

# Dutch Evangelical Trends and their Significance: A Critical Review Article

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C. van der Kooi, E. van Staaldoune-Sulman and A.W. Zwiep (eds),  
*Evangelical Theology in Transition* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2012) and  
 G. van den Brink and C. van der Kooi,  
*Christelijke dogmatiek* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 2012).

### SUMMARY

There has long been a distinction between *Reformed* and *evangelical* theology in the Netherlands, but in our global intellectual culture, English-language evangelical trends are influencing the shape of the Dutch speaking evangelical world. Two recent books published in the Netherlands highlight this shift. The collection *Evangelical Theology in Transition*, edited by Cornelis van der Kooi, Eveline van Staaldoune-Sulman and Arie W. Zwiep, points the way forward for Dutch Evangelicalism with

application to the Evangelical church and theology internationally. The new textbook of systematic theology by Gijsbert van den Brink and Cornelis van der Kooi, *Christelijke dogmatiek*, is an ecumenically minded, classical trinitarian, Reformed dogmatic theology. Both books represent a progressive, broadly focused, evangelical and Reformed theology in Dutch speaking Europe. This critical review article investigates highlights of these works for the continuing strength and growth of evangelicalism in the Low Countries, and its implications for the global evangelical movement.

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### ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Über eine lange Zeit hinweg hat es in den Niederlanden eine Unterscheidung zwischen reformierter und evangelikaler Theologie gegeben. Jedoch sind in unserer globalen, intellektuellen Kultur englischsprachige, evangelikale Trends dabei, das Profil der Holländisch sprechenden evangelikalen Welt zu beeinflussen. Zwei Bücher, die kürzlich in den Niederlanden veröffentlicht wurden, verdeutlichen diese Veränderung. Die Anthologie *Evangelical Theology in Transition* [Evangelikale Theologie im Wandel], herausgegeben von Cornelis van der Kooi, Eveline van Staaldoune-Sulman und Arie W. Zwiep, weist der holländischen evangelikalen Welt den Weg im

Hinblick auf evangelikale Gemeinden und Theologie auf internationaler Ebene. Das neue Handbuch für systematische Theologie von Gijsbert van den Brink und Cornelis van der Kooi, *Christelijke dogmatiek* [Christliche Dogmatik], ist eine ökumenisch ausgerichtete, klassisch trinitarische, reformierte dogmatische Theologie. Beide Bücher repräsentieren eine moderne, breit angelegte, evangelikale und reformierte Theologie im Holländisch sprechenden Europa. Diese kritische Studie untersucht die wichtigsten Punkte beider Werke, was die anhaltende Stärke und das Wachstum der evangelikalen Bewegung in den Benelux-Ländern betrifft sowie ihre Auswirkung auf die globale evangelikale Welt.

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### RÉSUMÉ

Aux Pays-Bas, on a longtemps distingué la théologie réformée et la théologie évangélique, mais, dans notre culture intellectuelle globalisée, les tendances du monde évangélique anglophone influent sur les formes d'expression des évangéliques néerlandophones. Deux ouvrages récents sont la manifestation de ce changement. La série

intitulée *Evangelical Theology in Transition* et éditée par Cornelis van der Kooi, Eveline van Staaldoune-Sulman et Arie W. Zwiep ouvre la voie pour le monde évangélique hollandais en visant une application pour l'Église évangélique et la théologie évangélique au plan international. Puis, le nouveau manuel de théologie systématique de Gijsbert van den Brink et Cornelis van der Kooi, intitulé *Christelijke dogmatiek*, est un ouvrage de



dogmatique réformée, qui maintient les positions trinitaires classiques, dans un esprit œcuménique. Ces deux ouvrages aux larges centres d'intérêts représentent une ligne progressiste au sein de la théologie évangélique et réformée, dans l'Europe néerlandophone. La présente

recension critique examine leurs points forts pour favoriser le maintien de la force et de la croissance du monde évangélique aux Pays-Bas, et en tire des implications pour le mouvement évangélique à l'échelle du monde.

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## 1. Introduction

The impact of the Netherlands on the formation of Protestant evangelical theology is often overlooked in the English-speaking world. The ongoing debates between what is often called 'five-point' Calvinism and Arminianism among those who broadly consider themselves *evangelical* originally stem from Dutch soil.<sup>1</sup> Several Dutch theologians can be considered household names among Anglophone evangelical theologians and their works are readily available in English, such as Hendrikus Berkhof's *Christian Faith* and the various works of G.C. Berkouwer and Abraham Kuyper; in recent years, Herman Bavinck's classic four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics* was also translated into English.

In the Netherlands there has long been a sharp distinction between *Reformed* (or *Calvinist*) and *evangelical* theology. But just as evangelicalism has broadened its borders in the English-speaking world and is having an impact on and within the larger Protestant world, we also see this trend in the Low Countries, specifically with respect to Dutch Protestantism. In our global intellectual culture, thanks to air travel and electronic communication, theological influences spread rapidly across the world, and Anglo-Saxon evangelical trends are influencing the shape of the Dutch speaking evangelical world.<sup>2</sup>

Two recent books published in the Netherlands not only point to this broader vision of evangelicalism, but also demonstrate it in practice. The first book to be discussed, *Evangelical Theology in Transition*, edited by Cornelis van der Kooi, Eveline van Staalduine-Sulman and Arie Zwiep (2012), points the way forward for Dutch evangelicalism in particular, with application to the evangelical church and theology internationally. This is evidenced immediately by the fact that its title and articles are written in English. The authors address the nature of evangelicalism in the Dutch context through various 'transitions and fusions' of thought both of and within evangelicalism. The book also considers the meaning of 'evangelical'

through the lens of its theological and ecclesiological contexts and practices.

The second major book is a monumental, 722 page, up-to-date, textbook of systematic theology by the Dutch theology professors Gijsbert van den Brink and Cornelis van der Kooi: *Christelijke dogmatiek* (2012). (Van der Kooi is also one of the editors of the first mentioned book.) This is a contemporary, ecumenically minded, yet classical trinitarian, Reformed dogmatic theology. Although the text is written in Dutch, the authors draw upon many historical, contemporary, international and multi-lingual sources.

Both books represent a robust, broadly focused evangelical and Reformed theology. In this critical review article, it is our desire to investigate some specific highlights of these works for the ongoing strength and growth of evangelicalism in the Low Countries, and also to draw out helpful implications for the global evangelical movement. We will specifically focus on key points of 'transition' emphasised or developed by the authors. We will first consider the multi-authored *Evangelical Theology in Transition*; our evaluation will consider four of the areas which are addressed by the book's authors: 1) Evangelicalism in a Dutch context: its meaning and identity; 2) Origins of evangelical trends in the Low Countries; 3) Evangelical church practices; and 4) Arminian and Wesleyan theological engagements.

### 2.1 Evangelicalism in a Dutch context: its meaning and identity

In the introduction the editors begin by considering the meaning of Evangelicalism<sup>3</sup> broadly, then specifically in the Dutch context. As the introductory paragraph clearly indicates, they perceive the Evangelical movement as a blended pattern of transition and fusions that nonetheless has had considerable influence both socially and ecclesiastically. Of course, in a Dutch-speaking context, there must be an intentional effort to distinguish and compare Evangelicalism with Reformed Protestantism (1). The editors argue that there is in the Netherlands a broad, ecumenically minded Evangelical spirit that



has been called 'ecumenism of the heart' by a leading Dutch pastor.<sup>4</sup> They frankly state that they see the Evangelical as a 'counter-movement' alongside the 'church at large' that includes Reformed churches, parachurch organisations and other historical Christian expressions with similar concerns. In this sense Evangelicalism is a 'critical minority', which is nonetheless influential due to the increasingly multi-cultural context and a decrease in the authority of religious institutions (3-5).

The editors further suggest that the Evangelical movement is in transition towards a critically reflective and cooperative theological engagement, and moving away from earlier tendencies of anti-intellectualism. Optimistically, they argue that some areas of 'Evangelical Spirituality' from a postmodern perspective connect well with the 'dominant culture'. This would include areas such as a 'strong individualism', a 'high esteem' of empirical research and an expressed distinction between the Bible itself and our interpretation of it (6). Certainly this last observation is key to the postmodern criticism of modernist epistemological optimism: Our interpretations are always situational and contextual; our statements *about* the Bible are never equivalent to the Bible itself.

However, the former two points do not appear, at least at first glance, to reflect postmodern sensibilities. A general feature of postmodernism is a move away from the radical individualism of modernity towards a more community-centred paradigm. But the context to which the editors refer is perhaps the change in the Dutch Christian culture from an institutional and cultural view of the church's influence to a subjective, individualistic view of religion as personal choice.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the postmodern critique includes a radical questioning of the value of empiricism as a launch pad for our truth and / or knowledge claims. It is not that empiricism has lost its credentials entirely, but it has certainly lost its footing to set the terms for our faith and theological dialogue. Nonetheless, this renewed interest in empirical research stems from what the editors see as a transition from a primary, if not at times exclusive, concentration on beliefs to a concentration on the practices that shape evangelicalism and the role of the church. Consequently, to properly reflect on church practice requires empirical research.

Following the Introduction, Baptist theologian Henk Bakker begins the first chapter by considering the phenomenological aspects of the Evangelical movement. Bakker sees Evangelicalism

as originally a prophetic and eschatological call to keep the kingdom of God separate from the world (4, 10, 17). However, in the Netherlands the movement has become so trans-denominational that its prophetic fervour has waned; it is now less a protest movement than it is a pragmatic movement which seeks to unite 'culture, Gospel and people' (21-23, 26, 29). Bakker notes that Dutch Evangelicals, unfortunately, are seldom involved with science and academic research, although their work as care providers has had a significant impact in the past three decades. In spite of its anti-intellectual reputation, Dutch Evangelicalism has been able to adapt to its culture for gospel-centred purposes (31, 37).

Bakker is careful to distinguish Evangelicalism in the Netherlands from that of the UK, Germany, France and North America, by claiming that in the Netherlands the word 'Evangelical' does not have a 'denominational and theological meaning' (33 with note 56). Certainly, geographical and sociological distinctions such as these are worth noting, but the contrast he sees with North American Evangelicalism may be overstated. The latter is heavily politically driven, with an extremely diverse denominational and even theological background.<sup>6</sup>

The above diversity is also made evident in the Netherlands, especially by Reformed theologian Ad de Bruijne, who states in chapter four:

Evangelicals are to be found in the Netherlands among such groups as the Pentecostals, Baptists, Plymouth Brethren, and a series of free, sometimes charismatic churches that do not operate within organized denominations (86-87).

With this observation, De Bruijne also signals cooperation between Reformed and Evangelical Christians. He highlights various political and religious differences and commonalities across this diverse Evangelical landscape and emphasizes a move away, among some Evangelicals, from more Anabaptist and separatist tendencies to 'the long-established Reformed tradition of Christian politics' (86). In the past, Evangelicals were reticent to embrace political participation either due to Evangelicalism's prophetic, eschatological origins that separate God's Kingdom from that of the world or due to dispensationalist eschatological views, accompanied by an individualistic application of Christian spirituality (88-89).<sup>7</sup> Today, 'politically awakened' Evangelicals in the Netherlands embrace more of the Kuyperian tra-



dition, emphasizing the goodness of creation and its structures; by doing so, they find opportunities for Christian witness to society.<sup>8</sup>

In the United States, De Bruijne observes, there was a culture clash between Christians who embraced modernity and those who remained steadfast in the traditional faith. As Modernism gained the upper hand, Evangelical conservatives withdrew from the public arena; this included those of the Reformed tradition. In the Netherlands, however, due to Abraham Kuyper's influence upon Dutch culture and society, Reformed Christianity became more influential. De Bruijne notes that Evangelicals with an Anabaptist background also joined the Reformed Christians in the common struggle against secularism, drawing upon the historical Christian character of Dutch society (95-96, 106-109).

De Bruijne's research displays the vast richness of Evangelicalism, ranging from Puritanism, Methodism, Neo-Calvinism to dispensationalist views – all of which contribute to a prophetic-political challenge to pervasive secularism. The way forward, De Bruijne wisely argues, is not simply a return to a full-fledged Kuyperian Neo-Calvinism, even though it does provide the broader context for political engagement. Kuyper himself understood the historical-contextual limits of his project; moreover, the times have changed. Although the church is not equivalent to society, neither can it be detached from it while seeking the Kingdom of God. The church is embedded within society and it must learn to accept its condition, realising that its composition of diverse identities has helped to form that society itself (114-115, 118, 127-130; also see editors' comments, 10-11).

With a variety of denominational adherents, biblicism has been a general inclination of the Evangelical movement in the United States. The origin of this mindset, however, stems from the same Enlightenment roots as Dutch Evangelicalism. In chapter two, Eveline van Staalduine-Sulman provides five characteristics that represent this Enlightenment influence: 1) individualism and equality; 2) the separation of church and state; 3) an emphasis of spirit over body (with a notable 'reactionary trend'); 4) viewing God as separate from creation; and 5) 'the disappearance of Neo-Platonism from theology and hermeneutics' (45-48). Along with the emphatic optimism about the individual's ability to access the truth of God comes an emphasis on personal experience in both the reading and the application of the Bible, apart

from one's tradition or ecclesiological context. Staalduine-Sulman argues that Evangelicalism has 'positioned itself as a counter-movement' to Enlightenment thinking. Yet, her research points out that in its opposition it in fact affirms the same philosophical underpinnings of foundationalism which stem from Enlightenment-born modernity. Rather than rationalism and historicism setting the agenda, Evangelical fundamentalism *suggests* that the Bible alone, as the ultimate authority, must set the agenda (54-55). Yet the methods by which one interprets the Bible within this paradigm are either existential, or ironically, rational-scientific (as in the case of many classical Evangelical apologetic efforts).

Yet Staalduine-Sulman is not all negative in her assessment of Evangelicalism. She affirms that it is a movement in transition which is responding to and integrating with current times and cultures, while at the same time refusing to accept mainstream liberal theology. Evangelicalism has also refused to remain a theology for the academy; the ordinary Christian believer is an implicit concern of the movement. With an increasing number of Evangelical students of theology in the Netherlands, she wisely submits that the self-critical, modest approaches which stem from the postmodern critique of Enlightenment modernism will help pave the way for both those steeped in modernism and (especially) those immersed in fundamentalist expressions of Evangelicalism. She is undoubtedly correct, as they have more in common than either perspective is ready to see or admit.

## 2.2 Origins of evangelical trends in the Low Countries

As the editors point out, two of the articles (chapters three and seven) propose that the aforementioned Evangelical tendencies in the Netherlands find their background in American and/or British Evangelicalism (11). In chapter three, Maarten J. Aalders suggests that the Oxford Group Movement of the pastor-evangelist Frank N.D. Buchman, as well as the Reformed Churches in Restored Union [*Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (in Hersteld Verband)*], were an outcome of Welsh revivalism. Buchman's networking and influence in the Netherlands (from 1923 onwards) fuelled Evangelical tendencies (68-71). Aalders points out the positive reaction from within the Restored Union Churches to the Oxford Group Movement which can be seen in the first published article



regarding this movement by Rev. G.W. van Deth in 1933 (71). Van Deth described a house meeting that consisted of Bible readings and group discussions, confession of sins, and the sharing of personal religious experiences. Although Aalders mentions that Van Deth had some reservations about the group's 'economic, social and political naivety' he fully recognised the Oxford Group Movement as a movement of the Holy Spirit and as a sign of revival (72).

This optimism about the Oxford Group Movement and its influence on the Restored Union Churches, however, does not take away from the fact that it also met with criticism. Yet this criticism did not lead to a full scale rejection of the Oxford Group Movement until the moment it changed its name to 'Moral Re-Armament' and began moving in a different, broadly focused, even political direction. There was then more emphasis on 'revolution' than on 'revival', and Moral Re-Armament moved away from 'local variations' while discontinuing their house meetings (81, cf. 84). Aalders submits that the tendencies within the Oxford Group Movement that incorporated too much American optimism, along with too little connection with the Biblical witness, ultimately led to its failure to truly impact the Dutch churches (85).

In another vein, in chapter seven, Bernhard Reitsma focuses on a particular recent trend in Evangelicalism in Europe, Africa and Asia which is popularly known as the 'health and wealth' gospel. Reitsma notes that Evangelicals 'are less sympathetic to health and prosperity theology', adding that 'key-figures have denounced it as unbiblical' (164). A bit ironically, Reitsma contends that these health and wealth teachings seem recently to have gained ground among ordinary Evangelical Christians in Europe. In view of this, he calls for 'a renewed Evangelical reflection' (165) in order to address the primary claims of this trend vis-à-vis the present day suffering of Christians. He contends that this reflection must take place in view of eschatological redemption and future glory (164-181). In Romans 8:17, Paul relates present suffering to future glorification (167-171) indicative of the 'crossroads of the old age of Adam and the new age of Christ' (173). Suffering must not be reduced to persecution, because it includes the entire impact of the groaning of creation under the curse of death, while it goes through the birth pangs of the new life brought through Christ's redemptive work (175-178). He concludes that

Evangelicals are not 'detached from a broken world' (179); hence they are not exempt from the impact of its suffering. Our current salvation, however, is a pointer to the fullness of redemption to come.

Reitsma clearly maintains the eschatological emphasis that is characteristic of Evangelicalism, as we have noted above, while at the same re-orienting the current Evangelical position clearly within the embodied concreteness of the world. His response represents a significant transition from the lure of the dualism of modernity<sup>9</sup> (whether in the secular or religious sphere) to an embodied faith in the context of creation – whether for good or ill at the present time.

### 2.3 Evangelical church practice

Stefan Paas discusses three ecclesiological shifts in a late-Modern, post-Christian society in the Netherlands in chapter five. His considerations stem from both his academic research and his personal experience working with a church plant in Amsterdam called Via Nova which ministers among 'young, secular, career focused people' (132). His observations include the shift from monopoly to marketing, from congregation to network, and from confessionalism to mission and values. Paas submits that these transitions must be seriously considered and applied for church planters in today's world. He strongly argues for the appropriation of a marketing metaphor for reaching young urban professionals in the multi-ethnic context of Amsterdam. He acknowledges that marketing and Church mission are not the same but argues that it is nonetheless useful to consider marketing perspectives to reveal otherwise hidden dimensions of mission (136). For example, the importance of reaching a 'target group' may be related to the incarnation and the weakness of the cross may be related to the needs of the weak among us (138).

Paas describes how from the time of the Reformation to the Reveil movement of the nineteenth century, missionary movements in the Netherlands have worked in a context of support 'from the ruling powers' (140) in a nominal Christian context. In the current culture, this connection has been lost. Consequently, he argues that the free church, while having less structure and less formal denominational ties (140, 142), maintains a commitment to 'peace, dialogue and reconciliation' (146) that will help pave the way forward.



Paas is to be commended for his astute insights into Dutch religious culture and his suggestions for reaching post-Christian people in the Netherlands. Nonetheless, we would express two concerns with his marketing metaphor. Firstly, in general, we are wondering if the marketing paradigm itself reverts to a modernist mentality that allows modern culture to set the terms for communication. Paas wisely submits that we must indeed be attentive and aware of our culture. This can be applauded as long as modern culture does not have the final say on our church practices or alienates us from the history and tradition of the church where the Holy Spirit has been working through the ages. Secondly, Paas suggests that the marketing metaphor of reaching a target group is akin to Jesus' incarnation: he came as a Jewish man in a Jewish context. The particularity of Jesus' incarnation is certainly significant. But Jesus was notably counter-cultural in his entire approach to reaching people in his day. He did not attempt to 'fit in' with the existing culture but showed a radical hospitality that was completely foreign to the political and religious mindset. Creativity and innovation were not his objectives (cf. 138) but rather radical love and compassion apart from the religious or cultural expectations.

René Erwich (chapter six) discusses the significant influence of Pete Ward's book *Liquid Church*<sup>10</sup> through the lens of the practical theology of Richard R. Osmer (148). Erwich summarises Ward's notion of 'liquid church' (in contrast to 'solid church' with traditional leanings) as 'a flow of religious communication through smaller and larger networks' (151, 153). Like Paas, Erwich suggests that 'liquid discourse believers' (especially noticed among Baptists in the Netherlands) are those who have taken on a consumerist mentality, looking for 'meaning and spirituality' without membership or commitment to a formal church structure. He points out that the newer forms of 'liquid' church are challenging more traditionally minded Baptist churches to 'reconsider their ecclesiology' (155).

After providing some brief examples of 'liquid church' in the Dutch context, Erwich submits that Evangelicalism in general 'lacks a well grounded ecclesiology' (156). In fact, the formation of the Evangelical movement itself stems from a confessional, experiential and anti-institutional sentiment with regard to the church (156). At this juncture it would have been helpful for Erwich to provide some nuances to Evangelicalism in gen-

eral and those Evangelical churches (for which he provided examples) that have intentionally incorporated forms of 'liquid church'. Would Erwich suggest that Evangelicals in general are more or less 'liquid' as opposed to 'solid'? If so, how do Dutch Reformed churches identifying themselves as 'Evangelical' fit into his analysis? On this particular question, Erwich seems unclear. Nevertheless, he wisely points out that a deeper dialogue is needed on how churches perceive themselves on this 'continuum between "solid" and "liquid"' (159). He challenges us to be open to learn from Emerging Church expressions as we strengthen our understanding of both culture and church practice through 'long term empirical research' and 'study groups' (159-160). To do this effectively, he counsels churches to move away from being 'solo-players' (162), to build networks for dialogue and cooperation, and also to bring together church practitioners and theologians.

#### 2.4 Arminian and Wesleyan theological engagements

The transition towards more theological dialogue is also reflected in the 'updating' of Reformed theology regarding the subject of free will. Rather than simply pitting Arminian and Reformed theology against each other, or simply lumping Arminian and Wesleyan theology together, connections are revealed that were overlooked or ignored in the past. Issues such as open theism, freedom and necessity, and the Wesleyan quadrilateral in dialogue with contemporary systematic theology and hermeneutics, are explored in the last three chapters of the book.

In chapter eight, Cornelis van der Kooi examines open theism and its relevance with regard to an 'Evangelical-Reformed theology' (182). He perceives the late Canadian theologian Clark Pinnock to be a prime example in this regard – not because Pinnock was necessarily saying anything new but because he pushed us to think carefully about classical theism in view of an Evangelical theology of Scripture (182-184).

Van der Kooi argues that in addition to moving towards a broader understanding of Evangelicalism, Evangelicals are transitioning from debates about the Bible towards a greater emphasis on community. Pinnock's work, he notes, points towards this communitarian emphasis of viewing doctrine embedded within the community (185-186). Open theism emphasizes the relationality of God rather than his absolute independence from



the world. The decisions that humans make are real decisions within time; they are not simply the result of some unilateral decree of a timeless God (189). God is love, and in his love he allows us to make decisions. However, Van der Kooi presents five dilemmas we face when confronted with open theism. We will not mention all of these dilemmas here but we will highlight some concerns that, in our view, are most pertinent for this discussion.

With open theism (i.e. Pinnock's 'creative love theism') God's convincing yet gracious offer of salvation will not supersede our human freedom; we have a choice, and that choice is not determined by God (193). But Van der Kooi deftly asks this key question: 'Should we allow ourselves to be forced into the dilemma that open theism offers, i.e. the choice between determinism and freedom?' (190). He astutely suggests that contemporary theology has perhaps unwittingly incorporated a view of equality that stems more from our social-historical-religious context than it does from the Bible. For example, the importance of the equality of people before God is evident in the American Declaration of Independence and also strongly manifested in Europe in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. With Barth, this is spelled out as the 'yes' of God to all human beings. This perspective is also evident, Van der Kooi argues, in Pinnock's creative love theism (192). So the question is: Has our overarching view of fairness obscured our view of God's work in salvation?

Van der Kooi submits that open theism has disregarded the omniscience of God (194), where 'openness has become a gap' and 'God is powerless if a person refuses to allow God to take control' (194). Open theists may regard this judgment as a bit hasty, as it is not that open theists deny God's omniscience, but they rather re-frame the nature of omniscience by virtue of that which they submit constitutes 'knowledge'. Knowledge is that which is known or has been known based on the present or past state of affairs. In other words, for open theists, the word 'knowledge' does not refer to future states of affairs.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, they are able to maintain belief in God's omniscience, while still denying that all future events are 'foreknown'.

Nonetheless, Van der Kooi's analysis stimulates us to think through how our context influences our views of omniscience, foreknowledge and human freedom. He effectively challenges us to return to the narrative of Scripture to see again how God has interacted with and revealed himself to his people. Rather than simply positioning

our freedom within our own choices, he asks us to 'place it in the depth of God's own being', as witnesses of God's *oikonomia* – his work through creation and his people throughout history through the Holy Spirit (201).

In another attempt to build a bridge to strengthen Reformed-Evangelical theology, Antonie Vos provides a bold declaration toward the theological reconciliation of Wesleyanism and classical Reformed theology, both of which strongly influence (and have strongly influenced) Evangelicalism. We must not confuse Arminianism and Wesleyanism, Vos argues, because Arminius argued for a 'neutral divine will' where God's will is bracketed in order to allow humankind to make a decision (209, 217, 219). In fact, the 'classic Reformed tradition before 1800 is neither necessitarian nor deterministic' (219). For Wesley, however, the will is always important for God and humans; it is not simply bracketed by God for humans to make a choice (209). But for Wesley, this will 'presupposes freedom or liberty' rather than denying it (211). Regardless of whether one ultimately agrees with Vos's conclusions, his scholarship is incisive, challenging us to reconsider our often-presumed polarities in the so-called Reformed-Wesleyan divide.

In the final chapter, Arie Zwiep also borrows insights from Wesleyanism, specifically from the Wesleyan quadrilateral. He interacts with contemporary hermeneutics in Evangelicalism, using Gadamer as his primary interlocutor, as a guide and corrective to prevent a misappropriation of Wesley (223, 236-237). Zwiep insightfully points out that the notion of a quadrilateral in theology does not find its origins in Wesley, even though the idea is obviously present in his theology. Zwiep notes that an analogy to the quadrilateral may be the medieval fourfold sense of Scripture. Although the fourfold sense of Scripture does not use the same 'motif', Zwiep submits, the use of multiple perspectives in the interpretation of Scripture is still remarkably similar (228-229).

Zwiep comments on each of the four elements of the quadrilateral. The primacy of Scripture must not be equated with Scripture as the exclusive authority. *Sola Scriptura* was always understood by the Reformers in the context of the community of faith. Tradition then is the voice of that community in contrast to the radical subjectivism that is often characteristic of modernity. The acceptance of tradition is not a blind appropriation but a continual call to dialogue in the context of the broader



community of faith (230, 234-237). The pillar of reason is not abandoned – although it is certainly placed under dispute in the postmodern critique – but it must be used with care (237). Zwiép points out that Wesley expressed a confidence in reason and method that Gadamer would question. Our faith simply cannot be equated with our understanding of the natural world. Additionally, experience is significant, but not merely experience as individualistic and subjective, but the experience of the community of faith through the ages (238-244).

All in all, Zwiép submits that the Wesleyan quadrilateral provides us with insights on how various Christian perspectives across contemporary and historical traditions may help us when doing hermeneutics and theology. These various sources for theological reflection not only provide enrichment to our understanding of faith, but reveal the inadequacies of harbouring one exclusive approach.

We heartily affirm Zwiép's recommendation of the Wesleyan quadrilateral to help us address changes in the theological hermeneutical landscape of today. However, we are wondering why he concludes his article suggesting his position 'presupposes firm belief in rationality and the rational character of reality, yet at the same time it requires us to recognise the boundaries of what reason can achieve'. With this statement, Zwiép appears to lose ground. How is a 'firm' belief in rationality different from simply suggesting that rationality has its place? Although Zwiép consistently argued for the limits of reason, his presupposition of the 'rational character of reality' seems at least partially contrary to his overriding emphasis. Reality is not rational in character, but multi-dimensional: it is experiential, affective, social and cognitive – all at the same time. We suspect Zwiép may in theory agree with this but we suggest it is nevertheless a critical distinction to emphasize if we are to move forward with Zwiép's overarching constructive proposal.

### 3. Christian Reformed Dogmatics

As mentioned in the introduction, the second major book we will consider is the contemporary systematic theology textbook by two well-known Dutch theology professors, Gijsbert van den Brink, and Cornelis van der Kooi: *Christelijke Dogmatiek*.

It is already clear that *Christelijke Dogmatiek* (hereafter *CD*) is having a large impact in the Low Countries. The market for academic theological

books in Dutch is small but this book is already in its fourth printing. It is being introduced at several theological seminaries and universities as the new, updated textbook in Christian doctrine in the Dutch language.<sup>12</sup> Many see it as the successor of the one-volume dogmatic theology, *Christian Faith*, by Hendrikus Berkhof (1914-1995).<sup>13</sup> Like this textbook, it will soon have an English translation. *CD* certainly has an ecumenical spirit and an appreciation for evangelical traditions, but at the same time it is clearly a traditional Reformed book written by two theologians from the VU University of Amsterdam (formerly known in English as the Free University of Amsterdam). Cornelis van der Kooi is known for his research on the relation between Calvin and Barth<sup>14</sup> whereas Gijsbert van den Brink belongs to the Utrecht School that stresses classical academic theological reflection.<sup>15</sup> In the Dutch context, both authors are reluctant to call themselves 'evangelical' since they position themselves within the historic Reformed tradition<sup>16</sup> but from a global evangelical perspective they may safely be considered 'Reformed-evangelical'.

Evangelicalism as a separate movement is not often mentioned in *CD*, and when it is, it is referred to in the third person, especially when dealing with charismatic, Arminian or dispensational views – in short, those perspectives which are not considered Reformed. At the same time, there are limited references to evangelical theologians such as Stanley Grenz, Kevin Vanhoozer, Miroslav Volf, Alister McGrath and there is a frequent dialogue with the Dutch evangelical systematic theologian, Willem J. Ouweneel.<sup>17</sup> Most Reformed Dutch theological texts were more limited to their own traditions (Herman Bavinck, Hendrikus Berkhof, Gerrit C. Berkouwer, Abraham Kuyper, Oepke Noordmans, Abraham van de Beek and others), along with key figures in German theology (Karl Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, Eberhard Jüngel). In this regard, Van den Brink and Van der Kooi's wide engagement with different authors and traditions makes the book an interesting and refreshing read within the Reformed tradition.

The general methodological approach of *CD* is one of *fides quaerens intellectum*. Placing faith as a key player in theological reflection is in itself still a bold position on the European academic scene. Moreover, this jubilant tune of renewed faith comes from the same university where a generation ago the Reformed theologian Harry M. Kuitert (1924- ) played his requiem over confessional theology. Kuitert's style of demolishing



classical theology and replacing it with the more scientific discipline of 'religious studies' unfortunately remains a sad reality in the Netherlands today.<sup>18</sup> In this context, a confessional dogmatic theology like *CD* is a beacon in the current storm of Enlightenment scientism.<sup>19</sup>

But starting from a position of faith certainly does not exclude careful thinking. Theology does not merely fall from heaven, but connects to our thinking, experience and our broad religious consciousness. In the prolegomena, the authors find room for modest apologetic reasoning in defence of theism (52-64). They see a theologian as a reader of a detective story who tries to see the coherence between God, humanity and world. Based on faith and an engagement with the sources, the theological reader is one who is constantly challenged to make sense of reality (27).

The authors take a broad approach to the subject of Christian revelation. God reveals himself in a diversity of forms such as cognitive propositions, verbal communications, personal presence, historical events, religious experiences, human conscience, theological traditions and faith praxis (164-173). Theology connects these different models of revelation and puts the Christ event at its centre, as its constitutive and normative principle. Indeed, *CD* adheres to the Reformed formal principle of *sola Scriptura*. Interestingly, however, the doctrine of Scripture is discussed *after* the doctrines of the Trinity, Christology, soteriology and pneumatology. For the authors, thinking about Scripture is in line with thinking about the work of the Holy Spirit since the Bible is a gift from the Holy Spirit, and Scripture is the means by which the Spirit connects us to the kerygma of salvation (498-499). This approach resembles Stanley J. Grenz's approach in his *Theology for the Community of God*.<sup>20</sup>

*CD* does not begin with a general teaching about the essence of God, but with the Trinity. The revelation of Christ is the central event from which theological reflection must begin. We cannot think about God independently from Christ as the climax of salvation history. The God of Scripture can only be understood from the perspective of the Trinity (83-87). The authors make clear that the doctrine of the Trinity is distinctively Christian, supported in Scripture in contradistinction with Islamic monotheism (107-109). In a European context with a large population of Islamic immigrants, this dialogue is essential. The central position in which they place the doctrine of

the Trinity is a distinct, welcome difference from Berkhof's belittling of this doctrine. In this way, the authors are more in line with the overall re-appreciation of the Trinity in mainstream evangelical theology today.

*CD* is a post-critical text, as it addresses the limitations of Enlightenment and the historical critical method. The authors point out that the results of the historical critical method have been diverse and conflicting (488-493). The Bible was reduced to a human religious artefact, rather than seen as a life-giving message about God and our relationship with him. In their day, scholars such as Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck, Charles Hodge and Benjamin Warfield developed the theological concept of organic inspiration. *CD* develops a theological bibliography that is more based on the work of the Spirit in the Church, but it is critical about any approach resulting in individualistic relativism.<sup>21</sup> We are indeed situated within a history, culture, language and tradition from which our interpretations rise and fall (495). Although we cannot escape from our own subjectivity, this realisation must not lead to the loss of the authoritative role of Scripture. The authors show appreciation for the contemporary, broadly evangelical trend towards theological interpretation of Scripture. As we study Scripture, we study it theologically. This means first of all that the reader asks the ultimate question: Who is God? We desire to hear 'the voice of God' in our Bible reading (502). Furthermore, the Bible is the book of the Church. We read the text within the community of faith, which is already a product of the word of God (*creatura verbi*). Hence, this ecclesial reading of Scripture must be done within the catholicity of the Church worldwide (501-507).

The chapter on creation as it relates to faith and science (chapter six) will stir great interest. *CD* takes a stand for the importance of creation while affirming that the scientific evidence of evolution is overwhelmingly clear. At the same time, the authors strongly denounce evolutionism as a philosophical ideology. In line with Benjamin Warfield, a clear distinction is made between a bold theological concept of creation (*ex nihilo*) and the secondary process of evolution that follows creation (211). The authors do stress, however, the importance of a historical fall. In this sense they are clearly more orthodox than Berkhof, for whom being human and being a sinner are one and the same thing, both aspects standing in a dialectical relationship. But the problem remains: How do



we incorporate the fall of humanity into the scientific evolutionary narrative? This is one of the most challenging questions for integrating evolutionary biology with biblical orthodoxy. In traditional terms, it is the question as to the original '*status integritatis*'. In an excursus, *CD* contests the traditional monogenism of humanity's common descent from one human couple, Adam and Eve. Instead, the authors submit that human origins included several thousand individuals (polygenism) who shared one common biotope and destiny. This small population rebelled from God, thus changing their destiny (277-278). This fall of humankind was later expressed in the biblical metaphors of Genesis 3.

Van der Kooi and Van den Brink follow the tradition of Berkhof and of recent Dutch theology in general by giving plenty of attention to the role of Israel. In the light of recent history, the Holocaust and the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, fresh theological reflection is required. For the authors, reflecting on Israel and the Old Testament creates a structural duality in Christian theology (323). The church does not replace Israel, but is rather a new community that can share in the expectations of Israel (313). As we approach the biblical story from a Christological perspective, we must be fully aware that Jesus was a Jew who obeyed the Old Testament to the fullest degree on one hand, and on the other, was rejected by the people of God. Jesus experienced both deep identification with and estrangement from his people.

Generally, *CD* addresses new developments in theology in a balanced manner. A good example is how it interacts with the New Perspective on Paul (E.P. Sanders, N.T. Wright, J.D.G. Dunn) as it relates to the traditional themes of justice and justification by faith. The authors appreciate the corrective to an individualistically focused theory of justification. There is a social and ecclesial dimension of salvation that was greatly neglected in traditional Reformation theology. Our understanding of early Judaism has been too limited and even biased by the Reformation debate. In the end, the New Perspective on Paul is not considered to be a refutation of the traditional Reformed soteriology but rather an important complementary enrichment to it (606-609).

Perhaps one of the weaker portions of *CD* for engagement with evangelical theology is the chapter on ecclesiology (chapter 14).<sup>22</sup> This becomes especially clear in comparison with the ecclesiol-

ogy of its predecessor, Berkhof's *Christian Faith*. *CD* engages the Catholic doctrine of the church (for instance *Lumen Gentium*) but it misses the opportunity to provide more interaction with evangelical/charismatic views on the church. *CD* takes a stand for the traditional Presbyterian model as a *via media* and depicts Episcopalianism and Congregationalism as opposite ends of an extreme (527). According to the authors, the free church emphasis on individual choice and the demand for baptism following personal confession makes the church a phenomenon of history rather than an institution which finds its origin in God's initiative (527). Unfortunately the free church model is too briefly addressed by and rejected by the authors, especially considering the success of free church ecclesiology among European evangelicals and in the majority world. This is especially the case for emerging free churches with strong missionary initiatives in a postmodern/ post-Christian context. Respect for differences in practice and organisational structures is extremely important for the ongoing process of building unity among diverse Christian expressions and denominations. A deeper engagement with Miroslav Volf's *After Our Likeness* (which is cited), for example, would have been an improvement in this regard.<sup>23</sup>

Overall, we see an interesting and encouraging transition in the Low Countries. Classical theological reflection is still very much alive and appreciated by a wider Christian public. At the same time, classical theology in the universities is often replaced by the more descriptive label (with a presupposed neutrality?) 'religious studies', as has been customarily done in major universities in the United States. It is encouraging to see that secularisation has not yet extinguished the flames of academic reflection on Christian doctrine. The positive effect of European post-Christian culture is that theologians from different denominations are becoming more aware of their interdependence and common call. Indeed, healthy, rich reflection on and application of Christian doctrine must be done in view of the catholicity and apostolicity of the Church. This new type of Evangelical and Reformed orthodoxy is more loyal to the richness of varying Christian traditions and seeks engagement in open dialogue. The catholicity of the Church and the role of tradition have become increasingly important. Many challenges remain as the church continues to engage with scientism, the New Atheism, post-Christian moral relativism and Islam, along with the cultural and intellectual



superficiality that mark many churches. These two significant books demonstrate that theological schools and scholars must unify their resources to respond to these challenges – whether in Europe or elsewhere. All in all, the multi-linguistic setting and the classical training typical of the Low Countries provide an interesting and ongoing inspiring source for theological reflection today.

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## Endnotes

- 1 This is noticed in recent literature including Michael S. Horton, *For Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011); Roger E. Olson, *Against Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011); Robert A. Peterson and Michael D. Williams, *Why I Am Not an Arminian* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), and Jerry L. Walls and Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I am not a Calvinist* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004).
- 2 We are of course referring to both the Netherlands and Dutch-speaking (Flemish) Belgium. A couple of examples at the popular level include the influence of the Alpha course, Willow Creek's Leadership Network and Emerging Church communities. See C. van der Kooi, E. van Staalduine-Sulman and A.W. Zwiep, 'Introduction', in the same, *Evangelical Theology in Transition* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 2012) 2, 5, 9.
- 3 We will capitalise 'Evangelical' and 'Evangelicalism' when specifically referring to the work of the authors in this book since they capitalise these terms. In most cases in English the terms would remain uncapitalised since 'Evangelicalism' is not a distinct movement or denomination, as for example, would be the case with the designation 'Reformed'.
- 4 The editors correctly credit this label to Rev Arie van der Veer, a well-known Dutch broadcaster; see Van der Kooi, Van Staalduine-Sulman and Zwiep, 'Introduction', 3.
- 5 We would argue, however, that this betrays a latent modernism rather than postmodernism. Ultimately, even if an over-arching structure of ecclesiology is challenged, the voices that challenge that structure are already embedded within another community.
- 6 There is undoubtedly a biblicist hermeneutical strain in fundamentalist oriented Evangelicals in the United States, but this would also be characteristic of fundamentalist Evangelicals in the Netherlands.
- 7 Ad de Bruijne draws upon the research in a col-

lection of essays in J.J. Frinsel sr. *et al.* (eds), *Vreemdelingschap en politieke verantwoordelijkheid* (Nunspeet: Marnix van St. Aldegondestichting, 1994). See A.Th. de Bruijne, "A banner that flies across this land": An interpretation and evaluation of Dutch Evangelical political awareness since the end of the twentieth century' in Van der Kooi, Van Staalduine-Sulman and Zwiep, *Evangelical Theology*, 88-89.

- 8 De Bruijne links this to the Evangelical participation in the political party *Reformatische Politieke Federatie* in the 1980s and 90s, a forerunner of the present-day *Christen Unie*; see De Bruijne, 'Banner', 88.
- 9 Modernist appropriations of Cartesian rationalism tend to separate head from heart, and mind from body. The mind or (applied religiously) the 'spirit' is often seen as where true godliness lays, not the body. If your heart and mind is set on Christ, then it may be assumed that blessings will ensue for the body. Granted, this is a distortion and misapplication of an evangelical tendency, but one that has certainly been manifested in recent years, as Reitsma points out.
- 10 Pete Ward, *Liquid Church: A Bold Vision of How to Be God's People in Worship and Mission* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002).
- 11 See Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker and David Basinger, 'Systematic Theology' in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1994) 121-125.
- 12 For instance, *CD* is now used at the Theologische Universiteit, Apeldoorn, the Theologische Universiteit Kampen, the Protestantse Theologische Universiteit in Amsterdam and Groningen, and at the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit, Leuven.
- 13 *Christelijk geloof* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1973) had its latest reprint in 2003. English version Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An introduction to the study of the faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999). Interestingly, *CD* follows a similar format by using a small font for more profound excurses and references to literature.
- 14 Cornelis (Kees) van der Kooi is professor of Christian Dogmatics at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU Amsterdam) and director of its Centre of Evangelical and Reformation Theology. See e.g. C. van der Kooi, *As in a Mirror: John Calvin and Karl Barth on Knowing God* (Studies in the History of Reformed thought; Leiden: Brill, 2005). Gijsbert van den Brink taught at the University of Leiden (2001-2007) and is currently also a professor at the Free University.
- 15 Van den Brink belongs to the Gereformeerde Bond (established 1909), a conservative movement within the larger Dutch Reformed Church.



The Utrecht school stresses the importance of logical and coherent reasoning in theology. It could be typified as Reformed scholasticism, but this is a reduction. There is also a deep appreciation for medieval theologians such as John Duns Scotus. Notable figures of this school in the Low Countries would include its 'founder' Vincent Brümmer, and then Antonie Vos, Marcel Sarot (Roman Catholic) and Andreas Beck. See for instance Gijsbert van den Brink and Marcel Sarot (eds), *Understanding the Attributes of God* (Contributions to Philosophical Theology Vol.1; Frankfurt: Lang, 1999) [Original Dutch 1995]; and Gijsbert van den Brink (ed.), *Philosophy of Science for Theologians: An Introduction* (Contributions to Philosophical Theology, vol.12; Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009).

- 16 We already noted that Van der Kooi is one of the editors and contributors of the first book considered, *Evangelical Theology in Transition*. He notes: 'The English term "evangelical"... has a wider scope than the term *evangelicaal* in the Netherlands.' (Van der Kooi, Van Staaldune-Sulman and Zwiep, *Evangelical Theology in Transition*, 185).
- 17 Willem J. Ouwenel is a scientist, philosopher and theologian. He is a prolific writer with more than 120 books. Belonging to the Open Brethren, he is charismatic in his theology. He has written a series on Christian doctrine in Dutch, *Evangelisch-*

*dogmatische Reeks*.

- 18 For instance, after the closure of the department of theology at the University of Leiden, the department of theology at the University of Utrecht (where Gisbertus Voetius held a post) has also been closed. Some traditional theologians such as Antonie Vos are now at the Evangelische Theologische Faculteit in Leuven/Louvain (Belgium).
- 19 *CD* is also highly appreciated for its 'loyal orthodoxy' by the American Catholic theologian, Eduardo Echeverria, see *Calvin Theological Journal* 48 (2013) 143-149.
- 20 Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994).
- 21 *CD* positions itself between theology as an apologetic discipline (Pannenberg) and as a form of Christian self-description (Barth and Hans Frei); see *CD*, 43, 44.
- 22 The brevity of the treatment of the ecclesiology in this volume is compensated by a recent publication by another VU Amsterdam (emeritus) professor of Systematic Theology, Abraham (Bram) van de Beek: *Lichaam en Geest van Christus, De theologie van de kerk en de Heilige Geest* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2012; 556 pages).
- 23 Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness. The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).