

Sunday, December 16, 2012—Grace Life School of Theology—*Grace History Project*—Lesson 84 Early Mid-Acts Leaders of the 1920s: Harry Bultema

## **Introduction**

- One of the men that was pivotal in the establishment of the mid-Acts movement in the United States was Harry Bultema. In this lesson we want to consider how Harry Bultema began to understand dispensational truth as well as how that truth led to being excommunicated from the Reformed Church.
- In order to accomplish this task, the lesson has been organized into the following three points:
  - Who Was Harry Bultema?
  - *Maranatha* Causes Trouble for Bultema
  - Excommunication and Renewal

## **Who Was Harry Bultema?**

- “Harry Bultema (1884-1952) was born in Holland and was one of six siblings who came to America in the early 1900s. He was raised and nurtured by devout parents. In the U.S. he studied at Calvin College and Calvin Seminary in Grand Rapids, Michigan. After graduation he pastored Christian Reformed churches in Illinois, Iowa, and Michigan.” (Couch, 66)
- Mr. Bultema recounts the early days of his ministry in his autobiography titled, *Valiant and Diligent for Truth: Autobiography of Harry Bultema*. In the Forward, Daniel Bultema (Harry’s Son) records why his father began writing his autobiography in 1934. As Harry began to record the major events in his life, he began with the following words.
  - “I am only fifty years and a relatively young man, but I feel death lurking in me and old age and weakness are stealing on me. Realizing that the thread of my life might suddenly snap one of these days and considering that my brief life has been much misunderstood, I have a desire that my dear children and my many friends and foes may know the motives and mainspring of my life. Hence, not a vain desire for post-mortem fame, but love for the children and for the truth as it is in Him prompts me to pen down these few pages.” (Bultema, VI)
- Daniel Bultema offers the following commentary with regard to his father being “misunderstood.”
  - “Pastor Bultema alluded to being “misunderstood” and having “foes” during his ministry. The decades of the 1920’s and 1930’s were especially tumultuous years for my father. In the 1920’s, after deep study and much soul-searching, he took his stand for pre-millennial truth. Many friends in Western Michigan, as well as in other parts of the country, were moved through the ministry of this truth by my father to fresh expectancy of Christ’s coming. His further conviction that Christ is King of Israel (supporting the truth of

prophecy) and Head of “the Church which is His body” (supporting the truth of the mystery) led to his being forced into leaving the Christian Reformed denomination where he had been reared, trained, and ordained. In the decade of the 1930’s, when his deeper studies brought him further insights into dispensational truth, he proclaimed the truth of our indemnification with Christ through the one baptism of Ephesians 4:5. Again, many received this doctrine with all readiness of mind, but others opposed it.” (Bultema, VI-VII)

- “Harry Bultema’s intimate friend during his collegiate years was William B. Eerdmans, Sr., who became the renowned publisher. On July 24, 1912, Bultema married Dean Kuiper, sister of Rev. H. Kuiper, who assisted in the marriage ceremony. . . Soon Bultema was active in his first charge, the First Christian Reformed Church of Peoria, Iowa, where he was ordained and installed on October 18, 1912. He soon established himself, not only a fine preacher and pastor and as a strong advocate of missions, but also as a writer for columns in Pella newspapers and as a force to be reckoned with in Classis. Bultema’s effectiveness in Iowa, within a few years, caused him to be in great demand for calls from outstanding churches of his denomination. He accepted a call to the First Christian Reformed Church in Muskegon, Michigan, and early in March 1916 he and his wife and three little girls set out for Michigan. . . Following his first sermon, “Heavenly Treasures in Earthen Vessels,” on April 2, 1916 he continued in persistent study and writing and, by April 1917, Bultema managed to have published his *Maranatha*. By July of the same year, the second edition of this 400 page volume came out. Both editions were in his native language, Dutch; nevertheless, the response to his advocacy of premillennianism was dramatic and widespread.” (Boslooper, 17)

### **Maranatha Causes Trouble for Bultema**

- In his autobiography, Mr. Bultema recounts the following events from very early in his ministry in Peoria, Iowa. It was perhaps during this pastor’s conference that he first began to question the standard views of the Reformed Church with respect to the future of the nation of Israel.
  - “When I was in Peoria, the Rev. Fles was in Pella for at least the first two years. We once had a pastoral conference at the home of his son-in-law, the Rev. DeLeeuw, who was married to his eldest daughter. They had asked the old patriarch to give conclusive proof that Israel would be restored. His father, having been a Rabbi in Holland, knew Israel’s’ past, present, and future as few others did, and he believed and preached and taught Israel’s future, though always in a general and never in a specific way. I was convinced at the time that God was not all through with Israel, as many believed, but I did not know how, why, when, and wherefore. I was greatly interested to hear what our revered Father Fles would say on this important theme, so close to his own heart.

He quietly read the brief chapter of Hosea 3 and said, “You all know that Israel was married in covenant to Jehovah, and you all admit that Israel has broken the marriage covenant and committed adultery with other gods.” Then he went on how Israel now sits without a God-given King and without a royal prince of their own choice after their

rejection of King Jesus. Hence, he said the royal people have no King, neither God-given, nor self-chosen. Further, the priestly people have no sacrifice after their rejection of Calvary's perfect Lamb. Neither do they have an image or idol-statue. God cured them of their former idolatry. "Finally, brethren, there is a third important reason," he said. "The Prophetic people have no ephod, this standing metonymically for the urim and thummin, God's revelation, but neither has Israel now any teraphim, or methods and tokens of false revelation. Hence the royal people are without a King, the priestly people without an offering, and the prophetic people without a revelation. This is Israel's present-day desolate, orphaned period. Ichabod, the glory is all gone! That Israel is Lo-Ammi, not My people, and Lo-Fuhamah, having no-mercy, you all admit as an undeniable fact.

"Now listen then, brethren, to the Word of God in verse 5," he said. "Afterward, i.e., after this long period of Israel's desolation, which is still going on, the children of Israel shall return, and seek Jehovah their God, and they shall fear Jehovah and His goodness. When? In the latter days, the day of Christ's coming and Kingdom."

After the venerable old man was through, his son-in-law tried to tear his presentation all apart. Taking the figure from Kuyper, he exclaimed, "Israel is the fire-hose, and when God has quenched the burning world, then He burns the hose." All the other preachers agreed with Rev. DeLeeuw and all agreed that Israel had sinned so terribly that God, in wrath, had put Israel forever aside. Christ was the end of Israel and His Church had now fully and finally taken Israel's place in God's plan and counsel.

As the youngest, I kept still to the last, but I felt somewhat like Elihu must have felt in Job 32:18-19. I said, "Brethren, you have come with sweeping generalizations, colored by prejudice and dogma, and you have not even made a fair attempt to answer the logical exegesis of our Rev. Father Fles. It is not at all to the point what Kuyper, Bavink, and Warfield may have said, but the point is what God has said in this Word right here, eloquently brought before us. This exegesis is right or it is wrong. If the latter, show it conclusively. If it is right, accept it as God's Word. Let us as ministers of the Word not exalt man's vain reasoning above God's Word. They said the exegesis was wrong, but not one made an attempt to prove it wrong." (Bultema, 84-86)

- Since the time of the account presented above, Bultema studied these issues on his own. Thomas Boslooper, author of *Grace and Glory Days* presents the following influences upon Bultema's thinking and the conclusions that were presented in *Maranatha*.
  - "Bultema described how aware he had been of how lacking Calvinistic congregations he had known were of Christian hope. His own study of hope focused on the blessed hope of the second coming of Jesus Christ, and this led him to develop a premillennialism interpretation of this great biblical concept. He too made use of the Scofield Reference bible, but had been previously influenced by J.N. Darby and numerous other theologians

whom he had meticulously researched. His principal conviction, however, stemmed from his own private reading and study of Scripture.

Crucial to his interpretation were the following: all prophecy in the Old and New Testament must and shall be fulfilled-literally. Israel and the church are two and not one, and Christ is the King of Israel and the Head of the Church.” (Boslooper, 17-18)

- In his autobiography, Bultema highlights the core principals of *Maranatha* that landed him in hot water with the reformed Church.
  - “Throughout church history it is seen that the truth was benefited by error. Even if the two points of MARANATHA had been in error, the truth was greatly benefited by them, because they caused a wave of new and fresh Bible study. It threw thousands of religious traditionalists out of their ruts and grooves to set them on a fresh line of Bible study to this very day.

The two points could certainly not be fundamental errors, because they were well substantiated by texts from the Word. All admitted that there is an Israel. All admitted that there is a church which is the Body of Christ. All admitted that these two are not identical. Again, all conceded that Christ was the King of Israel, and all readily granted that Christ is the Head of the Church, and all recognized that the two concepts of King and Head are not exactly identical. Yet my whole MARANATHA was practically condemned as a dangerous book because of these two points: 1) Israel and the Church are two and not one. 2) Christ is the King of Israel and the Head of the Church.” (Bultema, 100)

- “Fundamentalists and premillennarians within the sound of his voice and within range of his writings welcomed him enthusiastically. The brethren in his own denomination, in their immediate response, lauded him. At the Synod in June of 1918, however, Bultema found himself on the agenda. Four overtures had come to the Synod objecting to *Maranatha*—from the classis of Zeeland, Holland, Orange City, and Sioux City. By the conclusion of the session, the record of the proceedings against him and his views amounted to 200 pages (in Dutch).” (Boslooper, 18)
- Herman Hoeksema, a rival of Bultema’s since seminary was his chief antagonist. Hoeksema presented to Synod with his own condemnation of *Maranatha*. According to Boslooper, “Synod’s committee reported it had met with Bultema personally for a considerable length of time, but years later Bultema complained that he was not allowed even five minutes to address the Synod personally.” (Boslooper, 18)
- Bultema offers the following perspective on these proceedings in his autobiography:
  - “I admitted to the Synodical Committee that there were many points of unity between Israel and the Church, e.g., a unity with both in Adam. And I was glad to concede that there were many points of unity between a King and a ruling Head, but these brethren, as

well as the various classical brethren, always wanted me to retract those two points as falsehood and error. It was simply impossible for me to do it. It would have been moral suicide. It would have seared my conscience as with a hot iron. I would have lost the smile of the Lord. I would have grieved His good Spirit. I would have lost all self-respect and surely would have had to give up my ministry, as I certainly could not have prayed and preached in public any longer.” (Bultema, 100-101)

- “Although Bultema contradicted no Doctrinal Standard of the Reformed tradition, his view apparently contradicted the prevailing biblical interpretation that Israel and the Church formed a unity, and that the church is one from the time of creation until the time of Christ’s second coming. . . According to Christian Reformed Confessions, Christ was to be thought of as King of Israel and King of the Church. Bultema did not view Israel and the Church as identical. Fundamentally, the struggle between Bultema and the Synod was over the question of whether Confessions serve to interpret Scripture (Synod’s view) or whether Scripture served to interpret the Confessions (Bultema’s view).” (Boslooper, 19)
- “Although Harry Bultema wholeheartedly accepted all Creeds of Christendom and the doctrinal standards of his Calvinistic heritage and the Christian Reformed Church, he found himself, in the summer of 1919, in a precarious position denominationally. He discovered that his denominational papers (the “Banner” and “De Wachter”) would not publish his articles or statements on the crisis at hand, and so in September of 1919, he commenced publishing his own “De Bereer” Soon it was being sent to 1,000 homes throughout the country, and was said to be read in nearly every state in the Union.” (Boslooper, 19)

### **Excommunication and Renewal**

- “The Consistory of the First Christian Reformed Church in Muskegon was called upon by the Synod to act on this matter relevant to its Pastor. Herman Hoeksema was one of the members of the three-man committee to present this matter to Bultema’s church. . . His church, the largest church in Muskegon, and the largest church of his denomination, was filled three times every Sunday with 1,500 people. As his notoriety spread, he was also elected as Chairman of an Interdenominational Bible Conference which was to meet monthly.” A Declaration of twelve Beliefs was signed by seventeen pastors from the midwest including two members of the Reformed Church in America. (Boslooper, 19)
- “Harry Bultema’s Consistory, however, did not act on the recommendation of the Synod, and when the Classis of Muskegon convened in Grand Haven, Michigan on November 11, 1919, it named a committee to ask the Consistory of Bultema’s church to suspend him as a Christian Reformed pastor. In the event that the Consistory did not do so within three weeks, both pastor and Consistory would be suspended by Classis until the Synod met in June of 1920. . . By this time the “Bultema story” was in the newspapers throughout Western Michigan, and they reported that the 1,500 members of his congregation, the largest church in Muskegon, were behind Bultema, refused to oust him from his place, and had done nothing whatever toward securing a retraction of his statements.” (Boslooper, 20)

- “On December 19, the Classis of Grand Rapids West and Holland met to take action against Bultema, unanimously voting to depose him as pastor of the First Christian Reformed Church of Muskegon, and as a minister of the Christian Reformed Church. His entire Consistory (sixteen men) was also deposed. The congregation, however, was not deposed, and Professor Samuel Volbeda from Calvin Seminary in Grand Rapids was appointed by the Classis to occupy Bultema’s pulpit on Sunday, December 21, at the morning worship at 9:00 a.m. Arrangements were made for Volbeda to meet with Bultema and the consistory at 8:45 a.m., prior to the Morning Worship at 9:00 a.m. on the 21<sup>st</sup>. Volbeda arrived with an entourage at 8:48 a.m. surprised that the service was well under way. Bultema had begun the worship at 8:35 a.m. The Consistory, prior to that Sunday morning, had voted to have Bultema preach. Bultema’s text for that morning, to a packed church, was John 9:34—“And they cast him out.” In the sermon Bultema spoke to the issue raised by the Synod—that his book *Maranatha* made expressions directly opposed to two fundamental doctrines of the church—the kingship of Christ and the unity of the church of all ages. He made it clear that he was in fact, and felt himself to be, cast out of the Christian Reformed Church.” (Boslooper, 20-21)
  
- Bultema offers the following account of these events in his autobiography:
  - “At the classis meeting, where my whole consistory and I were deposed . . . a sepulchral voice cried out, “Next Sunday, Muskegon, Professor Dr. Volbeda will preach for you. You must all come.” My heart, though sick, was fully determined to preach. God had, I was convinced, called me singly and most surely to Muskegon and God had not called me away, and I was not a hireling to run away when a few dangers threatened. . . The next Sunday I heard the newsboys scream on the streets of Muskegon, “All about the Bultema case; Bultema ousted from his pulpit; will Bultema preach or Volbeda?” I have always loathed notoriety and sensational claptrap, and I cannot say what a sickening, paralyzing feeling crept over me when I heard this. Once the inner reassurance of my conscience that I had not sought or made this mess, made me calmly go on with determination to preach. I took my text from John 9, “And they cast him out.” . . Dr. Veltman, my able assistant, strongly urged, yea begged me to enter the pulpit five minutes before time. This was not at all my plan, nor my desire but when they assured me solemnly that serious trouble and scandal might arise if I did not do this, and I looked at the brethren and saw them all ghastly pale with nervousness, then I became convinced that it was the best and with great calmness and firmness, I entered the pulpit. . . When I entered the pulpit a few people walked out, as I expected. The Professor Volbeda appeared in the back of the church, and he went with the dear folk that walked out to the lower auditorium of the Bethany Church. God gave me grace to speak without malice and with great liberty.” (Bultema, 106)
  
- Bultema reports that the following evening a group of men met and decided to carry on as if nothing had happened. (Bultema, 106) This however, was not the case. There immediately arose a legal battle over ownership of property. Bultema’s congregation refused to leave the premises believing the building belonged to them. Taking the position that the property belonged to the

denomination, on Saturday, December 27, 1919 a Bill of Complaint was filed by the Classis and congregation of the First Christian Reformed Church with the State Supreme Court. (Boslooper, 21-22)

- “It soon also became apparent that, although initially Bultema’s congregation seemed to stand as a unit behind him, there were, in fact about forty families (including two consistory men) that had decided to remain faithful to their denomination. An advertisement appeared in the Muskegon Chronicle announcing a service to be held on December 25, Christmas Morning at 8:30 a.m. at the Bethany Christian Reformed Church for the congregation of the First Christian Reformed Church, with Professor Samuel Volbeda preaching.” (Boslooper, 21-22)
- Finally, on March 31, 1921, after a lengthy legal battle, a report was issued from Lansing that “a circuit court decision giving the officers of the Christian Reformed Church in Muskegon custody of the church property was affirmed by the state supreme court. . . The supreme court held that, while members of the church had the right to withdraw from membership, they had no right to withdraw from the church any property. After a long struggle Bultema had finally lost possession of the First Christian Reformed Church, but he was not slowed down in his action. On April 4, 1921, the 260 families of “the cast out congregation” made plans for a new building and parsonage. During the next four days they accomplished the unbelievable—they built a tabernacle seating 1,000 people at Iona and Ambrosia Street. . . Morning services were to be held in the Holland language. Evening services were to be in English.(Boslooper, 26-27)
- Once again, Bultema recounts these events in his autobiography:
  - “Early in April of the year 1921, when the snow was still on the ground, we had to move out of the building of worship and we did not know what to do with nearly 300 families. We could not get a church building, a store was far too small, and a theater downtown was, for more than one reason, not desirable. Hence we decided to build a tabernacle on Ionia Street by the P.M. Railroad track. A brother from the Christian Reformed Church offered us the ground, and within four days, mind you, they erected a large tabernacle, seating a thousand people. Not only all the carpenters of the church, but many outside donated their time and labor freely and gladly. . . It was a cold winter morning that first Sunday, but the people were warm at heart and served the Lord with gladness.” (Bultema, 109)
- The official name of the new church was “The First Berean Reformed Church.” Mr. Bultema explains why that name was chosen, “We reorganized ourselves as the Berean Reformed Church, the name Reformed showing that we still clung to all the ancient foundations, while the word “Berean,” based on Acts 17:11, embodied for my mind more of a scriptural ideal than anything else.” (Bultema, 108)
- “We were, from the beginning of April to the first of January, 1922, in our tabernacle on Ionia, which is still standing there today, and my people and I can truly testify that these have been our most happy and joyful days.” (Bultema, 109) Between April 1921 and January 1922, Bultema’s

congregation purchased property on Delaware and Terrance Street where they erected a church and parsonage for a grand total of \$50,000. On the cornerstone of the church building are the words, "Built by the grace of God." On New Year's day, 1943 the congregation burned the mortgage. (Bultema, 110)

- Services from Berean Reformed Church were broadcast from the new church on radio station W.K.B.Z.—a Friday night Sunday School Lesson at 9:30 p.m.; organ music on Sunday morning at 8:00 a.m.; Morning Worship on Sunday mornings at 9:30 a.m.; and a Holland sermon on Sunday afternoons at 2:00 p.m. In addition, there was an evening Service at 7:00 p.m. The newspaper heralded that "THE CHURCH STANDS FOR THE BOOK OF GOD, THE BLOOD OF CALVARY, THE BODY OF CHRIST, AND THE BLESSED HOPE OF HIS IMMINENT APPEARING." (Boslooper, 28-29)
- Bultema said that there were three distinctive features about Berean Reformed Church:
  - "First of all it believed in a teaching ministry and a firm stand for the truth for which the Puritans of England and the water beggars of Holland have died. As Fundamentalists, we were unalterably and implacably opposed to Modernism in all its phases."
  - "The second distinctive feature of the church has been its activity. With all its mission programs, the various benevolent purposes were not forgotten."
  - "The third distinctive feature of the Berean Church has been the optimistic outlook to the future." (Bultema, 111)
- "Congregations sympathetic to Bultema were being formed in Grand Rapids, Holland, Grand Haven, and Moline. Christian Reformed preachers in the area were aroused and inspired to preach on Revelation. One newspaper story reported that Rev. Henry Beets, the Pastor of Burton Heights Christian Reformed Church in Grand Rapids, and one of Bultema's leading antagonists, was beginning a Sunday evening series on Revelation. . . Bultema was speaker for innumerable special meetings in churches and missions and even in tents and pavilions. He was also made a member of the Board of Trustees of the Gull Lake Bible Conference." (Boslooper, 27-29)

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