Introduction

I shall have to write this sketch of someone whom I knew. I did not and could not know him as his family knew him. I did not and could not know him as his colleagues knew him. But he was my pastor for nearly twenty years and he was my professor in the seminary for at least six years. We knew him in the classroom, in the coffee room at break time, during the informalities of Student Club, and in the banter and give-and-take of seminary life.

Yes, it was six years, not the normal three of a full seminary course. While I was still in college but making plans to go to seminary, Herman Hoeksema suffered a stroke. The Lord gave him a remarkable, though not complete, recovery. We were concerned that by the time we were ready to enter seminary Hoeksema would no longer be capable of teaching, and we wanted to study Dogmatics under him. I and several others asked permission from the Theological School Committee to take Dogmatics with him even if it meant only auditing the courses. This permission was granted and we studied Dogmatics with him during three years of college studies. The Lord spared him for additional years, and we were given the privilege of studying Dogmatics (as well as other subjects) with him for an additional three years. So we went through the six loci of Dogmatics with him twice. Not a day of study was wasted.

It is not, I am sure, possible to balance praise with blame and to be just and right in both. God uses sinful means to accomplish His will. We hold our treasure, Paul tells the Corinthians, in clay pots. But these things are not my primary concern. What is of interest to me and ought to be of interest to all of us is the fact that God used him in remarkable ways in the church. That God uses sinners is a given. That God used Herman Hoeksema is reason for gratitude on the part of all who love the Reformed faith.

Gertrude Hoeksema, a daughter-in-law, has written the one biography of Hoeksema, and the readers of this sketch are urged to read it. Its title is, "Therefore Have I Spoken." On it I must rely for much information not available in other sources.

So, on with the story.

Hoeksema's Early Life

Herman Hoeksema was born on March 12, 1886 from Johanna Bakema and Tiele Hoeksema in Hoogezand, in the province of Groningen, the Netherlands. The date of his birth, 1886, will attract the attention of any who has knowledge of and appreciation for the history of the church in the Netherlands. It was the year Dr. Abraham Kuyper led the faithful in the apostate State Church out to form a new denomination, and thus reform the church in that country.

Dr. Kuyper's work, however, was not the first reformation brought about in the State Church; Henrik De Cock, as we discussed in an earlier chapter, had also led faithful people of God out of the State Church, but fifty years earlier in 1834. Hoeksema was born from parents who belonged to the churches which De Cock had formed, known as De Afscheiding, or The Separation.

The people of these churches were the common folk, the poor day-laborers, the people without influence. But they possessed something more important: a godliness and piety which had deep roots in Scripture and in a prayer-filled life.

In the tradition of these folk, Hoeksema was given a very godly mother. Her godliness and spirituality were all the stronger because of the husband to whom she was united. He was a drunkard who forsook his family to enlist in foreign service, and who spent what little he earned in sin. He returned home only occasionally and when Herman was nine years old, forcibly took Herman from his home. Mrs. Hoeksema had to get a court order, or legal separation, to prevent this from recurring.

His mother was required to take in sewing and to work long hours to support her family. Even with hard work, money was always in short supply. It was not easy to feed three growing boys and one girl and provide a Christian education for them besides. The result was that the family often went hungry and Herman took to running around with the town ruffians who sometimes engaged in stealing food to ease their hunger cramps.

It was possible for Herman to continue his education only because he was given support from the town. This education was in a trade school, which qualified him to serve as apprentice for a blacksmith. He obtained work away from home where, at 15 years old he worked from 4:00 AM to 10:00 PM for $30.00 a year plus room and board. The work was hard and the food he received meager and insufficient to sustain his growing body. For a year he worked here, but at the end of the year found a better job in his home town making wrought-iron fences.

The poverty and hard work of his youth gave to Herman a sympathy for the poor and a distaste for the selfish employer who refused to pay his help a living wage but demanded long hours and hard work. His preaching during his years in the ministry often reflected these childhood experiences.

Although he received his religious training in a church of De Afscheiding, Hoeksema had a friend who belonged to the churches of the Kuyper movement. Through this friend he came to hear Dr. Kuyper preach and speak, and was influenced by Kuyper's strong and uncompromising emphasis on salvation by sovereign and particular grace. It was an influence that was to be the standard of his life.

At 18 years of age, Hoeksema left Netherlands and the poverty he knew there to find a home in America. He stayed in Chicago with his sister who had preceded him. After holding a variety of jobs and saving what he could he was able to get his mother and brothers to this country, while he himself departed for Grand Rapids and Calvin College to study for the ministry of the Word.

Early Ministry

Hoeksema had received gifts from God which had to be used in different ways than working with his hands. He was a man of towering intellect, penetrating insight, and originality of thought. His studies came easy to him and he was able to absorb vast amounts of material. His interest was, however, in Dutch Reformed theology, and, because he knew the Dutch thoroughly, he was able to read with ease that ocean of Reformed Dutch thought, so rich and fertile, but so inaccessible to us today.

He was a man of many and varied gifts. In addition to the gifts of intellect, he was an artist of some ability. Later in life when he took up painting for relaxation, he became skillful in oils. But his artistic skills extended also into literary achievements. He wrote a dramatic production in poetry while in school; he composed a sonnet at the time of his 25th anniversary; and all his writing (and there was much of it) was characterized by a clarity and literary grace to which few attain. The clarity of his writing (and his preaching and speaking) was of such a kind that, although there were many who disagreed with his theology, no one ever complained that they could not understand what he meant. He could express profound ideas in simple language.

He was a man of iron will and steely determination. This was characteristic of his own life, which was highly disciplined; but it was especially evident in his commitment to the truth. Having once set himself upon the course of service to the church of Christ and the truth of God, nothing could swerve him from it. No one, friend or foe, would dispute the fact that he stood firmly for what he believed. This was so true that the word that came most often from the mouths of his detractors was "stubborn."

The evidences of his commitment to the church appeared already during his student days. When he was scheduled as a student to bring a word of edification to the congregation of Maple Ave. Christian Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, he knew that the congregation was opposed in large measure to Christian education. Aware of the implications of what he was doing, he prayed in his congregational prayers that God's covenant people might not in the education of their children deliver them over to the gates of hell -- his forceful characterization of the public school system. So infuriated did the congregation become that his hosts did not reappear in their own home until he had departed, and the consistory made an effort to keep him from their pulpit -- an effort that failed only because the student body in Seminary decided that no student would go to Maple Ave. if Hoeksema could not go.

It was, however, the beginning of a long life of controversy.

Controversy In His First Charge

From the day Hoeksema entered the ministry in 14th St. Christian Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan to the day he died, his life can be characterized as one of controversy.

It has been alleged that his controversy-filled life was due to his own constant efforts to "pick a fight." He was, so it has been said, willing "to go to the mat" for anything and everything. This is a grievous slander and one which will not stand the scrutiny of unbiased men.

One must understand a bit the background in the church in America of which he was a part.

The members of the Christian Reformed Church in the first half-century of its existence were almost exclusively from De Afscheiding. While indeed this movement in the Netherlands was a true reformation of the church and while several of its leaders were strongly Reformed, weaknesses in doctrine also ran through the movement,and not all the leaders were equally Reformed. These strengths and weaknesses were also present in the Christian Reformed Church. It was not as Reformed as it should have been. Especially strains of Arminianism were present in some parts of it. Doctrines such as the well-meant offer of the gospel, a universal love of God, and salvation dependent on the free will of man were openly taught. In some places there was strong opposition to Christian education and in other places the urge to "Americanize" the church led the church into unholy unions with unreformed organizations.

At about and shortly after the turn of the century, immigrants from the movement of Dr. Abraham Kuyper joined the Christian Reformed Church. They were a different kind of folk. Many of them held to Kuyper's rejection of the well-meant offer of the gospel, but others had been taken in by Kuyper's common grace, a common grace which was quite different in emphasis from that of the earlier immigrants. Both groups were present in the church and the struggle for control of the church was long and sometimes bitter.

Hoeksema, an heir to the piety of the people of De Afscheiding and to the doctrines of sovereign and particular grace in the Kuyper followers, had early come to the conclusion that the battle for the future of the church was to be fought -- as it had been throughout the ages -- in defense of sovereign and particular grace over against Arminianism and Pelagianism. But he saw, early in his ministry, that the truths of sovereign grace applied not only to the sovereignty of God in the work of salvation, but applied equally strongly to the antithetical walk of God's covenant people in the world. The common grace of the well-meant offer was a threat to the former; Kuyper's common grace a threat to the latter.

Into the ministry in this denomination Hoeksema entered, and through the maze of conflicting ideas he had to find his way, which, he was determined, would be the way of the historic Reformed faith. This brought him into controversy.

It started early. In his very first charge he faced opposition over two matters: his strong support of Christian schools and the emphasis in his preaching on sovereign grace rooted in double predestination. His steady hand on the tiller of the congregation, however, steered the people of God through many dangerous shoals: those who were not persuaded left for elsewhere while many learned to be thankful for a man who would direct them in a way consistently Reformed.

The years were those of World War I. Patriotism became all but an idol and blind patriotism the order of the day. Churches, in bursts of patriotic fervor, put the flag of our country on the pulpit. Hoeksema refused -- not because he was not aware of his calling to be in subjection to the magistracy, but because the church's business was conducted in the sanctuary of the church and that church is catholic, not bound to one country. Threatened by zealots in the community, he was forced for a while to carry a pistol in self-defense.

One great doctrinal controversy in the Christian Reformed Church at large involved Hoeksema during this time. It was a controversy over dispensational pre-millennialism. Hoeksema took a leading role in pointing out to the Church the fact that such a position was contrary to the Reformed Confessions because it denied that Christ is the King of the church, and his efforts were instrumental in protecting the church from a dangerous heresy.

Continuing Controversy

Hoeksema's second charge was in Eastern Ave. Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, Michigan. This was the church where my father and paternal grandparents were members.

Here, too, Hoeksema's life was filled with controversy.

The first controversy was in no respect of his making. It involved the teachings of Dr. Ralph Janssen in the seminary. This professor of Old Testament denied the infallible inspiration of Scripture and brought into his instruction higher critical methods. His four colleagues in the Seminary objected to his teachings, but could not secure a condemnation of his views by the churches in their broader assemblies. Hoeksema was finally brought into the battle, even though Dr. Janssen was a member of his congregation; his careful and thorough work as part of a study committee, presented to the Synod of 1922, was the basis for Janssen's condemnation.

The irony of it was, however, that Dr. Janssen used Kuyperian common grace to justify his higher critical methods, knowing full well that Hoeksema, already then, repudiated the doctrine. Although the issue of common grace was not faced by the Synod of 1922, it became the occasion for Hoeksema's expulsion from the Christian Reformed Church.

This brief biography is not the place either to discuss the issues or to trace in detail the history. We can only briefly describe what happened.

Faced with several protests against Hoeksema's denial of common grace and various overtures asking for a statement on common grace, the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church meeting in Kalamazoo, Michigan, adopted a doctrinal statement that combined the well-meant offer of the gospel and Kuyperian common grace into one decision. Although informed by Hoeksema that he would never subscribe to such an unbiblical and anti-confessional statement, the Synod refused to discipline him and, in fact, pronounced him fundamentally Reformed -- although with a tendency towards onesidedness.

Hoeksema's critics were not satisfied, and they finally prevailed upon the Classis of which Hoeksema was a part to require absolute subscription to the doctrine of common grace or to face suspension from the office of the ministry.

Upon Hoeksema's refusal, the Classis suspended him and set his Consistory and the congregation outside the denomination.

Thus, January, 1925 marks the beginning of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America.

Two other ministers, from a different Classis, were deposed as well for the same reasons: Revs. H. Danhof and G. M. Ophoff. Their congregations were also expelled.

These were busy years. Herman Hoeksema was the pastor of a congregation numbering more than 500 families; he taught Dogmatics and all New Testament subjects in the seminary which was formed immediately after 1925 to train the denomination's own ministers; he wrote extensively for The Standard Bearer, a bi-monthly Reformed periodical and served as its editor; he travelled around the country speaking in the many places to which he had been invited; he was full-time radio pastor from 1940 to 1963; he wrote a number of books, most of which are in print today.

The enormous amount of work which he performed took its toll, and in June of 1947 he suffered a massive stroke in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, on his way to Manhattan, Montana, where my father was pastor and I lived with my family.

The Lord gave him recovery from the stroke, never complete, but sufficient that he could take up his work once again in his church and in the churches.

The Last Battle

It was evident that the Lord gave him recovery because one more battle in defense of sovereign grace had to be fought. It happened in the early '50s. The battle was over the question whether salvation is conditional -- a clear and forceful attack against the doctrine of sovereign grace.

Dr. Klaas Schilder in the Netherlands had suffered at the hands of the Reformed Churches in his own country. He had been unjustly deposed from office in the same way as Hoeksema. The year of his deposition was 1944. Twice, in 1939 and in 1947, he had come to this country. Hoeksema had struck up a friendship with Schilder and had been influential in seeing to it that the pulpits of our churches were open to him. But, although Schilder and Hoeksema had much in common, they differed radically on the doctrine of the covenant. Hoeksema insisted that a unilateral and unconditional covenant was taught in Scripture and the Confessions; Schilder taught a bi-lateral and conditional covenant. Hoeksema insisted that only the elect children of believers were included in that covenant. Schilder insisted that all the children of believers had some place in it.

Many of the ministers in the Protestant Reformed Churches began to teach and preach Schilder's views, until the church was rocked with controversy. In 1953 the controversy was only settled through a difficult split, which took nearly 2/3 of the ministers and members out of the Protestant Reformed Churches. Another denomination was formed which eventually returned to the Christian Reformed Church.

In that controversy Hoeksema played a major role: in his preaching, his writing, and his defense of the faith on the floor of the assemblies. He understood that the conditional theology of Schilder and his followers constituted a serious threat to the doctrines of sovereign grace and that the very right of existence for the Protestant Reformed Churches demanded that they hold unswervingly to the truth of unconditional salvation. It was what Hoeksema had fought for in his battle against common grace; it was still what had to be defended, if the churches of which he was a part would survive faithful to their heritage.

God gave the Protestant Reformed Churches the victory. It is true that the numbers of the denomination were severely diminished. It is also true that the controversy was bitter and difficult. But God preserved the cause of the Protestant Reformed Churches, that there might be a denomination which uncompromisingly continued to teach the same truths which the whole church of Christ throughout the ages has loved.

But it was indeed the last battle for an old and weary warrior.

Although Hoeksema lived for another 12 years and took part in rebuilding a shattered denomination, God ended his work before He ended his life. He died in September of 1965 and went to his eternal resting place.

Conclusion

It is hard to imagine the amount of work which Herman Hoeksema produced. But this was and is true of many whom God uses in His church. They spend themselves in the cause of the gospel and do work that indeed derives its power from heaven.

Hoeksema was, above all, a preacher. It is difficult for us to understand how anyone who heard his preaching could leave his congregation. He was clear, concise, biblical, and confessional. A little child could understand him; an adult versed in theology could be stimulated by his thought. Eloquent, moving, forceful, and persuasive, the real power of his preaching was in careful exegesis, which unfolded the riches of the Scriptures and brought them home in countless practical ways.

One who heard him preach could never doubt that his first love was preaching. I well remember that near the end of his life, though while he was still preaching, he would begin in such a painfully slow manner that one wondered whether he would be able to get through the sermon. But as he became caught up in it, his eyes would begin to sparkle, his face would light up, and he would begin to preach as one who received new life.

It was also especially toward the end that Hoeksema began to preach more and more about heaven. When he spoke of heaven he would refer to it as "that blessed hope." This was significant because, as he was ready to explain, he did not mean that hope was a mere "shrug of the shoulders" -- as he called it; hope was absolute assurance which rested on the faithfulness of the promise of God. His "blessed hope" was real and certain.

But his exegesis was always his strength. It is the strength of his Reformed Dogmatics; it is the strength of his many books; it was the strength of his instruction in the Seminary. He would debate with us with great patience and longsuffering and would bear with our immaturity with grace and kindness; but he insisted that we bolster every argument with Scripture. If we did not want to take the time or put forth the effort to do that, he would not permit us to waste his time.

He was a man of great physical strength who wore himself out in his work. But he was a man of great mental strength as well. He would never cease to amaze us in seminary with his ability to show the falsity of a theological argument with sure, probing, and few remarks that exposed the hollow character of much theological thought.

But he was a man of enormous spiritual strength. Some called it stubbornness; the Bible calls it steadfastness. He loved the Scriptures, was committed to the defense of the Reformed faith, and would not be moved no matter what the price. And he paid a very dear price indeed.

He was a sinful man -- as we all are. He knew how great is the miracle of grace that God uses sinners in His church. Hoeksema had his weaknesses. He was not above making fun of shoddy thinkers who passed themselves off as profound theologians and made bold but unproved assertions. He sometimes walked his own path without due consideration of those who were one with him and determined to support the cause for which he stood.

But he was absolutely convinced that the truth which he preached was the truth of Scripture and the Reformed faith. He said in my hearing more than once that he would stand alone for that truth even if all turned away. His conviction was unshakable and his commitment to faithfulness was total.

Yet, when he was in the circle of friends and fellow saints, he was jovial, with a robust laughter, a ready wit, a warm spirit of camaraderie. Some never came to know this side of his character, but even within the congregation he showed it in moments of relaxation.

Two incidents of Hoeksema's character stand out in my memory. The first had to do with our Seminary training.

Hoeksema was content all his life to teach in a single room in the basement of First Church, a room which was dark, dingy, cold damp, and wholly unattractive, when with some compromise he could have been an outstanding theologian in the ecclesiastical world and a blazing star in the ecclesiastical firmament. He never complained that he was squandering his gifts when he spent his life with two or three students patiently teaching them theology in what was little more than a walled hole in the ground. The only explanation for this can be a total commitment to the truth of Scripture and the Reformed faith.

The second incident is of a different kind. It took place when in 1953 we had to seek other quarters for the Seminary and we were using Adams' St. Protestant Reformed Christian School. It was Hoeksema's 70th birthday. It was coffee time. We were in the Teachers' Lounge. Hoeksema was soliloquizing. His remarks went like this.

"Now that I am 70 years old I sometimes wish that I could live another 70 years. If the Lord would give me another 70 years, I think I could finally come to understand the truth a bit. Now I know almost nothing."

I do not know whether he saw our jaws drop in amazement, I doubt it. But he added, almost to himself, "No, I am glad that I won't live very long any more because I shall soon go to heaven. Then I shall understand perfectly."

It was an important evidence of the fact that Hoeksema well understood that because the truth of Scripture was the truth of God Himself, it was unfathomable, and we mere men could know only very little of it. He often concluded a sermon with a remark to the effect that he had only succeeded in scratching the surface of a text; and he often said in his prayer at the end of the sermon that all he had done was mutter and stutter a bit about the truth. It was all rooted in that great governing principle of his life that God is God, great and glorious and greatly to be praised.

Nor was he a man that gloried in an isolated ecclesiastical life. It was forced upon him because of his defense of the faith; but it was not his wish.

He would have enjoyed being sister churches with the churches formed under Dr. Schilder's leadership if a common basis could have been found in the truth. That enjoyment was rooted in part in a personal affection for for Dr. Schilder himself. Hoeksema was saddened by the rift between himself and Schilder and between the churches they represented. He was genuinely sorrowful when Schilder died.

He preached in other churches when the opportunity was given him. Dr. Henry Atherton's Grove Chapel in London is one example. The Orthodox Presbyterian Church of Portland, Maine, near the place where Hoeksema vacationed, was another. He sought out and eagerly participated in a conference with ministers from the German Reformed Churches of Eureka Classis. He willingly participated in a conference with Christian Reformed ministers called to try to heal the breach. He urged the Synod at one point to send observers to the Reformed Ecumenical Council. But he permitted no compromise when it came to questions of the truth.

Hoeksema hated church politics in any form. His firm belief that Christ preserved His church kept him from the evil of playing political games in the church, soliciting support through ways others than debate, attempting to influence decisions by maneuvering, and "counting noses" to be assured of sufficient support before making a move. All the things so important in today's church world were abhorrent to him.

Above all, Hoeksema was used by God to bring reformation to the church. With the adoption of common grace the Christian Reformed Church chose a path of apostasy which would (and has) led the denomination astray. It is understandable that common grace would receive a great deal of attention in the early years of the Protestant Reformed Churches. But it is a man who leads a sect who never gets beyond criticism of heresy, always and only against things, having a obsession to write critically of others without producing anything positive. Hoeksema wanted more than anything else to see the CRC reject such false doctrine as it had adopted. But when it would not, when it cast Hoeksema out after stripping him of his office, and when it persisted in going its own way, Hoeksema turned to the positive work of church reformation. Such reformation was in the area of church government and liturgy without doubt. The CRC had departed from the Reformed line in introducing hymns into worship, and the church polity of the church had been corrupted when the broader assemblies engaged in discipline of Hoeksema. But such reformation was especially in doctrine.

I cannot spell it out here. But as Hoeksema stood for the truths of sovereign and particular grace, he developed those truths in some important areas. Undoubtedly because of his experience in the case of Dr. Janssen, who denied the miracles in Scripture and did so on the grounds of common grace, he developed those truths of sovereign and particular grace in the area of miracles. In His Reformed Dogmatics one will find one of the best, most Biblical, and most beautiful development of miracles that one can find anywhere.

He applied the truth of particular grace to the concept of revelation and subjected the doctrine of "general revelation" -- especially as many wanted to relate it to common grace -- to rigorous scrutiny in the light of Scripture.

But above all he saw the implications of the doctrine of sovereign and particular grace, rooted in eternal election, for the doctrine of the covenant. And here is his greatest work. He has given the church an inheritance of the truth which is powerful, throbbing with life, filled with practical implications for an antithetical walk on the part of God's covenant people, and above all, gives all glory to God. It is a Biblical doctrine of the covenant which begins with God and ends with God and has as its theme: Glory to God. If Hoeksema had done nothing else but this, it would have been enough.

He has not been recognized by the church world. To know the approval of God was the important thing. Mostly he knew opposition, hatred, slander, or cold and disdainful ignoring of him and his theology. Records are kept in heaven that are the only ones which count. The sins are there too, of course. They are covered in the blood of Christ. But the suffering, the persecution, they too are noted. And God, Who had His own place in the church militant for Herman Hoeksema, has His own place in the church triumphant for a man who fought a good fight, finished the course, and kept the faith. He received the crown of righteousness which God gave to him and will give to all who love Christ's appearing.

http://www.prca.org/books/portraits/hoeksema.htm

http://www.prca.org/theme/show/itemlist/category/67-early-years