

# VU Research Portal

## Herman Hoeksema: A Theological Biography

Baskwell, P.J.

2006

### **document version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

### **citation for published version (APA)**

Baskwell, P. J. (2006). *Herman Hoeksema: A Theological Biography*. [PhD-Thesis – Research external, graduation internal, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam].

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

### **E-mail address:**

[vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl](mailto:vuresearchportal.ub@vu.nl)

## Introduction

In 1924 Herman Hoeksema and a small band of followers found themselves at odds with their own denomination, the Christian Reformed Church. The Christian Reformed Church, at the time a small denomination consisting largely of Dutch immigrants to the United States and Canada and the descendents of Dutch immigrants, found Hoeksema and his followers guilty of denying the ‘doctrine’ of common grace, a ‘doctrine’ recently adopted in three points and elevated to confessional status. Hoeksema, aided by Henry Danhof and George Ophoff, fought the acceptance of this ‘doctrine’ of common grace by the Christian Reformed Church both from the pulpit and in print. In the end there was not room in the Christian Reformed Church for both; the Three Points of Common Grace were accepted while Hoeksema and company were rejected.

The conflict surrounding Hoeksema had to do with burning issues and discussions in the Reformed world in the beginning of the twentieth-century. Hoeksema had very distinctive opinions, but due to the clash neither his opinions nor the development of his thought was ever analyzed unless by people who were themselves participants of the conflict. Now, after almost a century, it is time, with the required distance, to take up this work and to analyze Hoeksema’s thought. This study, however, is not about common grace as a whole; rather, it is my attempt to understand one of the more characteristic persons of Reformed theology in the first half of the last century. And now, with more distance, to bring forth again his arguments in the discussion on common grace, and, in a broader perspective, to apply them to the relation of church and society.

What is this common grace that Hoeksema would receive the ultimate sanction a minister can get for having denied it? Actually, as the Three Points themselves show, common grace is not just a single concept, it is actually a rubric, or category, which contains several, rather disparate tenets. In saying this I am following primarily the exposition of the ‘doctrine’ as it was given confessional status in the Christian Reformed Church in Hoeksema’s day. Simply put, common grace allows non-Christians to be credited with doing a certain amount of good, especially in the civic realm and in other areas of culture. Common grace also maintains that one of the functions of the Holy Spirit is to restrain sin in the heart of non-Christians. And yet another facet of common grace is the favorable attitude on the part of God towards the unbeliever in the free offer of the Gospel. There are indeed other things that make up common grace, but in the course of our study we will concern ourselves primarily with these three tenets because these are the ideas which were given confessional status in the Christian Reformed Church in 1924 and which Hoeksema resisted, even to his removal from the denomination. From this perspective, this thesis is not meant to be the definitive study of the ‘doctrine’ of common grace. It is rather the study of one man’s encounter with these concepts and his rejection of them as seen through his eyes. There have indeed been many others since Hoeksema’s time who have weighed in on the debate, but it would be beyond the scope of our study to deal with them all at any length.

I would also like to ask the question: Who was this man Herman Hoeksema? The Protestant Reformed Churches, which he founded after being released from his charge in the Christian Reformed Church, say that he was a remarkable man. The Christian Reformed Church and her historians portray Hoeksema as little more than a footnote to

their history. In the course of time since 1924, Hoeksema has more often been ignored than grappled with, let alone refuted. Born into relative poverty in the Netherlands, Hoeksema learned at an early age to fight for what he wanted. It seems, however, he liked the fighting aspect a bit too much and this did not suit him well in his later ecclesiastical struggles. Yet in spite of his rather inauspicious beginnings and some rather disagreeable personality traits, it is my belief that, as one of the more distinctive and consistent Reformed theologians of the twentieth-century, Herman Hoeksema is still a force that must be reckoned with.

In order to answer my questions about Herman Hoeksema and the ‘doctrine’ of common grace, I begin my thesis with a spiritual/intellectual biography of Herman Hoeksema (Chapters 1-6). The only work to cover the period in Herman Hoeksema’s life prior to his immigration from Holland to the United States in any detail is a biography written by his daughter-in-law Gertrude Hoeksema, and published in 1969, under the title *Therefore Have I Spoken*—this has been the only biography on Herman Hoeksema to date. I am greatly indebted to this work for much of the material in the following pages. Yet, for material on Hoeksema’s parentage and early chronology, I am also indebted to Mr. M. S. Mulder who graciously supplied me with these particulars as they are recorded in the municipal offices of Hoogezand/Sappemeer. While the biography that follows may build on the work of Gertrude Hoeksema, they are indeed very different. Her concern was to chronicle the life of her father-in-law for readers in the denomination which he founded. In a sense she was introducing the younger generation in the Protestant Reformed Church to their spiritual grandfather. My intent, by comparison, is to analyze Hoeksema’s intellectual and spiritual development. Hence, the spiritual/intellectual

biography chronicles Hoeksema's spiritual and intellectual odyssey from his native Holland, through the early years in the pastorate in the United States, through the conflicts which continually seemed to beset him, and ending in the late 1940s following a debilitating stroke from which he never fully recovered. While it may be objected that Hoeksema lived until 1965 and that I am neglecting a large portion of his adult life, I feel justified in the parameters I have chosen. By the time of Hoeksema's debilitating stroke in 1947 his theology was already finished, and thus, for our purposes, his spiritual, intellectual development was essentially complete. Granted, his theological thinking did not cease with the stroke, but, at least to my mind, any further development in his theology did.

The second part of the following thesis (Chapters 7-9) will concentrate primarily on the 'doctrine' of common grace. I say primarily, because I will only include those distinctives of Hoeksema's theology which in some way relate to, or hinge upon his evaluation of common grace. In this part of the thesis I intend to examine in some detail the doctrine of common grace as it was contained in the Three Points adopted by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1924, devoting a chapter to each of the Three Points. In examining the Three Points we will be, if you will, looking through Hoeksema's eyes in both our understanding and evaluation of these important concepts and their applications, both intended and unintended.

The analysis that follows, therefore, is intended to demonstrate both the significance and coherence of Hoeksema's theology by way of his denial of common grace and his own distinctive developments. It is not a pleasant thing to be immersed in the sorry affairs of church struggle and strife, bitterness and hatred, as happened in the

Christian Reformed Church and in Hoeksema's life, but I think it is beneficial in the long run to see the power that sin had in these institutions of benevolence, and the rank unwillingness among members of the clergy for any brotherly discussion of differences. Hence, I intend to present this conflict with all its hatreds, contradictions and absurdities. Additionally, by means of the framework and divisions I have chosen, i.e. beginning with a spiritual/intellectual biography of Hoeksema and then proceeding to analyze through Hoeksema's eyes the Three Points of Common Grace of 1924, I believe we will gain a better view of the life of the mind that indeed characterized the man Herman Hoeksema.

### *Bibliographic Materials*

Much of the material used here relating to Hoeksema's development and the common grace struggle has not been used before. *The Banner* articles in particular are almost completely forgotten by the Christian Reformed Church and even the Protestant Reformed Churches in their continued treatment of the subject. It is my contention that these articles, four years worth, are crucial for understanding Hoeksema's developing thought, and I have endeavored to demonstrate this throughout. All editions of *The Banner*, extending back to its inception in 1866, can be found in the Archives at the Heckman Library on the campus of Calvin College and Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The Archives at Calvin College and Seminary also contain Hoeksema's senior paper entitled 'Rousseau and Education,' which he wrote in 1912, his last year in the preparatory division of Calvin Seminary, which later became Calvin College. Also available in the Archives are a complete set of the *Acts of Synod* for the Christian Reformed Church. For my purposes, only the years 1922, 1924, 1926 and 1928 were of

significance. In addition to its holdings, the Archives at the Heckman Library produces a historical magazine entitled *Origins*, which I have found especially helpful in bringing to light the lesser known aspects of the history of the Christian Reformed Church, immigration issues particularly as they bear on the Christian Reformed Church in Canada and significant people connected in some way with the development of Dutch Reformed theology both in the United States and abroad.

With regard to archives, I have already mentioned the birth and population records held in the municipal offices in Hoogezand-Sappemeer. These were supplied to me by M. S. Mulder, who is curator of these records, and who was very timely in responding to my requests for information. The final archive that I made use of was the Public Records Office in the Cook County Health Department, Chicago, Illinois. It was here that I obtained the death certificate for Johanna Bakema, nee Hoeksema, Hoeksema's mother.

Another source I have employed in the thesis are the many interviews I conducted with members of the Hoeksema family, as well as any surviving associates. Not surprisingly a high percentage of those 'associates,' many advanced in years at the time of the interview, are now deceased. Not all the interviews were helpful, some were downright hostile, but a complete list of those I used can be found in the bibliography.

Hoeksema's shorter writings can be found in both *The Banner* and *The Standard Bearer*. *The Banner*, discussed above, is the official organ of the Christian Reformed Church, and Hoeksema's contributions to the rubric 'Our Doctrine' in *The Banner* span the years 1918-1922, with the last article dated 31 August 1922. With his dismissal from the ministry of the Christian Reformed Church, Hoeksema proceeded to found the

Protestant Reformed Churches in 1924. At the same time he also established a new periodical, *The Standard Bearer*, both as his outlet in the Protestant Reformed Churches and as a rival to *The Banner* in the Christian Reformed Church. The many volumes of *The Standard Bearer*, the first issue bearing the date October 1924, are more readily available than those of *The Banner*. Several years ago the Protestant Reformed Churches committed all past issues of *The Standard Bearer* to CD, complete with its own search engine. Their stated plan at the time was to update the set every ten years and it has been updated once since its unveiling. The complete set is available from the Reformed Free Publishing Association, 4949 Ivanrest Avenue SW, Grandville, MI 49418-9709.

In addition to the many hundreds of articles contained in both *The Banner* and *The Standard Bearer*, the Hoeksema corpus also includes hundreds of unpublished sermons still in manuscript. A word about these sermons is in order because of their unusual provenance. As David Engelsma of the Protestant Reformed Churches has written regarding these sermons:

The explanation of the existence of these sermons in written form is a story in itself. So far as I have been able to determine, Hoeksema's own outlines...no longer exist. But as Calvin had his scribes in Geneva, to whom we are indebted for the sermons by Calvin that we possess, Hoeksema had his scribe. He was Martin Swart (1891-1977), a member of the First Protestant Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan from its beginning in 1924 to his death in 1977. For many of those years, Mr. Swart took down Hoeksema's sermons by his own system of shorthand. Older members of First Church remember seeing Mr. Swart absorbed in his writing, service after service, as Hoeksema preached. Those were the days before tape recordings. Immediately upon returning home, Swart would write out the sermon in full with a pencil. Later, he transcribed the sermon into spiral notebooks with a pen. (Engelsma 2000b:293.)

Swart, who worked his whole life 'as a wood cutter in furniture factories in Grand Rapids' (Engelsma 2002:xxiv), produced 'some 70 notebooks' (Engelsma 2000b:293) of Hoeksema's sermons in this manner. The notebooks to this day remain in the Swart

family although they have been copied several times over the years with at least one copy residing in the Heckman Library, Calvin College and Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. I have my own copy of all the Swart transcriptions.

As amply demonstrated by the above sources, the Hoeksema corpus is simply enormous. His industry as a pastor, teacher, author and polemicist was seemingly inexhaustible. Hence, the time and effort expended in sifting through this veritable mountain of material in order to understand the man and his thought has been considerable.

#### *Status of Research*

Aside from the many articles written in the denominational magazines of the Christian Reformed Church and the Protestant Reformed Churches, there is relatively little said elsewhere concerning Herman Hoeksema. Even the Christian Reformed Church has had little to say as of late. This situation began to change somewhat in 2000 when both the April and November issues of the *Calvin Theological Journal* were devoted to the Three Points of Common Grace and the events surrounding their adoption in 1924. John Bolt and Raymond Blacketer, in a total of three articles, revisited the events of 1924 in articles that were unusually sympathetic to Hoeksema and his cause.

There are only two other articles that center on Hoeksema, outside Protestant Reformed circles that is, of which I am aware. The first, by L. Vogelaar, is entitled 'Hoeksema was verbaasd over Schilder.' This can be found in *De Hoeksteen*, Volume 25 (December 1996), afl, 5-6. Pg. 210-213. The second is by P. Rouwendal, entitled 'Herman Hoeksema. Leven en opvattingen van een controversieel theoloog,' and it can

be found in the *Tijdschrift voor Nederlandse Kerkgeschiedenis* IV. 3 (September 2001), pages 70-82.

There have been three academic theses that deal with Hoeksema to a greater or lesser degree; his name is in the title of each work. The first one of these was a thesis written by A. C. de Jong for the Free University of Amsterdam in 1954 entitled *The Well-Meant Gospel Offer: The Views of H. Hoeksema and K. Schilder*. This work shows little sympathy for Hoeksema's theological distinctives. I analyze this work in some detail in chapter 7. In 1985 a dissertation by H. David Schuringa was submitted for the degree of Master of Theology in the department of Practical Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary. Entitled 'The Preaching of the Word as a Means of Grace: The Views of Herman Hoeksema and R. B. Kuiper.' This dissertation concentrates almost exclusively on R. B. Kuiper, with Hoeksema and his 'rationalism' little more than a sub-theme. The final thesis was written by David B. McWilliams and submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Wales, Lampeter in January 2000. It is titled, 'Herman Hoeksema's Theological Method.' McWilliams brings together a huge amount of material in the course of his discussion. It seems, however, that all his sources are, in one way or another, used simply to castigate Hoeksema. McWilliams subscribes to the school of Reformed thought centered on Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Because of this McWilliams show a preference for paradox and mystery that was not shared by Hoeksema. Hoeksema was logical to a fault, and his enemies criticized him endlessly for it. McWilliams does the same. Hence, there is little in Hoeksema's method that McWilliams finds attractive. I will deal with much of this in chapters 3, 6 and 7.

There is one other thesis that, while not being strictly about Hoeksema, devotes some space to his thought. Entitled ‘Grace without Christ? The Doctrine of Common Grace in Dutch-American Neo-Calvinism,’ this work was submitted by Walter Campbell Campbell-Jack in 1992 to the University of Edinburgh, Scotland in fulfillment of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. In what seems to me to be a relatively balanced work, the author investigates the common grace of Abraham Kuyper, Herman Hoeksema and Klaas Schilder. Out of 325 pages the author devotes less than 20 to Hoeksema, which seems to be a deficiency, but, while Campbell-Jack is more sympathetic to common grace than its denial, which Hoeksema does, he is fair in his presentation of Hoeksema’s views.

In 2000 Richard J. Mouw, President of Fuller Seminary in California, was invited to deliver the Stob Lectures at Calvin Theological Seminary. This he did with distinction under the title *He Shines in All That’s Fair: Culture and Common Grace*. Much is said in these lectures of Hoeksema and much is sympathetic. David Engelsma of the Protestant Reformed Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan wrote a response to some of Mouw’s conclusions entitled *Common Grace Revisited: A Response to Richard J. Mouw’s He Shines in All That’s Fair*—see the bibliography at the end of the thesis for further information on both books. Both books are very informative and they complement each other well.