INTRODUCTION
THE DOGMA IS NOT NECESSARILY THE DRAMA

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It is an honour to write an introduction to this Festschrift for Richard Muller. I could have written a scholarly article on some aspect of Reformed orthodoxy; but Richard’s role in my academic life has been much more than simply that of a scholarly mentor. He has been a personal friend; and one of the oft untold aspects of scholarly enterprise is the role of friendship. It is one thing to read a book by an influential scholar; it is another to sit and hear him lecture, seeing an original mind in action. Even greater, though, is the intimate interaction of casual conversation among friends. And some such conversations have an impact far beyond their immediate context.

Indeed, as I reflect upon all that I have learned from Richard, my mind goes to the halcyon days of the late nineties when, over a period of years, Richard and I would visit our friend, Willem van Asselt in the Netherlands, give lectures at Utrecht University, and spend many hours sitting outside Dutch cafes, drinking fine Belgian beer and talking history. It was there that I learned that good historians are marked not only by knowledge of primary and secondary sources but also by careful reflection on historical method. Indeed, the historian who is not methodologically self-conscious is a poor historian indeed. And it was in one such conversation that Richard made a statement which fascinated me and which has become a significant component of my own historical approach: “Not everything which presents itself in a historical text as a doctrinal problem necessarily has a doctrinal cause or a doctrinal solution.” To borrow a phrase from Dorothy L. Sayers and turn it on its head: the dogma is not necessarily the drama.

This point is crucial. There is always a tendency for intellectual historians to overestimate the power of ideas and then to abstract them from their historical context. In part this is no doubt an understandable reaction to the repudiation of intellectual history within the larger historical guild. To reduce human beings to mere puppets in some larger drama of the flow of capital or of psychological forces inaccessible to the historical
agents seems self-evidently reductionist and contrary to human experience: we all know that ideas can be powerful forces in shaping history. Yet too often intellectual historians forget that ideas are the actions and the instruments of real people whose identity and whose lives cannot be reduced to a set of abstract principles. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the history of theology. The church trades in ideas; blood has been spilled over ideas; historians of the church must inevitably take ideas with the utmost seriousness.

Yet Richard’s work has demonstrated time and time again that the history of doctrine needs to be rooted in more than just the history of doctrine. The development of Reformed orthodoxy, like the development of Christian dogma in general, is not the quasi-Hegelian outworking of some inner dynamic principle; rather it is the result of a complex interplay of intellectual and material factors. There is of course the inherited linguistic and conceptual tradition of past doctrine which brings with it its own logical and rhetorical conventions. But then there are philosophical traditions, pedagogical methods, library holdings, even matters of book production to consider. In addition to these we might add the social context (e.g., urban or rural, kingdom or republic), the existence of political and military alliances, the shifting sands of social psychology, the personal experiences of particular individual thinkers, and the networks of formal and informal personal relationships that existed. Some or all of these factors play significant roles in every book written in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in every debate which took place, and in every confession formulated.

The realization of this wider framework for understanding the development of doctrine in a way that does not sacrifice the significance of doctrinal content is evident in the changing shape of Richard’s own work. One need only compare the kind of arguments made in Christ and the Decree with those in The Unaccommodated Calvin or After Calvin to see how he has himself integrated wider questions of context into his explanations of the shifts in emphasis and even content which he discerns in Reformed thought during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the earlier work, doctrinal development is explained in doctrinal terms. The narrative is compelling and, dare I say it, true; but it lacks attention to wider factors which may have been of influence. The later works represent a broadening of perspective. For example, there is the problem of the ordering of the topics in Calvin’s Institutes which had been a battleground between dogmaticians for many years. Richard’s proposal—that Calvin was persuaded by the topical ordering his friend Melanchthon proposed