

# A new paradigm for doing Reformed dogmatics <sup>1</sup>

Gordon J. Spykman  
Department of Religion and Theology  
Calvin College  
Grand Rapids  
MICHIGAN

## 1. INTRODUCTORY

When discussing *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* some people may call it my *opus magnum*. Perhaps time will tell. The book has only recently - early 1992 - entered the marketplace of theological ideas. How critic readers and reviewers respond will go a long way toward settling the case.

This 'new dogmatics' bears the title, *Reformed Theology*. Its subtitle serves as the title to this article - "a new paradigm for doing dogmatics." The purpose of this article is to lay out briefly the rationale and vision which motivates this project.

## 2. CALVINIAN TRADITION

The title, *Reformational Theology*, is the outcome of a very self-conscious and deliberate set of decisions. It is intended to signal the tradition out of which this renewal project in Reformed dogmatics is born and which helps give it shape and form. Nothing is ever gained, I believe, in theology or anywhere else, by trying to disguise one's religio-philosophical tradition. Tradition, like roots, belongs to the very lifeblood of theology. Detached from its tradition, theology, like a cut flower severed from its roots and sub-soil, soon withers in one's hand. No theology ever arises *de novo*.

In honouring tradition we assure critical and constructive continuity with the past, and at the same time create the possibility for opening new doors to the future. As often said, they who forget the past are doomed to repeat its mistakes. The past is, in fact, prologue to the future. As the confessional matrix for theologizing, tradition serves as the bearer of a community's identity, the stimulus for its enterprising spirit, the shaper of its habits of thought, the forum for its critical reflections. It is the historical-cultural channel within which theologians respond to the claims of God's Word upon their dogmatic soundings. A certain stability as well as a certain tentativity, therefore, accompany all theologies, this new paradigm no less than older ones from the past.

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper focuses on aspects of the recently published *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (1992) by Gordon J. Spykman. (Editor)

Historically, this project takes its point of departure in the sixteenth century Reformation, more specifically, in Calvin's theology. Following the Calvinian line we encounter serious problems: the 'orthodoxy' of Protestant scholasticism and the 'heterodoxy' of the Enlightenment. The problems posed by these movements are real, and must be faced forthrightly, and overcome, before moving on. After assessing the impact of these disruptive interludes, this renewal project proceeds to pick up the more normative ideas rearticulated in the Calvinist revivals of the nineteenth century. In retracing these lines of development, I seek to take advantage of the best in mainline Reformational thinking as it comes to expression in Kuyper en Bavinck around the turn of this century and as further developed in the neo-Kuyperian scholarship of our times.

Accordingly, the book opens with an extended "Introduction", as is customary in most dogmatics. Instead of the conventional topics, however, it explores foundational ideas undergirding the partnership of theology with philosophy. The central thesis as developed in this introductory section is this: the best *prolegomena* ("things to be said in advance") for doing Reformed dogmatics is a Christian philosophy (see Spykman, 1988:137-156). Theology is too important to be left to theologians who are not clear about their religio-philosophic perspectives. Taking advantage of the resurgence of world view studies in recent decades, this *prolegomena* aims to make a convincing case for a sound Christian philosophy as the most suitable context for theologizing.

Given this orientation, some of the basic contours of this 'new paradigm' can be delineated.

### 3. WORLD-VIEWISH THEOLOGY

No matter how it is presented, that insistent question simply will not go away: how can one possibly justify coming out with yet another work on systematic theology? Have we not reached a saturation point? Is it not past high time to heed the preacher's precautionary word about there being "no end" to "the making of many books" (Ecclesiastes 12:12)? Strangely, however, H. Berkhof calls doing dogmatics in our times "a lonely venture" (Berkhof, 1979:xii), despite our rich heritage Bavinck, Berkouer, Thielicke, Weber, Barth, Brunner, L. Berkhof, König, Heyns, Jonker, Van Huyssteen, Durand, plus H. Berkhof himself - to mention no more.

The wide-ranging works of this distinguished array of theologians lends added urgency to the question: How to justify this venture? In response let me simply say that I have checked out there - different models, different paradigms, different principles of organization. Yet, amid the differences there is also a striking sameness. One cannot help but notice the continuing formative influence of prevailing *loci* methods. This renewal project represents a significant and substantial departure from such

conventional ways of arranging systematic theology. It claims to being 'new paradigm' rests in large part, therefore, on shifting to the biblical story line as its organizing principle.

This 'new paradigm', accordingly, also involves a conscious commitment to doing "world-viewish theology" (Holmes, 1983:25). It calls for locating dogmatics within the framework of a Christian philosophy shaped by the biblical world view. In so doing I am attempting to follow through on André Troost's comment that authentic renewal "can be worked out with a certain assurance of justification only in the context of a theology that proceeds from a biblical world view and is philosophically Reformed" - adding that "to date, as far as I know, there is no such theology" (Troost, 1980:2).

#### 4. FRESH WINDS

This 'Reformational theology' represents the convergence of several additional lines of thought. Let me briefly sketch them.

Over roughly the past half century, notably since the Qumran discoveries of the late forties, biblical scholarship has enriched our understanding of the Scriptures with many refreshingly new insights into the text and context of the biblical message. Earlier already the Reformed tradition generated some studies that helped pave the way - recall the work of De Graaf, Holwerda, Greydanus and Schilder prior to World War II, and the later works of Ridderbos, Bruce, and Van Ruler. Taken together, their exegetical insights, plus those of others, have come down to us as ripened fruit ready to be plucked. Biblical studies flourished. Meanwhile, with few exceptions, systematic theology found itself largely in a holding pattern. Thus, these two theological disciplines went their separate ways. Instead of cooperation, professional stand-offishness arose between them.

Now at last many of us envision the dawning of a new day. Harvest time is here. It is time to integrate the best results of biblical studies into a renewed dogmatics. Bringing biblical theology and systematic theology together into a closer working relationship, this is one major objective of this 'new paradigm'.

Historical reflection on the course of Western theology over the past 500 years further bolsters the case for a renewal project in Reformed dogmatics. The Reformers introduced radical and sweeping breaks with medieval scholastic thinking. Fresh evangelical winds began to blow anew in many Christian communities. We hear echoes of the rediscovered gospel in Luther as first generation Reformer and in Calvin as spokesman for the second generation. Soon thereafter, however, these primordial reforming impulses fell prey for centuries to the stultifying effects of contrary winds of

doctrine. With Groen and Kuyper things began to change. Around the turn of this century Bavinck's dogmatics served to stem the tidal wave of scholastic thought and turned theology into a more Reformational direction. His venerable dogmatics has a perennial freshness about it. It recaptures much of the original genius of the sixteenth century Calvinian Reformation. Then around mid-century Berkouwer launched his monumental series of *Dogmatic Studies*, updating and rearticulating the thinking of Calvin and Bavinck for our times. Meanwhile on the North American scene the systematic theology of L. Berkhof continued to hold almost undisputed sway. It shaped the thinking of successive generations of Reformed preachers, teachers and pastors, and through them the mind-set of their church communities. L. Berkhof's dogmatics represents the seasoned end product of a centuries-old Protestant scholastic tradition. Against this background the question arose repeatedly during recent decades: Is it possible to reconstruct a more authentic Calvinian approach to doing Reformed dogmatics? The impetus for this new outlook is reinforced by H. Berkhof's remark that "traditional theologies offer weighty answers to questions that nobody asks anymore" (Berkhof, 1979:xvii).

## 5. RECONSTRUCTION

The case for this 'new paradigm' rests therefore on felt theological needs as well as on biblical and historical considerations. In our theological training many of us were spoon-fed heavy rationalistic doses of L. Berkhof's scholastic theology. In time, however, such theologizing creates as many problems as answers. Numerous anomalies emerge. The end result is a "paradigm crisis" (Kuhn). Enmeshed in this stalemate situation, many of us experienced exposure to Berkouwer's cascading series of monographs as a liberating experience. Berkouwer liberated us *from* L. Berkhof. But as time went on it became increasingly unclear *unto* what we were being liberated, for Berkouwer leaves us with an imposing and very helpful row of about twenty monographs. But what hold them all together? There is no explanatory *prolegomena*, no stated methodology. We are left with 'unsystematized systematics'. So the question now arises how the pieces can be put together again. Is it possible to work out a new model which avoids simply returning to a past which has had its day, which takes these recent developments into account and builds on them, and - as an added bonus - moves theologizing another step or two along the way on a life-reforming course of action? This 'new paradigm' presents itself as an affirmative answer to these questions.

## 6. OVERCOMING DUALISMS

Our Western world faces a "colossal obstacle" (Bonhoeffer), one that stands in the way of a "unified field of knowledge" (Schaeffer), namely the problem of dualism. It is a deeply ingrained mind-set, and nearly omnipresent. It comes to expression both in sophisticated theories and in everyday practice. Within Christian communities over the past 200 years and still today, whenever things go seriously wrong, I judge that

about 99% of the time some sort of dualism lies at the bottom of the troubles.

Even if this sweeping assessment is only remotely true, we have a serious problem on our hands. It is incumbent upon us then to know what we are talking about. What precisely are we to understand by the concept dualism? How are we to define it? Addressing these issues calls for being as clear as possible.

Dualisms always involve some sort of two-realm theory. Its adherents view life as divided into two parts. One part is viewed as in some sense superior to the other. A kind of 'upstairs/downstairs' model of reality emerges. Such a perspective is evident, for example, in the nature/grace scheme of medieval thought and in the law/gospel dialectic of Lutheran theology. Whatever its configuration, a dualism always draws a line of demarcation through created reality, assigning one part a higher/holier/better status than the other. Ancient Greek philosophers employed form/matter categories. Kant, the maker of the modern mind, bequeathed to his posterity the idea of 'pure reason' and 'practical reason', which lives on in popular culture as well as in academic circles under the captions science and religion, facts and values, the sacred and the secular. In hermeneutics such dualist methods drive a wedge between history and *kerygma*. In the self-image of many people it fosters the notion of a conflict between body and soul, which is traceable to the 'mind-over-matter' perspective of ancient Greek thinkers.

Such antinomies have also shaped the longstanding, deep seated tension between theology and philosophy. The former was regularly enthroned as the 'queen of the sciences'. The latter was, at best, tolerated as 'handmaiden' in the fore-court of the theologians. At worst, philosophy was banished as an irreconcilable enemy. It was conceived of as a strictly rational enterprise directed wholly toward earthly, temporal things. Theology, on the other hand, was thought of as operating by faith and dealing with a higher order of things, such as God, Scripture, the church, heaven and eternity.

## 7. HOLIST PERSPECTIVES

During my student days at college I would at times read a dash of classic theology, say, from Bavinck. There one finds references to philosophers such as Kant and Hegel and theologians such as Schleiermacher and Harnack, often on a single page. Theologians and philosophers mentioned in the same breath! What was a fledgling scholar to make of that? We attended lectures on philosophy in Room 33, and then we moved down to the hall to Room 35 for a session on theology. How are these two disciplines related?

Armed with questions, I approached my professors for help. The answers I received, often came down to something like this: philosophy operates in the realm of general

revelation and common grace, theology in the realm of special revelation and saving grace. Shades of St. Thomas, I thought, later, looking back. Aquinas was still alive and well in Calvinist circles deep into the twentieth century.

On such a world view, when philosophy (sometimes known as natural theology) is allowed to play the role of *prolegomena* to dogmatics, it serves only as preparation for dealing with spiritual realities, which is the domain of theology proper. To move from the one realm to the other, to bridge the gap between philosophy and theology, demands a leap of faith. This was the heart of the matter in the well-known interchange around the turn of the century between Warfield with his Princeton apologetics and Kuyper representing the fideist position of the Free University.

This 'new paradigm' is dedicated to developing a holist perspective. It seeks to escape the perennial pitfalls of dualist thinking and to honour the proposition that dogmatics together with its philosophical *prolegomena*, indeed life as a whole, is religiously of one piece. Such holism is the hallmark of Reformational thinking: it is "radical", "universal", "all-encompassing", "totalitarian" in the sense that all the key biblical concepts - creation, covenant, fall, redemption and kingdom - are "cosmic in scope" (Wolters, 1985:10 & 60).

## 8. GOD'S MEDIATING WORD

Another leading motif in this 'new paradigm' is its espousal of three-factor theologizing to replace the two-factor paradigms which have dominated Western theology over the past two millennia. Two-factor world views assume as a working principle that in doing theology we are dealing with only two factors - the Creator and his creation, God and man. On such views the vexing problem arises where we are to locate the norm, not only for theologizing, but also for life as a whole. We are left with only two options. On the one hand, the norm can be pushed 'upstairs', into the heavenly realm, in the mind of God. This results in decretal theology with all its enervating consequences. The norm then lies too far away, beyond our reach. It becomes inaccessible. It fosters a kind of agnosticism. On the other hand, one can pull the norm down into history. Then it becomes too close. Some created reality is then ascribed an ultimately normative status in life - for instance, human rationality ('man is the measure of all things'), the state, the scientific method, the church. The result is a secularized norm, some form of humanism, a relativism that breeds "situational ethics" (Fletcher).

Two-factor thinking creates cruel dilemmas for contemporary theology. One is compelled either to follow the trend of modern liberalism as shaped by its spiritual father, Schleiermacher, doing theology 'from below', moving from man to God. Or one must follow Barths' approach - doing theology 'from above', however, how are we to find a firm foothold in getting started. Two-factor theologies create irresolvable problems in doing theology in an authentically biblical and Reformed way.

Three-factor theology goes a long way toward relieving these enormous tensions. It appeals to the Scriptures in granting the mediating Word of God a normatively structured place in its thinking. It concurs in a comment by Vollenhoven, "God/his World/ the world - these are the three basics of a biblical world view". A three-factor approach is truly relational, truly covenantal. It takes seriously not only the *relata* - God en man - but also the *relatio* which binds these covenant partners together. God holds himself to his covenanting Word, and He holds us to it as well. Such three-factor theologizing can make a significant difference in our view of marriage, education, civil obedience and disobedience, and perhaps especially in coping with questions regarding predestination (Spykman, 197:171-194).

## 9. BIBLICAL STORY-LINE

Perhaps the most immediately recognizable change embodied in this 'new paradigm' is its new organizing principle. It breaks with the conventional *loci* method. In traditional theology the topics dealt with are arranged in a sequence of six doctrinal headings - God, man, Christ, salvation, church, and last things - or, restated in technical terms: theology, anthropology, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology. This method is burdened with so much baggage left over from the era of Protestant scholasticism that it literally begs for reformation and reformulation. How, for instance, is it possible to deal with the doctrine of God (*locus de Deo*), say for the first month of a course, without bringing in God's relationship to man (anthropology), the topic for the second month? And how is it possible to reserve reference to Christ - the God-man - until the third month? Does this approach not foster an abstract concept of the God who is there? Moved to action by such persistently nagging problems, out of concern for the felt need of many for a new look at systematic theology, this 'new paradigm for doing Reformed dogmatics' offers a first step in the direction of an alternative. In place of six *loci*, and in keeping with much of contemporary narrative theology, it adopts the biblical story-line as its organizing principle, namely, creation/fall/redemption/ on the way to the consummation of all things in Christ Jesus.

These several lines of thought, like fresh furrows in a fields, converge in this project to break new ground. Some seeds have been sown - hopefully good ones. What remains is the invitation, communally, to till the soil, cultivate it, and then anticipate the bearing of some good fruit.

## 10. BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BERKHOF, Hendrikus 1979. *Christian Faith*. Grand Rapids : Eerdmans.  
HOLMES, Arthur 1983. *Contours of a World View*. Grand Rapids : Eerdmans.  
SPYKMAN, Gordon J. 1988. *Christian Philosophy as Prolegomena to Reformed Dogmatics*. (In Wethmar, C. & Vos, C. 'n Woord op sy tyd. Pretoria : NG Kerkboekhandel. p. 137-156.)

*A new paradigm for doing Reformed dogmatics*

---

- SPYKMAN, Gordon J. 1992. *Reformed Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics*. Grand Rapids : Eerdmans.
- SPYKMAN, Gordon J. 19?. A New Look at Election and Reprobation. (*In* Spykman, Gordon J. *Life is Religion*. p. 171-194.)
- TROOST, A. 1980. Circular of ICICHE, 18:2. April.
- VANDERGOOT, H. *ed.* 1981. *Life is Religion*. St. Catherines. Ontario : Paideia.
- WETHMAR, Conrad & VOS, Cas 1988. 'n Woord op sy tyd. Pretoria : NG Kerkboekhandel.
- WOLTERS, Albert 1985. *Creation Regained. Biblical Basis for a Reformational World View*. Grand Rapids : Eerdmans.