

HISTORY OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMED CHURCH: LEARNING TO LIVE WITH CARICATURE

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One often wonders how others perceive you. This relates to many areas of our lives: personal appearance, effectiveness on the job, personal relationships, educational background, status within your profession, to name just a few. In all these areas, if one is seeking to know how others perceive you, you generally want an honest, solid, well-evidenced analysis and evaluation. This is also true with regard to one's religious beliefs. If criticism or praise is to be given about our beliefs, they ought to be based upon sound evidence, not personal bias or prejudice. It would be reasonable to expect that given the importance of religious belief and given the highly personal nature of those beliefs that it would be doubly important that the analysis or evaluation given be based on the facts at hand. If that isn't the case, then the result will be a distortion of a person's beliefs. And, when those distortions are the results of exaggerations of certain points of doctrine, then the result is caricature, not truth.

It's my contention (and experience, I might add) that this is what has happened and is happening when the story of the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) is being told. You'll be happy to note--right up front--that I will apply this to both sides of the fence: to those who have presented the doctrines and persons of the PRC for ill, and to those who are more kindly disposed--mostly PR's themselves--to the telling of that history and of describing its notable persons.

So, when asked by my colleagues (often, I might add) about what I was going to do with topic, my response has been FIRST, I would like to ask whether the analyses and evaluations given about the origins and subsequent history of the PRC been accurate and fair. A good test of that will be subsequent history. Has subsequent history proven or disproven some of the analyses that have been made? SECONDLY, my purpose will be to give my own personal reactions to representations of our history. I've lived through some 40 years of our 67-year history; I've come to know quite well the leaders of our denomination, including the late Rev. Herman Hoeksema. I've heard them preach; I've read the literature both pro and con. And, I've found that for the most part, I've had to learn to live with caricature, not fact. Much of what I have to say, will, of necessity, focus about Herman Hoeksema, the founder of the PRC, but I think it will become evident quite quickly that the caricatures have extended far beyond him.

My problem today, of course, is time. I can't possibly relate the whole of our history in this brief space. But let me begin by sketching briefly our origins. My emphasis today will be on theology--not persons--although understandably persons and personal feelings enter into every dispute, be it secular or ecclesiastical. And, of course, I am going to have to refer often to Herman Hoeksema, the founder of the PRC. It was against him and his teachings that charges were leveled and caricatures made, so we have to deal with that. But, I believe it fair to say that even when Hoeksema was involved, the arguments were primarily theological, not personal. The only incident, an incident which actually precedes the history of the PRC *per se*, that might be more personal than theological was the flag incident in the 14th Street Christian Reformed Church (CRC) of this very city in which this conference takes place. All the big guns, including Gerrit Diekema himself, were brought out against Hoeksema and he was nearly tarred and feathered. Treason and Nazi were words often used against him in that controversy. Where's Jay Wabeke when you need him?

The official beginning of the PRC was 1926, when the CRC Synod of that year did not sustain the protests of Hoeksema and the Eastern Avenue consistory. His deposition was made final by that gathering. But, a separate existence began already in 1924 and, in fact, the periodical, *The Standard Bearer*, in which Hoeksema, Danhof, and Ophoff carried on their controversy with the CRC, was already established in 1924. In 1925, the three congregations involved adopted an Act of Agreement, temporarily organized as the Protesting Christian Reformed Churches and in 1926 organized permanently as the Protestant Reformed Churches in America.

There were two issues of primary importance in the 1924-26 struggles. The theological issue was common grace with its concomitant spiritual-ethical-moral issue of the relation of the believer to the world and secular culture. The antithesis was discussed at length. The church political issue was whether the local consistory was autonomous. Could, in fact, a classis or a synod suspend and depose a minister and his consistory. The answer of Hoeksema and his consistory was that suspension and deposition could only be done by a consistory. The fact, in Hoeksema's case, however, was that suspension and deposition occurred at the discretion of the classis and

synod. This, by the way, accounts for the distinction in the names of the CRC, the Reformed Church in America (RCA), and the PRC. Churches, not church, say the PRC. A distinction which is lost on many today.

This history, however, must be put into context in order to understand the reaction of the CRC to Hoeksema and his cohorts Danhof and Ophoff. James Bratt in his book *Dutch Calvinism in Modern America* sets the context fairly well. There were two cases preceding the 1924 Hoeksema/Common Grace case which figure into the demise of Herman Hoeksema in 1924 in the CRC: the Bultema case and the Janssen case. The Bultema case, sometimes known as the Maranatha case, dealt with eschatology and Bultema's leanings toward premillennialism. The Janssen case dealt with higher criticism and Janssen's alleged denial of the miracles in Scripture. Hoeksema figured prominently in both these cases. He served on both synodical committees and authored most of the synodical committees' reports in these cases. He was now a marked man. And, when he continued his writings against common grace after the Janssen case, the protests against him began. The conclusion of the matter was the Three Points of Common Grace adopted by the CRC Synod of 1924. The result for Hoeksema personally was his suspension and deposition along with Danhof and Ophoff. And so it was that the history of the PRC began.

The beginning of the history was also the beginning of the caricature. Gross exaggerations of the PRC theology and of its moral stances abounded. I can not be complete here, but let me give you some of the most glaring examples:

1. Right out of the box was the charge that the PRC was not a church, but a sect. Its theology was so lop-sided that it was a single-issue church. Its leader, Herman Hoeksema was so dominant that what was begun as the PRC was the mere following of a man and therefore had no right of existence. St. Herman and Pope Herman were a few of the choice epithets hurled his way. But this was caricature. Subsequent history has shown that this charge, made in 1924 and repeated often in subsequent years, was not correct. Herman Hoeksema has been dead for 25 years--we're still here; in fact, there are no Hoeksemas occupying positions of leadership in the PRC today. Common grace certainly occupied the mind of the PRC, but much positive development of doctrine was achieved, particularly in the area of the covenant of grace.

2. Then there was the immediate charge in 1924 that Hoeksema and his followers were anabaptistic in their view of culture and the world. J.K. Van Baalen led the charge in this regard and accused Hoeksema of being separatist and of promoting world flight--a classic anabaptist. But again, this was caricature. And, again, subsequent history is the determinant. Hoeksema, good Calvinist that he was, certainly was a proponent of the antithesis, but never did he promote the world-flight of the anabaptists. His detractors only heard the negative part of the thesis, the believer's "no" to the world, but they didn't hear the positive teaching of the "yes" to God. That's the true presentation of the antithesis. Therefore, a full, active, spiritual life "in the world" was absolutely necessary.

3. Next there was the caricature of the PR theology as scholastic. Hoeksema and Danhof were, in fact, already characterized by the Synod of 1924 as men who were thoroughly reformed in their preaching and teaching but they were those who had a tendency to one-sidedness, the one-sidedness of logic and reason. He was accused of placing his own reason above the authority of the Word of God. Hoeksema's theology was "single track", emphasizing the sovereignty of God in salvation, but he needed to be "double track", emphasizing the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man. Hoeksema, it was said, destroyed the scriptural paradox of sovereignty and responsibility, and he did this by human reason alone. And, to top it off, to make matters even worse, he was one of those supra-lapsarians who argued continually from the viewpoint of the counsel of God. Someone who argues this about Hoeksema and PR theology, however, simply has not read enough about us. We believe in a reasonable, rational faith just as many other Calvinists do. Doctrine, however, all by itself simply will not do. Faith without works, says the biblical writer James, is dead. This we teach and believe. We take seriously the teaching of The Heidelberg Catechism in Lord's Day 39: When confronted with the question of the catechism as to why we must do good works, we confess along with all reformed believers "that so we may testify, by the whole of our conduct, our gratitude to God for His blessings, and that He may be praised by us; also, that everyone may be assured in himself of his faith, by the fruit thereof; and that, by our godly conversation, others may be gained to Christ. And, as Herman Hoeksema himself wrote in his pamphlet, "The Christian and Culture", ". . .(the believer's) calling in this present world is to represent the cause of the Son of God always and everywhere, in the family, and in the school, in society and in the state, in the laboratory and in the shop. . .He strives for a Christian family, a Christian home, a Christian life in society, a Christian school, a Christian university, a Christian state, and is a living member of the Christian church."

4. And, finally, I call attention to the caricature of the PRC and its theology as hyper-Calvinism. Particularly, this label has come about because of the PRC's denial of the well-meant offer of the gospel. That this is caricature is evident from the book of A.C. De Jong, *The Well Meant Offer of the Gospel: The Views of H. Hoeksema and K. Schilder*. The origin of this book was his doctoral dissertation on this subject for none other than G.C. Berkouwer. And the thrust of the work is to paint Hoeksema as a hyper-Calvinist of the baldest sort. Berkouwer, in turn, spread this caricature in his own dogmatics. He refers to De Jong's book as an authoritative, reliable analysis of Hoeksema's teaching on the offer and preaching. The spin from all of this is that the PRC as hyper-Calvinistic take pains to make sure that that's all they do. This, of course, precludes all mission preaching, and, in fact, the PRC have been characterized as having no interest in missions at all. This also leads, of course, to the label of being a Post Toasties church--better than anybody else and, of course, the old, old charge that only PRs will be in heaven singing Dutch psalms, of course. By now, you've guessed the response. Not hyper-Calvinism of the baldest sort, but caricature of the baldest sort. There are those who believe that only the elect should be preached to and that mission preaching is non-essential at best and wrong at worst. But that's not what the PRC believes and teaches. The PRC endorses the teaching of Canons, II,5 that preachers ought to preach promiscuously and without distinction and to command all humanity to repent and believe. The question for us has not been whether we should preach to all or call all to come to Christ, but the question has been whether God is gracious in the preaching to all, indeed loves all, and wishes to save all. And missions, what about missions? Currently the PRC, in addition to home mission work in the U.S., has mission projects in Jamaica, Singapore, and Ghana. And Post Toasties? I think it is abundantly clear to those who listen well to what we say and write, that we clearly believe in the catholicity of the church. But I promised to deliver both sides. Our own analyses and the presentation of our own leading persons by our people and in our publications has lead to a unique caricature of its own. Let me cite a few examples that come readily to mind:

1. There is first of all the caricature of Herman Hoeksema himself. St. Herman? Pope Herman? Part of that caricature is true. That's the problem with all caricature. Caricature is exaggeration, but exaggeration which is based on what is. And, I've witnessed it for myself. Hoeksema was placed on a pedestal by his followers. He was catered to and was adored. Did he speak *ex cathedra*? To some perhaps. Fact, however, is that Hoeksema was very human. He was, according to some naive about people; he was gullible. Often he could not discern the truth about those who heaped adoration and adulation upon him. Hoeksema's own last years were marred by those zealots who insisted that their own beloved Dominie Hoeksema could not possibly suffer dementia. History, however, will sort this out. As generations pass, there will no longer be those who lived the history of 1924. Hoeksema as a person will be put in perspective, and focus will turn to his legacy as a theologian. The absence of peer review of publications also, I believe, hampers our publications. The smallness of our denomination is a factor here. But I hope that we can accomplish some of that in the future.

2. Secondly, there is the attitude of some in the PRC that we ought indeed be separatists. Any and all discussions have to be done on our terms and with our issues. We've fought the battle against those who insist on the PRC as the only *true* church, all the rest being apostate or false. The positive development of the concept of the catholicity of the church has been slow in coming, but it is coming.

3. Finally, there is the matter of the antithesis. We have those who live out of negativism, those who understand only the "no" of the antithesis. There are some in the PRC who have not achieved the delicate balance between the legalist and the libertine. But the believer can not live out of a negative position. The positive development of the truths of scripture have to be a priority if the believers in the PRC are to lead healthy, full-orbed Christian lives.

So, what do I make of all this personally. Several points, in conclusion, for you to think about--as historians, as theologians as aspirants to either.

1. Why can't the story get told straight? Historians are dedicated to accuracy and truth. But historians can not seem to tell the story of the PRC correctly. And, in connection with this, why can't historians recognize our existence. True, we're small, but we're part of the reformed community. I make reference to James Bratt's book particularly. He deals with our origins but does not deal with our continued existence. And as far as theologians go, the opposite seems to be true. They seem obsessed in dealing with Herman Hoeksema. The continental theologians, and Berkouwer in particular, can't seem to get Hoeksema out of their minds. James Daane, probably one of the more astute CRC theologians of recent time, seemed to be fascinated with Hoeksema and often came to hear him preach. And, the irony in this all, is that of all the theologians that the CRC has produced, Hoeksema has written the most, been debunked the most, been debated with the most, but has never been

2. To be more personal still. There seems to be something about the PRC that instills dread in people. Why is it that when is thinking of church migration, that all the options, whether it be Catholicism or Baptist or Methodist, are acceptable, but try to migrate to the PRC and you will quickly be told that you will be making a grave mistake. And this dread seems to be passed from generation to generation. The caricature continues. Just recently, for example, I had lunch with a former colleague at the college. We had not seen each other for some five years and as we were catching up on families and work, the conversation turned to church. Utter disbelief that I was still affiliated with the PRC. How was it possible that I still maintained membership there. Now he had had no contact with us, but his opinions of the PRC were firmly fixed. And, that causes me to look at myself and at what we as PRC teach and believe, so from that point of view the question is an important one. But caricature abounds and having to deal with that perhaps gives us a sense of defensiveness that shows too much.

The solution to caricature is commitment to truth. For those of you who are interested in the Reformed community and in the history of those denominations that claim membership, I urge you to read critically our history and theology. Analysis and criticism, to be sure, are to be expected, but tell the story straight and present not only us, but everyone, as they are, not what you would like them to be. And, I reiterate, that cuts both ways. I am reminded of a remark made to one of our professors by none other than Harry Boer. This professor had reviewed one of Boer's books on the doctrine of reprobation. Boer's comment to him was that, while there was certainly disagreement over the contents of the book, he appreciated the fact that his views had been presented accurately. That is what we ask and, I think, is what we can expect.