The Life
Behind the
Voice

M. R. DeHaan

Founder of Radio Bible Class,
home of Our Daily Bread

JAMES R. ADAIR

DISCOVERY HOUSE

Feeding the Soul with the Word of God
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A smile played at the corners of her thin, stern mouth and tears of joy welled in her blue eyes that warm morning of June 11, 1901, as Johanna DeHaan watched fifteen-year-old John, her eldest son, leave for school. To her, there was no finer lad in the town of Zeeland, Michigan, nor elsewhere throughout the surrounding Dutch colony. She dabbed her eyes with her white apron, taking care that her younger sons, Ralph and Martin, didn’t see her and misunderstand her tears.

From a window of the two-story red brick home on the corner of Lincoln and Peck Streets, Johanna, a plumpish woman of thirty-five, watched her son disappear on his way toward Zeeland High School on Main Street. Then she returned to her kitchen chores, remembering last night’s discussion with her husband.

“Reitze, it’s time we made some decision regarding John’s further schooling. He’s finishing ninth grade, and it’s not too early for us to start planning how we’ll send him to college.”
Reitze DeHaan was the town cobbler, a gentle, practical man who wanted the best for his family, though most of the time he made not much more than a dollar a day, hardly enough to assure each of his children a college education.

Johanna, who most certainly had more than an equal vote in family decisions, suggested they should tighten up even more on their spending and begin looking into the matter of a loan for John’s advanced schooling, likely at Hope College in nearby Holland, Michigan.

By the light of a kerosene lamp, the DeHaans talked of the professions and occupations that John might study for: businessman, lawyer, doctor, preacher. . . . Of course, only John himself, who had not yet said what he wanted to be, could really decide, they concluded. “How nice it would be if God called him to be a minister,” mused Johanna. Reitze agreed that this would be the fulfillment of their dreams and prayers.

Before school that Tuesday morning, June 11, Johanna had shared with John the news that they were definitely planning to send him to college.

John’s face brightened and he looked past his mother out the window as if trying to penetrate the future. “Let’s see, I’m fifteen now, and by the time I’m twenty-two, the Lord willing, I will be a minister.”

These words sent an electric tingle down Johanna’s spine, and she pondered them as John rode his bike toward Zeeland High.

That afternoon, following school, John and a friend, Herman Boone, rode their bikes to a lake-like stretch of the Black River west of Zeeland called Boone’s River. With other school friends, they gathered water lilies for botany class. The fun was over and the others were starting home when John and Herman called,
“There are some nicer lilies out there; we’re going to stay and get them. We’ll catch up with you on our bikes.”

What happened after that was never fully known. Harry and Thomas Vander Pels, of Zeeland, who were fishing, saw the two boys picking water lilies about 4:45 that afternoon. As they left to fish farther upstream, the two boys were stripping for a swim. Then about 6:30 the two men returned to the spot where the boys had been and noticed their clothes on the riverbank, but the boys were nowhere in sight. Afraid that the boys might have drowned, the fishermen began raking the bottom of the river with their cane poles. Within fifteen minutes they discovered the boys’ bodies in about six feet of water and about six feet apart.

* * *

For Johanna and Reitze DeHaan, the dream of having their eldest son become a minister had been shattered within a few hours. The gentle, shimmering Black River had become a slithering, greedy monster, snuffing out the lives of the two teenagers. And John’s last words to his mother, which had thrilled Johanna’s heart, were to linger only as memories and suggest what might have been.

While young John had enjoyed attending church services with his family at the First Christian Reformed Church in Zeeland and had taken his catechism classes seriously, neither his brother Ralph, the next oldest, nor the youngest, Martin, showed the inclinations that John had exhibited. Eleven-year-old Ralph also gave himself seriously to things of the church, but he was quiet and somewhat of an introvert. Ten-year-old Martin, on the other hand, was more of an extrovert and an earthy kind of lad who was more interested in Crackerjacks
(and the prize inside the box), frogs, pollywogs, and skunks—and following the town lamplighter from corner to corner in the evening.

Once, when Reitze asked a visiting minister to offer thanks for the food at the dinner table, Martin had embarrassed his parents by saying, “Could you please make it short, so we can get on with the meal?”

But there came a day when, at least to Martin, it seemed that God’s hand had touched him in a special way.

* * *

Periodically the slow clop, clop of horses’ hooves and the creaking of a buckboard wagon moving into town from the west, carrying a tall woman evangelist, drew swarms of young Hollanders to Main Street in Zeeland. Dressed in wide-collared shirts, short corduroy pants or knickers, long stockings and high-top shoes, the youngsters scampered from their white frame and red brick houses with steep gabled roofs and skinny windows to taunt the woman with the thundering voice who preached from the buckboard. Her name was Nellie Churchford, and she came from the City Mission in Holland. She was a sort of female John the Baptist, emerging as she did from the rural “wilderness” that separated the towns of Holland and Zeeland and preaching a coming judgment. Up and down Main Street her powerful voice reverberated from storefronts, carrying a clear message on how to escape God’s wrath.

“Salvation is all of God’s grace. You don’t earn it by baptism, catechism, or church membership! You don’t inherit it from your parents. Confess your sin and be born again by Jesus Christ into the family of God!” She quoted Bible proof texts such as “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not
of yourselves, it is the gift of God—not of works, lest any man should boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9).

Ignoring the taunts of youngsters, Nellie stood tall in her black full-skirted, ankle-length dress with its high lace collar, shaking her long index finger at the Zeelanders and hoping the Truth would sink deeply into the hearts of some of her listeners.

Martin DeHaan was often among those who flocked after the street evangelist, but it was when he was about twelve years old that he felt as if the long, thin finger of Nellie Churchford had singled him out as the worst sinner in town. That day he didn’t jeer with the rest of the kids, nor let on to anyone that the message had spoken to him. But as the buckboard creaked back toward Holland, with Nellie’s husband at the reins, Martin trudged homeward with serious thoughts bombarding his boyish mind and heart. And sometime that afternoon, young Martin talked to God as he never had before. By faith, he wanted to be saved and be the kind of Christian Nellie Churchford talked about. He apparently didn’t discuss this decision in detail with anyone, not even his parents or his pastor. This, he felt, was personal—between him and God.

It’s not clear whether Martin had a genuine spiritual experience at this time; his life exhibited no marked change, although in later life he made occasional reference to this convicting moment. Nor is it known whether becoming a minister entered his mind at that time. Often when a young person comes face to face with the Eternal, he does have such thoughts. And if Martin had shared this news, his friends and his godly parents would have been pleased, for he was surrounded by hardworking, God-fearing people who delighted to see their sons and daughters become part of the church.
The Dutch immigrants who settled in western Michigan, founding the towns of Holland and Zeeland, had a heritage deeply rooted in the Christian faith. The founders of Zeeland, like the seventeenth-century Pilgrim separatists, had traded persecution in their Netherlands homeland for a fresh start and a life of hardship in America in order that they might worship and serve God according to their beliefs. They were rugged individualists from Zeeland, the most southerly maritime province of the Netherlands, who for centuries had fought the sea and whose motto was “Luctor et emergo” (“I struggled and I emerge”).

Trouble for them had begun in the Netherlands after the Crown established the state church in 1816. Influenced by the radical liberal theology of contemporary German thought, the church had developed a spirit of reckless free thinking and a dead formalism. Finally, in 1834, the loud protest of many pastors and their congregations resulted in secession and the establishment of the “Christelijk Afgescheiden Kerk” (Christian Seceded Church, later renamed Christian Reformed Church).

Persecution followed, though a royal decree in 1836 eased matters somewhat. The abused separatists began talking of emigration, and in September 1846 Albertus Christiaan Van Raalte, an enthusiastic young minister of the secession, sailed from Rotterdam for the United States with his family and forty-seven followers. In February 1847 they settled in western Michigan, founding the city of Holland. Next a body of prospective colonists in Zeeland completed a church organization, called Cornelius Van Der Meulen to be their pastor-leader, and 457 of them sailed for the States in the spring of 1847. Such a
move by an emigrating group—coming as a complete church—had not been known since the days of the Pilgrims.

On June 27, after many had died from hardship and disease, the homesick Zeelanderers arrived on a flat boat at Van Raalte’s Holland. Jannes Van De Luyster, who had been a wealthy land owner in the province of Zeeland, then set up headquarters six miles east of the Holland settlement and proceeded to buy land at $1.25 an acre for a village to be called Zeeland. In his journal, Van De Luyster recorded the reason for the name: “Because it was founded by the Zeelanderers, who called upon the name of the Lord to prosper His work, and that His name might be called upon there forever.”

The Zeelanderers worshiped for the first time there on the third Sunday in August 1847 under Dominie Van Der Meulen. Coached by those who had already conquered the wilderness, these Dutch settlers, with patience, perseverance, industry, and common sense, slashed out a rectangular village whose lots sold for $6.48 each. Here, for years to come, they would live under the able leadership of Jannes Van De Luyster, “the proprietor of the village of Zeeland,” and Cornelius Van Der Meulen, the sympathetic, resourceful “Apostle of Zeeland.”

Over the years, stories of the advantages of living in the Dutch colony in Michigan enticed more immigrants from the Netherlands, including twenty-two-year-old Reitze DeHaan, who came to Zeeland in the fall of 1881. The same year, fifteen-year-old Johanna Rozema, with several sisters and brothers, settled there.

In time Reitze became the town cobbler, but in those early years his thoughts were focused more on winning the hand of lovely Johanna than on mending shoes. A young man with an oval chin, a rather wide mouth, long sideburns, and oversized ears, he admired Johanna’s industriousness and little stubborn
Dutch ways. There was nothing giddy about her and she loved the church as he did. Besides, there was much attractive about her: rather large blue eyes, a determined mouth, skin as delicate as a rose petal, and dark hair pulled tight and worn in a little knot; her figure pleased him, though she was ever so slightly taller than he was.

Reitze left his pedal stitcher and the smell of leather as he closed shop one day, and, with excitement surging within, hurried to ask Johanna the magic question. They were married in 1885, when she was nineteen and he, twenty-six. John was born a year later, followed in 1889 by a second son, Ralph.

Although Johanna longed for a girl, their third child, born on March 23, 1891, was another boy. She and Reitze decided he would be named after Reitze’s brother, Martin, who worked with him at the cobbler’s shop, and their third son was given the full name, Martin Ralph.

“Marty” was not quite ten when a daughter, Anna, was born to the DeHaans, but she died in infancy. Then a short time later a daughter was added to the family through adoption. It was the day before Christmas 1901 that Wiebe Vander Velde lost his wife in childbirth and found that five children were too much for him to care for by himself. The baby, Peter, went to relatives, while three-year-old Ada came to live with the DeHaans and was later legally adopted.

Ada was too young to remember her oldest adoptive brother, John, or his tragic drowning death, but years later she recalled the day-and-night difference between her brothers Ralph and Marty. “Ralph didn’t care about worms and bugs and things like that, as Marty did. Their natures were different and they didn’t even look alike. Ralph was thinner-faced and a little taller. In temperament he took more after my dad while Mart took after Mother, who was higher strung than Dad.”
Marty, his sister said, once embarrassed his mother because of his keen interest in the insect world. As a boy of seven or eight, he was visiting with his mother in a home that was, as with many of the Dutch women, “crazy clean.” Johanna DeHaan herself kept her home spotless, regularly brush-scrubbing woodwork and floor, and doing a thorough spring and fall housecleaning. But this woman went even further, washing the clothesline poles every week and keeping her house almost antiseptically clean. Thus both women were horrified when they discovered that Marty had brought flies in his pocket and was releasing them one by one, until the house was buzzing with the pests.

In a real sense the Holy Scriptures were the center of the DeHaan home. With pious regularity Reitze read from the family Bible before each meal, followed by a substantial prayer, thanking God for supplying their needs and invoking His divine blessing. There was also a prayer of thanksgiving after every meal.

Around the table it was sometimes a babel, with three languages being spoken. When Reitze talked with Johanna, they usually spoke Frisian, their native dialect, a Low German tongue closely related to Anglo-Saxon. To the children the parents spoke Dutch, and the youngsters responded in English, which the parents understood but spoke with difficulty.

Like most other Zeelanders, the DeHaans were strict in their observance of Sunday. Reitze and Johanna regarded that day as the Sabbath, holy unto God, and all weekday activities ceased. The children dared not even play in the yard. On Sunday mornings the children were likely to awaken to the lusty voice of their father singing hymns and Dutch psalms as, with two fingers,
he played the wheezy old reed organ downstairs. The family faithfully attended church three times on Sundays—morning, afternoon, and evening—where the relatively long services were in the Dutch language. The children went to catechism classes on Tuesdays, and these, too, were in Dutch.

During the first sixteen years of their married life, Reitze and Johanna were members of the First Christian Reformed Church in Zeeland. But following their eldest son’s tragic death, the minister of their church didn’t come to see them to offer comfort and help, whereas the pastor of the First Reformed Church showed special kindness to the family. The DeHaans soon placed their membership in the First Reformed Church, which dated back to the founding of Zeeland, its first pastor having been Dominie Van Der Meulen.

From time to time young Marty would visit his father’s cobbler shop and chat with him and his Uncle Martin, who was a man with fascinating ideas. Uncle Martin talked of his religious beliefs, ideas that weren’t generally heard or appreciated around the local Dutch community. He was considered a bit of a heretic and took pleasure in it. Christ, he said, was going to return someday in bodily form, just as He had been received into heaven following His resurrection; He could come any day. When that happened, believers were to be taken up to be with Jesus—the dead were to be raised, and the living were to follow them to be forever with Him. After a seven-year tribulation period on earth, Christ, with many of His followers, would set up a thousand-year kingdom on earth, over which He would rule from Jerusalem, asserted Uncle Martin, who shared with his nephew proof of his beliefs from a well-worn Bible.

While all this intrigued Marty, he didn’t become a follower of Uncle Martin and his ideas. Instead, he loved exploring and learning what life was all about. He continued to collect insects
and look for frogs along the edge of the cedar swamp in back of his house. He enjoyed studying the habits of animals and watching birds in flight.

He also enjoyed talking with his friends, though he was generally regarded as something of a loner. He and his buddies would gather at the railroad tracks, where they sat and discussed everything from the facts of life to theology. One boy from the gang ran away to the nearby city of Grand Rapids and returned with the story that he had heard a minister who seemed to doubt that the Bible was truly God’s inspired Word—at least not all of it.

“We began to bat that around, and it was one of the most helpful discussions in this teenage period of my life,” recalled D. J. (Dirk) De Pree, a boyhood friend of Martin DeHaan. “This conversation made us wonder if everything preached in our town was right. I don’t definitely remember Martin in these conversations, but I imagine he was there. We had a gang and he was in it.”

Martin was “one of the best students in the class,” De Pree said. “In our day, students usually took four years of Latin and two years of German. Martin did a minimum of homework and preparation, but our teacher, Miss Wilhelm, herself a German, was really impressed by the way he could stand up in class and give a free translation of German. Actually, he knew the Frisian language so well that when it came to German he had little problem, because of its similarity. This particularly appealed to the teacher.”

Apparently Martin’s keen mind was not as challenged as it might have been in school. Since occasionally he wasn’t prepared with his lessons, he devised a standard trick to avoid looking bad during oral quizzes. Questions were written and displayed, and the teacher went from student to student to ob-
tain the answers. Martin quickly calculated which question would be his, and if he didn’t know the answer, he held his handkerchief to his nose and asked to be excused. “I have a nose bleed,” he said. Those who knew him well snickered at his pretense.

During his high school years, Martin concluded that he should drop out of school and go to work. For at least a semester he worked for an aunt and uncle, but getting up at 4:30 a.m. to begin chores appealed to him less than the boredom of classes. So, heeding his parents’ urgings, he returned to school.

By the time he was a teenager, Martin was a husky young man, stocky, thick-necked, with muscular legs and arms and shoulders that let you know he was a football player. His high school football team was coached by a young man from Hope College in nearby Holland, a brainy fellow named Paul De Kruif, who would later write such books as *Microbe Hunters* and *Hunger Fighters*.

Martin was a 180-pound combination of power and speed. But according to De Pree, who was also on the team, “We couldn’t get Martin to keep in training as he should and play regularly.” The climax of his last year, 1908, in high school athletics was a post-season game with one of the two city high schools of Grand Rapids. The city team’s star player that day was, a year later, named center on the Michigan All-State High School team, but that day the big-city team was held scoreless while Martin continually plowed through their line, scoring the only two touchdowns of the afternoon. It was said that he almost single-handedly won the game for the Zeeland High School against a formidable team.

* * *
During his high school years Martin showed little indication of what he might do as his life work. If Johanna and Reitze DeHaan hoped their youngest son would become a minister, as they had dreamed for their eldest son, they had little on which to base those hopes other than faith that God would someday call him. However, three men in the community, besides Uncle Martin, undoubtedly sowed seeds in his mind and heart that would later influence him.

One of these men was a veterinarian with whom Martin enjoyed riding and talking as the vet made calls on his animal patients. Another was Dr. Huizenga, a Zeeland physician, and the third was Huizenga’s son George, a talented fellow who began writing stories for *The American Boy* magazine when he was still in school. A would-be minister who in 1911 dropped out of seminary because of an eye affliction, George was another Zeelander who had become sort of a heretic by Reformed standards. In seminary George had been assigned to write a paper against premillennialism, but his research convinced him that indeed the return of Christ would be premillennial. This affected his own life to the extent that he became a fervent Christian, doing personal witnessing on the streets of Zeeland and sharing Christ over fences with his neighbors. George told Martin things that he never forgot, things that later became especially meaningful to him, adding to what he had learned from Uncle Martin.

One day a slick character came to town and set up in a hotel, hoping to make a few bucks off curious farmers and gawking schoolboys. The sign he displayed provoked interest: “How smart are you? What is your main talent? What does the future
hold for you?” According to the sign, the world-renowned Doctor X. Y. Smartz (or some such name) could “tell all” by a simple reading of one’s head.

Martin DeHaan and Dirk De Pree gazed with awe at the sign and couldn’t resist the temptation. Soon, with great ceremony, the phrenologist was deftly feeling the conformation of the skull of one lad and then the other. To Martin he pronounced, “Someday, my boy, you will be a great public speaker! I predict great things for you. You will be eloquent, and many people will listen to you.”

Later, the boys decided they would put the phrenologist to the supreme test. Returning to their homes, they changed into entirely different clothing, then again visited the skull reader.

Would his predictions be the same? To Martin’s amazement, the man uttered the same pronouncement. He was to be a public speaker.

But Martin shrugged it off as a lot of foolishness. “Me? I’m going to be a doctor,” he told Dirk De Pree.