

The Reformation Continues: A Study in Twentieth Century Reformed Theology

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'The Reformation continues.' This statement of Friedrich Schleiermacher was described by Paul Tillich as 'the only consistent Protestant attitude.'¹ The idea of the continuation of the Reformation is an idea that does not always come to the fore in Reformed circles. In some Reformed circles, there is a great deal of defensiveness with respect to any suggested reinterpretations of the traditional Reformed faith. There are, of course, others who wish to move beyond the traditional interpretations of the Reformed faith. They wish to reformulate these forms of faith.

This study will consider two theologians of the Dutch Reformed tradition, Louis Berkhof² and G. C. Berkouwer.³ Berkhof is taken as a representative of the traditionalist school that is largely resistant to change. Berkouwer is understood as a representative of the school of thought that is more open to reinterpretations of the Reformed faith. Berkhof, one-time Professor of Systematic Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan, has been a major theological mentor of many of the older ministers in the Reformed Church in America. He is normally regarded as a stalwart defender of the traditional interpretation of the Reformed faith. His position has, however, been challenged by many who feel that it threatens to fossilize the Reformed faith. Berkhof's critics call for a greater appreciation of the principle, 'The Reformation continues.' Berkouwer, Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology at the Free University of Amsterdam, is, on the other hand, a theologian who illustrates well the principle, 'The Reformation continues.'

The primary focus of this study will be on Berkouwer, Berkhof will be used simply as a point of contrast, by which we may highlight Berkouwer's thought more clearly. If the statements about Berkhof seem rather brief (and perhaps somewhat simplistic and caricatured), this is due to the fact that this paper is chiefly concerned with the thought of Berkouwer. If the scanty references to Berkhof, by way of contrast with Berkouwer, help us to understand that 'the Reformation continues', their inclusion will have been justified. In this study we shall find a marked contrast both in theological method and in the material content of the respective theologies.

These differences can be seen in a whole host of areas – the use of the Bible, the approach to system-building, and the approach to particular doctrines such as the doctrine of God and allied doctrines such as divine election and divine providence, the doctrine of man, the doctrine of Christ and his atonement, the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and the Chris-

tian life, the doctrine of baptism, and the doctrine of the last things. This study will not attempt to evaluate the theology of Berkouwer. Rather, it will restrict itself to giving an outline of the basic contours of his theology as a theology in which 'the Reformation continues' is a central motif.

Writing on Berkouwer's method, Hendrikus Berkhof, Professor of Dogmatics and Biblical Theology at the University of Leiden in Netherlands, has noted a chronological progression in his thought from the absolute authority of Scripture to the salvation content of Scripture and finally to the existential direction of Scripture.⁴ This idea of a progression is accurate up to a point since Berkouwer has certainly not remained static in his theological thinking. Berkouwer himself writes, 'I believe that without genuine curiosity . . . theology will not do well. I regret every sign that theologians have lost their curiosity. It happens when we are satisfied with a small territory . . . and lose our feel for new perspectives . . . Without the tensions of curiosity there is little hope for any essential corrections in one's own insights . . . A curiosity that works itself out in passionate study and serious listening to others promises surprises, clearer insight, and deeper understanding.'⁵

It is, however, quite misleading to suggest that Berkouwer has moved away from the 'absolute authority' to the 'existential direction' of Scripture. Berkouwer does not mean to contrast these two categories, and thus diminish the absolute authority of Scripture. The absolute authority of Scripture is properly recognized when Scripture is seen in its original context and interpreted according to the divine intention in that context.⁶ To remove Scripture from the complex business of interpreting it in its original context and according to the divine intention in that context is to relativize rather than absolutize its authority.⁷

Nevertheless, Hendrikus Berkhof's 'stages' provide us with a useful means of contrasting Louis Berkhof and Berkouwer. This contrast can be seen in their respective uses of the Bible. Louis Berkhof tends to use the Bible as a book of proof-texts,⁸ as a timeless authoritative book. Berkouwer does not use the Bible in this way. He allows Scripture to speak to the whole man in a way that always challenges him to response. Berkouwer is afraid of lifting the Scriptures out of the context of existential challenge, even hypothetically for the purposes of theological discussion.⁹ The Scriptures must be allowed to confront us as the living Word of God which demands the response of the whole man in obedience to Jesus Christ.

We now move on the matter of system-building. Berkhof has written a 'Systematic Theology' while Berkouwer has not. Berkouwer has warned against trading confession for system.¹⁰ He sees dogmatics as a confession of faith arising from the experience of the believer. Christian doctrine is not, however, merely a projection from a purely human experi-

ence. Christian experience finds its foundation in the living God. Experience of the living God provides the context for dogmatics as a confession of faith. The importance of faith for the formulation of Christian doctrine can be seen in Berkouwer's doctrine of Scripture.¹¹ He ascribes to faith a receptive rather than a creative role. This receptive faith is not merely passive. Faith receives and actively participates in the reality of God and his Word. Christian 'truth' is not, however, a projection of the believer's faith. This understanding of the relation of man's faith to God's truth runs through Berkouwer's whole approach to doctrine. He holds that no doctrine can be discussed apart from faith. Alongside this, he affirms that 'faith is decisively determined by the object of faith . . . God.'¹² Christian doctrine is, then, seen as the articulation of the reality of the living God, which reality is known only in the relation of faith.¹³ The warning against trading confession for system does not make Berkouwer a poor systematic theologian. It does mean that, in his emphasis on the faith-encounter with the living God, he opposes a closed system that tends to put God into a strait jacket. If we could speak of a 'system in Berkouwer's writing, we would speak of it as one that is open to and defined by the freedom of the gracious God.

Since theology is concerned with the living God, it is important that we consider the doctrine of God. Berkouwer discusses the doctrine of God as an independent subject in theology.¹⁴ Berkouwer, on the other hand, always discusses God in relation to man and the world.¹⁵ Berkouwer will not ask the question 'Who is God?' abstractly, in isolation from God's dealings with us. This question must be asked in the biblical way, in the mood of adoring worship, which reflects on the goodness of God towards us: 'Who is a God like thee, pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression . . . ?' (Micah 7:18).¹⁶ Another point of contrast concerns the question of the importance of the traditional proofs for the existence of God. Berkouwer begins his *Systematic Theology* with a section on 'The Existence of God' which includes a discussion of the 'proofs' as 'establish(ing) a strong probability and thereby silenc(ing) many unbelievers.'¹⁸ Berkouwer wants to 'stay clear of the old rationalism and avoid the vague categories of the old natural theology.'¹⁹ While Berkouwer affirms the revelation of God in creation, he rejects natural theology, since the way in which we come to appreciate such revelation is by experiencing God's salvation in Christ.²⁰

The doctrine of God is closely related to the doctrines of election and providence. The differences between Berkouwer and Berkouwer is quite marked at this point. On predestination, Berkouwer affirms a double decree, 'election and reprobation, the predetermination of both the good and the wicked to their final end.'²¹ Berkouwer sees a 'depth-aspect' in the Bible's predestinarian language.²² Predestinarian language points to the absolute priority of grace. It points to the freedom of God's grace. He saves us not because something in us obliges him to save us, but because he has freely chosen to be gracious.

Berkouwer's view of predestination faces him with the charge of making God arbitrary – a God who arbitrarily chooses one and equally arbitrarily does not choose another. Berkouwer's 'depth-aspect' points to the grace of God which is the eternal foundation of salvation. That some do not accept that grace does not make God any less gracious. That

God is eternally a God of grace does not lead to universalism. Grace does not compel any man to submit to its authority. Rather, it calls men to respond freely. Those who respond in faith know that salvation finds its source not in their faith but in the grace of God. Faith is no more than a recipient, receiving that which is given to it by grace. Those who do not respond in faith have only themselves to blame, for it is themselves who have not responded in faith to the gracious salvation provided for them and freely offered to them in Christ. The difference between Berkouwer and Berkouwer concerns the interpretation of divine sovereignty. Berkouwer's concept of divine sovereignty is an almost completely formal concept of omnipotence. Berkouwer is equally concerned to emphasize divine sovereignty. He is concerned, however, that his understanding of sovereignty is defined by Scripture. Thus, he stresses not a purely formal concept of omnipotence²³ but the sovereignty of the One who is love.²⁴ He speaks, on biblical grounds, of the impossibility of 'an abstract, merciless and loveless sovereign decree.'²⁵ 'The election of God is an election of mercy, precisely because it is election in Christ.'²⁶

Does Berkouwer's identification of election with grace²⁷ mean that he must opt for universalism? Berkouwer answers this question negatively. He holds that the Bible transcends the double decree-universalism dilemma. The Bible can speak of the universality of salvation without implying universalism because it refuses to objectify the grace of God. The universality of the Bible is seen in the act of God in Christ. This act of God in Christ is presented to us as the call of God's grace. It does not bring grace to all as a matter of course. It does, however, assure us that there is grace with God and calls us to receive that grace through faith.²⁸

From this perspective Berkouwer speaks thus of the relation of divine sovereignty to human freedom: 'The divine act makes room, leaves open the possibility for man's act. That possibility is not absorbed or destroyed by divine superiority, but created, called forth by it.'²⁹ This 'divine superiority' is the 'personal superiority of love and grace, which in man's experience is making room for him to act by not destroying his freedom.'³⁰

Similar differences between Berkouwer and Berkouwer can be expected on the matter of providence, since providence, like election, brings divine sovereignty and its relation to human freedom to the fore. Because of the similarity to election, this section will be brief. The problem with a doctrine of providence is essentially this: 'how can we divorce . . . the confession of God's providence . . . from . . . a heartless determinism?'³¹ Berkouwer's doctrine of providence raises similar questions to his doctrine of election. Berkouwer approaches providence along the lines of the divine superiority-human freedom perspective already outlined. Berkouwer states that the nature of the living God absolutely defines the nature of the determining. 'Christian determinism,' he says, is a contradiction in terms since Divine determination and human responsibility are not competitors, but rather the divine activity is an activity over and in the creaturely activity of man.³²

Since the doctrines of election and providence are so concerned with human freedom (in its relation to divine sovereignty), a word is in order concerning the doctrine of man. Berkouwer teaches the idea of a twofold 'image' of God in

man – the broader image that is retained despite the fall and the narrower image that is lost through the fall.³³ Berkouwer opts for a more dynamic view of man. He says that we should not approach the idea of the image of God in man in terms of one aspect remaining in fallen man and another aspect being lost. The image of God should be seen in terms of calling. The fact that man has been created as man does not mean that he bears the image of God. Creation as man is the precondition of bearing the image of God. Man is called to bear the image of God by submitting to God in faith and thus coming to know the restoration of the image of God through Christ. The creation of man is ‘the background and presupposition for the image. But the actual image is found in the use of these created qualities in an active and dynamic service of God.’³⁴ We noted earlier that election is, for Berkouwer, the gracious call of God to bear the image through faith in Christ. This provides us with a fine example of Berkouwer’s determination always to let Scripture speak to us with existential challenge, an existential challenge that is constantly pointing us to Jesus Christ, and calling us to receive the grace of God through him.

This determination continually to point us to Jesus Christ and his salvation leads us to consider the doctrine of Christ and his atonement. Here we meet with a marked difference between Berkhof and Berkouwer. Berkhof is concerned to defend a doctrine of limited atonement: ‘Christ died for the purpose of actually and certainly saving the elect, and the elect only.’³⁵ Berkouwer rejects the objectivity – subjectivity schema on which the double decree-universalism dilemma is based. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that he speaks of the death of Christ differently from Berkhof. We have already noted that Berkouwer affirms the universality of the act of God in Christ while emphasizing that this does not lead to universalism. The act of God in Christ does not bring grace to all as a matter of course but rather calls all to receive the grace that has been made available through Christ.³⁶ Berkouwer is here affirming the sufficiency of Christ’s death for sinners. He recognizes that the good news may not be accepted. This does not, however, imply an insufficiency in Christ’s death but rather in unbelieving man.

The idea that ‘Christ died for the elect, and the elect only’ is far from Berkouwer’s mind. The doctrine of election, for Berkouwer, emerges as a confession of faith arising from the hearts of those who have experienced God’s grace. Such a confession, rather than setting up two groups – the elect and the reprobate – glories in God’s grace. Election, far from being in tension with evangelism, lies at the heart of evangelism. To confess the doctrine of election is to testify to the grace of God, declaring that grace to others. Berkouwer, citing Bavinck, writes, ‘Election does not serve as is so often taught, to repel many, but to invite all to the riches of God in Christ.’ Precisely because the election of God is free and does not take place according to human justice and merits, ‘the doctrine of election is of such great comfort, both to the believer and the unbeliever . . . there is now hope for the most miserable sinner!’³⁸

How is Berkouwer able to avoid both limited atonement and universalism? This point has already been made but bears re-emphasis. The objectivity-subjectivity schema, presupposed by such a dilemma, is transcended by the Bible, which stresses both the availability of grace to all and the

absolute necessity of faith for the reception of that grace. By adopting this biblical perspective, Berkouwer is able to emphasize that God is love and that there is not hint of arbitrariness with him.

Since the reception of grace by faith is of the utmost importance, we now consider how faith is born in the heart of the believer. Berkhof understands the emergence of faith in terms of ‘effectual calling.’³⁹ A radical distinction is drawn between ‘effectual calling’ and ‘general calling’.⁴⁰ Critics of this distinction point out that such a distinction tends to call in question whether God is sincere in his offer of grace to those who are not elect. Although Berkouwer has never explicitly written a volume on the Holy Spirit, he can be called a theologian of the Holy Spirit, since the reality of the Holy Spirit and his working pervades his whole theology. The working of the Holy Spirit is not, however, seen in terms of an effectual calling that cannot be resisted and a general calling that appears to be less than genuine. The working of the Holy Spirit is through the Word which he empowers.⁴¹ The working of the Holy Spirit does not determine what kind of response the hearer will make. What is predetermined is the character of the Christian message the Holy Spirit brings to men. It is a message of grace. God has chosen to be gracious and where the proclamation of his grace meets with faith there will be salvation.

The working of the Holy Spirit through the Word leads one to the beginning of the Christian life. Here, we find that Berkhof believes in the idea of the *ordo salutis* (the order of salvation). He writes, ‘The question may be raised, whether the Bible ever indicates a definite ‘*ordo salutis*’. The answer to that question is that, while it does not explicitly furnish us with a complete order of salvation, it offers us a sufficient basis for such an order.’⁴² Berkouwer agrees with Berkhof that the Bible does not explicitly teach on *ordo salutis*, but he does not agree that ‘it offers us a sufficient basis for such an order’. Berkouwer refuses to impose a system on the Bible. He considers the variety⁴³ in the biblical way of speaking of salvation and comments, ‘Only the richness, not the order, of the way of grace comes to expression.’⁴⁴ Berkouwer does not then work out a literal time-sequence of salvation. Rather, he points to the ‘existential direction of Scripture’, which is always to point us to the grace of God in Christ.

The differences between Berkhof and Berkouwer also express themselves in the area of church practice, eg, the sacrament of baptism. Berkhof does not believe in baptismal regeneration.⁴⁵ Nonetheless, he speaks favorably of the concept of ‘presumptive regeneration’,⁴⁶ ie, the baptized child is presumed to be regenerated until he/she proves otherwise. This is a highly speculative concept, based on a questionable concept of the objectivity of the sacrament. It is also a concept which threatens to undercut the proclamation of the necessity of regeneration. Berkouwer sees the objectivity of the sacrament in a quite different light. The objectivity resides not in anything that has happened or is presumed to have happened to the baptized person. Rather, it resides in the character of God and his grace.⁴⁷ God is a gracious God who, from generation to generation, waits to be gracious to those who will receive his grace. To the baptized child, baptism and the covenant community in which baptism takes place, speak of the grace of God freely offered to him/her at each point in life as he/she grow up. This reminder of God’s

grace remains as a call to faith throughout life. Even while the baptized person continues in sin, he is reminded by his baptism of the availability of grace.

It is appropriate at the close of this article that we speak of the doctrine of the last things. Again, there are significant differences, and, again, these differences are closely related to the concept of objectivity being used by Berkhof and Berkouwer. Berkouwer's emphasis on the importance of the subjective element in faith for the formulation of Christian doctrine is never meant as the abrogation of objectivity. On the contrary, Berkouwer affirms that authentic subjectivity comes only through encounter with the objectivity of the living God himself. Berkouwer's insistence on the importance of God as the object of faith that decisively determines the nature of faith must, however, be distinguished from an artificial objectivism that tends to rationalize truth into a system of ideas. Berkhof, on the other hand, is open to the charge of not drawing a sufficient distinction between the true objectivity of God and the false objectivism of the system. This distinction will help us to understand the differences between Berkhof and Berkouwer.

While Berkouwer affirms the return of Christ,⁴⁸ he does not discuss 'the signs of the times'⁴⁹ in quite the same way as Berkhof. For example, when Berkhof discusses millennialism,⁵⁰ he only discusses pre- and postmillennialism. Amillennialism is dismissed as 'purely negative'.⁵¹ Berkouwer refuses to speculate about 'the signs of the times' as 'pertinent to only a remote end-time'.⁵² 'The signs of the times' are a 'summons to constant watchfulness'. The relevance of eschatological preaching is not then removed 'to some unknown future date'. It is a message that is characterized by 'perpetual contemporaneity'. Berkouwer then emphasizes the objectivity of the returning Christ while carefully avoiding the kind of false objectivism that would systematize the Bible's eschatological imagery in a way that diminishes its existential thrust.

With respect to the final destiny of believers and unbelievers, Berkhof has two sub-sections entitled, 'The Final State of the Wicked' and 'The Final State of the Righteous'.⁵³ Berkouwer, on the other hand, would not be so bold as to speak in such unequivocal terms.⁵⁴ He stresses that we must speak from what we know through the gospel. We do not have precise knowledge of 'the final states'. What we do know is that God comes to men in the preaching of his Word with the promise of salvation and the warning against spurning that salvation. Both the promise and the warning are designed to bring men to faith. The fact that Berkouwer does not speak of hell in such objective terms as Berkhof does not mean that he is a universalist. He makes it quite clear that he does not accept the universalist position.⁵⁵ His teaching would not 'a priori' exclude the possibility of God's being gracious to all, but it would give us no encouragement to presume upon such a superabundant bestowal of grace upon all. If God chooses to be gracious to all, who are we to argue? But then again, who are we to presume on such universal grace?

As we draw to a close, it must be remarked that there is quite a marked contrast between Berkhof and Berkouwer. Reading Berkhof makes one fear that the idea that 'the Reformation continues' has become well-nigh redundant. Reading Berkouwer encourages us to believe that 'the Refor-

mation continues'. Berkhof makes one feel that Christianity is a 'system' to be learned and used to oppose 'opponents' of 'the Reformed View'. Berkouwer makes one feel that Christianity is a living, dynamic message to be proclaimed, a message that is of crucial importance for the life of men and a message that brings inestimable blessing to this life. In short, Christianity is Christ – the living, gracious and absolutely trustworthy Savior of men!

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Notes

- 1 *Systematic Theology*, Vol. I (University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 87, n. 8.
- 2 Berkhof's major publication is his *Systematic Theology* (ST), (Grand Rapids: Wm. B Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1983).
- 3 Berkhof's major works are those that comprise his *Studies in Dogmatics* (SID), Eerdmans, various dates).
- 4 *Ex Auditu Verbi*, (Kampen: J. H. Kok).
- 5 *A Half Century of Theology* (Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 7-8.
- 6 *Holy Scripture* (SID), pp. 181-193.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 134-137.
- 8 Cf. his ST and his *Summary of Christian Doctrine* (Eerdmans, 1938).
- 9 Cf. *Man the Image of God* (SID) for an excellent example of this.
- 10 *Faith and Justification* (SID), p. 21.
- 11 *Holy Scripture* (SID), p. 10.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 10.
- 13 *Man the Image of God* (SID), p. 35.
- 14 Cf. the section entitled 'The Doctrine of God' in ST, pp. 19-178
- 15 Berkouwer has never written a book on the doctrine of God. The nearest he has come to such a venture is represented in his volumes in SID, *Divine Election and the Providence of God*.
- 16 *A Half Century of Theology*, p. 77.
- 17 *Ibid.*, pp. 19-28.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 19 'Reviewing the Proofs' in *Christianity Today* (Nov. 5, 1971 [SVI, 3], p. 53.
- 20 Cf. *General Revelation* (SID), p. 131.
- 21 ST, p. 113. Cf. pp. 113-118.
- 22 *Divine Election* (SID), pp. 61, 172.
- 23 Cf. 1 John 4:8, a simple yet profound statement which is of crucial significance for our understanding of election and (as we shall see later) atonement.
- 24 *Divine Election* (SID), p. 143.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- 27 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 153, n. 38.
- 28 Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 235-236.
- 29 *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 49.
- 31 *The Providence of God* (SID), pp. 141-142.
- 32 *Ibid.*, pp. 152-153.
- 33 ST, p. 204.
- 34 Cf. *Man the Image of God* (SID), pp. 54-55.
- 35 ST, p. 392. Cf. pp. 394-395.
- 36 *Divine Election* (SID), pp. 235-236.
- 37 ST, p. 394.
- 38 *Divine Election*, p. 225.
- 39 Cf. ST, pp. 465-479.
- 40 Cf. ST, pp. 354-364.

- 41 Cf. *Holy Scripture* (SID), chapter on 'Holy Scripture and Preaching', references to the Holy Spirit and references to 1 Thess. 2:13.
- 42 ST, p. 416.
- 43 Cf. Rom. 8:29-30 and 1 Cor. 6:11.
- 44 *Faith and Justification* (SID), p. 31.
- 45 Cf. ST, p. 477.
- 46 Cf. ST, p. 640.
- 47 Cf. the appropriate section in *The Sacraments* (SID).
- 48 *The Return of Christ* (SID), p. 16.

- 49 *The Return of Christ* (SID), chapters entitled 'The Signs of the Times', 'The Antichrist', and 'Israel as Sign'.
- 50 Cf. ST, pp. 708-719.
- 51 ST, p. 708.
- 52 Cf. *The Return of Christ* (SID), pp. 246-248.
- 53 Cf. ST, pp. 735-738.
- 54 Cf. 'Apocatastasis?' in *The Return of Christ* (SID).
- 55 Cf. Berkouwer's penetrating critique in 'Apocatastasis?' (*The Return of Christ* (SID)), and, as already noted, in *Divine Election* (SID).