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## Summary

### **Eilardus Westerlo (1738-1790):**

#### ***From Colonial Dominee to American Pastor***

This study focuses on the Dutch pastor Eilardus Westerlo and on the role he played in the history of the Dutch Reformed Church in North America when the United States gained its independence from Great Britain. The study of his life will insert a few more missing pieces in the complex puzzle of Early American history in general and that of the Dutch Reformed Church in particular.

How Westerlo's beliefs were shaped, who influenced him, and whom he influenced are questions which will be answered in this study. The result is a spiritual biography that shows how Westerlo, in the years before, during, and after the American Revolution, fulfilled his politically important role as pastor in Albany, NY, as well as explains what his background was in the Netherlands, and shows what role he played within the Dutch Reformed Church in North America.

### **Eilardus Westerlo and the Dutch Reformed congregation in Albany**

Born in Groningen, raised in Denekamp, and educated at the grammar school in Oldenzaal, followed by the University of Groningen, Eilardus Westerlo only held one full-time job in his entire life, as pastor of the Dutch Reformed Church in Albany, from October 1760 until December 1790. During this period the United States fought for its independence, and the Dutch Reformed Church in North America gained its independence from the mother church in the Netherlands.

Westerlo became one of the leaders of his denomination in America. For thirty years he successfully steered his own congregation past problems of discord. Moreover, he was instrumental in helping the Dutch Reformed Church establish its own organization in New York and New Jersey.

When Westerlo arrived in Albany, he had only seven colleagues from the Netherlands in the British colony of New York. At first glance it seems that the Dutch Reformed Church in general and Westerlo in particular played a minor role during the War of Independence. Within the Dutch Reformed Church in New Jersey and New York there were only about thirty pastors, serving an estimated 9,000 people. North America had an estimated population of 3.5 million in 1775.

However, in view of the relatively high concentration of Dutch Reformed congregations in New Jersey and New York, and also of the importance of Albany in the region, Westerlo and his Dutch Reformed Church did exert a certain level of power. In 1775, when Westerlo married Catharine Livingston, a daughter of Philip Livingston, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, and the widow of the wealthy and influential Stephen van Rensselaer II, Westerlo's

position in Albany became even more important. At a time full of changes and problems, Westerlo played a crucial role in bringing and keeping his congregation in Albany together.

While most churches feared British repercussions during the Revolution, historians have suggested that the Dutch Reformed Church, and especially its pastor in Albany, openly supported the cause of independence. In addition, they have credited Westerlo with being a fervent advocate of American independence throughout the war. However, I found very few examples in my research to support such claims.

### **A Pietist with Dutch and German intellectual origins**

The motivation behind Westerlo's actions was to a large extent religious. This is evidenced in his *Memoirs*, of which a 20-page overview of the years 1738-1774, in two parts, has been preserved, along with some 500 pages of almost weekly notes between December 1781 until his death in December 1790. From them, a picture arises of a deeply Pietistic man who viewed everything that happened in his life through a religious lens. This image is reinforced by the analysis of his collection of books, his letters, his work as scribe of the consistory, and his translation of Robertus Alberthoma's *Uittreksel van de Leere der Waarheid*, which appeared as *Principles of the Christian Religion, as Taught in the Reformed Protestant Dutch Churches* in 1790.

An analysis of Westerlo's life, with special attention paid to his conversion experience and to his faith, shows that the intellectual roots of his Pietism lay in Groningen and in Bremen. His teacher was Daniel Gerdes, a disciple of Friedrich Adolf Lampe.

### **Conversion**

There is nothing exceptional about the fact that Eilardus Westerlo experienced a conversion. Pastors were familiar with conversions, both from personal experience and from the stories told by other believers. The importance of Westerlo's 1768 conversion experience lies in the fact that he describes it in detail, which allows us insight into such an experience.

Westerlo was convinced that his conversion marked the beginning of a new life in the service of the one who granted him this life, Jesus Christ. Although Westerlo often expressed doubts about his own behavior and about his preparedness to "meet his Savior on the Throne," he knew that his conversion took place when Jesus came to "live in him."

## **Westerlo and the Church Order of Dort**

Westerlo played an important role in the propagation of the gospel in upstate New York. After the United States gained its independence, the Dutch Reformed Church in North America had the opportunity to revise or abolish the Church Order as established during the National Synod of Dort in 1618 and 1619. Westerlo helped retain the directives of this Church Order. It may be said that the Church Order has survived several centuries in the Dutch Reformed Church, named the Reformed Church in America since 1867.

Westerlo took great interest in education, often of a religious nature. He was a member of the first Board of Trustees of Queen's College in New Jersey, now Rutgers University, and after 1779 he pushed for plans to found a university in Schenectady, resulting in the establishment of Union College in 1795. In Albany, Westerlo was one of the driving forces behind the Albany Church Academy, a precursor of the current Albany Academy.

In order to strengthen the position of the Dutch Reformed Church in the Albany area, Westerlo regularly delivered sermons for the congregations of Schaghticoke, Schoharie, Niskayuna, Schenectady, Schodack, Kingston, Livingston Manor, New Paltz, Red Hook Landing (Old Red Hook), and Halfmoon in New York, and Raritan in New Jersey. He also helped establish the congregations of Schuylerville (Old Saratoga) (1770), De Boght (Cohoes) (1784), East Greenbush (1787), Guilderland Center (Helderberg) (1767), Upper Red Hook (1788), Stillwater (Sinthoik) (1789), and Waterford (Halfmoon) (1771). It is also very probable that through his influence certain congregations were established after his death, such as Buskirk (Sinthoik) (1792) and Wynantskill (1792).

## **Westerlo's creed**

By stepping into the discussion about the New-Testament meaning of *πάρεσις* and *ἀφεσις*, 'forgiveness' or 'absolution,' Westerlo showed that he was aware of the differences between Cocceians and Voetians. The fact that he did not feel the need for further explanation of this controversy to a former fellow student makes it clear that this was common knowledge they had acquired at the University of Groningen.

Moreover, Westerlo may not be classified as either a Cocceian or a Voetian, because the debate around these two movements had ebbed considerably after 1750, and it did not play a role in North America after 1760. Westerlo's neutrality corresponded with what he had learned from Daniel Gerdes and his teacher, Friedrich Adolf Lampe. Gerdes and Lampe, both born and educated in Bremen, tried to reconcile the Voetian and Cocceian theories. They started out as Cocceians, as did Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen.

### **The role of the Frelinghuysens**

Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen, his children, sons-in-law and grandchildren played important roles in the Dutch Reformed Church in New York and New Jersey in the eighteenth century. Yet, Westerlo, who succeeded Theodorus Frelinghuysen in Albany and who probably met Frelinghuysen in Groningen, hardly ever mentioned him or his family. A possible explanation for this is that Westerlo had understood that not everyone in his congregation had a positive image of his predecessor.

Theodorus Jacobus Frelinghuysen arrived in North America forty years earlier than Westerlo. Both Pietists showed an interest in other religious movements, and they invited pastors to deliver sermons to their Dutch Reformed congregations. The experience of Westerlo and Frelinghuysen in converting believers, their interest in Psalm 25, and the common ground of their education may explain their respective success in the New World.

Although it would take more than a century after the British takeover of New Netherland in 1664 for the English language to replace Dutch in Albany, this process was accelerated by the presence of British troops in and around Albany during the French-and-Indian War (1754-1763). Westerlo's switch from Dutch to English in his *Memoirs* in 1782 and the addition of English as the language in which he preached exposed his conflicting feelings about the use of Dutch: he did not want to disappoint the elderly members of his congregation, while at the same time he realized that hanging on to Dutch would lead to the loss of the non-Dutch-speaking part of the population for the Dutch Reformed Church in Albany.

### **John Henry Livingston: father of the *Reformed Church in America*?**

John Henry Livingston played a crucial role in the transition of the Dutch Reformed Church to the Reformed Church in America. Calling him "the father of the Reformed Church in America" does not do justice to the role others played during that transition. Livingston would have rejected such an honorary title, and he himself mentioned seven colleagues by name who were indispensable for this transition. Eilardus Westerlo was one of these colleagues. In religious matters Livingston often asked Westerlo for advice, as his friend, brother-in-law, and colleague. Westerlo's congregation in Albany was the largest not to join the *Union* immediately in 1771, and this made his role in persuading his congregation to accept the *Plan of Union* crucially important for the prosperity of the independent Church.

Westerlo's local missionary work fits the tradition of the Dutch reformed Church in New York and New Jersey. It is on this tradition that Livingston built in the nineteenth century, when he proposed an international missionary role for the Church.

## **George Washington and Westerlo's sermon**

On June 27, 1782, Westerlo delivered a sermon about leadership and responsible citizenship to a special group of listeners: military leaders, including General George Washington, were preparing the final battle of the Revolution in the state of New York. This sermon, likely inspired by a sermon Westerlo had heard near Groningen in 1760, called on citizens to follow and support the leaders of the new nation.

This theme is also found in George Washington's *Circular Letter* of 1783, in which he claims that citizens should obey their government and work together as brothers to ensure the success of the United States. Washington appears to refer to Romans 13:1, the same Bible text Westerlo mentioned in his sermon one year earlier.

## **Conclusion**

Eilardus Westerlo's success can be partially traced to Daniel Gerdes and Michaël Bertling, who were asked to find an adequate successor for Theodorus Frelinghuysen as pastor in Albany in 1760. Thousands of miles from Albany, unfamiliar with the American situation, faced with a limited number of candidates, these two Groningen professors appear to have selected a very suitable candidate as the new pastor.

Within a few months after graduating from the University of Groningen, the young pastor Westerlo proved not only that he understood the issues in Albany, but also that he could come up with workable solutions. He led the large, politically divided congregation, with its powerful consistory and with many influential members, to a solution, first in the *Coetus-Conferentie* conflict, and later on the issue of whether the congregation in Albany should join the other North American congregations under the *Plan of Union* proposed by the Classis of Amsterdam.

As soon as Westerlo's congregation finally joined the Union of Dutch Reformed Churches in 1785, he was immediately chosen to be president of the General Synod. Perhaps for this reason, but also in honor of his efforts towards education, he was made an honorary doctor of theology by the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University, that same year.

Another delicate issue in which Westerlo carefully guided his congregation was its position vis-à-vis the War of Independence. The War put the Dutch Reformed pastors at risk. The transition from Dutch to English was not easy either. Westerlo's preaching reflected that problem too, beginning in 1782.

In 1984 Howard Hageman called Eilardus Westerlo, “Albany’s Dutch Pope.” This says more about the influence that is now ascribed to Westerlo in Albany. He should, however, be known as a successful representative of his church community in the quickly changing world of Revolutionary North America.

### **Appendices**

This dissertation, a spiritual biography of Eilardus Westerlo, is accompanied by a number of appendices. I used these as resources to support my claims. Until now, most of these texts could only be found in archival manuscripts, but now that they have been transcribed, they can be studied in their original text.