

THE FREE OFFER ISSUE (5)

H. L. Williams

Being a critical analysis and review
of a book by Rev. David Silversides entitled
The Free Offer: Biblical And Reformed
Marpet Press, 2005, paperback, 128 pp.

What must be emphasised at this juncture is the fact that the “powers that be” in the modern Christian Reformed Church (CRC) and at the modern Calvin Seminary have for some time “moved on” from debates over “common grace” and the “free offer.” For them the whole Calvinist and biblical foundations of their religion is just a history to be studied now from some “lofty” and “neutral” academic standpoint. This has been evident for some twenty years or so, in that professorial staff from the Protestant Reformed Seminary have been able to enrol at Calvin to follow Master’s research degrees, and have used the opportunity to some effect. Notable is Professor Herman Hanko’s M.Th. thesis of 1988 on the relation between the views of Professor R. Janssen and common grace. In pursuit of his thesis, Prof. Hanko was evidently allowed to access a substantial area of CRC material and produce an analysis that justified Hoeksema’s position with respect to Janssen and verified that Hoeksema’s predictions as to what Janssen’s views on “common grace” would ultimately do to the CRC did actually happen.¹

Hence we come to the recent researches of Bolt and Blacketer. Academic neutrality characterises their work too. None in the CRC or Calvin Seminary seemed to mind that what they actually published in the *Calvin Theological Journal (CTJ)* was really a damning indictment of the CRC of the 1920s and, subsequently, a vindication of Herman Hoeksema and the PRC.² It was all just history to the CRC by then.

¹Cf. Herman C. Hanko, *A Study of the Relation between the Views of Prof. R. Janssen and Common Grace*, Thesis submitted for M.Th. at Calvin Theological Seminary, April 1988. Copies available from the Protestant Reformed Seminary, Grandville, Michigan.

²The relevant articles are in the April and November 2000 issues of the *CTJ* (vol. 35, nos. 1-2):

1) April, 2000, pp. 7-36, “Common Grace and the Christian Reformed Synod of Kalamazoo (1924): A Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Perspective,” by Dr. John Bolt (www.prca.org/articles/ctj1.html).

2) April, 2000, pp. 37-65, “The Three Points in Most Parts Reformed: A Re-examination of the

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But for us, in our theological realm, where the issues are still a living reality, their findings are dynamite. To the big names in modern, “mainstream” Calvinism, however, the whole affair has been met with silence. It is reprehensible, however, that the theological “powers that be” in modern, mainstream Calvinism have not drawn public attention to these researches in recent years. What underlies that attitude we can only guess at.

In the *CTJ* for April 2000, Dr. Bolt, Professor of Systematic Theology at Calvin Seminary, examines the issues of “Common Grace and the Christian Reformed Synod of Kalamazoo (1924).” In his opening paragraph, he admits that “the reader may be mildly surprised by [this and the following] articles,” because they are “self-critical and evidence some sympathies for the critique of the CRC stand on common grace offered by the Rev. Herman Hoeksema.”³ He thereon gives in full the “Three Points of Common Grace” which were adopted by the CRC in 1924 (to which David Silversides [DS] refers in his brief and unsatisfactory statement regarding Hoeksema’s deposition).⁴ Nearly 30 pages of closely-argued and well-documented material follows in the *CTJ* discussing this whole affair. Bolt outlines how “Kuyperian common grace” had been infused gradually into the CRC in those early years of the twentieth century, and with it had come a new attitude to the study of Scripture, encapsulated at Calvin Seminary in the Old Testament lectures of Prof. R. Janssen. For Janssen, “common grace” was the key to the so-called “scientific understanding” of the Old Testament, which meant that he approached Scripture as if it was just another human-produced book. Janssen went on to “naturalize” the Bible, reckoning that much of the Old Testament was an adoption of ancient Babylonian mythology, etc. Pretty soon, he was opposed by the rest of the faculty, namely Professors Heyns, Vollbeda, ten Hoor, and Berkhof. The whole matter boiled over for some years and Herman Hoeksema was involved in some official capacity in investigating the claims made against Janssen. Others, like Rev. Henry Danhof, also supported Hoeksema. The final upshot came in 1922, when Janssen was at last deposed. But

So-Called Well-Meant Offer of Salvation,” by Raymond A. Blacketer (www.prca.org/articles/ctjblack.html).

3) November, 2000, pp. 205-237, “Common Grace, Theonomy, and Civic Good: The Temptations of Calvinist Politics, being Reflections on the Third Point of the CRC Kalamazoo Synod 1924,” by Dr. John Bolt.

³Bolt, *CTJ* (April, 2000), p. 7.

⁴For the text of the “Three Points of Common Grace” (including the Scripture passages the Synod cited), see Herman C. Hanko, *For Thy Truth’s Sake* (Grandville, MI: RFPA, 2000), pp. 423-424.

the underlying issues of Kuypertian “common grace” were not addressed properly in this whole affair, much to Hoeksema’s concern.⁵

Janssen’s departure left a cleavage in the CRC. Many of their “big name” preachers, like Jan Karel Van Baalen, were highly sympathetic to him and his views, and evidently loaded with plenty of bile over his deposition. Thus they launched what Dr. Bolt effectively characterises as a “get Hoeksema” blitz, as they regarded Hoeksema as one of the chief protagonists against their hero Janssen.⁶ And their target was on the issue of “common grace.” They saw, correctly, that Hoeksema’s rejection of “common grace” was foundational to his brilliant polemics exposing Janssen.⁷

Bolt’s description of the machinations of the anti-Hoeksema faction is fascinating for its revelation of underhand and illegal activity in order to get Hoeksema indicted before the Synod. Church order procedures were short-circuited, even turned upside-down.⁸ (You would never suspect such unchristian and scandalous goings-on from just a read of DS’s little book. I made the point in *BRJ* 44 how DS’s book was too patent, and lacking in proper research of all the material.⁹ This tended to give his book a “fait accompli” appearance.)

It is fascinating to see how the four Calvin Seminary professors who had opposed Janssen suddenly changed sides in this whole affair and opposed Hoeksema. Ten Hoor, Volbeda, Heyns, and Berkhof doubtless wanted to keep their orthodox views on Scripture intact, but they failed to see that their espousal of Kuypertian common grace undermined their foundations in this respect.¹⁰ Common grace was the “in”

⁵Cf. Bolt, “Common Grace and the Christian Reformed Synod of Kalamazoo,” pp. 9-14, where he “sets the stage” for the whole Hoeksema affair of 1924.

⁶Dr. Bolt cites the actual phrase “get Hoeksema” as a description of what was going on (p. 19), and he describes the anti-Hoeksema movement as an “assault,” indeed, “a kind of ecclesiastical blitzkrieg” (p. 18).

⁷Dr. Bolt notes how Van Baalen and Janssen accused Hoeksema and those who opposed Janssen as being “anabaptistic” because “they deny common grace” (pp. 12-14).

⁸Bolt also claims that there were irregularities about the trial of Janssen and gives his reasons. However, the idiosyncrasies in the Janssen case were due to the fact that Janssen refused to give straight answers to the questions asked of him concerning his beliefs vis-à-vis the inspiration and authority of Scripture. The result was that most of the “hard evidence” that could be adduced against him was from student notes. By contrast, Hoeksema and Danhof were both open and forthright about their views in the Synod of 1924.

⁹*BRJ* 44 (Winter, 2005), pp. 46-48.

¹⁰“Kuypertian” common grace is a term intended to specify the particular type of common grace dogma running riot in the CRC in those days. There are a number of different types of “common

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doctrine of those times, popularized as it had been by Dr. Abraham Kuyper's monumental three-volume study *De Gemeine Gratie*.¹¹ Though not in anyway represented in any of the Reformed confessions to which every CRC minister had sworn allegiance, the dogma was now so "in fashion" that the CRC "powers that be" ordered, and got, the "Three Points of Common Grace" drafted, and finally added, albeit ambiguously, to their confessional standards. Then the zealots got a hold of it, and wielded it as a club to "get Hoeksema."

DS in his book makes but one brief allusion to the Reformed confessions with respect to these matters, making the claim that *Canons of Dordt* III/IV:9 teaches the free offer (p. 62). This is interesting because, first, given that the common grace/free offer controversy that DS is dealing with arose primarily and par excellence in a denomination espousing the *Three Forms of Unity*, this is the only time in his whole book that he refers to those standards, and he is effectively limited to just one use of the word "offer" in the English translation to underwrite his contentions here. The tenuousness of this is striking. Second, the reference he gives is inconclusive in that it is the meaning of "offer" as given at that juncture that is a serious point in contention, a point that he goes on to dispute, erroneously as we shall observe later (DV). Third, the context of the word "offer" in the *Canons* here will not support DS's interpretation, as his interpretation would have the article then run foul of the assertions of the immediately preceding and succeeding articles. Fourth, the "free offer" caucus in the CRC were not themselves satisfied about the kind of weight that DS would want to put on III/IV:9, else why would they add the "Three Points of Common Grace," albeit ambiguously, to their confessional standards in order to indict Hoeksema et al.? If the *Three Forms of Unity* unequivocally taught "common

grace," but fundamentally they all share the same original "gene pool" or DNA, so to speak. The fact that there are a number of them is indicative of the tenuous grip these dogmas have on Scripture. Fundamentally, there is no difference betwixt Kuyperian common grace and the sub-genus espoused and defended by DS. A reading of Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* will indicate this to the reader.

¹¹*De Gemeine Gratie (Of Common Grace)* was authored by Dr. Abraham Kuyper, Dutch Calvinist leader and Dutch Prime Minister (1901-1905). The three volumes of *De Gemeine Gratie* contain a paucity of Scripture references, and contrast sharply in this respect to his other work on grace, *Dat De Genade Particulier Is*. This one-volume work has been translated into English by Marvin Kamps under the title, *Particular Grace: A Defense of God's Sovereignty in Salvation* (Grandville, MI: RFPA, 2001). In it, Kuyper carefully distinguishes between "gratie" and "genade," a distinction not easily maintained in English. "Genade" is the true saving grace of God, as distinct from "gratie," which latter is non-saving and really questionably "grace" at all.

grace” and the “free offer,” then what need was there to add to them the “Three Points of Common Grace”?

Dr. Bolt, accessing CRC synodical archives, states,

the impression is overwhelming that the assault on Hoeksema was well-orchestrated and hurried, a kind of ecclesiastical blitzkrieg ... There is a final bit of evidence supporting the idea that the opposition to Hoeksema was collaborative and perhaps even well-financed ... one cannot avoid the impression of high-pressured haste operating behind the scenes (pp. 18, 19, 20-21).

Again, Bolt writes,

The sense that Hoeksema had of agitators outside his congregation stirring the pot of protest seems justified when we also note that in addition to the outside protest that came from the Rev. J. K. Van Baalen to Classis Grand Rapids East, the Rev. J. K. Van Baalen also submitted a similar protest to Classis Grand Rapids West against Hoeksema’s fellow anti-common-grace pastor, the Rev. H. Danhof of Kalamazoo First CRC. Van Baalen was not a member of either classis and had submitted his protest to the respective consistories and classes without first submitting [them] to the pastors in question (p. 18).

This procedure was a contemptuous setting aside of the legally-established provisions of the denomination’s Church Order. In fact, Dr. Bolt goes on to reveal that the consistories of both Hoeksema’s church and Danhof’s had offered Van Baalen a combined meeting with Hoeksema and Danhof to consider the matters Van Baalen had against them, but Van Baalen had refused it, and “insistently delivered” his protestation to the respective classical bodies over the top of the pastors concerned and their individual consistories (p. 18). Added to all this were the “additional irregularities” from other anti-Hoeksema sources such as Rev. M. Schans of Kelloggsville CRC. He had evidently prepared an “overture” against Hoeksema to present to Classis Grand Rapids East, but his own consistory refused to approve it, so Schans went ahead and had it printed and distributed to all churches of the Classis, going over the top of his own consistory. All this was without informing Hoeksema or his consistory (p. 18).

Thus the “common grace” party descended to illegality and sordid breaches of scriptural church order in their maniacal drive to destroy Hoeksema. “Common-

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gracers” seemingly willingly cast “common decency” to the winds in order to get their way. When Classis Grand Rapids East met on 21 May, 1924, the Classis nevertheless took up the overture from Schans, even though it was of dubious legal standing, declared it legal, and combined it with other protests against Hoeksema (p. 19). The latter and his elder at the Classis presented written objections as to the legality of this whole procedure, but their protests were ignored, and, under instructions from their consistory, they then withdrew from the meeting. At this, the Classis, this august body of “Reformed” stalwarts, went into closed session, and, realising its own foolishness over the illegality of its procedures, finally issued a public statement saying that “it had *never* decided to treat the protest and enter into its subject matter!” (p. 19; italics mine). Pilate was washing his hands again.

It didn’t work. From his distant pastorate of Munster, in the State of Indiana, Van Baalen had pushed the issue to Classis Grand Rapids West too. Again, illegal procedure. This protest was directed against Rev. Danhof, a co-protagonist with Hoeksema against the common grace/free offer caucus. At first this Classis decided correctly that Van Baalen and Danhof should meet personally to attempt to iron out the matter. That failing, the issue should be sent first to the consistory of Danhof’s church. But amazingly, the Classis also decided that if Van Baalen was not satisfied with this—the scriptural and legal Church Order procedure—then “he would have the privilege of calling a special meeting of Classis Grand Rapids West on June 10th 1924,” a date just two weeks hence.

This fact prompted Dr. Bolt to state,

Once again, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the hasty manoeuvring was designed to provide an umbrella of legality for a conclusion already arrived at. Was the outcome ever really in doubt? (p. 21).

Van Baalen met Danhof and evidently was unsatisfied. His next step, legally and scripturally, was to take the matter up with Danhof’s consistory. This he refused, and went straight ahead and called for the special meeting of the Classis. However, the Classis, suddenly noting that Synod was only eight days hence, decided that the whole protest should be shunted right up to the top, “seeing it concerned a matter that was of import to the churches in general.” This, says Dr. Bolt, was a correct decision, but it also meant that another question was raised with it. Would the Synod deal with the case in the same haste as the two Classes had dealt with it or would it deal with the common grace issue with “appropriate, deliberate, ecclesi-

astical caution, taking the time to weigh all sides and consequences of the issue carefully?” (p. 21). This the Synod of Kalamazoo failed to do.

There was little time left for a Committee of Pre-Advice to investigate the protests and present to the Synod wise recommendations. The committee that was formed to attend to this matter did however make some salient recommendations in a 24-page report presented on 18 June. We may summarise its deliberations and recommendations as follows:

- 1) That Van Baalen’s Classis Grand Rapids East protest not be dealt with by Synod, because the “emphases on Divine Sovereignty” Danhof and Hoeksema manifest are common to the supralapsarian tradition allowed in Reformed denominations through the centuries, and the two ministers indicted by the protests are known to “absolutely reject” the notion that God is the author of sin, a conclusion which some allege against them.
- 2) That Rev. Vander Mey’s protest concerning the two defendants also not be dealt with, because:
 - a) the protest addresses similar concerns to those of Van Baalen;
 - b) it is based on the preaching of Rev. Hoeksema, and the committee lacks the necessary means to “make an impartial judgement” on this;
 - c) the allegations Vander Mey makes vis-à-vis the “less than satisfying gospel-preaching of Hoeksema” were based again on the latter’s preaching, which the committee lacks the means of verifying. Also the accused’s consistory have never expressed any concerns in this regard. Again, the “kind of preaching in which the invitation is missing” is “nothing new in Reformed circles and has always been tolerated.”
- 3) That with regard to three points,
 - a) the favourable disposition of God to all men, not only to the elect;
 - b) the restraint of sin in individuals and society;
 - c) the doing of so-called righteousness by the unregenerate;

the committee recommend that because we are dealing here with points in which Danhof and Hoeksema have chosen to take specific positions on, and that these points have declarations concerning them in the confessions, then Synod should take up this matter and declare itself firmly for the sake of keeping the peace in the churches.

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- 4) That the committee considers in the light of certain Scriptures and comments from theologians in the Reformed tradition (Calvin, Ursinus, and Van Mastricht were cited) that “some” of the views of Hoeksema and Danhoff were “in conflict with the Holy Scriptures.” However, in that the matters were complex as well as pressing, the committee urged the synod:
 - a) to make no declaration at present regarding the doctrine of common grace and its ramifications;
 - b) to appoint an investigative committee to formulate a dogma concerning this matter which can be incorporated into the confessions, and that this process be extended over a “long period of exchange of thoughts” which may take some years. Public debate should be encouraged to familiarize the whole denomination with the issues, which should lead after “the passing of a few years” to a common opinion generally held on the matter, thus rendering the opportunity for the denomination to make a “united confession concerning common grace.”
- 5) That, in conclusion, the synod should be reminded
 - a) of the warnings issued by Dr. Abraham Kuyper concerning the dangers inherent in the doctrine of common grace that can issue in misuse, history already proving that “this danger is real and more than imaginary” and that “Dr. Bavinck has reminded us of this danger in his dogmatics;”
 - b) that “the Doctrine of special grace in Christ” was being “crowded more and more to the background” by the pressures from the common grace advocates, and that there was in the denomination a “strong desire to bring theology in harmony with philosophy which stands in the service of unbelief;”
 - c) that the church must “always be watchful that Jesus Christ crucified and risen from the dead be the core of its preaching” and that God’s holy people are a special people, called out of this world, exhorted not to be conformed to it, but “transformed” by the renewing of their minds (pp. 22-26).¹²

Dr. Bolt informs us that this advisory report was received by the synod “as information” (p. 27). After some further sessions, in some of which Hoeksema, Danhof, and Van Baalen were allowed to “clarify” their positions by open addresses to the Synod, a counter proposal was submitted recommending that Synod now “step

¹²The above is a summary in my own words for the sake of brevity and conserving space. I believe I have accurately adumbrated the work of the Committee of Pre-Advice.

down from the matter of common grace” and in a spirit of brotherly love carry out further research, and this latter be carried out by a specially appointed committee representing all sides, as “the time is not yet ripe to make a precise declaration concerning” the issues (pp. 27-28).

This wise advice was dismissed; the substitute proposal was defeated. Synod instead issued a confusing and ambiguous deliberation:

- 1) It accepted the committee’s advice that Hoeksema and Danhof were basically Reformed and orthodox.
- 2) It issued the recommended warning concerning “worldliness” to the churches.
- 3) It made no declaration for the present concerning the standpoint of the church vis-à-vis “common grace.”
- 4) It would *not* appoint a committee to investigate the doctrine in order to formulate dogma which would be incorporated into the confessional standards.
- 5) It adopted the now famous “Three Points of Common Grace” *not*, it seems, as an addition to the confessional standards to which office-bearers would be obligated confessionally, but as a means for careful study of the matter.
- 6) It did *not* recommend *any* disciplinary action vis-à-vis Revs. Hoeksema and Danhof, and this despite certain recommendations of the committee of pre-advice that they be admonished to abide by the “Three Points of Common Grace” (pp. 28-29).

Dr. Bolt rightly sums up this final deliberation by saying,

Whatever the status of the Three Points, the tentativeness of synod’s decision—if not its outright contradictory character—suggests that it would be wholly inappropriate to use the three points as a tool for ecclesiastical discipline and censure. Alas, it was not to be (p. 29).

This analysis puts a distinctly different picture before the reader than the terse one-paragraph description given by DS in his book (p. 10). DS’s words there are:

[Hoeksema] rejected the “Three Points of Common Grace” adopted by the Synod of the CRC of America at its meeting in Kalamazoo in 1924 and was subsequently deposed from the Christian Reformed ministry.

In contrast, Dr. Bolt’s researches indicate that:

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First, the three points were *not explicitly adopted* as a mandatory, binding dogma.

Second, Hoeksema was *not deposed by the Synod*, but was in fact deposed some four months subsequently via a further illegal machination which in fact utilised the Three Points *as if they were explicitly binding dogma*.

In the aftermath of the Synod of Kalamazoo, as Dr. Bolt explains, “the ambiguity of the Synodical deliberations did not stop the concerted ecclesiastical opposition to Hoeksema” (p. 32). Also, these deliberations did not satisfy Hoeksema either, and he noted that the Synod’s decisions were ambiguous. Notwithstanding the ambiguities, the anti-Hoeksema caucus “continued the journalistic attacks” via press and pamphlet. Also, in that some of this caucus was internal to Hoeksema’s congregation, in the form of a small group under censure by the consistory for raising opprobrium against Hoeksema, in a manner inconsistent with Scripture and the Church Order, a new factor emerged when the consistory refused to raise the censures under order from Classis Grand Rapids East meeting on 20 August (p. 32). The reader will understand immediately that in that the censures were rightly based on Scripture and the Church Order, the Classis had no right and no business to issue such an order to Hoeksema’s consistory. Their correct procedure should have been to investigate the legal and scriptural basis for the censures and, on finding that the consistory were following meticulously correct procedures, to have supported the consistory against the plaintiffs. Classis could have gone on, had it wished, to admonish the plaintiffs to withdraw their accusations, then present their complaints against Hoeksema in the proper scriptural manner, as per the Church Order. That way the consistory could have rightly lifted the censures. However, seemingly headlong in its drive to “get Hoeksema,” the Classis went ahead, and its order caused Hoeksema’s congregation to divide, some for and some against him, which latter expanded their protest to include the consistory as well. Classis Grand Rapids East, next meeting in November-December of 1924, then intervened, insisting not only that Hoeksema and his consistory should merely lift the censure on their dissident members, *but also submit to the Three Points of Common Grace as if these points now held explicit confessional status*, which, as we have seen, legally they did not. Of course, Hoeksema refused, whereon Classis deposed him, an act which was, according to the Church Order of the denomination, illegal. Unlike in Presbyterian churches, the Reformed Church Order grants autonomy to a local church, and as

such only the local consistory can legally dismiss its minister. A classis, unlike a presbytery, has no hierarchical rights over a local church, and has no legal right to bypass the authority of the local consistory. Nevertheless, legal or not, the CRC “powers that be” steam-rolled ahead and after “much ecclesiastical wrangling” Hoeksema and his consistory were deposed from the denomination, leaving a small rump of 92 members who had been anti-Hoeksema, and were now gunning for securing the properties against the majority. A civil court case, initiated by the 92, contra the Lord’s admonitions in I Corinthians 6:1ff., turned into a travesty which saw godless lawyers, judge and jury, poking their noses into a theological conflict none of them understood. They reacted sharply against Hoeksema’s Reformed and confessional theology, judged it to be “medieval,” and then ruled accordingly in favour of the minority. In April 1925, Hoeksema and the 800 were forced by court order to relinquish the congregational properties to the 92.

Fat lot of “grace” there was in those “common-gracers.”

But all this detail gives the reader quite a different impression, does it not, to that conveyed by the terse brevity of DS? We might rephrase what DS has written in the light of the facts, to read as follows:

Rev. Herman Hoeksema rejected the “Three Points of Common Grace” that were tenuously adopted by the Synod of Kalamazoo 1924 as a means to study the disputed doctrines, and, although the said Synod saw no need to place him under discipline for this, nevertheless, through underhand and unscriptural machinations, his enemies had him illegally deposed over these same three points as if they were suddenly “binding dogma.”

Quite a different picture, is it not? The reader will now appreciate perhaps the need for a detailed study of the facts underlying all the facets of the common grace-free offer controversy. We shall (DV) have to consider next what DS says concerning the “Three Points of Common Grace,” with respect to Messrs Berkhof and Hoeksema, for here again, lack of proper information has led him to present a superficial picture which somewhat obscures and, sadly, seriously distorts the actual facts.

to be continued (DV)