

Establishing Schools to Provide Reformed Covenant Education (6)

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This series has reviewed articles written about seventy years ago in the Standard Bearer by Rev. Herman Hoeksema and Rev. George Ophoff. We have stated that the ideas and concerns expressed in these articles written during the first decade of the existence of the Protestant Reformed Churches have provided some of the direction and incentive that have served to promote the development of the Protestant Reformed Christian schools.

It may seem strange and out of place to some of our readers that we should spend so much time on these writings. One might ask, "Isn't there something more current that could be considered? Why should it be the case that the pages of the Standard Bearer should be filled with quotations from writings that have become yellowed with age?" Although to some these objections may seem legitimate, we should not be among those who have forgotten the past.

This is especially true if one considers that it took approximately twenty years after these articles were written to establish the first PR schools in the Grand Rapids area (Hope and Adams). Nonetheless, Christian schools based upon the fundamental thinking of these articles did come into existence and still exist. They are giving distinctive and God-centered instruction to the covenant youth. Because the Protestant Reformed Christian schools that were established were based on the ideas and concepts advocated and developed through the early writings of the

earliest leaders of the churches, a review of the writings of George M. Ophoff and Herman Hoeksema is, in my opinion, important and necessary. The PRC schools must continue to adhere to the fundamental principles that brought the schools into existence.

The first two of the Specific Principles were reviewed in the October 1, 1999 and the April 1, 2000 issues of the Standard Bearer. The articles reviewed the analysis by Hoeksema and Ophoff of the first two Specific Principles advocated by Dr. C. Bouma and published in 1925 by the National Union of Christian Schools (now Christian Schools International).

This article is an examination of the third of the Specific Principles. It reads as follows:

Man is a fallen creature

Genesis 3.

Though depraved, man is nevertheless an image bearer of God

Ephesians 2:5,

and through restraining grace he is able to do civil good

Romans 2:14.

Though lost in sin, man can be saved through faith in Christ

John 3:16;

and through restoring grace, in principle, is able to do spiritual good

I John 3:9.

Both Herman Hoeksema and George M. Ophoff subjected this third principle to analysis and criticism—Rev. Ophoff in his series of articles entitled "Dr. Bouma's New Platform" (Standard Bearer, Volume 3, pp. 83-85, November 15, 1926), and Rev. Hoeksema in the series of articles "The Christian School Movement Why a Failure?" (Standard Bearer, March 15, 1932 and April 15, 1932; Volume 8, pp. 271-273, 318, 319).

Rev. Ophoff, in his critique of the first two sentences ("Man is a fallen creature. Though depraved, man is nevertheless an image bearer of God") used the same approach that he employed in his critique of the second Specific Principle. His method at the outset was to refer to pertinent sections of the Reformed confessions. He quoted the following:

We believe that God created man out of the dust of earth, and made and formed him after his own image and likeness, good, righteous, and holy, capable in all things to will agreeably to the will of God, who was his true life. But being in honor he understood it not, neither knew his excellency, but willfully subjected himself to sin, and consequently to death and the curse, giving ear to the words of the devil. For the commandment of life which he had received, he transgressed, and by sin separated himself from God, who was his true life, having corrupted his whole nature; whereby he made himself liable to corporal and spiritual death. And being thus become wicked, perverse, and corrupt in all his ways, he hath lost all his excellent gifts, which he had received from God, and only retained a few remains thereof, which, however,

are sufficient to leave man without excuse; for all the light which is in us is changed into darkness, as the Scriptures teach us.... We believe that, through the disobedience of Adam, original sin is extended to all mankind; which is a corruption of the whole nature, and an hereditary disease, wherewith infants themselves are infected even in their mother's womb, and which produceth in man all sorts of sin, being in him as a root thereof; and therefore is so vile and abominable in the sight of God, that it is sufficient to condemn all mankind... (Belgic Confession, Articles 14, 15).

Rev. Ophoff then turned to the Canons of Dordt:

Therefore all men are conceived in sin, and by nature children of wrath, incapable of saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in bondage thereto, and without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, they are neither able nor willing to return to God, to reform the depravity of their nature, nor to dispose themselves to reformation (III/IV, 3).

Ophoff declared that these articles of the Reformed confessions emphatically assert the following: (a) Man subjected himself to sin and consequently to death and the curse; (b) Man has corrupted his whole nature; (c) Man is perverse and corrupt in all his way; (d) All the light which is in man is changed into darkness; (e) Sin produces in man all sorts of sin; (f) Man is neither willing nor able to reform the depravity of his nature, nor is he willing to dispose himself to reformation (p. 83).

The chief concern of Rev. Ophoff was to demonstrate and prove that schools which are distinctively and specifically Christian and Reformed cannot be what they claim to be unless the basic and specific principles of these schools are upheld and supported by the official confessions of the church. Rev. Ophoff opposed the claim of those who assert that the ecclesiastical creeds should only be used in the church and should not be used to give direction to the schools.

Herman Hoeksema stated that he was trying to find an answer to the question why the Christian school in our country was, as yet, a failure. He contended that an important part of the answer is that "the movement cannot stand on the basis that by the operation of a common grace upon a fallen creature that remains the image-bearer of God he is able to do civil good" (p. 319).

The proponents of the theory of common grace insisted that the doctrine of total depravity and the theory of common grace went very well together. Those who advocated the theory of common grace said that common grace was one of the elements constituting the Reformed or Calvinistic system of thought from the very outset. They denied that the presence of the theory of common grace in the theology of the Reformed theologian gave the appearance that it was a collection of contradictory statements.

In distinction from this position Rev. Ophoff contended that the doctrine of total depravity and the theory of common grace are mutually exclusive.

Herman Hoeksema at the outset of two articles on this third principle asserted that, although he had characterized and described the Specific Principles in previous articles as being vague and too general, they were in this instance very specific. He said the authors had taken pains to incorporate in them the errors and the corruption of Reformed doctrine that had been adopted by the Christian Reformed Church in the three points and common grace theory of 1924 (p. 271).

Hoeksema elaborated as follows:

We must give the authors of this declaration credit, that they surely succeeded to crowd all the errors of the Three Points of 1924 into one brief article. This article makes it absolutely impossible for any true member of the Protestant Reformed Churches to be a member of the Union (NUCS) or to support its movement. It is also the deathblow to all specific Christian instruction. For, if a Protestant Reformed person would subscribe to this declaration, he would thereby most emphatically deny the confession of his own church; disavow the very principles for the maintenance of which we were expelled from the fellowship of the Christian Reformed Church. And, if this were true, if this second declaration were in harmony with Scripture and the Confessions, there would be absolutely no reason for the costly maintenance of our Christian schools (p. 272).

Having made this initial statement concerning the third principle, Hoeksema suggested that we pay closer attention to what he called this "travesty of Reformed truth." He described the first part of the third Specific Principle as an "apology" for the Reformed doctrine of total depravity. His chief concern was that this "apology" for the Reformed doctrine of total depravity was not an orthodox and correct statement of the condition of fallen man. He said that the statement merely says that man is a fallen creature. It concedes that man is depraved but then qualifies and modifies the complete depravity of man by never stating that man is by nature totally depraved. This, he declared, is a striking weakness in the third specific principle. Hoeksema wrote as follows:

I am rather safe in concluding, that it is intentionally avoided here. Were the authors afraid? Were they ashamed of their own principles? Or do they not believe in total depravity? Or, perhaps, did they feel that the general public would immediately detect the contradiction, if they would speak of a totally depraved man that is still an image-bearer of God and is able to do good in civil matters? (p. 272).

Ophoff compared the statements taken from the confessions with the statement made by the NUCS that man is a fallen and depraved creature. Ophoff wrote:

There is a remarkable difference between what is asserted by the Union and the plain teachings of the Confession. The Confession maintains that by nature man is dead in sin and totally depraved. In vain do we search the so-called Specific Principles of the Union for a clause that asserts that natural man is dead in sin. Nor do these Principles state that man is totally depraved. It is merely asserted that man is depraved and fallen. A statement of this kind in no wise militates against the semi-pelagian doctrine that man is capable of performing spiritual good in virtue of the fact that there is in him a spark of holy life. In other words the semi-pelagian will subscribe to the statement that man is a fallen and depraved creature. The question is to what extent is man depraved. And the answer of the Confession is that man is totally depraved. The NUCS failed to answer the question at all and contents itself with the mere statement that man is fallen and depraved (p. 83).

Both Ophoff and Hoeksema addressed the veracity of the statement "that man is still an image-bearer of God." The fundamental question for both is the following: "Is the statement that man is still an image bearer of God true without further elucidation?"

Rev. Hoeksema admitted that the fall had not deprived man of his rational and moral nature. He

also affirmed that one could see very plainly that according to his nature he should be God's image-bearer. There is a sense, says Hoeksema, that one may call this rational-moral nature of man "the image of God in a wider sense."

Concerning this aspect of the issue Ref. Ophoff wrote,

The distinction image of God in the wider sense and image of God in the narrower sense is well known. The term image of God in the narrower sense is made to apply to the holiness of man while in the state of righteousness, while the expression image of God in the broader sense is a term signifying man's rationality and morality minus holiness. This image is depraved, unholy. It is the carnal man, the old man of sin (p. 84).

Hoeksema preferred different terminology than image of God in the broader and narrower sense. He wrote that it is better to distinguish between the image of God in "a formal and material sense." By the formal, Hoeksema meant the peculiar and distinct nature of man, according to which he is so constituted as to be able to bear the image of God and to reflect the life of God in his own image. This distinguishes him from the animal. By the material, Hoeksema referred to the proper operation of the nature of the regenerated man and woman so that they actually reflect God's image. This is the true knowledge of God, righteousness, and holiness that man lost in the fall and which was restored in principle in regeneration (cf. Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day III, Question and Answer 6, [Eph. 4:24](#) [1], and [Col. 3:10](#) [2]).

Hoeksema continued his argument by stating that there is no question that man has retained a few remains of his natural gifts. He has not ceased to be the creature that ought to be the image-bearer of God. He is still a moral-rational creature, though wholly corrupt. He remained a human being. But he does not actually bear God's image. He is just the opposite. He bears the image of the devil.

The Canons of Dordt use the same language.

There remain, however, in man since the fall, the glimmerings of natural light, whereby he retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the differences between good and evil, and discovers some regard for virtue, good order in society, and for maintaining an orderly external deportment. But so far is this light of nature sufficient to bring him to a saving knowledge of God, and to true conversion, that he is incapable of using it aright even in things natural and civil. Nay further, this light, such as it is, man in various ways renders wholly polluted, and holds it in unrighteousness, by doing which he becomes inexcusable before God (Canons of Dordt, III/IV, 4).

But as man by the fall did not cease to be a creature, endowed with understanding and will, nor did sin which pervaded the whole race of mankind, deprive him of the human nature, but brought upon him depravity and spiritual death (Canons of Dordt III/IV, 16).

Hoeksema continued by saying that it is not correct to say that man only partly lost God's image, while he retained it partly. Hoeksema wrote:

Nowhere do you read such philosophy, either in Scripture or in the Reformed Confessions. It is not even sufficient to say that he merely lost the image of God; if I lose something I have nothing of that something left, the result is zero. It is correct to

say, that the image of God in man changed into the very opposite; the result is not zero but minus. That operation of the image of God whereby man stood in righteousness, holiness, and knowledge of God was wholly perverted. He did not merely lose his knowledge, but his knowledge became darkness; he did not merely lose his righteousness, but his righteousness changed into unrighteousness; after the fall he was not merely without holiness but he was filled with corruption and enmity of God (p. 272).

Hoeksema continued his argument by stating that, because man retains the image of God in the purely formal sense, he is so constituted that he must be either righteous or perverse, holy or evil, a lover of the truth of God or a lover of the lie. He must be a friend of God or an enemy of God. He cannot be neutral.

Hoeksema contended that those who wrote the third Specific Principle had distorted and corrupted the truth of total depravity. They do that by asserting "... that there is something left in man, some knowledge, some righteousness, some holiness which, under the influence of the Holy Spirit, is preserved and is able to bear fruit in so-called civil good" (p. 272).

George Ophoff wrote that it is this image of God in the broader sense in man that the authors of the Specific Principles had in mind when they asserted that man, though depraved, is nevertheless an image bearer of God. It is the supreme task of the child to realize this image. The child can do this because, according to the authors of the Specific Principles, this image is not totally depraved. Ophoff believes that it is not accidental that the term total depravity is not found in the Specific Principles. It is the view of the authors of these principles that the depraved sinner is not totally depraved. The totally depraved and spiritually dead sinner, revived by common grace, is to a degree good, virtuous, and noble. The child that is not regenerated is good material with which to work. Properly trained, he would develop into a useful, peace-loving, and law-abiding citizen, with the ambition to reconstitute the sin-perverted world (p. 84).

Concerning this so-called civil good that man is able to do, Hoeksema wrote as follows:

To do civil good can only mean, that the natural man is able to do good before God in every sphere

of civil life, the home, the society, the state, the school. He is, therefore, able to do good before God in the sphere of education, not merely formally, as far as methods of education are concerned, but also materially, as far as the contents of the instruction are concerned and this also in an ethical, moral sense. The conclusion is that public education is well able to prepare the child for a good life in this world (p. 319).

Preparing the child for a good life in this world, said Hoeksema, is exactly what the school ought to do. The purpose of the school is not to prepare the child to make confession of faith in the church or to appropriate the blessings of salvation in Jesus Christ. This is the domain of the preaching of the gospel and the church. Concerning the purpose of the school Hoeksema wrote as follows:

The purpose of the (Christian) school is to prepare him for a life in the world that is good before God, to give him sound instruction in the various subjects he must know to assume his place in the different domains of this present life. Is it not the distinctive Reformed, Calvinistic conception of life, that life belongs to God in its entirety; that nothing may be excluded from the service of the living God; that His glory is the chief

purpose of all? (p. 319).

Hoeksema asked, "Is it not exactly on this basis that a need is expressed for an education that may prepare the child for such a life?" (p. 319).

Hoeksema brought his argument to a close by considering the second half of the third principle: "Though lost in sin man can be saved through faith in Christ; and through restoring grace he is able to do spiritual good." Hoeksema cannot see that one can build a Christian school on the basis of this statement. He wrote: "First, this possibility is left universal: man may come to the state in which he can do spiritual good. Secondly, spiritual good according to the interpretation of the common grace adherents is limited to such things as faith, hope, love, etc. What does this have to do with reading, writing, arithmetic, civics, history, physical geography, etc., etc.?" (p. 319).

Once again he said, "Why this lame, vague statement, that is as far from the central line of truth as the poles are from the equator?" He pleads for a distinct statement and recommended that the third Specific Principle be written as follows:

From the fallen and wholly depraved human race and in the midst of a world that lieth in darkness, a crooked and perverse generation, God saves His elect, establishing His covenant with them and their children in the line of continued generation, forming them by His sovereign grace in Christ into a people of Himself, that they might be His friends, and, living in every sphere of life from the principle of regeneration through faith, they should show forth His praises and walk as children of light in the world (p. 319).

As we have indicated in previous articles, this restatement of one of the Specific Principles is more than a last paragraph in an article written nearly seventy years ago. The basic truth of Hoeksema's restatement of this third Specific Principle is found in the section called "The Basis" of many of the Constitutions adopted by the Protestant Reformed Christian schools. The following is an example taken from one such Constitution:

Our Sovereign, Triune, Covenant God has from eternity chosen and in time forms a people unto Himself, that they may stand in Covenant relationship to Him, and live to His praise in friendship and loving service in all spheres of life, in the midst of a sinful world.

... to be continued

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