, to pursue the salvation of the world, true to its unifying motto, by making everyone Lutheran.

Now I am a paid servant of the church, as such I must work for its construction and prosperity. But its boundaries are too narrow, too cramped for me. One of the two must now happen: either the church must be expelled, or I must be expelled from the church. The latter is necessary, it also conflicts somewhat with the decency of our time, which at least wants to assume the appearance of tolerance. Therefore it is better not to give in, so that one expels oneself from the church. Since nothing is now seen of the expulsion of the church, yes even the demand is too daring, as much as signing its own death warrant, there was nothing left for me but to give up the place that I loved and in which I thought I could work usefully. — But that church has changed constantly, only a few still stand on that old standpoint, it has experienced the influence of progress. And especially our Lutheran church, it is said, it is as liberal as one could wish, one only pays attention to the decisions of the last synod, where the “maintenance of doctrine” was removed from the regulations, where everything that could give rise to any conscientious objection was omitted from the signature formula. Dangerous appearance! — It is, however, no more than appearance. Or was it not retained: “I declare that I will carefully promote the interests of Christianity in general and of the Lutheran church in our fatherland in particular, through doctrine and conduct?” Strange association! Or what if the interests of Christianity in general conflict with the interests of the Lutheran church in particular? I believe I am a Christian, not because I share the insights of Jesus, as the gospels tell us, but because I also emphasize the conscience of man as the only guideline for conduct and behavior, because I also highly value the value of man, of every man, and demand with Jesus that all who are human should be able to lead a life worthy of man. But those special interests of the Lutheran church bind the general ones: the Christianity of the spirit is a curse against a church, whether it is orthodox or modern. Furthermore it says; “that I will devote myself with all diligence to the promotion of religious knowledge, Christian faith, good morals, order and harmony.” Again that sounds very simple, but what is “Christian faith?” and what if the Christian faith conflicts with “good morals?” Morality demands that a man, if it has now become apparent to him that faith as based on authority undermines the search for truth, in other words prevents him from being true, is that not a struggle? No, the appearance of freedom is saved but the essence — that is still far away! Suppose that one is a prisoner, locked up in a small room, to which one must remain confined. One complains about the lack of freedom, now they give you two rooms, are you free now? Compared to before you are somewhat better off but is that enough? Again you complain: they give you a house, but you are not allowed to go outside.

Finally, you are given the place of your residence, within which you may move freely. Woe to you, however, if you want to go outside the boundaries of the community, you are brought back, are you free now? Certainly, whoever considers the former situation, he has reason to rejoice, but would it not be foolish to rejoice over freedom, if one is not allowed to direct one's steps where one wants? However spacious the cage in which the bird resides, it is not the example of freedom as long as it is not allowed to fly freely in the wide vault of the sky. That is how it is now with the church, each time one wants to give a little more, but one suddenly stops. And of course – because the reason for the existence of the church community ceases, when it has become one with society. But we do not want to be Lutherans, Protestants, Christians, only or above all people. That is our highest unity and therefore we do not feel at home in a church community, in which the highest unity is expressed in its interests in particular, in other words, these are the holy of holies, to which, if necessary, the general interests must yield and stand behind. For us, the church community lacks all meaning, all sense in this our time, our church is the society in which we unite to achieve all kinds of goals that can promote human salvation. A modern church is a monstrosity; church and modern exclude each other, how can they then run together for one and the same chariot? That is my opinion for which I ask you not to hold anyone responsible, except me, because I speak only for myself, not for others. Shouldn't those others then come to the same conclusions? They should know that; there are errors against reason, which do not yet plead against character, their not acting as if right over others. I judge no one. leaving it to everyone's conscience, how and what he should do, but equally asking respect for my opinion by those others. And that I am not alone in my judgment, I had two testimonies from you from the very last time, borrowed from our church papers, one from a respected, liberal preacher in Rotterdam, who is by no means modern and the other from a church-modern man. I share them with you as remarkable testimonies, from which it appears how the church conditions are most deplorable, and have an immoral and enervating effect on civilization. No, we too can sing with the poet that the forms of the church no longer fit to meet the needs of this time. But let us hear both testify: "it has gradually become clear to me that the Dutch Reformed Church as a church, that is to say, as a large organized (or rather in a state of unavoidable disorganization) body, does more harm than good to the coming of the Kingdom of God, that better formations, more suitable for our time and our needs, emerge from it.

... One should have an eye for the undeniable reality. In my opinion, the Dutch Reformed Church should not and cannot be saved, it should perish because it has served its purpose, has become an impossibility. The leather bag is outdated, one should not try to patch it up, but look for a new one, so that the noble fluid does not flow away. "But we love that church so much, in spite of its shortcomings it still did so much good and it is the means by which the preaching of the Gospel was ordered and the life of the church existed." I hear you; but however dear to me a long-used garment has become, there comes a time when no new patch will help on the old garment and that one hangs it in the closet as worn out.

I repeat, one should have an eye for reality. Hand on heart, if the financial issue could be solved without damage and with fairness for the various directions and a way was indicated to remove local difficulties, would there really be many, capable of judging and inspired by a pious Christian spirit, who would defend the perpetuation or should I say, patching up of the Dutch

Reformed Church as conducive to the coming of the Kingdom of God? I doubt it. ¹ The other reads:

“The ancient church wants nothing more or less than to “play the Kingdom of God”, the members of that church are supposed to distinguish themselves characteristically from those outside it ... Accession to an ancient church is always more or less an act, an act of importance.

The Jewish theocracy was the first church. From that the Catholic was born as the second. Of that Catholic mother, a reverend mother who fully deserves to be called a church, who knows what consistency is, our Protestant churches are daughters. You too, gentlemen Mennonites! Even if you dust off your municipal autonomy. Your brotherhood too, gentlemen Remonstrants! Even if your will is as free as that of a bird in the air. I will not even speak of the Lutherans. Their society resembles the mother church in a hair's breadth as well as that of the Reformed...

An association that wants to be something other than society for the benefit of the general or fate benefit of the Israelites — except that it seeks its sphere of action in another area — has no right to exist for the modern consciousness”.²

You see: how others also think essentially the same, even if they may differ in relation to what we have to do.

After this explanation I would like to keep your attention occupied for a few more moments by speaking about John 18: 36. “My kingdom is not of this world.”

“My kingdom is not of this world.” This is the standpoint of the church, regardless of whether it calls itself orthodox or modern, whereby it always shrouds itself in the mists of secrecy and assumes a mysterious haze. The church is then the repository of religion in a separate world, separated from everything else, actually the holy of holies in man, of which one does not know what and how it is. Thus religion becomes the bond that connects the visible and invisible worlds. But how do we arrive at these two worlds? Are we compelled to do so by reason? In the visible world in knowledge, knowledge is the main thing; is everything explained and resolved in it? Fool who would claim so! We know little: every day we come to that conviction through reflection and a voice within us says sometimes reproachfully, sometimes complainingly: too little. But would we now have the right to assume another world for the things we do not know, that is, a great hiding place for our ignorance, in which we could store everything that was unknown? No, we have no right to do so. Our life becomes desperate, our restless research in the wide field of science, the tireless search for the laws to which everything in nature is subject, if we do not hold on to the belief with Goethe: the incomprehensible must become comprehensible. Who will make an effort and investigate if he is convinced for himself: there are things that we not only do not know but that we will never know? No, it is precisely the little we know that arouses in us a passion to go ever further and to open new paths for our knowledge, never to sit still and rest on our laurels, no, further and further! That is how it sounds in our ears and although we sometimes complain of fatigue, our strength is sustained and our song also finally sounds: “We walk and do not grow weary, we run and do not faint.” And because that world cannot be justified by our reason, we must therefore accept an organ that has the right to speak of it, namely faith. That faith is something indefinite because it is made into a matter of feeling. We cannot possibly argue about feeling. You say: it is warm, I on the other hand: it is cold, can we convince each other that our feeling is the true one in contrast to that of below? As soon as one appeals to immediate

¹ Rev. W. Francken (Church Gazette of June 28, 1879)

² Dr. H.U. Meijboom (Reformation of June 28, 1879)

truths, which come about in a special way, one has closed the door to all reasoning. Reason is banished there, it may not speak because its weapons are arguments, which can be tested and tasted by everyone. And it is only too true: "it can never be one's duty to insult or say goodbye to the highest guide one possesses, reason, and to accept ideas that are either contradictory or unthinkable." One must believe in that other world of invisible things — so it falls outside our perception, our experience. Religion is still the same for many as: belief in or about God. As long as one does not know what is to be understood by God, religion is therefore an unknown matter. And who knows how to say that? One speaks of the "Incomprehensible," another of the "Unspeakable." I ask you, what use are such words to us? What use are things that we do not understand or cannot express? Would we not do better to speak about them first when we do understand them and can express them? What I may pray to you: do not let us be taken in by big words. For me at least it is not enough to know that someone exists, if it is immediately added that it is impossible to know anything about what he is. Whoever dares to declare to us: the covering of God is an immediate fact of experience and therefore indisputably certain, he cannot lay the slightest claim to a reasonable ground of faith, he is completely equal to the Roman Catholic, who also with regard to the pope's infallibility appeals to immediate experience, as such indisputably certain. Well, that is how the church has always understood it and that is how it still does it. "My kingdom is not of this world," that is to say, religion does not belong to the domain of things of this world, it relates to, is connected with another and higher world. We humans, on the other hand, are of this world. Immediately someone or other cries: of this world, but not of it alone. I answer: again that is an assumption! Let us start from the known, the generally accepted and descend: we humans belong to this world.

We all agree on that; about the other there is a difference, so we let it rest. Well, if we belong to this world and not to the realm of religion, then many are excluded, all who think that we belong to this world alone. Religion is then not universal, not for all, not human as sufficient to all reasonable needs. But MH.! That may apply to the church-dike religion, preserved in a church that claims to be a supernatural institution, but not at all to religion in general. Or did not Jesus call: love for God and neighbor the law and the prophets? Did he not summarize morality in the precept: what you would that men should do to you, do also to them? Does he not lay all emphasis on doing, acting, living and not at all on faith, confession? Does he connect salvation to a proposition or was it not he who said: if you want to be saved, keep the commandments? Far, very far was that conception removed from Jesus' intention. But that is why he did not found a church, he wanted to improve people, but by no means to establish an association, whose members would consider themselves better than others. Jesus did not concern himself with supernatural speculations, he remained closer to the ground, he limited himself to man, as he was and as he had to become. That is why he urged conversion, improvement. For him religion was human life according to its destiny and that is why he cared about the fate of the poor and unfortunate, of the small and insignificant. He lived with and for people and wanted to make them happy, not in a distant future, but in the present, in the world in which they lived. The church did not do that, it educated people for another world and as such had a different goal than Jesus. Well, we want to go with Jesus and not with the church. See how small was the influence of the church in the great times of its prosperity on social and domestic life! Instead of civilizing the interests of men, it allied itself with the powerful to oppress the people. With its promises of a future salvation in a world hereafter it preached contentment and resignation to their lot, since it was a divine order according to which some alone enjoyed and others alone did all the work. Everything that

science discovered, it found a fierce opposition from the side of the church, everything that concerned general development, it could count on the opposition of the church. Thus it has come to pass that the flourishing times of faith were the darkest pages in the history of the morality of the human race. And still the church in its departments continues to play the same role. Where is it, when it comes to social interests? Like the priest in the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan, she passes by the misery without reaching out to alleviate need and care. She still repeatedly takes the word to her lips: that does not belong to the sphere of action of the church, that does not concern us as a church.

Of course, "my kingdom is not of this world!" Whether injustice prevails and inequality undermines all brotherhood, or domination weighs heavily on the shoulders of many — what does the church dare to do about it? She is far too busy with baptisms and celebrating the Lord's Supper and making regulations. Is baptism done properly, as prescribed? — that is what she asks, and at the slightest omission the deviation is reported with indignation — but whether hundreds and thousands of children die there from lack of food, healthy air and bad care, she does not care about that, it is not within her domain. It was constantly preached how one should have love and be content, that everything was a gift from the heavenly father, to whom one should be grateful, how a drink of water and a piece of dry bread taste much better to the poor than the rich man's finest meal, that a hut of clay and a bed of straw are preferable to the most magnificent palace and the fluffiest bed, because peace of mind is not found in such luxury. But one does not let oneself be preached to sleep with this, one wants to see how brotherhood creates a better division in life, through which everyone can find what is necessary. It is precisely for this reason that many are hostile to the church, because it has always withdrawn from what was its first, closest duty. That is why church life languishes. Does the church demand of its servants that they know the laws of society, the orders of society because only through them can improvement be prepared? — Not at all. The church then says again as she answered me: — so an answer from a so-called modern church — that is not the task of the church. No wonder that she has lost all influence and is gradually becoming an obstacle, an obstacle to civilization and progress. How can man be morally and spiritually prosperous, if he suffers from hunger and want? How can he become a saint in spirit, as long as he is becoming bestial in body? Therefore the church should have expanded her domain and included in it the social relations of this world, as the Roman church has done with dedication here and there, but no, she has quarreled about words, had no eye and no heart for the great interests and now they let her quarrel and go her way without anyone caring about her. Having fallen outside the world, her influence on the world is almost nothing. Whoever today does not concern himself with the social questions that affect the world, he will perish without doing anything to improve it. Bible sayings and doctrines will not banish disproportion and misery; no, knowledge is first necessary about the structure of society, and only then will it be possible to work for good.

Therefore, as long as the foundation of the church remains: my kingdom is not of this world, so long will it be powerless, intruded and finally resemble an old woman, who grumbling and grumbling makes life unpleasant for herself and others. I do not wish to cooperate in that, no, the religion that is of and for this world, the pure human religion of reason, which makes the fulfillment of human capacities possible. Man's happiness must be to work and live in his environment with all the strength that is in him, because making happiness is being happy. Well then! Religion may be our pursuit, in which it is good for all, in which love and brotherly feeling between people bridge the gap that keeps them apart, in which all cooperate, to bring peace and

prosperity, wealth and happiness to all on earth. Not elsewhere in an imaginary world sought our peace, our happiness, but in the reality in which we live, move and are — there be the field of our labor and who does most for others, who serves out of love, he will later be able to rule through love.

That religion, which reveals itself in an active life of brotherhood and love for the benefit of all — let it be ours, so that being human and society, founded on the principles of humanity, may become the highest for us. Working together on this, not considering anything human to be foreign to us — My friends! Then let the world call us as it will, we will feel satisfied by the peace of the soul and by the conviction that we are worthy to fill our place. If we want to work like this, then there will be ways that can be walked, for where there is a will, there is also a way. Where our treasure is, there is our heart, if our treasure is the welfare of our fellow men, our heart will be there and from the heart come all great and noble thoughts. May we prove to be faithful workers in that important task! Amen.

II. Farewell speech

It is now about four years ago that I was surprised in my quiet village community by the news of the call to this place. I was personally unknown to all of you, but no one could say that he did not know then what he would have in me and what he could reasonably expect from me. After all, the press works next to the pulpit and so it was known, in black and white, that I did not wish to belong to the “middle men”, not to those “tame” liberals who carefully weigh their words to attract many to themselves who wrap the truth in swaddling clothes. Even then I understood how many difficulties might await me in this city, where on the one hand great indifference and on the other a submissive spirit live. In my answer to the church council that premonition already expresses itself. It read: “It is my holy intention to preach among you the religion of truth and love on the basis of freedom in accordance with and in connection with our great predecessor Jesus. To this end I wish to give myself, to this end I wish to work with the strength that has been given to me, desiring for you and for myself the freedom of conscience, which constitutes the great principle of every truly Protestant church.” Although I am aware of many weaknesses, also of omissions during the four years that I worked among you, I dare to ask: have I been unfaithful to my intention, then expressed? have I not given myself, myself also with my weaknesses? And when I said in my inaugural address that I would try to preach the old religion, which is always new, the religion of being good and doing good, then I spoke a word that can still be said by me with full conviction.

Have I changed, as some claim? Changed in the sense of enfoldment — yes, I hope that can be testified of me as of you. But that change is not the breaking off of a series of principles, no, it is completely explainable and nothing other than a gradual and regular continuation of the principle, then professed by me. I appreciate that you know this, now that after 4 years of work I lay down my mandate of trust in the hands of those who gave it to me.

I do not wish to be lavishly praised for honesty by the orthodox, because that would give the impression that I considered others who remained dishonest, and yet dishonesty only begins where one is aware of doing something against one’s better judgment. And if you moderns want to condemn me, I will bear it, it is not the first time that inconsistency, caught red-handed, does its best to call the consequence of which one is powerless, all that is ugly. Some of you will

certainly still remember the so-called “Ascension storm” that arose against me. It was already then apparent that not all who called themselves modern were indeed so, or rather the word-moderns immediately took a hostile stance against the first act. Yet my attitude could not surprise anyone who could know how I had written: “for all moderns, Ascension Day has lost all reason for existence. At most, he is the superfluous repetition of the Easter festival. One can make anything out of anything, and so it is very possible to preach edifyingly on that day, just as well as on any other Thursday, but what to say of a festival on which one must either speak about something else, or play with words and sounds, in order to find some connection between the festival and heavenly life or something like that?”

Let me quote a few words and every impartial person will have to admit that I have followed the same path, then indicated by me. I disapproved of a confession, whatever it may be, because it demands authority, and external authority. How difficult will the content be? Either very broad, so that there is room for different opinions, or very narrow by precise determination and description of what must be believed. In the first case it really means nothing and one opens the door to the greatest possible arbitrariness and dishonesty and in the second case one acts contrary to the Christian principle, which according to all parties demands freedom of conscience.

For example, one sets as a requirement, as a minimum of confession: belief in God. In itself this means nothing. After all, everything depends on the description, on the way in which God must be presented, so that one knows precisely the boundaries within which one has to move. Every formulation will be very defective. It does not satisfy what it demands. After all, one does not thereby keep out the dishonest, but will make it difficult for the conscientious, who are aware of what they do. There must be room for everyone who wants to enter the community. One must not restrict but leave free, leaving to each person’s conscience whether one can join or not. We repeat that beautiful word of Vinet: “whoever wants to be a Christian, already is.” That word must also be applied to pantheists and atheists. But a pantheist or an atheist cannot be a Christian. You do not have that, no one has to decide that, that is a matter of conscience and if they themselves do not object, then we may not do so either. Or why not also exclude the orthodox? The question is whether most of them are worshippers of gods. The God of Jesus and the God of the catechism will probably have no more resemblance to each other than the name alone. The genuine, true Lutherans with their materialistic concept of the Lord’s Supper do not belong in the Christian community either. And neither do all those who have brought fetishism into Christianity. But we have no right to ask for all that, we have no right to say to someone who wants to join: you cannot, you may not want to. If we do that, what will be left of freedom of conscience?” I still take over those words entirely from myself. I mentioned the misfortune of moderns, that they practically perpetuate in the church what they theoretically reject. I demonstrated this with regard to the use of the Bible, which theoretically is a book like all others, that must be judged by its contents alone, but practically proves to be “the book of religion”, with regard to baptism, the acceptance of members, the Lord’s Supper, the feast days and the entire method of preaching. Everything came down to the concept of the church and it can be truly testified: “it is the church atmosphere that unnerved the pious, used to breathe it in. And the dangerous part of Jesus’ work consisted in teaching those pious people that if their righteousness did not abound, they could not enter the kingdom of heaven. And if the great master did not lack the energy to offend those pious ones, does one not feel how hard it must have been for his faint-hearted disciples to follow him on that path? Then cast a glance back at this time and see how many weak teachers succumbed to that trial. The light of science had opened their arches to the shortcomings of orthodox church

doctrine. Why did they not dare to proclaim openly from the pulpit the new gospel, which had poured heavenly joy into their hearts? Because they feared to offend the pious, to offend their friends, to lose their favor and influence. Failing to see that faith is heroism, they wanted to spare the little believer the hard struggle of the new truth and preferred to shut themselves up with the congregation in the ecclesiastical hothouse, rather than grow together in rain and sunshine, in storm and calm, in summer luxury and winter frost. One can certainly get used to that hothouse life, and even feel comfortable in it, but the disadvantage of it is that it takes away hunger. There is no more desperate people for the common man than the satiated, the contented. Therefore Jesus said to the pious of his time: adulterers and publicans will go into the kingdom of heaven before you.”³

For us who preach: truth above all! must also be the first demand that we make of ourselves: be true, true in what you say, true in what you do, true for all. Therefore it cannot but annoy us, when we see men who think the same, present themselves completely differently. Respect for everyone who knows how to proclaim an ideal principle with conviction and enthusiasm, even if it differs from ours. But disappointment about everyone who regards the Church as a place of safety, where one finds lifelong support. And yet that is often true of the Church. Money keeps it standing, otherwise it would have collapsed already. If many were not forced by financial reasons to keep their place, they would have left the Church already. Take away from the Church its institutions and its dispensation, many would not let themselves be accepted as its members. Just consider the reasons that many give for acceptance, for example, one can never know what will happen to a person and that is why it is good that he is registered as a member of a church. Worldly interests have become so identified with spiritual matters that they are difficult to separate from each other. You see, gentlemen! that I stand on the same position with regard to the church, now as I did then. What is the difference between those 4 years? Simply this: then I expected the church to be susceptible to reformation, now I no longer do that, now I have realized that this was an illusion. A church without a confession is like a house without a foundation and the thinking person does not want to bind his spirit in a confession. Does it not make a sad impression when one reads of Mennonite congregations that decide to accept people who are not Mennonite into their community? The reason for the existence of a society, an association disappears if one takes away its characteristic mark. Then dissolve the association, but do not maintain a false appearance at the expense of the truth! That is what the liberal churches do and therefore diminish the respect for it. Let it be as it is, or let it not be — see there the principle that must be maintained on the right as well as on the left. That discovery was a disappointment to me. Or could it be anything but disappointing, when one is forced to give up one’s position in the prime of one’s years? A position that was dear to me, because from childhood I have never wanted to be anything else. A popular teacher? — is there anything more noble conceivable than to be able to devote one’s powers to raising the level of knowledge and as a result the standard of morality too? The work remains dear to me, and melancholic memories accompany the remembrance, but the ecclesiastical bond oppressed and pinched me. That is therefore the only reason for my departure. Not to you, Gentlemen! lies the fault, oh no, I have no reason to complain of being dissatisfied or discouraged, when I saw how many faithfully continued to come forward, although attempts were made to deter and frighten them, when I know how there are among you who went with me on the path of freedom to allow and demand investigation in the fullest measure, who, averse

³ Roorda van Eijsinga in his “Leiding van den Tijdsgeest”

to the dominion of phrase as it prevails in the church, desired food for head and heart and found this in my preaching.

Not to you, then, but to the character of the church. To me, humanity is the highest, the church is more or less hostile to humanity, and if I work on my goal, I cannot do so as a minister in an established church. After all, who wants to destroy with one hand what he builds with the other? Inhumane is the existence of different church communities that know something higher and better than being human. They live on through the narrow-mindedness of many who do not seek the highest in being human. Therefore their justice is also small, but ours must also be greater. And if the future is now uncertain for me, I may no longer eat the bread of a church that in essence and organization tries to undermine what is dear and precious to me above all. Where duty commands, all other considerations cease. Consider this, gentlemen!, as the personal part of my speech, although matter and person are inseparably connected here, for if I speak about my person, I do so only as the bearer of a certain principle. What do persons mean in the great maelstrom of humanity? But above that go ideas, they rule and govern the world. People die; ideas are immortal.

Let me now continue to occupy your attention by speaking about Matthew 9:17. "No man patches an old garment with a piece of new cloth, for the patch is torn from the garment, and the rent is made worse. Neither do men put wine into old bottles, otherwise the bottles burst, and the wine is spilled out, and the bottles are spoiled: but if men put wine into new bottles, both are preserved".

That is a harsh word put into the mouth of Jesus by the evangelist. One would rather skip it or twist the meaning so long that all meaning has actually gone out of it.

It is a reformatory word that fits so well on the lips of that reformer, who was anything but served by half measures, by compromise and wordplay. It is strange that art has always created images of Jesus in which he has something sweet and passive. The gentleness radiates more from his eyes than the strength. Yet the evangelical representation gives little reason for this, or how often are we not struck by his powerful language, by his bold behavior, by the almost defiance of his enemies? He was gentle, accommodating towards the little ones, the oppressed, the poor, who were always under the power of others and felt that pressure with leaden weight, but powerful towards the rich and powerful, who imagined much and prided themselves on what they had. He excused the sins of the poor and condemned those of the rich without mercy, with all severity. And why? Because the world did the opposite, it measured out everything concerning the poor in length and breadth, just as it does now, while it always comes dragging along the mantle of charity, when it concerns the sins of the rich. A world turned upside down, because the guilt of the rich is heavier, precisely because he is rich, than that of the poor who is everywhere and always the victim of the bill. Jesus throws all half-heartedness, every wrinkle far away from him. Old or new, he places them opposite each other and whoever does not want to go along with him completely, he must just stick to the old, because "whoever is not for me is against me." Always, throughout history, we see two kinds of reformers, namely those who want to improve from above; reformers who do not want to offend anyone and yet reform, who want to establish the new on the old foundations; and others who want to reform from below, because they see the unwillingness or the inability to establish the better as in conflict with the interests of the powerful and rulers, because they could not build a solid building on decayed and rotten foundations. Jesus and those with him who walked that last path are the men whom we hold in grateful memory. But the church that calls itself after Christ acts differently. Of course, because

it was powerful and it still imagines itself to be so. Every reformation bears the traces of this and therefore it expires again. See it in the most radical reformation of the 16th century.

Hardly is Luther founding a church, or the Roman Catholic institution comes back to life, the Protestants are Roman Catholics in Protestant clothing. Where else do those persecutions of heretics come from, which still take place? Luther asks for freedom of conscience, he rejects the authority of the church. By what right does he now maintain the authority of the Bible, a book that can only derive its authority from the church? That half-heartedness has hindered Protestantism in its development from the beginning. The Protestant church is nothing but a new patch on the old Roman Catholic garment, and therefore the rent becomes worse and worse. A philosopher of our day⁴ once wrote: "In this period of world history our ecclesiastical garments are sadly worn out at the elbows. Worse still: most of them are nothing but hollow, empty forms, masks behind which no living face lives but which are filled with spiders and a horrible multitude of unclean animals, who spin their web with their feet. And that mask still fixes its glass eyes on you with the horrible appearance of life!" Indeed, that is how it is. The old forms still exist, but the essence, the core, the main thing has been taken from them. Vain attempts, by many, to retain the idea of an object, while the object itself has been removed. No, when Copernico made his ideas about the solar system known, then the foundation of so-called theology had been undermined. Hence no discovery has had such a powerful effect on the human mind as the teaching of this man. Goethe testifies to it: "the earth ceased to be the centre of heaven: a world of innocence and piety disappeared in smoke, the testimony of the senses, the conviction of a poetic religious faith. No wonder that one resisted with all one's strength such a doctrine, which called upon its adherents to an unprecedented, indeed never suspected freedom of thought and greatness of mood." Astronomy has taken the heavens above the head and geology the ground from under the feet of theology, and now it floats around, pitching its tents in the church, which itself also floats. Outside the church it is also finished. Philosophy has taken the place of theology and the church for the thinking world. Faith has disappeared. Wherever reason rules, and the more it is in the foreground that man is a rational being, to that extent faith becomes the refuge of the ignorant. Faith leads to spiritual slavery: knowledge to the liberation of the human spirit. Faith is dangerous to morality, because truth is the core of all morality. Thus two worldviews stand opposed to each other in this our time as sharp contradictions that exclude each other: the old one that knows an invisible world elsewhere outside the visible world and the new one, which rejects that belief of another world and makes only the visible world the object of its investigation. Between these two, however, move thousands and thousands who are indeed inclined to the new worldview, but are too full of the old leaven in the world of their ideas to let go of the old one entirely. They limp between two thoughts, they want the new wine, but preferably in the old skins. Jesus already reminded us that this was not possible and yet they want to try it again and again to their own shame and disgrace, uneducated as they are. No, religious faiths do not admit of reforms, because faith is not susceptible to more or less, it is clear in itself, the stagnant, and if they want to exert influence, they would have to change their character and transform themselves into religions of reason. But that is the same as demanding of the church, the repository of faith, that she signs her own death sentence in order to be buried. The mysterious attracts man, but ignorance is the ground on which it can flourish. See it in the quackery in medicines, by which the credulous public allows itself to be deceived under a beautiful appearance that costs dearly! Knowledge

⁴ Thomas Carlyle

alone will bring deliverance from that situation. And once seated in the train of principles, one should not want to stop halfway, no, the locomotive logic is not stopped in its course. No need to worry, however, it will bring us safely to the end of the journey. Therefore do not fear, but beware of providing the old with new patches. Wise in the eyes of the world it is folly that makes us appear deceived. Straightforward, that is not the way to go — so said our forefathers, we adopt that word from them and if then “honesty lasts the longest” is the flag under which we sail, then let storm and flood arise, we fear nothing: victory belongs to truth and justice.

Someone I spoke to about my leaving the church said: I agree with you that things look very sad in the church, but is that a reason to leave it instead of trying to make it better? Society is not encouraging either, so you should leave it. There is truth in that saying and yet it is not correct. Society — it is the goal of our work. All religions, wherever and however they may be, have this in common that they want to free suffering humanity from all earthly ills, to lead it to the pure, the good, the divine. Some do this by praying, fasting, self-mortification, that is outdated, now we must strive to do so, with deeds by putting our hands and our heads at the service of humanity and actually improving humanity. The church has been a means to that end, very imperfect but nevertheless effective in its own way towards that goal. That means has now served its purpose. Even if the goal remains the same, will we still use means that do not lead to the goal? That would be foolish and unwise! What did Jesus envision? The coming of the kingdom of God. What was that kingdom of God to him? In any case, a humanity, pure in mind and happy through peace. Others speak of the coming of the Holy Spirit among men. What is it other than a spirit of happiness and peace and freedom for the blessing of all who fight and strive and hunt for the better in the world? And we too, do we not speak of a kingdom of truth and justice, where to each and all is given what belongs to each and all? So always: the happiness of all.

But through us — as the priests in Jesus’ days cried, as the church servants still cry, we, we show the way to salvation and without us you will not get there. As long as the crowd is ignorant, that voice will find an echo, but as knowledge increases we begin to say: we are our own priests, we do not need mediators. Away, away with Jesus! Thus cried those men of authority, whose livelihood was the preservation of the old religion. And through all the ages the same cry against all who wanted to lead man to independence and freedom, without priests. The people are immature. But is not the truth for all? Is not every man disposed to truth? Well then the truth must also be proclaimed to all and not be hidden behind a mysterious veil. One does not need to be a priest to be a good man, therefore everyone must have the freedom to be saved in his own way, also the freedom not to be saved at all. No wonder that the self-interested priests spoke of deceivers of the people about those who revealed that secret to the crowd.

One does not need to be a lawyer to be a righteous man, no, everyone has a sufficient degree of legal consciousness in him to pronounce a judgment on what is evil. The lawyers have contributed all too often to extinguish legal consciousness! No wonder that the gang of professionals, lawyers, railed against him who told this to all and thereby took away the holy wreath, artificially placed by them on their premises to inspire respect among the people. But the people who do not know the law are more powerful and know what is right; lawyers who know the law but often do not know the right, wage war against the people who do not know the law and

do know the right, in order to make a sound judgment themselves, regardless of all professional knowledge.

One need not be a physician to be a healthy man, no, everyone must be his own physician as the best opportunity to learn to know himself and his own constitution. Professional physicians rebel because the interests of their purse are involved, but others, learned by experience, continue their efforts in the interest of suffering humanity. No wonder that a fight breaks out and the man who calls nature the best physician is banished. In various fields the same superstition, but in religious matters the prejudice is killed in many who are still unfree in other fields. Yet reform will take place, if not by theologians, lawyers and physicians, then a purification of society that forms the counterpart of the purification of the temple, as it was accomplished by Jesus in Jerusalem. In society too, people are constantly busy putting new rags on old garments, putting new wine in old bottles. Jesus would have resisted this just as much with all the strength that was in him and we want to follow his example. Or does not humanity cry out, when the church rejoices in her songs on feast days, that the redeemer has come, does it not cry out: yes, possible, but when, when will the redemption dawn? Redemption from under the yoke of slavish labor, no less oppressive and more quickly killing than the old slavery, redemption from misery and care, from hunger and need, deliverance from the great disaster of ignorance? And the answer remains elusive, of that redemption not yet a trace. Labor is the savior of the world, but does not it also apply to it, that it is the suffering servant, everywhere oppressed and in misery? Are not its servants, who bring everything about, wronged, so that labor is glorified, but the laborers are despised and oppressed? Our religion must include in its precepts what no other has done, the commandment: you shall labor. And where religion does not drive to action, to labor, we must cry out to it: there is no place for you among us. The crown of thorns of misery, the cross of contempt — they have long enough been the symbols of labor, now it must be placed in honor, rise from the dead and live again to let all who have worked for humanity live in peace and quiet. We want to live — we want to be happy on earth, we want to suffer no more hunger — these are the songs then sung by the redeemed hosts of men, and no reflection of a heavenly bliss, of a world hereafter, in which the contradictions that now exist will disappear, are more able to hold the souls of the children of men captivated. Many want to die in life and live in death. Strange worldview, exactly the opposite of what we strive for. But that is precisely why we must sell our life as dearly as possible, that is to say, we must spend our life as usefully as possible. Every hour has its purpose, well ours, if we do not have to complain about hours that have been lost through our own fault! Let us contribute our part to that. The very fact that attention has always been focused on other worlds is the reason that the well-being of all in this world has been neglected and neglected. Therefore no artificial means to heal society, no new patches on the old garment, because they tear off anyway and are of no use. Everything is therefore connected. Do not expect from the person who has grown up in the midst of ecclesiastical and religious prejudices that he will have a free view of political and social matters. True freedom is there where man is religiously free. Precisely through the disappearance of supernatural things, the only goal is not to seek happiness elsewhere, but to make the earth into heaven, into the place of happiness for all. Is it? You know better, you know how for the majority the earth is a dwelling place of care and misery. And the worst thing is that this is not inherent in nature, but that we humans cause each other the greatest suffering, torment each other the most. Would one then still believe in the religion of man? It cannot and may not be a worship of words, which is limited to a single place on a single day and a single hour! Do people believe in religion? But why do they let people suffer hunger

who provide for us to be splendidly dressed? Why do they allow them to live in caves and reside when our workshops are on earth? Why, but where would I end, if I wanted to hang up a picture of the misery suffered on earth.

However much imagination could conjure up in life, in this the reality would be worse than all those scenes. Do people then believe in religion? If so, I ask: show me your works, O Christian world, you who boast of much and many things. Is that world so much better and purer than that of the heathen? To cover one's face with shame would be the best thing in this. Nothing, nothing of that community of interests necessary for the well-being of all. People may pray every day: Give us this day our daily bread, but they mean: Give me this day my daily bread. What is our fellow man to us? Am I my brother's keeper? If one member suffers, the whole body suffers — but how can one then see not one but many members suffer, without stretching out a hand to save them? The abuse of strong drink, the increase in prostitution and so many other things testify, do they not testify that society is suffering from diseases, the cause of which must be sought and which cannot be cured by the foundation of an association against this or that manifestation of the disease. No, it is of no use to put new patches on the old garment, that does not make it new. And those who wish this with the best will, often work more backwards than forwards.

I have come to kindle a fire on earth! How I wish it were already burning! — this is handed down to us by Jesus. Who does not want to see the fruit of his labor? But he who cannot wait is a fanatic, Lessing once rightly said. Therefore do not expect fruit immediately from the seed that we sow in the field. Perhaps we will see nothing of it. No need! As long as the conviction lives in us that the good seed must come up and will bear fruit. Perhaps it is true of us: "We come not to reap, we come to sow". But hands outstretched; not expecting that fruit will sometimes spring up while we have not sown. No, courageously forward, even if it goes along uneven roads and bumpy tracks. If we find no way, well then let us make one for ourselves. What are objections and obstacles for if not to be overcome? Besides, one must also be able to suffer and bear for the sake of one's conviction. No one can ever be an apostle of truth if one does not have the courage to be a martyr for it! We humans are also very limited. "Like skilled birds we have only mastered one or two tunes, which keep returning", but with infinite variety we must try to make variations on the same theme. That theme is: the happiness of humanity. Everything that can contribute to that, must be seized with both hands. And although it is the order of the day to bend principles to interests, let us show above all that we strive for that nobility of soul, which makes one ask more about what one is than about what one has.

Certainly, it is a good thing to think consistently, but that is only a first step; it is greater and nobler to live and act consistently. My friends! may my word, spoken in this place, have inspired you to do so. Continue to work courageously on that task of humanity, so worthy of all efforts.

I too will do my part, even if it is not from this place of speaking from now on. May you be inflamed with enthusiasm for that principle of humanity, may that enthusiasm reveal itself above all in deeds, which testify of you: see, how good he or she is! And if the paths along which one seeks that goal diverge, let us be satisfied if that search is done with seriousness. I have neither spoken nor written to flatter the opinions of men who die, but only to tell them the truth that does not die. There must come annoyance, that is the way to come to happiness. Let us despise no one's efforts and let others say of us: they have no religion, let us say of them: they do have religion but they are still backward, as is evident when they accuse others who strive for the good, seek the true, track down the noble, of having no religion, as if there were not the character of

religion in that! For us and ours the motto for the future is, labor will take the place of war; science that of theology; humanity that of God.

Farewell then, all who bear me a good heart, continue to remember me as I do you. Try to become a man, more is not possible, less is not necessary, but to be a man is to fulfill your destiny. Nobility obliges! The nobility of humanity imposes heavy obligations upon you, heavier than a church to which it is applicable: forgive her, she knows not what she does. To make humanity the foundation of our outlook on life with awareness, not to deliver defective or half-hearted work – see our work there. Let us bear each other's burdens to that end, support each other, so that through unity we may become powerful! Amen.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Ferdinand Domela Nieuwenhuis
My farewell to the church
1879

Retrieved on March 22, 2025 from
https://www.anarchisme.nl/namespace/mijn_afscheid_van_de_kerk

theanarchistlibrary.org