

Key Features

Holy Scripture

[chap. 3

How human writings can be the Word of God is discussed when we contemplate theopneusty or the inspiration of Holy Scripture (see § 7).

This topic presents us with the fact that we are faced with radically divergent opinions. In theology there are schools of thought that *deny any revelatory character* to the books of the Bible: *the Bible is not the Word of God*.

Main Text:
Concise
and Clear

There are also theologians who seek to establish a connection between the Scriptures and revelation with the notion that the Bible is a *record of revelation*. It has frequently been said: *the Bible is not God's Word, but it contains God's Word*.

More so than in the past, Holy Scripture is viewed as a *testimony to revelation*. Many prefer this concept over that of a record of revelation. The Bible is not a dead protocol, but a living witness (L. Ihmels). M. Kähler (1835–1912) especially came to emphasize the view of Scripture as testimony, and many followed in his footsteps. Subsequently the characterization of Scripture as testimony gained popularity especially under the influence of dialectic theology. According to Barth, the Bible is God's Word so far as God lets it be, so far as God speaks through it (C.D., 1.1.123). *The Bible becomes the Word of God* whenever it pleases God.

J. H. Scholten, one of the fathers of modernism in the Netherlands, does consider the Bible to be a source of knowledge for Christian religion, but not revelation. Holy Scripture provides information about God's revelation, but is not revelation itself and therefore cannot be called the Word of God. G. J. Heering, an important representative of rightist modernism, reproaches the Reformation for creating a heteronomous, legalistic biblicism. God does not reveal himself in a book with such a variegated content, a voluminous book representing God's own Word from Genesis 1 through Revelation 22. According to Heering, the New Testament contains many images that we could not possibly consider to be part of God's revelation, and therefore neither as being inherent to the Christian faith.¹ A critical treatment of the books of the Bible and especially those of the Old Testament leads to a rejection of Holy Scripture as the Word of God. The Old Testament scholar C. J. Labuschagne honestly believes that the Bible is no longer the Word of God. To him the Bible is a truly human book, "a deep human testimony to insights of faith concerning God and his acts."²

More in-depth
information for
looking deeper.

Ethical theology generously employs the term "record." Its proponents believe that the Bible is a collection of proclamations concerning the revelation of salvation.

1. G. J. Heering, *Geloof en openbaring* (faith and revelation), 1944², 428, 314.

2. C. J. Labuschagne, *Wat zegt de Bijbel in Gods naam?* (what does the Bible say for God's sake?), 1977², 100.

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Concise Reformed Dogmatics

Concise Reformed Dogmatics

J. van Genderen
W. H. Velema

TRANSLATED BY

Gerrit Bilkes

and

Ed M. van der Maas


P U B L I S H I N G
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Publisher's Preface to the English Edition

This English edition of *Concise Reformed Dogmatics* is the merger of two translations, one by Ed van der Maas and the other by Gerrit Bilkes for the John Calvin Foundation. It is the product of a multi-step process of comparing the two translations and combining their strengths. With an eye for clarity and theological integrity, a team of readers—including W. H. Velema, the lone surviving author, together with Lawrence W. Bilkes and Gerald M. Bilkes—checked the entire work.

The resulting translation reflects a preference for economy of words and closeness to the original text, including its paragraph breaks and headings. Only slight adjustments in formatting have been made to clarify organization. Importantly, this translation retains the original distinction in text-font sizes, which gives readers the option of delving into or forgoing weightier discussions.

Readers will find help for translating foreign-language titles in the list of abbreviations, the notes, and the literature lists at the ends of chapters. Throughout the text, many quotations have been conformed to published translations in English, most notably Herman Bavinck's four-volume *Reformed Dogmatics*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–8); Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. G. T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956–75); and H. Berkhof's

Publisher's Preface to the English Edition

The Christian Faith, trans. S. Woudstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979).

Finally, this edition has two indexes instead of three, one for Scripture references and the other a combined index of subjects and names.

P&R Publishing Company presents this work, a standard among Dutch theological literature, as a crystallization of the best confessionally Reformed Dutch thought in a single, manageable English-language volume.

Preface

The principle underlying this *Concise Reformed Dogmatics* is spelled out in the opening chapter, which serves as its introduction. It is therefore not necessary at this point to present a detailed account of our position. But this is indeed the place to say something about the plan of this book.

A book on dogmatics deals with the doctrine of the church. What is to be believed and confessed in the church of Christ? Various statements have been made in this regard from the perspective of the Word of God. Theologians and other Christians raise questions about these matters—adding new queries to old issues. But aside from such discussions, it is continually necessary to hold up the dogmas of the church to the light of Scripture. For this reason this book pays close attention indeed to the biblical foundation of the doctrine of the church.

The designation “Reformed” in the title does not merely imply that this work distinguishes itself from Roman Catholic or Lutheran dogmatics. Since the question as to what “Reformed” means has been answered in very different ways, a further clarification is not redundant. We interpret “Reformed” to mean confessionally Reformed, which implies that we hold that the Reformed confession must be allowed to speak for itself. It would not be right to listen to the voices of theologians of earlier and later periods and not to heed the voice of the confession of the churches of the Reformation.

In many cases we have been able to agree with the Reformed tradition of dogmatics of which J. Calvin and H. Bavinck are classic representatives. Our own dogmatics indeed carries a Reformed signature,

but this does not imply that it is only meant for those of the Reformed persuasion. The current situation in the church and in theology calls for a broader presentation of information and argumentation.

In presenting this dogmatic material, the authors imposed numerous constraints upon themselves in order to limit the scope of this work. It not only constitutes a handbook for Reformed dogmatics, focusing on key issues, but can also be used as a reference work equipped with a table of contents, indexes of subjects, names, and Scripture references, and cross-references to sections and subsections.

The need for conciseness may not impede a discussion of contemporary issues. A new dogmatics must be relevant to its own time. It is for this reason that the views of theologians such as Barth and Moltmann, Berkhof and Kuitert—to list only a few names—keep turning up.

When views diverge, key differences may not be ignored. When rejecting opposing views as unbiblical, one should never fail to present them fairly and to appreciate what is good in them.

Neither should conciseness be pursued at the expense of clarity. It is important to take a clear stand in the midst of the confusing multiplicity of views that are encountered in contemporary theology. This is all the more essential since dogmatic insights have implications for preaching, instruction, and pastoral work.

As in comparable books, both a larger and a smaller font have been employed. The ongoing argumentation in larger print should be accessible to all those who think about questions of faith, while the additional details presented in finer print could well be skipped. Although the finer print is primarily aimed at theologians, this dogmatics has definitely not been written for them alone.

The number of footnotes is comparatively small, but the text itself also contains brief references to the literature. A distinction has been made between general literature and literature specific to each topic. The general literature is referred to by means of the abbreviations presented immediately following the table of contents. The specific literature is provided at the end of each chapter, including authors' names and dates of publication. In the case of several publications by the same author, the titles have been arranged in chronological order. For example, *BSLK* is the abbreviation for a book that appears in the list preceding the first chapter, and "(1977, 173ff.)"—which appears in a paragraph in Chapter 1 dealing with H. M. Kuitert—refers to a book of his that appears in the literature listed at the end of that chapter.

This list contains three books by the hand of G. C. Berkouwer, with the dates of publication determining their sequence.

No attempt was made to provide a comprehensive list of the literature. We only selected items that appeared relevant to us.

This dogmatics owes its existence to the initiative of the publisher and the collaboration between its two authors, who are both associated with the Theological University of Apeldoorn, the Netherlands, and took note of each other's work and took each other's comments into account. Each retained responsibility for his own chapters: W. H. Velema for chapters 8, 9, and 12 and J. van Genderen for the remaining chapters.

One of our students, Mr. C. J. Droger, did us a great service by proofreading most of the text and by assembling the indexes of subjects, names, and Scripture references; Mrs. G. van der Laan-de Boer typed three chapters, while Mrs. J. W. van der Zande-de Roo, our university secretary, did a great deal for the publication of this volume by typing the remaining material and preparing everything for publication. We are most grateful to them.

It is our heartfelt wish that this dogmatics, in which we, in keeping with our confession, recognize Holy Scripture to be the sole binding standard, may help readers to understand what is believed in the church on the basis of the Bible. Dogmatics is focused on the knowledge and service of God. The highest purpose to which we set ourselves in articulating Christian doctrine is the glorification of the name of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

J. van Genderen
W. H. Velema
Apeldoorn, January 1992

List of Abbreviations

Althaus, C.W.	P. Althaus, <i>Die christliche Wahrheit</i> (the Christian truth), 1952 ³
Andresen, <i>Handbuch</i>	C. Andresen, ed., <i>Handbuch der Dogmen- und Theologiegeschichte</i> (handbook on the history of dogma and theology), 1–3, 1980–84
Barth, C.D.	K. Barth, <i>Church Dogmatics</i> , 1–4 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1956–75)
Bavinck, R.D.	H. Bavinck, <i>Reformed Dogmatics</i> , 1–4 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–8)
Beker/Hasselaar, <i>Wegen</i>	E. J. Beker/J. M. Hasselaar, <i>Wegen en kruispunten in de dogmatiek</i> (ways and crossroads in dogmatics), 1–5, 1978–90
BSLK	<i>Die Bekenntnisschriften der evangelisch-lutherischen Kirche</i> (the confession documents of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church), 1956 ³
Berkhof, C.F.	H. Berkhof, <i>The Christian Faith</i> (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979)
Brakel, R.G.	W. à Brakel, <i>Redelijke godsdienst</i> (reasonable service of God), 1–3 (reprint), 1881–82
Brakel, R.S.	W. à Brakel, <i>The Christian's Reasonable Service</i> , 1–4, (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992–95)
Brunner, <i>Dogmatics</i>	E. Brunner, <i>Dogmatics</i> , 1–3 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1949–60)
Calvin, <i>Inst.</i>	J. Calvin, <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> , mostly cited (in the Dutch original of <i>Concise Reformed Dogmatics</i>) from the publication by A. Sizoo (1949 ²), sometimes as translated by W. van 't Spijker, <i>Teksten uit de INSTITUTIE</i>

List of Abbreviations

	<i>van Johannes Calvijn</i> , 1987, and occasionally in our own translation.
<i>Chr. Enc.</i>	<i>Christelijke encyclopedie</i> ² , 1–6, 1956–61
<i>C.O.</i>	<i>Ioannis Calvini Opera quae supersunt omnia (Corpus Reformatorum)</i>
<i>C.Th.J.</i>	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
Dijk, K.D.	K. Dijk, <i>Korte dogmatiek</i> (short dogmatics), no date.
<i>D.L.</i>	<i>Dordtse Leerregels</i>
<i>DS</i>	H. Denzinger-A. Schönmetzer, <i>Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum</i> , 1967 ³⁴
Ebeling	G. Ebeling, <i>Dogmatik des christlichen Glaubens</i> (dogmatics of the Christian faith), 1–3, 1979
<i>E.K.L.</i>	<i>Evangelisches Kirchenlexikon</i> ³ , 1986–
<i>E.Q.</i>	<i>The Evangelical Quarterly</i>
Erickson, <i>Chr. Th.</i>	M. J. Erickson, <i>Christian Theology</i> , 1987 ³
<i>Ev. Th.</i>	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
<i>G.T.T.</i>	<i>Gereformeerd theologisch tijdschrift</i>
Guthrie, <i>N.T. Theol.</i>	D. Guthrie, <i>New Testament Theology</i> , 1981
H.C.	Heidelbergse Catechismus
Heppe, <i>Dogm.</i>	H. Heppe, <i>Die Dogmatik der evangelisch-reformierten Kirche</i> (ed. von E. Bizer), 1935
Heyns, <i>Dogm.</i>	J. A. Heyns, <i>Dogmatiek</i> , 1978
Honig, <i>Handboek</i>	A. G. Honig, <i>Handboek van de Gereformeerde dogmatiek</i> (handbook of Reformed dogmatics), 1938
Ten Hoor, <i>Comp.</i>	F. M. ten Hoor, <i>Compendium der Gereformeerde dogmatiek</i> , no date
Kamphuis, <i>Aant.</i>	J. Kamphuis, <i>Aantekeningen bij J. A. Heyns, Dogmatiek</i> ^{1,2} (notes to accompany J. A. Heyns, dogmatics), 1982
<i>K. en Th.</i>	<i>Kerk en theologie</i>
Kersten, R.D.	G. H. Kersten, <i>Reformed Dogmatics: A Systematic Treatment of Reformed Doctrine</i> (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983)
Kraus, <i>Syst. Th.</i>	H.-J. Kraus, <i>Systematische Theologie im Kontext biblischer Geschichte und Eschatologie</i> , 1983
Kreck, <i>Grundfragen</i>	W. Kreck, <i>Grundfragen der Dogmatik</i> (basic questions of dogmatics), 1977 ²
<i>K.V.</i>	<i>Korte verklaring der Heilige Schrift</i>
Miskotte, V.W.	K. H. Miskotte, <i>Verzameld werk</i> (collected works), 1–11, 1982–89
<i>M.S.</i>	<i>Mysterium salutis</i> (ed. von J. Feiner und M. Löhrer), 1–6, 1965–81

List of Abbreviations

Müller, <i>Bek.</i>	E. F. K. Müller, <i>Die Bekenntnisschriften der reformierten Kirche</i> (the confession documents of the Reformed church), 1903
<i>Neues Handbuch</i>	P. Eicher, ed., <i>Neues Handbuch theologischer Grundbegriffe</i> (new handbook on basic theological concepts), 1–4, 1984–85
Van Niftrik, <i>Kl.D.</i>	G. C. van Niftrik, <i>Kleine dogmatiek</i> (short dogmatics), 1961 ⁵
Noordmans, V.W.	O. Noordmans, <i>Verzamelde werken</i> (collected works), 1–9, 1978–
<i>N.T.</i>	<i>Nieuwe Testament</i>
<i>O.S.</i>	J. Calvini <i>Opera selecta</i> (ed. P. Barth-G. Niesel), 1–5, 1926–52
<i>O.T.</i>	<i>Oude Testament</i>
Ott, <i>Grundriss</i>	L. Ott, <i>Grundriss der katholischen Dogmatik</i> (outline for a Catholic dogmatics), 1981 ¹⁰
Polman, <i>Ned. Gel.</i>	A. D. R. Polman, <i>Onze Nederlandsche geloofsbelijdenis</i> (our Netherlands confession of faith), 1–4, no date
Pop, <i>Bijbelse woorden</i>	F. J. Pop, <i>Bijbelse woorden en hun geheim</i> (biblical words and their secret), 1972 ³
<i>PRE</i>	<i>Realenzyklopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche</i> ³ , 1–24, 1896–1913
Ridderbos, <i>Paul</i>	H. Ridderbos, <i>Paul: An Outline of His Theology</i> (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975)
Van Ruler, <i>Ik geloof</i>	A. A. van Ruler, <i>Ik geloof</i> (I believe), 1968
Van Ruler, <i>T.W.</i>	A. A. van Ruler, <i>Theologisch werk</i> , 1–6, 1969–73
Schilder, <i>H.C.</i>	K. Schilder, <i>Heidelbergsche Catechismus</i> , 1–4, 1947–51
Schlink, <i>Ök. Dogm.</i>	E. Schlink, <i>Ökumenische Dogmatik</i> , 1983
Seeberg, <i>Lehrbuch</i>	R. Seeberg, <i>Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte</i> (textbook of dogmatic history), 1–4, 1953–55 ^{4, 5}
<i>Synopsis</i>	<i>Synopsis purioris theologiae</i> (1625), ed. H. Bavinck, 1881
<i>THAT</i>	<i>Theologisches Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament</i> , 1–2, 1971–76
Thielicke, <i>Ev. Glaube</i>	H. Thielicke, <i>Der evangelische Glaube</i> (evangelical faith), 1–3, 1968–78
<i>Th. Ref.</i>	<i>Theologia Reformata</i>
<i>TRE</i>	<i>Theologische Realenzyklopädie</i> , 1977–
<i>TWAT</i>	<i>Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament</i> (theological dictionary for the Old Testament), 1973–
<i>TWNT</i>	<i>Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament</i> (theological dictionary for the New Testament), 1–10, 1933–79

List of Abbreviations

Vriezen, <i>Hoofddlijnen</i>	Th. C. Vriezen, <i>Hoofddlijnen der theologie van het Oude Testament</i> (main perspectives of the theology of the Old Testament), 1974 ⁴
Weber, <i>Foundations</i>	O. Weber, <i>Foundations of Dogmatics</i> , 1–2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1982–83)
Wentsel, <i>Dogm.</i>	B. Wentsel, <i>Dogmatiek</i> , 1981–
WA	M. Luther, <i>Werke</i> (Weimarer Ausgabe [Weimar edition])
WAT	M. Luther, <i>Werke</i> , Tischreden (table speeches, Weimarer Ausgabe [Weimar edition])

In the original Dutch edition of *Concise Reformed Dogmatics*, the Dutch confession documents were mostly quoted from the following edition: De Nederlandse belijdenisgeschriften uitgegeven in opdracht van de Generale Synode van de Nederlandse Hervormde Kerken in Nederland, de Generale Synode van de Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, 1983 (the Dutch confession documents published as commissioned by the General Synod of the Dutch Reformed Churches in the Netherlands, the General Synod of the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, 1983).

Chapter 1

Introduction

§ 1. DOGMA AND DOGMATICS

1.1. *The role of dogmas*

1.2. *The nature of dogmatics*

1.1. *The role of dogmas*

There are times when dogmatics is in demand, and there are periods when this discipline is not highly regarded. Within a faculty of theology, biblical and practical courses are sometimes much more popular.

Yet as the discipline that studies dogmas, systematic theology is indispensable. This is why we first call attention to the significance of dogma. We define “dogma” as *doctrine that the church, under appeal to the Word of God, holds to be normative*.

The Greek word from which we get “dogma” turns up in the New Testament. It may signify a decree of an emperor (Luke 2:1) or the commandments of the Law of Moses (Eph. 2:15; Col. 2:14). Among the Greeks a philosophical concept could also be called a dogma, although we do not encounter it in that sense in the New Testament. In Acts 16:4 the word “dogma” signifies decisions reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem. This went far beyond mere human judgment, because the council was convinced that it was led by the

Holy Spirit whom Christ had promised to his church. When they announced those decisions, therefore, they could say, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). A decree of the emperor of Rome reflected imperial authority, but ecclesiastical decisions reflect a different and higher authority.

From the third century in the East and later also in the West the word “dogma” signified the doctrine of the church, although it was not yet an established concept. The *Ecclesiastical Institutes* is the title of an influential work by Gennadius (ca. 500) in which the term is used in the sense of an ecclesiastically adopted or authoritative teaching.¹

The Reformers knew the word in this sense, but did not make it their term of choice. Like Luther, Calvin often spoke of doctrine (*doctrina*), a term he preferred to dogma. For him dogma was often the “new dogma” of Rome, over against which he placed the doctrine of Scripture, which is sound, pure, and spiritual.²

As for the councils of Nicea (325) through Chalcedon (451), Calvin said that he regarded them as holy insofar as they concerned the doctrines (*dogmata*) of the faith. When someone brings the church into confusion with his teaching and it looks as though serious discord will ensue, the churches must convene and make a pronouncement that is derived from Scripture (*definitio ex Scriptura sumpta*). Thus the Council of Nicea upheld the eternal divinity of Christ over against Arius (*Institutes*, 4.9.8, 13).

According to Rome, when the church makes a definitive pronouncement, there can be no appeal to a higher authority. For us, however, doctrine accepted by the church does not constitute the highest authority because the church does not have the final say. As Luther put it, “God’s Word shall establish the articles of faith and no one else, not even an angel” (Gottes Wort soll Artikel des Glaubens stellen und sonst niemand, auch kein Engel, *BSLK*, 421).

What the church has pronounced on the basis of God’s Word, and has not retracted, constitutes dogma from a formal point of view. As far as substance is concerned, however, dogma is completely contingent on revelation. The fact that dogma has derivative authority does not detract from the fact that the church accepts it as normative. In its dogmatic pronouncements, the church of Christ does not so much say what *is* being believed within its community as what *should* be believed on the basis of the Word of God.

1. Cf. G. Söll, *Dogma und Dogmenentwicklung* (dogmas and their development), 1971 (Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte = handbook of the history of dogmas. 1/5); *TRE* 9:26–41; E. A. de Boer, “Geloof onder woorden (faith expressed in words),” *Radix* 10 (1984): 68–76.

2. Cf. W. van ’t Spijker, “Doctrina naar reformatorische opvatting (Reformational doctrines),” *Th. Ref.* 20 (1977): 263–80; 21 (1978): 7–25.

There are various forms of authority. The authority of the government must be recognized. Scientific theses have authority for us when they are convincing. But what the church teaches in accordance with the Word of God demands acceptance. It is a matter of the heart.

Among those who are of an entirely different view in this regard is Kuitert, who does not consider “acceptance” to be a felicitous term when it comes to truth. According to him, many view believing as being equivalent to accepting a number of clearly delineated doctrinal truths about God, Jesus, man, and the future. He advocates a radically different approach, one that requires neither “swallowing nor choking.” A radical revision is required for the way in which churches tie themselves to the past. Actually, the notion of “being tied to” is not appropriate in connection with faith. Christian symbols provide food for thought, but do not prescribe what should be thought.³

To Kuitert, the content of the Christian faith (*fides quae creditur*) is an orientation scheme or heuristic model, a concept of God and his salvation that did not arise apart from human experience and which cannot endure without affirmation based on human experience. The Christian heuristic model soon takes on the form of ecclesiastical dogma, which brings with it the risk that it will end up as church discipline and coercion in doctrinal matters. The truth of a heuristic model is, however, not confirmed by preserving it inalterably, but only by an appeal to human experience. Is this not how it is with scientific hypotheses also? The heuristic model can and must be adjusted continually. So it is with theological research, whereby admittedly the Bible plays the key role, but not as a simple criterion. Without the first witnesses of Jesus with whom the Bible confronts us, we would not exist as the Christian church. But the church, which enters into dialogue with the first witnesses, can and may distance itself from their testimony if it believes that there are valid reasons for doing so. The Christian church is an independent entity, which *also* possesses the Spirit.

It is striking that Kuitert, who does not think that he can view Scripture as a norm or criterion, introduces another norm. Not all that the Bible authors say about God meets this norm for the truth concerning God, his salvation, and his will, namely, “that it gives people freedom and opens up the future” (1977, 173ff.).

Aside from the difficulty that this kind of norm presents as far as its content is concerned, its vagueness makes it a choice that is very subjectively determined and can never rise above subjectivism.

Theology always has a starting point. For us, this is the position that the churches subscribing to the Reformed confession in the Netherlands have traditionally held, jointly with the other churches of the Reformation. This means that the canonical books of the Scriptures constitute the sole rule of faith (Belgic Confession of Faith, Articles 5 and 7). As far as the foundation of and norm for the Christian faith

3. H. M. Kuitert, *Wat heet geloven?* (what is believing?), 1977, 185, 27; idem, *Zonder geloof vaart niemand wel* (without faith no one fares well), 1974, 54.

are concerned, nothing may be put on a par with Holy Scripture. Only the Bible has inherent credibility in itself (for the necessary substantiation, see especially chapter 3).

Kuitert's clearly articulated striving for freedom in matters of faith enjoys widespread support. Doctrinal pronouncements by the church are depicted by his followers as a law to which the faithful must submit themselves. Furthermore, they are of the opinion that such submission is tantamount to being shackled to the past, or at least to being obligated to abide by the insights of previous generations.

We point out that the form in which the dogmas of the church are transmitted to us is the confessional form. This is not the case with most of the dogmatic pronouncements of Rome, but is true of the churches of the Reformation, for their dogmas are embedded in the confessions. In this way their unequivocal character as reflection of the truth and defense against error is preserved. As decisive pronouncements that the church was constrained to make in the past, they are of lasting significance. They have been incorporated into the confessional documents in texts that not only call for consent but also can be used for believing reflection.

The ancient church dogma of the Trinity of God comes to us in the Nicea-Constantinople Creed. The words of this dogma are part of a creed that is doxological in tone.

The doctrine of justification does not merely say what is and what is not the biblical message. In Article 23 of the Belgic Confession and in Lord's Day 23 of the Heidelberg Catechism, it functions in a context in which personal faith is confessed.

The Canons of Dort give some the impression that they constitute a massive exposition of Calvinistic doctrine. But how movingly this confessional document speaks of election, the atonement, conversion, and perseverance (see 1.13, 14; 2.9; 3/4.17; 5.8–15).

Is not the main objection to continuing to attribute normative authority to the ecclesiastical doctrines and confessional statements, that they tie us to the past? Yes indeed, if we were to view these dogmas and confessional formulations in isolation. However, in a church of the Reformation, dogmas and confessions function only in conjunction with the authority of the Word of God. Every human document and every ecclesiastical decision may be appealed to Holy Scripture, which is the final arbiter in cases of disagreement.

Today a great deal of fuss is made about being bound to dated ecclesiastical pronouncements that were in part determined by their historical

context. But actually this is not the most fundamental issue. A parting of ways occurs at the questions as to how we interpret the authority of the Bible and how we deal with the teaching of Scripture.

It is the task of the church and theology to understand dogmas in the light of the Scriptures and to test their validity against the Scriptures. Although this is not exclusively the domain of dogmatics, it does constitute its special concern.

1.2. *The nature of dogmatics*

“Dogmatics” is an abbreviation of “dogmatic theology.” This term occurs in the title of a work by L. F. Reinhart, *Synopsis theologiae dogmaticae* (1659), and conveys more than older titles such as *Sententiae* (Pronouncements), *Summa* (Summation), *Loci, Loci communes* (Essentials), or *Synopsis* (Survey). See also H. Berkhof, 1982, 11.

In the nineteenth century, preference was given to such names as “Doctrine of Faith,” or “Christian Doctrine,” but especially under the influence of Karl Barth the term “dogmatics” has come to the fore again (*Church Dogmatics*). “Dogmatics” has regained its rightful place in the theological encyclopedia (Runia, 1957, 3).

Theology, however, is in constant flux, and Barth’s position did not fail to elicit reaction. The new wave is characterized by the demand that dogmatics be linked to human experience and be relevant to it. These are critical, experience-based theologies that are described by a noun (e.g., theology of hope, theology of revolution) or by an adjective (e.g., black theology, feminist theology). This profusion of theologies threatens to crowd out dogmatics in which the dogma of the church has a voice.

Those who are under the spell of hermeneutics are even of the opinion that dogmatics as a theological discipline is impossible, impermissible, irrelevant, and inexpedient (Polman, 1969, 7–10).

Regardless of changes in *Zeitgeist* and mode of thought, an important argument for dogmatics is that the relationship to dogma finds clear expression.

Dogma expresses succinctly what the church views as central and essential in the biblical message. Dogmatics analyzes, presents arguments, and elucidates.

We will now consider what we believe to be the characteristic features of dogmatics.

1. *Its ecclesiastical character.* Without the church there would be no dogma. Actually there could be no dogmatics either, but only strictly personal statements of doctrine.

Dogmatics is a ministry that the church demands or at least should demand. We deliberately speak of ministry, for neither dogmatics nor any other theological discipline should ever seek to rule. It needs indeed to be reminded from time to time that its function is to minister. Only then can it assume a ministry of its own in the church “with exegesis as its foundation and preaching as its goal” (Noordmans, V.W., 2:174ff.). This does not mean that the task of dogmatics should always be viewed in such a narrow ecclesiastical sense that all questions not directly affecting the church should be ignored by it. Such issues might not directly affect the church today, but could in the future. It is precisely dogmatics that is equipped with the necessary antennae.

2. *Its confessional character.* In our view this aspect of dogmatics is directly implied by the preceding one. We are dealing with the church and her confession. Dogmatic works reveal the confessional standpoint of their authors. Thus Bavinck’s standard work is appropriately titled *Reformed Dogmatics*, and the well-known concise dogmatics of Ott is called *Grundriss der katholischen Dogmatik* (Fundamentals of Catholic Dogmatics).

For us, confession means more than tradition. We appreciate the Reformed tradition, but we are in agreement with the Reformed confession. Tradition points us in a particular direction and the confession provides us with a clear vision as to the paths to be followed, but the confession also alerts us to bypaths and ways that would lead us astray. Dogmatics must go beyond the confession. It must go to Scripture itself in order to “bring forth” out of that “treasure things new and old” (Matt. 13:52).

3. *Its systematic character.* Bavinck calls dogmatics the scientific system of the knowledge of God (*R.D.*, 1:83); H. Berkhof calls it the systematic thinking through of the relationship that God in Christ has established with us (1982, 13).

Those who strive to establish a coherent system must be on guard for formulations that are detrimental to faith. There is the danger that we will regard as secondary whatever does not fit into the system or that an a priori principle leads to one-sided conceptions.

Even if the theologian has a desire for ever-increasing knowledge and an ever-deepening grasp of the issues, he must nevertheless make the following words of the psalmist his own: “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it” (Ps. 139:6). Our knowledge is in part (1 Cor. 13:9), our insight limited. Of old, reference was made to a *theologia viatorum* (pilgrim theology), i.e., that we are still on the way. We discover connections and are impressed by the great deeds of God. We speak about these acts in amazement while we realize that we do not see everything and do not have a comprehensive view.

Even if we take a systematic approach, a scientific system of the knowledge of God does not lie within our reach. When we study dogmatics, we do see more and more connections and perspectives. Van Ruler calls it the poignant beauty of theology that it teaches us to speak of God in an orderly fashion (*T.W.*, 1:39).

What the apostle Paul impressed on the church certainly also applies to the theologians in her midst: “every thought” must be brought “into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5). Dogmatics involves faith that seeks understanding (*fides quaerit intellectum*) as well as scholarly reflection that seeks to serve faith: in short, believing scholarly reflection. However, believing reflection that is not scholarly in nature has its own value, and there is no reason to look down on it. We can also learn from it!

4. *Its critical character.* The critical task of dogmatics flows directly from the nature of dogmas. As Reformed Christians we view it with critical sympathy—as Schilder put it (cf. Kamphuis, 1980, 9ff.). Dogmatics must raise the question whether the teaching of the church is in all respects in harmony with the Word of God. That Word is the sole criterion for a dogmatics that is critical in a responsible way.

With Rome this is different, because there the church’s teachings do not stand under the authority of Scripture. A dogma is considered infallible there, even though one can attempt to make a distinction between the teaching itself, which is fixed forever, and its formulation, which can be adapted to a different time or culture. Some argue that not only should it be stated differently, but also that today something different should be said from before.⁴

Besides, dogmatics must remain critical because in addition to ecumenical dogmas there are also ecclesiastical tenets that differ from each

4. We are thinking of a figure such as H. Küng, especially his book *Infallible?* 1971, in which the dogma of infallibility is in fact rejected.

other and even contradict each other, as is the case for instance with a comparison of Reformed confessional documents with the decisions and canons of the Council of Trent.

Furthermore, there are numerous *theologoumena* or opinions of theologians that also have a certain influence. It goes without saying that we have to severely restrict ourselves in this regard. Two theologians whose views we often pay attention to in this book are K. Barth and H. Berkhof. Those who are familiar with the field of theology know that this is no arbitrary selection. A critical approach to the work of others, however, does not preclude finding elements of truth that must be recognized.

5. *Its timely character.* This too is an important aspect, although it is not the primary demand made of dogmatics, for continuity must take precedence over currency. Before opening our own mouths we must listen to the answers that the church of all ages has given to the great questions of the faith. With a variation of the words of Van Ruler (*T.W.*, 2:41), we can say that studying dogmatics also definitely involves studying the history of dogmas.

However, new questions have arisen, and old answers must be reevaluated in the face of current problems. There are possibilities for restatement that does not constitute mere reiteration. The theses and antitheses that are implicit in a dogma need to be explained in terms of the past, but also confronted with the present. Reservations of various kinds encourage us to engage in a more thorough investigation of the cause that we defend.

Moreover, the ongoing task of exegesis requires that we assimilate all that is found in Scripture, including a dogmatic processing of biblical data. Exegesis repeatedly confronts dogmatics with questions and continually opens up new perspectives. Dogmatics does, however, place certain accents on exegetical material. This is to be expected in light of the current situation and contemporary problems, although the latter should never predominate in discussion.

Sometimes dogmatics must lay the groundwork for the refinement or development of the teaching of the church. Thus at the time of the Synod of Dort (1618–19), a great deal of dogmatic work was done. It is also possible that as a result of new theological reflection, old antitheses are overcome. An illustration of this may be seen in the consensus that was reached in 1956 between the Dutch Reformed

Church and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the Netherlands with respect to the doctrine of the Lord's Supper.⁵

In our dogmatics we try to formulate what Scripture teaches us and the church confesses in such a way that it is intelligible to our contemporaries. It is tempting to add to or subtract from Scripture in order to make things easy for people to understand, but this results in accommodation theology against which we must caution.⁶ Those who go in this direction are often motivated by the conviction that the Christian faith must be acceptable in every cultural context. History teaches that in doing so, new philosophical concepts are often used that give the resultant theological presentation a modern flavor. Dogmatic theology is always in communication with the thought patterns of its time, but by simply taking over a philosophical way of thinking one runs the great risk that the biblical content loses in significance. Examples abound: from the influence of neo-Platonism, Aristotelianism, Cartesianism, Hegelianism, Neo-Kantianism, and right up to existentialism!

6. *Its practical character.* In answer to the question whether theology is theoretical or practical, the Leiden *Synopsis* (1625) states that it is both theoretical and practical because it concerns the knowledge and service of God. Theory and praxis therefore are not antithetical (1:22–23). We do not apply the term “theory” to the knowledge of God, but we can say that dogmatics has a theoretical aspect because it is a scholarly pursuit. It is also highly practical because its *raison d'être* is to serve the church and the life of faith. It is concerned with the truth, but this truth is also truth for us personally. We may never lose sight of the connection between doctrine and life. The quest for truth and the quest for salvation cannot be separated. Calvin says: “We have given the first place to the doctrine in which our religion is contained, since our salvation begins with it. But it must enter into our heart and pass into our daily conduct, and so transform us into itself so as not to prove unfruitful” (*Institutes*, 3.6.4).

Here we must, however, oppose the notion of *the primacy of praxis* that has a large number of proponents in newer theology. As Molt-

5. Cf. C. W. Monnich and G. C. van Niftrik, *Hervormd-Luthers gesprek over het Avondmaal* (Reformed-Lutheran discussion of the Lord's Supper), 1958 (see the text of the consensus on 5–7).

6. See W. H. Velema, *Aangepaste theologie* (adapted theology), 1971 (concerning the theology of H. M. Kuitert).

mann has observed, this is related to radical changes in the modern world. Kant judged that only that which is acceptable and useful from a practical point of view can be considered to be appropriate for faith in modern times. In our era, the praxis of life itself has acquired a cognitive character and has become both source and criterion for theology. The particular kind of praxis may vary from political decisions to mystical experiences.⁷ Kraus, taking his cue from Moltmann, writes, “The new principle of theology and faith lies in praxis” (*Syst. Th.*, 107).

In the Netherlands, Kuitert, in a study about truth and verification in dogmatics, defends the thesis that “Dogmatic pronouncements must prove their truth-value on the basis of what we—empowered to do so by revelation itself—may call their meaning, i.e., whether they open a future for humanity and the world.”⁸ Here Kuitert is in agreement with Pannenberg who states that what is at stake here is the “Bewährung an der Wirklichkeitserfahrung der jeweiligen Gegenwart” (confirmation by the experience of reality of every successive present) (Pannenberg, 1971, 178).

Like other scholarly hypotheses, dogmatic pronouncements also need verification as to their truth content. There must be a workable criterion for doing so. As we saw already (§ 1.1), Kuitert is of the opinion that Scripture can no longer serve as a criterion for doctrine. The principium of Scripture (*sola scriptura*), with which the Reformation believed it stood on solid ground, now finds itself in a crisis situation, according to Pannenberg and Kuitert. The truth of Christianity is not served well when couched in authoritarian pronouncements that do not allow any questions to be asked.

Those who like Kuitert want to put theological pronouncements about God and his work to the test of external verification should realize what they are doing. One insurmountable objection to Kuitert’s position is that for him the touchstone of truth is to be found in anthropology and sociology, which raises more problems than it solves. What opens the future for man and the world? Everyone may decide this for himself. In a later publication the criterion becomes how durable such experiences of God will turn out to be in reality.⁹ Here again this theology continues to resemble a circle in which man stands at the center.

Even if in this way truth could be found that is as controllable and verifiable as possible, it still would not be the truth with which the church and theology are concerned. To know truth in the biblical sense of the word, so as to receive assurance of our salvation, we need the revelation of God and the illumination of his Spirit. Then we

7. J. Moltmann, *Wat is theologie?* 1989, 103–5. See also D. Sölle, *Gott denken*, 1990, 15.

8. H. M. Kuitert, *Om en om* (around and around), 1972, 213.

9. H. M. Kuitert, *Filosofie van de theologie*, 1988, 85–95.



Chapter 3

Holy Scripture

§ 6. HOLY SCRIPTURE AS THE WORD OF GOD

6.1. *Revelation and Holy Scripture*

6.2. *The Old and the New Testaments*

6.1. *Revelation and Holy Scripture*

The revelation of God and Holy Scripture are not the same thing; neither are the revelation of salvation and Holy Scripture. Special revelation comprises more than what is contained in the Bible, for not everything that has been revealed has been written down (cf. John 21:25). Furthermore, revelation does not coincide with its written record. For example, the revelation received by the prophets was frequently not recorded until a later date. An example of this can be found in Jeremiah 36. Scripture is therefore that portion of special revelation that God has planned to safeguard for all times and for all people.

The *distinction* that we make between the Word of God that has come to people from the beginning and the books of the Bible implies *no separation* between the two. But how can we further delineate the relationship between revelation and Holy Scripture?

In Bavinck's work we come across ideas that have a strong appeal. He refers to Holy Scripture as the servant form of revelation, and thereby makes a connection between the incarnation of the Word and the recording of the word, i.e., between incarnation and inscripturation. Did Christ not take on the form of a servant? The Son of God came to us in history, and similarly revelation entered into history. The Word became Scripture, and as Scripture subjected itself to the fate of all scripture. But just as Christ's human nature remained free from sin, so also Scripture was conceived without defect. Scripture is Christ's servant and also shares in his ignominy (*R.D.*, 1:434ff.).

Just as Christ is both God and man, the Bible contains both divine and human elements. This seems like a parallel, but is not. The incarnation is an absolutely unique event. Our reception of God's revelation in human language is essentially different from adoption of human nature by the Son of God.

It is not incorrect to follow Bavinck in saying that Holy Scripture is at the service of revelation. Nevertheless, this image does not do full justice to the revelatory character of Scripture. Scripture could be at the service of revelation without being itself revelation. But the church believes that Scripture is the Word of God. We are dealing here with the divine Word, the holy and divine Scriptures, the holy and canonical books of God (Belgic Confession of Faith, articles 2–7).

The basis of the confession that Holy Scripture is the Word of God is found in Scripture itself, although it requires the testimony of the Holy Spirit to recognize this (see § 9).

The church says nothing of Scripture that is not said by Scripture itself. Only by confirming this completely and absolutely can the church do full justice to Holy Scripture.

Jesus continuously appeals to Scripture: "It is written" (Matt. 4:4, 6, 7, 10). He declares that what is written of him is bound to be fulfilled (Mark 9:12; Luke 22:37). The Holy Scripture of the Old Testament is to him the authoritative Word of God. The apostles are so convinced that Scripture is the Word of God that from time to time they directly ascribe to God what has been spoken by the prophets or the psalmists and has been recorded in Scripture. Psalm 95:7–11 is quoted as words of the Spirit (Heb. 3:7). What is said by the poet of Psalm 16 is ascribed to God (Acts 13:35). The Spirit of God speaks through the last words of David (2 Sam. 23:2).

How human writings can be the Word of God is discussed when we contemplate theopneusty or the inspiration of Holy Scripture (see § 7).

This topic presents us with the fact that we are faced with radically divergent opinions. In theology there are schools of thought that *deny any revelatory character* to the books of the Bible: *the Bible is not the Word of God*.

There are also theologians who seek to establish a connection between the Scriptures and revelation with the notion that the Bible is a *record of revelation*. It has frequently been said: *the Bible is not God's Word, but it contains God's Word*.

More so than in the past, Holy Scripture is viewed as a *testimony to revelation*. Many prefer this concept over that of a record of revelation. The Bible is not a dead protocol, but a living witness (L. Ihmels). M. Kähler (1835–1912) especially came to emphasize the view of Scripture as testimony, and many followed in his footsteps. Subsequently the characterization of Scripture as testimony gained popularity especially under the influence of dialectic theology. According to Barth, the Bible is God's Word so far as God lets it be, so far as God speaks through it (C.D., 1.1.123). *The Bible becomes the Word of God* whenever it pleases God.

J. H. Scholten, one of the fathers of modernism in the Netherlands, does consider the Bible to be a source of knowledge for Christian religion, but not revelation. Holy Scripture provides information about God's revelation, but is not revelation itself and therefore cannot be called the Word of God. G. J. Heering, an important representative of rightist modernism, reproaches the Reformation for creating a heteronomous, legalistic biblicism. God does not reveal himself in a book with such a variegated content, a voluminous book representing God's own Word from Genesis 1 through Revelation 22. According to Heering, the New Testament contains many images that we could not possibly consider to be part of God's revelation, and therefore neither as being inherent to the Christian faith.¹ A critical treatment of the books of the Bible and especially those of the Old Testament leads to a rejection of Holy Scripture as the Word of God. The Old Testament scholar C. J. Labuschagne honestly believes that the Bible is no longer the Word of God. To him the Bible is a truly human book, "a deep human testimony to insights of faith concerning God and his acts."²

Ethical theology generously employs the term "record." Its proponents believe that the Bible is a collection of proclamations concerning the revelation of salvation.

1. G. J. Heering, *Geloof en openbaring* (faith and revelation), 1944², 428, 314.

2. C. J. Labuschagne, *Wat zegt de Bijbel in Gods naam?* (what does the Bible say for God's sake?), 1977², 100.

Like other records or early valuable documents, they deserve to be analyzed from a historical-critical perspective (J. J. P. Valetton). Ethical theologians have no problem with scriptural criticism, believing that it cannot harm God's revelation, since it is supra-historical (a term suggested by H. M. van Nes) and we may conceivably learn something from it.³

According to Barth, the proclamation of the Word by the church can become the Word of God to us. The same is thought with respect to the Bible as a whole. It is God's prerogative to speak through human words. It is in this sense that the Bible is God's Word. In this view the Bible reflects human attempts to restate and reproduce the Word of God in terms of human thoughts and words in certain human situations. God spoke and Paul spoke. These are two entirely different things. But when the Word of God is an event ("im Ereignis des Wortes Gottes") it is one fact. Revelation and the Bible are then word-for-word one at that (*C.D.*, 1.1.127). When viewing Holy Scripture as testifying to revelation, Barth implies a separation of revelation and Scripture. The absolute identity between the human words of Holy Scripture and the Word of God is precluded. Qua content, the Bible is testimony to the revelation in Jesus Christ; qua form, it is the testimony of the immediate witnesses. The Bible is not a book of oracles, no means of direct communication. Prophets and apostles could fall short with every word and did fall short with every word. The disputability of biblical testimony also has implications for its religious and theological content. There are parallels in the history of religion and there are mutual contradictions among authors. But it is precisely by grace alone that they have spoken the Word of God in their fallible and erring human word (*C.D.*, 1.2.530).

Barth's motives differ from those of Heering. There is a clear difference between the view that the Bible as such is not the Word of God and that through faith man must use his own judgment to determine what constitutes the gospel for him,⁴ and the view that the Bible, however contestable, can through God's sovereign grace become the Word of God to us. But neither Heering nor Barth does justice to the view that is rejected by them. The church's Reformers do not teach a heteronomous, legalistic biblicism (Heering's reproach), and orthodoxy does not support a paper pope (Barth's reproach). More serious is the accusation that orthodoxy appears to refuse to live by grace and thus seeks certainties of its own. The Reformational doctrine that the Bible is God's Word does not threaten God's freedom. Is God not free to provide us with his revelation in a reliable form by human means?

It is now necessary to focus on the concept of "testimony." According to Barth, it refers to or points to Christ who is the Word of God. By distinguishing between revelation and Scripture, Barth's terminology also implies the relativity of Scripture as human testimony.

The testimony of the Bible is not subjective or fallible testimony advocated by man, but reliable testimony employed by God.

3. Cf. A. de Willigen, "Geloof en geschiedenis bij (faith and history according to) J. J. P. Valetton, H. M. van Nes en G. van der Leeuw," in *Ernst en vrede* (sincerity and peace), 1951, 193–213.

4. G. J. Heering, *Geloof en openbaring* (faith and revelation), 1944², 317–18, 329.

Jesus' statement that the Scriptures testify of him (John 5:39) implies something entirely different from the usual interpretation given by the more recent theology. It is a judicial term and reflects a process in which witnesses are employed to establish the truth to such a degree that no doubt can remain (cf. Deut. 19:15; Heb. 10:28). The apostles are referred to as witnesses to the resurrection (Acts 1:22). They have seen the risen Lord with their own eyes and heard him speak. He, who made his followers to be his witnesses, stands behind their testimony that goes out into the world to win men over to his cause. The apostolic testimony demands from us that we allow ourselves to be convinced and won over.

Biblical testimony does not involve facts only but also their significance. We are not at liberty to depart from either. We can say with Trimp: witnesses are those ministers of God who "are authorized by Christ and equipped by his Spirit to proclaim the factual truth and the true factuality of the salvation brought about by Christ and to hold it up to the lie that rules the world, in order to put unbelief to shame and encourage repentance" (Trimp, 1970, 26).

The Spirit of Christ already testified in the words of the prophets to "the sufferings of Christ and the glory that would follow" (1 Peter 1:11). In the conflict with unbelieving Jews, Jesus says: "And the Father himself, which hath sent me, hath borne witness of me." In this context we find the words: Ye "search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me" (John 5:37–39). This implies that the testimony of the Scriptures concerning Christ is the testimony of the Father himself.

Biblical testimony is not merely a human approximation or interpretation of the mystery of revelation. It is God's testimony that is for ever sure.

As far as the concept "testimony" is concerned, the following literature is relevant: R. Schippers, *Getuigen van Jezus Christus in het Nieuwe Testament* (witnessing to Jesus Christ in the New Testament), 1938; H. Strahtmann in *TDNT*, 4:474–514; H. N. Ridderbos, *Heilsgeschiedenis en Heilige Schrift* (redemption history and Holy Scripture), 1955, 116–34; C. Trimp, *Betwist Schriftgezag* (disputed scriptural authority), 1970, 7–35).

Schippers concludes that bearing witness to Jesus Christ in the New Testament is speaking about him either by himself or by the Father and the Holy Spirit, or by eye- and ear-witnesses concerning his life and actions—in order to persuade people through this speaking to make their great decision with respect to faith. This testimony in terms of knowledge and representation of the facts thus serves God's justice. The New

Testament knows only of witnesses who are bound to the facts (199, 198). Especially Luke employs the concept of “testimony” in order to place the entire emphasis on the historical foundation of kerygma. Apostolic testimony, which occupies a unique place in the history of redemption, represents the link established by the Holy Spirit between the great event of redemption in the fullness of time and the emerging church. Therefore it is not merely testimony to revelation, but itself also forms part of this revelation. We do not have the right to oppose it. This testimony is not given by a single authority, but by many. This constitutes not only a reinforcement of this testimony but also a declaration of its multiplicity (Ridderbos, 117, 120, 126).

6.2. *The Old and the New Testaments*

The distinction between the Old Testament and the New Testament dates back to the beginning of the third century AD. Those who wonder why we make this distinction can find its origin in what Paul says about the Jews of his day: “For until this day remaineth the same veil untaken away in the reading of the old testament; which veil is done away in Christ” (2 Cor. 3:14). The reading of the old covenant here must be the reading of the scrolls during worship service in the synagogue. The old covenant stands in contrast with the new covenant. A Latin word for covenant is “testamentum,” hence the names Old Testament and New Testament.

To Jews the *Tanach*—law, prophets, and scriptures (cf. also Luke 24:44)—represents the content of what we refer to as the Old Testament.

The distinction between the Old Testament and the New Testament does not at all detract from the unity of Holy Scripture as the Word of God. The church of Christ believes that the entire Old Testament testifies to Christ and finds its fulfillment in him. For that reason it has held to the unity of Scripture right from the beginning.

There have been those who turned this distinction into a contrast. In the second century, Marcion declared that the Old Testament came from the God of the Jews who was at the same time the Creator and the Lawgiver, but that it no longer had any value if on the basis of the gospel one believed in the God of love who had revealed himself in Christ. The New Testament came—at least in part—from the good God, the Father of Jesus Christ.

There were also those who had trouble accepting the Old Testament, e.g., Augustine, who at first could not understand that in early times different laws of God prevailed than those in his own days. He subsequently discovered that ceremonial laws belonged to shadows that had passed. Over against the Manichaeans, under whose influence he had lived for years, Augustine very clearly held on to the lasting significance of the Old Testament and the unity of Holy Scripture. Faustus attacked the Old Testament for supposedly not containing any prophecies regarding Christ. He saw it as carnally oriented and as containing a great deal that was improper. In view of the teaching of Christ, the old and the new would not go together. Those

who are so critical of the Old Testament do not leave the New Testament unscathed either. We see this happen to Marcion and his followers, but also to Manichaeans such as Faustus who thought that the promised Paraclete would teach Christians what in the New Testament they should accept and reject.

Whether the Old Testament has always been properly interpreted by the church is a secondary matter. From the beginning there were chiefly two different interpretations: the typological and the allegorical. Typology clung to the primary significance of the text, but not exclusively so. The main thing was the perspective of what was to come, i.e., the “Vorausdarstellung des Kommenden” (the representation of what comes, L. Goppelt). The allegorical approach sought a truth beyond the truth. To Origen, not the literal but the spiritual meaning was important. But at any rate, the Old Testament passages were linked with Christ or with Christ and his church (Augustine).

The revelatory character of the Old Testament must be maintained over against all views that reject the Old Testament as God’s revelation.

Rationalism has not spared the Bible and certainly not the Old Testament. At the beginning of the nineteenth century we encounter Schleiermacher, who viewed the Old Testament as a legalistic book. The church did inherit it, and at least at first could not avoid it. But this historical perspective is no theological justification for the recognition of the Old Testament as Christianity’s Holy Scripture. Christianity does not require Jewish support.

Terms frequently employed during the nineteenth century include: Israelitic literature (the official reference in Dutch Legislation concerning Higher Education of 1876) and the record of the religion of Israel.

The twentieth century witnessed a fierce attack on the Old Testament. It was viewed as a Jewish book. The prominent German theologian A. von Harnack (1851–1930) wrote the frequently quoted statement: in the second century the church correctly avoided the mistake of rejecting the Old Testament; in the sixteenth century the Reformation could not avoid the fate of its retention; but preserving it as canonical proclamation following the nineteenth century constitutes religious and ecclesiastical paralysis.

It became worse when the Old Testament came to be referred to as the document of another religion. It was felt that it had been canceled and invalidated by the New Testament. “The New Testament concept of the kingdom of God and the Redeemer radically eliminates the Old Testament Jewish representation” (E. Hirsch).

The wave of anti-Semitism that swept through Germany during the time of National Socialism also influenced certain theologians and the German church to some extent. The slogan became: away with the Old Testament. The ideology of A. Rosenberg reflected the position that the Old Testament as religious book needed to be discarded once and for all. The aversion to the Old Testament had far-reaching consequences

and also affected the New Testament. According to Rosenberg, there were clearly mutilated and superstitious messages in the New Testament, which needed to be eliminated. But this time has fortunately passed.

There is also another side. We have in mind the position that W. Vischer took in his work *Das Christuszeugnis des Alten Testaments* (the testimony to Christ in the Old Testament, 1934–42). His treatment of the Old Testament does not do justice to the historical aspect of this portion of the Word of God (cf. Oosterhoff, 1954, 16ff.).

There is indeed anti-Semitism. But there is also philo-Semitism, which views the Old Testament as preeminently a Jewish book. One can be so enthusiastic about the *Tanach* that one wants to hear of little else.

This is not the case with Van Ruler. But it goes too far to treat the Old Testament as the real Bible, also from the point of view of the Christian church, while “the New Testament is so to speak nothing but a glossary appended to explain uncommon terms.”⁵ One can here take into account that Van Ruler had a tendency to stimulate discussion by making extreme statements. But it is typical that in this connection he rejected the notion of an ongoing revelation that presents a linear interpretation of history. According to him the nature of the Bible is much more circular (prophetic and apostolic testimony around history proper, in the “fullness of time” of the impact of revelation).⁶ This is reminiscent of Barth.

The image of a continuous line is much more consistent with the history of God’s revelation. It is indeed a matter of progression (see Heb. 1:1; cf. also Rom. 16:25–26; Eph. 3:4–6). We encounter a similar line of thought in the Heidelberg Catechism (response 19).

Without schematically fixing the relationship between the Old Testament and the New Testament, we can say that there is a progression from promise to fulfillment (cf. Baker, 1976, 373). This is only an approximation, for it is not true that the Old Testament is purely a collection of promises and that the New Testament merely represents their fulfillment. Promises of God were repeatedly fulfilled in Old Testament times, and in the new dispensation by no means all of God’s

5. A. A. van Ruler, *Religie en politiek*, 1945, 123.

6. Ibid., 128. Subsequently Van Ruler expressed it somewhat differently, although he kept saying that the Old Testament was the real Bible (*Die christliche Kirche und das Alte Testament* = the Christian church and the Old Testament, 1955).

promises have yet been fulfilled. Fulfillment in the New Testament does not yet constitute the final consummation of all things.

God's promises are not predictions or prognostications that cease to have relevance once they have come true. In that case part of the Old Testament would only be of historical significance to us! The church of Christ sees the coming of God to his people described in all of the Old Testament, and hears in it the announcement of salvation. Therefore the church still loves the Old Testament as the Word of God, just as it was the book of life and the book of prayer to the Son of Man.⁷ Passages from the Psalms became words from the cross. Jesus said of the Scriptures of the Old Testament: "They are they which testify of me" (John 5:39). "To him give all the prophets witness" (Acts 10:43). It says in the gospel "that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning [him]" (Luke 24:44). We must keep in mind that when God's promises become true, this does not necessarily mean that they have been completely fulfilled. The Old Testament promises of salvation open mighty perspectives pertaining to consummation and God's eternal kingdom. It says that "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea" (Isa. 11:9). This is not yet the case. We can indeed see more of it than could those who first heard the words of this prophecy. At one time the knowledge of the God of the covenant remained practically limited to a single nation, while today the Word of God reaches around the globe. But the full realization of these promises remains outstanding. Their realization in the new dispensation will be superseded by their ultimate fulfillment in the coming kingdom of God.

The Old and New Testaments are so inextricably intertwined that we cannot accept the one as the Word of God without the other. They are so interrelated that we cannot understand the New Testament in the absence of the Old Testament and vice versa.⁸ The former statement speaks for itself. Anyone engaged in Bible study discovers this. But the latter statement is equally true, although it is vehemently denied by Jews. The synagogue is of the opinion that the church reads into

7. G. C. Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, 1954, 137.

8. Cf. A. A. van Ruler, *Verwachting en voltooiing* (anticipation and fulfillment), 1978, 46: "One can and may not only interpret the Old Testament from the perspective of the New Testament, but must also interpret the New Testament from the perspective of the Old Testament."

the *Tanach* things that are not there, while the church says with Paul that in the synagogue there is a veil over the reading of the old covenant and that the locus of this veil is the heart. What is read does not penetrate to the heart; it remains closed to it (cf. 2 Cor. 3:14–15).

We reiterate that the New Testament is hidden in the Old Testament and that the Old Testament is revealed in the New Testament. These are the classic words of Augustine. But we are aware that what remains hidden is not altogether unknown!

Reformed Protestantism has learned a great deal from Calvin's insights, and it is in part because of this that the Old Testament plays a greater role in its confession, preaching, liturgy, and life of the church than elsewhere. Since Calvin, Reformed theology has appreciated the Old Testament the most positively and has treated it the most literally (Van Ruler). Calvin was preceded in this by Zwingli, Bullinger, and Bucer. His commentaries and his *Institutes* demonstrate that he does not accord less authority to the Old Testament than to the New Testament. Both of these testaments belong together and are essentially one. Calvin does not place the Old and New Testaments over against each other. However, neither does he place them on a par. When considering the relationship between the Old and New Testaments he keeps in mind both their unity and their differences, although their unity has priority, reflecting the unity of the covenant of God with his people, which is essentially always the same covenant, although its administration differs (*Institutes*, 2.10.2). A distinction is that "under the law" the people stood from afar in the forecourt of the sanctuary, while today nothing hinders their entry into it, because the veil has been rent. The veil—the reference is to 2 Corinthians 3—has been removed and we now see God face to face in Christ. In him the light of God shines more brightly than through the law and the prophets. The Old Testament points to him. He was present in the Old Testament, albeit in a veiled manner. He was indeed present with his power and grace, so that the significance of his coming predated his incarnation (cf. De Greef, 1984, 116ff., 214ff., 257). Referring to various Scripture passages (such as John 1:18; 2 Cor. 4:6; Heb. 1:1), Calvin says that God, when he appeared in the image of Jesus Christ—his own image—made himself to some extent visible, whereas his appearance had been indistinct and shadowed in the Old Testament (*Institutes*, 2.9.1).

Much of this we recognize in the Belgic Confession of Faith. It clearly differentiates between what is transitory and what is permanent: "We believe that the ceremonies and symbols of the law ceased at the coming of Christ, and that all the shadows are accomplished; so that the use of them must be abolished among Christians; yet the truth and substance of them remain with us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have their completion. In the meantime we still use the testimonies taken out of the law and the prophets to confirm us in the doctrine of the gospel, and to regulate our life in all honorableness to the glory of God, according to his will" (article 25).

One can speak of a double confrontation: with Rome and with the Anabaptists (cf. Polman, *Ned. Gel.*, 1:200–205; 3:168–79; Graafland, 1978, 21–24). In the Reformed view, Rome has relapsed into a new Judaism. But the rejection of the Anabaptist views is equally forceful. Just as Augustine had to defend the unity of the Old and

New Testaments over against the Manichaeans, Calvin and his co-religionists had to deal with “Anabaptist Radicals” to whom the Old Testament was of secondary significance.⁹ In his commentary on Luke 24:27 Calvin combats those who hold that Christ started with first principles with the intent that the disciples would gradually progress to the full gospel and would no longer be interested in the prophecies. He points out that Christ did not open the minds of the apostles so that they would understand the law on their own, but so that they would understand the Scriptures. Thus the Old Testament is indispensable for the correct insight into God’s entire revelation.

Although the books of both the Old and New Testaments are characterized by diversity, we can nevertheless speak of a single message from God. It indeed reflects the richness of his revelation that the message of salvation comes to us in such a varied form.

The unity of the Old and New Testaments does not constitute identity, for each Testament has its own character. The central message of the New Testament is what God does in Christ, in his person and in his work, and what he does through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This is of crucial importance for our personal relationship with God and for the life of the church of Christ. But salvation in Christ could be distorted in an individualistic or spiritualistic manner by ignoring prominent Old Testament perspectives, i.e., God’s creation and his guidance through history. “Man’s daily life, his interaction with others and questions with respect to marriage and the family are not exclusively human but have a direct bearing on the relationship between man and God.”¹⁰ For this reason, one report on the relationship between the Old and New Testaments concludes: “Precisely in our time with its macro-ethical and structural questions we require the breadth and depth of the Old Testament more than ever.”¹¹

It has sometimes been thought that there is a contrast between the Old and New Testaments as far as God is concerned. An expression such as “God, to whom vengeance belongeth” (Ps. 94:1) is referred to in order to underline the contrast between the two Testaments, because according to the New Testament “God is love” (1 John 4:8).

9. Cf. W. Balke, *Calvin and the Anabaptist Radicals*, trans. William J. Heynen (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1981), 98–99, 309–13.

10. J. de Groot and A. R. Hulst, *Macht en wil* (power and will), no date, 348.

11. “De verhouding van Oud en Nieuw Testament,” Rapport, opgenomen in *Kerk en theologie*, 25e jrg. (“the relationship between the Old and New Testaments,” report, published in *Church and Theology*, vol. 25): 1974, 323.

The Old Testament is seen as the book of retribution. The Old Testament would present the religion of holiness and the New Testament faith in God's love. But this view is not really tenable. It is indeed the case that in the Old Testament we encounter God in his exaltation and holiness. But he is also "merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth." This is how the announcement of his name begins in Exodus 34:67. Thus the LORD manifests his compassion, his gracious benevolence, and his covenantal faithfulness. The New Testament testifies to God's love as manifested in Christ, but also refers to his wrath (John 3:36). "Our God is a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29). "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Heb. 10:31).

Already the first few chapters of the book of Genesis are of fundamental significance for self-knowledge. Man, created in God's image, fell away from him, but God considered his state and sought him out. Thus man stands there as creature of God and sinner before God. God, who is his creator, also seeks to be his redeemer. God both demands and grants the atonement for sin (Lev. 17:11). Via the subsequent preaching of atonement through sacrificial ministry and through prophecy, all lines lead to Christ, of whom the New Testament says: "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). When Paul refers to Christ as the last Adam, the unity of the Old and New Testaments is underscored (cf. 1 Cor. 15:45; Rom. 5:12–21).

There is a distinction between the message of the coming of Christ and the message of the Mediator who has come, between the Old Testament messianic expectation and the New Testament knowledge of the person and the work of our Lord Jesus Christ, but it concerns the same Mediator, the same covenant, the same faith, and the same salvation (cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.10.2).

Although in the Old Testament, salvation is depicted in earthly colors and national tints to a greater extent than is the case in the New Testament, life in communion with God is there also a reality for all who fear the Lord. The New Testament focuses more on the spiritual and heavenly character of what God grants in Christ, but not at the expense of what believers already receive during their lives on earth. Both testaments teach us to look forward to the new heaven and the new earth, where righteousness dwells (Isa. 65:17; 66:22; 2 Peter 3:13).