

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

Chapter 6

The Rationalist

Because the charge of ‘rationalism,’ or its relative ‘rationalist,’ always seems to hold pride of place in any discussion of Hoeksema’s thought, in the following chapter I would like to investigate this matter.

6.1 J. K. van Baalen

J. K. van Baalen, in his 1922 pamphlet entitled *De Loochening der Gemeene Gratie: Gereformeerd of Doopersch* (The Denial of Common Grace: Reformed or Anabaptist) (Van Baalen 1922), simply mimicked Professor Ralph Janssen who first charged Hoeksema with rationalism a year or so earlier. I say mimicked, because it seems Van Baalen offered no more by way of proof of this charge than did his predecessor; in fact, any justification of the charge just seemed to be assumed at the outset. His critique of Hoeksema’s ‘rationalism,’ is confined exclusively to a discussion of common grace and Hoeksema’s denial of it and it is from this critique that his charge of rationalism subsequently flowed. Reading Van Baalen’s critique, however, one is struck by his consistent misunderstanding and misstatement of Hoeksema’s position.

6.2 A. Kuyper Jr.

The next one to charge Hoeksema with rationalism was Dr. A. Kuyper Jr. This came about when a series of articles that were originally published in *The Standard Bearer* were issued in book form under the title: *Een Kracht Gods Tot Zaligheid of Genade Geen Aanbod* (A Power of God unto Salvation or Grace No Offer) (Hoeksema 1996). Originally published in 1931, these articles comprised a lengthy debate between Herman Hoeksema in *The Standard Bearer* and a Reverend H. Keegstra in the Dutch weekly *De Wachter* (The Watchman) on the subject of common grace. When the articles were finally published as a collection they were reviewed from various quarters, one of which was published in the *Gereformeerde Kerkbode* (Reformed Church Messenger) of Rotterdam by Dr. A. Kuyper Jr. (Hoeksema 1996:54-66).

Initially, Hoeksema was elated to have an esteemed colleague from the Netherlands take such an interest in his work. He wrote that: ‘We have eagerly awaited the day when men of prominence and position in the Netherlands would let themselves be heard in regard to the issues that occupy our attention’ (Hoeksema 1996:54). This initial euphoria, however, was to be short lived. Dr. A. Kuyper’s review of *A Power of God unto Salvation* extended over the course of three installments, but by the end of the second article Hoeksema’s enthusiasm had waned substantially. ‘When I read this article (#2),’ Hoeksema lamented, ‘I was deeply disappointed. Now that the conclusion of Kuyper’s discussion of my brochure has reached me and I have read all of it, I am even more disappointed’ (Hoeksema 1996:59). He regretted his decision to publish Kuyper’s critique of his book in *The Standard Bearer*, along with his own comments because, as he said later, ‘they are not worth it’ (Hoeksema 1996:60). It seems that Hoeksema’s one

desire was that ‘finally we would actually discuss the issue’ (Hoeksema 1996:60). He was clearly not satisfied with the outcome. In fact Hoeksema’s disappointment was precipitated by some rather severe criticism on the part of Dr. A. Kuyper. Kuyper wrote concerning Hoeksema’s position on common grace:

We cannot say that we find the reasoning of Rev. Hoeksema to be logical; it appears to us to be more *rationalistic*. He builds a rationalistic system upon a Reformed foundation. ...Seemingly this reasoning of Rev. Hoeksema is logical. But this is nothing more than sham. The Germans would call it *conzequens-macherei* (sic). (quoted in Hoeksema 1996:55.)

Elsewhere in his review, Kuyper referred to Hoeksema’s reasoning as both ‘hyper-logical’ (Hoeksema 1996:59) and ‘one-sided’ (Hoeksema 1996:64). By the end of the third installment, Hoeksema’s ire was kindled; this is evident from the tone of his response. In a rather gruff manner he wrote:

Why does he [Kuyper-PB] not do justice to my reasoning and then in a manly manner answer argument with argument, instead of assuming that he can brush us aside with a few texts? No, Dr. Kuyper has done his work poorly. He does not enter into any of my arguments. He acts as if they do not exist and as if I as a rationalist had put my own reason on the foreground. Is that the way the leaders in the Netherlands deal with their opponents? (Hoeksema 1996:63.)

Hoeksema then continues:

The esteemed writer [Kuyper-PB] expresses as his opinion that my reasoning appears to be logical, but in reality is illogical. This accusation as such does not disturb me very much, although naturally I readily agree that reasoning must remain logical. But it does interest me that, if somewhere I have made myself guilty of an error in logic, I be straightened out in this regard, so that I can correct it. In other words, Dr. Kuyper should have brought the error in my logic out into the open. That he did not do. And, therefore, let him take no offense: I do not accept it. I accept absolutely nothing from any persons purely upon their authority. Therefore Dr. Kuyper will be compelled to point out my error. Otherwise I maintain that my entire reasoning is completely logical and no *conzequenze-macherei* (sic). The accusation of rationalism is more serious. Rationalism wants to exalt reason above the Scriptures. May the Lord protect me from that! But again Dr. Kuyper offers no proof. He in no way shows how I in my brochure attack the Holy Scriptures or would want to exalt my human reasoning

above its authority. It is probably not asking too much that I expect Dr. Kuyper will still prove this, or at least withdraw this last accusation. (Hoeksema 1996:58.)

Hoeksema went on to say that all he really wanted was for Dr. Kuyper to have entered into the contents of the book and analyzed it, pointing out any inconsistencies in either reasoning or argumentation along the way. He was at a loss to explain Kuyper reticence in this matter. ‘There remains but one possibility,’ concluded Hoeksema, ‘the articles of Dr. Kuyper offer to us the very best that can be offered in defense of a so-called general offer of grace. At least they offer to us the best that Dr. Kuyper can give us’ (Hoeksema 1996:60).

While the exchange with Dr. Kuyper is very interesting to read, it gives little insight as to why Kuyper would have charged Hoeksema with rationalism, and/or faulty reasoning, in the first place. Hoeksema may have worn his frustration and disgust on his sleeve as he commented on Kuyper’s last two installments, but he did not imagine the distinct lack of proof that attended much of Kuyper’s criticism. Additionally, while Hoeksema requested that proof beginning with his comments on Kuyper’s first installment, none was forthcoming. Even though Kuyper may not have provided any explanation for his charges, I think some inkling may be gleaned from another controversy several years later on which Hoeksema commented extensively.

6.3 The Clark Case

In the early 1940s the Orthodox Presbyterian Church was rocked by a dispute over the ordination of Dr Gordon H. Clark by the Presbytery of Philadelphia. In addition to a charge of rationalism, Clark was also criticized for his denial of the ‘Free Offer of the

Gospel' as well as his questioning of the prevailing view, in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, of the incomprehensibility of God (see Klooster 1951). Because of the issues involved, Hoeksema followed the course of what came to be known as 'The Clark Case' with intense interest. While I do not intend to enter into every facet of this case, I would like to discuss several aspects that are pertinent to question at hand.

The first point of contention involved the question of the incomprehensibility of God. It was alleged that Clark denied this particular facet of 'Reformed' doctrine. The opposition, led by the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary under the leadership of Cornelius van Til, asserted that God's knowledge is not just quantitatively different than man's knowledge but qualitatively different in every respect. Desiring to maintain the 'creator/creature' distinction, the opposition claimed that man's knowledge is 'analogical' to God's knowledge, but their use of the word 'analogy' is mitigated by their insistence that man's knowledge and God's knowledge do not correspond at any single point (Robbins 1986:33-34). Clark, on the other hand, understood incomprehensibility to mean that human knowledge, while not as comprehensive as God's knowledge, is still true, as far as it goes. Clark said time and again that God understands the relation of every proposition or truth to every other proposition; his knowledge is infinitely higher than that which is possible to humanity. Hoeksema, whose suspicions were aroused by the dictates of the opposition, did not miss this fact. He commented:

even now one begins to wonder whether the real question in this controversy is not whether *God*, but whether his *revelation* to us in the Scriptures, is comprehensible, that is, can be logically understood by the mind of man. Dr. Clark's position is that all Scripture is given us that we might understand it, that all of it is adapted to our human mind, so that, even though there be many things in that revelation of God which we cannot *fathom*, there is nothing in it that is *contrary* to human intelligence and logic. And the opponents appear to deny this.

...Either the *logic* of revelation is *our logic*, or there is no revelation. (Hoeksema 1995:8.)

This spirited defense of Clark's position points to Hoeksema's own views on revelation, language and logic. He believed, first and foremost, that there are no contradictions or inconsistencies in the Holy Scriptures whatsoever. Flowing naturally from this premise, Hoeksema also believed that the Scriptures were given for the express purpose of being understood, in their entirety. While there are undoubtedly difficult verses and passages, the problem is not with the language or the logic, in that regard they are perfectly capable of being understood, no, the problem is with humanity's lack of a desire to study and understand.

Clark's opposition used their conception of incomprehensibility to justify the acceptance of 'paradox,' 'contradictions' and/or 'apparent contradictions' in Scripture. In fact they demanded, as evidence of piety, that these contradictions be accepted as part and parcel of the Reformed faith. The leader of the opposition, Cornelius van Til, believed that all knowledge inevitably involved a paradox. 'Now,' declared Van Til, 'since God is not fully comprehensible to us we are bound to come into what seems to be a contradiction in all our knowledge. Our knowledge is analogical and therefore must be paradoxical' (Van Til 1967:44). Writing on this matter, Hoeksema, drawing a comparison between the events at hand and those of 1924, maintained that the whole purpose of this reasoning is:

to persuade the Orthodox Presbyterian Church to adopt the Arminian doctrine of the Christian Reformed Church as expressed by the Synod of Kalamazoo in 1924, particularly the view that God is gracious to the reprobate, and that the preaching of the Gospel is a well-meaning offer of salvation on the part of God to all men—in other words, the doctrine that God sincerely seeks the salvation of those whom He will not save—this first point is quite important. For this Christian Reformed doctrine, itself a plain contradiction, is based on the contention that there are

contradictions in Scripture, and that it is possible for faith to accept contradictions, that is, you understand, contradictions for man's mind, not for God. And in that light one can understand that the complainants must maintain the position: *A proposition does not have the same meaning for God as for man.* (Hoeksema 1995:11.)

Clark found himself afoul of the denominational leaders from Westminster Seminary precisely because he refused to accept the contradictory, and went about developing a solution. Herein, I believe, lays the basis for the charge of 'rationalism.' Hoeksema, comparing the charge against Clark to 'the language of the Christian Reformed leaders since about 1922-1924' (Hoeksema 1995:23), commented that:

The accusation of rationalism is based on the contention that Dr. Clark tries to solve problems, paradoxes, and contradictions, particularly the problem of the relation between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Anyone who makes an attempt to solve this problem, who tries to harmonize these two, who claims that this solution is possible—and especially he who is ready to offer his solution of this problem—is, according to the complainants, a rationalist. (Hoeksema 1995:22.)

As to the whole idea of contradictions in Scripture, Hoeksema writes:

As to "contradictions," I maintain that there are no such things in the revelation of God in Scripture, for the simple reason that the Scripture teaches everywhere that God is One, and that he cannot deny himself. His revelation, too, is one, and does not contradict itself. No, but the complainants would say, there are no real contradictions, but there are *apparent* contradictions in the Bible nevertheless, and them we must leave severely alone, without even making an attempt at solution. We must simply and humbly accept them. I most positively deny all this. By *apparent* contradictions the complainants mean propositions or truth that to the human mind, and according to human logic, are contradictory. I deny that there are such propositions in the Bible. If there were, they could not be the object of our faith. It is nonsense to say that we must humbly believe what is contradictory. This is simply impossible. The complainants themselves cannot believe contradictions. Contradictions are propositions that mutually exclude each other, so that the one denies the truth of the other. ...I challenge anyone to point out that there are propositions in the Bible that violate [the] fundamental principles of logic. I challenge anyone to prove that it is possible for a believer to accept such contradictions, or that it is Christian humility to claim such faith. (Hoeksema 1995:26-27.)

That the type of thinking Hoeksema attacked in the ‘Clark Case’ was also present in the Christian Reformed Church is evidenced by a bit of autobiographical material from Herman Hanko. Hanko recalled that R. B. Kuiper, Ralph Janssen’s brother-in-law and also a professor at Westminster Theological Seminary during the years of the ‘Clark Case,’ gave a graduation address entitled ‘The Balance that is Calvinism’ at his graduation from Calvin College in May 1952. ‘He was at great pains,’ Hanko recalled, ‘to demonstrate that the genius of true Calvinism was its ability to hold in proper balance doctrines that were, as far as we could tell, mutually contradictory and, therefore, mutually exclusive of each other. Such doctrines were man’s responsibility and God’s sovereignty, and the well-meaning offer of the Gospel and God’s decree of election and reprobation, etc.’ (Hanko 2000:200-201).

6.4 Conclusion

Based on the above evidence I am persuaded that Herman Heoksema was not guilty of the rationalism wherewith he was charged. On the contrary, Hoeksema followed closely in the line of Bavinck and Ten Hoor, from whom he learned so much. His method, I am convinced, was radically biblical, and thus, he was logical to a fault. That he was familiar with philosophy, I could hardly dispute. But, to charge Hoeksema with rationalism because he would not subscribe to contradictions in Scripture, apparent or otherwise, seems to me to be rather odd indeed. More than likely, I suspect, the charge was made because he refused to submit to the current thinking on common grace. Rationalism was just the most convenient brush with which to tar him. Hence, I am

convinced that those who would level the charge of 'rationalism' or 'rationalist' are themselves confusing rationalism with rationality.