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That They May Teach Them to Their Children

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Three articles (cf. Nov. 15, 1998, Feb. 15, 1999, and March 15, 1999) have summarized and reviewed some of the early significant writings by Herman Hoeksema and George M. Ophoff concerning Christian education and Christian schools.

I have contended that the articles respecting Christian education and Christian schools during the earliest years of the publication of the *Standard Bearer* influenced profoundly the development and formation of the Protestant Reformed Christian Schools. I believe that it can be demonstrated that those articles, written seven decades ago by the early leaders of the PR churches, convinced members of the fledgling denomination to organize their own PR Christian schools. These early articles both influenced and reflected the thinking of parents and others who organized and developed good PR Christian schools.

We begin in this article a review of the analysis and critique written by Hoeksema and Ophoff regarding the six "Specific Principles" for Christian education which were part of the booklet *Basic Principles of Christian Schools of America*, published July 1925 by the National Union of Christian Schools (NUCS), now Christian Schools International (CSI).

An Examination of the Review, Critique, and Restatement of the Specific Principles

It is important to note the date (July 1925) of the publication of the six "Specific Principles." July 1925 was one year after the significant decision of the 1924 synod of Kalamazoo. This synod of

the Christian Reformed Church produced and adopted the well-known Three Points, which became the theological cause for the organization of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America. The Three Points taught a common grace of God to the reprobate, i.e., a restraining of sin in the reprobate because of common grace, and the ability of unregenerate man to do civic righteousness because of common grace. Hoeksema and Ophoff were deposed from office and forced out of the CRC because they would not agree with the false doctrine taught by these Three Points.

Herman Hoeksema summarized five of the six Specific Principles as follows:

- a. The Bible is the book of books.
- b. God is triune, transcendent, and immanent, creator and sustainer, the loving sovereign of all.
- c. Man is fallen but can be saved through faith in Christ; fallen, he is still God's image bearer and able to do civic good; saved he can do spiritual good.
- d. The world is steeped in sin; the beauty, order, and virtue of the world is a manifestation of God's goodness.
- e. The task of the school is to enable the pupil to realize himself as God's image bearer; to equip him for this calling; and to reconstitute a sin-perverted world by realizing the kingdom of God. (Cf. Standard Bearer, Feb. 15, 1932, Volume 8, p. 223.)

You may read the complete text of the six Specific Principles in the March 15, 1999 issue.

Following is a complete statement of "Principle a":

The Bible is the Book of books. By virtue of its divine organic inspiration (2 Peter 1:21) it is unique among all books. The Bible is not only the infallible rule of faith and conduct, but also the infallible guide of truth and righteousness. All school administration, instruction, and discipline should be motivated by biblical principles.

Concerning "Principle a" both Hoeksema and Ophoff expressed significant concerns. Both contended that the statements "The Bible is the Book of books" and "the Bible is not only the infallible rule of faith and conduct but also the infallible guide of truth and righteousness" were vague and left room for many interpretations. Both contended that because "Principle a" lacked specificity, modernists and higher critics could agree with it.

Ophoff wrote that "Principle a" is too brief and too indefinite (cf. Standard Bearer, Nov. 15, 1926, Vol. 3, pp. 80-85). It does not say enough. It has too many "loopholes." He asserted that many writers on comparative religions would not object to endorsing the assertion that the Bible is "an infallible rule of faith and conduct" and "the infallible guide of truth and righteousness." He contended that the statement is of doubtful significance and could not be quoted in support of the proposition that the entire content of the Bible, in all its minutest details, is God-inspired, and hence the infallible Word of God. He wrote as follows:

...Inspiration must be made to apply to the chronology of Scripture, and to the historical data as well as to the ethical-religious truths. It is a noteworthy matter that the article only asserts that the religious-ethical truths are infallible (Ibid., p. 80).

Regarding the statement that the "Bible is the book of books," Hoeksema wrote:

The first declaration has it that the Bible is the book of books. Perhaps it is, although it is never quite clear to me what is meant by the expression. Does it imply a comparison with other books? Does it mean that it is superior to other books? Does it place the Bible on the shelf with other books, only to mark it as the best among them all? The authors of this platform would, perhaps, reply that they added to this definition of the Bible that it is unique among all books by virtue of its divine organic inspiration. That sounds very good. And a platform of specific principles, let me add, must sound good, for if it does not it is in danger of being repudiated. Yet, it may not be as good as it sounds. What I want to know, in order to be very specific, is whether the Bible is from beginning to end the inspired Word of God. You say, That is exactly what we mean? Splendid! Let us express ourselves just in that way, then! (SB, Vol. 8, pp. 223, 224).

A lengthy section of the analysis by GMO quotes Articles 3-7 of the Belgic Confession. Ophoff contended that these articles from the Belgic Confession are much more specific than the Specific Principles. He summarized and identified in what he called nine "vital statements" the instruction and confession in Articles 3-7 concerning the Word of God — the Holy Scriptures.

- a. These articles denominate the Bible the Word of God.
- b. It is declared that this Word was not sent, nor delivered by the will of man.
- c. Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. Hence, the Bible is in the absolute sense the Word of God. The prophets and the apostles were so many mouthpieces of God.
- d. God commanded His servants, the prophets and the apostles, to put His revealed Word to writing.
- e. Against the Holy Scriptures, contained in two books, the Old and New Testaments, which are canonical, nothing can be alleged.
- f. We receive all these books and these only as holy and canonical ... believing without any doubt all things contained in them.
- g. It is unlawful for anyone, though an apostle, to teach otherwise than we are taught in the Holy Scriptures; nay, though it were an angel from heaven.
- h. It is forbidden to take away or add anything to the Word of God.
- i. We reject with all our hearts whatsoever does not agree with this infallible rule (ibid., p. 81).

Ophoff contended that "Principle a" was a weak and unsatisfactory statement of the truth concerning the Holy Scriptures as the foundation of all instruction in the Christian school. The conclusion of his analysis and critique of "Principle a" affirmed that the articles of the Belgic Confession should not have been ignored and avoided nor ought they to have been replaced by "Principle a." Ophoff wrote:

It appears that these particular articles of the Confession are clear-cut and

unequivocal statements of what the Church, a few centuries back, thought of the Bible. Any one endorsing these articles will not and cannot submit the Bible to a scientific test. That is to say he will not do so if he is bent on playing fair. Such a one will not attempt to rearrange the data of Scripture, nor will he place a question mark behind this or that historical event. In a word, he will leave the Bible alone. This man will bow before the entire book, not only as a believer but also as a man of science and even as a polemic or disputant (SB, Vol. 3, p. 81).

GMO contended that Dr. C. Bouma recommended "Principle a" because he wanted to make the Christian schools palatable to all "Christians," not merely for those who are Reformed. Therefore GMO asked and answered the following question:

What could have induced Dr. C. Bouma to set aside these articles (Belgic Confession, Arts. 3-7, AL) and recommend as a substitute the weak and equivocal so-called interpretation of the Union (NUCS)? The reason given is that these articles are deliverances of an ecclesiastical body. In other words, they are church creeds. We don't believe that this is the reason. What may it be? (Ibid., p. 81).

Herman Hoeksema believed that he could see in "Principle a" evidences of the higher criticism taught by Dr. Ralph Janssen to the students in Calvin Seminary in the 1920s. Those who are familiar with this history will know that Hoeksema had opposed this form of higher criticism, i.e., Janssenism. During the years prior to his deposition in 1924-25 Hoeksema had opposed the theory of common grace that was adopted as doctrine in the Three Points of 1924.

... when Herman Hoeksema had been a member in good standing in the Christian Reformed Church, when he was looked to as a brilliant young leader, he wrote in The Witness: "I would not even want to live in a denomination in which they raise the conception of Rev. Groen (on common grace) to official status. That conception leads us right into the world..." He said at that time that he saw the connection between Rev. Groen's theory and Dr. Janssen's teaching. (Cf. Gertrude Hoeksema, Therefore Have I Spoken, p. 154.)

Hoeksema contended that the language of higher criticism is evident in the language of "Principle a" that refers to the Bible as "the book of books although unique because of its organic inspiration." In addition, Hoeksema failed to understand the meaning of the statement that described the Bible as follows: "not only the infallible rule of faith and conduct, but also the infallible guide of truth and righteousness."

Hoeksema wrote:

Let us say: "We believe that the Bible is given by plenary inspiration (complete, full inspiration, AL), and that it, therefore, is from beginning to end the Word of God." There are many that would subscribe to the statement that the Bible is the book of books, that they believe in organic inspiration, that it is the infallible rule for faith and life, and that yet agree with the higher critics to a large extent and have no scruples to reject large and small portions of this book of books as not so organically inspired (SB, Vol. 8, p. 224).

Hoeksema continued as follows:

I know not, whether the authors of this platform expressed themselves intentionally in

this indefinite manner. Fact is, of course, that the expression: The Bible is the written Word of God, is common enough among us, and was known also to the writers of these "specific principles." However this may be, especially in our time it is better to be specific on this point. The expression: The Bible is the book of Books, is not definite, leaves plenty of room for many heresies, even though you add that it is given by organic inspiration. In the form suggested by the platform the definition frankly smacks of Janssenism (ibid., p. 224).

Concerning the phrase, "not only the infallible rule of faith and conduct, but also the infallible guide of truth and righteousness," Hoeksema wrote:

This "not only ... but also" I fail to understand. Perhaps, the writers could elucidate the statement. A guide of truth? A guide of righteousness: In distinction from being a rule of faith and life? Not only the latter ... but also the former? Frankly, I do not understand what this means. It surely is not very specific (ibid., p. 224).

Hoeksema concluded his analysis and critique of "Principle a" as follows:

Probably, what the writers of this basis for Christian instruction intended to convey is the idea, that all the instruction that is given in the Christian schools should be based on the Scriptures, should be permeated with the truth of the Word of God; that Scripture should absolutely be the criterion of all that is taught, so that no instruction shall be either "neutral" or in conflict with the Word of God. This must not only be the case with the instruction that is given in the Bible as such, with the Bible lesson, but as much as possible with all other subjects taught in the Christian school. History, for instance, not only sacred but secular, is according to Scripture the realization of the eternal counsel of God and its course tends to the ultimate realization of the Kingdom of God. In a Christian school it must be taught emphatically in this light. It surely cannot use the material that is offered in our modern textbooks, which are all based on and proceed from the theory of evolution.... And as it is with the instruction proper, so it is with the management of the school, the relation of teacher to pupil, and discipline. The appearance and conduct of the teacher, the language he or she employs, the attitude assumed, it shall all be in harmony with the Word of God. ...school discipline should not follow every whim and fancy of modern pedagogy. The fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom and which is objectively revealed in the Bible should reign supreme and dominate in the instruction and life of the Christian school.

Perhaps it was the intention of the authors of "specific principles" to express this.

But why not be definite? Why this studied attempt to be vague and general?

Under cover of this language the historicity of the first three chapters of the book of Genesis is denied, the narrative of creation is harmonized with the theory of evolution, the history of Adam and Eve, Paradise, the Fall, etc., receive a new meaning. Yet, we still speak of the Bible as given by organic inspiration and as the infallible rule of faith and life!

I do not accuse the writers of this basis of Christian instruction of such intentions.

But as far as the terminology is concerned, they may have been Janssen-men.

Why not express ourselves definitely and in a much simpler form? Why not simply say:

The Bible is from beginning to end the written Word of God, given by infallible inspiration. All school administration, instruction, and discipline shall be based on it and permeated by its teachings, for we acknowledge that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom (ibid., p. 224).

The suggested restatement, by Herman Hoeksema, of the first "Specific Principle," i.e., "Principle a" in the booklet Basic Principles of Christian Schools of America, has become more than a first suggestion. The truth of this statement has become a permanent idea and a statement of truth used in the Constitutions and the By-laws of the Articles of Incorporation of the school societies that have been organized to provide distinctively Protestant Reformed Christian Education.

Seventy years ago men of God critiqued, analyzed, corrected, and restated the "Specific Principles" composed to help the NUCS schools provide direction in the Christian training and instruction of the youth.

Today the Protestant Reformed Christian schools are the beneficiaries of the noble and diligent efforts of Herman Hoeksema and George M. Ophoff. We who benefit from these faithful efforts ought to be thankful that God gave the churches leaders whose writings demonstrated that they believed fervently that it was the calling of the church through the consistories to see to it that there are good Christian schools and good Christian school teachers.

The consistories everywhere shall see to it that there are good Christian schools (good school teachers) not only to teach the children reading, writing, languages, and the liberal arts, but also to instruct them in godliness and in the Catechism (cf. Article 21, Church Order of Dordt).

To God is all the glory!

... to be continued.

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