

BOOK REVIEW

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A WATERED GARDEN: A Brief History of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America
Gertrude Hoeksema – illustrated by **Jeff Steenholdt**
Reformed Free Publishing Association, Grand Rapids, USA
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This reviewer finds biographies of limited worth. Of course, reading about certain men of God, such as Calvin, Zwingli, Gill, etc, can indeed be of great profit. But compared to a work on theology or exegesis a limitation generally exists, in my opinion. Denominational biographies, to stretch a term, are different – they convey the growth of a movement in a particular doctrinal direction, imparting to the reader a sense of the blessings and guidance of a sovereign God in yesteryear. *A Watered Garden*, subtitled *A Brief History of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America*, falls into such a category.

It may be asked, Why review a history of the Protestant Reformed Churches? [hereafter, PRC]. Is this not denominationalism and proof of the enemies' charge that the BRF and the BRJ are almost synonymous with the PRC and its publications? To answer the last question first, the reviewer is not a member of the PRC, has never, at the time of writing, met a PRC minister or heard one preach; he is not a member of the BRF and has not met any of its officers. He can, therefore claim to be unbiased. *Why review a history of the PRC?* – because it reveals a struggle, not ostensibly but actually, for the doctrinal purity of an unadulterated Calvinism. This contention is supported by a Presbyterian, Garrett P Johnson:

A similar controversy [the free offer of the Gospel] had plagued the Christian Reformed Church during the 1920's... In 1924 the CRC controversy ended with the *exodus of the Calvinists* from the Christian Reformed Church under the leadership of Herman Hoeksema, and the formation of a new church, the Protestant Reformed Church [*sic*]. It is worth noting that a number of the

Westminster faculty had been members of the Christian Reformed Church, were former professors at Calvin Seminary, and were influenced by the Christian Reformed view of common grace [emphasis added - RAK]. ["The Myth of Common Grace," *The Trinity Review*, March/April 1987, p 1.]

The book shows some inaccuracies in Johnson's statement, however. No 'exodus' took place. Hoeksema *et al* were clearly 'deposed' or 'ejected' from the Christian Reformed Church [hereafter, CRC], as a transcript of the minutes of Classis Grand Rapids East (December 1924) prove [p 71f]. Indeed, for some time after the ejection, the Hoeksema group tried to remove the impasse while holding the title *Protesting Christian Reformed Churches*. The Classis (equivalent to a Presbyterian Presbytery) acted illegally, for in Reformed circles the various bodies were not vertical but horizontal, not higher but broader; they were gatherings of delegates, not hierarchial institutions. *Therefore it was the job of the Consistory to discipline*. Herein lies another inaccuracy in Johnson's statement: the PRC "stresses the autonomy of the local church and are opposed to hierarchism of any kind," hence the name PR Church-es. That the PRC founders were 'the Calvinists' in the 1924 controversy, is indeed correct. The CRC Synod, meeting in Kalamazoo, Michigan (June-July 1924) declared: "It cannot be denied that they [Hoeksema *et al*] are Reformed in respect to the fundamental truths, even though it be with an inclination to one-sidedness." Their opponents acknowledged they were Reformed, yet their respective Classis ejected them in December 1924. Were they no longer 'Reformed,' no longer opposing the errors of Arminianism, no longer preaching the Scriptures or believing the Reformed Confessions? The same men, believing the same doctrines, preaching the same message, vindicated as 'Reformed' by the Synod were, six months later, *ejected* by the CRC. Their crime, their heresy? - "*Reformed in respect to the fundamental truths*" !

The charge of hyper-Calvinism has been laid at the door of the PRC, very wrongly, I believe; for hyper-Calvinism is incompatible with evangelism and mission and, therefore, not in oneness with the PRC. *A Watered Garden* clearly demonstrates and reveals the missionary zeal of the PRC: the umpteen churches established under God by PR ministers and missionaries, not only throughout America, but presently in Canada, Singapore and New Zealand, besides their missionary work in Ulster. This *is* Calvinism; *not* hyper-Calvinism!

The PRC grew dramatically through the decades of the 30's

and 40's until the issues dealt with in 1924 began to surface again. A major split occurred in 1953 and the denomination looked crippled. At this point I literally wept for Herman Hoeksema: the pain he must have felt, the thoughts he must have had, the melancholic surges his impressive mind had to abide! But I believe he took it joyfully, knowing the justness of his cause and the fact that "in heaven [was] a better and an enduring substance" (Hebrews 10:34). This split brought the denomination back to the doctrinal purity of the post-1924 period, with days of blessing again and the Lord's hand guiding. Numerically, the denomination was now very small – no more than 3000, probably less. Yet their influence far exceeded their strength. It is not a large denomination today (not much in excess of 10,000), though in the past twenty years a proliferation of its doctrinal position has taken place, thanks to the independently controlled *Reformed Free Publishing Association*, publishers of materials by the Hoeksemas and other Protestant Reformed ministers and writers.

A Watered Garden is an engrossing and doctrinally significant story. Gertrude Hoeksema, daughter-in-law of the late Herman Hoeksema, is an exceedingly credible, prolific and readable author, well positioned to chronicle a detailed account of the PRC. The brief was originally given to her late husband, Homer, and although his labour was sadly prevented by a terminal illness, he succeeded in outlining the book before his decease.

This book is crucial reading for those interested in the history and doctrinal stand of the PRC; it is also essential reading for those who are not in agreement with the PRC but who, nevertheless, wish to oppose them in a well-researched way, avoiding ignorant misunderstandings. I have no hesitation in recommending this excellent and informative 'read,' and of assuring readers of my reluctance to part with my own copy! The book is further enhanced with more than ten pages of photographs, mainly of PR church buildings, but two are of founding members – Herman Hoeksema and George Ophoff.

"The church of God is essentially one in all ages, whether Old Testament, New Testament, or today, and finds its unity in its salvation by Christ. To the extent that a specific church or a particular denomination is faithful and obedient to the revelation of that salvation in the Scriptures, to that extent it belongs to the history of the church as a whole."

From the Preface to *A Watered Garden*