

## Book Review

by Wes Bredenhof

*Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, J. Van Genderen and W.H. Velema (translated by Gerrit Bilkes and Ed M. Van der Maas), Phillipsburg: P & R, 2008. Hardcover, 922 pages, \$59.99.

This volume was first published in Dutch in 1992 as *Beknopte Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*. In terms of adoption as a textbook for Reformed systematic theology training, it became the Dutch equivalent of Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*. Consequently, it seemed a good idea for the John Calvin Foundation to make efforts for the publication of a translation. Perhaps a translation would even supplant Berkhof in the English-speaking world as a standard text.

*Concise Reformed Dogmatics* (CRD) was authored by two men who served as professors at the Theological University of the Christian Reformed Churches (CGK -- Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerken) in Apeldoorn, the Netherlands. The equivalent of the CGK in North America are the Free Reformed Churches. J. van Genderen passed away in 2004 and so was not able to contribute to the publication of the English translation. His colleague W.H. Velema, however, did participate – even though he originally authored only chapters 8, 9, and 12.

As far as the translation goes, the John Calvin Foundation found itself in the unusual position of having two complete English translations, one by Gerrit Bilkes and the other by Ed van der Maas. A team of editors merged the two translations and the resulting work was published in its present format by P & R. Unfortunately, as we will see, the end product leaves much to be desired in many formal respects.

With regards to content, confessionally Reformed readers of CRD will find much with which to be pleased, stimulated, and challenged. The book reflects a serious commitment to the authority of Scripture and to the derivative authority of the Reformed confessions. Van Genderen and Velema endeavoured to build on the foundations laid by John Calvin and Herman Bavinck. They clearly state that their goal was to write a *Reformed* systematics. Furthermore, they indicate that for them “Reformed” means “confessionally Reformed which implies that we hold that the Reformed confession must be allowed to speak for itself” (xi). That approach (and its successful execution) deserves applause.

The organic inspiration of Scripture is taken seriously in CRD “as an attempt to do justice to the Bible as the Word of God in human language” (83). The authors also echo the sentiments of Bavinck regarding the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit with regards to Scripture. He continues to sustain and animate it “and in many ways brings its content to humanity, to its heart and conscience” (83). However, CRD does indicate some discomfort with the notion of inerrancy. Harold Lindsell’s presentation is regarded as “spasmodic” (89). They note that the Bible is indeed the “inerrant rule for faith and life” (cf. Belgic Confession article 5), but that does not mean that the Bible must be free of all unevenness. Unfortunately, while inerrancy is discussed in CRD, infallibility is not. While some theologians (i.e. Robert Reymond) see infallibility and

inerrancy as essentially synonymous, there should at least be some discussion of whether or not there is a distinction, and if so, how they should be distinguished.

Van Genderen and Velema also maintain the traditional Reformed position on the eternal generation of the Son (155). The old Anabaptist teaching of incarnational sonship is soundly rejected, as it is also by the Belgic Confession in article 18. This doctrine was taught for a long time by John MacArthur, but (to his credit) eventually he repudiated it. Incarnational sonship was also the trajectory of Jakob van Bruggen's *Jesus the Son of God*. Unfortunately, van Bruggen's controversial (at least in the Netherlands) book was first published in Dutch in 1996, so CRD does not have the opportunity to engage it.

One teaching that could and should have been engaged is the openness of God theology or open theism, at least in its incipient forms with the likes of Clark Pinnock. While Pinnock's *Openness of God* was not published until 1994, his direction was already clear in the 1970s and 1980s. Despite his influence, Pinnock is not mentioned at all in CRD. However, there is a brief discussion of process theology (178) and theologians like H. Berkhof and A. van de Beek whose views sound much like open theism. Nevertheless, the usefulness of CRD in a North American context would certainly be enhanced with more interaction with theologians on this side of the Atlantic.

Chapter 7 of CRD has a helpful discussion of common grace. Van Genderen and Velema object to the teachings of Abraham Kuyper on this point. Kuyper's views are said to lead to "strong cultural optimism," which in itself is not problematic. What is problematic is the use of the word "grace" to describe God's non-salvific dealings. CRD also engages the views of Klaas Schilder and finds his formulations to be equally unsatisfying. The authors prefer Calvin's approach and they make a good case for doing so. Calvin argued that God sustains society through the granting of various gifts and in doing so has not abandoned mankind to itself. Mankind fell away from God and so it is a miracle that God continues to be preoccupied with our race (296-297).

CRD also interacts with Schilder on the image of God in man. Does man, after the fall, still retain the image of God? Traditionally, Reformed theology has often answered that question by distinguishing between the broader image of God in man (which the unbeliever retains), and the narrower image of God (which the unbeliever has lost – the image in true righteousness and holiness). Schilder rejected this distinction and preferred to conceive of the image of God in terms of office: "The image is not a matter of nature or of qualifications, but of officebearing" (343). Van Genderen and Velema rightly point out that, while there are elements that can be appreciated and even appropriated here, Schilder's view is inadequate and one-sided. This is because in his view, "...man's creation precedes his becoming the image of God. The office is added to being human. And the image lies in this incidental aspect" (345).

The authors propose to answer the question of whether fallen man retains the image by speaking of "man as the image of God in an absolutely negative manner (in a negative mode)" (327). Even after the fall, man has a mandate "to represent God, even though he is no longer

able to do so" (327). CRD is rather abstract on this point and it is not readily clear how this is an improvement on the traditional broader/narrower distinction. In fact, there does not appear to be any meaningful discussion on why the older distinction should be discarded. They do mention that Bavinck appreciates the older distinction to an extent, but ultimately rejects it because "the two images are placed side by side too mechanistically" (340). This is a difficult issue and this is reflected in the fact that CRD concludes its discussion with six open-ended questions (345-346). That would seem to indicate that their conclusion mentioned above (image in a negative mode) is itself a tentative proposal.

In this day when the doctrine of the imputation of the active obedience of Christ is under attack, it is refreshing to observe that CRD holds the confessionally Reformed position. Van Genderen and Velema distinguish the active and passive obedience of Christ, noting that while Christ's obedience has these two facets, it is, in fact, indivisible. Christ bore not only the punishment for our sin, but also actively met the demand of God's law on behalf of his people (518). It is also worthwhile to note that, unlike some recent writers, Van Genderen and Velema do not portray *active* and *passive* as opposites. Passive simply refers to what he suffered (from the Latin, *passio*).

Related to that, CRD acknowledges that justification belongs to "the heart of the gospel" (607). According to Scripture, "to justify someone means to declare him to be righteous" (610). Further, according to the apostle Paul, "to justify someone always means to declare him righteous by imputing to him the righteousness obtained through Christ's sacrifice" (610). Unlike Paul who sees it as something that takes place in the present, the rabbinical tradition associated justification with the final judgment (611).

Justification "combines a change in status (righteous instead of guilty) with a positive relationship with God" (612). We are restored to being God's children. Moreover, "in justification God imparts to the sinner what he had in mind with respect to the covenant of life" (612). It should be noted that CRD calls the covenant of works, "the covenant of life." The righteousness imputed to a sinner in justification is Christ's obedience to the law and it constitutes an "alien righteousness" (612).

CRD also addresses the old question of Paul versus James. The authors rightly take the position that Paul and James are addressing different issues and therefore they cannot be pitted against one another. Paul was battling nomism, "which relies on works." James was addressing those who "limit justification to cold, lifeless words." Paul also knew "that in justification by faith alone, this faith does not remain alone, but works and manifests itself in love (Gal. 5:6)" (615).

The authors emphasize the forensic character of justification. As noted above, they acknowledge the imputation of the active obedience of Christ and what Luther called "the joyous exchange" between ourselves and Christ (617). Justification is by faith alone and faith is not a work (618). It is "not a creative, but a receptive act" (619).

There is also a large section in chapter 12 where CRD discusses historical developments in the doctrine of justification up till the present day (1992). Figures discussed include Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Peter Stuhlmacher, Paul Tillich, Karl Barth, H. Berkhof and H. Wiersinga. The New Perspective on Paul (NPP) is completely missing, which is understandable to some degree. However, E.P. Sander's *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* was published in 1977 and James Dunn's essay, "The New Perspective on Paul: Paul and the Law" appeared in his commentary on Romans 1-8 in 1988. Closer to the Netherlands, the Finnish scholar Heikki Raisanen also published works in the 1980s promoting a new perspective. Newer systematic theologies can reasonably be expected to directly deal with what the NPP has done with justification.

Elsewhere in CRD, readers will find engaging discussions on the doctrine of the covenant (chapter 11), the relationship between law and gospel (chapters 9 and 14), and the doctrine of the church (chapter 13). As with any systematics, there are a few areas where one might disagree with some of the formulations or the authors might have expressed themselves more clearly. But in the end, this is indeed a Concise **Reformed** Dogmatics, characterized by a deep respect for Scripture and the Confessions. The authors are not enamoured with Barth, H. Berkhof, or any other theological innovators. Rather, commendably, their sentiments lie with Bavinck and Calvin.

Unfortunately, the content is marred by a myriad of typos, infelicities, and mistakes in the editing of the volume. For instance, the name of H. Wiersinga is sometimes mistakenly given as H. Wiersema, and at other times as H. Wierenga. It is readily apparent that this volume was rushed to press without adequate editorial efforts. Hopefully, these problems will be corrected in a second edition.

Enthusiasm for CRD is tempered by two other factors. This volume was originally written in the Netherlands. Consequently, it has a very strong European flavour. The main conversation partners are typically European theologians such as H.M. Kuitert and H. Berkhof. Most of the footnotes reference European theological works in Dutch and German, of which only some have been translated. On page 82, there is a reference to the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland. The editors added a note stating that this is a "Reformed denomination in the Netherlands." But if they could do that, why not also let the reader know that the GKN referred to here no longer exists, having been absorbed into a merger some years ago? It is difficult to get away from the sense that this book was and may still be valuable in the context of the Netherlands, but that it loses some of that value in the North American context where its parochialism may be a liability, especially for those who might want to use it as a systematic theology text.

CRD was also written in 1992 and, as such, reflects its age. For example, throughout the volume reference is made to the *New Catechism* (a.k.a. the Dutch Catechism) of the Roman Catholic Church, published in 1966. CRD cannot interact with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, published in 1994. One has to conclude that this translation would probably have encountered a better reception if it had been published fifteen years ago.

Most likely the significance of CRD will rest in giving North American theologians a sense of the issues being dealt with in the Netherlands in the last few decades. In due time, it may even become an important text for historical theologians, providing a window into Dutch Reformed theology of the twentieth century. For instance, CRD draws attention to many of the highlights in the works of Klaas Schilder – the bulk of which has never been translated into English. We can be thankful that CRD introduces us to theological reflection with which we might not otherwise be familiar. We can also be thankful for a dogmatics that understands Reformed to mean Biblical *and* confessional.