

Reformational Theology
A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics

Gordon J. Spykman

Book Review titled “Spykman Work Overturns Old Models”

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It's been a long time since someone in the Christian Reformed community attempted a full-scale treatment of systematic theology. The last to do so was probably Calvin Theological Seminary Professor Louis Berkhof, in his imposing *Systematic Theology*, published in 1947.

Berkhof's famous compendium of Reformed dogmatics has now found a worthy – but very different – successor in a hefty new volume by late professor of theology at Calvin College, Grand Rapids, Michigan. Spykman's book, *Reformational Theology: A New Paradigm for Doing Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), is the crowning achievement of a lifetime of studying, preaching, and teaching. Spykman clearly loved the Reformed tradition and believed passionately that it has much to contribute to the broader theological world.

Spykman's book may sound daunting to the ordinary reader, but it actually is not: Spykman has a flair for writing about weighty matters with clarity and freshness. While this is a major work of systematic theology, it is also easily accessible to the educated layperson – or to anyone with intelligence and an inquiring mind. That is

one way in which Spykman's book is very different – and very much better – than that of his predecessor Berkhof. Spykman writes in a lively, lucid, and contemporary style that is a delight to read.

More Than Style. But it is in more than style that Spykman moves beyond Berkhof. What he gives is not just a neatly organized restatement of traditional Reformed theology in contemporary English. He moves beyond into a bold attempt to introduce a “new paradigm” – a complete reorientation – into the doing of theology in the Reformed tradition.

That attempt is indebted especially to two Reformed thinkers: Gerrit Berkhouwer and Herman Dooyeweerd. The influence of these two thinkers is evident on every page of this book.

Building on their work, Spykman attacks what he calls the scholasticism and dualism of much of Reformed theology. He emphasizes that biblical religion is instead *historical* and *comprehensive*. The Bible, Spykman argues, is about a historical drama of salvation that takes very seriously the earthly reality of our everyday lives. What's more, that drama is comprehensive, or all-inclusive. Christians must not focus on abstract statements of eternal truths or allow a split to occur between the sacred and the secular.

This does not mean that Spykman has no use for careful thinking (after all, he is himself in the business of academic theology), but he insists that the main thing with which theology deals is the living, covenantal interaction between God and God's people. And that, he says, is not theoretical in nature.

Spykman thus vigorously opposes our long legacy of theological intellectualism, which sought to make all Christians into theologians of some sort. Yet he does not fall into the opposite error of anti-intellectualism. Here we see the influence of Dooyeweerd, who distinguished between theoretical thought and naïve experience while at the same time stressing the limited but legitimate place of all theoretical work.

One of the surprising things about Spykman's big book is the way it combines an open allegiance to biblical authority with an equally open indebtedness to

philosophy. In many other theologians, the Bible and philosophy have been competing influences. An allegiance to Aristotle or Kant or Marx has, for instance, made theology less than fully biblical.

But Spykman's thought shows a decisive difference. While others have usually accepted philosophy's claim to be religiously neutral, Spykman does not – passionately. He asserts, instead, that philosophy must be geared to biblical revelation. Philosophy, he claims, is no different from everything else in human life: it stands under the authority of Christ and his Word and must be made subservient to the coming of Christ's kingdom. If it accepts that role (as it does in the thought of Dooyeweerd and other contemporary Reformed philosophers), it can then help theology to be more, not less, biblical.

Biblical Delight. One more thing that makes Spykman's book a delight to read is its thoroughly biblical character. *Reformational Theology* shows the influence of a lifetime of reverent interaction with Scripture. Like his teacher Berkhouwer, Spykman does his theologizing with the Bible constantly open before him. Because of that, Spykman's book is one of the best introductions to a Reformed view of Scripture available. I am not talking here only of the parts that explicitly deal with Scripture and its authority. These sections are excellent, but what is even more inspiring is the way Spykman cites and illuminates Scripture throughout the whole book. As a biblical scholar myself, I was repeatedly and joyfully surprised at how Spykman made the biblical texts come alive. I was also impressed by his familiarity with recent trends in biblical studies.

In a book of this scope, everyone will find some favorite passages. I personally liked Spykman's treatment of a biblical worldview, of the charismatic gifts, and of the new earth. On the charismatic gifts, I like Spykman's view that they are not above or outside creation. I do wish, though, that he had also affirmed their present reality.

I also learned much from the brief historical survey in chapter 2. Others will find other passages that appeal to them or where they might want to put a question mark in the margin. I expect many will be intrigued by Spykman's treatment of

Genesis 1, in which he sketches a novel way of dealing with the issues surrounding creation and science.

One of the most innovative features of the book, which is also likely to be its most controversial, is Spykman's "three-factor alternative" in theology. Spykman proposes giving the Word of God as creation ordinance full weight alongside God and creation in theological reflection. This idea of creational law is the flip side of the traditional Calvinist emphasis on God's sovereignty and becomes the cornerstone of Spykman's new paradigm. Through this new mode of thinking, he seeks to reorient all theological reflection.

The great virtue of Spykman's approach is that it fights the subjectivism infecting much of contemporary theology. Yet it does so without having recourse to the old Greek structure that places God at the highest rung of the ladder of being. Spykman here homes in on a problem that's been at the center of two thousand years of dogmatic theology. I commend him for his bold attempt to bring a central Reformed insight to bear on it.

Spykman has produced a book that is at once readable and profound, biblical and philosophical, rooted and contemporary. It is one of the finest recent fruits of the strong Christian intellectual tradition that has come to be associated in North America with the Christian Reformed Church.

Book Review

by Bradley M. Class,

(executive director of The Evangelical Literature League)

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As the title suggests, Spykman's book looks backward and forward. Understanding that reformations are never complete, the author has accepted the challenge to construct a new paradigm (*para deigma* - Gk. *deiknya* - to show). He has sought to refine, develop, and clarify traditional theology in an orderly and systematic fashion. He commits himself "to locating dogmatics with the Reformed worldview and the Christian philosophy developed within the neo-Kuyperian tradition."

Spykman charts bold new directions. He distances himself from the rationalist-scholastic way of abstracting the traditional six loci of a former day. Instead, he bases his theology on "a right understanding of the relationships between creation and redemption." He designs the basic Christian dogmas by following the narrative line of God's redemptive program – Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Consummation. He sets out to avoid the traditional dualisms – general/special revelation, faith/reason, for example – by redefining the problem and thus achieving a more comprehensive solution. And his discourse is shaped as well by the onslaughts of modern secularism, and the current immanentistic, monistic ideologies which destroy the very ground of theology.

The book is truly an encyclopedia of dogmatics. In addition to a discussion of such familiar topics as covenant partnership, canonicity of Scripture, and miracles, he accounts for such new terms as theology "from below" and theology "from above." He also discusses practical applications of these issues – marriage, the Sabbath, and the cultural mandate – man's obligations towards the created world. After his extensive Part I, "Foundations," including his prolegomena (pp. 13-39), he proceeds in Parts Two, Three, and Four to nuance the teachings about Creation, Sin and Evil, and the Way of Salvation under the aegis of the neo-Kuyperian worldview.

Spykman does not flag as he takes on eschatology. He warms up to this fascinating and crucial stage in God's redemptive program. In Part V, "The Consummation," with such fresh titles as "The Home Stretch," "The Millennium," and "Eschatological Countdown," he discusses what one can call the "pay-off" for the Christian and the Church. To clarify matters about the millennium, he introduces a new word for the theological lexicon, *promillennialism*, which he urges as a substitute for the term *amillennialism* (pp. 540-543).

The book makes a strong case for the neo-Kuyperian worldview. The believer who has not got beyond the classic, scholastic view of theology will be either discomfited by the challenge or will experience liberation with Spykman's paradigm. In my opinion, *Reformational Theology* is a book which all seminarians and pastors must read and study in depth. Spykman's *opus* is destined to become the standard Reformed systematic theology for decades into the 21st century.