

A history of Christian publishing in Grand Rapids:

how four families shaped an industry.

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### Abstract

This paper will address the histories of four major publishing companies in Grand Rapids: Zondervan, Baker, Eerdmans, and Kregel. These publishing companies, through their individual and interwoven histories have shaped and sustained the publishing industry in the Midwest, and Grand Rapids in particular. These publishing houses are significant to the history of books and publishing because, for roughly a century, these publishing houses have been producing Bibles and other evangelical materials that are educating people the world over, from the youngest Sunday school pupils to the oldest seminarian. Finally, the paper will discuss the impact these companies had collectively on the world of theological books and publishing, and will briefly touch on the state of each company today.

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Grand Rapids in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a rugged place, with millions of feet of logs floating down the river, and saw mills peppering the banks. Settlers from various ethnic backgrounds came from far and wide to work the lumber trade and make their fortunes on the fine pine timber that flourished along the banks of the Grand River and its tributaries (Baxter, 1891). As the city grew and became more established, many immigrants arrived and began establishing their own industries. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a large Dutch immigrant community had established itself in the area: a devout people with their own language—although many could also converse in English—and culture. Many of these families relied on import businesses to give them a taste of home. They imported chocolates, biscuits, oil, but most importantly, they imported books. For the Dutch Calvinists in the United States, especially Grand Rapids, religious books in their own language held an immense appeal (ten Harmsel & Van Til, 2011). It was from this necessity of reading material that the Dutch-American publishing industry was born, with four families blazing the trail. Their histories and families are interwoven, as were their businesses over time. As a combined force the Kregel, Baker, Eerdmans, and Zondervan families have built Grand Rapids into the capital of Evangelical publishing, with a global reach that has been inspiring multicultural and multilingual readers for over a century.

**Kregel Publications, Inc.**

Louis Kregel, founder of the Kregel Publications business, immigrated to the United States from the Netherlands in 1909. Like many of his peers at the time, he began importing goods from the continent to feed the nostalgia of his fellow countrymen. Primarily, Kregel began importing Dutch theological books for the insatiable readers in the Calvinist community of

Grand Rapids. In her 2008 unpublished personal memoir, Henrietta Lillian Kregel Molenkamp, Louis Kregel's daughter, describes her father's import business as a "bookkeeper, not in the way we think of a bookkeeper, but because he sold and imported books. He did some importing of items from the Netherlands, among them darning needles, cod liver oil, and small booklets in Dutch for Sunday School teachers to give out. Eventually he started purchasing books for ministerial use, new and used, and had a book business in the house" (Molenkamp, 2008).

The business was successful, and soon Kregel's home was filled with imported books—so much so, that he began building shelves in every room to accommodate his inventory. Henrietta recalls that when her dad tried to build bookshelves into the bedroom, her mother put her foot down and suggested he rent a true and proper storefront and launch his business (Molenkamp, 2008). Kregel did just that, and in 1929 he relocated his inventory and business to Kregel Bookstore near the intersection of Eastern and Franklin streets in Grand Rapids (Kregel, 2016).

In October of the same year, the stock market crashed and the nation began to struggle through the Great Depression. Fortunately for the Kregels, Louis was cautious with his money, and the family and business fared pretty well during a time when a lot of the rest of the nation was barely making ends meet. Henrietta describes it like this: "Talking about the Depression, it was not evident in our home as we always had enough food and were not wanting for anything" (Molenkamp). Although Kregel was careful with his money, and provided well for his family, he was not stingy but generous, providing often, but quietly, for others in need—both strangers and friends (Molenkamp).

Around this time, Herman Baker, Kregel's nephew, started working for him. Baker was the son of Kregel's sister, Jenny, and Ricco Bakker, who emigrated in 1925, and whose name

was changed to Richard Baker upon gaining citizenship (Byle, 2014). Baker worked for Kregel until 1939 when he opened his own shop. On December 24, 1939, after battling cancer, Louis Kregel died at the age of 49, leaving the running of the business to his 20-year-old son, Robert, and daughter, Henrietta (Molenkamp).

Within ten years, Robert had grown Kregel Bookstore into a publishing company and found a nice niche for the company publishing reprints of classic theological works. Within another ten years, Kregel had outgrown its space. In 1959 Kregel demolished its building on Eastern Avenue SE to build a new and bigger space for the expanding business, which included providing schoolbooks for students, reprinting the classics that theologians and lay-people wanted to read, and selling used books. The following year, Robert began to serve a two-year term as president of the Christian Booksellers Association (CBA). In 1964, Kregel registered as a Michigan corporation, and by 1966 Kregel had published its first original work, alongside the Grand Rapids Historical Commission: *The Story of Grand Rapids*, written by Z.Z. Lydens (Kregel).

Over the next two decades, more family joined the publication business. Jim, Robert's son, came on as office manager, and Harold, Robert's brother, brought his Spanish-language publication ministry, Editorial Portavoz, to Grand Rapids from Spain, where he had spent several decades as a missionary (Kregel). According to Henrietta Kregel's 2008 unpublished memoir, Harold and his wife Esther were the first American missionaries to the country (Molenkamp). Not only was Kregel adding family members to the business, but also acquiring titles, rights, and stock from various other publishing companies, such as VanKampen Press (1985); Klock & Klock Christian Publishers (1987); and Keats Publishing (1988) (Kregel).

From the early nineties to the present, Kregel has gained accolades and made its mark on the publishing industry, opening several storefronts, but also closing some. Although its retail operations may not have always been the most successful of its ventures, Kregel Publications, Inc. is still making its mark on the Evangelical world through excellent publication, the provision of learning materials in English and Spanish, strong family ties—the business is now owned by two of Louis Kregel’s grandsons—and solid business acumen.

### **Baker Book House**

Herman Bakker was born in the United States, but his family returned to the Netherlands when he was just 2 years old. By the time he had reached 14 years of age, his father, Ricco (Richard) Bakker and family decided again to emigrate to the United States and settled in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Within a couple of years, Ricco gained citizenship and adopted an American name, Richard Baker. Herman was promptly put to work in his uncle’s business, Kregel Bookstore. Herman grew to love what he did, providing solid theological works in Dutch and English to his community.

While still working for his uncle, Herman met his wife, Angeline Sterkenberg, and they married in 1932. Soon the two became four with the births of first Joanne, and then Richard. Two more children would follow: Ruth Ellen and Peter, to complete the family. In 1939 Baker left his uncle’s employ to open his own shop, and pursue what he loved doing under his own authority and name. He rented a space on Wealthy Street in Grand Rapids for the incredible rate of eighteen dollars per month. His first inventory were 500 books that he had himself gathered during his time at his uncle’s store. In *The Baker Book House Story*, Ann Byle (2014) describes Herman’s humble beginnings as a book seller: “His equipment consisted of two used desks and a typewriter purchased at the Salvation Army” (p.15).

Even with the competition of Kregel selling much the same product, Baker's business boomed and expanded during the war years, and he quickly had to scramble to find space: adding ground-floor rooms and the basement of his original building into shop space, and then purchasing neighboring buildings and apartments and converting them into show and sales rooms (Byle). Baker moved speedily into publication, after only one year, and in 1940 published his first work by a local author, Dr. William Hendriksen of Calvin Seminary. Of this work, Byle states:

*More Than Conquerers* proved to be the sort of title Baker loved to publish: conservative, scholarly, biblical, and timeless. The book is still in print and continues to gather praise nearly seventy-five years after the original publication (Byle, 2014, p.16).

This was the kind of book that Baker would continue to publish, although later in his career he branched out to include a diverse inventory of fiction and non-fiction for adults and children, biblical and theological works, and even Bibles.

The years during World War II were difficult for Baker, but he grew the business anyway with frugality and strategy. Byle (2014) describes Baker as waiting to send catalogs out until the money became available for stamps, and Herman Baker began adding new and used fiction to his inventory at this time, to draw in business from wives, mothers and daughters of servicemen who were left at home while their men went to serve in the war. Baker also did an astonishing business from a distance: he sent hand-typed catalogs and purchasers would send back an order form with their payment. When the form and payment were received, Baker and his staff would pack up the order and ship it to the customer (Byle). By this method, and by instituting a Volume-a-Month Plan to publish large series without having to raise large capital, Baker Book House became "one of the largest distributors of new and used religious books in the United

States and abroad” (Byle, p.19). All of this was accomplished with very modest means and equipment. At this point in his career, Baker used only one A.B. Dick mimeograph (Byle).

After the war, when the men returned home and G.I. Bill induced many of them to attend religious colleges and seminaries (as well as public universities, of course), the Christian publishing companies rose to the challenge of providing them with their reading materials. It was a time of great growth and expansion for many companies, Baker included. The storefront on Wealthy underwent a renovation in 1953, and again in 1959, when the CBA came to Grand Rapids for their annual convention. Baker was a charter member of the association, and was determined to make the very best of impressions when other booksellers toured the facilities as part of the itinerary (Byle).

As the business grew and expanded, Baker, like Kregel, kept business mostly in the family, and by its twenty-fifth year, Baker Book House added Baker’s sons to its staff. Richard attended nearby Calvin College and pursued a course in publishing through Radcliffe College. Peter also attended Calvin, and later Davenport Business Institute, now the much larger Davenport University—still in the greater Grand Rapids area, but moved to a much larger campus, and with a much broader scholarly scope. Many of Baker’s employees came through Calvin College, either as staff or students (Byle). It would seem that Baker and Calvin had a symbiotic relationship, Baker supplying the books to Calvin, and Calvin supplying the labor force to Baker.

Baker fame didn’t extend just to Calvin or even to West Michigan, but also globally. Baker sold materials the world over: South Africa, the Netherlands, Korea, and even Hungary. Baker also sold to celebrities: according to Byle, Baker family oral tradition holds that Eleanor Roosevelt once bought materials from Baker. Johnny Cash also confirmed to Baker employee

Gary Popma that Cash's father-in-law Ezra Carter purchased a commentary set from Baker that Cash himself kept in his own library (Byle). But it was not the celebrity of which Baker Book House would have been most proud. Baker became a gathering space for pastors, theologians, and scholars, what the literature now calls a "third space" where ideas and theologies were discussed and pursued, born and debated. A rare few pastors obtained keys to Baker Book House and gained access in the wee hours of the night to compile books from their wish-list, which would then be sent along in the morning by Baker's staff (Baker). By these methods, Baker became a necessity to pastors and educators the world over, and built its solid reputation.

Beginning in the 1960s, Baker launched a campaign of growth. Baker constructed a 25,000 square-foot facility in nearby Ada, Michigan. This would be the new home of the publishing arm of Baker. This building, like the Wealthy Street storefront, Baker expanded thrice to accommodate its rapid growth. In 1980, the beloved Wealthy Street store had finally burst its confines, and Baker moved its primary sales location—by then there were several other stores—to a larger office-and-warehouse facility on East Paris in Kentwood. Baker Book House, however, was not only expanding within its own walls, but also by acquiring other publishers. In 1968, Baker acquired the W.A. Wilde Company; in 1992, both Fleming H. Revell and Chosen Books; in 1999, Brazos Press; in 2003, Bethany House (Byle). It was with the acquisition of these companies that the diversity of Baker's published materials grew into the multifaceted inventory of today. Baker allowed all of its acquired companies to operate much in the way they once did, but under its umbrella and with Baker's guidance, they flourished.

In 1987, Baker Book House underwent two transitions, which propelled Baker into the future of Evangelical publishing: the purchase of its first Macintosh computer, which increased output and reduced per-page cost; and the retirement of Herman Baker. Richard Baker led the

company through 10 years of tremendous growth and technological advancement. Dwight Baker took the reins of the company in 1997. Under his leadership, Baker Publishing Group has prospered, even through the recession of the early 2000s. At a time when many companies had to lay off staff to stay afloat, Baker implemented scale-back in pay, and office staff even pitched in to work in the warehouse when orders could not be shipped on time, due to a hiring freeze (Byle). It has been the close family ties, innovative and imaginative spirit, and financial prudence which have carried Baker into being one of the foremost Evangelical publishers.

### **William B. Eerdmans**

William B. Eerdmans' immigration story began in the Netherlands, with a rebellious and adventurous spirit. William was born the seventh of eleven children to a proud Frisian family who owned and operated a textile business, processing leather and wool. The rebellious and adventurous spirit was not his own, however, but that of his older brother Jo. Some of William's and Jo's siblings had already emigrated to the United States, and Jo desperately wanted to go, also. Forbidden by his father to do so, he quit school and began to work in the textile business. One day Willy and Jo were sent into the nearby port town of Rotterdam with 300 guilders to buy supplies. Normally Willy's father entrusted him with the money and supply lists, but Willy had met a girl in Rotterdam, and wanted to see her again. He gave the guilders and the list to Jo, and made plans to meet up with him later (ten Harmsel & Van Til, 2011).

Jo, however, had no intention of meeting up with his brother. He absconded with the money and promptly booked passage to the United States. In *An Eerdmans Century: 1911-2011* ten Harmsel and Van Til (2011) describe how Jo had burned through his 300 guilders on the passage over or shortly thereafter, and worked odd jobs in New York for several months until he could raise the funds to join his brother Dirk in Michigan. This is how the reunion went:

Initially pleased and surprised to see his little brother, Dirk exploded when he found out what had happened. Three months had gone by, and Jo had somehow not managed to send a note to his family explaining what he had done. They sent off a cable immediately, informing the family of his whereabouts (ten Harmsel & Van Til, 2011, p.9).

In the Netherlands, the Eerdmans had enlisted the police's help to find Jo, to no avail, and had been mourning him as dead for many months. Willy went back to work with his father, burdened by an enormous guilt for abandoning his duties and brother in Rotterdam, and returning alive with no clue as to the condition or whereabouts of his brother. Jo stayed in the United States and started his own dairy business, eventually moving to Minnesota (ten Harmsel and Van Till, 2011).

Three years later, after the death of his father, Willy secured permission to journey to the United States to visit his brother and sisters, with the secret intention of staying there once he had arrived. His eldest brother Dirk returned to the Netherlands in the previous year, to take over the business there and care for their mother. Willy was an enterprising young man, having run a little side business of buying and selling while working for his father. He continued this business in Grand Rapids, when he finally settled there. He took on a partner, Herman Hamstra, who later married one of Willy's sisters. He traveled back and forth between the Netherlands and the United States often, importing products from his homeland to sell in his new home. He enrolled and graduated from Calvin College, intending to be a pastor one day. Before attending seminary, however, he returned to Europe to visit family and take a tour of neighboring Switzerland, France, and Germany. This visit served to confirm to him his calling to move to America serve God there (ten Harmsel & Van Til, 2011).

He returned to Grand Rapids to attend seminary, but found that it didn't suit him. Ten Harmsel and Van Til describe him as "never a typical student, nor, by his own admission, a

particularly intellectual one. But he worked hard and kept busy” (p.14). Unfortunately, his professors agreed his own assessment. They did not see in him the pastor he wished to be, but noticed his business acumen and encouraged him in his side career as a salesman of imported Dutch delights. Unsure of his career as a pastor, but desperately wanting to serve the Lord, Eerdmans returned once again to his homeland to seek advice and do a little soul searching. Here, he consulted with Dr. Herman Bavinck, whom ten Harmsel and Van Til describe as one of his “heroes of the faith” (p.20). Bavinck told him, in no uncertain terms, that Grand Rapids did not need another pastor, it needed a publisher. William B. Eerdmans returned to Grand Rapids with a renewed sense of identity and a new focus on importing theological books from Holland and England (ten Harmsel & Van Til).

In 1911 Eerdmans formed a new partnership—Hamstra having moved to New Jersey to pursue a larger customer base after marrying William’s sister—with Brant Sevensma, a bookseller who sold books primarily in Dutch. In her 2008 article *Language shift in the Christian Reformed Church press of West Michigan*, Kara Van Dam describes the Dutch language market in Grand Rapids at the time being remarkably strong, with new immigrants and many in the Church still speaking Dutch. It would not remain this way, however, as young Dutch students were receiving an education in English, and even the Dutch-English bilingual Calvin College switched to English-only within a decade of Eerdmans’ founding. Thereafter, Eerdmans primary language of publishing was English, but he did find a lucrative market abroad for his materials in Dutch: exporting Dutch-language books, instead of importing them, to the Netherlands and South Africa (Van Dam, 2008). Thus, Eerdmans was another small publisher in West Michigan with the beginnings of a global influence.

Although Eerdmans was a shrewd businessman, capable of earning, saving, and building capital, he and Sevensma started by reprinting European theological classics that were in the public domain, and either free or inexpensive to publish. His desire was to eventually publish the best possible edition of John Calvin's works, but that would require more capital than he had available, especially after investing \$20,000 of his own money into the new business. Eerdmans also published educational materials, in the form of "Sunday school lessons, patterns for sermons, commentaries on the Gospels and the Prophets, devotional pamphlets for homes and families, and so forth" (ten Harmsel & Van Til, 2011, p.23). In this way, Eerdmans found his way to serve the Lord, make a good business, and support the curriculum of Calvin College, his alma mater, which he supported throughout his life.

While the publishing business was profitable on its own, Eerdmans never gave up his import business, and continued to make frequent trips to the Netherlands. On one such trip he met a young German woman who was traveling to New York to become a nanny for a year. When she returned to Germany, he pursued her, and in 1917 they were married. They remained in Europe for a while, and their first child was born there in 1919. Their second daughter was born in the United States in 1921, and William B. Eerdmans, Jr. (Bill) was born in 1923. What ten Harmsel and Van Til describe as Eerdmans' "restless spirit" (p.32) never did calm, and in 1922 he severed his partnership with Sevensma by buying him out, and in the same year he ran for public office, but his campaign was unsuccessful. During the 1920s Eerdmans grew the business, buying the copyrights, printing plates, and stock of publisher George D. Doran. Eerdmans even branched out a little from the very religious material he normally published and printed a comic novel written by a friend (ten Harmsel & Van Til).

When the stock market crashed in 1929, Eerdmans was determined to get his family and his business through unscathed. Similar to Baker, he instituted a policy of reduced wages, and his publishing company was able to make it through the whole of the Depression without laying off a single worker. His import business, however, did not fare as well. Concerned about the domestic economy, the U.S. Congress passed the Smoot-Hawley Tarriff Act on June 17, 1930. As a result, taxes on imports rose to their highest level thus far in American history. Eerdmans had been on a trip to New York to meet a shipment of his imports when the Act went into effect. He could no longer afford to pay the import taxes on his imported goods from the Netherlands, and he had to leave his items on the ship to be claimed by the U.S. government. He never did return to the import business, focusing all of his time and considerable skills on the publishing business. After experiencing the loss of his import business, Eerdmans was unprepared for another devastating loss: Eleanor, their second daughter, died from pneumonia at nine years old (ten Harmsel & Van Til).

It was during this time that Eerdmans began to rely on his nephews, Peter “Pat” and Bernie Zondervan, sons of his sister Nellie, and their step-father Louis Zondervan, who adopted the boys after he married Nellie. Pat Zondervan was interested in becoming a partner in the Eerdmans firm, but William was not as keen on the idea. Eerdmans, when he had returned from yet another trip to Europe, accused Zondervan the elder of stealing from the company, and fired him. The younger Bernie remained employed for a short time, and then he, too, was fired for “working at cross purposes with his uncle’s business” (ten Harmsel & Van Til, 2011, p.52). Shortly thereafter, the Zondervan brothers would begin the fourth influential Dutch-American publishing house in Grand Rapids.

Eerdmans turned to grooming his son for the future of the company. Bill, however, was not an eager pupil. Bill flunked out of this freshman year in public school, and was subsequently sent to military school in Tennessee. He fared not much better there, and found himself on the receiving end of disciplinary action more than once. He finally committed the act that broke the camel's back, and Bill expelled just two weeks shy of his graduation. A nearby Seventh Day Adventist college allowed him to take his final exams there, and he left school, not with a diploma, but with a certificate. He returned to Grand Rapids with his disappointed father, but did not stay very long. Bill felt that it was his imperative duty to join the war. In 1943, against his German mother's wishes—her family in Europe had already been torn asunder by the war raging there—Bill enlisted and was sent to North Africa, Italy, and Austria before the end of the war, and was involved in some of the most fierce and important battles of the war. Because of his distinguished service and correspondence with his former headmaster, ten Harmsel and Van Til state that "Bill could not have known it at the time, but by the end of war, he had also managed to graduate high school" (p.74).

During the decades after the war, Eerdmans went through an incredible expansion, adding staff and facilities, authors and genres: children's materials, theologies outside of the Christian Reformed Church traditions, reference books, commentaries, and the like. Eerdmans became the American religious publisher with the most contacts in Europe, including a spot in the Frankfurt Book Fair where, over the years, Eerdmans has cemented its relationships with like-minded European publishers. After William B. Eerdmans, Jr. took the reins of the company in 1963, he continued to expand the company in scope, in topic, and in vision, earning himself the label as a controversial publisher. Eerdmans began publishing materials on racial justice, evolution, theological satire, and moved away from a strictly evangelical base. Eerdmans now

publishes materials from Christian denominations, including Roman Catholic and Orthodox, as well as materials from outside of Christendom, adding Jewish and Islamic texts to its inventory as well (ten Harmsel & Van Til). Bill Eerdmans remains the president and publisher of William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company and has brought the company through turbulent years, technological advancements, yet another facility move to their present location on Oak Industrial Drive, and through it all Eerdmans continues to be a publisher of renown.

### **Zondervan Publishing House**

In his 2006 work *The House of Zondervan*, James Ruark glosses over the events that led to the rupture between the Zondervan brothers and William B. Eerdmans, but he does state that just one month after his employment ended with Eerdmans, Pat Zondervan went to New York to buy books from the publishers there, that perhaps they couldn't publish. They continued buying up used books and selling them to local students and pastors, and used their mother's home as the first storefront and warehouse of the Zondervan Publishing House. Eventually every spare corner of the farmhouse was packed with books (including the chicken coop), and just a year after their mail-order book business had begun in 1931, the brothers Zondervan were booted from their mother's home, and forced to rent a space in on Eastern Avenue.

The Zondervan brothers were not merely interested in selling books, however, and they very quickly moved into publishing. They were not wealthy, and they were not established, but they wanted to put their "own name on a book and thereby give it a more personal stamp of approval" (Ruark, 2006, p.24). From meager means, the Zondervans wanted to make a mark on the world, serve God, and publish meaningful works. With the help of friends and family members, and loans from the bank, Zondervan Publishing House was able to put its name on Abraham Kuyper's *Women of the Bible*, which was translated by Henry Zylstra from the Dutch.

By 1935, just four short years after its founding, Zondervan had outgrown its Eastern Avenue storefront, and moved their store and offices to a larger building on Franklin Street, keeping its presses in the Eastern Street location (Ruark). From this moment on, Zondervan became a competitor to the other three major publishing houses in Grand Rapids.

Within five years, Zondervan had again outgrown its facilities, and need more space not only for their printed material, but also for their rapidly growing staff. The brothers had purchased an 18,000-square foot, two-story brick building on Ottawa Avenue in Grandville, Michigan. All of the company's departments moved to this new building: offices, warehouse, shipping and printing, and retail. With this new building also came the *Zondervan Book News*, a flyer that served as advertising and a sort of newsletter for the company. Zondervan's informal vision statement was central to the first issue:

The policy of Zondervan Publishing House is to publish only those books which rank, in our opinion, as the finest and best in their particular field. Every book which we publish has our hearty endorsement and approval. We have pledged ourselves to publish only the soundest of fundamental, evangelical literature. We have the reputation of printing our books in a beautiful and attractive form (Ruark, 2006, p.43).

During the turbulent years of World War II, the Zondervan Publishing House clung to this ideal and soldiered on, even as several of their staff were called away to serve in the Armed Forces.

When the war ended and the world began to heal, healing of another sort came to both the Zondervan and the Eerdmans families. Ten Harmsel and Van Til state that the Zondervans had arranged for three impartial men to judge their case and address the accusations that their uncle had laid against them. Eerdmans had never publicly denounced them, and he refused to attend the meeting. Ten Harmsel and Van Til postulate that although Eerdmans never directly accused them, that perhaps a sense of guilt and rumors within the publishing industry were the catalysts for the Zondervans wanting to clear the air, and their reputations. "The 'proceeding' seems to

have concluded with a determination to sweep these old practices under the rug in the interest of the greater good and a bright future” (ten Harmsel & Van Til, 2011, p.86). Healing did indeed eventually occur, and Eerdmans and Zondervan entered into a friendly competition. Ruark (2006) describes a time in the 1960s when Eerdmans invited Pat Zondervan to lunch and they agreed not to hold anything against one another.

Zondervan continued to grow in authors and locations in the next decades, adding several storefronts and moving its headquarters to Lake Drive in Eastown, Grand Rapids in 1954. Zondervan branched even farther in 1961, with the purchase of Singspiration, a music company, and began producing records in addition to their printed materials. In 1973, they published the New Testament in the New International Version, and in 1978 the complete New International Version, which today is one of the best-selling Bible versions on the market: “Nothing in print equals in its beauty, importance, and value [sic] the New International Version of the Bible. It was the culmination of great traditions and continues to have a lasting influence on religious publishing and the Christian church” (Ruark, p. 150). Bibles would continue to be a vital portion of Zondervan’s publication line, designed and marketed to very specific customer bases: boys, girls, students, etc.

Unlike the other three publishing houses, Zondervan could not remain in the family. When Bernie passed away in 1966 from a brain tumor, it was a devastating blow to both Pat, his brother, with whom he had a close friendship, and Bernie Jr., on whom fell many of Bernie senior’s executive roles. When Bernie Jr. also passed away in 1970, Zondervan Publishing House became a publicly traded company. In 1973, Pat Zondervan ceremonially broke ground a brand-new production and warehouse facility. It was the first building built by the company, and it was state of the art. It reduced costs and improved efficiency, making it possible to store many more

books than they ever had before—but the shrink-wrap method they used needed much less space to do so.

In the 1980s the Zondervan Publishing House saw growth, optimism, and uncertainty. Pat Zondervan retired as chairman of the board, and James G. Buick took over as president and chief executive officer. Ruark writes, “Then the bubble burst. Buick quickly discerned that things were not all as they appeared...investors had been misled about Zondervan’s financial condition and discrepancies had been hidden from the company’s independent auditing firm” (Ruark, 2006, p.165). Stock in the publicly traded company fluctuated, and several companies attempted to take it over, but every attempt fell through. There were layoffs and uncertainties around every corner. Finally, when Harper & Row of New York purchased the company in 1988, and under its guidance, Zondervan Publishing House was able to stabilize and capitalize on its international partnerships and acquisitions, among them Marshall Pickering. Zondervan continues to produce music, children’s products, Bibles, and academic and trade books in Grand Rapids and the world over (Ruark).

### **The Impact**

Beginning from humble origins in a small Dutch immigrant *kolonie* in Grand Rapids, Michigan, two families diverged into four Evangelical publishing houses that have, through shrewd business practices, financial frugality, and the sheer forces of faith and will, impacted the globe over the course a little more than a century. Kregel, Baker, Eerdmans and Zondervan have provided an intellectual outlet for theologians and teachers, publishing works by great men in the employ of West Michigan’s colleges. These colleges have, in turn, provided both the labor force and additional authors, innovators, and the voracious readers for the publishing houses. These publishing heroes have fought injustices, supported their communities, led the way in teaching

peoples of other language groups, and inspired converts to be bold in their faith and pursue their callings and education. They have all survived harrowing times and periods of uncertain transition, both in family matters and in technological leaps forward. They have maintained and grown their businesses in diversity and adversity, and continue to impact the globe with materials in all formats: paper, digital, music, and multimedia. Authors and publishers alike deal in ideas—those which inspire, incite debate, educate and call for action. That’s what these four firms have done for a little over a century, and hopefully, with God’s blessing, will continue to do for another.

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