

A Spiritual House Preserved: A Century in the River's Bend edited by Calvin Kalsbeek. Jenison, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2016. Pp. 752. [Reviewed by Bruce Koole]

Hope Protestant Reformed Church has set the standard for church memoirs with their book entitled *A Spiritual House Preserved: A Century in the River's Bend* (728 pp. + xxii). This is a book well worth spending all the time it takes to digest its seven hundred and fifty pages of material. Hope's anniversary committee deserves *summa cum laude* for the vast amount of organization and labor put forth in the publication of this book.

The title *A Spiritual House Preserved* is so very apropos. By my count, for Hope's century of existence as a church militant, she has been without a minister for nearly twenty-five years. Further, over her first twenty years of existence she had a minister for just under seven years. Jehovah tells Zerubbabel, "Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit" (Zechariah 4:6) and, "For who hath despised the day of small things? For they shall see the plummet in the hand of Zerubbabel with those seven" (Zechariah 4:10). Such is the grand story of Hope Church: though very insignificant in the world, she is rewarded for her faithfulness.

The story of Hope and any other true church follows the preaching. Very appropriately, the book begins with Rev. David Overway's concise meditation on I Peter 2:4-5 about a spiritual house built on the rejected cornerstone, Christ Jesus (xi-xiv). This text had been the sermon first preached by Rev. John R. Brink, whose memoirs of Hope are included as an appendix, when Hope humbly began at the river's bend in the winter of 1916 (679-680). Without that foundation there would be no true Hope Protestant Reformed Church. The book ends with an edited version of a 2014 sermon on that same passage (708-720). Both are very instructive.

This work of history has about every writing type and historical style possible. Comprehensive is an understatement. There is her early history; a brief history of her twelve ministers (seventy-five years of which were related to Richard Bloem); an architectural history; a recalling of Hope's experiences in the searing 1924 and 1953 doctrinal controversies; the perspectives and autobiographical retrospectives of Hope's ministers; an opening of Hope's consistorial minutes book; thirteen very dazzling oral histories; and the memories of those about the 1956 tornado. There is the doctrinal section on the pastor's labors; the council's jobs; the member's responsibilities; the life of the various societies; the sons who have entered the gospel ministry (one of whom was my father); daughter congregations; mission work; covenantal education (637-651); Young People Convention memories; and thirteen appendices with graphs, statistics, and charts. There is a list of organists (700-701); themes and texts used in family visitation; a description of the card-making work of that guileless dove, Anne Buijer (498-499); a description of the struggles faced by wheelchair-bound Kris Moelker (98-100); and the decades-long difficulties of the Kooienga family after Rog's car accident (222-224). In terms of mission work, Hope has labored in Lansing, Michigan; Christchurch, New Zealand; Victoria, Canada; Singapore; and Yangon, Thailand. The book is chock-full of maps, diagrams, pictures of members, and buildings past and present. After reading a man can say with the Psalmist Asaph, "Truly, God is good to Israel, to such as are of a clean heart" (Psalm 73:1).

In keeping with the budgetary struggles from her early years through both the economic difficulties of the Great Depression and the loss of members in '24 and '53, Hope's frugality played a role in their church life past and present, as it has in many of our churches. Permit me one example not found in the book but that found its way into some *Standard Bearers*. This story is shaped by one of my ancestors.

Ken G. Vink explained in the *Standard Bearer* rubric “News From Our Churches” that during divine worship services the sanctuary architecture was designed in such a way that for five minutes or so of every sermon the setting sun’s luminescence would blind the preacher. Hope debated getting a drapery and made a motion declaring such at a special congregation meeting.¹ In the course of debate my paternal grandfather stood up and declared with absolute certainty that it was a waste of money to buy curtains. What they should do instead was buy sunglasses for the pastor. My grandfather would go so far as to pay for them himself. Say what you will, this argument proved conclusive to those present. Vink related that a drapery purchase was approved.

A few *Standard Bearer* issues later, Ken G. Vink reported that someone had instead donated the drapery. He concluded, “The [building] committee further reported that ‘sunglasses were available for emergency conditions, but they were never used’.”² Even at the late date of 1977, Hope Church was still guided by the extreme financial paucity of her 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s existence (5-42, 132-150, 679-680). But such a Corinthian attitude towards building fiduciary is not unfamiliar in many of our other churches. Many other stories dealing with poverty, budgets, and architectures are included in the book (77-102).

With all the highlights of the two keys of the kingdom—that is the preaching and the administration of the sacraments—the third key, discipline, is not left out. It is dealt with mercifully. There was the shocking departure of a prominent member Tony (253, 304-305). There was a minister who had to read the Form of Excommunication even as the unrepentant member thrust a microphone and tape recorder in his pastor’s face (163). There were the children misbehaving in church (185, 226). And, there was the consistorial motion that only the believing parent may stand for baptism (193). Did you know that the heretic Hubert De Wolf (41-42, 142-143, 217-218, etc.) pastored Hope for five years? Read and see.

The true church always has the line of election and reprobation cutting through the line of the covenant. This impacts me personally. My parents, paternal grandparents, and maternal grandparents worshipped at Hope for many decades. While the history of this church has elements of hagiography, the history of each of us is hagiographical by the second. We are each covered in Christ’s blood, without whose justifying death for our sins, we could not stand in the throne room of Almighty Jehovah and pray nor have any hope of salvation. Thus, mercy is the watchword.

Something of note is that Hope Church’s setup today in the modern, suburbanized world is providentially similar to her founding in the era of horse and buggy. Hope’s members can walk to church, societies, catechism, grade school, and high school. In the age of the automobile, plane, space travel, and cell phone, the families and children who walk slow still run the show. What is the old adage? The more things change, the more things stay the same. Or, does not the unchanging Jehovah still show us a bit of himself and have the last laugh?

Editor Calvin Kalsbeek deserves praise for keeping a very readable style throughout the book. With the large number of different authors, the book seems to have only one writer. There is certainly a repeat of various information about persons and their activities, but by no means was any of it monotonously peripatetic. Credit the editor and the anniversary committee.

Three minor errors I did notice, which did not detract in any major way from the flow of the narrative. The section on the church’s early history notes that on January 23, 1916 (Hope’s first church service) the United States was mid-way through World War I (78). Technically, America’s official

¹ Ken G. Vink, “News From Our Churches,” *Standard Bearer* 53, no. 19 (August 1, 1977).

² Ken G. Vink, “News From Our Churches,” *Standard Bearer* 53, no. 21 (September 15, 1977).

involvement in WWI started on April 3, 1917 and ended on November 11, 1918, and the halfway point would have been early February 1918. That was more accurately Europe at the mid-way point through WWI.

Second, Professor Herman Hanko notes that Hope's official role with the 1953 controversy happened only through the work of Elder Richard Newhouse. He was a hero of faith, delegate, and co-author of the adopted May, 1953 Classis East minority report that called Rev. Hubert DeWolf's statements heretical *per se* (125-129, 691-693).

However, Hope was also involved in December 1950 when the consistory, under the signature of Rev. John Heys and elder Dewey Engelsma, sent to Synod a letter dealing with the Declaration of Principles. This letter did three things: first, it approved in the main the doctrines explained in the Declaration of Principles; second, it suggested a few other improvements and additional creedal quotes; and, third, it requested that a section on man's responsibility be added with creedal quotes to combat the calumnies lobbed at the PRCA (185-186, 687-690). This request was one of many that led the 1951 Synod to not only adopt a section on man's responsibility, but also eventually led to the memorable and edifying 1953 seminary graduation speech by Herman Hoeksema, entitled "Man's Freedom and Responsibility"³. Hope followed the orthodox covenant doctrine as explained by Rev. John Heys (42-49, 143-151).

Third, it would have been nice to include as Appendix 13 the church and school history reports from Gertrude Hoeksema's 1975 book *God's Covenant Faithfulness: The 50th Anniversary of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America*, (16-17, 26, 40, 45-46; Hope PRCS: 647-649). This would have provided another delightful perspective on the difficult labor of both living during the Great Depression and getting a school started just after the rationing of World War II.

I conclude with a request: perhaps the committee could consider including in the second edition a necrology, a list of the deceased. Grounds: the church militant becomes the church triumphant at death. Also in a very concise manner, probably 3-5 pages, this list would take a poignant look at the great sorrow of death and the comfort contained therein when hope of salvation is grounded in Christ's blood. Churches provide that comfort through the preaching and through the prayers and acts of the kindness of the saints (see pages 543-546 for a summary of the work of the church catering committee). Perhaps then this book would not need to be labeled a "monstrosity" but rather a delight.

The book was beyond scintillating and very edifying. I continually returned to it for new information and discovered such things as the benefit of classical music in junior high (648-650). I hope that other of our churches produce similar works very soon so, that like Hope Church, they and we all can review our histories (Psalm 105). Along with the editor, Calvin Kalsbeek, I pray that our covenant God through preaching, scripture, and the creeds preserves Hope Church and His church worldwide until His Son returns again (677-678). Most highly recommended.

³ Herman Hoeksema, "Man's Freedom and Responsibility," *Standard Bearer* 29, no. 18 (July 1, 1953).