

Book Review by Rev. Mitchell Dick, *Sovereign Grace URC* of the book

I BELIEVE: *Sermons on the Apostles' Creed*

by Herman Hoeksema

The book, *I Believe*, is the publication of a series of sermons/lectures/meditations on the Apostle's Creed delivered by Herman Hoeksema on the radio during the years 1951-1955. This would have been during the middle of the controversy in the PRC over "conditions" in the covenant. It would have also been just about the time ministers and churches, including those going by the name "Reformed," would start to stop caring about such details of theology.

Grand patriarch of the Protestant Reformed Churches, Herman Hoeksema stands also as one of the old guards of the Reformed faith. Therefore, yes, Hoeksema (HH) has more to say than No to common grace and Yes to the unilateral covenant. In Hoeksema is the vintage theology of the tradition of Dordt and of the Protestant Reformers of the Reformation.

The sermons of *I Believe* reflect this old theology.

Good Old Theology

This reviewer thinks first of all of Hoeksema's exposition of the first article of the Creed "I believe in God..." When you say this, HH notes,

You state that God is God, and that you know him as the true God. Who is God? My answer is briefly: he is the one who has revealed himself in Jesus Christ, the revelation that is contained in the holy Scriptures, and in the light of which we hear and interpret the speech of God in all his works. We of ourselves can never say who and what God is. What we say of ourselves concerning God is always a lie. We can never approach him who is in an accessible light. If we are to know him, he must approach us. We can never speak of ourselves concerning him, but must be silent when he speaks. For he is the infinite one, and the finite can never approach the infinite. (p.7)

HH, continuing to unfurl the banner of the truth of God, speaks (on one page of *I Believe*, and in one paragraph of one sermon seventy-five years ago on the radio!) of God the infinite one; God the eternal one; the immutable one; transcendent above all creation, yet immanent in all things; the almighty one who does whatever he pleases; the sovereign Lord of all in heaven and on earth; the holy one, completely consecrated to himself; the God of absolute love, who loves himself above all and all creatures for his own name's sake; the absolutely righteous one who is gracious and merciful, full of lovingkindness and truth to them that fear him; who is the Jehovah, the immutable I Am, the Rock in whom we may trust.

One with ears to hear and those with eyes to see are compelled to conclude, from such profound, man-humbling, God-glorifying divinity in a sermon, that the man behind the words has been drinking some of the brew of the high theology of Calvin, himself accused by his

Roman Catholic adversaries, of being “God intoxicated.” May we all be so accused, though it be but the first hour of a new reformation.

HH, Reformed theologian and preacher that he is, preaches the God of *the counsel*, and the counsel, therefore, that is truly divine—the eternal, sovereign good pleasure of God according to which he works all things to his desired goal. HH concludes thus:

The world is not stationary: it develops. It passes through the ages of time. It is headed for some end. And the end of time, the omega toward which all things in time must tend, is the purpose of God. For God has his counsel. And this counsel is his eternal purpose, according to which he works all things. And the end of this eternal purpose is the glory of his own name, through the highest possible realization of his covenant with his people in Christ Jesus our Lord. For he has “made known unto us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure which he has purposed in himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth” (Eph 1: 9, 10) (p.20).

Expounding the great Christology of Colossians 1 HH preaches the Christ as first in the counsel of God, and therefore,

In the eternal counsel of God the risen Lord is the firstborn of every creature. In that eternal counsel he stands first. In the divine decree he is conceived first. And he opens the womb for every creature. All the works of God are subservient to the glory of this image of the invisible God...All things in time must serve the realization of the firstborn of every creature. They have their ultimate meaning in him, and in him alone, to the glory of the Father...We understand that when God created the first world good and finished, though it was in itself, he had in mind the second world, in which all things concentrate in the glorified son of God...Then we do not place the forces of darkness, the devil, sin, and death, dualistically in opposition to the Most High, but know that they are subservient to his purpose, and that God chose the deep way of sin and grace had “provided some better thing for us” (Heb. 11:40)...(pp. 173-175).

God-centered, God-focused, HH is a champion of the truth of the sovereignty of God. This is clear in all HH’s polemics beginning with his protest against the CRC’s postulation of a non-saving grace to all men, and the presentation of the gospel as a “free” or well-meant “offer” of God depending for its acceptance on the free will of man and leaving God, therefore, deeply disappointed when sinners reject his overtures and his grace. This concern to uphold God’s sovereignty is evident, as well, in *I Believe*. HH upholds God’s sovereignty vs. all forms of humanism, Arminianism, sub-Calvinism and “well-meant offer” evangelism. So:

(The) sovereign dominion of the Lord is not restricted to the irrational creature. It includes also the thoughts and intents, the desires and aspirations of the heart of man. Again, there are those who would deny this. Here, at least, they say, in the heart of man is a sphere that excludes even the sovereignty of God. Man is free. He is sovereign in his own dominion. He thinks what he wills, and wills what he thinks, and freely, that is, sovereignly, follows the inclinations of his own heart. But it must be clearly understood that this free-will philosophy is not in harmony with the word of God. God is the Lord. He is Lord also over man, over angels

and devils, over the righteous and unrighteous alike. For “the king’s heart is in the hand of the Lord, as the rivers of water: he turneth it whithersoever he will.” (Prov. 21:1) (pp. 18, 19).

Speaking on the Creed’s article *the holy, catholic church*, and the Catechism’s mention of the *church chosen to everlasting life*, HH lambastes the Arminian view that salvation and inclusion in the body of Christ is really just a possibility, a possible salvation and society dependent on what men do with the gospel by their willing and their working, HH also combats “the many so-called Reformed preachers that camouflage this truth (of the Reformed view of the sovereignty of God in salvation, MD), between whose preaching and that of the Arminians one can detect no difference whatsoever. For, he notes,

There are those who teach and preach that the gospel is a well-meaning offer of salvation, well-meaning from the part of God to all men. And there are those who proclaim from the pulpit that God promises salvation to all on condition of faith. There are those who preach that instead of God’s sovereign act of regeneration, it is our act of conversion that is (the) condition to enter into the kingdom of God. But by thus teaching and preaching they corrupt the Reformed truth in the name of Calvinism. (p. 253)

Good Reading Today

At every point in *I Believe* HH sets forth the orthodox faith of the early creeds and of the Reformed faith. At every point also, though preached several generations ago, HH’s sermons are relevant. If, for example, one looks in vain for direct commentary on the evils of our day, both doctrinal and moral deviations, yet in sound, sharp, *God-centered* sermons such as HH’s is truth to discern the lie of the contemporary false Federal Vision, truth to work in hearers of these sermons *today* a godly contempt of a woke culture and a godly desire to walk as the people of God and of the antithesis in these latter days, truth to contend not to win mere culture wars and a sort of mere Christianization of the world, but to contend earnestly for the faith, for true disciples, and for the glory of Christ revealed in the advancement and fruitfulness of his spiritual and heavenly kingdom, the Church-bride of his love.

Indeed, though usually HH trusts the Spirit to use doctrine itself to sanctify hearers and readers of his teaching, yet at various times there is a direct call from God through this preacher, such as when HH is expounding the truth of the coming of the Lord:

Do you live with the hope of his coming in your hearts? Then we must keep our garments clean. Otherwise this hope is impossible. We must walk in sanctification of life, be sober, and watch unto prayer. Then, in the midst of the tribulation of this present time, we may lift up our heads, and earnestly look for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our final and complete redemption. That is the hope of his coming. (p. 212)

All those who do care for the advancement of a sound theology, a Reformed worldview, and a godly, principled piety will certainly profit who read Hoeksema, carefully and thankfully. In HH is a preacher man and theologian who in his day stood almost alone against a fatal compromise

of his mother denomination, the CRC and who with prophetic voice foretold the evils to which this compromise would lead and has led. All those will profit, that is, who are wiser than to believe the slanders of Hoeksema and the PRC that they are simply hyper-calvinists, anabaptists, sectarian, arrogant Pharisees.

Especially ministers will profit from this prophet. They will profit from the setting forth, in *I Believe*, of Reformed basics, distinctives, and definitions—the teachings and their implications. They will profit from this master sermon-craftsman whose preaching was of biblical texts in light of themselves and their contexts and in light also of the one faith of the complete corpus of God’s revelation; here, as elsewhere in his writings and sermons, is exegetical-doctrine preaching and teaching at its best for godliness and Christ-centered living for all believers and battlers for the crown rights of Jesus and the glory of God. They will profit, as well, from the courage of HH. For in *I Believe* is set forth the teaching of man not at all concerned to be what is today called “inclusive,” nor more united than Reformed.

A few things might be said to Protestant Reformed readers:

*The PR’s founder, your man, Herman Hoeksema, was but a man. Follow him where he leads to and from Scripture. Be careful, however, as sometimes HH was not, to be dogmatic “overmuch.” I think, for example, of his seeing in Mary’s question “How shall this be true seeing I know not a man,” her wondering how she could be the mother of the Christ if there were no person left in the line of David other than herself. For though it be true that there was no one left in David’s line, yet clearly Mary was wondering how she could conceive outside of sexual intercourse.

*At different times HH quotes the 1912 Psalter as if it were the Psalms (e.g. p.124). The songs in the Psalter are not the inspired psalms, but human renditions of them. Edifying they are, but not infallible.

*Refreshing is the fact that in his sermons HH rarely, if ever, quotes other authors. This in marked contrast to the many sermons I have heard from guest ministers, often students but also seasoned preachers, who cannot seem to declare *Thus saith the Lord* from the word of God without mentioning and quoting John Calvin, John Piper, Martyn Lloyd Jones, C.S. Lewis, and C.H. Spurgeon. HH, however, tends to go to the other extreme, methinks, not only in his sermons, but in his *Reformed Dogmatics, Triple Knowledge*, etc.. in quoting theologians only to cross swords with them (such as Abraham Kuyper), and hardly anywhere showing his indebtedness to the work of those who have gone before, and who, like HH, ought to be considered, at least, “in most parts Reformed.” Beware following men, especially one man, though he be brilliant.

*And thus: read what other Reformed theologians have to say about things Reformed, and even about common grace, the covenant of works, the *pactum salutis*, and the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man.

*About that last point: In chapter eighteen of *I Believe* HH treads where few still do, on the subject of *everlasting righteousness*. In combatting the teaching that faith and believing is not a condition a sinner must fulfill upon which his salvation depends, HH notes that this cannot be true “for the simple reason that all the elect are justified before God from eternity, and they are objectively justified in the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (p. 129). This statement of HH is problematic, seeming to grant more reality to God’s decree and eternity than to time and the fall of man, even elect men (who by nature are children of wrath! Eph. 2:1ff), and then to the blotting out of guilt on the cross, than to the truth of justification by faith alone. Somehow HH’s emphasis on eternity and objective justification of the cross seems to this reviewer not at all to solve the problem of the proper relationship nor to appreciate the *mysterious wonder* of the confluence of the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man in salvation. Seems as if the controversy prompting the *Conclusies of Utrecht* (1905) and continued into and through much of the twentieth century among the Reformed is not yet concluded. Who shall take up the study and explanation of the relation between decree, cross, and faith, and of God’s sovereignty and man’s responsibility in this whole important matter of the justification of sinners? Seems like the churches (still) need to settle this (or to settle for *not* ever settling this!) for a true Reformed witness and unity. Chalcedon set forth the truth of the union of the two natures, divine and human, in the one divine Person of Christ. Shall Grand Rapids one day set forth clearly, until, at least the mist of all sin is dispersed, the truth of the union of the Holy God of all righteousness and elect and yet once fallen in Adam sinners?

*Be thankful for the heritage—of God and the truth of God through a man of God such as Herman Hoeksema. In the midst of all your controversy forsake not that heritage. You have been given good old theology. Gratefully receive it, study and ponder, and do the next godly, truth-full-of God thing. That would be walking in the old paths of the old theology. That is God’s demand. That is your privilege. Grace believers *I Believe!*

Thanks to the RFPA for the publication of these sermons of HH.

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