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# THE REFORMED FAITH IN CRISIS

PROF. H. C. HOEKSEMA

*(The text of an address delivered at a Reformed Witness  
Rally held in South Holland, Illinois on January 19, 1967  
under the auspices of the Protestant Reformed Churches  
in America)*



Published by the Mission Board of the Protestant Reformed  
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## P R E F A C E

The content of this pamphlet consists of the text of an address delivered at a Reformed Witness Rally held in South Holland, Illinois on January 19, 1967, under the auspices of the Protestant Reformed Churches in America.

Except for a few editorial corrections made with a view to publication, the address appears here exactly as it was delivered and recorded the evening of the Rally.

May Christ, the King of His church, use these lines to stir up His people, to call the church to repentance and reformation, and to maintain the cause of His truth.

— Homer C. Hoeksema

Beloved Brethren and Sisters in our Lord Jesus Christ:

Before I speak on the subject that was announced, The Reformed Faith In Crisis; I would like to say, first of all, just a few words about my approach to you this evening. In the first place, I want to say that I approach you as heirs and lovers of the heritage of the Reformed faith; and I speak to you on that basis. In the second place, that also holds for myself. I speak to you tonight as one who counts himself, by the grace of God, an heir of that heritage and a lover of it. And in the third place, as far as my approach is concerned, I speak tonight as a member of the Protestant Reformed Churches, and as such, as a member of what has come to be known rather generally as the Reformed community, and as one who is concerned about the crisis in which that Reformed community at large finds itself today.

I also wish to say a few words by way of introduction about my subject. Then I would like to have it understood, first of all, that to me the Reformed faith is the faith of the gospel, and that too in its purest and most richly developed form according to the Scriptures. That in itself already makes our subject tonight worthwhile. That makes it worthwhile in the deepest sense of the word because that means that the cause of God's church, the cause of God's Zion, the cause that is incomparably bigger and of greater significance than any human institution of the church, is at stake in the consideration of this subject.

My subject, as is plain, also presupposes the idea that that Reformed faith is in crisis, that it faces a crisis. It presupposes therefore the thought that this is a time to speak out, not to keep silence. That is the nature of a

crisis. It is a time to warn. It is a time to counsel, and advise, and let our testimony upon the basis of the Word of God, our witness, be heard. That also presupposes -- by virtue of the very fact that we are present here to let that witness be heard tonight -- it presupposes that we believe that we have something to say, and that we have something that should be heard, and something that should be heeded. And that, by the grace of God, I certainly believe with all my heart. If that were not true, I would not be on this platform to speak to you.

With that in mind, I ask your attention for the subject, *The Reformed Faith In Crisis*. And I call your attention to this subject under the following divisions:

I. The Reformed Faith

II. The Crisis In Which It Is Involved

III. Our Calling In That Crisis

First of all, then, the Reformed faith. What do we mean by that? I would describe that Reformed faith, in the first place, from a formal point of view. I cannot describe in full tonight and in all its details. It is far too rich and too all-embracing in its scope. It involves the whole body of the truth of Scripture. And to study it and set it forth in full would take far more than this evening's lecture alone. And therefore, I will limit myself to the chief aspects of that Reformed faith and to the salient features of that faith both from a formal and a material point of view. What is the Reformed faith? What is characteristic of it, first, then, from a formal point of view?

Certainly the outstanding feature of that Reformed faith is the fact that it is *confessional*. That Reformed faith has been embodied since the time of the Reformation of the 16th century in several creeds or confessions, some of them called Reformed, some of them called Presbyterian. They are creeds or confessions that were developed and set forth by the churches of the Reformed persuasion according to the lands in which that faith came to expression. I am sure that for most of us here tonight those creeds are the creeds

of our Dutch Reformed heritage, our three great Formulas of Unity: the Heidelberg Catechism, our comfort book; The Netherlands Confession, the 37 Articles of Faith; and the Canons of Dordrecht, sometimes known as The Five Points of Calvinism.

Those confessions are the official declarations in which the Reformed Churches set forth systematically what they believe and hold to be the truth of the Word of God. By those creeds we set forth our faith in distinction from and overagainst all the world, and in distinction from other churches, in obedience to the divine calling to let our light shine as His church and to give constant expression to our faith. By those creeds also, -- and that should never be underestimated, -- our distinctive heritage is preserved and handed down through the generations of the church, in order that those generations may grow up and be instructed according to that same faith. And by those creeds our unity is expressed. Our confessions constitute the bond of union, on the basis of which Christians of one belief unite, and churches of one faith and one confession unite. It is characteristic therefore of confessions that they are *binding*: binding not upon the conscience, because it is part and parcel of the Reformed faith that there is nothing that can or may bind the conscience, except the Word of God as we have it in the Scriptures in their entirety. But confessions become binding through the free and voluntary obedience to and subscription to those confessions both on the part of officebearers in the church and the members of the church.

That brings me to the second aspect of that Reformed faith from a formal point of view. As I have already suggested, those confessions, in turn, have their authority and their binding power only from the Scriptures. That is the deeper aspect of the Reformed faith from a formal point of view. That implies the truth, in the first place, of the absolute authority and the absolute infallibility of the Scriptures as the verbally inspired record of the Word of God. And that is based, therefore, exactly on that truth

that Scripture *is* the infallible and the inspired and the inerrant Word of God in its entirety, from beginning to end. And that means that it is characteristic of the Reformed faith, as one of our Reformed creeds puts it, to "believe without any doubt all things contained" in the sixty-six books of the Old and the New Testament. That is fundamental! Scripture in its absolute authority and infallibility is fundamental to all the faith. Without that Scripture and apart from that Scripture, there is no knowledge of the truth of the God of our salvation possible. That implies, too, the truth of the clarity, or as it is sometimes called, the perspicuity of the Holy Scriptures. The Scriptures are understandable, and the Scriptures are one in their meaning; and those Scriptures are open and plain to any believer. You do not have to be a theologian to understand the Scriptures. The Scriptures are plain and they are simple. Any simplest child of God can understand the Scriptures and read the Scriptures, fundamentally. And finally, that implies the truth that according to the Reformed faith it is the calling and the duty of believers to be in *unconditional obedience* to those Scriptures. The Scriptures are the only test for all of faith and all of life. They are the only and absolute authority before which we bow without reservation. The only authority upon which also the authority of any confessions in the church is based and from which it is derived. And we must remember that according to our Reformed faith that calling, that duty to bow before the Scriptures means that we so completely bow without reservation before that Word of God that if it comes to a choice of bowing before that Word or bowing before the institute of a church, we always choose the former. That is Reformed!

You understand, of course, that this really forms the foundation of the entire Reformed faith. This is the ultimate basis. That is Scripture too! The Church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone. Take those Scriptures away, and you take that foundation away. Distort those

Scriptures, and you distort that foundation. Deny the authority of those Scriptures, the infallibility of those Scriptures, and you attack the very basis, the very foundation of the faith.

With that in mind, let us turn now to the question: What is that Reformed faith materially?

And again I say, I cannot possibly mention all that belongs to the material of that faith. There is no time for that. But I want to try to emphasize as pointedly and as clearly as possible what especially distinguishes the Reformed faith from every other faith. What distinguishes the Reformed faith from Modernism, for example, — Modernism, which still calls itself the Church, Modernism which nevertheless denies all the fundamental truths of Christendom, the Bible, the Vicarious Atonement, the Incarnation, the Resurrection, and the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ? And still more specifically, what distinguishes that Reformed faith from orthodox Christianity in general, — orthodox Christianity, which in general may still confess the great truths which I mentioned a moment ago, and which may still pride itself to a degree on being what is called Fundamentalist or Evangelical? What distinguishes that Reformed faith from Lutheran faith? What distinguishes it from Methodism, from Dispensationalism, from Baptist faith, from Arminianism? What distinguishes it even from Roman Catholicism, which still to a certain extent holds to some of those fundamentals? That is the question!

In distinction from all of those, our faith is Reformed! And that it is Reformed means, in the first place, that it holds to the truth of the absolute sovereignty of God in the salvation of His people. That is characteristic of the Reformed faith: that it holds to the truth of sovereign, particular grace, without reservation. At the very heart of that truth is the truth that has many, many times come under attack and which is in crisis again also today, the truth of predestination, sovereign predestination, election

and reprobation. Our forefathers in the Reformed faith many times called that doctrine the heart of the church. It is central! It is controlling! But the whole of that truth of sovereign, particular grace has been spelled out in the well known TULIP, or Five Points of Calvinism.

They are briefly: *Total Depravity*, in the first place, the truth that man apart from the regenerating grace of God is by nature incapable of doing any good and prone to all evil. That is Total Depravity, no matter what may be said nowadays under the name of Total Depravity that is not really Total Depravity. Total Depravity means that the natural man cannot, and will not, and cannot will to do anything good, to do anything but sin. That is man! That is characteristic of the Reformed faith, because it is of the essence of the Reformed faith that according to it man is nothing, and God is all. In the second place, there is that truth, already mentioned, of *Unconditional*, or *Sovereign Election*, and with it necessarily the truth of sovereign, righteous Reprobation. The truth that is, therefore, on the one hand, that God from eternity and solely because of His own divine good pleasure chose certain definite persons, and chose, in fact, an entire church, an entire body, unto salvation and unto everlasting life in Christ Jesus. And this includes the truth, on the other hand, that God in absolute sovereignty destined the others, the reprobate, unto eternal damnation in the way of their own sin and unbelief. In the third place, the truth of *Limited*, or *Definite, Atonement*, that is, the truth that Christ laid down His life for His sheep only, thereby bringing the sacrifice of infinite value that made complete satisfaction of the justice of God with respect to all the sins of all His people, and of them only, and thereby obtaining for them all the blessings of salvation. In the fourth place, there is the truth of *Irresistible Grace*, the truth that God through the Spirit of Christ actually saves that elect sinner, who is in himself totally depraved, and capable only of sin, — God makes of that sinner a child of God. He does that all alone. He does that when He regen-

erates that sinner, unconditionally, irresistibly. He does that when through the Word of the gospel and by the power of His Spirit He sovereignly and unconditionally and effectually bestows the gift of saving faith. That is God's work, not man's. He bestows the gift of repentance and conversion; that is God's work. He does that when He bestows upon His people sovereignly, and imparts to them as conscious partakers of it, *all* the benefits of salvation. That is a wonder of grace, pure, sovereign grace, in no way dependent upon the will of man. And, finally, there is the truth of the *Perseverance of the Saints*, that is, that the sinner, totally depraved in himself, unconditionally elected from eternity, redeemed and atoned for by the precious blood of Christ, and irresistibly called out of darkness into God's light, is preserved by that same grace and perseveres to the very end. God preserves His people, so that there is no falling away from grace, and so that His people persevere unto the end and endure and overcome temptation and fight the battle of faith and obtain the final victory in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That is the first fundamental feature of that Reformed faith materially: the truth of sovereign, particular grace.

That is not all. There is another truth that is, if anything, still more distinctive as far as the Reformed faith is concerned, but a truth that is very, very much neglected and forgotten in our day. I refer to the truth of the *Covenant of God*. Reformed theology and Reformed faith is covenant theology! That is a central and characteristic truth of the Reformed faith. It is very little thought of and very little taught in our times, and still less understood and appreciated in our times. There is very little covenant consciousness in the church nowadays, — in the Reformed church at large also. Very little! There is very little proceeding from and living out of that truth of God's covenant. But it is a very precious truth. It is not very precious as long as you conceive of the covenant as a sort of an agreement or contract between God and man. That is

not really the covenant at all. The Reformed truth of God's covenant means that God establishes and realizes His eternal covenant of grace as a *covenant of friendship* with His people in Christ Jesus, with believers and their seed, in the line of continued generations.

And the relation between that and the previous truth which we mentioned is this, that this covenant is established and realized with God's people and in God's people by absolutely sovereign, particular grace. There are others outside of the Reformed faith who hold to these Five Points of Calvinism, but they cannot hold to them successfully and permanently because they do not at the same time hold to that fundamental Reformed truth of God's everlasting covenant of grace. That is why ultimately, historically also, Baptist doctrine, for example, ends in Arminianism, even though it may begin with Calvinism.

The third fundamental truth which follows from these two is the truth of the absolute antithesis, another forgotten and neglected truth in our day. The antithesis between light and darkness, between the truth and the lie, between the church and the world, between the believer and unbeliever. That truth, characteristic of the Reformed faith, means that as a covenant people, in the first place, we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works which God before ordained that we should walk in them. And it means, secondly, that God placed that people, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, in the midst of a world that lies in darkness. And He gives to that people the grace and the calling to be His people in that world, that is, to be in principle a spiritually separate people in that world. We have in us as the people of God, a new heavenly life, the life of regeneration. And the world, in the midst of which we live, lives and moves and acts out of a principle which is the very opposite of that, the principle of sin, the principle of enmity against God. So that as God's people in the world, we have all things in common with that world, *except grace*. That is the Reformed truth. We are a separate people,

pilgrims and strangers in the earth, to be and to shine as lights in the midst of darkness. As such, -- and there you have the practical aspect of that truth, something else that is more and more forgotten and neglected and denied in our day, -- we have the calling and the sacred duty to put on no unequal yoke with unbelievers and to make no common cause with the world in any sphere of life. We have the calling to walk as of the party of the living God, and to live and walk in every sphere of life out of but one principle, the principle of regeneration, the principle of the new life.

That is our faith, that is our Reformed faith, objectively.

Let me conclude this part of my lecture, beloved, by emphasizing that that objective Reformed faith is for the Reformed believer the object of *faith*. That is not something that leaves him cold, something that is of no importance. He *believes* it! He believes it with all his heart! And he believes it with all his heart to be the truth of the gospel, according to the Scriptures.

And if you are at all alert to things ecclesiastical, you certainly cannot fail to be aware today that that Reformed faith is in crisis. That is a rather generally acknowledged fact today in the churches, churches of the Reformed community. That is not just my claim. And that is not just the claim, or the particular hobby of the Protestant Reformed Churches. There are many, many others that recognize and begin to recognize that too. There are those who *seek* a change and who *seek* a broadening out, and who are having a part in bringing about the present crisis; and they recognize that there is a crisis developing and that they are bringing it about. They talk about the winds of change in the churches. And there are also those who are genuinely concerned about the dangers and the crisis. We live in an era of change, rapid change, change also in the sphere of the church and change in the sphere of the Reformed community. There is an air of expectancy in the church; there is something brewing, something that must happen; and at the same time there is an air of fear, of

fear and recognition that all is not well in Reformed Zion. There is a crisis.

The idea of a crisis is that it is a crucial point, or a crucial stage, of longer or shorter duration, at which it is determined whether or not a certain state of affairs shall go on or not. Thus, for example, we can speak of a crisis in the economy. Let us say there is economic prosperity. That builds up to a crisis. And at that point of crisis it is determined whether that economic prosperity shall continue or whether there shall be a crash and a depression. That is the idea of crisis.

So here there is a crucial point, a crucial stage at which it is determined whether or not that Reformed faith shall continue. That crisis implies, of course, that there are opposing forces, and that there are contrary tendencies operating in the Reformed community, tending to bring about that crisis. Those opposing forces and tendencies are present for a longer or shorter period of time, and they build and build and develop; and finally a crisis is reached, a crucial point. It comes to a head, and a determination is made, and a decision falls. The future is decided, one way or the other.

There have been many such crises in the history of the church. This is not the first one.

I like you to understand, too, very clearly that in the deepest sense of the word there is not, and there cannot be a crisis for that Reformed faith as such. That Reformed faith is the truth; and that truth is surely going to stand, whether it stands with our standing in it, or whether it stands without our standing in it, that truth is going to stand. There will always be God's truth, and there will always be God's church in the world to the very end, with us or without us, with or without your church or mine. That is the truth of the Scriptures, and God will preserve it. That is not dependent on us. That is our hope and our comfort in the time of crisis too. God maintains His cause. Do not worry about that!

But the crisis or turning point concerns us very really. It is a crisis with respect to that Reformed faith for the so-called Reformed community. And from that point of view that crisis involves the question whether we and our children, whether our churches and denominations, belonging to that Reformed community, will continue in and according to that Reformed faith or not. That is the question in the crisis. That crisis is a point, or a stage, at which it will be decided *whether that Reformed faith is held at all any more, or not*. It will be decided whether we continue even in name and in general Reformed profession in our ecclesiastical life, or whether we abandon that faith in its essentials and its distinctiveness and depart farther and farther and farther, until finally we end in modernism outright. I say such a crisis, if it has not been reached in some cases already, is fast approaching! The seeds, the germs of a crisis like that may have been present for a long time. They usually are. But today as never before there is a massive crisis approaching. There are forces and tendencies more numerous in the church than ever before. And I speak of the Reformed community! There is development and change more rapid than ever before. You can hardly keep up with it. And what is especially characteristic is that those opposing forces and tendencies arise not from outside the Reformed community. They are always there. But they arise within. They arise in high places, places of leadership and influence. They arise in the seminaries, in the pulpits, and the journals of today.

The evidences of it are manifold.

There are *doctrinal evidences*. Scripture is attacked. That is one thing. In the Reformed community Scripture is attacked in its inspiration, in its infallibility. There are many, many attacks like that going on from many angles. Covert attacks, and in some cases, open denials! In close connection with that is another evidence. Creationism versus theistic evolutionism has become an issue in the church. That is a bad sign. It forebodes crisis. It does so

because for the Reformed faith in the deepest sense of the word that is an undebatable issue; and at the same time it is an issue that involves Scripture very, very closely and intimately. To adopt evolution you have to throw the Bible away. In the third place, in the Reformed community sovereign, particular grace is under open attack; and that open attack goes on undisciplined and unstopped. It is taught that God loves all men, and Christ died for all man; and the gospel purposes and the church purposes to save all men that come under its preaching.

There are other symptoms, symptoms of what I would call ultra-liberalism. It arises in the colleges, in the seminaries, and the churches of the Reformed community, even to the point of bowing to higher criticism, unbelieving higher criticism of Scripture. With that, of course, goes this, that the authority of the confessions is flouted, openly contradicted. Those confessions are archaic, old-fashioned; or to use the favorite word of the day, they are not relevant, relevant! They are too narrow! And the attempt is under way to change them, to revise them. In the sphere of ecclesiastical action we have an evangelism that is thoroughly Arminian and conducted at the expense of the truth. And you have cooperation with evangelicals and neo-evangelicals, such as the recent Congress on Evangelism in Berlin. That is no place for a Reformed man! Or, you have, on the other hand, that ultra-liberalism which more and more imitates the social gospel. That, by the way, is not something new, but it is presently being re-emphasized and modified, and it is being introduced as something rather new in the Reformed community. And with that goes, of course, the fact that the church is not content to preach, and especially is not satisfied with *expository preaching*. That is largely a lost art, — distinctive Reformed preaching and teaching that is expository, that expounds the truth of Scripture, and builds up the church, and sends the church home with a solid comfort.

And with that goes a symptom that is well-known to you

all, and that is making rapid strides in our day, the symptom of ecumenicalism, the attempt to merge all into one great world church of some kind or other. This attempt is not marked by discussing and deliberating upon the truth, but by ignoring it and by discarding creeds as walls of separation, and by neglecting discipline, and by leaving all free to believe and to live as they please. It is marked by emphasizing so-called practical Christianity, and world improvement, and world involvement, and philanthropy, and world peace. It is represented in our day especially in movements like the World Council, which should never be an issue for a Reformed church. They have no business there. It is represented by a movement like COCU, Consultation On Church Union. Those things are not new, of course; but that the Reformed community is more and more becoming involved in them, that is a new development. And be warned! Those things stand in the sign of the beast and the false prophet of the Book of Revelation! That movement moves in the direction of Antichrist!

And with all that goes the fact that to a large extent in the church, in education, in the home, in labor and industry, in politics and economics, in amusements and art, and what is commonly called culture, there is world conformity. The art of Christian separation according to the principle of the antithesis is largely a lost Christian art today. And you do not have to look far to find evidences of that.

What is our calling then?

Negatively, we certainly must not assume the ostrich attitude, put our heads in the sand, and try to convince ourselves that everything is all right, and everything is going to turn out all right; just do not pay too much attention to it. That is wrong! Certainly our calling is not either to have the dyed-in-the-wool attitude: "My Church, right or wrong!" There is not any church loyalty, any loyalty to a certain institute, that may ever go as far as that! You take that stand, and you will surely end up ultimately with your church all wrong. Depend on it! Remember this,

too: the Reformed faith is larger, is more important, than any particular institute! Nor must our attitude be, -- and that is a very common thing today: "Well, after all, all these things are not for us laymen. Let's leave it to our leaders, to the clergy; they know best." That is wrong! It is *your* church and *your* faith that are involved. And above all, it is wrong to take that attitude of unconcern and neglect, because it is the *cause of Christ* that is involved, and the *truth of God*. We may not neglect that! Nor must you take the attitude according to which you feel very pathetic; and you complain, probably complain that you come home from church nowadays with practically nothing; and you probably propagandize a little bit. But for whatever may be the reason, you really *do* nothing. You take no stand, and you take no action. Nor, as far as the older generation is concerned, may your attitude be that of Hezekiah, "There shall be peace in my time." Maybe there will be, maybe. But what about your generations?

What then must be our stand?

Maybe there are some of you that think I am going to say: "Well, you all better become Protestant Reformed!" I would to God you were! I mean that! But that is not my point tonight. I do not want to leave that impression at all. I am not here tonight to proselyte. That is not my purpose. That is not the purpose of our churches. Surely, it is not our purpose to try to get a few members, -- even though it is true that the denomination to which I belong as a denomination does not itself face this crisis. We do not have it. But the situation is much too serious to make it a question of simply some proselytizing.

There is a spiritual principle involved here, and a spiritual course of action, that the lovers of the Reformed faith must understand. And whatever practical questions may be involved in it will take care of themselves then.

There is one thing that you and I must always do as Reformed believers, without any compromise, without any reservation, no matter what the consequences may be. And

that is: *we must seek the true church!* And we must let that be the controlling thing in our ecclesiastical attitude and life. We must not seek simply *our* church, -- whatever that is, whether that is the Reformed Church in America, or Christian Reformed, or Protestant Reformed, or any other. We must not seek simply that. There is a principle here, -- the church! And that means that the principle at stake here is the *Reformed faith*. You and I must insist upon and judge things in the church according to the marks of the church which our confessions mention; the pure preaching of the Word. That is the chief mark. The church must preach! And it must preach the Word! And it must preach that Word purely! And in connection with that the other marks stand; the right administration of the sacraments, and the exercise of church discipline. That is our Netherlands Confession on the church.

Operating out of that principle, our calling is to stand shoulder to shoulder with all everywhere who profess that *precious Reformed faith*. If that means *internal conflict* in your church, then let it be! That may not stand in the way. If that means ultimately separation, and even re-affiliation, then let it be! That is not the question. The question is: do you seek the church, God's Zion? If it means that you look to us for fellowship, for counsel, for leadership, then I like you to know that we extend that fellowship to all who hold the Reformed faith dear. We must stand, stand in the unity of the faith.

For where that faith is, where those marks of the church are, there Christ is. Where they are not, there Christ is not. Where they are corrupted, the church must repent or perish! And where they are kept purely and held high, there Christ is, and Christ commands His blessing in life that is unending.

May God grant to you and me that we may hold fast to these principles; that, if we have at all departed from them, we may return; and that holding fast, we may experience His blessing. Amen.

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