

The Destructive Power of False Doctrine

Dewey Engelsma

The temptation is strong for a young person to question the necessity of an emphasis on true doctrine. It is certainly not a concern of the world, or even of most of what calls itself church. The question is asked, “What do all of those truths with large, hard to remember names like propitiation and substitutionary atonement have to do with my life? I am trying to make my way through high school, and that truth isn’t going to get me better grades or the girl I really want to date. I will let the ministers and professors take care of that; I have more pressing concerns!” This feeling doesn’t go away with age. It can infect believers of all ages. Although as we get older, we become more shrewd in how we phrase what is on our heart, it is possible, even common, for adult believers to minimize the importance of doctrine. One example of this is when voices are raised asking for less doctrinal preaching, and for more practical preaching.¹

The argument is not new. Doesn’t an unbalanced emphasis on right doctrine create divisions and factions within the church? If it weren’t for the insistence on true doctrine, we could be done with fighting and get about the real work of the church, which is to fight abortion and poverty, and correct social injustices like racism and chauvinism. Isn’t it just a matter of one man’s preference over another?

The implication is that false doctrine is not as serious as it is made out by a few to be. We may have different understandings of baptism, the scope of God’s grace, and the true meaning of the millennium, but is it worth fighting over? Since it doesn’t impact our everyday life and the important thing—which is that we live a holy life—why make such a big deal over it?

The simple answer is that doctrine is *the* most important thing because it is what you are saying about God, and who he is. We are all jealous (sinfully, most of the time) for our own name and reputation, but God is jealous righteously for his own name. “I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images” (Isa. 42:8).

As important as it is for individuals to speak rightly about God, the absolute importance of churches speaking rightly about who God is was driven home to me recently after reading a captivating biography of Henry J. Kuiper by James DeJong.² Not a name familiar to most *Beacon Lights* readers, H.J. Kuiper was a pastor in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), editor of the church paper, the *Banner* from 1929 until 1956 and a leader in the church. Kuiper’s influence on the CRC was immense. DeJong quotes James C. Schaap to illustrate that impact, “Today it is inconceivable that any single person could lead the denomination so completely. Many looked to Kuiper’s words as if they were Holy Writ” (Introduction, xiii).

Reading the book, one is impressed with Kuiper’s stand on a multitude of issues.

Kuiper appeared to be fiercely on the side of orthodoxy and as such, understood the significance of false doctrine. “False doctrine is sin, a great sin, and all sin must be confessed with sorrow” (176). He gave a stirring description of the spiritual life of a Christian, “It is the life that is hid with Christ in God...It is begotten in the heart by the Holy Spirit, on the ground of the atoning work of Christ on the cross.” The strength of a church is not in its outward appearance or

¹ Such would disagree with Herman Hoeksema who said the following in 1922, “If you ask me what, in our time, our people need above all, in the first place, my answer is: Doctrine! If you ask me what they need in the second place, I say: Doctrine! If you ask me what they need in the third place, I say: Doctrine!” (cited in *Believers and Their Seed*, Herman Hoeksema, RFP, 1997, p. vii). Almost 100 years later, the need has not changed.

² *Henry J. Kuiper: Shaping the Christian Reformed Church, 1907—1962*, James DeJong, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2007

seeming influence in the world, he taught, rather it is in the “spiritual growth and vitality of its members” (187–188).

When it came to the Janssen case³, Kuiper rightly saw that “sympathy for Janssen was a very serious matter. He judged that it disqualified one from key positions.” Kuiper felt so strongly about that this, that he opposed a man’s name being included on a list of nominees for the seminary’s systematic theology opening because the man had “been supportive of Janssen,”—and therefore of Janssen’s doctrine (52).

Kuiper was a staunch defender of Christian education. He wrote promotional brochures, served on a school board, gave passionate speeches promoting the Christian day school and presided over the first graduation of Grand Rapids Christian High School. So vehemently did he defend Christian schools that his opponents accused him of “an extreme and even ridiculous interpretation of Article 21.”⁴

Henry Stob, himself a CRC heavyweight, had written an article in the *Reformed Journal* in 1957 in which Stob had accused the CRC of having a “mind of safety.” In Stob’s mind, this attitude produces “world flight.” Stob implored the CRC to put on the “mind of love.” Kuiper responded strongly: “we can not at present recall any article with which we disagree so completely as the one now under consideration.” Kuiper pointed out that Stob’s argument was “illogical, since being concerned with confessional and theological safety is not incompatible with the attitude of love, nor is wholesome fear of evil or standing in awe (fear) of the Lord less than what the Bible requires.” “The very reason,” Kuiper wrote, for why the safety of the church should be the first concern, “is that *the church cannot properly discharge its task in this world unless it clings with might and main to the truth which it has embraced* (emphasis Kuiper’s)” (119).

Kuiper tried to stem the onslaught of the assault on marriage by divorce and the inevitable remarriage. Although he defended the position that remarriage was permitted of divorced persons in some cases (not only unbiblical but untenable, as time has shown), he did what he could to stem a growing danger. “On maintaining policy on divorce and remarriage, Kuiper argued that verbal penitence alone over broken marriage vows must not become a gateway for allowing people living in ‘continuous adultery’ (people remarried after an “unbiblical divorce”) to belong to the church” (120).

In his final editorial Kuiper warned the people about the spiritual dangers he saw in his church. He confessed an apprehension, that “with all the emphasis on pure doctrine, Christian Reformed people lacked doctrinal discernment, in his opinion. This left him ‘disillusioned’.” He again implored the CRC to “cling with might and main to its heritage of truth and to preserve its best traditions.” “This is not easy,” he wrote, “In fact, nothing is harder than to prevent its gradual, almost imperceptible slipping away from its moorings” (165). He exhorted the CRC to engage in “penetrating self-examination and confess that we have not been as faithful as we should have been in contending for the faith.” He left them with the probing insight that “many who are deeply concerned about ‘external unity’ are indifferent to ‘spiritual and doctrinal unity,’ which are more basic and important” (165–166).

Kuiper repeatedly warned of the dangers of worldliness. He wrote against social dancing, card-playing, theater attendance, union membership, listening to baseball games on Sunday,

³ Ralph Janssen was a professor at Calvin College who was released in 1922 for his higher critical views of the Old Testament. Janssen’s biggest mistake was being born 100 years too soon.

⁴ Article 21 of the Church Order states, “The consistories shall see to it that there are good Christian schools in which the parents have their children instructed according to the demands of the covenant.”

Halloween, and the formation of women's bridge clubs. He was a "crusader against worldliness" according to DeJong (237–238).

No doubt in response to Kuiper's admonitions, the 1928 synod of the CRC approved the printing of a brochure on worldly amusements that instructed and warned the people about the dangers of worldly living and ungodly amusements.⁵ Classis Grand Rapids West went further in 1930 and brought an overture to synod to "print and distribute the pamphlet to every church at synodical expense" (238).

Was Kuiper effective? Were all of his admonitions successful in keeping the CRC on the path of true doctrine and godly living? Did the members in their generations turn from worldliness to a life of orthodox confession and holy living?

In 2016, some 90 years later, Classis Grand Rapids East brought a different report to their synod. Gone were the admonitions to holiness. Absent was the earlier exhortation to the leaders of the church to "warn unceasingly against the prevailing spirit and forms of worldliness," which if not obeyed were to result in discipline of the unrepentant member.⁶ In 2016, Classis Grand Rapids East brought a study report to their synod that advocated for sodomite and lesbian marriage.

Young person, examine the facts—in only a short period of time, the report of classis went from admonishing its people to avoid circuses because of the worldly atmosphere to urging on its people gay marriage. Anyone can discern that this is not a growth of spirituality, holiness, or godly living—this is backsliding and apostatizing.

Reading this causes the man who loves the church of Christ to weep.

Henry J. Kuiper exerted himself to prevent the sea of worldliness from engulfing the church. Today, that same church is awash in it.

How could Kuiper have known? Perhaps on this one point, he can be forgiven? Didn't he do his best? How could he have known that adopting this false doctrine would have such disastrous results?

He, and the rest of the CRC, were warned.

As God always does when a church is "slipping from her moorings" he sent them faithful prophets. Their names were Hoeksema, Danhof, and Ophoff, and they warned Kuiper and the rest of the denomination about what would happen if this false teaching were adopted. Common grace, Hoeksema wrote, will "lead us right into the world, as is already evident in the Netherlands and in our church...Christ and Belial have nothing in common, least of all grace."⁷

Hoeksema was courageous, writing "I will continue to fight the battle against the forces of opposition...Fighting that battle, we live on earth as strangers and pilgrims, like the saints throughout history, the witnesses and heroes of faith...For the glory that is set before us we are willing to suffer with Christ. For the crown that is ours in Christ we gladly bear the cross behind him."⁸

Hoeksema loved the CRC. He loved her so much that he was willing to warn them sharply, even though it would mean the loss of his position and name in that church. "Having as our only purpose the Lord's cause and will, we therefore continue onward in our struggle for our convictions, come what may."⁹

⁵ 1928 Acts of Synod, CRC, http://www.calvin.edu/library/database/crcnasynod/1928acts_et.pdf, accessed 1/19/19

⁶ CRC 2028 Acts of Synod, 90

⁷ *The Rock Whence We are Hewn*, RFPA, 83

⁸ Ibid, 83

⁹ Ibid, 165

Kuiper and the other leaders in the CRC not only ignored the warnings but as has happened throughout history, they were determined to rid themselves of these faithful prophets. This came by way of marginalizing and ostracizing them and finally ejecting them from the church.

False doctrine poisons, corrupts, and finally, it destroys. The history of the CRC is as clear an example of that as anyone could ask for. Ultimately, however, it is Jehovah God himself who judges apostatizing churches in their generations. He does this by giving them over to their sin, and the natural fruit of their sin, for their daring to teach something false about his glorious name.

“So will I make my holy name known in the midst of my people Israel; and I will not let them pollute my holy name any more: and the heathen shall know that I am the LORD, the Holy One in Israel” (Ezek. 39:7).

Is doctrine important? It’s a matter of life and death.

Originally Published in:
Vol. 78 No. 5 May 2019