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Chapter 9

Point Three: The Development of Culture

Relative to the third point which is concerned with the question of *civil righteousness as performed by the unregenerate*, synod declares that, according to Scripture and the Confessions, the unregenerate, though incapable of doing saving good, can do civil good. This is evident from the quotations from Scripture and from the Canons of Dordrecht, III, IV, 4, and the Netherlands Confession Art. 36, which teach that God without renewing the heart so influences man, that he is able to perform civil good; while it also appears from the citations from Reformed writers of the most flourishing period of Reformed Theology, that our Reformed Fathers from ancient times were of the same opinion.

In this chapter we will investigate the Third Point of Common Grace as adopted by the synod of the Christian Reformed Church in 1924. This point states emphatically that unregenerate humanity is able to do good works, more specifically civic good, and that this is possible because of the direct influence of God. The point also states that any good that a person may do because of this specific work of God, while of civic good, which has been understood as cultural good as well, is not of saving good. That is to say, that while these works may be of merit in this world, they are not of merit in the next.

Hoeksema denied the truth of this point as well as of the other two. His reason primarily was that this point as well as its predecessor denied the Reformed truth of total depravity. In doing so it also denied the truth of the antithesis. Many of the same arguments used against point two are used against point three as well since both points speak of a non-saving work of God in the unbeliever. I have tried not to overlap the

arguments, but to keep each to the point against which they were made. There will nevertheless be some overlap in concepts, it was simply unavoidable.

In the next few pages we will be looking at the concept of culture and whether, from Hoeksema's perspective, this is possible at all. In analyzing the teaching of this point and Hoeksema's response to it, I will also be presenting a positive statement of Hoeksema's teaching on the antithesis, total depravity, and organic development. This is not to say that everything I write in this chapter will be positive. Not everything Hoeksema had to say on these matters was positive. But I do hope to present a faithful representation of Hoeksema's thoughts on these matters and to show in the process that Hoeksema's position was not just a reactionary one as De Jong believed, but rather a well thought out statement of what he believed to be the truth of the matter.

Some may lament the lack of references to Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck. My purpose in analyzing this point, although the thinking of Kuyper and Bavinck looms large in the background, is simply to deal with the third point as framed by the Synod of 1924 and, hence, as Hoeksema encountered it.

9.1 Synod's Confessional Proof

As proof for their decision in adopting this point, synod referred to article 36 of the *Belgic Confession* and the *Canons of Dordrecht*, III and IV, 4. Article 36 of the *Belgic Confession* was given as proof for the second point as well. This article says: 'We believe that our gracious God, because of the depravity of mankind, hath appointed kings, princes, and magistrates, willing that the world should be governed by certain laws and

policies; to the end that the dissoluteness of men might be restrained, and all things carried on among them with good order and decency' (Schaff 1985:432). This article, as Hoeksema seeks to demonstrate, proves the opposite of what the synod adduced from it in the third point. Article 36 article proceeds from the assumption of the 'depravity of mankind' and the need for external restraint (the magistrate with the sword) to curb that depravity. But Hoeksema concludes, 'If the declaration of synod were true, that an influence of God urges the natural man to do good, the police might be abolished. But since that declaration is untrue the sword-power is peremptory in society' (Hoeksema 1942:24).

The confessional basis for point three also seems a bit confusing. The *Acts of Synod* for 1924 in one place lists the confessional proof for the third point as being the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine, article 4 (*Acta der Synode* 1924:132), and in another place is added another article from the same Heads of Doctrine (*Acta der Synode* 1924:146). Article 3 from the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine reads: 'Therefore all men are conceived in sin, and are by nature children of wrath, incapable of any 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 dispose themselves to reformation' (Schaff 1985:588). Since this article from Dort does not appear as a proof in the final version of the Three Points of Common Grace, Hoeksema did not comment on it in regard to its usage here. But I have enlisted Hoeksema's son, Homer Hoeksema, in order to ascertain what this article from Dort would have meant to Hoeksema. Homer Hoeksema's comments run approximately four pages, concentrating on total depravity and the need for the

regenerating grace of God. He ends by saying: ‘Only through the grace of regeneration can he be delivered from his corruption. This leaves him in the hand of God: for the grace of regeneration is of the Holy Spirit. That grace is the indispensable prerequisite of all correction of a depraved nature and of any disposition to such correction’ (Hoeksema 1980:451). Herman Hoeksema was a bit more ruffled by synod’s use of article 4 of the *Canons of Dort*, Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine, because, in so doing, they quote only the first half of the article. From the Acts of Synod for 1924, this article is quoted as follows: ‘There is, to be sure, a certain light of nature remaining in man after the fall, by virtue of which he retains some notions about God, natural things, and the difference between what is moral and immoral, and demonstrates a certain eagerness for virtue and good behavior’ (*Acta der Synode* 1924:132). The second part of article 4 of the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine, the part which the Synod of 1924 omitted, reads: ‘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 farther, this light, such as it is, man in various ways renders wholly polluted, and holds it [back] in unrighteousness; by doing which he becomes inexcusable before God’ (Schaff 1985:588). Hoeksema considered synod guilty of deceptive practices in the framing of the Third Point of Common Grace because of its misuse of the confessions. He wrote that synod’s use of this article 4 from the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine was ‘very deceiving, because it contains only half of the article to which it refers, a fact which is all the more deplorable because the second half of the same article makes it evident that synod by its partial quotation is corrupting its meaning and changing it into the very opposite from what it actually teaches’ (Hoeksema 1942:24).

It is interesting to note in this connection that James Daane in his book on common grace uses article 4 of the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine in the very same manner as the Synod of 1924, quoting only the first part of the article, in the course of his discussion of the ‘Restraint of Sin and Civic Righteousness’ (Daane 1954:88). In a further attempt to bolster his case for the production of ‘civic righteousness’ by the unregenerate, Daane cites ‘the traditional manner in which Reformed theology accounted for this difference between total and absolute depravity was by reference to a general, gracious operation of the Holy Spirit upon unregenerate human hearts’ (Daane 1954:88). Nowhere does Danne offer any proof for this assertion, he just assumes its truth. However, as I shown before, Harry Boer strongly disagrees; believing instead that any attempt to distinguish between ‘total depravity’ and an ‘absolute depravity...is inherently impossible’ (Boer 1990:62).

9.2 Culture

The civic righteousness that both the third point of common grace and James Daane make reference to can also be referred to under the title of ‘culture.’ Hoeksema does this in his small book *The Christian and Culture*, as does Henry van Til in his persuasive work *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture* and more recently Richard Mouw in his book, which was based on the Stob Lectures delivered in 2000 on the campus of Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary, entitled *He Shines in all that’s Fair: Culture and Common Grace*. All these men are keenly aware of the inherent difficulty in defining the word ‘culture.’ Additionally, David Engelsma of the Protestant Reformed

Churches, in his response to Mouw's offering, has much to say on this matter as well. The allusiveness that attaches to this concept seems to be felt by all who attempt to write on it. The term itself, Engelsma writes, is both 'ambiguous' and 'unhelpful' (Engelsma 2003:53). By contrast, Henry van Til expends a great deal of space attempting to give satisfactory definition to the word 'culture.' He understands the concept 'culture' as conceived by some as too narrow and by others as too broad (Van Til 1959:25-35). In chapter two he says that 'religion cannot be subsumed under culture' (Van Til 1959:25), and in chapter three commenting on the chief end of man as outlined in the Westminster Confession of Faith, Van Til writes: 'This service cannot be expressed except through man's cultural activity, which gives expression to his religious faith' (Van Til 1959:37). On the same page Van Til quotes Paul Tillich with approval when the latter states that 'Religion is the substance of culture and culture the form of religion' (Van Til 1959:37). Later, quoting Emil Brunner, Van Til admits that 'The meaning of life does not lie in culture as such, but culture derives its meaning from man's faith in God; it is never an end in itself, but always a means of expressing one's religious faith' (Van Til 1959:28), hence, 'religion and culture are inseparable. Every culture is animated by religion' (Van Til 1959:44).

Van Til is very helpful when he comments on the etymology of the word 'culture.' Deriving from the Latin '*colere*,' it originally signified 'the tilling or cultivation of the ground. This is the idea of Scripture when we read that God placed Adam in the garden to "dress" it' (Van Til 1959:29). However, 'today,' writes Van Til, 'we use the word "culture" of any human labor bestowed on God's creation in the widest sense...by which it receives historical forms and is refined to a higher level of productivity for the

enjoyment of man' (Van Til 1959:29). With a measure of finality, Van Til finally says that culture 'is any and all human effort and labor expended upon the cosmos, to unearth its treasures and its riches and bring them into the service of man for the enrichment of human existence unto the glory of God' (Van Til 1959:29-30).

Hoeksema is in agreement with Van Til on the etymology of the word, but insists that since the eighteenth-century it has acquired a much wider meaning (Hoeksema 1946:5). On this wider meaning Hoeksema writes:

The whole man, with all his powers and in all his relationships, belabors the whole kosmos. He works upon it with his mind and discovers its laws and relations, its motion and force, its hidden laws and treasures, and the culture of the natural sciences is the result, biology and physics, astronomy and chemistry, etc. He exerts his physical power and mental ingenuity upon the world, to subdue it and to press it into his service, in agriculture and mining, in navigation and aeronautics, in all the various modern industries and inventions. He cleaves the depth of the sea and soars through the height of the heavens, he chains the very lightening and rides on it; he knows how to swallow up distance and speaks to his neighbor a thousand miles away. All these belong to modern culture in the comprehensive sense of the term. Then, too, he discovers the laws of harmony and beauty, and gives expression to it in the culture of fine arts; on the canvas and in the symphony, in sculpture and architecture he reproduces what his soul perceives and experiences of the beautiful in the world about him. And the same attention he devotes to himself. He examines his own physical organism, discovers its laws of operation, and finds the causes of disease and death; and then sets himself the task to develop the powers and the form of that organism in physical culture, athletics and sports of various sorts; and to fight sickness and pain, corruption and death by the culture of the medical and surgical sciences and arts. He investigates the workings of his own soul, his sensations and perceptions, his imaginations and reason, his emotions and aesthetic feelings, and devotes himself to psychic culture, the development of the intellect and will, and the building of moral character. And he studies the various relationships in human life, in the home in the school, in society and in the state, and develops the sciences of eugenics, pedagogy, sociology, economics and politics, in order to set himself the task of improving and perfecting all these relations between individuals, groups and nations. All these, and the products of these efforts must be regarded as belonging to what is known as modern culture. (Hoeksema 1946:6-7.)

But, according to Hoeksema, rather than simply investigating the things of the world and subduing them to its use, humanity is driven to aim higher still; humanity is looking for perfection (Hoeksema 1946:7). Recounting the belief of the ancient Greeks ‘of the beautiful soul in the beautiful body as the aim of human culture’ (Hoeksema 1946:7), Hoeksema writes:

And so modern culture, whether it is always conscious of this ultimate aim or not, cannot rest satisfied until it has attained to the perfect soul of the perfect body, the perfect man in the perfect society, in which all strife and disruption, war and unrest is found no more, from which suffering and even death are banished; and the perfect society in the perfect world, in which everything is subjected to man and serves him as its lord and sovereign! Such is the inevitable urge and purpose of modern culture! (Hoeksema 1946:7.)

Van Til brings up this same striving for perfection in connection with the views of Matthew Arnold, but believes that ‘with respect to culture, which indeed seeks perfection in the sense of fulfillment, Arnold is too naïve when he speaks of sweetness and light. For culture is not the opposite of depravity’ (Van Til 1959:25-26). Hoeksema refers to this ‘striving’ in man as a ‘cultural urge,’ or ‘cultural mandate’ from which man can never rid himself (Hoeksema 1946:9). Van Til sees the same effects of this ‘cultural urge’ or ‘cultural mandate,’ ‘as man strives to be master of the world, ruler of all that he surveys, king of the universe; he would be lord and sovereign over all that exists under the sun’ (Van Til 1959:34).

9.3 The Cultural Aspirations of Humanity

If Van Til is correct when he concluded that culture is derived from, even an expression of one’s faith (Van Til 1959:28), then humanity’s ‘urge’ to subdue everything

to itself as lord and sovereign makes humanity the object of their own faith. Humanity, it seems, wants nothing less than to be God. It would seem to me that this desire on the part of humanity, if indeed anything, is the result of total depravity. But how, then, can Van Til speak in such positive terms of culture deriving from this sort of faith? Maybe, Van Til is speaking of Christians, the elect, developing culture. He does not speak with any particular approval of the cultural activities of the Medieval Roman Catholic Church (Van Til 1959:15-19). He does not mention the fact that government offices in a good many European countries are referred to as ‘ministries,’ reflecting a time when Christian ideas permeated the institutions of society. But, we are really not talking about Christian cultural activities, but the cultural activities that naturally flow from one’s faith.

Hoeksema succinctly dissects the civic righteousness or cultural aspirations of the ‘natural man’ as they flow from naturally from his faith. In a book originally published prior to the events of 1924 entitled *Langs Zuivere Banen (Along Straight Paths)*, Hoeksema writes:

And what, then, is civil righteousness? According to our view, the natural man discerns the relationships, laws, rules of life and fellowship, etc., as they are ordained by God. He sees their propriety and utility. And he adapts himself to them for his own sake. If in this attempt he succeeds the result is an act that shows an outward and formal resemblance to the laws of God. Then we have civil righteousness, a regard for virtue and external deportment. And if this attempt fails, as is frequently the case, civil righteousness disappears and the result is exactly the opposite. His fundamental error, however, is that he does not seek after God, nor aim at Him and His glory, even in this regard for virtue and external deportment. On the contrary, he seeks himself, both individually and in fellowship with other sinners and with the whole world, and it is his purpose to maintain himself even in his sin over against God. And this is sin. And in reality his work also has evil effects upon himself and his fellow creatures. For, his actions with relation to men and fellow creatures are performed according to the same rule and with similar results. And thus it happens, that sin develops constantly and corruption increases, while still there remains a formal adaptation to the laws ordained of God for the present life. Yet the natural man never attains to any ethical good. That is our view. (Hoeksema 1942:75-76.)

There is another component to the cultural activities of the unregenerate that, according to Hoeksema, no one seems to be taking into account. This has to do with the curse that God placed upon Adam and Eve before their expulsion from the garden. Hoeksema admonishes us that, we must, in any discussion of culture, take account of the effects of this curse. He writes:

The possibility of “culture” is frequently deduced from paradise and the original state of righteousness and perfection, as if the terrible fact of the curse upon creation and of death, even in the natural, physical sense of the word, need not enter into the discussion. This, however, is a fundamental error. The ground is cursed, and the creature is in the bondage of corruption and made subject to vanity. The result is that creation gets nowhere. Vanity of vanities, all is vanity, saith the preacher. (Hoeksema 1946:10.)

Hoeksema’s stance with respect to culture and its development is not a popular position. But French Reformed theologian Jacques Ellul seems to be in agreement when he writes that ‘we are forced to assert that beneath all this apparent movement, and apparent development, actually we are not moving at all. It is true, of course, that there is great deal of disorder and violence, that there is progress in technics, that there are social and political experiences, but in reality our world is standing still’ (Ellul 1967:33).

While it is possible for humanity to discover some of God’s laws, as was previously said, and based upon these discoveries to come up with new advances in medicine and technology that are of benefit, according to Hoeksema it is still vanity. These inventions may indeed be considered good gifts of God, but they are ‘slippery places’ to the unregenerate. This concept of ‘slippery places’ quoted throughout Hoeksema’s writings, comes from Psalm 73, in which the good gifts of God are for the purpose of making the way to destruction for the unregenerate sure. The gifts God gives are always and truly good even though the recipient is not. Additionally, good gifts are

given to the regenerate and unregenerate alike; to the regenerate for their good, to the reprobate to further their condemnation. Regarding good gifts and their purpose for the reprobate Hoeksema writes:

And while God in his providence and by the Word of His power sustains his nature as man, and sustains his relation to the universe, thus providing him with means to develop and realize his life in the organism of all things, with these things man is always the sinner, the ungodly, the object of the wrath of God, gathering for himself treasures of wrath in the day of final judgment. (Hoeksema 1947:315.)

But what about the more noble and higher aspirations of humanity; those closer to God, if you will? Hoeksema posits a hierarchy or taxonomy on what are considered the components of culture. Technology and the mathematical sciences are relegated to the periphery because ‘the spiritual-ethical attitude of man hardly comes to expression in them’ (Hoeksema 1946:11). However, Hoeksema teaches, ‘the closer we approach to those branches and departments of modern culture in which man’s ethical nature finds its expression, the more it becomes evident that modern culture is corrupt’ (Hoeksema 1946:11-12). It is at this point that Hoeksema takes issue with Abraham Kuyper, whom he believes made art, because of common grace, central to his world of cultural pursuits.

Kuyper writes:

But if you confess that the world once *was* beautiful, but by the curse has become *undone*, and by a final catastrophe is to pass to its full state of glory, excelling even the beautiful of paradise, then art has the mystical task of reminding us in its productions of the beautiful that was lost and of anticipating its perfect coming luster. Now this last-mentioned instance is the Calvinistic confession. It realized, more clearly than Rome, the hideous, corrupting influences of sin; this led to a higher estimation of the nature of paradise in the beauty of original righteousness; and guided by this enchanting remembrance, Calvinism prophesied a redemption of outward nature also, to be realized in the reign of celestial glory. From this standpoint, Calvinism honored art as a gift of the Holy Ghost and as a consolidation in our present life, enabling us to discover in and behind this sinful life a richer and more glorious background. Standing by the ruins of this once so wonderfully beautiful creation, art points out to the Calvinist both the still visible

lines of the original plan, and what is even more, the splendid restoration by which the Supreme Artist and Master-Builder will one day renew and enhance even the beauty of His original creation. (Kuyper 1987:155.)

Van Til believes that art is the object of a ‘sensitivity in the natural man’s cultural striving, a sense of deity, even a yearning for the things of the spirit’ (Van Til 1959:33). And furthermore, because of this yearning for the things of the spirit, natural man ‘longs for truth, beauty, and goodness and expresses this longing in music, poetry, painting, and gives expression to his spiritual aspirations by building cathedrals, mosques, or pagodas’ (Van Til 1959:33). Responding specifically to Kuyper’s words above, but in words equally critical of Van Til, Hoeksema writes:

Flighty words and high sounding phrases I consider these words of Dr. Kuyper’s, that are rather the expression of unrestrained imagination than historical truth and sober thought. It is quite impossible for the artist to reconstruct the original world of perfection. What painter, for instance, could ever produce a picture of man in his first state, without sin and suffering and death, in righteousness, holiness and truth, with his original power and royal majesty in the midst of creation? The little halo that is painted around the head of some saints in old paintings is a confession of the artist’s incompetence to produce on his canvas a true representation of a righteous man. Neither original righteousness nor regeneration and its life of perfection can be put on the canvas. And the perfect world that is to come can so little be construed by art that even Scripture always speaks of that world in earthly terms. It belongs to those things which “eye hath not seen, ear has not heard, and never arose in the heart of man.” And what is true of art is true of science and of culture in general. It must needs move within the scope of the vicious circle of corruption and death, of the curse and vanity. Culture cannot make the perfect man, not build the perfect world. (Hoeksema 1946:13.)

9.4 General Revelation

Even so, for Hoeksema, the ungodly never learn anything of God in the gifts He gives to them. While Hoeksema never really developed his ideas on what is commonly called ‘general revelation,’ he saw the concept as it stood in need of work. The Christian

Reformed Church has of late taken the step of making an understanding of general revelation dependent upon common grace (Committee on Creation and Science 1988:7-9). They are of the opinion that ‘if God reveals himself in nature, then this means that we know him in our experience of nature’ (Committee on Creation and Science 1988:9). This report further concludes that we must ‘think of general revelation as the manifestation of God’s wisdom in the world and of science as the discovery of that wisdom’ (Committee on Creation and Science 1988:9). In the thinking of the Christian Reformed Church, it seems that science has taken a major role in the development of culture. In fact, it could be said that culture in general at the beginning of the twenty-first century is increasingly defined by science in all quarters. This was the thesis of French Reformed theologian and law professor, Jacques Ellul, forty years ago in *The Technological Society* (Ellul 1964); a book as radical in its day as it is strangely prophetic in ours.

In Hoeksema’s estimation, for general revelation, or rather the revelation of God as revealed in nature, to be understood humanity would have to have retained the image of God, which, for Hoeksema, they did not. Since he denied common grace, Hoeksema also reconsidered what was available to the understanding of humanity in the creation. In his *Dogmatics* he concluded:

We are accustomed to distinguish two forms of revelation, a “general” revelation in “nature,” and a “special” revelation in Scripture. And frequently these two forms of revelation are presented as if they were two wholly different revelations, not only distinct, but separated from each other. The one is adapted to reason as its subjective principle of knowledge, the other to faith. The one is a revelation of God to man in general, the other to His people in Christ. The one provides man with the necessary material for the structure of a “natural theology;” the other is the source of Christian dogmatics. But this is plainly erroneous. It speaks about general revelation, natural theology, and natural religion as if the original condition of the first paradise still existed. And it completely fails to take into

account the important change that was brought about in his “general revelation” through the fall of man and the curse of God. Yet, on the one hand, through this fall the recipient of God’s revelation was so changed and corrupted that he can no longer truly hear the Word of God. For he lost the image of God, and all his light was changed into darkness. And although the light still shines in the darkness, the darkness comprehendeth it not. But, on the other hand, it dare not be overlooked that also the medium of revelation, the speech of God through the things that are made, is changed. For the creature is made to bear the curse of God and is subjected to vanity; and man himself pines and dies through the fierce wrath of God upon him. (Hoeksema 1966:41-42.)

What Hoeksema is saying, essentially, is that at the point of the fall the lights went out in creation. Prior to this Adam named the animals according to their essence, which he could clearly see in each of them. Now humanity stumbles about in darkness, never really knowing what things mean. There is only one recipient of God’s revelation and that is ‘the new man in Christ Jesus. In His light do we see the light’ (Hoeksema 1966:42). In an unpublished paper on Romans chapter one, Herman Hanko quotes a letter from his father Cornelius Hanko who probably knew Herman Hoeksema better than anyone, at least he knew him longer than anyone. In the letter the elder Hanko lends some interesting insight into Hoeksema’s understanding of general revelation, he writes:

I recall that in H.H.’s notes on Genesis, he makes a point of it that God saw the light, that it was good. He spoke of the fact that light “carries” the object into our vision and thus to our minds. I often tell the catechumens that when we speak of ἀποκάλυψις, this implies an object that is capable of “seeing” receiving the revelation. Just as a beam of light hits an object and thus becomes light for us, so God’s revelation finds its object in our souls. We reflect the light. And just as our natural eyes see what the light reveals, so our spiritual eyes see what God reveals. Manifestation is something quite different. Seeing they see but believe not; hearing they hear but perceive not. God manifests His power and divinity to the wicked. They know it; can never escape it, but suppress that knowledge in unbelief and unrighteousness. Herein the wrath of God is revealed to God’s people, who have eyes to see even that in paganism. An idolater bowing before his idol is a revelation to us of the wrath of God. An evolutionist is no less a revelation of that wrath. ...And thus even in the pagan it becomes evident that before God no flesh is justified, but that justification is only by faith through the Spirit in our hearts. I think that is the point H.H. tried to make in his repeated references to Romans 1 in school. (Hanko [s.a.]: viii.)

This paragraph from Cornelius Hanko identifies the only knowledge of God available to humanity in general as ‘manifestation’ as oppose to ‘revelation.’ The difference, from my perspective, is that revelation is the communication of a father to his children in a language understood by both, while manifestation, lacking any emotional or endearing quality, is simply an in-your-face proclamation or announcement which may or may not be comprehended. Hanko is explicit in that God manifests both His power and divinity to the wicked. Hoeksema says the same in numerous places. It is this manifestation that leaves the reprobate without excuse, as Hanko understands Romans 1 to say. In other places Hoeksema denies any knowledge at all to the reprobate. This may seem like a contradiction, and maybe some will see it that way, but having read Hoeksema at length I think he is just saying the same thing as Cornelius Hanko. On this matter of knowledge to the reprobate, Herman Hanko writes: ‘Hence, they have no subjective knowledge of God at all. Not because God does not give it to them. But because they hate it. There is therefore, no “revelation.” There is constant manifestation, but no revelation of God. Revelation always presupposes a person who can see it, understand it, appropriate it and come, through it to a knowledge of God. This they do not have’ (Hanko [s.a.]:x.). This knowledge, according to Hanko, is not saving knowledge, simply because it is not meant to save. Neither is it a knowledge that puts the unbeliever on some higher spiritual plane simply for having it, as the purveyors of point one of common grace would have it. It is knowledge that is suppressed. But, is this knowledge suppressed consciously? Hanko concludes that:

The point is therefore, that the wicked refuse to keep this manifestation of God even in their consciousness. They not only reject it, they will not even allow it to come before their mind’s eye. They drive it out. They bury it beneath the level of

their thinking. They will not admit they possess it. In fact, they will not even admit this to themselves. They refuse it room within their consciousness continuously so that it never appears there. This is their awful sin. Not for a moment will they tolerate any thought of God whatsoever. This does not deny that it is there. God sees to it that it is. But they bury it continuously and drive it from them whenever they come face to face with it. (Hanko [s.a.]:x.)

I see the knowledge available to the unbeliever as knowledge that is never really known. It is knowledge, according to Hanko and I think Hoeksema as well, that is not even consciously acknowledged. Because of the totally depraved nature of the unbeliever any knowledge of God in general revelation is automatically and unconsciously suppressed or rejected. It is a natural or involuntary reflex stemming from the depraved nature of the unbelievers mind to do this. Like breathing, it is a simple unconscious reaction. It is also, in this regard, an organic reaction that occurs naturally along the lines of the antithesis. I am convinced by what I have read of Hoeksema that this was indeed his position, although he probably would have phrased it differently.

9.5 Anabaptism and the Antithesis

Because of his distinctive and unpopular position on common grace, Hoeksema and those who stood by him were given the label ‘Anabaptists.’ Right after the expulsion of Professor Janssen from the Christian Reformed Church, Jan Karel van Baalen, Christian Reformed minister in Munster, Indiana entered the fray to take up Janssen’s cause. In his 1922 book *‘De Loochening der Gemeene Gratie: Gereformeerd of Doopersch’* (*The Denial of Common Grace: Reformed or Anabaptist*), Van Baalen argues that the struggle for and against common grace is ‘de strijd tusschen Calvinisme en Anabaptisme’ (the struggle between Calvinism and Anabaptism) (Van Baalen 1922:9). In

so doing he gave Hoeksema a label that has outlived its subject. The Protestant Reformed Churches to this day bear the same stigma. Between his 1922 book and another that followed in 1923 entitled 'Nieuwigheid en Dwaling' (Innovation and Error), Van Baalen did no more than repeat his original charge. Taking the two books together, his argument is simply that we need common grace in order to make the world, culture if you will, both accessible and relevant to the Christian. Christians need the non-Christians and vice versa and common grace is the only thing that gives legitimacy to any cooperative effort, which there must be if the church is to have a world view and, in turn, communicate this world view to the unregenerate and gain adherents. By contrast, according to Van Baalen, Hoeksema's denial of common grace drove a sharp distinction between the church and the world that did not belong. What Hoeksema was really advocating was world-flight; withdrawal from a depraved and sinful world where only sin reigned and in which the believer could therefore have no positive effect.

Much of what Van Baalen said was true. Hoeksema did indeed believe that the world was a place where sin reigned and the curse had controlling interest. Hoeksema also believed that the regenerate and the unregenerate had little to nothing in common. This lack of commonality was inherent in the organism of the race as a whole because of the 'antithesis.' The antithesis was, in the providence of God, a line of demarcation separating the human race into the elect and reprobate. Harry Boer is of the opinion that it was predestination that split the race into elect and reprobate (Boer 1990:161). In a sense, Boer is right. It is God, in His decree that determines the eternal disposition of each individual that comprise the human race. But it was this predestinating activity of God in eternity that found expression in time in the antithesis. As we have seen before, the

‘moederbelofte,’ mother promise given in Genesis 3:15 put enmity between the seed of the serpent and the seed of the woman (Hoeksema 1966:260). This early promise of redemption constitutes the creation of the antithesis. The antithesis is the complete disjunction between the elect part of the race and the reprobate part. The disjunction begins in Genesis 3:15 and continues along spiritual/ethical lines. Hoeksema also sees this separate development as organic development as well. The elect remnant develops along the lines of the covenant in history ‘with believers and their children, in their generations (Hoeksema 1981:8). Hence, in Genesis 3:15, ‘by the seed of the woman is meant,’ Hoeksema concludes: ‘The spiritual children of the covenant, the holy seed in the line of the generation of the elect. In the highest sense it is Christ, the Son of Mary, David, Judah, Israel, Abraham, Shem, Noah, Seth, Adam, born of a virgin without the will of man. And the positive meaning of the enmity against Satan which is here announced by God is the covenant fellowship of the Most High’ (Hoeksema 1966:261). The reprobate also develop along organic lines, according to Hoeksema, lines which reflect their enmity with God, that is, along the lines of sin (Hoeksema 1966:260-261).

This organic development of sin, as a component part of the antithesis, depends for its outworking on the connectedness of the human race. This connectedness of the race, for Hoeksema, is found in its organic head, Adam. In fact, Adam’s relation to the race in a corporate sense is three-fold:

(first) he was the first father, the bearer of the entire human nature, so that organically the entire human race was in him; secondly, he was the head of all mankind, so that he legally represented them; and finally, he was the root of the race, so that, figuratively speaking, all nations, tribes, families, and individuals are branches of the tree of which Adam is the root. (Hoeksema 1966:223.)

Hoeksema is at pains to point out that the historic confessions of the church emphasize the ‘organic rather than the legal relation of Adam to his posterity’ (Hoeksema 1966:223), as it is on this organic relation that the legal relation rests (Hanko 2000:240).

The organic nature of the race, for Hoeksema is divided along the lines of election and reprobation. As Hoeksema explains it, the significance of this is that

(God) created a church from the beginning of the world organically, that is, within the organism of the human race, which, of course, included the reprobate element of humanity. ...That this reprobate shell in time lives under God’s providence in natural organic relationship, as chaff with the grain, with the elect organism. Elect and reprobate are in a natural, organic sense of the word temporarily one. The reprobate shell serves the organism of the elect, of the church. The two are separated along the line of election and reprobation by an ever-continuing process, and in the end of the world the organism of the elect church will be finally and completely separated from the reprobate shell. ...According to our conception, God from eternity proposed to create a church in Christ. That church was created in the loins of Adam organically, together with the reprobate shell of the human race. And in the line of election and reprobation God separates the pith from the shell and brings His elect church to glory. Nothing is lost. Sin and Satan must simply serve the purpose of realizing the church of Christ. (Hoeksema 1966:574-575.)

Elsewhere, Hoeksema, in the book he co-authored with Henry Danhof in 1923, describes this organic development along the lines of election and reprobation, of sin and grace, as the ‘antithesis.’ Speaking first of grace, Hoeksema wrote that,

This is the positive line. With an eternal, unchangeable purpose of irresistible love in Christ His Beloved, and through His work of reconciliation and reunion by the Holy Spirit of regeneration and qualification, He turns to His elect people. He brings that people to faith in Christ, makes them worthy of suffering for Christ, and allows them to experience in Christ the covenant of His friendship. The end-result is that the tabernacle of God is with men, and God shows forth gloriously in Zion in the perfection of beauty. The grace of God has triumphed. But parallel to that runs the negative line. At the same time and in the same manner as the work of God’s elective love that delivers, saves, and exalts to a fellowship of friendship, there is a separating, banishing, rejecting, humiliating action of God’s aversion, hate, wrath, anger, and great displeasure in regard to the non-elect, along the line of reprobation. This also takes place according to the immutability of God’s will. ...Emphasis must be laid upon the twofold operation of God’s will: from the will of God’s eternal good pleasure proceeds the operation of love,

election, saving grace; but also the operation of hate, rejection, wretchedness, banishment. Scripture speaks of life and death, of blessing and curse, of light and darkness, struggle, victory, rest, salvation, and the joy of the Lord, but also of increase in unrighteousness, hardening in that which is evil, perishing, condemnation, suffering, and everlasting fire. Living out of the principles of sin and grace, humanity is divided into friendship and enmity toward God and toward one another. The development of all things takes place along antithetical lines. (Danhof & Hoeksema [1923] 2003:169-170.)

Hence, as Hanko says, ‘the line of reprobation is the line of the organic development of sin’ (Hanko 2000:252). Hanko further relates this organic development of sin to both the cultural mandate depicted in Genesis and the sovereignty of God in the outworking of His counsel. In a well written passage, Hanko develops this theme of the organic development of sin thoroughly.

The human race itself develops, It develops socially, economically, politically, culturally. All this development is, however, in connection with the carrying out of the cultural mandate. God gave His command to Adam as king to subdue the earth. After the fall, man continued to perform that original cultural mandate. But he did so totally in the service of sin rather than in the service of God. The result is that sin develops as the cultural mandate is carried out and man subdues the earth. He invents many wonderful inventions and puts more and more of the marvelous powers of the creation to use so that they can be subordinate to his purposes and serve his goals. And so sin manifests itself in more and more ways. All is used to demonstrate fully and completely man’s disobedience of God’s commands. Adam could not sin with television; modern twenty-first century man can and does. Cain could not sin with an automobile; today’s generation can. Nimrod could not sin with an atomic bomb; America does. God wills that throughout history all the powers which He has put within the creation are uncovered by man and subjected to man’s nefarious and God-dishonoring purpose. When the creation is completely subdued, then men will have sinned as much as it is possible to sin and will have expressed the root sin of disobedience in every possible way. ...This one root sin develops in such a way, therefore, that each generation builds upon the generation that precedes it, both by making use of past inventions and perfecting them, but also by different ways in which to use them to sin. And as new inventions are added to the list, they are incorporated into the life of the human race and become part and parcel of the cultural life of mankind. Through it all, God’s purpose is accomplished. It is in the way of this organic development of sin, although under the sovereign control and direction of God’s providence, that man becomes ripe for judgment. He shows in all his life that he will do nothing but sin—even when God gives him such great gifts as are to be found in the creation. The greater the gifts, the more man sins and the more

terrible do his sins become. ...Hence, in this sense, there is “organic” development of sin because it takes place along with and is inseparable from that organic development of the world of reprobate men. (Hanko 2000:254-255.)

There is, however, no common grace here either. This development is again another example of the unfolding of God’s providence in history. As David Engelsma explains:

The power of providence is directed by the counsel of providence, which is the wise plan of God decreeing that and how all things will glorify Him in the day of Jesus Christ. The power of grace originates in and is controlled by the counsel of predestination, which purposes the salvation of the elect church (Eph. 1:3-12). The power of providence is all-comprehensive, extending to devils as well as to angels and including the wicked deeds of the reprobate as well as the good works of the elect. The power of grace is particular, extending exclusively to the elect church in Jesus Christ. Providence serves grace. God’s upholding and governing of all things accomplish the spiritual and eternal good of the elect believers. ...but providence *is not* grace. (Engelsma 2003:59.)

9.6 Was Van Baalen Correct?

Having discussed Hoeksema’s ideas on organic development, as relating to both election and reprobation, which, in turn, determined his view of the antithesis, I think the following question is in order. Was Jan Karel van Baalen correct in branding Hoeksema an ‘Anabaptist,’ one who was guilty of world flight?

Some believe that when used of Hoeksema and those, who, with him, were embroiled in the events of 1924, Anabaptist is nothing but a term of opprobrium. As Engelsma observes, it is often the case that when one denies common grace ‘the defenders of common grace make him out to be an anti-cultural barbarian or, what seemingly is worse, an Anabaptist’ (Engelsma 2003:54). I believe Engelsma is correct here. Hoeksema always, in all his works, portrays the Christian as one who is in the world but not of it, as a pilgrim and sojourner here, whose affections are set on heavenly

things. I do not see this as Anabaptism. Nowhere, for example, does Hoeksema spurn governmental authority, which was so characteristic of Anabaptism (Troeltsch 1986:36). Ernst Troeltsch sees Anabaptists as guilty of a ‘wholly individualistic, subjectivistic Spiritualism’ (Troeltsch 1986:36). For all the epithets that have been hurled at Hoeksema, no one has ever accused him of holding a subjective spiritualism. If anything, because of his insistence of the use of logic and reason in theological construction, his error would be in the opposite direction. But what about other possible similarities? In his recent book on common grace, Richard Mouw provides an answer to this as well as uncovering a pertinent piece of history surrounding Van Baalen’s use of the Anabaptist epithet. He writes:

As the Christian Reformed pastor-theologian Leonard Verduin has argued in a number of writings, it is no accident that Anabaptist-type themes keep making their presence known within the Calvinist community. They are not alien thoughts that keep forcing their way from the outside; they emerge from home-grown convictions. Calvin Seminary professor William Heyns made a similar point—albeit without Verduin’s Anabaptist sympathies—in a 1922 letter to Christian Reformed minister J. K. Van Baalen, who had just written a rather inflammatory pamphlet depicting Hoeksema and his associates as Anabaptists. Heyns endorsed the general thrust of Van Baalen’s critique, but he chided him for his rhetoric, instructing Van Baalen that he “would have done better to leave out that epithet ‘Anabaptist,’ which here can serve only as a scornful word.” Surely, Heyns wrote, Van Baalen was not ignorant of the fact “that all of the same things” he found in Hoeksema’s thinking could “also be said of the old theologians of Reformed scholasticism.” (Mouw 2001:23.)

9.7 Christ against Culture

‘Professor Henri Bergson has described religion,’ writes H. Richard Niebuhr, ‘as “the crystallization, brought about by a scientific process of cooling, of what mysticism had poured, while hot, into the soul of man”’ (Niebuhr 1988:1656). Professor Niebuhr

goes on to say that this quote from Bergson ‘is subject to many criticisms’ (Niebuhr 1988:1656). In this I agree, but I think it has much to say if we take the concept and apply it, which is essentially what Niebuhr did in his book *The Kingdom of God in America*, in which he also makes pertinent use of the terms ‘dynamic’ and ‘static.’ In his other book, *Christ and Culture*, Niebuhr speaks of five ways of relating Christ to culture, one of which is the title of this section.

I think it safe to say that Hoeksema pitted Christ against culture (Hoeksema 1966:261). To him culture was the result of the organic outworking in history of reprobation. That is to say, the development of culture followed in the lines of the generations of the unbelieving. Christians, while in the world, are not of it; they are strangers and sojourners. Hence, the bulk of what might be considered culture is a result of the activity of the unbelieving. And, while all this culture building proceeds according to the dictates of God’s providence, it is still not a result of grace nor pleasing in His sight. You might even say that, from Hoeksema’s perspective, the mother promise contained in Genesis 3:15 promises nothing but enmity between Christ and culture, i.e. the world throughout history; further still, it is the stuff of which history is made. David Engelsma makes this exact point citing John 2:15-17 as evidence: ‘Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lust thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever’ (Engelsma 2003:54). Niebuhr also reviews this and similar verses concluding that they are integral to the Christ against culture position (Niebuhr 1956:48). But, given Hoeksema’s very detailed

definition of culture, cited earlier, can one really divorce one's self from the surrounding culture entirely?

Speaking of the 'radical Christian,' the one who pits Christ against culture, the one who feels the need to choose Christ as opposed to man's culture, Professor Niebuhr understands their quest as an impossible one. It is possible to separate one's self from the world to a certain extent; to become a hermit or a monastic. Even striving to be a recluse is possible, but not usually with a following. No matter the degree to which one thinks he or she has separated themselves from the world, the culture, they still must use the tools culture has provided, as there are no others. As Niebuhr writes:

It is so with all the members of the radical Christian group. When they meet Christ they do so as heirs of a culture which they cannot reject because it is part of them. They can withdraw from its more obvious institutions and expressions; but for the most part they can only select—and modify under Christ's authority—something they have received through the mediation of society. (Niebuhr 1956:70.)

One must work within the culture that prevails. It can be railed against as the prophets of old, but there is simply no substitute. Hoeksema railed against some of the more flagrant and flamboyant demonstrations of culture, but this the church has always done. Hoeksema did not seek to become a monastic, although there were many cultural activities, especially amusements, from which he abstained. Hoeksema was in the world and he did not seek escape from it, but he was not of the world in that the world was not his focus.

Many who followed Hoeksema in the Protestant Reformed Churches, however, lacked his balance. Some have adopted a cultural variant and labeled it Dutch culture or 'Dutchness,' because of the Dutch overtures contained in it whether real or imagined. Others in the Protestant Reformed Churches have tried to separate themselves from the

things of the world as much as possible both physically and mentally. This tendency has produced some interesting, and at times amusing, cultural anomalies. For instance: I remember my first encounter with the Protestant Reformed Churches, I was not greeted with a ‘hello’ or a ‘nice to meet you,’ rather the first words spoken by a Protestant Reformed minister to me was ‘why are you here?’ I have already mentioned in the biography that union membership is prohibited; so are movies and dancing. In many households having insurance is seen as circumventing God’s sovereignty. Anesthesia for women in childbirth is frowned upon because it somehow mitigates the curse. Women’s suffrage is repudiated. But the main staple of Protestant Reformed dogma is the denial to any marriage after a divorce, irrespective of who is at fault or the circumstances. I could mention many more examples, but I think this is sufficient to get a proper understanding of what defines the Protestant Reformed Churches culturally.

These cultural oddities are, however, only a symptom, and I believe there is an explanation. Let us return again to our quote from Henri Bergson. I would like to change the quote a bit to reflect what I believe has happened in the Protestant Reformed Churches. What constitutes the Protestant Reformed Churches today is, in fact, the crystallization, brought about by time, of what Hoeksema poured, while hot, into his church. Hoeksema was original, creative, and equally dynamic. Additionally, Hoeksema was not conservative. He was orthodox, but he was not a conservative. He did not seek to conserve for conservation sake. Hoeksema’s own definition of the theological task is that ‘in which the dogmatician, in organic connection with the church in the past as well as in the present, purposes to elicit from the Scriptures the true knowledge of God, to set forth the same in systematic form, and, after comparison of the existing dogmas with Scripture,

to bring the knowledge of God to a higher state of development' (Hoeksema 1966:5). There is nothing in this definition about conserving the doctrines of the past just because they are from some glorious past. No, Hoeksema believed that conserving for conserving sake was not the job of the theologian. Hence, Hoeksema never had the 'wagon train' mentality that characterizes much of what the current Protestant Reformed Church stands for.

Still, what Niebuhr had to say about men and movements is as true today as when he said it, and I think it captures well the relationship of Hoeksema to the church he founded.

Yet institutions can never conserve without betraying the movements from which they proceed. The institution is static whereas its parent movement had been dynamic; it confines men within its limits while the movement had liberated them from the bondage of institutions; it looks to the past, the movement had pointed forward. Though in content the institution resembles the dynamic epoch whence it proceeded, in spirit it is much like the state before the revolution. ...Institutions, however, differ not only in spirit from their parent movements; they tend also to change the content which they are trying to conserve. When the great insights of a creative time are put into the symbolic form of words, formulas and creeds, much must always be omitted. The symbol is never the reality and it is subject to progressive loss of meaning; in time it often comes to take the place of the experience to which it originally pointed. (Niebuhr 1988:168-169.)

What Niebuhr says here is true of all religious movements in one way or another, and this is no less true of Hoeksema and his church. As the institution tries to conserve for posterity advances made by the dynamic individual or movement, the result is 'only to have these cool off into crystallized codes, solidified institutions' (Niebuhr 1988:167) and an unhealthy preoccupation with the law. The conservation process brings about conservatism, which, in and of itself, precludes the dynamic at all costs. Hence, while the conservative mind seeks to conserve the advances of the dynamic time, laws, rules and regulations become the norm. As dynamic moves to conservative, understanding yields to

practice, explicit faith to implicit faith and the orientation of this faith also changes from what God has done to what man must do. When the leader's vision is reduced to codes of conduct he never stressed, this 'emphasis on conduct may lead to the definition of precise rules, concern for one's conformity to such rules, and concentration on one's own will rather than on the gracious work of God' (Niebuhr 1956:79).

Herman Hoeksema broke with the Puritan legalism he found in the Christian Reformed Church (Goris 1932), only now to have the Protestant Reformed Churches which he founded return full circle. Admittedly, on paper their theology is still that of Hoeksema, but for all intents and purposes, the understanding is gone and only the rules remain. In 1995 Cornelius Hanko wrote an article for the *Standard Bearer* entitled 'Where We Stand Today.' One might have expected a glowing assessment of the current state of the Protestant Reformed Churches, but this was not to be. He starts with the question: Is there a difference between the preaching in our churches now and the preaching in our early years? Out of obvious loyalty to a church in which he ministered for seventy years, Hanko's criticism is mild and unabrasive. Still, he puts his finger on the problem straight away. He writes:

Yet it must also be admitted that there has been a shift in emphasis in the preaching. Anyone who will listen to a tape or read a sermon or the *Standard Bearer* of fifty or more years ago will immediately recognize the strong emphasis on doctrine. An example of that can be found in the sermons of Rev. Herman Hoeksema in *God's Eternal Good Pleasure*. We were advised in the seminary: "When the truth is preached, God's people can and do apply it to their own lives." Or again, "Preach to the most intelligent in your audience; the others will be edified." Today the preaching often emphasizes the problems we face as believers in an evil world, especially problems related to family. And a more serious effort is made to reach the young people and the children of the congregation. The question, however, may well be raised, "Has the pendulum swung too far the other way? Are our people being as thoroughly indoctrinated as they should be?" We must maintain the one, but not at the cost of the other. (Hanko 1995:45.)

Niebuhr is hopeful that the ‘the same institutionalism which represents the death of an old movement can be, as history amply illustrates, the pregnant source of a new aggression’ (Niebuhr 1988:198). That is to say, the destruction of one movement lays the seeds for the rise of the next. This has been happening throughout church history, but rarely do two dynamic men or movements come from the same source.

9.8 Conclusion

In this chapter we have looked at the last of the *Three Points of Common Grace* as adopted by the Christian Reformed Synod of 1924 and Hoeksema’s objections to it. We began by analyzing, through Hoeksema’s eyes, the confessional proof cited by the synod for its justification in adopting this point. The significant feature regarding this confessional proof revolves around the Third and Fourth Heads of Doctrine of the Canons of Dort, article 4, in which synod quotes only the first half of the article to prove their point. The second half of the same article, as Hoeksema pointed out, proves exactly the opposite of what synod was attempting to prove.

While point three mentions ‘civic righteousness’ specifically, most writers take this in the wider sense of culture as did Hoeksema. Hence, we have dealt with the cultural aspirations of humanity and inquired into their motivation. Humanity sees their cultural mandate to subdue the all things to themselves, as they are their own lord. Hoeksema is at pains to show that this cultural activity is not a grace from God. Good gifts from God are definitely given, but these are with the sole purpose to further the condemnation of the unbelieving. To Hoeksema, this is simply not grace.

What is usually called 'general revelation' is equally not a grace of God to the unregenerate. Hoeksema maintains that there is no revelation to the reprobate whatsoever. God manifests himself to them, but revelation presupposes a capacity to receive it. This the reprobate do not have. This capacity, if you will, is a gracious gift of God for the elect alone.

For his ideas Hoeksema was branded an Anabaptist, one guilty of world flight. Upon examination this label also falls to the ground. Hoeksema did, however, teach the antithesis between the elect and the reprobate; an antithesis that continues throughout history along the organic lines of the generations of each. This antithesis, this enmity, will continue until God in His time brings it to an end. Even this does not prove Anabaptism. Although Hoeksema did pit Christ against culture, he never sought a monastic existence. He always saw himself as one who is in the world but not of it, it was simply not his focus.

No so for the denomination which he founded. The Protestant Reformed Churches have sought to preserve the gains and insights made by Hoeksema who was not really a conservator of the past himself. In doing so, they have taken that which was dynamic and reduced it to what is static. They have taken understanding and reduced it to rules, regulations and practices. In so doing they have, in theory, created their own distinct culture, one that bears little similarity to the teachings of the founder.