Gerard Groote Biography

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Biography

The Dutch evangelical preacher Gerard Groote (1340-1384) is considered the founder of the Brethren of the Common Life and of the Devotio Moderna, a religious movement which contributed to the Protestant Reformation.

Born of wealthy parents at Deventer, Gerard Groote received extensive education in law, medicine, and theology at Aachen, Cologne, Paris, and Prague. But about 1375 his life changed dramatically when he experienced a spiritual conversion. Influenced by his friend Jan Van Ruysbroeck, he gave up his wealth and possessions and entered a Carthusian monastery. After 2 years there he wanted to preach, was ordained a deacon (but never a priest), and left the monastery. He began to preach in the diocese of Utrecht and attracted large, enthusiastic audiences.

Groote's popularity was the result of his preaching in the vernacular (unlike the Latin services of the Church) and his appeal to the spiritual ideals of the times. Popular religious feeling centered on the imitation of Christ, the idea that all Christians should practice his virtues. Groote preached this message, and although never heretical, he angered the Church by his criticism of the clergy's wealth and power. For this reason, in 1384 the bishop of Utrecht ordered Groote to stop preaching. Groote obeyed, but he appealed to the Pope. Before the Pope could reply, Groote died at the age of 44, on Aug. 20, 1384.

Although his career was cut short, Gerard Groote is tremendously important for his influence on others. His followers formed the Brethren of the Common Life, whose aim was to teach the common people and thus develop their moral and spiritual qualities: the practical result of this movement was greatly improved education in the Netherlands. Groote's disciple Florent Radewyns founded the Windesheim Congregation of Canons Regular, which was copied in the Netherlands, Germany, and Switzerland. A member of this order was Thomas à Kempis, probable author of *The Imitation of Christ*. The Brethren of the Common Life and the Windesheim Congregation, in turn, gave rise to the Devotio Moderna (New Devotion), a religious reform movement of the Low Countries and the Rhineland which influenced Renaissance humanists and figures of the Reformation. Thus Gerard Groote has a double significance: he is the culmination of popular religious feeling in the Middle Ages, the search for a more meaningful faith; and he is one of the spiritual forerunners of the Protestant Reformation.