‘EUTHANASIA’ IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY:
ARS MORIENDI IN DUTCH REFORMED PERSPECTIVE

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Introductory Remarks

When writing about ‘euthanasia,’ in the 17th and 18th century, Reformed authors do not, as present day readers in the 21th century might expect, address primarily the medical-ethical issues involved. In his book, Euthanasia (1741), the Dutch Reformed pastor, Wilhelmus van Eenhoorn, refers to the Roman Caesar Augustus, who—when informed of someone’s passing away quickly and without pain—said that he wished such an “euthanasia”, preferably in a distant future of course. But according to Van Eenhoorn for a Christian “euthanasia” must be “εν κυριῳ αποθανειν”, the fruit of a life with the Lord (Phil. 1:21; Rev. 14:13). Euthanasia in this latter sense is the desirable outcome of the ars moriendi, the art of dying well. The lively interest in the process of Christian dying as well as the pastoral care of the dying, is a remarkable aspect of classical Reformed piety.

In today’s systematic theology, eschatology is evidently not a forgotten item. In the Twentieth century Jürgen Moltmann widely influenced theology and church by his Theology of Hope (1964). He “enabled theologians to think once more of eschatology as speaking of the real future of the

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World and thereby also to envisage its relevance to the present not just in terms of the destiny of the individual but also in terms of the church’s engagement with the world on its way to the kingdom of God.3 Theologians like Wolfhart Pannenberg, Johann-Baptist Metz and Gerhard Sauter followed in his footsteps, albeit in their own ways. This contemporaneous, eschatological thinking embraces a holistic vision of redemption and the transfiguration for the whole of God’s creation and strives to overcome all kinds of dualism. Nevertheless, in my view, a new danger emerges here. Nowadays, the Biblical accent on the pilgrimage of Christians on earth as people who already have become citizens of heaven seems to get too little attention.4 Therefore, a renewed emphasis on the relevance of per-egrinatio seems to be certainly justified. Bram van de Beek clearly voices such a view in his books on eschatology, thereby making a strong appeal to the mentality of early Christians as exemplary and corrective for us, modern Christians.5 In this contribution I want to support his intentions by calling attention to the relevance of the ars moriendi, the art of dying well. The well-known first question of the Heidelberg Catechism (1563): “What is your only comfort in life and death?”, has not lost its relevance and actuality at all; neither has the answer: “That I with body and soul, both in life and death, are not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.” This view of the human as a pilgrim on his way to eternity, generates a life in earnestness, and sheds a mild light upon ageing and dying believers. They may leave the storms of life definitely behind them and are well prepared to anchor in the harbour of eternal rest.6

4 Cf. Calvin P. Van Reken, “Christians in This World: Pilgrims or Settlers?”, Calvin Theological Journal 43 (2008), 234–256, who describes the ‘Old Vision’ in this way: ‘The idea was that this world is not the Christian’s home but a time of spiritual struggle and, by God’s power, some measure of sanctification until the day God calls one to his eternal home. What seemed most apparent was the transient nature of our earthly lives, and what made its many trials tolerable was the hope of a glorious future in a home that was far away.’ (237)
5 A. van de Beek, Hier beneden is het niet—Christelijke toekomstverwachting [It is not here below-Christian expectancy of the future] (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2005); God doet recht. Eschatologie als christologie [God does right. Eschatology as christology] (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2008).