

# The *Reformed Dogmatics* of Geerhardus Vos<sup>1</sup>

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Many readers of this journal are familiar with Geerhardus Vos (1862–1949), fairly seen as the father of Reformed biblical theology for his numerous publications in this area. These largely date from the period 1893–1932, when he was the first occupant of the chair of biblical theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, and after that in his retirement. Less well known is that prior to his Princeton years, he taught at the Theological School of the Christian Reformed Church, now Calvin Theological Seminary, in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

During this time (1888–1893), when instruction at the Theological School was in Dutch, Vos taught a wide range of subjects, including systematic theology (dogmatics). The latter resulted in the circulation of material that, though originally produced for the classroom, led to the publication, handwritten, of *Dogmatiek* in 1896. This, in turn, was subsequently transcribed into typescript and printed in 1910. While the 1896 version is apparently in Vos's own hand, the transcription is almost certainly by some other person or persons. There is no good reason, however, to question that it was done with Vos's full knowledge and approval. The *Reformed Dogmatics* is a translation of this transcription, corrected or supplemented in a few places in light of the 1896 version.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 5 vols., trans. and ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2012–2016). In this article I have made some use of material in several of the prefaces to these volumes.

<sup>2</sup> An extensive bibliography of Vos's writings is in James T. Dennison Jr., *The Letters of Geerhardus Vos* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), 89–110, on the *Dogmatiek*, 90, 92.

The *Dogmatiek* has received very little attention, due in large part to its being published in the United States, where a reading knowledge of Dutch was and remains limited. Copies of the 1910 transcription, published in three leather-bound volumes, are found today mostly in the libraries of a few theological institutions and universities. I came into possession of a copy many years ago as a student and soon learned to appreciate it as a work of considerable value.

In early 2011, Logos Bible Software contacted me about producing a digital English translation of the *Dogmatiek* and asked if I would be interested in doing the translation. That I was interested is an understatement. As I had benefitted over the years from consulting it for my own work, I had often wished that a complete English translation were available, much as I had long wished that for Herman Bavinck's *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*. But for several reasons—primarily its length, which comes to just under 1200 pages, six-and-a-half by nine-and-a-half inches, single-spaced, and given my age and existing commitments—I was reluctant to undertake the translation on my own.

Logos Bible Software then agreed to recruiting a stable of translators, each of whom would be assigned a portion (some translators more than one), which would be sent to me for review and finalization of the translation. The project went forward in this way beginning in 2012, as translators worked with PDF picture files from the 1910 transcription for each page in their assigned portions. In this regard, it would be remiss not to acknowledge indebtedness to the unknown person or persons responsible for what has proved to be the careful transcription work done over a century ago. Those labors, now digitized, made this translation project immeasurably more feasible.

Initially, the goal was to have the translation completed and published by the end of 2013. This, however, soon proved to be unrealistic. The time required for my review proved to be much longer than had been anticipated. I remain grateful for those who prepared initial translations—their names can be found in the volumes on which they worked. Without their considerable labors, the *Reformed Dogmatics* would not have seen the light of day. Still, with the revisions, major and minor, that proved necessary or advisable, the final volume did not appear until late 2016. If I had known at the outset how much of my time the translation would take, I might have hesitated

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For a survey of his life, see 13–85. Recently, Danny Olinger has written a thoroughly researched and important fourteen-chapter biography published serially in volumes 25–28 of *Ordained Servant Online*, beginning in October 2016 with “Geerhardus Vos: Life in the Old Country, 1862–1881,” [https://www.opc.org/os.html?article\\_id=573&issue\\_id=118](https://www.opc.org/os.html?article_id=573&issue_id=118).

taking it on, even as a team effort. But there is no question that it was a project well worth doing and for me personally, for all I that I learned from Vos over the years about Scripture and devotion to the God of Scripture, a labor of love.

The translation has aimed as much as possible for formal rather than dynamic equivalence. Nothing has been deleted, no sections elided or their content summarized in an abbreviated form. Vos's occasionally elliptical style in presenting material, originally meant for the classroom rather than for published circulation, has been retained. The relatively few instances of grammatical ellipsis unclear in English have been expanded, either without notation or, where the expansion is more extensive, placed within brackets.

It should be noted, however, that this is not a critical translation. No effort was made, for instance, to verify the accuracy and provide exact bibliographic details for all the secondary sources Vos cites or quotes, usually by referring to no more than the author and title and sometimes only to the author. Explanatory footnotes have been kept to a minimum. An effort was made to verify Scripture references, and occasional instances of typographical error were corrected without that being indicated.

During the course of the translation the decision, very much welcome, was made to publish a print as well as the digital edition. So, the *Reformed Dogmatics*, with full indices, is available in both forms—the print edition from Lexham Press, the digital edition from Logos Bible Software, divisions of the Faithlife Corporation.

In its basic structure, the *Reformed Dogmatics* follows the conventional *loci* or topical approach, using a question and answer format throughout. The first four of its five volumes treat, in turn, theology proper, anthropology, Christology, and soteriology, with the final volume covering ecclesiology, the means of grace, including a lengthy discussion of the sacraments, and eschatology, both individual and general.

Dealt with in volume 1, along with the knowability, names, being, and attributes of God, and the Trinity, are the decrees of God in general, predestination, creation, and providence. Covered in volume 2 are the nature of man, sin, and the covenant of grace, distinguished from the covenant of works and the covenant of redemption (counsel of peace). Christology is treated in terms of names, natures, person and natures, offices, and states in volume 3. Volume 4 begins with a lengthy discussion of the *ordo salutis* before dealing with regeneration and calling, conversion, faith, justification, and sanctification.

The relative distribution of attention to the topics treated in volume 5 is striking and will likely be surprising to those familiar with the interest in

eschatology prominent in Vos's later work in biblical theology. Here less than a fifth of the whole is devoted to eschatology, the rest to the church and the means of grace—with approximately sixty percent more attention to baptism alone than to eschatology, and only slightly less to the Lord's Supper than to eschatology.

No doubt a disappointment to many readers, there is no introduction (prolegomena) to systematic theology. It is unclear if—and if so, where—this area was covered in the curriculum of the Theological School at that time and whether Vos or someone else taught it.<sup>3</sup> In that regard, however, in volume 5, under “The Means of Grace,” the answer to question 11, “In how many senses can the expression ‘the word of God’ be understood?” (83–84), warrants careful consideration, not only in its own right, but also because it provides an indication of key elements that would have surely marked Vos's formal treatment of the doctrines of special revelation and Scripture.

Several further overall observations may be made here about the *Reformed Dogmatics*.

First is the question of antecedents, particularly its immediate antecedents. Were there teachers or others contemporary to Vos or from the recent past who may have had a significant influence on his views or directly contributed to his handling and presentation of material? Vos himself, whether in the *Reformed Dogmatics* or elsewhere, provides no answer to this question. He gives no indication of a current or more recent Reformed theologian or theologians to whom he is indebted or upon whose work he sees himself as building. My limited efforts at looking into this question shed no light on its answer. Perhaps in time others may be able to do that.

Among contemporaries and near contemporaries with whom he was close theologically are certainly Charles Hodge, Abraham Kuyper, B. B. Warfield, and Herman Bavinck. But Vos makes only passing references on specific issues to Hodge and little more to Kuyper—sometimes, particularly for Hodge, to dissent. There is no mention of Bavinck or Warfield, although he carried on a considerable correspondence with both during his time in Grand Rapids, sometimes touching on matters theological.<sup>4</sup>

What is clear, though, along with an impressive grasp of the history of doctrine, is a committed use of the Reformed standards, especially the

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<sup>3</sup> My thanks to Mark A. Garcia for verifying this state of affairs from the resources available in the Heritage Hall Archive at the Calvin College and Seminary Library, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

<sup>4</sup> For Vos's side of ongoing correspondence with Kuyper, Bavinck, and Warfield, see Dennison, *Letters of Geerhardus Vos*, 116–203 (for the time prior to and during his Grand Rapids period, 116–78). None of this correspondence sheds any light on the existence of the *Dogmatiek*.

Heidelberg Catechism, and frequent references, largely appreciative, to the works of a number of earlier Reformed theologians of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Cited most often are John Calvin and, among English-speaking theologians, John Owen.

The *Reformed Dogmatics* invites comparisons. Two that suggest themselves immediately and as potentially profitable may be noted here. Mention has already been made a couple of times of Bavinck, and with good reason, because of the ties between the two men. The slightly younger Vos (by seven years) considered Bavinck not only a close theological ally but also a friend, and that appears to have been mutual. Consequently, the availability of the *Dogmatics* translation of each will now enable English readers not only to compare them but also to do that with the anticipation that whatever differences emerge will also disclose substantial affinity. As that comparison is explored, it should be kept in mind that Vos's work antedates Bavinck's. The first volume of Bavinck (in Dutch) did not appear until 1895, after Vos's Grand Rapids period and the completion of his *Dogmatiek*.<sup>5</sup>

An obvious comparison to be made of course is within Vos himself, between the early and the later Vos, between the systematic theologian and the biblical theologian. Undertaking that comparison will be of particular interest to many who would agree that F. F. Bruce's characterization of *The Pauline Eschatology* provides an apt description of his work in biblical theology as a whole: "indeed outstandingly great ... a rare exegetical feast."<sup>6</sup>

How does the *Reformed Dogmatics* compare?<sup>7</sup> That question can only be touched on briefly and selectively here. But an important reference point for any comparison made is provided by Vos himself, who is clear in affirming the thoroughly positive, complementary relationship he sees between the two disciplines. He is emphatic on this point in his Princeton inaugural

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<sup>5</sup> Vos provided lengthy and appreciative reviews of volume 1 (1895) and volume 2 (1897) of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek* soon after each appeared; see Richard B. Gaffin Jr., ed., *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos* (1980; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001), 475–93.

<sup>6</sup> On the front cover of the 1953 Eerdmans reprint.

<sup>7</sup> For reflections on his work in biblical theology (or "History of Special Revelation," the designation he much preferred), and its significance, see especially throughout the Olinger biography cited in footnote 2 and my "Vos, Geerhardus," in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2007), 1016–19, with the literature cited there, 1019; and my "Introduction," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, ix–xxiii; see also Dennison, *Letters of Geerhardus Vos*, 36–41, 49–59, and the editor's "Introduction: The Writings of Geerhardus Vos," in Danny E. Olinger, ed., *A Geerhardus Vos Anthology. Biblical and Theological Insights Alphabetically Arranged* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), 1–27.

address in the spring of 1894,<sup>8</sup> a point that is echoed decades later, well after his retirement.<sup>9</sup> My own conclusion, after completing the translation of the *Reformed Dogmatics*, is that whatever differences may yet come to light, it seems safe to say that subsequent comparisons will continue to substantiate continuity between his systematic- and biblical-theological work, a continuity that is deep and pervasive.

Still, there are observable differences, several of which may be mentioned here. Particularly noteworthy for those familiar with his biblical-theological writings, in volumes 1 and 3 he cites Romans 1:4 as a proof text for the deity of Christ. This contrasts with the position he had already arrived at by 1912 in “The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit”<sup>10</sup> and reinforced later in *The Pauline Eschatology*—that verse 4 refers to the transformation of the incarnate Christ by the Holy Spirit in his resurrection and that the contrast in verses 3 and 4 is not between the human and divine natures of Christ but between his state of humiliation followed by his state of exaltation.

Also, in volume 3, in places where we might expect it, lacking is any indication of the already-not yet structure of biblical eschatology. By volume 5, however, despite the relative lack of attention given to eschatology noted above, there is a clear recognition of the two age (aeon) construct, including the present interadvental overlapping of this age and the age to come, and the structural importance of this construct for biblical eschatology as a whole—an insight that he subsequently develops so profoundly in *The Pauline Eschatology* and elsewhere. This, apparently, is a development within *Reformed Dogmatics*, pointing toward his later biblical-theological work.

Another indication of such development is present in both volumes 3 and 4 where, as he argues convincingly in his later biblical-theological work, the description of the resurrected Christ in 1 Corinthians 15:45 is seen as a reference to the Holy Spirit and translated, “life-giving Spirit.”<sup>11</sup>

Everyone who undertakes to do work in biblical theology need not previously have taught the whole of systematic theology or produced a *Reformed*

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<sup>8</sup> Geerhardus Vos, “The Idea of Biblical Theology as a Science and as Theological Discipline,” in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, 23–24.

<sup>9</sup> Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 23.

<sup>10</sup> Reprinted in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*, 91–125.

<sup>11</sup> The prevailing continuity between his treatment of eschatology in *Reformed Dogmatics* and his latter biblical-theological writings is discussed in my “What ‘Symphony of Sighs’? Reflections on the Eschatological Future of the Creation,” in John M. Frame et al., eds., *Redeeming the Life of the Mind: Essays in Honor of Vern Poythress* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 146–64.

*Dogmatics*. But what a comparison between Vos's systematic theology and biblical theology signals overall and impressively is that the biblical soundness of the biblical-theological enterprise will only be enhanced where it is informed by a thorough knowledge of the history of doctrine and, above all, of the unified teaching of the Bible as a whole.

This overview doesn't begin to do justice to the riches of *Reformed Dogmatics*. Given that it is apparently without immediate antecedents and was completed before Vos had reached the age of thirty, it is a remarkable achievement. Though understandably overshadowed by the recent availability in English of Bavinck's magisterial *Dogmatics*, it makes a welcome addition of its own for anyone wishing to benefit from a uniformly sound and often penetrating articulation of biblical doctrine. Those who neglect it do so to their loss.

Here is a work that will well serve the well-being of the church and its mission in and to the world in our day and beyond.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> One indicator of a recognition of this value, particularly worth noting in this journal, is the Korean translation of the *Dogmatiek* in process by Young Ho Kim, Professor of New Testament at the Hapdong Theological Seminary in Suwon. Volumes 1 and 2 have already appeared in a single volume published in 2016.