Twentieth-century interest in federal theology in general and in Cocceius' theology in particular was primarily motivated by the intention to compensate for the post-Reformation Reformed interest in the doctrine of predestination by the notion of the covenant. The alleged role of predestination as the “Zentraldogma” gave so-called “Reformed orthodoxy” the image of a harsh, rationalist, fatalistic system. In this context, a strand of Reformed theology in which the loving fellowship between God and believers played a crucial role was more than welcome, fitting as it was into the typically twentieth-century interest in thinking God as love. Thus, twentieth-century research on Cocceius interpreted his theology as biblical rather than scholastic, historical rather than rationalist, experiential rather than abstract.

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1 For the view of the doctrine of predestination as a “Zentraldogma,” see Willem J. van Asselt, ed., Inleiding in de gereformeerde scholastiek (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1998), 18–30. Willem van Asselt has been one of the key critics of this so-called “old school”-interpretation of Reformed scholasticism.


Willem J. van Asselt is the present day expert on Cocceius.⁴ He always resisted the oversimplified appropriations of Cocceius’ thought, arguing that it is an anachronistic misreading of Cocceius’ work if one contrasts it too much with the mainstream Reformed scholasticism of his contemporaries.⁵

Still, van Asselt shares much of the twentieth-century worries about the particularist aspects of Reformed theology. Two anecdotes may be invoked to illustrate this. Once, I heard van Asselt reinterpret the traditional Dutch Reformed opening (votum) of a Church service. He paraphrased “Who will never abandon the works of his own hands,”⁶ as “Who will never abandon the work he has begun in each of us.” What if his great seventeenth-century hero Johannes Cocceius had heard him, who, as we will see, argues against this “heresy” to much length in the Summa doctrinae! Also, when I was a student and expressed my worries about the consequences of predestination thought to van Asselt, he always replied with a quote from one of his teachers, the Dutch systematic theologian Arnold van Ruler: “The gospel skims across the border of universalism.”⁷ Although van Asselt has been eager to criticize a number of Karl Barth’s readings of the Reformed scholastics, when confronted with the riddle of predestination, he often expressed his sympathy with Barth’s universalisation of Reformed soteriology.

Given the combination of van Asselt’s expertise on Cocceius on the one hand, and his appreciation for a Barthian solution to the problem of predestination on the other, it seems appropriate to me to devote my contribution to this Festschrift to the question of the relationship

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⁴ Among his main works on Cocceius are a complete Dutch translation of Cocceius’ Summa doctrinae: Johannes Coccejus, De Leer van het Verbond en het Testament van God, trans. from the Latin by W. J. van Asselt and H. G. Renger (Kampen: De Groot Goudriaan, 1990) and, in addition to numerous articles, two monographs: a more biographical one in Dutch (Willem J. van Asselt, Johannes Coccejus: Portret van een zeventiende-eeuws theoloog op oude en nieuwe wegen, Kerkhistorische monografieën 6 (Heerenveen: Groen, 1997)), and the thoroughly revised English translation of his dissertation: van Asselt, Federal Theology.

⁵ Van Asselt, Federal Theology, 94–105.

⁶ A traditional Dutch Reformed church service opens with the following phrase: “Our help is in the name of the Lord, who has made heaven and earth, who will never abandon the works of his hands,”—a combination of Pss 124:8 and 138:8.