

Establishing School to Provide Reformed Covenant Education (8)

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More than seventy years have passed since two of the early leaders in the Protestant Reformed Churches, Herman Hoeksema and George M. Ophoff, wrote articles concerning the nature and essence of specifically Reformed Christian education. The articles were critiques of the Specific Principles that were adopted in 1925 by the National Union of Christian Schools (today called Christian Schools International). The articles that were written by Hoeksema and Ophoff not only were critiques, but they also included ideas and concepts based on Scripture and the Reformed confessions.

The previous articles have affirmed that the writings of George M. Ophoff and Herman Hoeksema had a pronounced influence on the development of the Protestant Reformed Christian

Schools. The ideas and the concepts developed in the early articles are employed in the constitutions of the schools. In addition, the ideas expressed in the articles are reflected in the basic principles that regulate the instruction in the schools that have been established by Protestant Reformed parents.

The current articles that survey the contents of the articles of Hoeksema and Ophoff may seem unnecessary and out-of-date, but a review of the history contributes to our understanding of the Protestant Reformed Christian Schools. The reviews of the articles of Hoeksema and Ophoff attempt to demonstrate how these men have contributed to the understanding and development of the correct goal and objective for Reformed Christian education.

An Examination and Review of the Critique and Restatement of the Specific Principles of the National Union of Christian Schools

We begin by quoting in its entirety the fifth Specific Principle that was adopted by the NUCS in 1925.

The all-embracing objective of the school is to promote the glory of our covenant God:
(a) by seeking in humble dependence upon God to equip the pupil for his supreme task, namely, to realize himself as God's image-bearer

II Timothy 3:17;

and (b) by seeking in that same dependence upon God to reconstitute the sin-perversed world by realizing God's Kingdom in all spheres and phases of life.

Matthew 6:33 [1]

This is possible at least in principle through Christ, who is not only the Creator (as the Logos) but also the re-creator.

John 1 [2]

In two articles, one appearing in the May 15, 1932 issue of the Standard Bearer and the other published in the July 15, 1932 issue, Herman Hoeksema provides his critique and criticism of the fifth specific principle of the NUCS.

Hoeksema describes the terminology of Specific Principle 5 as high sounding, and he also indicates that he is certain that the authors of Principle 5 could not tell how a school could attain to the ideal proposed. He asks, how can the school: "enable the pupil to realize himself as God's image-bearer? Reconstitute a sin-perversed world? Realize the Kingdom of God in all spheres and phases of life?"

He cannot see how the Christian school as it existed in the days that he was writing his critique of the principles could approximate the objective stated in the principles, nor does he believe the Christian school should attempt to work for this objective.

Hoeksema continues by calling attention to the expressions that are used in the fifth Specific

Principle. He begins by analyzing the phrase "the all-embracing objective of the school is to promote the glory of our Covenant God," and he declares that this expression has become hackneyed (commonplace). Particularly in Calvinistic circles the phrase has been used so often that it seems trite. Although Hoeksema states that the phrase may be commonplace, he asserts that it cannot be gainsaid that the purpose of all things, and therefore of the Christian school, is the glory of God. He notes that what follows in the Specific Principle indicates the specific way the authors of the principle say the school may promote the glory of God.

Hoeksema considers next the phrase that the school must equip the student for his supreme task, i.e., "to realize himself as the image-bearer of God." In this part of his critique, Hoeksema expresses his fear concerning the exact meaning of the authors. He writes as follows:

Do the authors here refer to the regenerated covenant child, in whom the image of God has been restored by grace? Or do they have in mind any pupil natural or spiritual, and must the schools make of all the children men and women that realize themselves as image-bearers of God?

Hoeksema states that the expression must be considered in the light of its context. Although he hardly dares to believe this, he argues that the context leaves him no other conclusion than that the authors of the statement are teaching that the school must make all children realize themselves as image-bearers of God.

Since Hoeksema believes this is the meaning of the authors, he proceeds to cite three reasons why this is impossible. He writes

I maintain (1) That the task is an impossible one, for the natural man has not the image of God. (2) This whole conception is contrary both to Scripture and to our Reformed Confessions. (3) That the reference to

II Timothy 3:17 ^[3]

certainly is a mistake, for it speaks of the man of God and not of any man.

Hoeksema says that he is willing to grant for the sake of the argument the possibility that the authors did not intend to convey the idea that natural man is an image-bearer of God. In his response he shows that in a previous principle (i.e., the third Specific Principle) the natural man is referred to as a bearer of the image of God. Hoeksema contends that the statement in the third Principle is rooted in the belief that natural man is able, because of common grace, to do civic righteousness. He maintains that the authors proceed from the following presuppositions: "(1) The natural man is still an image-bearer of God. (2) As such, man is able to do civic good. (3) This doing of civic good is the self-realization of the natural man as an image bearer of God."

Hoeksema declares that if the authors did not mean natural man in this fifth declaration they ought to admit and realize that the language of the article is to be blamed for this lack of specificity.

Hoeksema continues his critique by stating that the first part of the fifth Specific Principle is bad enough, but the statement that "the school must seek to equip the pupil for this supreme task to realize himself as the image-bearer of God" is equally bad. In addition, the proof-text that is cited, "That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (II Tim. 3:17 ^[4]), does not prove what it is purported to prove.

Hoeksema correctly states that this text does not teach that every man is an image bearer of God. The text does not speak of every man, but it speaks of the man of God, the regenerated and sanctified child of God. The text does not say that the task of the man of God is to be busy "realizing himself as God's image-bearer." Man cannot do this because all men have lost the image of God in the fall. Instead II Timothy 3:17 ^[3] teaches that the man of God, as a bearer of the image of God, has been created anew in Christ Jesus. As an image-bearer he can and must live to the glory of God.

Although Hoeksema gives no proof-text for his assertion concerning what kind of man is a bearer of the image of God, the Scriptures are replete with this truth. Romans 8:29 ^[5] speaks of those who are predestinated and who are "to be conformed to the image of his Son." Ephesians 4:24 ^[6] speaks very plainly concerning the image of God. "That ye put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness." II Peter 1:4 ^[7] speaks of the sons of God being made "partakers of the divine nature."

Hoeksema writes that a correct understanding of the text is that it holds before the man of God

the purpose whereunto God has called him, that he must be perfect in the midst of the world, without blame and rebuke in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. And for this end the man of God must have Scripture, the inspired Word of God, as a constant guide and light in the darkness, for it is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.

Hoeksema continues his critique by referring to the second part of the fifth Specific Principle. His evaluation is that the statement "by seeking in that same dependence upon God to reconstitute the sin-perverted world by realizing God's Kingdom in all spheres of life" is equally bad.

Concerning this, Hoeksema states that there is a possibility that the language does not mean that it is the objective of the school to realize God's kingdom in all spheres of life. But he does not give much probability to this as a possible objection and states that he believes the authors did intend to declare that the school must seek to equip the pupil for the task of reconstituting a sin-perverted world by realizing God's kingdom in all spheres of life.

Hoeksema maintains that this is flighty language. He refers to it as "shooting at the moon." He states that the phrase "in humble dependence upon God" does nothing more than cover up a Pelagian idea, but it does not eradicate the error of the statement concerning the "reconstituting of a sin-perverted world by realizing God's Kingdom in all spheres of life." He says that this is a statement that was too frequently heard in his day. We can assert that this continues to be true today.

If we take the language concerning "the sin-perverted world" very seriously, as we should, the question, "What is the sin-perverted world?" must be answered.

Hoeksema's answer is that, in its context, the phrase must refer to the world of ungodly men, as they live out their life of sin in every sphere and aspect of life and pervert all things. "The world as it is living from the principle of sin corrupts every phase of life: the family, the state, society, business, industry, science, and art. Such is the sin-perverted world."

Hoeksema contends that "the reconstitution of the sin-perverted world" and "the realization of the kingdom of God in the world" must mean either of two things: "that it is the objective of the Christian school to convert all, or the great majority of ungodly men, into citizens of the Kingdom

of God; or that it aims at realizing the Kingdom of God and reconstituting a sin-perverted world by way of social reform."

Hoeksema maintains that in the first instance the specific principle is Pelagian. If the authors had in mind the second possibility, they are proclaiming the social gospel.

Hoeksema asserts that in both cases they are wrong, because neither the Christian school nor the Christian church can reconstitute the sin-perverted world or realize the kingdom of God on earth. Jesus said, "My kingdom is not of this world."

Hoeksema says that the language of the Specific Principle is not the language of Scripture. Although Scripture is cited, the language of Scripture is very specific in that it commands the children of God to be without rebuke and to be willing to suffer with Christ and to keep His commandments. In no place does Scripture assign to the people of God the task of reconstituting the sin-perverted world and of realizing the kingdom of God on earth. That is God's work, not ours.

Hoeksema writes that the fifth Principle cannot and may not be presented or used as the objective of the Christian school. If the Christian school is directed by this principle, it is "inculcating the principles of modernism into the hearts and minds of its pupils." He sees the language of this principle as being exceedingly dangerous because it is done in the name of Christianity and Calvinism.

Once again he proposes a restatement of the fifth Principle. This restatement has also become one of the principles that the Protestant Reformed Christian schools hold and practice in the instruction of children of believing parents.

It is the objective of the Christian School to furnish the pupil with an education which in all its branches is rooted in the principle of the fear of God, as the beginning of wisdom; and thus to co-labor, in its own proper domain, alongside of and in distinction from the home and the church, to equip the pupil with that knowledge and wisdom which is necessary in order that he may be able to walk in the midst of the world worthy of the vocation wherewith God calls His people, and that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

... to be continued

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