

EDITORIAL: HYPER-CALVINIST! (1)

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Introduction

Recently, brethren have brought to my attention Phillip R. Johnson's "A Primer on Hyper-Calvinism."¹ They were offended that he called the Protestant Reformed Churches (PRC) hyper-Calvinists: "The best known American hyper-Calvinists are the Protestant Reformed Churches." My initial reaction was to ignore such accusations—I prefer to answer exegetical arguments, and Johnson's "Primer" does not offer any such arguments. I imagine he does do exegesis, just not in this article. Exegesis is much more than listing texts. Exegesis requires that one dig out of the text its meaning and demonstrate that the text proves what one claims. However, since Johnson is influential, and since he directly attacks the PRC, and since younger, inexperienced brethren may not know how to answer him, I offer this response in a series of editorials.

One paragraph of Johnson's "Primer" which particularly grieved me was his dismissal of Prof. Engelsma's book, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel*:

The most articulate advocate of the PRC position is David Engelsma, whose book *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel* is an interesting but in my view terribly misleading study of the question of whether PRC theology properly qualifies as hyper-Calvinism. Engelsma does some selective quoting and interpretive gymnastics in order to argue that his view is mainstream Reformed theology. But a careful reading of his sources shows that he often quotes out of context, or ends a quote just before a qualifying statement that would totally negate the point he thinks he has made. Still, for those interested in these issues, I recommend his book, with a caution to read it very critically and with careful discernment.

Johnson makes serious charges against Engelsma. However, he makes no attempt to substantiate his allegation of "selective quoting." With this in mind,

¹ Phil Johnson, "A Primer on Hyper-Calvinism" (www.spurgeon.org/~phil/articles/hypercal.htm). As an illustration of how accessible this article is, google "hyper-Calvinism."

I recently re-read Engelsma's book. I carefully read all the sources in context, and I e-mailed Johnson to furnish me with some examples of his allegation. Thus far, Johnson—a busy man, no doubt—has not responded. Johnson also fails to mention that John Gerstner, who wrote the Foreword to Engelsma's book, went on record that Engelsma “carefully defines and convincingly avoids ‘hyper-Calvinism’ himself and clears his denomination, the Protestant Reformed Churches, of so teaching.”²

One might wonder, Who is this Phil Johnson, and what qualifies *him* to write “A Primer on Hyper-Calvinism”? According to his online biography, Johnson is executive director of Grace To You, the ministry of John MacArthur, a Calvinistic, Baptist, dispensationalist. One assumes that Johnson is either wholly, or almost, in agreement with MacArthur. If this is true, we have a Baptist dispensationalist writing a primer on hyper-Calvinism!³ Johnson identifies himself thus: “a five-point Calvinist, affirming without reservation the Canons of the Synod of Dordt.” Since he, the BRF and the PRC affirm the *Canons*—and PRC office-bearers (although probably not Johnson) are bound to them by the “Formula of Subscription”—we should find some common ground.

Before Johnson gives his own definition of hyper-Calvinism—a five-point definition, which, if true, would make the PRC and BRF three-point hyper-Calvinists—he quotes a dictionary. Apparently, whoever writes the theological dictionaries rules the theological landscape! However, theological dictionaries do not determine theology. The creeds do! They—not theological dictionaries—were officially adopted by the church. The article is by the Anglican Peter Toon in the *New Dictionary of Theology*.⁴ The main features of its definition of

² John H. Gerstner in David J. Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel* (Grandville, MI: RFP, repr. 1993), p. vii.

³ Phil Johnson, “Who is Phillip R. Johnson?” (www.spurgeon.org/~phil/bio.htm).

⁴ Peter Toon, “Hyper-Calvinism,” in Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (eds.), *New Dictionary of Theology* (Leicester: IVP, 1988), pp. 324-325. However, Toon is a hypo-Calvinist (see his *Born Again: A Biblical and Theological Study of Regeneration* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1987]) and even in his dictionary article he speaks of “the universal duty of sinners to believe savingly in the Lord Jesus with the assurance that Christ actually died for them” (p. 324), contrary to the truth of particular atonement! The same dictionary notes that Augustine (p. 636) and Gottschalk (p. 259) denied that God desires to save the reprobate, yet they are not called hyper-Calvinists! Not only did the *New Dictionary of Theology* publish a hypo-Calvinist author and article defining hyper-Calvinism, but it has N. T. Wright promot-

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hyper-Calvinism are (1) an overemphasis on God's sovereignty with a minimising of the moral and spiritual responsibility of sinners, (2) an undermining of the universal duty of sinners to believe in the Lord Jesus and (3) the denial of the word "offer" with respect to the preaching of the gospel. This definition is too broad—it includes real hyper-Calvinism (a denial of duty faith) but it muddies the waters by including some theological positions which are *not* definitive of hyper-Calvinism (avoidance of the word "offer," an "overemphasis" on God's sovereignty, etc.).⁵ Moreover, Johnson defines "offer" as "the sincere proposal of divine mercy to sinners in general."

Another aspect of hyper-Calvinism, which Johnson rejects, and of which the PRC and BRF are certainly *not* guilty, is a morbid introspection in the search to know one's election. The PRC, and especially Engelsma himself, have been very critical of that error. We encourage and enjoy a healthy assurance of salvation (see *Heidelberg Catechism*, Lord's Days 1, 7; *Canons* I:12-13, 16; R:7; III/IV:13; V:9-13; R:5-6). Hyper-Calvinist churches and denominations "tend to become either barren and inert, or militant and elitist," adds Johnson—a charge Arminians have made against Reformed churches for centuries, and a charge of which the PRC, by the grace of God, is innocent. By God's covenant faithfulness, the PRC are lively and vibrant, lovers of the truth, faithful and generous. Godly homes and marriages with large families, a solid seminary, good Christian schools and zealous mission work testify to this. Calvinism for the PRC and the BRF is not "cold, lifeless dogma," but truth which lives in our hearts and which is our unspeakable consolation in life and in death

ing New Perspective on Paul ideas in his treatments of "Justification" (pp. 359-361) and "Righteousness" (pp. 590-592), over against Reformed teaching on this article of a standing or falling church.

⁵ We need not fear an over-emphasis on God's sovereignty. Writes Engelsma, "Had Toon charged Hoeksema with an exclusive emphasis on the sovereignty of God, so that he denied or minimized the responsibility of man, we would have to take Toon's charge seriously. Since the charge is that of 'excessive' emphasis, we can ignore it. For it is impossible to emphasize the sovereignty of God excessively, especially as regards the sovereignty of grace. Stand before the incarnation, the cross, and the wonder of regeneration, and try to de-emphasize sovereign grace. The 'charge' that a theologian excessively emphasizes sovereign grace is in fact the highest praise that one can give that theologian, praise that identifies him as a faithful servant of the gospel of the grace of God in Christ Jesus ... Not in an emphasis on God's sovereignty but in a denial of man's responsibility must the characteristic flaw of hyper-Calvinism be located" (*Hyper-Calvinism*, p. 200).

(*Westminster Confession* 3:8; *Belgic Confession* 13). Thus we abhor Arminianism and hyper-Calvinism (as well as other heresies repugnant to the truth as summarized in the Reformed confessions).

Johnson then proceeds to a brief analysis of “common but not quite precise definitions” of hyper-Calvinism—a denial that God uses the means of preaching, fatalism, supralapsarianism and double predestination. Johnson is correct that not all supralapsarians or double-predestinarians are hyper-Calvinists. Indeed, we add that those who deny reprobation are not true Calvinists, but are hypo-Calvinists who fall short of Calvinism (*Canons* I:15, 18; R:8).

“Some critics,” adds Johnson, “unthinkingly slap the label ‘hyper’ on any variety of Calvinism that is higher than the view they hold to.” This approach, Johnson warns, “lacks integrity and only serves to confuse people.” Did Johnson examine himself before he wrote those words, and before he called the PRC the “best known American hyper-Calvinists”?

Johnson’s Definition

Johnson’s proposed definition of hyper-Calvinism has five parts:

A hyper-Calvinist is someone who either

#1 Denies that the gospel call applies to all who hear OR

#2 Denies that faith is the duty of every sinner OR

#3 Denies that the gospel makes any “offer” of Christ, salvation or mercy to the non-elect (or denies that the offer of divine mercy is free and universal) OR

#4 Denies that there is such a thing as “common grace” OR

#5 Denies that God has any sort of love for the non-elect

Denial #1 is ambiguous—what does “applies to all who hear” mean? Only #2 is genuine, historic hyper-Calvinism. Only #2 is condemned by the confessions. Denials #3-5 are not hyper-Calvinism. Johnson may not like or agree with denials #3-5, but that does not give him the right to label them as “hyper-Calvinism.” Is Johnson not, to use his own words, “slapping the label ‘hyper’ on any variety of Calvinism that is higher than the view he holds to”?

We propose to examine the issues of the gospel offer (#3), the gospel call (#1-

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2) and common grace (#4-5) to see where this charge of hyper-Calvinism may legitimately be laid. This will require several editorials in the next few issues.

The Gospel Offer or Serious Call?

In order to determine whether a denial of the gospel offer is hyper-Calvinism (#3), we look at the *Canons of Dordt*, which are the official, creedal definition of Calvinism. In 1924, when the Christian Reformed Church (CRC) adopted the Three Points of Common Grace, it appealed to *Canons* III/IV:8. We quote from Articles 8-10:

Article 8: As many as are called by the gospel are unfeignedly called. For God hath most earnestly and truly shown in His Word what is pleasing to Him, namely, that those who are called should come to Him. He, moreover, seriously promises eternal life and rest to as many as shall come to Him and believe on Him.

Article 9: It is not the fault of the gospel, nor of Christ offered therein, nor of God, who calls men by the gospel and confers upon them various gifts, that those who are called by the ministry of the Word refuse to come and be converted ...

Article 10: But that others who are called by the gospel obey the call and are converted is not to be ascribed to the proper exercise of free will ...

These articles were written in response to the Remonstrants or the Arminians, who submitted their “Opinions” to the Synod. The issue here is God’s seriousness—if the gospel only comes to some, and if God grants faith to only some who hear the gospel, is God *really serious* in the call of the gospel through the preaching? The Arminians contended that, if God did not intend to give salvation to all, and if Christ did not purchase salvation for all, and if sinners do not have the ability to choose salvation, then God must be hypocritical, insincere and unserious in the preaching, by promising something He does not have and which He does not intend to give.

The “Opinions of the Remonstrants” are very enlightening about what the Arminians understood by the offer of the gospel:

Whomever God calls to salvation, He calls seriously, that is, with a sincere and completely unhypocritical intention and *will to save*; nor do we assent to the opinions of those who hold that God calls certain ones externally whom He does not *will to call internally*, that is, as truly converted, even before the grace of calling has been rejected.

There is not in God a secret will which so contradicts the will of the same revealed in the Word that according to it (that is, the secret will) He does not *will the conversion and salvation of the greatest part of those whom He seriously calls and invites* by the Word of the Gospel and by His revealed will; and we do not here, as some say, acknowledge in God a holy simulation, or a double person.⁶

Notice that it is the Remonstrants (Arminians)—and not the Calvinists at Dordt—who teach that God has a “sincere and completely unhypocritical intention and will to save” all who hear the gospel. Arminians believe that God desires the salvation of all men without exception. Johnson would have us believe that only hyper-Calvinists deny God’s desire to save all men.

That background greatly clarifies the meaning of the *Canons*. The key is the Latin word *serio*. Three times the word *serio* is used in *Canons* III/IV:8, translated by various adverbs in our official English version: “unfeignedly [*serio*] called,” “earnestly [*serio*] shown” and “seriously [*serio*] promises.”

What *serio* does *not* mean is what the Arminians taught—“whomever God calls to salvation, He calls seriously, that is, with a sincere and completely unhypocritical intention and will to save.” Modern compromised Calvinists, however, such as Johnson himself, *do* define the gospel call (or offer) that way, as God’s desire to save all or, in Johnson’s words, “the sincere proposal of divine mercy to sinners in general.” Are we to imagine God as a young, lovesick man, earnestly proposing marriage to a beautiful young lady, a proposal rejected by the majority of sinners who hear it as a “sincere proposal of divine mercy”? A disappointed suitor indeed! How could Christ propose to any sinners who

⁶ Peter Y. De Jong (ed.), *Crisis in the Reformed Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformed Fellowship Inc., 1968), pp. 226-227; italics mine.

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are not part of His divinely ordained bride? And how does that differ from the typical Arminian message of Jesus knocking on the sinner's heart?

About *serio* (unfeignedly, earnestly and seriously) we can make several observations. First, God is pleased with faith and repentance ("that those who are called should come to Him," *Canons* III/IV:8). The good pleasure here is not God's eternal decree, that which He is pleased to ordain. God is *not* pleased to ordain that all should repent and believe, for He has not decreed to give all men faith (Eph. 1:11; 2:8; Phil. 1:29). Rather, God's good pleasure is that which is pleasing in His sight, or that in which He delights, or it is that which He approves in His creatures, and therefore that which He commands in His creatures (such as obedience to the law, faith and repentance). Second, God is serious, in earnest, about this. God is not indifferent to sin and unbelief. God does not say that He does not care whether people believe or not. Will God send preachers but remain indifferent as to whether sinners believe in Jesus? Will God remain unconcerned if sinners despise His Son in unbelief? Of course not! God is so serious about this that He threatens eternal damnation upon those who refuse to believe and to repent!

But the word *serio* certainly does *not* mean that God earnestly desires the salvation of all hearers. It cannot mean that, because God did not elect all to salvation (in fact, He reprobated many of those who in time hear the gospel); Christ did not die for all men (in fact, God has nothing to offer the reprobate who hear the gospel); and the Holy Spirit does not work graciously in the hearts of all hearers to regenerate them and work faith in them (in fact, the Spirit hardens many who hear the gospel).⁷ Since the Triune God does nothing for the salvation of the reprobate—He neither elects, nor redeems, nor regenerates them—how could He, then, in the preaching of the gospel desire (even seriously, ardently and passionately desire) the salvation of the same reprobate?

Such is the confusion of the modern "Calvinist." Such was not the confusion of Dordt, and a rejection of that confusion does not make one a hyper-Calvinist, Johnson's "Primer" notwithstanding. *to be continued (DV)*

⁷ John Piper, another modern "Calvinist," understands this, which is why he argues that Christ died for all men in some sense, in order to make it possible for God to make a bona fide "offer" of salvation to all men, a scheme which has no basis in Scripture and which certainly falls foul of the *Canons of Dordt* (especially II:8-9; R:2-4).