

Letter of Concern to the Editors of the Standard Bearer

May 23, 2019

Dear Editors of the Standard Bearer (Profs. R. Dykstra and B. Gritters and Rev. K. Koole),

We, the undersigned, are members of the RFPA board, RFPA association, or Standard Bearer (SB) readers. We come to you with this letter of concern about your editorship of the SB. We come to you as members of the organization that owns the SB, as subscribers and readers of the SB, and thus to you as editors of the SB.

The SB as a magazine is dear to us. It stands for the Protestant Reformed truth. It stands for freedom to write and to publish that truth. It stands for polemics and vigorous debate of the doctrinal issues, not only issues of a former day, but issues of the new day.

The SB was started by worthy men during the doctrinal turmoil over common grace in the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) and because there could be no writing or discussion of that issue in the CRC paper, *The Banner*. The SB gave birth to the PRC in 1924 and preserved her in 1953 because there was free debate and clear leadership in the SB. The SB did not merely tolerate such discussion, but invited it for the truth's sake.

Since its inception the SB has been a clear and feared witness to the truth of God's sovereign grace in salvation to the glory of God and over against any and all attempts to glorify man. It has provided a forum for discussion of the issues of the day, refuted errors old and new, and given valuable leadership at crucial points in our history. It has in reality been a standard bearer to which the troops can rally at all times in the battle for the truth.

During your tenure as editors you have not upheld the history, character, and standards of the magazine.

First, the editors have taken the magazine in a direction that is not in keeping with its character as sharply Protestant Reformed, doctrinal, and polemical. The editorials develop virtually no doctrine and the tone is weak. This is reflected by force of editorial leadership throughout the magazine. Pursuing this direction the editors have eroded the historically polemical character of the magazine. The present day character of the magazine is one that we do not believe is simply the result of different men with different abilities and interests, but the result of a conscious decision to stamp the magazine with another character and take it in a different direction.

Second, the editors threaten the freedom of the magazine and thus its historic position as a magazine that invited criticism and debate for the sake of the truth. Writing in the SB has been censored by the editors and letters attempting to discuss the doctrinal issues of the day rejected, unreasonably delayed, or held hostage by demands to change the content of the letters. Efforts to have discussion in the SB about the issues of the day or about writings in the SB have been met with denials, deflections, criticisms, silence, delays, and refusals to publish. Of these things and their transgression of longstanding SB practice you are well aware. These things indicate to us that you do not value the magazine's principle and history of freedom, but rather undermine it. They show to us that you do not value the magazine's history as a forum of vigorous debate on the issues of the day for the benefit of the readers and the churches, but rather view debate as a threat.

Third, we also have a serious problem with the relationship between the SB and the RFPA, the organization that owns, publishes, and ultimately has the final say over all content of the magazine. We seriously disagree with the adopted relationship policy that purports to establish the relationship between the SB and the RFPA.

The fact that such a document was deemed necessary is indicative of a deep problem in the relationship between the SB and the RFPA and of a long-standing and deplorable struggle for control of the content of the SB. We believe your editorship and the direction that you have set for the magazine is responsible for the breakdown in the relationship and the supposed need for such a policy. The SB magazine is owned by the RFPA and is the paper of the members of the Association. It does not belong to the SB editorial staff. The staff is supposed to be a faithful caretaker of the content of the magazine for the RFPA as an organization that stands for the Protestant Reformed truth.

That document fundamentally alters the relationship between the RFPA and SB that existed since the paper's founding. It not only alters it by ceding control of the content of the paper to the editorial staff and taking it away from the organization in whose hands it properly lies, but also by making the relationship, which heretofore was as organic and harmonious as that between the hand and the arm, into a legal contract. That policy serves to take the paper away from the organization that started, owns, and operates it and to insulate the paper and the editors from legitimate control, criticism, or demands by the board and ultimately by the RFPA.

In this regard we quote to you from Rev. Hoeksema speaking to a gathering of the RFPA in 1945:

This also implies that the Standard Bearer is yours. It is not an organ of any consistory, classis, or synod. Nor is it under the sovereign control of the editors that fill its pages. It is yours. Even as our free Christian Schools are not ultimately controlled by the teachers, but by the parents; so the Standard Bearer, though its contents are the care of its editors, is your paper. (SB 22.6)

Each one of these problems all by itself is serious. However, they become intolerable and compel us to write to you when they are combined with the stance of the SB under your leadership in the most recent issues and troubles in our churches.

First, when the PRC were going through a doctrinal controversy over the place of works in salvation the editorial pages of the SB were silent. The controversy dealt with the fundamental doctrines of justification and the unconditional covenant, yet the SB said nothing. In these troubles the magazine had an obligation to speak clearly for the benefit of the churches and for the sake of the truth. Our sincere hope with every issue was that there would be some writing to illuminate the issues, but the magazine was painfully silent and thus derelict in its duty.

Synod declared the error a compromise of justification and the unconditional covenant. The Apostle Paul and the Holy Ghost name the compromise of justification by faith alone by anyone and for whatever reason—though he be an angel from heaven or the Apostle Paul himself—as heresy and pronounce a fearsome anathema on those who do that impenitently. Since justification is the heart of the gospel of the covenant of grace, the Apostle Paul and the Holy Ghost pronounce the compromise of the unconditional covenant to be heresy. There is nothing more serious and nothing with greater consequences—eternal consequences for the minister and his hearers—than compromising the doctrine of justification and the unconditional covenant.

When the controversy finally was settled at the broadest ecclesiastical gathering of the Protestant Reformed Churches without any help from the SB, when the synod identified the trouble as a compromise of justification and the unconditional covenant, and when at that point there was an opportunity for the SB editors to inform and instruct on the issues just faced by the churches and their seriousness, the editorial pages of the SB were bold to minimize the threat to the churches and to issue a threat against all who were inclined to take the doctrinal threat seriously.

Second, soon afterward editorials appeared condemning a new species of antinomianism that was allegedly a danger in the PRC. The recent controversy in our churches also went seriously wrong by the introduction of an invented antinomianism. Not only did it hinder the condemnation of erroneous statements in the preaching, but in the process the doctrine of grace in its criticism of those false statements was declared antinomian. Now this approach is being perpetuated on the pages of the SB.

Third, following this approach the editors of the SB instigated criticism of the doctrine of Rev. Herman Hoeksema as maintained through the doctrinal split of 1953. Rev. Koole has written regarding Rev. Hoeksema's exegesis of Acts 16:30-31 as that is found in a well-known sermon on that text, that if it was anyone else he would say, "Nonsense!" What that means is that the exegesis is nonsense to Rev. Koole and that he believes the exegesis ought to be nonsense to the readership of the SB.

In the May 15 issue of the SB, in response to an SB reader who did not think that that exegesis was nonsense, Rev. Koole makes clear that he not only thinks the exegesis was nonsense, but also dangerous. He wrote, "But in this instance, he went about it in an unnecessary manner, one that can easily lead to improper doctrinal conclusions and charges. HH's explanation of the salvation of the Philippian jailor in this one sermon is not the full Hoeksema. In order to condemn conditional covenant theology, one does not have to say that the apostles were calling regenerated men to do nothing."

Rev. Koole's analysis of Rev. Hoeksema's words is a caricature to make them look like nonsense. Rev. Hoeksema was preaching in that sermon over against the theology of his day that used passages like this to teach conditions in salvation by emphasizing faith as an activity and by stressing man's responsibility. Not all the ministers were as bold as Rev. De Wolf. Rev. Hoeksema notes that in the sermon and elsewhere in the literature of the day. There was a trend and an emphasis. Activity and responsibility were the watchwords of the day in the preaching and writing of the ministers. That emphasis led to the explicit preaching and defense of conditions and the gospel was lost to many.

When he preached that sermon he did so as that controversy had come to a head. When he preached that sermon, he preached the gospel, the full gospel, the glorious gospel of grace, a kind of distillation of his preaching his entire ministry long, the kind of preaching for which he was contending in the PRC, and for which he would occasion a split in the PRC. We find nothing wrong with Rev. Hoeksema's "manner," for which Rev. Koole criticizes him, but love him exactly for that preaching and receive it as the gospel.

We do not find that the gospel he preached in that sermon "can easily lead to improper doctrinal conclusions and charges," as Rev. Koole contends. We find Rev. Koole's statements particularly troubling in light of the fact that it was exactly Rev. Hoeksema's preaching and teaching of this kind that was set down in the Declaration of Principles and that led to the rejection of conditions—any and all conditions in the covenant—and that finally led to the charges of false doctrine against a Protestant Reformed minister. These were not improper doctrinal conclusions or charges, but right and necessary, and ones that delivered the PRC of false doctrine and those teaching it.

In that same May 15 issue of the SB Rev. Koole writes about the letter writer and by implication about the theology of Rev. Herman Hoeksema that the man is espousing,

I am convinced that while you want nothing to do with hyper-Calvinism, antinomianism, or labeling regenerated men stocks and blocks, you are heading in that direction by your failure to give full glory to what irresistible grace makes of a man, what it enables us as new creatures to do in response to the Word of God in law and gospel. That's what becomes consistent with your view. Not staying out of the hyper-Calvinist ditch, but sliding into it.

He writes later,

It is the view you are espousing, brother Boonstra, that in the end seriously underestimates and diminishes the true power and work of the indwelling and sanctifying Holy Spirit. And that, in turn, will have an adverse effect on what the preaching can and must expect of regenerated, confessing men and women in Christ's church.

The theology of Rev. Herman Hoeksema as it was preached in that sermon is now viewed as a danger to the PRC and those that espouse it are considered hyper-Calvinistic and antinomian. Rev. Hoeksema and Hoeksema's theology now is criticized in the paper he founded.

For the first time in its illustrious history the SB was shamefully silent in a serious doctrinal controversy in the PRC over the very heart of the gospel. Now having found a voice the editors of the SB are using the SB as a platform to call the doctrine of Herman Hoeksema dangerous and those that espouse and maintain that doctrine antinomian and hyper-Calvinistic, the very charges that this denomination and that paper have endured through the decades for their stand for the truth.

This stance of the magazine we find unacceptable. The editors' treatment of Hoeksema's theology and those that support it shows how far the magazine under your leadership has departed from its historic stance. We see it as the end result of the previous direction set by editors and, indeed, its fruit.

In light of these things we have come to you to inform you of our concerns and to inform you that we have addressed a letter to the RFPA board detailing these concerns and asking them to take action.

For the love of the truth,