



RFPA update

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Fall 2013

The **SB** and the **PRC**... A TRUMPET BLAST AND REFORMED TESTIMONY

by Prof. David J. Engelsma

Rightly, both friend and foe of the magazine perceive the *Standard Bearer* (SB) as the literary voice of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America (PRC). That the SB is published by a “free” association, that is, an association that is independent of the churches, does not affect the perception. All hear this voice as a trumpet—a clear, loud sounding of the Reformed faith as purely known and boldly confessed by the PRC.

In an address at the 1945 RFPA annual meeting, the cofounder and first editor of the magazine, Herman Hoeksema, said, “The *Standard Bearer* wants to send forth a trumpet blast of no uncertain sound. It purposes to send forth a testimony that is very specifically Reformed.” Hoeksema added that the “very heart” of this specifically Reformed truth, that the SB would clearly and loudly testify, is “the idea of the covenant of grace.” And the truth of the covenant of grace “dare not be divorced from the doctrine of sovereign predestination.”

Little did Hoeksema know that in a few years the SB would have to give a “trumpet blast of no uncertain sound” regarding the doctrine of the covenant for the defense of the Reformed faith within the PRC themselves. But this it did, for the preservation of the churches in the pure Reformed faith, for the development of the doctrine of the covenant by means of controversy, and for the public

exposure of grievous heresy regarding the covenant with believers and their children.

The year 2013 is the sixtieth anniversary of a notable schism in the PRC. The issue was the doctrine of the covenant, whether having its source in the eternal decree of election and, therefore, made unconditionally with Jesus Christ as head of the covenant and with all the elect in him (Gal. 3:16, 19, 29), or cut loose from election and, therefore, made conditionally with all who are baptized. Involved in the controversy was also the conception of the covenant as a living, warm bond of intimate fellowship, reflecting the life of the Trinity, rather than a cold contract or agreement, patterned after a business deal or a political alliance.

In June, 1953, the large, influential First PR Church in Grand Rapids, mother church of the PRC, was divided over the issue of the covenant. In September, 1953, the schism spread to Classis West of the PRC. In October, 1953, the schism sundered the churches in Classis East, thus becoming denomination-wide.

To celebrate schism in the church of Jesus Christ, schism being a gross, public sin that does damage to the visible church of Christ, is inappropriate. We mourned the schism. Sixty years later, we still mourn the schism. But we celebrate the work of Christ in and by the wicked, hurtful schism. That work was the preservation of the PRC in their

belief and confession of salvation by sovereign, particular (unconditional) covenant of grace. We celebrate also the work of Christ by the schism of bringing about development of the doctrine of the covenant; of causing a Reformed denomination officially to adopt and confess orthodox Reformed principles of the doctrine of the covenant (in the PRC's Declaration of Principles); and of exposing and condemning a perennial threat to the truth of the covenant and the gospel of grace in Reformed churches.

The main instrument of the Spirit of Christ in this work, other than the sermons preached by the faithful PR ministers, was the *SB*. Beginning in 1948 and continuing through the heat of the controversy in the early 1950s, the *SB* explained the issues of the controversy and defended the truth of the covenant, crossing swords with the enemies of the truth in the PRC. Thus the magazine preserved the PRC, though in much smaller size than before the schism.

The crucial importance of the *SB* for the PRC and their confession of the truth of the gospel of grace in the schism of 1953 was not the first time the magazine had functioned in this capacity in hard times. The *SB* was instrumental in forming the PRC in March, 1925. The first issue of the *SB* was published in October, 1924, when Hoeksema, G. M. Ophoff, and H. Danhof and their congregations were still members of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC).

Quite directly, the *SB* occasioned the formation of the PRC as a separate Reformed denomination. Rather than the churches producing the magazine, the magazine helped to produce the churches. The deposition by CR classes of Hoeksema, Ophoff, and Danhof and the expelling of their congregations from the CRC were due, in no small part, to the ministers' publishing of the *SB* and writing against the doctrine of common grace, which the synod of the CRC had adopted in the summer of 1924. A ground for the deposition of Danhof and Ophoff and their consistories was their "association with the *SB*." Although his involvement in the *SB* was not mentioned in the grounds for Hoeksema's deposition, it was mentioned in the proceedings that led up to it (Herman Hoeksema, *The Protestant Reformed Churches in America*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids, 1947], 252, 158).

In the early years of the PRC, the *SB* was the main means of the expansion of the denomination among Christian Reformed people who shared the PRC's rejection of common grace and convictions concerning particular grace and the antithesis.

The *SB* vigorously and uncompromisingly defended the unconditional covenant during the internal struggle of the PRC in the early 1950s that culminated in the schism of 1953. This defense is shown today as a glorious defense of the gospel of grace by current developments concerning the covenant in many reputedly conservative Presbyterian and Reformed churches in North America. The heresy of the

federal vision, which is widespread and entrenched in these churches, openly denies justification by faith alone—the heart of the gospel—and thus all the doctrines of grace confessed by the Canons of Dordt with specific regard to salvation in the covenant. For the Reformed critique of the theology of the federal (covenant) vision, see my *Federal Vision: Heresy at the Root* (Jenison, MI: RFPA, 2012).

By its own admission the federal vision is nothing other than the development of the doctrine of a conditional covenant that the PRC repudiated in 1951 by the adoption of a synodical document called the Declaration of Principles, and in 1953 by the discipline of a minister who was preaching the conditional covenant. For the full account of the adoption of the Declaration of Principles, including its contents, and an account of the schism itself, see *Battle for Sovereign Grace in the Covenant* (Jenison, MI: RFPA, 2013). The witness of the *SB* in the late 1940s and early 1950s to the unconditional covenant, now summed up in the Declaration of Principles would be the salvation of Reformed churches in North America, if only they would give heed to it.

The important work of the *SB* on behalf of the PRC and the Reformed faith and life is not finished. What this work—a calling—continues to be is indicated in the statement of the *SB*'s purpose by the founders of the magazine. Originally, the purpose of the magazine was to develop and defend the truth of particular grace against the theology of the three points of common grace adopted by the CRC synod of 1924 (cf. Hoeksema, *PRC in America*, 134–35). The importance of this calling of the *SB*, still today, in AD 2013, is evident from the appalling apostasy of the CRC, both in doctrine and in life, as that church goes on foolishly and wickedly developing and applying its doctrine of common grace.

In their announcement to the CRC that they intended to publish the *SB*, Danhof and Hoeksema advised the CRC that the magazine would testify that "the doctrine of common grace necessarily leads to world conformity" (*Om Recht en Waarheid* [For justice and truth], Kalamazoo, MI: Dalm Printing, n.d., 46; the translation of the Dutch is mine). This warning, many other Reformed churches besides the CRC need to hear. They criticize the CRC for its falling away, while themselves embracing, defending, and preaching the false doctrine that has destroyed that church.

As editor Herman Hoeksema declared in his address to the annual meeting of the RFPA in 1945, the calling of the *SB* is to sound a "trumpet blast of no uncertain sound" that is "very specifically Reformed." And the "very heart" of this "very specifically Reformed" blast is "found in the idea of the covenant of God," which "dare not be divorced from the doctrine of sovereign predestination."

If ever there were a time when such a blast should be sounded throughout all of Reformed Christendom, it is the present. The churches are plagued either by the absence

of a covenant consciousness, as Arminian evangelicalism corrupts the churches, or by the heresy of a conditional covenant that is deliberately divorced from sovereign predestination and is, therefore, also the Arminian error.

For such a time as this, God has raised up the PRC and their *SB*.

In carrying out this calling, the *SB* must not only be positive, but also negative. The constitution of the RFPA requires the *SB* “to reveal false and deceptive views repugnant [to the Word of God as expressed in the Reformed creeds].” The *SB* must be polemical—a fighting magazine. The wars of the Lord did not end in 1953. And the Lord’s wars intend the destruction of the foe.

For this warfare courage is demanded. The magazine must be willing to endure slander and ridicule, while persevering in the conflict without wavering. Love of the truth must outweigh the suffering of the hatred of men.

This means that the editors and writers of the magazine must be willing to be studiously ignored by the wider Reformed community in their magazines and journals, as though the content of the *SB* is unworthy of consideration. They must write without desiring or expecting the praise of men, in anticipation of the only commendation that matters—the Lord’s “well done, good and faithful servant.”

But if history lasts another one hundred years, Reformed scholars somewhere in the world (for the Reformed faith will endure; God grant that it may be in the PRC) will write that, in the midst of shameful embarrassment at the Reformed, Christian faith and life and in an environment of dreadful apostasy, there was a magazine known as the *SB* that kept and fought for the faith of Jesus Christ according to the Reformed religion.

ENCOURAGING THE NEXT GENERATION TO READ

<i>The Standard Bearer</i>		
A Reformed Semi-Monthly Magazine • April 16, 2010		
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RFPA Annual Meeting 2013

September 19, 2013, 7:30 p.m.
Georgetown Protestant Reformed Church
7146 48th Ave, Hudsonville, MI 49426

Speaker: Rev. Brian Huizinga, pastor of Hope Protestant Reformed Church in Redlands, CA

Speech title: “Encouraging the Next Generation to Read”

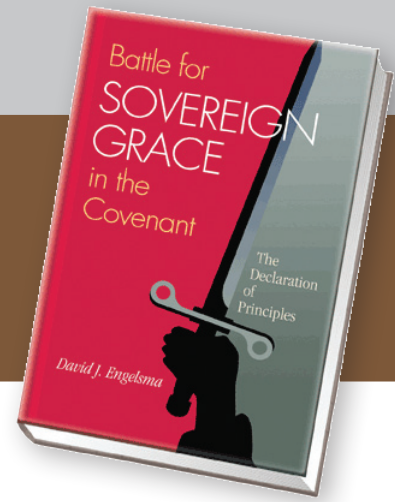
Stick around after the speech to hear more about the work of the RFPA and enjoy refreshments and fellowship with our Association members, authors, and fellow readers!

“The Board of the RFPA reports that at present only 64% of P.R. households subscribe to the *Standard Bearer*. Additionally, at various Christian conferences throughout the year it is commonly and alarmingly reported by others that young people today do not read sound, spiritually edifying literature. Reading has a significant place in the covenant of grace as an instrument of God for the fulfilling of His promises. We must share the conviction that reading sound, spiritually edifying literature cannot disappear among us, lest a generation arise which know not the Lord nor the works which He has done for us. What can we do to help promote such reading among the next generation? This timely question the lecture will address and answer.”

—Rev. Huizinga

IN REVIEW:

BATTLE FOR SOVEREIGN GRACE IN THE COVENANT



A Review of *Battle for Sovereign Grace in the Covenant* by David J. Engelsma
Reformed Free Publishing Association, Jenison, MI, 2013
Hardcover, 304 pages; \$28.95

Reviewed by Justin Smidstra

Battle for Sovereign Grace in the Covenant is a timely publication, examining the controversy over the doctrine of the covenant. This treatment is merited not only by the present need to preserve the history of the schism of 1953, which becomes more distant with each passing generation, but also by the present ecclesiastical landscape in which conditional covenant theology is rampant even within the walls of conservative Reformed churches. This book is an important historical study readily applicable to the lives of contemporary Reformed Christians.

Historically, the book covers the provisional adoption of the Declaration of Principles in 1950, through the tumultuous period of controversy leading up to and following the synod of 1951, and concludes with the schism of 1953 and the subsequent return of the schismatic churches to the CRC. The commentary on this history is engaging as the author not only recounts these events but analyzes them, explains their meaning for the churches, and provides insight into why they occurred.

The author focuses primarily on the Declaration of Principles, the document that precipitated the controversy. This Declaration, as the author maintains, is a landmark document in the history of Reformed Christianity. This is not because it teaches anything new. Rather the Declaration articulates that which the PRC has always confessed, namely that the covenant is sovereignly established by God with the head of the covenant Jesus Christ and the elect seed of believers. The covenant is therefore governed by election and is dependent for its fulfillment solely on the gracious work of God. In the course of the book, the author articulates this covenant doctrine and decisively refutes the disguised Arminian view of the Liberated, which divorces the covenant from election.

The author also draws out some important implications of the Declaration for Reformed churches

today. First, the doctrine of the unconditional covenant is not a peculiar creation of the PRC alone; rather it is a doctrine that necessarily arises from a consistently applied Calvinist theology. This is accomplished by proving the complete harmony of the Declaration with the confessions. In this way, by illustrating the soundness of the Declaration's creedal argument on behalf of the unconditional covenant, the author demonstrates that all Reformed churches who subscribe to the three forms of unity are bound to confess that the covenant is unconditional. It is a matter of creedal fidelity.

Second is the application of the Declaration to the current controversy surrounding the federal vision, a theology that teaches on the basis of the conditional covenant that God gives the covenantal promise to every baptized child and that the fulfillment of that promise depends upon the child's fulfillment of the conditions of the covenant. This latest mutation of "salvation by works" theology that now plagues numerous Reformed Churches is essentially the same covenant theology that was unmasked and defeated by PRC in the 1950s. The Declaration holds the cure, but few have sought to learn from history's light. Indeed the *Battle for Sovereign Grace* shows that this battle is an ongoing battle between the true gospel and the false gospel and, as members of the church militant, we are called to fight the good fight on behalf of God's truth.

In this regard this book is a very worthwhile read for anyone, young and old alike, who cherish the truth of the covenant and who desire to see this heritage preserved for the good of the church and the glory of God.

Mr. Justin Smidstra is a member of Hudsonville Protestant Reformed Church in Hudsonville, MI, and will be entering the Protestant Reformed Seminary this fall, the Lord willing.

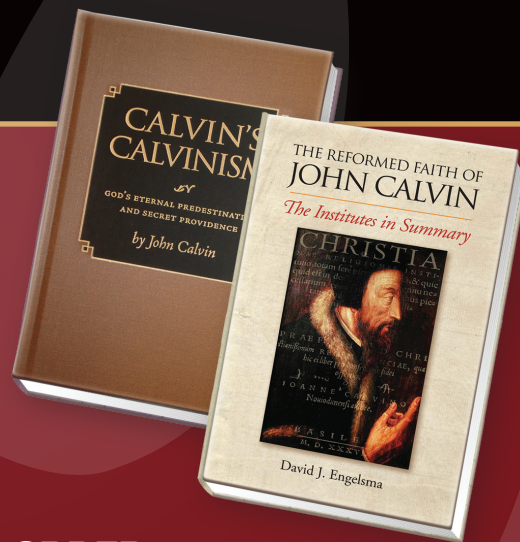
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All Glory to the Only Good God

Book 3 in the *Reformed Spirituality* series

by Herman Hoeksema

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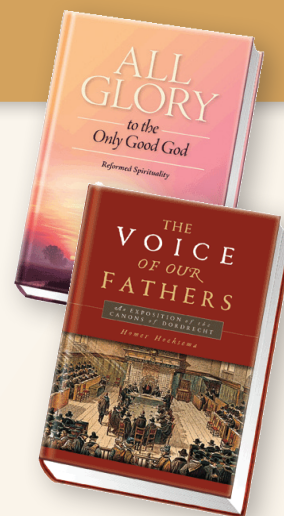
This set of beautiful meditations demonstrates that genuine spirituality rises from and ends in the glory of God, for the zeal of the soul for God's glory is the most profound spirituality. And because the Spirit works spirituality by sound doctrine, spirituality exists and flourishes by means of sound instruction in biblical, Reformed doctrine.

Voice of Our Fathers: An Exposition of the Canons of Dordt, REVISED EDITION!

by Homer C. Hoeksema

656 pages, \$49.95

This revised second edition features improved readability while maintaining the meaning and substance of the material. This book is an extensive commentary on the articles drawn up by the great Synod of Dordrecht (1618–19). The articles state and defend the doctrines of sovereign grace and reject the Arminian error of free will. The Canons thereby resolved a raging controversy in the Dutch Reformed Churches concerning the sovereign grace of God.





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RFPA update

Reader Feedback

Thank you for your valuable publication of the eBook version of the *Church Order Commentary*. I have already learned much from it and am very grateful for yet another outstanding RFPA publication (as always, the best that there is)!

—Reader from Tennessee

In the last year I was introduced to the *Standard Bearer*. I have found so much already that has helped us grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord. This is a Reformed journal to which every Reformed believer should be a subscriber. When I finish each issue, I leave it in the narthex of my church for others to read. Thank you for maintaining fidelity to God's Word as summarized in the Three Forms of Unity.

—Reader from New York

I received *Reformed Dogmatics* by Hoeksema. Thank you for sending along a free copy of *Our Goodly Heritage Preserved* and a free copy of the *Standard Bearer*. I thoroughly enjoy reading the *SB* and read many *SB* articles online while deployed in Afghanistan.

—Reader from Michigan

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