



## Louis Berkhof: (Part 1)

### ***Secession or Doleantie Theologian?***

The recent formation of the United Reformed Churches in North America, comprised of congregations which separated from the Christian Reformed Church, gives us cause to examine their Reformed character and background. We believe that a historical overview of Louis Berkhof's theology and his influence in the Christian Reformed Church may help us understand the theological and spiritual milieu in which most members of the new denomination have been nurtured. It may also give us some indication as to how they are likely to develop in the future.

### **Who Was Louis Berkhof?**

Louis Berkhof is known in the English-speaking Reformed world as the author of his *Systematic Theology*, a manual of Reformed doctrine which has been translated into many languages and which is still being used as a text book in a number of Reformed Seminaries and even in many non-Reformed Bible colleges.

As for his background, very little is known about Berkhof's early life. Recent research at the Calvin College Library in Grand Rapids showed very little information about his early life and no authorized biography has appeared. We know he was a native of Drente, the Netherlands, and immigrated with his parents to the United States soon after his birth in 1873. Young Louis was a very bright lad and feared the Lord from his youth. Sometime during the 1890's he enrolled at the Calvin Theological School in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Upon graduation he continued his studies at Princeton Seminary. In 1900 he was ordained to the ministry and served two Christian Reformed congregations in the Grand Rapids area. In 1906 he was appointed professor at Calvin Seminary where he remained until his retirement in 1944.

### **Background**

The Christian Reformed Church (CRC) of which Louis Berkhof was an almost life-long member has its roots in the Dutch Secession of 1834. From its inception in 1857 until around 1890 the denomination reflected a definite Secession mentality. This began to change when large numbers of new immigrants from the Netherlands arrived who were influenced by the theology of Abraham Kuyper, the leader of the Doleantie. Secession theologians like F. M. Ten Hoor, L. Hulst, W. Heyns and others strongly opposed the new ideas from Holland. Especially, when graduates from the Free University assumed leadership roles in the CRC, the battle was joined between the "Old" Calvinists and the "Neo"-Calvinists. By 1900 three main groups had emerged in the denomination: the Confessionalists, led by F. M. Ten Hoor and W. Heyns, the Separatists represented by K. Schoolland and J. Van Lonkhuyzen and the American Calvinists whose main spokesmen were H. Beets and B. K. Kuiper.

The Confessional Reformed, as their name indicates, were staunch defenders of the Three Forms of Unity and insisted on a strict adherence to those creeds. They strongly opposed the speculative philosophical tendencies in Kuyper's supralapsarian views which they condemned as a departure from the classic Reformed Faith and a serious threat to vital godliness. Ten Hoor had opposed Kuyper already while he was a minister in the Netherlands and he continued the battle in the United States.

The Separatist party was made up of those who had recently come from the Netherlands, where they had undergone the influence of Abraham Kuyper's theology, especially his social and political views. They were convinced that Calvinistic principles demanded separate Christian organizations and independent action in all areas of life. Theologically, they followed Kuyper's supralapsarian understanding of the way of salvation and his idealistic covenant view.

A third distinct mind-set in the church was that of the American Calvinists. Representatives of this group advocated the need for openness to American culture, customs and institutions, and called for adaptation to them in so far as this was compatible with Calvinistic principles. They wanted an authentically American church with a distinctively American form of Calvinism.

Where did Louis Berkhof fit in? There is no easy answer to this question. It is perhaps best to say that he cannot be identified with any one party but that he tried to combine the best elements of all three.

## Career

When the thirty-four-year-old theologian is appointed by the Synod of 1906 to teach at the denominational Seminary he already enjoys a reputation for his great erudition and pulpit gifts. His first assignment is to teach both Old and New Testament exegesis!

In 1926 Berkhof is asked to take over another key department in theological studies: the chair of dogmatics. His predecessor, F. M. Ten Hoor, has retired after twenty-four years of faithful and solid instruction and now the mantle is thrown over younger, even more gifted shoulders. Ten Hoor has laid a good Reformed foundation, but the time has come for a more scholarly approach to theology and Berkhof is the man for this moment. His command of the English language far exceeds that of his predecessor. In fact, until Berkhof almost all lectures have been conducted in Dutch!

With Berkhof a new era begins. In 1932 he publishes his two volume *Reformed Dogmatics*, which nine years later is revised and issued as *Systematic Theology*. It is mainly on this book that Berkhof's reputation rests. As mentioned already, his Dogmatics has been used as a text for many years and is still required reading in many seminaries. Berkhof's *Systematics* reveals its author's clear grasp of Reformed theology and is written in a very readable style. It is full of helpful definitions and summaries and serves as an excellent overview of the whole range of Biblical and Reformed truth.

In this standard work Berkhof draws heavily on Herman Bavinck's four volume *Dogmatiek* and it is not wrong to say that what we have here is Bavinck in English. Berkhof is not an original thinker, but he does have the gift of popularizing the Reformed faith and making it accessible to a wide audience. To maximize its usefulness, Berkhof also produces an abridged version of his Systematics for the benefit of college students, called *The Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, and a still more simplified edition, *Summary of Christian Doctrine for use in high school and catechism classes*. These books are still being used in many Reformed churches and schools, including the Free Reformed Churches.

In addition to doctrinal works, Berkhof turns out many publications on a variety of topics such as the *Kingdom of God in Modern Thought and Life* and *The Christian Labourer in the Industrial Struggle*. In both works he draws heavily on A. Kuyper's *Pro Rege*, but also-interestingly, on G. Wisse's *Christelijke Wereldbeschouwing en Moderne Arbeidsbeweging*. Practical subjects also hold his interest, evidenced by the publication of the book *The Assurance of Faith* and a collection of sermons entitled *Riches of Divine Grace*.

Berkhof's writings give us a clear indication of where he stands theologically. As stated above, his *Systematics* are largely a re-statement of Bavinck's views which have their roots in the Secession. His keen interest in social, educational, economic and political issues show an indebtedness to Kuyper and his Doleantie views.

As far as the doctrine of salvation is concerned, Berkhof is close to Ten Hoor and others of the Secession party, but when it comes to the church's task in society, he stands with the Neo-Calvinists,

while he agrees also that the Americanization of the church is a necessity. Berkhof recognizes the good elements in each of the three wings in the church. Christ came to save souls, he agrees, but also society; redemption involves the physical as well as the spiritual realm; the redeemed should set their sights on heaven, but while here they must apply their principles to "all spheres" of life.

Here Berkhof displays his great ability to be flexible. With Kuyper he affirms the cultural mandate and the importance of principle, calling for a witness that improves the world by means of separate organizations. With the Confessionalists, he affirms that knowledge of doctrine is the highest good, preaching to lost souls is the primary task, the circle of believers is the first object of concern, while he supports the American Calvinists in their quest for a broader, more indigenous form of Reformed church life. Clearly, Berkhof's aim is to be balanced and to avoid taking extreme positions. Ten Hoor and Heyns, while enjoying the respect of the denomination, were considered by many to be too one-sided in their Secession views. The Neo-Calvinists, for instance, dismissed them as pietists and isolationists, but they went too far the other way. Berkhof, therefore, sought to ease the tension by finding the middle-ground between what he considered extreme positions.

Another good example of Berkhof's mediating approach is his definition of the covenant of grace. He defines it as *"that gracious agreement between the offended God and the offending but elect sinner, in which God promises salvation through faith in Christ, and the sinner accepts this believingly, promising a life of faith and obedience."* Notice how he describes the second party. It is the offending but elect sinner. This shows the influence of Kuyper. But he also recognizes that the covenant is broader in scope than what his definition would suggest. According to this wider aspect, the covenant of grace has been established with believers and their children, and thus includes not only those who are (still) unregenerate but also those who will ultimately prove to be non-elect. Here we see the influence of Bavinck, Ten Hoor and Heyns.

One also detects here the views of Geerhardus Vos, who had taught briefly at Calvin Seminary before going to Princeton Seminary where he was to acquire a reputation as one of the greatest Reformed theologians of this century. Vos, like Kuyper, was a supralapsarian, but unlike Kuyper he recognized that the covenant of grace included more than the elect. He did this by drawing a distinction between the covenant as a "legal bond" (*rechtsverbintenis*) and as a "fellowship of life" (*levensgemeenschap*). According to this view, God established this legal relationship with believers and their children, while the fellowship of life only included the elect.

Ten Hoor could accept this kind of distinction, provided it would not lead to the notion of an internal covenant made with the elect only and an external covenant established with the rest. For him and even more so for Heyns, there was only one covenant of grace whose promises were addressed to all, elect and non-elect. Consequently, both saw the essence of the covenant to be the promise of salvation rather than the "fellowship of life" which they regarded as the ultimate goal of the covenant relationship.

Berkhof leaned to the latter view, namely that the essence of the covenant was this fellowship. While this may seem but a very small difference, in reality it marks a significant departure from the old Secession covenant concept according to which all children of believers are equally heirs of the promise as the Reformed Form of Baptism clearly states. As L. Hulst had taught, the sacrament of baptism confirms, not the possession of the spiritual blessings of the covenant, but the promise that if the person baptized appropriates these blessings in the way of faith and repentance, he or she shall be saved. In other words, salvation is conditional upon obedience.

Berkhof, on the other hand, seems to think that God's promise is unconditional in the sense that as members of His covenant we have the assurance that He will work in the hearts of the covenant youth with His saving grace and transform them into living members of the covenant. This is not, however, a promise to each covenant child individually, but to the church as a whole. In his own words: *"The promises of God are given to the seed of believers collectively, and not individually."* If this is so, it is difficult to see how individual members are to appropriate the covenant blessings. Berkhof does not answer this question, but he does say that as long as the children of the covenant

do not reveal the contrary we shall have to proceed on the assumption that they are in possession of the covenant life. Clearly, this is the influence of Kuyper again. But he qualifies this again by adding that the mere fact that one is in the covenant does not carry with it the assurance of salvation and therefore it is necessary to remind covenant children that they need to be regenerated and converted.

Thus Berkhof constantly wavers between the infralapsarian views of Heyns and Ten Hoor and the supralapsarian views of Kuyper and Vos. Dr. J. Faber, emeritus professor of the Canadian Reformed Theological School in Hamilton, rightly characterizes Berkhof's covenant view as *"a confusing ambiguity."*

During his tenure as professor at Calvin Seminary, Berkhof becomes embroiled in several doctrinal controversies, especially the one concerning common grace. In 1924 the Synod of Kalamazoo issues its so-called Three Points dealing with the question as to whether there is a general grace which God extends to the non-elect. Herman Hoeksema has vigorously denied that there is such a grace. In his view, there is only one grace and it is extended only to the elect. The reprobates are always and only under the wrath of God. The CRC disagreed and stated in the First Point that *"touching the favourable attitude of God towards mankind in general, and not alone toward the elect, synod declares that it is certain, according to Scripture and the Confession that there is, besides the saving grace of God, shown only to those chosen to eternal life, also a certain favour or grace of God which He shows to His creatures in general."*

Berkhof agreed with this statement and wrote a brochure defending the Three Points against its detractors. Hoeksema could not conscientiously acquiesce in these Synodical Pronouncements and left the CRC. He and his followers proceeded to form a new denomination called The Protestant Reformed Church. Since that time he and his colleagues have polemicized unceasingly against especially the "First Point of Kalamazoo." The brunt of the attack was aimed at Berkhof whom Hoeksema accused of being an Arminian.

The controversy became known also in the Netherlands and drew the attention of such leaders as K. Schilder and G. C. Berkouwer. The former joined in the debate between Hoeksema and the leaders of the CRC. Schilder's interest was occasioned largely by a visit which he made to America in 1938. Initially his sympathies were with Hoeksema, but in the end he distanced himself from him, although he could not find himself exactly in the formulations of Kalamazoo either. Schilder, of course, became embroiled in a controversy himself during the Second World War. The controversy concerned the matter of the covenant promise as it terminates upon the elect and the reprobate who live within the covenant of grace. Do both receive the promise? Do they both receive it in the same manner? Schilder maintained that the promise of the covenant of grace, signified and sealed by the sacrament of baptism, was addressed to all the children of believing parents in the same way. This puts him in the camp of Ten Hoor and Heyns, and to a certain extent with Berkhof as well.

## **Louis Berkhof: Part (2)**

### ***Defender of the Reformed Faith in North America***

The recent formation of the United Reformed Churches in North America, comprised of congregations which separated from the Christian Reformed Church, gives us cause to examine their Reformed character and background. To help us understand the theological and spiritual milieu in which most members of the new denomination have been nurtured, we continue with an overview of Louis Berkhof's theology and conclude with an assessment of his significance.

#### **Berkhof as a Teacher and Preacher**

At his funeral, Dr. Henry J. Kuyper, one of Berkhof's former students, said this of his mentor:

*Berkhof's lectures, both in Exegesis and in Dogmatics, were eminently constructive and marked by exceptional clarity and coherence. He was a voracious reader, easily absorbed what he read, and what he reproduced bore the stamp of his own penetrating and orderly mind. We remember him also as a great preacher. He was a master at exegeting a text; yet his messages could be understood even by the unlearned because of their unusual clarity. His language was faultless; his pulpit manners were most gracious and free from all mannerism. The practical element was never lacking in his sermons. Berkhof was as balanced in his preaching as in his teaching. He proclaimed the love of God but also his justice; God's sovereignty but also man's responsibility. He preached to saints, but not less to sinners. He spoke to the mind but also to the heart.*

## **Berkhof as a Christian**

His contemporaries knew him as a godly man who loved the Lord and His church with unusual passion. His trust in the Lord never wavered. Like all God's children, he experienced many trials and tribulations in his life. When his beloved wife sustained serious injuries in an automobile accident there were moments when he despaired of her life. When he himself underwent two serious operations, his faith was tested but it came forth as gold tried in the fire. He could speak of his complete trust in the Lord and knew that God's way was the best way. He openly testified of his assurance of salvation and placed complete reliance in the promises of God. On more than one occasion he expressed that when his earthly pilgrimage was finished he would enter into the inheritance of the saints of God. In this connection he loved to quote Romans 8:31-39.

## **Berkhof's significance**

As stated above, Berkhof's fame rests mainly in his written legacy, especially his *Systematic Theology*. James D Bratt characterizes Berkhof as the most important theologian the Christian Reformed Church has produced in this century. He certainly was the most capable defender of Reformed orthodoxy during the first half of this century. According to Bratt, Berkhof's *Reformed Dogmatics* stands as a monument of that entire era. As Professor of Systematic Theology at Calvin Seminary for two decades and president of that institution for fourteen years, Berkhof had unsurpassed influence over the training of the Christian Reformed Church's future leaders. His summa was meant to follow them into their parish studies, and its one-volume distillation, *Manual of Reformed Doctrine*, extended his influence on the rank and file; it would be used to catechize the young for thirty-five years.

In either format, Berkhof's intent was clear. Here was a final, comprehensive statement of the true faith and a touchstone with which to test all other opinion. As the author himself wrote in the preface to his *Manual*,

*The, work seemed particularly important to me in view of the widespread doctrinal indifference of the present day, of the resulting superficiality and confusion in the minds of many professing Christians, of the insidious errors that are zealously propagated even from the pulpits, and of the alarming increase of all kinds of sects that are springing up like mushrooms on every side. If there ever was a time when the church ought to guard her precious heritage, the deposit of the truth that was entrusted to her care, that time is now.*

One cannot but admire the zeal for and love of the Reformed faith which the above statement reflects. Berkhof was unquestionably a champion for doctrinal purity and precision. Yet it should not surprise us that in recent years his theology has come under considerable criticism and that from two perspectives. There are those who fault him for being scholastic and rationalistic. Bratt, for instance, writes that "*Berkhof's work, the model of faith, was well-ordered, logically argued and thoroughly systematic; it was filled with proof-texts, rebuttals, and appeals to authorities ancient and Reformed, and utterly devoid of imagination and feeling.*"

This is typical of much modern criticism of older theologies which proceed from the inerrancy of Scripture and the strict adherence to the great creeds of the church. Berkhof and the school he represents is too precise, too dogmatic, too restricted and does not allow for the "freedom" which many seek. When I attended the same school where Berkhof taught, this critique was in full swing. Many students would mock his *Systematics* which was still required reading then (in the sixties). They objected to his use of proof-texts and charged that his doctrinal formulations were more the products of rational reflection than Biblical exegesis.

I do not agree with this kind of criticism because I know where it comes from. I am always suspicious when people voice such strong opposition to what they consider scholastic theology. It usually means they do not like the doctrines set forth in such works.

I find Berkhof very useful as a textbook in Reformed theology and would like to see it in the hands of all students for the ministry. If I, nevertheless, have some criticism of Berkhof's *Magnum Opus* it is the criticism of a friend, not an enemy. My criticism is this: for all its clear and complete exposition of Biblical and Reformed truth I miss the experiential flavour that so characterized earlier works such as Brakel's *Reasonable Faith* and similar works by older theologians. One can, of course, point out that Berkhof's goal was to write a doctrinal and not a devotional treatise — but why cannot the two be combined? Berkhof's *Systematics* and even more so his *Manual* have trained countless students and other church members, giving them a good grasp of Reformed doctrine.

But one has to wonder whether this strong emphasis on doctrinal knowledge has been balanced by an equal stress on the need for experiential knowledge. It isn't that Berkhof never mentions this need. In his discussion of the order of salvation and the sacraments he emphasizes the necessity of regeneration, including that of covenant children, but he does not explain what is all involved in the new birth. When he speaks of conversion, he rightly points out that it should not be confused with regeneration, but then he makes the rather puzzling statement that Scripture nowhere mentions the necessity of conversion. Even where it appears to do so, as for instance in Matthew 18:3, the call to conversion comes only to the persons addressed and should not be generalized.

What he means is that not everyone needs to pass through a *conscious* conversion experience. He writes:

*Those who die in infancy must be regenerated, in order to be saved, but cannot very well experience conversion, a conscious turning from sin unto God. In the case of adults, however, conversion is absolutely essential, but it need not appear in each one's life as a strongly marked crisis. Such a definite crisis can, as a rule, be expected only in the lives of those who, after a life of sin and shame, are arrested in their evil course by the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit and by the effectual call to conversion. In them the life of conscious enmity is at once transformed into a life of friendship with God. It can hardly be looked for, however, in the lives of those who, like John the Baptist and Timothy, served the Lord from early youth. At the same time, conversion is necessary in the case of all adults in the sense that its elements, namely, repentance and faith must be present in their lives. This means that they must in some form experience the essence of conversion."*

While I can agree with much of what Berkhof says here, especially his views on the salvation of children, I wonder what he means by adults experiencing the essence of conversion. He does not elaborate on it. Does it include coming to realize one's lost and undone condition before God? Does it involve recognizing that being in the covenant of grace does not automatically annul the relationship to Adam and the covenant of works? In other words, does the essence of conversion not require at least a degree of conscious change from death to life or of being cut off from the first Adam and being engrafted into the second Adam?

Berkhof does not address these questions and seems to leave it up to everyone to figure out for himself what this essential experience consists of. I am reminded of a discussion in doctrine class at Calvin Seminary, where one student asked the professor when and how conversion and justification

takes place and the answer was: this is different for each person, some experience this in a dramatic way and others more gradually. What he seemed to mean was: I don't know, but somehow we as Christians experience these things, consciously or unconsciously. Needless to say, the student was not helped very much by this explanation.

How different was the teaching of the Secession theologians who once taught at Calvin! One-sided they may have been, but sometimes there is only one right side to an issue. Ten Hoor and Heyns were convinced that the infralapsarian understanding of the way of salvation was the only correct one, certainly from the pastoral perspective.

It was especially with one supralapsarian doctrine, namely presupposed regeneration, that the Secession theologians were deeply concerned. The notion that the elect are regenerate from birth or at least must be presumed to be in a state of grace, they viewed with great alarm and rightly so. It could only lead to a false sense of security. The goal of preaching in such a context becomes primarily nurture of believers rather than the conversion of sinners. If it is assumed that those who hear the Word are already regenerated, preaching does not have to deal with the necessity of a new heart. The focus, consequently, is on the spiritually alive.

In fairness to Berkhof, he recognized the need of preaching to sinners, by which he presumably meant the unconverted. But one gets the impression that this did not constitute a major element of his preaching. It is mentioned, but not too often. The bulk of the sermon deals with the saints. The result is that almost everyone is confident of being in a state of grace.

Again, we see the result of his mediating position between the Secession and the Doleantie. This was to be expected. He did, after all, subscribe to the Conclusions of Utrecht (1905), which the Christian Reformed Church adopted in 1908, including the fourth point which states: *"And finally, as far as presumptive regeneration is concerned, Synod declares that, according to the confession of our churches, the seed of the covenant must, in virtue of the promise of God, be presumed to be regenerated and sanctified in Christ, until as they grow up, the contrary appears from their life or doctrine."* True, Synod also added this caution: *"It is, however, less correct to say that baptism is administered to the children of believers on the ground of their presumptive regeneration, since the ground of baptism is the command and the promise of God."*

The key phrase is "less correct." Here we have the crux of the problem that has haunted the Christian Reformed Church ever since. Synod should have said: It is incorrect to do so, because both Scripture and the Confession teach different.

Did Ten Hoor, Hulst and Heyns and others of the Secession party not also subscribe to these Conclusions? Yes they did, regrettably, even though they had protested and warned against Kuyper's theology for years. They continued to speak out against 1905/8 in the hope that the Secession view would prevail in the end. But it did not. It could not, because of this compromise between truth and error. Even when in 1967 "1908" was "set aside" as a binding confessional statement by the Christian Reformed Church it did not really change anything. By this time the doctrine of presumptive regeneration had so permeated the thinking of the church that it did not even have to be taught any more. It was simply taken for granted that covenant children are saved from birth.

Berkhof's theology, sound as it is in many ways, has contributed to the demise of the Secession mentality in the Christian Reformed Church and to the eventual dominance of the Doleantie view of the covenant, of baptism and of other vitally important doctrines. This is said, not from a desire to be contentious and even less from an attitude of spiritual superiority.

We as Free Reformed churches have very little to boast of, but we do have a heritage to preserve: the Secession heritage, which has always stressed that our theology and therefore our preaching also must be Scriptural, confessional and experiential. Such preaching proceeds from a *realistic* rather than *idealistic* view of the covenant and the congregation. With Ten Hoor we continue to see the church as basically a *salvation* institute, the 'workshop' of the Holy Spirit, where sinners are

saved and believers nurtured in the faith as well as equipped for living in this world as the salt of the earth and the light of the world.

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