

John Bolt, Common Grace, the PRC, and (Theological) Modernism

by David J. Engelsma

Introduction

Writing recently in the Christian Reformed seminary journal, the *Calvin Theological Journal (CTJ)*, Dr. John Bolt, Calvin Seminary professor of dogmatics emeritus, subjected the Christian Reformed Church's (CRC) doctrine of common grace to critical re-examination. The two articles appeared in the November 2022 and November 2023 issues of the CTJ. These articles were reprinted in the April 2024 and the November 2024 issues of the theological journal of the Protestant Reformed Seminary, the *Protestant Reformed Theological Journal (PRTJ)*.

Bolt's articles call for a Protestant Reformed response. This article is that response. Because the majority of the readers of this article will be Protestant Reformed, my response will refer to, and quote, the republication of Bolt's articles in the PRTJ of April 2024 and November 2024, unless otherwise noted.

The two articles that originally appeared in the CTJ in November 2022 and November 2023 were not the only critical treatment of the CRC doctrine of common grace by John Bolt in recent times. In the April 2000 issue of the CTJ, Bolt published an article titled "Common grace and the Christian Reformed Synod of Kalamazoo (1924): a Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Retrospective." This significant article accompanied a related article by CR theologian, Raymond A. Blacketer, titled, "The Three Points in Most Parts Reformed: A Reexamination of the So-Called Well-meant Offer of Salvation." Bolt also published an article titled, "Common Grace, Theonomy, and Civic Good: the Temptations of Calvinist Politics (Reflections on the Third Point of the CRC Kalamazoo Synod, 1924)," in the November 2000 issue of the CTJ.

Also, in a publication that was not without its irony, Bolt had an essay, "Herman Hoeksema was Right (on the Three Points that Really Matter)," in the volume, *Biblical Interpretation and Doctrinal Formulation in the Reformed Tradition*, edited by Arie C. Leder and Richard A. Muller (Reformation Heritage Books, 2014). The inclusion of Bolt's piece in this volume was ironic because the book consists of "essays in honor of James De Jong," emeritus president of Calvin Theological Seminary. James is the grandson of Dr. Y. P. De Jong, who by all accounts played a leading role in the formulation and adoption of the CRC's doctrine of common grace in 1924.

Bolt's Judgment of 1924

John Bolt has been doing, on behalf both of the CRC and of the wider Reformed community, what Herman Hoeksema and his colleague at the time, Rev. H. Danhof, earnestly besought the CRC to do one hundred years ago: carefully examine and thoroughly discuss the doctrine of a purported common grace of God. In an address to the CRC synod of 1924, of which he was a member, Rev. Henry Danhof, at that time a respected minister in the CRC, became almost pathetic in his appeal to the synod not to proceed with the hasty adoption of a doctrine of common grace, which adoption would result in the expulsion of Hoeksema and himself. He pleaded with the synod rather to appoint a committee to study the issue. In addition, a number of delegates to the 1924 synod presented written requests to the synod that rather than hastily adopting a controversial doctrine of common grace the synod appoint a committee to study the doctrine for several years. This committee would consist of both advocates and of opponents of the doctrine.¹

Having already adopted a doctrine of common grace, the CRC Synod of 1924 then adopted a decision urging “the leaders of our people, both ministers and professors, to make further study of the doctrine of Common Grace.” A ground was that the truth of common grace did not yet “live clearly in the consciousness of [the CRC].² This call to the study of the issue of common grace with the admission of the lack of clear “consciousness” of the doctrine and its implications *after* the CR synod had adopted the doctrine of a common grace of God, and with such definiteness as to warrant the deposition of officebearers and the exclusion from the CRC of churches that rejected the CR doctrine, was a clear case of shutting the barn door after the horse had escaped. The result was that no one in the CRC ever carried out a critical examination of the theory of a common grace of God (the “further study” enjoined by the CR synod of 1924) until the work of John Bolt now, some one hundred years later.

One hundred years later, a prominent CR theologian actually engages in the study urgently and officially advised by the CR synod of 1924. But Bolt’s study is one hundred years too late for the purposes that motivated the request for the study in 1924. Hoeksema, Danhof, Ophoff and their adherents have been cast out of the CRC. Hoeksema has been instrumental in the forming of a new denomination, the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC). This denomination lives and works by the confession of the particularity of the grace of God, rejecting the theory of common grace as a heresy that is destructive both of the doctrine and the life of the gospel.

And by this time the CRC has so developed in the theology of common grace that it is essentially a “common grace church” in both doctrine and life.

¹ These requests, referred to as “protests,” can be found on pages 192 – 200 of the *Acta der Synode 1924* of the Christian Reformed Church held from June 18 to July 8, 1924 in Kalamazoo, MI.

² Cf. Herman Hoeksema, *The PRC in America* (2nd ed. Grand Rapids, n. d., pages 94, 95).

But this does not imply that Bolt's re-examination of the doctrine of common grace is without benefit, whether for the members of the CRC, or for the members of the PRC, or for that matter for the broad community of Reformed and Presbyterian churches. With regard to the broader Reformed community, no subject is of more importance to all the churches of NAPARC than that of the issue whether the grace of God is common or particular—the controversy between the CRC and the PRC.

I must, however, respectfully disagree with Dr. Bolt when he suggests an ecumenical benefit of his revisiting 1924.³ The reason is not any disparagement of ecumenicity. Not the least of the sins of the common grace decision of 1924 was its willful, wicked division of the body of Christ. As the synod of 1924 well knew, the effect of its adoption of the three points of common grace, if not a purpose, was to force Hoeksema, Danhof, and Ophoff out of the CRC, and the creation of a new Reformed denomination: schism.

But the reason for my disagreement with Bolt's ecumenical purpose in the revisiting of 1924 is that after one hundred years not only the reunion but also amicable ecclesiastical relations of the CRC and the PRC are hopeless. The CRC has so developed doctrinally and practically under the influence of common grace as to have been thoroughly conformed to the world. The PRC, in contrast, have decisively developed in the truth of particular grace so as to live the antithesis—the church's spiritual separation from and spiritual warfare with the world of ungodliness. In passing, I observe that the life-and-death, practical issue of the controversy over common grace is expressed in this word and in this phrase: antithesis and world-conformity.

The utter impossibility of any latter day rapprochement of the CRC and the PRC came home to me in the matter of Bolt's appeal itself to the assemblies of the CRC to re-examine its doctrine of common grace, in 2001. A Reformed man of integrity as well as a sound theologian, Bolt addressed an appeal to the synod of the CRC to confess the wrongdoing of the CRC synod of 1924. His appeal had to make its way to synod through Classis East of the CRC. Bolt informed me of the process and invited me to attend the classis. If I entertained any illusion of a favorable, indeed objective, treatment of Bolt's appeal, it was dashed immediately upon my entrance into the church building in which the classis was meeting. A large number of the classical delegates were women. This is no disparagement of the theological gifts or soundness of the female sex. But it is recognition that Scripture forbids female members of the church from holding office in the church and that the recent opening of the offices particularly of minister and elder to women is the effect upon churches of modern culture, that is, of the thinking of the wicked world concerning the equality of the sexes, which thinking the theory of common grace embraces

³ In the introduction to his article, "Common Grace and the Christian Reformed Synod of Kalamazoo (1924): A Seventy-Fifth Anniversary Retrospective," Bolt writes of his "hope that genuine ecumenical conversation may yet be possible between the Christian Reformed Church and the Protestant Reformed Church (*sic*), a family conversation that should never have been stopped in the first place" (*CTJ*, April 2000, p. 7).

and authorizes, Scripture to the contrary notwithstanding. An assembly that is itself the product of the theory and thinking of common grace cannot be expected to judge objectively, much less adversely, its foundational principle. Bolt's overture concerning common grace went on to synod, but not with the approval of Classis East of the CRC. Women holding office by virtue of the doctrine of common grace were not about to give a hearing to an overture that called into question the legitimacy of their holding office.

Women in church office is only one of the significant developments of its doctrine of common grace in the CRC. Bolt refers to the public teaching of the heresy of universal atonement by CR seminary professor Harold Dekker. In defense of his heresy, Dekker appealed to the CR doctrine of common grace of 1924. If God offers the gospel to all in the well-meaning desire to save all, Christ must have died for all. The CRC could neither discipline the heretic nor outrightly condemn his false doctrine. It did recognize Dekker's heresy as the development of the doctrine of common grace adopted by the CRC in 1924. A few years after the Dekker controversy, CR theologian, Dr. Harry Boer publicly appealed to the doctrine of common grace to deny the doctrine of predestination taught in the Canons of Dordt. Neither could the CRC come to the defense of this fundamental truth of the gospel, *the content of its creed*, because of its commitment to the theory of a common grace of God as adopted by the CRC in 1924.

Worthy of note is that neither the appeal of Dekker to the theory of common grace in support of his doctrine of universal atonement nor the appeal of Boer to this theory in support of his denial of predestination moved the CRC and its theologians to reconsider its doctrine of common grace. Also worthy of note is that these two public controversies over the implications of the CRC doctrine of a common grace of God did not move any of the alleged "conservative" Reformed and Presbyterian churches or theologians in the world to reexamine the doctrine of a common grace of God, which doctrine all of them maintain zealously. In fact, the silence of reputedly "conservative" theologians concerning Bolt's criticism of the "Three Points of Common Grace" adopted by the CRC is deafening. Critical examination of the theory of a common grace of God is left to the "hyper-Calvinistic" PRC, and of late to Dr. Bolt, regardless of Harold Dekker and Harry Boer, and the open rejection of the gospel of sovereign grace.⁴

As for the ethical influence of the doctrine of common grace upon the holy lives of the members of the CRC, it is enough, and more than enough, to know that in 2025 the synod of the CRC had to treat the issue of the permissibility on the part of its membership to engage in sodomite "marriage." A Reformed synod found itself called to judge whether men may "marry" men, and women, women! The possibility and propriety of sodomite "marriage" disgraced the agenda of the synod of the CRC. The synod said "no." I rejoiced

⁴ For the PRC refutation of the charge that denial of a "well-meant offer of the gospel" to all who hear the gospel is "hyper-Calvinism," cf. David J. Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel: An Examination of the Well-Meant Offer of the Gospel*. 3rd ed. Jenison, MI: RFP, 2014.

at this decision of my “mother church.” But the issue has risen in the CRC. This in itself shameful fact indicates the extent and power of the working of the theory of common grace in the CRC. For it is the thinking and behavior of the unbelieving world, which is supposed to share a cultural grace of God, that has put sodomite “marriage” on the agenda of the CRC.

In addition, Bolt notes a contemporary threat to the theology and practice of the missionary labors of the church that finds support in the theory of common grace. Rather than speak of the mission of the church, a popular, powerful ecclesiastical movement today speaks of the “mission of God.” This is presented as the work of the Holy Spirit carrying out the love of God for all humans and renewing the world. The mission calling of the church is not the gathering of an elect church, but to participate in God’s renewing work, which “embraces both the church and the world.”⁵ This “missional thinking involves an intentional shift of attention away from the church and the salvation of individual persons toward the world.”⁶

Because its doctrine of common grace opens up the CRC to this kind of thinking about missions, Bolt urges that “it would be a profitable exercise for the CRC to revisit the issue of common grace and its relation to the grace of the gospel. Synod 1924 left the CRC with unfinished business.”⁷

In sharpest contrast to the popular thinking of the CRC and other Reformed churches regarding missions, the mission theology, preaching, and practice of the PRC are motivated and governed by the truth of particular grace established in the eternal decree of election. The mission of the church is the mission of God to be sure. God is at work in the mission preaching of the church. But this work of God is not the renewal of the wicked world. It is not the unifying of the church and the world. The mission of the church is the calling out of the world a people chosen by God to eternal life. It is a gathering of an elect church, as the greatest of all missionaries confessed in Romans 8 – 11: “whom he did predestinate, them he also called” (Rom. 8:30). By this mission of God in the mission of the church, the wicked world is not “renewed,” but hardened and thus prepared for judgment.

That some receive the gift of faith from God and others do not receive it proceeds from God’s eternal decree...*who worketh all things after the counsel of his will* (Eph. 1:11). According to which decree He graciously softens the hearts of the elect, however obstinate, and inclines them to believe, while He leaves the non-elect in His just judgment to their own wickedness and obduracy.⁸

⁵ *CTJ*, November 2023, p. 294.

⁶ *CTJ*, November 2023, p. 296.

⁷ *CTJ*, November 2023, p. 297.

⁸ Canons of Dordt 1/6.

The theory of a common grace of God now corrupts the truth of that great work of God by His church that consists of missions.

In his thorough reexamination of the CRC's adoption of the doctrine of common grace, Bolt is critical both of the doctrine itself and of the manner in which it was adopted. The formulation and adoption of the "Three Points" were hasty. The synod did not give the theory the careful study that was required. Nor did it allow for such study by the appointment of a study committee. This failure, which is unworthy of a Reformed synod, manifested itself in several ways. First, the biblical basis put forward on behalf of the doctrine consisted merely of the listing of several texts. No interpretation of the passages was offered by the committee of pre-advice, or by the synod itself. Bolt on his part offers the interpretation that the synod of 1924 failed to provide. His conclusion is that the passages cited not only do not support the theory of a common grace of God, but in fact support the theology of Hoeksema and Danhof.

Second, the creedal proof offered is scanty, in the extreme—only two passages from the Canons of Dordt. And, as Bolt demonstrates, these passages do not support the synod's doctrine of a common grace of God. A critic might add that the "Three Points" lack completely all reference to, and even any notice of, that truth of the gospel that the Canons was drawn up to defend and that even the Reformed schoolboy is aware of: the particularity of grace according to election and limited atonement. This lack of attention to the main message of the Canons renders inexcusable especially that aspect of the doctrine of common grace that consists of the confession that the gospel is a "well-meant offer" of salvation to all humans.

Third, with regard to the supposed declaration in the first point of common grace of a desire of God to save all, the alleged "well-meant offer," this, if true, would not, in fact, prove a common grace of God in things natural and earthly, but the Arminian heresy of a universal, conditional *saving* grace of God.

Fourth, the appeal of the "Three Points" to the Reformed tradition is mistaken: "The Synod of Kalamazoo failed to faithfully represent the Reformed tradition to the Christian Reformed Church."⁹

The judgment of Dr. Bolt is that the "Three Points of Common Grace" adopted by the CRC must be retracted. He calls his church to reexamine and revise the common grace decision of 1924. Although he phrases the confession carefully and conditionally, at the conclusion of his study Bolt confesses the error of the CRC in its common grace decision of 1924 and its sin in its mistreatment of Hoeksema and Danhof.

In that case the judgment on Hoeksema and Danhof was unjust. Professor Dekker's questions about the love of God and the extent of the Atonement

⁹ *PRTJ*, April 2024, p. 42.

arose from an honest concern to be faithful to the teaching of the First Point. With all of this in mind, the CRC should make every effort to state its convictions about common grace correctly and even acknowledge historical mistakes. If the Christian Reformed Church still believes that the doctrine of common grace is important, she needs to state it correctly. Doctrinal truth is important and theological precision is invaluable.¹⁰

A reconsideration of its doctrine of common grace by the CRC will never happen for at least the following reasons. First, churches never admit errors or confess sins. Members do, but churches, never. Second, the CRC is in love with the doctrine of common grace. Indeed, the doctrine now defines the CRC. It determines what they are. It is their very being, both with regard to a gospel of a saving love of God for all humans and with regard to a view of earthly life and history as revealing a favorable attitude of God to all and as the blessing of God upon all.

There is a third reason why Bolt's (otherwise convincing) call for the CRC to reconsider its doctrine of common grace and to repent of its mistreatment of Herman Hoeksema in the common grace controversy of 1924 will get no hearing in the CRC in 2025. This reason is the lingering, intense dislike of Hoeksema personally in 2025, a dislike that has passed on upon the PRC. More than once Bolt suggests that an unholy, quite un-theological motive played a part in the condemnation of Hoeksema by the CRC in 1924. Bolt poses the provocative question, "Is it possible that other factors such as personal animus against Herman Hoeksema played an important role?"¹¹ There is a dark underbelly in the existence of the church: the disgraceful envy by their colleagues of gifted ministers who confess the truth strongly and who sharply condemn error. On his deathbed, Calvin spoke of such hostility to himself on the part of his colleagues in Geneva. Envy played a role in the Jewish deliverance of Jesus to death: "for envy" the Jewish authorities delivered Jesus over to Pilate (Matt. 27:18).

Intriguingly, Bolt offers a restatement of the first of the "Three Points," which sets forth the main issues in the debate over the doctrine of a common grace of God.¹² Were a committee of the CRC and a committee of the PRC ever to meet in order to reconsider the doctrine of a common grace of God, Bolt's revision of the first point would make an excellent starting point. The PR committee would express considerable enthusiasm for the opening line of Bolt's proposed revision of 1924: "Synod declares that God's saving grace is always particular, to the elect." This line would be the abolition of the "little point of the first point," the doctrine of the "well-meant offer," which Hoeksema and the PRC have always regarded as the most offensive element of the "Three Points."

¹⁰ *PRTJ*, November 2024, p. 37.

¹¹ *PRTJ*, November 2024, p. 37.

¹² *PRTJ*, November 2024, p. 38.

The "Favor" of Providence

But the enthusiasm of the committee of the PRC for Bolt's revision would be short-lived. For there is an "addition" to the statement concerning the grace of God: "In addition to this saving grace of God, shown only to those chosen to eternal life, there is also a favor of God shown to all creatures." This "favor" is then found in the works and gifts of providence, with appeal to Lord's Day 10 of the Catechism. The meaning is that God has a favor to all humans, not only the elect, in bestowing upon them the good gifts of providence—rain and sunshine, health and wealth, food and drink. Bolt's revision of the first point of common grace finds a universal favor of God in the gifts of providence.

In the end (as a disciple of Abraham Kuyper?), Bolt cannot restrain himself from extending God's grace (in the form of "favor") to all men. "Favor" is, most broadly, a positive attitude towards others—the will to do him good, an attitude of grace. It then becomes a deed or gift that intends to benefit them. Bolt thinks to find a universal favor in God's providence. God gave health to Esau as well as to Jacob. Esau was also a wealthy man. According to Bolt's revision of the first point of common grace, Esau was, therefore, the object of God's "favor." Thus, common grace severely qualifies Romans 9:13: "Esau have I hated."

What Bolt overlooks, especially in Lord's Day 10 of the Heidelberg Catechism, to which he appeals in support of a universal favor of God in providence, is that the favor of providence is particular—for the elect believer only. Providence and its gifts are universal; the favor of providence is particular. This is the clear, powerful message of Psalm 73. The wicked prosper in this life with the good gifts of providence. They prosper. They are not in earthly, physical trouble. They have more than heart could wish.

In contrast, the godly are plagued every day. They are sick. Their business fails. Such is the effect of these doings of divine providence that the godly man is sorely tempted to envy the wicked and to doubt the goodness of God to the members of the church. "My steps had well nigh slipped" (Psalm 73:2). So severe is this trial concerning the providence of God with regard to earthly life and its things that the believing child of God envies the unbelieving world, that hates God and spits on the gospel.

The salvation of the godly of Psalm 73 is not the realization that in the end God will save him and damn the ungodly. But his salvation is the knowledge that with the good gifts of providence—health, riches, and a "good life"—God sets the ungodly on slippery places, to slide easily into destruction (Psalm 73:18, 19). The gospel is not grace to all. Neither is providence grace, or favor, to all. Rather, to the unbelieving reprobate the gifts of providence are curse, unless sliding smoothly into hell is favor.

Conclusive regarding the limited favor of providence is the very Lord's Day to which Bolt appealed in support of his statement that the gifts of providence are a "favor" of God to all, Lord's Day 10 of the Catechism. Here is one of the places where the English

translation of the original German of the Catechism, at least the translation used by the PRC, fails us. I refer to Question 27. The question is, “What dost thou mean by the providence of God?” The answer, in our English translation, concludes: “all things come, not by chance, but by His fatherly hand.” This part of the answer omits one, little, fundamentally important, German word: “*uns*” (“to us”). All things do not come to all humans by the “fatherly hand” of God. They come so, that is, by a fatherly hand, “to us”—to those who believe on Jesus Christ according to God’s gracious election. To unbelievers, all things of earthly life come by the hand of God, but that hand is not fatherly. Rather, it is the punitive hand of a holy judge. The implication of Lord’s Day 10, is that nothing comes to the reprobate unbeliever “by the fatherly hand of God,” but that all things come to him by the punitive hand of God the righteous judge.

Providence is not gracious to the reprobate unbeliever. Nor are the things of providence “favor” to him. All his health and wealth are the curse of God upon him, sliding him smoothly into desolation (Psalm 73:18, 19).

On the other hand, painful as the earthly life of the believer may be, all things are always *for* him; all things are working together for his good (Rom. 8:28). Sickness and poverty, drought and cloudy days, disease and the harsh circumstances of war come by the fatherly hand of God “*uns*.” The grace of the gospel is particular. Likewise particular is the favor of providence.

No one should underestimate this aspect of the gospel, that is lost by the simple identification of providence as grace, or by finding the favor of God is those aspects of providence that humans enjoy, for example, health and wealth. I was a pastor for 25 years. I had to make pastoral visits to husbands and wives whose mates had abandoned them. I was required to inform parents that their son or daughter had been killed in an accident. I was compelled to sit with a young husband and father who had just been informed that he would die shortly of cancer. My first pastoral act in one congregation was a funeral service for the first baby of a young couple of the church. Multitudes of worldly couples were having babies who lived; this couple who received a child in the name of Christ, and who loved the child in the covenant, had to lay it in the ground in Lansing, Illinois.

And more. And worse. The theology that the good things of providence are divine favor would have crushed my parishioners. For the implication is that the evil things of providence are a curse, the expression of God’s disfavor. The theology of common grace is the final straw of despair to one whose feet are already well nigh slipping as he sees the trouble-free, prosperous lives of the ungodly.

The Major Evil of the “Three Points”

Indeed, it is now my judgment that the doctrine of a common grace of God in things temporal and earthly is the major evil of the “Three Points of Common Grace” adopted by the CRC in 1924, and the main doctrinal issue between the CRC and the PRC. This has not

always been my judgment. Until recently, my heaviest criticism of the “Three Points” fell on what Hoeksema called “the little point of the first point.” This is the affirmation of a “well-meant offer” of salvation to all who hear the gospel. This drew Hoeksema’s most severe criticism also. There is good reason for this judgment. All of the rest of the three points of common grace “merely” affirms a non-saving grace, or favor, of God to all humans in things earthly: rain and sunshine; wealth and pleasant family relations; indeed, all things that humans find enjoyable. The doctrine of “the little point of the first point” affirms a would-be saving grace of God for all humans, so that the salvation of humans is made to depend upon their acceptance, or choice, of God’s universal grace. The “little point” is sheer, naked Arminianism.

The “little point of the first point” compromises the gospel itself; the rest of the three points “merely” compromises the biblical, Reformed view of earthly life and of the truth about the pleasant things and events that are the experience of unbelievers on their way to hell. The main thought of the three points “merely” misconstrues what Psalm 73 calls the “prosperity of the wicked” (v. 3).

I have changed my mind. *Met ouderdom komt wijsheid*. If Hoeksema were alive, I would try to change his mind concerning the main error of the three points of common grace adopted by the CRC in 1924. The major evil of the three points of common grace is not the little point of point one, but the big point of point one—a common grace of God to all humans in the things of earthly life—and all of points two and three, which supports and amplifies the big point of point one.

The doctrine of the three points in their entirety is that the church and the world are united—are one—in a grace of God toward both. Grace, be it common, wipes out the boundary between the church and the world. Church and world are united, therefore, by God Himself in the glorious task of solving the world’s problems; of making the world a pleasant place in which to live; indeed, of “Christianizing” the world. All radical opposition between church and world is dissolved—by a grace of God. Church and world are not at war, but at peace—by a grace of God. The antithesis—the spiritual separation of the believing church and the unbelieving world—is negated.

A grace of God unites the church and the world. Church and world are one in the grace of God.

Since this grace is not, according to the three points of common grace of the CRC, the saving grace of God in Jesus Christ, church and world are united apart from Jesus Christ. Many saviors can be agents of this unifying grace, whether Mohammed or some atheistic humanist. But this denial of Jesus the only Savior by the CRC doctrine of common grace is another aspect of the evil of the “Three Points.” It is not my concern in this article. My concern in this article is the contention that the doctrine of common grace as adopted by the CRC in 1924 is a fatal concession to theological modernism.

The fundamental evil, then, of the three points of common grace that the CRC adopted in 1924 was not the “little point of the first point,” grievous as this error is, in its extension of a saving grace of God to all humans. But the fundamental error of the doctrine of a common grace of God is its avowed, explicit uniting of the church and the world in a grace of God. Of this error, the little point of the first point is but an aspect. This uniting of church and world in a grace of God was the concession of the CRC to the monstrous movement of that day known as “modernism.” Modernism was, and is, a theology, presenting itself as *Christian* theology, that denies all the doctrines of the Christian faith. It is associated especially with the names of F. Schleiermacher (1768 – 1834), the “father of modern theology,” and of A. von Harnack (1851 – 1930). The purpose of modernism was, and is, the undoing of the separation and warfare of church and world. Positively, the purpose was, and is, the uniting of the believing church and the unbelieving world.

In 1924, the attack of modernism upon Christian orthodoxy was raging. The highly regarded and influential German heretic, von Harnack, published his popular attack on orthodox Christianity in 1900, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (English translation: *What is Christianity?*). In 1903, the Presbyterian Church in North America revised the Westminster Confession of Faith to affirm a love of God for all humans. The unbelieving, modernistic Auburn Affirmation was published in 1924—in 1924! Harry Emerson Fosdick preached his popular sermon, “Shall the Fundamentalists Win?” in 1922.

And the CRC itself wrestled with sheer modernism in the Janssen case, Prof. Janssen being deposed in 1922.

In the ecclesiastical atmosphere of this theological and spiritual struggle, the CRC adopted the doctrine of common grace, affirming a oneness of the church and the world in a common grace of God. The near origin of the doctrine in the CRC was the theology of A. Kuyper and H. Bavinck in the Netherlands, where modernism had been raging for many years. The reformatory movements known as the *Afscheiding* of 1834 and the *Doleantie* of 1886 were resistance to modernism by de Cock and by A. Kuyper. But in his doctrine of common grace, Kuyper surrendered to modernism at a key and fatal point: the oneness of church and world in a grace of God. By this time, the surrender of Kuyper to the very essence of modernism has proved fatal to Kuyper’s churches, the *GKN*, as the present theological, ethical, and spiritual condition of that denomination shows to all.

From the Netherlands, the infection of modernism in the form of a common grace uniting church and world has spread to the CRC. It threatens all the supposedly “conservative” Reformed and Presbyterian churches that are influenced by Kuyper and the CRC to embrace the doctrine of a common grace of God. They have the essence of modernism at their vitals. This is, in reality, *the* issue for the churches of NAPARC, not the issue of women in church office, which is merely a symptom of the real issue, and not the most important, but the issue of common grace, which obliterates the antithesis between church and world.

I repeat: the most important aspect of the three points of common grace adopted by the CRC in 1924 is its main message of a non-saving grace of God that unites church and world. This is the introduction of the essence of modernism into the CRC. The “little point of the first point” is an implication of this overwhelming modernism. If church and world are one in a grace of God, Dekker was right in teaching the denial of limited atonement and Boer was right in denying predestination. These heresies are but the implication of a union of church and world in a (common) grace of God. In the end, the sacrifice of a distinctive church on the altar of commonality—a commonality of *grace*—with the world means the loss of all the fundamentals of the Christian faith. I refrain from expanding this article in demonstrating the truth of this judgment in the history of the CRC since 1924. Like Kuyper’s *GKN*, the CRC is open to the unbelief of the world. It is well advanced, not merely in Arminianism, but in modernism.

I conclude by observing that this judgment of the three points of common grace adopted by the CRC in 1924 demands a certain analysis of the PRC and their history. They are not merely another “conservative” Reformed denomination of churches. They are rather the one denomination in North America, if not in the world, that stands up today against the massive, malignant movement of theological and spiritual modernism. They deny that Christ and the world are one in grace. They confess that church and world are radically separated, are in fact at war. And what accounts for the separation and warfare is the grace of God, which is particular.

Lest anyone misunderstand this affirmation as a carnal boast, I do not refer to the lives of the members of the PRC in comparison with the lives of members of other Reformed churches. We have the same totally depraved natures as all others. We struggle with the same temptations as do all other Christians. Our members too sometimes yield to the allure of the world, although they are warned that the world is the enemy. But I refer to the doctrinal confession of the PRC and to the message of the preaching.

Grace is particular in the divine attitude of favor and in the work of salvation.

Grace is particular with regard to all of earthly life, that is, particular in the favor of providence.

One small Reformed denomination of churches clearly, boldly, and without (fatal) compromise wars against modernism, resisting its fundamental principle. At a time in history when all other churches are preaching commonality, the PRC uncompromisingly confess the antithesis.

The issue in 1924 was more significant than John Bolt understands. God was at work in 1924 giving His church a theologian/pastor who would expose the essence of modernism, while preserving churches from that peril. There had to be a denomination of

churches that would preach, confess, and defend (antithetical) orthodox Christianity in the face of (world-conforming) modernism, for at least one hundred years. There had to be an uncompromising confession and defense of particular grace.

It was more significant than the PRC have been aware. But now it is the solemn calling of the PRC to recognize the strategic position in which God has placed them, and in their defense of particular grace, and condemnation of common grace, vigorously to carry out the calling of this position. They must not weary in this well-doing.

It was more significant, perhaps, than Herman Hoeksema himself grasped. Standing against the doctrine of common grace, he was withstanding modernism—the modernism of Schleiermacher and von Harnack, the unbelief that by this time has ravaged much of that which has the name of church worldwide. It was Hoeksema *contra mundum*.

Can John Bolt and others in Reformed and Presbyterian churches who now question the CRC doctrine of common grace see that this is the issue?

Can the PRC see that this is the issue?