

# The Free Offer Issue (4)

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**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.**

## Recapitulation

In three previous articles thus far (*BRJ* 44, 46, and 47), I have sought to give:

1) a critical overview of the Rev. Silversides' (hereafter DS) book (*BRJ* 44);<sup>1</sup>

2) a critical examination of the exegetical tradition that he has worked within (*BRJ* 46 and 47).<sup>2</sup> This latter feature required some detailed analysis of the epistemological foundations undergirding the notions of "paradox" as being a manifest feature of Scripture. I traced its input into the Calvinist stream of orthodoxy from the early 18th century "Marrow" preachers of Scotland, which, according to later Scottish Presbyterian theologians, left a "permanent mark" on Scottish Calvinist orthodoxy which set it off significantly from the earlier Scottish Calvinism with respect to "free-offer" theology. I subsequently analysed the most developed logical codification of "paradoxism" intrinsic to modern Calvinist theology, this being found in the writings of Cornelius Van Til, and looked at the more than superficial similarity between Van Til's "paradoxism" and neo-orthodoxy's Barthian dialecticism,<sup>3</sup> noting finally how leading modern Calvinists and Banner of

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<sup>1</sup>*BRJ* 44 (Winter, 2005), pp. 37-48.

<sup>2</sup>*BRJ* 46 (Winter, 2007), pp. 20-33; and *BRJ* 47 (Summer, 2007) pp. 26-36.

<sup>3</sup>Note especially that Van Til in his *Common Grace and the Gospel* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1972) admits that his method "on the surface, and by the sound of words ... might seem to indicate a neo-orthodox approach to the question of God and His revelation to man" (p. v). He then goes on to claim that the opposite is actually true, that despite neo-orthodox appearances, his method is clean of such proclivities, asserting that he avoids the issue of the "post-Kantian limiting concept" by means of his "Christian limiting concept." It is my contention that he failed to make a true distinction here, but his attempt to do so saliently witnesses to the "neo-orthodox" or "Barthian" tone to his theological reasoning in that he attempts here to play down the similarities.

Truth men accept openly the notion that “God only knows” how the free offer can be reconciled with the doctrines of election and limited atonement. I then (*BRJ* 47) traced, *inter alia*, the pagan origins of dialectical thought and paradoxism, outlining its effects through the last few centuries and its deleterious effects on the Reformed faith.

Much more could be said in the vein of the foregoing. I have noted my impression that DS nowhere *explicitly espouses* the Van Tilian dogma or even evinces awareness of any first hand contact with the actual teachings of Van Til, but that nevertheless his presuppositional stance as manifest in his book “beats time,” so to speak, with Van Til neatly.<sup>4</sup> This is perfectly understandable and to be expected.

Theological training in today’s Calvinist environment virtually guarantees it. Theological fellowship amongst today’s Calvinist clergy virtually reinforces it, nay more, would tend to *enforce* it. But it means that the logical idiosyncrasies intrinsic to Van Til’s work logically and relentlessly emerge in DS’s book. Vitiating of the former inescapably means vitiating of the latter.

Nonetheless, DS goes on to work out these principles fervently in line with his stated goals:

- 1) *to advance the preaching of Christ to needy sinners and*
- 2) *to help establish weak and doubting Christians in the consolations of the Gospel.*<sup>5</sup>

It is henceforth necessary to track, and concurrently critically appraise, each step in his course.

First, we shall consider DS’s chapter 1, entitled “Statement of the Question” (pp. 8-11).

DS avers immediately that his book is written “from the standpoint of commitment to the five points of Calvinism.” We have to say, as our analysis will show, that commitment is very much forced into the mould of a *qualified* commitment, in that the doctrines of unconditional election and limited atonement are seriously compromised by the dialectical tensions that DS allows into his principles. Doubtless DS is, however, sincere in his

<sup>4</sup>Hence my comment to the effect that whereas DS nowhere uses the word “paradox,” his book is nevertheless framed on the presupposition of it (*BRJ* 46, pp. 32-33).

<sup>5</sup>Cf. DS, *The Free Offer*, p. 3.

claim here. As intimated previously, he appears largely oblivious to the idiosyncrasies of modern Calvinist exegetical tradition.

He then attempts to clarify what he means by the term “free offer.” Rightly, he *denies* any scriptural currency to

(1) the Arminianistic “invitation” system and the concomitant methods and acoutrements intrinsic thereto;

(2) any idea that the preacher should assure his unconverted hearers that “Christ died for you,” this being, he says non-apostolic, and compatible only with a belief in universal atonement. Christ died, says DS, “to save only the elect of God,” whereon he supplies an ensample of some seven apposite Scripture references (Isa. 53:8; Matt.1:21; John 10:15, 26; 17:9; Rom. 8:31-34; Eph. 5:25).<sup>6</sup>

We have to say, however, that nowhere here does he seem to realize that the free offer standpoint compromises all these and many other Scriptures. Also he does not here advert to the fact that his later exposition in his book presents a gospel that very much implies that Christ’s death is, somehow or other, referenced to all men for saving mercy, such that they all have what he calls a “warrant” to come to Christ for salvation.<sup>7</sup> In the face of this, we are constrained to ask that if Christ did *not* die for all men as DS asserts, how, logically *and morally*, can one say that *all men* have a *warrant* to come to him to receive that salvation achieved by His death? For if he did not die for the salvation of all men, then it follows inexorably that *for the non-elect there is no salvation in Christ* for them to come to and partake of. And if this is so, then how can a gospel preacher present the gospel in such terms as to imply that there *is* mercy and salvation in Christ for all men (non-elect included) without slipping, albeit sincerely and unconsciously, into what is a *de facto* deceit and hypocrisy?<sup>8</sup>

Again, what is of concern right here in chapter 1 of DS’s book is a failure to make clear what exactly he conceives as being the actual content of the gospel. He has rightly denied that it is not found in the notion that

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<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, chapter 5, pp. 73-80, especially pp. 79-80.

<sup>8</sup>DS seems to me to indicate some degree of discomfort here. On page 57, he expounds how the free offer contains a “conditional promise.” This notion we will, DV, consider anon. Suffice it to say here that such a free offer does not carry conviction when one realises that non-elect hearers of the free offer are totally incapable of fulfilling the conditions demanded. Logically and morally, this makes the notion of an offer untenable in this context.

“the preacher is to assure his hearers that Christ died for you,” and he thereafter goes on to equally, and rightly, deny the distortions of the truth known as hyper-Calvinism on the one hand and Arminianism on the other.<sup>9</sup> Both, he rightly says, deny that God commands every man “to do what their corrupt nature renders them unable and unwilling to do.” Inability does not abrogate responsibility when the inability was willingly and wilfully taken on by humanity in the person of Adam. We may illustrate, a man who is blind drunk has taken on himself a total inability to drive his car safely. If, nevertheless, he drives his car in this state, he still is as liable under the law for any accident or offence he commits just as if he was sober. By contrast, it is one of the characteristics of hyper-Calvinism that it denies that all men are duty bound to come to God in repentance on account of their being unable. Likewise, it is a riposte of the Arminians against the Calvinists to insist that, since God commands all men, all men must be able to repent, otherwise the command is unreasonable. These two doctrinal poles are actually based on one common notion: that God cannot demand that men do something they are incapable of.<sup>10</sup> DS is right to expose and reject both but, again, he fails to delineate what, in his view, is the correct content of the gospel. And it is vital that he should do so here in this first chapter, which, we remind our readers, is entitled “Statement of the Question.”

Again, in this first chapter, DS goes on to distinguish, very succinctly and accurately between God’s will of precept and His will of decree, rami-fying his assertions here with ample Scripture references, and summing it up with an apposite quote from John Calvin. We may illustrate this difference of divine will by citing the example of God’s commands to Pharaoh, to “let my people go” (preceptive will) and His determination to secretly harden Pharaoh’s heart (decretive will) so that he will disobey God’s command (preceptive will). Though DS does not explicitly say so here, it is evident that what he is implying is that God can and does sovereignly determine that His preceptive will is applied in the gospel preaching by the

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<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>10</sup>Again, it should be emphasised that whilst we have no problem with the idea that God can and does rightfully apply His preceptive will to all sinners, elect and non-elect, the idea that likewise this would legitimise the notion that He can apply an offer equally to all moves the logic from the realm of moral right to friendly persuasion. And it would make such an offer a mockery. But of this, more anon.

preacher, and that His decretive will He applies Himself secretly in the hearts of the hearers. But all hearers, like Pharaoh, are under obligation to obey the preceptive will. Such principles are Scripture-based; we have no quarrel or disparity with DS over such. However, he will later, as we shall see, make use of this distinction of the two wills of God in an unsatisfactory way.

Again, DS still does not furnish us with any definition of what he deems to be the true scriptural content of the gospel here. Having denied a series of well-known errors, he now proceeds to inform us that

In more recent years, however, another position has appeared which could be described as somewhere between orthodox Calvinism [sic] and Hyper-Calvinism, though claiming to represent the former.<sup>11</sup>

There follows two paragraphs outlining the theology of Herman Hoeksema and the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC).

With regard to this latter, we note firstly, and gratefully (!) that DS has put “clear blue water” betwixt Hoeksema and hyper-Calvinism! This is indeed a massive shift in a pro-PRC direction! We remember earlier exchanges with DS through the pages of the *British Reformed Journal*, and tape-recordings of his anti-PRC lectures and debates in which he distinctly gave the impression that he was convinced we all followed hyper-Calvinist tenets. A subsequent greater familiarity with PRC theology seems to have corrected his outlook to some degree, and for this we appreciate his comment here. We are aware too of the fact that Dr. James Packer has recently intimated that Prof. Engelsma’s book, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel*, has established that the PRC are “not hyper-Calvinists.”<sup>12</sup> And, of course, like statements have been made by such as the late and lamented Dr. John Gerstner<sup>13</sup> and Dr. Gordon H. Clark.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>12</sup>Private verbal communication.

<sup>13</sup>Cf. Dr. Gerstner’s “Foreword” to Prof. David Engelsma’s book, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: RFP, 1994), in which he affirmed his agreement with Hoeksema, Engelsma, and the PRC against the free offer system espoused by the “mainstream” Calvinism of John Murray, Ned Stonehouse, et al (pp. vii-ix).

<sup>14</sup>Prof. Clark was, of course, put through the same kind of vituperating assault as was Hoeksema 20 years previous, and for the same reason: denying the free offer. On this see the well-

However, DS is still not happy with the PRC position. Whilst referring to Hoeksema as an “able Dutch-American theologian,” he has nevertheless framed this book as a polemic against him. In the paragraph on page 10, describing briefly the historic development of Hoeksema’s theology vis-à-vis the Christian Reformed Church of North America, there is a distinctly unsatisfactory and inaccurate reference made which is prejudicial to Hoeksema’s good standing, without there being any evidence rendered to back this up. The effect is acutely pejorative. And distortive of the truth. It is necessary here to clarify these matters, and to refute the inaccurate assertions.

First, DS tells us that Hoeksema “rejected the Three Points of Common Grace adopted by the Synod of the Christian Reformed Church” in 1924 “and was subsequently deposed from the Christian Reformed ministry.” DS then immediately tells us that the “Three Points” were defended in a booklet by Louis Berkhof in the following year. The title of Berkhof’s booklet is given as “The Three Points in All Parts Reformed.” The impression given by this brief description of those events tends to portray Hoeksema as a maverick who wouldn’t submit to the tenets of true Reformed theology, with the maverick being rightly booted out of the denomination, and the tenets he wrongfully denied being defended by no less than the well-known, highly-revered, and scholarly Louis Berkhof, the then Professor of Dogmatic Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Berkhof’s *Systematic Theology* and several other books have established this man as a “leading light” in the world of Reformed theology from those days until now, his magnum opus long being on the publication list at the Banner of Truth, which, as I have previously adverted, is, in the form of their “leading lights” John J. Murray and Iain Murray, fully behind DS’s book presently under review.<sup>15</sup>

Hoeksema comes across in all this as if he was an “upstart” who was finally well and truly “put in his place” by the “revered and unimpeachable” big names and “powers that be” in what DS terms “orthodox Calvinism,” i.e., what DS considers proper Reformed theology.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

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written *The Clark-Van Til Controversy* by Herman Hoeksema (Hobbs, New Mexico: The Trinity Foundation, 1995).

<sup>15</sup>John J. Murray wrote the foreword to DS’s book, whilst Iain Murray gave it an up-beat review in the *Banner of Truth* magazine.

Again, we do not lay blame at the foot of DS. He is here merely reflecting the general viewpoint of mainstream, modern Calvinism. If the Christian Reformed Church of North America in 1924-25 got one thing right, it was this, how to circulate convincing propaganda. Nearly the whole of modern Calvinism bought into it big, because it was a propaganda advanced via “big names.” Berkhof, R. B. Kuiper, Ned B. Stonehouse, John Murray, Cornelius Van Til, and scores more. The Banner of Truth today continues this stream of anti-Hoeksema, anti-PRC propaganda. It is not so strange to me to discover that while the Banner men are eulogising DS’s book and continuing the anti-Hoeksema polemic, they are nevertheless highly enthusiastic at the same time about John Wesley and Methodism.<sup>16</sup> It all hangs together. And modern so-called “Calvinism” is largely being “hi-jacked” into a quasi-Wesleyan mish-mash. All in the name of “Reformed theology!” Against such a scenario, anything coming from Hoeksema et. al. is about as welcome as a detachment of US marines in Baghdad.

So let us have a look at the truth about Hoeksema and the events of 1924-25. That was a long time ago, and in the ensuing 76 years to the year 2000 the Christian Reformed Church (hereafter CRC), which had deposed Hoeksema in 1924, had followed out their “common grace” principles uncannily as Hoeksema had predicted back in 1924. By 2000 for them the issues of doctrinal and confessional fidelity had long gone into the trash can. As soon as the late 1940s even, candidates for Calvin Seminary could register total ignorance concerning what their confessional documents actually were, let alone what was in them. By the 1990s higher criticism and worldly morals had become ensconced in Calvin Seminary and in Calvin College, the denomination’s liberal arts college. Gays and lesbians were actively received and welcomed, and the legacy of 1924 had been forgotten, few who lived through it had survived beyond about 1980. The atmosphere of the denomination was now liberal, and they cared not about doctrinal exactness. In consequence the *Three Forms of Unity* and the CRC’s “The Three Points of Common Grace” were little more than antiques. In this climate, the few remaining men of Reformed persuasion at Calvin

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<sup>16</sup>Witness for instance Iain Murray’s book, *John Wesley and Men Who Followed*. Also the same author wrote in another of his recent books a chapter entitled “What we can learn from John Wesley” (*The Old Evangelicalism* [Edinburgh: Banner, 2005], pp. 139-165), wherein Murray is content even to uncritically include a quote from D. L. Moody to help underwrite the points he is trying to establish.

Seminary were able to make an unhindered, and unprejudiced research and re-evaluation of the Hoeksema affair of 1924. This action was apposite in about the year 2000, as the PRC then celebrated 75 years of existence as a denomination, and appropriately in that year the pages of the *Calvin Theological Journal*, published bi-annually at Calvin Seminary, carried a series of learned papers by two academics, Dr. John Bolt and Raymond Blacketer. From their position inside the CRC, these two were able to access the synodical archives of the CRC. They researched the documents relevant to the Hoeksema affair freely and extensively.<sup>17</sup>

It would take several whole issues of the *BRJ* to present the whole of their reports in detail. Suffice it here to present an outline of their findings. Those interested in looking at the original articles can do so via accessing the back issues of the *Calvin Theological Journal (CTJ)* or via the internet.<sup>18</sup> What must be emphasised at this juncture is the fact that the “powers that be” in the modern CRC and at the modern Calvin Seminary have for some time “moved on” from all 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 PRC 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

<sup>17</sup>I refer here to numerous documents, viz., the various *Acta der Synode* of the Christian Reformed Churches for the years 1920 through 1924, the *Agenda CRC Synod 1924*, *Reports of the Committee of Pre-Advice*, plus a plethora of archived publications, books, pamphlets, journal articles, news reports etc., in both English and Dutch languages for the years in question. The sources are adequately documented in the articles published in the *Calvin Theological Journal* issues cited hereafter.

<sup>18</sup>The relevant issues of the *CTJ* are the April and November issues for the year 2000. The articles I refer are as follows:

- 1) April, 2000, pp. 7-36, “Common Grace and the Synod of Kalamazoo (1924): A Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Perspective,” by Dr. John Bolt (<http://www.prca.org/articles/ctjblack.html>).
- 2) April, 2000, pp. 37-65, “The Three Points in Most Parts Reformed: A Re-examination of the So-Called Well-Meant Offer of Salvation,” by Raymond A. Blacketer (<http://www.prca.org/articles/ctj1.html>).
- 3) November, 2000, “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.

1988 on the relation between the views of Prof. 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.<sup>19</sup> It seems that the examining faculty at Calvin Seminary were largely indifferent to what Prof. Hanko was producing, and this because the whole issue was now just a matter of history to them. In short, the modern CRC was not really concerned that a research student would give the CRC of the 1920s a "kick in the backside" because they were, by the 1980s, so detached from the old traditions of the CRC that they didn't seem to be in any way prejudiced against the thesis.

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

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 "main-stream" 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 first 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."<sup>20</sup> He thereon gives in full the "Three Points of Common Grace" which were adopted by the CRC in 1924 (to which DS

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<sup>19</sup>Cf. 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 Protestant Reformed Seminary, Grandville, Michigan.

<sup>20</sup>Bolt, *CTJ* (April, 2000), p. 7.

refers in his brief and unsatisfactory statement referencing Hoeksema's deposition). Nearly 30 pages of closely-argued and well-documented material then follows in the *CTJ* discussing this whole affair.<sup>21</sup> Bolt outlines how "Kuyperian common grace" had been infused gradually into the CRC in those early years of the 20th century, and with it had come a new attitude to the study of Scripture, encapsulated at Calvin Seminary in the lectures of Professor R. Janssen. For Janssen, who lectured in the Old Testament department, "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 much of the Old Testament was an adoption of such sources as ancient Babylonian mythology. Pretty soon, he was opposed by the rest of the faculty, namely Professors Heyns, Volbeda, 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 was in 1922, when Janssen was finally deposed. But the underlying issues of Kuyperian "common grace" were not addressed properly in this whole affair, much to Hoeksema's concern.<sup>22</sup>

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. In consequence they launched what Dr. Bolt effectively characterises as a "get Hoeksema" blitz,<sup>23</sup> as they regarded Hoeksema as one of the chief protagonists against their hero Janssen. And their target was on the issue of "common grace." They had, correctly, analysed that foundational to Hoeksema's brilliant polemics exposing Janssen was Hoeksema's rejection of "com-

<sup>21</sup>The text of the "Three Points of Common Grace" can be found in Herman C. Hanko's *For Thy Truth's Sake* (Grandville, MI: RPPA, 2000), pp. 423-424, complete with the Scripture passages the Synod cited.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Bolt, "Common Grace and the Synod of Kalamazoo," pp. 9-14, where he "sets the stage" for the whole Hoeksema affair of 1924.

<sup>23</sup>Dr. 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).

<sup>24</sup>Dr. 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).

mon grace.”<sup>24</sup>

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.<sup>25</sup> (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 of the material.<sup>26</sup> This tended to give his book a “fait accompli” appearance.)

It is fascinating thenceforth 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 Kuyperian common grace undermined their foundations in this respect.<sup>27</sup> Common grace was the “in” doctrine of those times, popularized as it had been by Dr. Abraham Kuyper in his monumental 3-volume study *De Gemeine Gratie*.<sup>28</sup> Though not in any way represented in any of the Reformed confessional standards to which

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<sup>25</sup>Bolt 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, and 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.

<sup>26</sup>*BRJ* 44 (Winter, 2005), pp. 46-48.

<sup>27</sup>“Kuyperian” 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 grace,” but fundamentally they all share the same original “gene pool” or DNA, so to speak. The fact that there are 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.

<sup>28</sup>*De Gemeine Gratie (Of Common Grace)* authored by Dr. Abraham Kuyper, Dutch Calvinist leader and Dutch Prime Minister (1901-1905). The 3 volumes of *De Gemeine Gratie* apparently contain a paucity of Scripture references, and contrast sharply in this respect to his other work on Grace, *Dat De Genade Particulier Is*. This latter 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: RFP, 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 the “gratie,” which latter is non-saving, and really questionably “grace” at all.

every CRC minister had to swear 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 and makes the claim that the *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 one 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, DV, observe later. Third, the context of the usage of “offer” as utilised by 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, it is evident that 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 then have needed the “Three Points of Common Grace” to be added, albeit ambiguously to their confessional standards in order to indict Hoeksema et. al.? If the *Three Forms of Unity* unequivocally taught “common grace” and the “free offer,” then what need was there to have added 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 literally 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 the Rev. M. Schans of the Kelloggville 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, and also without informing Hoeksema or his consistory (p. 18).

Thus the "common grace" party descended to the level of illegality and sordid breaches of church scriptural order in their maniacal drive to destroy Hoeksema. "Common Gracers" indeed, they seemingly willingly cast "common decency" to the winds in order to get their way. Fascinatingly, 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 the other protests it had received 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 to discuss the mat-

ter, 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; emphasis HLW’s).

Pilate was washing his hands again.

It didn’t work. From his distant pastorate of Munster, in the State of Indiana, Van Baalen, in concert with his ilk 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 to personally 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 (what was a 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 the Synod of the denomination 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, ecclesiastical 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 and 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 is based on 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 reference. 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.
- 4) That the committee considers in the light of certain Scriptures and comments from theologians in the past 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 with a mandate 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. Coupled with this public debate should be encouraged to familiarize the whole of the 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).<sup>39</sup>

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 via open addresses to the Synod, a counter proposal was submitted recommending that Synod now “step down from the matter of common grace” and in a spirit of brotherly love carry out further research, and this

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<sup>39</sup>The 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.

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 Danhoff, and this despite certain recommendations of the committee of pre-advice that the two pastors 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:

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 by-pass the authority of the local consistory. Nevertheless, legal or not, the CRC “powers that be” steam-rolled ahead and after “much ecclesiastical wrangling” Hoeksema, his consistory, and 800 members of his congregation 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, and they reacted sharply against Hoeksema’s Reformed and confessional theology, judged it to be “medieval,” 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:

The 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 though the said Synod saw no need to place him under discipline for this, nevertheless, through under-handed 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 appreciate perhaps

now the need for what I previously intimated was the 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.