G.A. van den Brink


This study served as PhD-dissertation in historical theology at both VU University Amsterdam and the Evangelical Theological Faculty of Leuven. The author offers a fresh approach to the third antinomian controversy, that was sparked in the 1690s by the republication of the works of Thomas Crisp (1600–1643), who was involved in the second antinomian controversy. Van den Brink takes sides with recent research on Reformed scholasticism by Richard A. Muller, Andreas Beck, and Willem J. van Asselt, aiming at a conceptual analysis of the theological issues at stake, and diverging from the dominant, so-called ‘realistic’ method of historiography, which regards theological debates as a side-effect of social and political events and discussions. In a careful analysis of the positions in the debate, notably those by Johannes Piscator, Hugo Grotius, Anthony Wotton, John Owen, and Herman Witsius, the author shows what scholastic distinctions were used and to what effect. The study centers on the concept of imputation of sin to Christ, which is closely related to the concepts of sin, righteousness, law, punishment, forgiveness, justice, and proportionality.

While antinomians presented themselves as defenders of free grace and of the original Reformed heritage, appealing to the theology of Calvin and Luther, the author states that they were in fact repristinating the theology of the Reformers without taking contemporary theological distinctions in account. E.g., for antinomians, the distinction between the accomplishment and the application of salvation lost significance. They emphasized that Christ becomes the acting person in the sinner, being made sin himself, while the sinner undergoes Christ’s passion by way of commutation. The so-called neonomians, on the other hand, denied that sins as such were imputed to Christ, asserting only the imputation of the effects of sin to Christ.

In this conflict, the Dutch theologian Herman Witsius took a nuanced position which tried to mediate between the extremes. Conceptually, his position is close to John Owen’s, who asserted that when the sins of the faithful are imputed to Christ, these sins are communicated to him in a certain sense. That is, Owen distinguishes five aspects of sin, while only in regard of one these aspects (actual guilt, that is the ordination unto punishment), sin is imputed to Christ. For the neonomians, this is too much, since they teach that only the punishment of sin is communicated; for the antinomians, it is too little, since they teach that sin is transferred to Christ in all respects. In a careful, detailed
analysis, Van den Brink discusses the relevant distinctions and their implications.

A separate chapter is devoted to judicial questions. Against the Socinians, Hugo Grotius stated that God not only has the right to punish sins but also the obligation to punish, at least sometimes, because as ruler (rector) of the universe, he maintains his law. This maintenance would, according to Grotius, exclude the possibility of substitution; rather, God would grant a dispensation. The neonomians followed Grotius’s view, while many Reformed theologians defended that God maintains his law, but applies epieikeia, or equity. The antinomians, however, denied this equity. Van den Brink emphasizes the importance of epieikeia for seventeenth-century Reformed soteriology, although this should not come as such a surprise given the central place of aequitas, already in Calvin’s theology.

The strength of this study lies in the clear discussion of the intricacies of scholastic terms, concepts, and underlying ideas in soteriology. Owen and Witsius clearly have the author’s sympathy, while he denies the legitimacy of the antinomian position as a legitimate variant of Reformed theology and even labels antinomianism as “a form of repristination theology.”

This book is relatively weak in the historical contextualization, other than theologically, of the antinomian controversy. The author emphatically distances himself from social-historical historiography on the antinomian controversy, which pictures it as a resistance against the Puritan endeavor for a power monopoly. While Van den Brink convincingly argues that theological issues really mattered for those involved in the conflict, he tends to downplay social and political issues (although the Dutch text is much more nuanced than the English summary).

Finally, the author seeks to transfer the ideas that were developed in the course of the antinomian controversy to systematic theology by confronting these ideas with the views of Nicholas Wolterstorff. Although Van den Brink demonstrates some weaknesses in Wolterstorff’s approach, his choice to address only Wolterstorff’s position seems random. Van den Brink rightly pleads for the knowledge of scholastic distinctions to prevent misunderstandings and misrepresentations of earlier Reformed theologies. He overstates his case, however, when he advocates the use of these distinctions in the present debate, since biblical-theological insights into the nature of justification as more than merely judicial, cultural, and philosophical shifts in modernity and postmodernity, including views on personhood and guilt, offer a vastly different context than that of the seventeenth century. The neglect of these factors may lead to the kind of repristination theology that Van den Brink dislikes in antinomianism.