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This article, one in a series of articles that began November 15, 1998, continues the examination of the critique by Rev. George M. Ophoff and Rev. Herman Hoeksema of six Specific Principles that were adopted in 1925 by the Christian School Union. The Christian School Union was later known as the national Union of Christian Schools (NUCS) and is currently denominated the Christian Schools International (CSI). The critique was contained in articles that were written for the Standard Bearer by G.M. Ophoff in 1926 and by H. Hoeksema in the early 1930s. The writers contended that the six Specific Principles that had been composed by the leadership of Christian School Union were principles that were lacking in specificity and were not truly Reformed. They contended that these principles were not the kind required for truly Reformed Christian schools. This series of articles has demonstrated that the ideas of G.M. Ophoff and H. Hoeksema have had a pronounced influence on the Protestant Reformed Christian schools because the ideas are reflected in their basic principles.

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

The world is steeped in sin. All aspects of life, individual and family, social and political, industrial and economic, even the animal world, nature and things inanimate, show the mars and scars, the subversions and perversions of sin.

Rom. 8:22

The virtue, order, and beauty which is still present in the world is a manifestation of God's goodness.

[Matt. 5:45](#) ^[1]

The Fourth Specific Principle

Herman Hoeksema began his article in the May 1, 1932 issue of the Standard Bearer (vol. 8, pp. 342-344) by stating that it was obvious that the specific principles were composed under the influence of the spirit that became manifest in 1924. This spirit, he said, had expressed itself in the "Three Points of Common Grace." Hoeksema said that he saw evidences of this same influence of common grace in the fourth plank in the platform that was adopted in 1925 by the Christian School Union only a year after the well-known synod of 1924.

Hoeksema indicated that the first part of the fourth specific principle had a positive sound. The principle speaks of a world that is steeped in sin. It speaks of the mars, the scars, the subversions, and the perversions of sin. The principle appears to teach that in all phases and aspects of life, sin becomes manifest and corrupts all things.

Although Hoeksema is willing to grant that the fourth principle has a positive sound, he immediately noted that the first part is ambiguous and is not specific. He asserted that this fourth principle is characterized by a certain verbosity that is deceiving. The first part of the principle leaves room for the second part of the statement that speaks incorrectly concerning the virtue, order, and beauty that is still present in the world. Hoeksema wrote as follows: "It is difficult to conceive how this last part could still speak of virtue in the world, of a virtue that is a manifestation of the goodness of God, if the first part actually teaches what it appears to express at the first sight" (p. 343).

Hoeksema contended that the world is indeed steeped in sin and that every aspect of the life of the world reveals the subversions and perversions of sin. If that is true, how then could anyone still include the assertion that along with this perversity and perversion there also is virtue in the world?

At this point Hoeksema asked another very relevant and necessary question, "What is virtue?" He answered the question as follows: "It (virtue) is moral goodness and excellency. It is integrity of heart and mind. It is purity of soul. It is the power, the ethical power, to perform deeds that are good, that can carry God's own approval" (p. 343).

Having offered a definition and description of virtue, Hoeksema stated that the fourth principle states something that it does not prove. Hoeksema asserted that the authors obviously believed that everyone should simply assume that this statement is true. Hoeksema noted that the authors seem to think that it ought to be evident to everyone that there really is such virtue in man, such moral excellency and purity of soul, such integrity of heart and mind in the world—in a world that is steeped in sin.

At this point Hoeksema asserted that the authors of this specific principle certainly cannot have believed that the reference from [Matthew 5:45](#) ^[2] could relate to this statement. He said [Matthew 5:45](#) ^[2] speaks of rain and sunshine upon the just and unjust promiscuously, but it does not mention one word of a certain virtue of the natural man that is supposed to be a manifestation of the goodness of God. He also noted that the authors do not use any other passage from Scripture to provide proof for the fourth principle.

Hoeksema stated that the authors of the fourth principle could not have found any other passage in Scripture because the Word of God never speaks of the virtue and moral excellence of the natural man who is dead in sin and trespasses. The Word of God teaches exactly the opposite—that natural man is wholly corrupt and perverse in all his ways.

Hoeksema noted that the tacit assumption of the authors of the fourth principle concerning the virtue in the world was their conclusion concerning their perception of the different aspects of life. Concerning this observation and their conclusion he said, "the conclusion is quite in conflict with the judgment of the Word of God" (p. 343).

Although Hoeksema provided no other references from Scripture, there are many references that could have been cited to prove that man is by nature not endowed with the virtue that the fourth principle assumes. Following are several passages from the Word of God that speak the truth concerning the condition of natural man.

[Genesis 6:5](#) ^[3]

—"And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination* (or the whole imagination) of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually." (*The Hebrew word translated imagination signifies not only the imagination but also the purposes and desires.)

[Genesis 8:21](#) ^[4]

—"... and the Lord said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth...."

Jeremiah 17:9 [5]

—"The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?"

Job 14:4 [6]

—"Who can bring a clean thing out of an unclean? not one."

Ephesians 2:3 [7]

—"... and were by nature children of wrath even as the others."

Hoeksema also contended that the authors could not have appealed to the Reformed confessions. He wrote, "They (the confessions) do not teach there is virtue in the world of sinful men, but that the natural man by virtue of the remnants of natural light can have some regard for virtue" (p. 343). Hoeksema wrote that this regard for virtue is quite different from the statement in the fourth principle that fallen man as he is by nature is actually virtuous.

The term "regard for virtue" used by Hoeksema in his critique is a crucial and well-known phrase found in the Canons of Dort, III/IV, Art. 4. "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 from being 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."

The confessions that Hoeksema referred to include the Heidelberg Catechism. Lord's Day 3, Question and Answer 8 states: "Are we then so corrupt that we are wholly incapable of doing any good, and inclined to all wickedness? Indeed we are, except we are regenerated by the Spirit of God."

Concerning the intended meaning in the minds of the authors of the fourth principle, Hoeksema rhetorically asked, "Now surely the authors of this platform do not express themselves correctly, when they ascribe this virtue of the world to a certain goodness of God. It must be due to a goodness of man, a goodness that remained in him and that is preserved in him by the 'restraining grace' that is mentioned in the preceding article (Art. 3) of these Specific Principles. We may safely assume that this is just what the statement implies."

In his analysis of the fourth principle Hoeksema attempted to determine how it is conceivable that the authors of the principle could speak of "a certain virtue in the world" in the light of the first part of the principle. This first part speaks of "a world that is steeped in sin."

Here Hoeksema returned again to his concern about the ambiguity of the principles. He

contended that they are not as specific as they claim to be. Hoeksema wrote:

It may be pointed out that the term "world" in the Specific Principle is ambiguous. It is not quite clear whether by it the authors mean "the evil world of ungodly men" or "the organic world of creation," for in the rest of the Specific Principle they speak of both, including animals, nature, and inanimate things (p. 343).

It cannot escape our attention, that the Specific Principle merely states that the aspects of life show the subversions and perversions of sin (p. 343).

Hoeksema pointed out that the fourth principle declared that in every aspect of life—the family, society, the state, political, economic, industrial—are the mars, the scars, the subversions, and the perversions of sin. Hoeksema expressed surprise that the authors had not added the ecclesiastical dimension because he did not believe this aspect of life was exempt from these mars, scars, subversions, and perversions caused by sin.

Concerning these statements in the fourth principle, Hoeksema observed that the writers assume that we must "understand that in these aspects of life, alongside these manifestations of sin and depravity, there is still room for a manifestation of virtue, of integrity of heart, of purity of soul, of moral excellence. In the world, in every phase and aspect of life, you behold manifestations of sin and of virtue side by side" (p. 343).

At this point in the argument, Hoeksema asked a series of pertinent and probing questions. They are:

1. Why Christian schools if this is the truth?
2. Is the line of demarcation between God's people and the world not entirely obliterated in this statement (principle)?
3. Is not this description of the ethical condition of "the world" exactly applicable to the church as well?
4. Why did the authors omit the mention of the ecclesiastical aspect of life?
5. We are not Roman Catholics, are we, so that we divide the world into different aspects and call one aspect holy?
6. Is it not true that the Christian lives in these different aspect of life, and that the subversions and perversions of sin become manifest in all these phases as well as the goodness and virtue that is due to the grace of God?

Hoeksema responded to his litany of questions as follows: "And thus the distinction between God's people and the world is clearly denied. And with the denial of this distinction there is no conceivable *raison d'être** for separate Christian schools." (*Reason or justification for being in existence.)

Hoeksema concluded this discussion of the Specific Principles of the Christian School Union as he had concluded all the others with a proposed revision. He suggested the following version as Principle 4:

In the midst of and in distinction from the evil world, that lieth in darkness and is perverse in all its ways because of sin, it is the calling of the people of God to live by grace from the principle of regeneration according to the will of God in every sphere of life—individual, family, social, industrial, political, and ecclesiastical—so that they may be children of light in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. Hence, they insist that all education, that must prepare their children for such an all-sided Christian walk in the world, shall be adapted to this purpose.

We conclude our review and discussion with an observation similar to that which we have made several times before. We again should observe that the proposed principle is more than a last paragraph in an article written nearly seventy years ago. The basic kernel and truth of Hoeksema's restatement and proposed principle is found in the constitutions adopted by the Protestant Reformed Christian Schools. An example will illustrate this point.

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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