Maarten Wisse, Marcel Sarot and Willemien Otten (eds.)


Recent historiographical work on the development of early Reformed theology, the relationship between Calvin and later Calvinism, and the breadth and variegated nature of post-Reformation Reformed scholastic thought has transformed our understanding of the shape and development of the Reformed tradition. It is no exaggeration to say that this body of revisionist scholarship has cleared away the assumptions of several earlier generations, breathing fresh life into historical and doctrinal research into this neglected area of historical theology.

The results have been impressive. The nineteenth century “central dogma” thesis that regarded Reformed theology as organized around the principle of double predestination has been exploded. The “Calvin against the Calvinists” motif of much Barth-inspired English speaking scholarship of the later twentieth century has also been shown to be hopelessly simplistic, and wide of the mark. Fidelity to the theology of Calvin was never a litmus test for Reformed orthodoxy, and, in any case, the Reformed tradition was aboriginally diverse in its doctrinal emphases. Calvin is an important source for Reformed theology, but only one important source amongst a number of other great thinkers of the period. The idea that a golden age of humanistic even-handedness championed by Calvin was shoehorned into the rigid framework of a medieval scholasticism revived by Calvin’s successors, ossifying Reformed theology in the process, has been shown to be a hopeless caricature. Moreover, the claim that Reformed theology is equivalent to a species of determinism, with creatures as the puppets of a tyrannical deity, has been met with a much more nuanced account of early Reformed views about human freedom and bondage to sin indebted to Scotist metaphysics.

The work of Willem van Asselt has made an important contribution to this seismic shift in the historiography of early Reformed theology. Van Asselt has made major contributions to our understanding of the work of theologians whose work has shaped later Reformed theology in important respects, e.g. Johannes Cocceius. He has also challenged old paradigms in his scholarship on Reformed accounts of freedom, and in his work rehabilitating Reformed scholasticism. At the same time, he has continued an irenic and productive dialogue with contemporary systematic theologians (some of whom have contributed to this book). Much of his research has been collaborative. He has worked alongside other scholars to uncover new avenues of research into
Reformed theology, and the results have been clear, well written, and compelling. (A good example can be found in the recently translated *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism* that he co-authored with several other Dutch scholars, which is a very helpful piece of work.)

Consequently, it is appropriate that Van Asselt should be presented with a *Festschrift* like this one, full of essays that reflect the ways in which his work has changed this historical-theological literature. There are contributions by a number of those with whom he has worked and published over the years, particularly members of the (now scattered) “Utrecht School” of theology. The collection is a quality product. It is not possible to discuss all the contributions in a short review like this one, but I shall offer some pithy observations in presenting an overview of the chapters.

The editors provide an outline of Van Asselt’s career and the changes to the historical research on early modern Reformed thought, which sets the tone of what follows. The rest of the book is divided into three sections. In the first, there are essays on the Scotist heritage of Reformed thought. This theme is very much in the foreground of Van Asselt’s contribution to Reformed accounts of human freedom, and the essay by Antonie Vos and Eef Dekker takes this forward. They discuss modalities in the theology of Francis Turretin. Willemien Otten writes on scholasticism and the problem of intellectual reform, arguing that scholasticism cannot be context-free. Martijn Bac and Theo Pleizier offer an essay on teaching Reformed scholasticism in the revisionist “classroom” that Van Asselt’s work has contributed to, with particular emphasis on the work of the Prolocutor of the Westminster Assembly, William Twisse. A contribution by one “R.A. Mylius” on synchronic contingency in the work of “Cornelis Elleboogius” demonstrates that even serious historical theologians can enjoy some mischief. (Readers may also consult a Wikipedia page devoted to this “forgotten” divine.)

The second part of the book has offerings on the broader influence of Reformed scholasticism “at home and overseas.” Andreas Beck assesses melanchthonian themes in Voetius’ doctrine of God; F.G.M. Broeyer offers a reading of aspects of Voetius’ *Selectae Disputationes*; Aza Goudriaan writes about justification by faith in the early Arminian controversy in what is (to my mind) the most important essay in this section; Richard Muller’s contribution looks at Thomas Barlow’s views on the “new philosophy” as a handmaiden to theology; Carl Trueman considers Patrick Gillespie on the covenant of redemption; and Raymond Blacketer writes about William Perkins’ homiletical method in *The Art of Prophesying* and the purification of the church.

The third part of the volume is dedicated to furthering the more constructive project of relating Reformed scholasticism to contemporary systematic