

## Dr. B. Wentzel: Pastor, Theologian, Author, Apologist

Why write an article about a relatively unknown Dutch theologian in North American Reformed circles? Why choose Dr. Wentzel instead of a well-known Dutch theologian whose works are available in English? In 2007, the Christian Reformed Church in North America (CRC) celebrated its founding year – 1857. Ever since, there has been a close relationship between the Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (GKN) and the CRC, because those who contributed to its beginning were virtually all from the Netherlands. Both the GKN and CRC churches share the same Reformed roots, the same Reformed Confessions, and the same sixteenth-century church order. For many years the CRC considered the GKN as her "mother church."

In 1927, the CRC theologian Dr. Louis Berkhof said the Netherlands had a strong Reformed tradition where the Reformed people constitute a much larger percentage of its population. According to Berkhof, the prevailing mentality in North America was not favourable to the development of Calvinism. But the second World War changed not only the world, but also the church scene in the Netherlands. In 1944, a serious schism took place in the GKN, due to the conflict that centred especially around Professors Klaas Schilder and Seakle Greijdanus. Obviously, the CRC in North America could not closely follow the course of events in connection with this schism and the relationship between the two parties. When the CRC finally became aware of the split in the GKN, she chose to remain loyal to her "mother" church. After the war, a large number of emigrants left the Netherlands to settle in Canada. The majority of these immigrants came from the GKN, which influenced the CRC on both sides of the border with their Kuyperian background.

The once staunchly conservative GKN went through some traumatic theological upheavals. In the 1960s the GKN's decision to admit women to ecclesiastical offices surprised the CRC. The main causes of concern, however, were declarations and actions in connection with the doctrines and confessions of the church. Dr. Herman Wiersinga and his view on the doctrine of atonement and Dr. Harry Kuitert's undermining of the Reformed faith attracted special attention. Today, the GKN no longer exists. She united with the Evangelical Lutheran Church and the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk (Netherlands Reformed Church) to form the Protestantse Kerk in Nederland (PKN).

Where does Dr. Wentzel fit in the developments within the GKN and now the PKN? In a book discussing aspects of theology in the GKN from 1892 to 1992, Dr. Wentzel is not mentioned. Furthermore, the same book states that, in general, for current reformed theologians, historic reformed theology is no longer a point of reference. Since the 1960s it is seemingly forgotten.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Ben Wentzel (1929-) served for 37 years in five congregations of the GKN (1953-1990), taught dogmatics for 21 years at Wittenberg in Zeist (1976-1997) and since 1994 was connected with the Evangelical Theological Academy in Ede. In 1970 he received his doctorate on the basis of his thesis *Natuur en Genade* (Nature and Grace). Besides many articles and books, he wrote a seven-volume work of dogmatics from 1981-1988, which are now condensed in the two volume (746 en 792 pp.) *Hij-is-er-bij. Handboek bijbelse geloofsleer* (Handbook of Biblical doctrine), published by Kok, Kampen 2006. The title *Hij-is-er-Bij* means JHWH revealed himself to Moses under this name (Ex.3:14). With this name JHWH set the tone of His revelation and in the history of salvation.

When Wentzel's first volume of dogmatics was published, it was no less than the beginning of a phenomenon: a new reformed dogmatics. A.M. Lindeboom remarks that since Bavinck, Wentzel's volumes of dogmatics were the first ones that appeared on the Reformed scene. But he was shunned by the liberal wing of the GKN. At an exhibition in Utrecht, commemorating the Secession of 1834, there were all kinds of displays of memorabilia, including the works of the liberal theologians, Kuitert and Wiersinga, but not one of Wentzel's many works was on display, as if Kuitert and Wiersinga were the only ones who represented the spirit of the Secession. When one reads Wentzel's works, one can understand the reason why the liberal crowd shunned him. He is a confessional theologian. He believes the many creeds and confessions are a treasured inheritance. They are not relics from the ancient past, but monuments of the faithfulness of God. When new generations think that they must re-invent the truth of the Gospel, they overestimate themselves.

## **Wentzel the Theologian**

Wentzel does not introduce a "new theology." He stands on the shoulders of previous generations of orthodox Christians. He does his theology from the heart of the historic Reformed faith. He mentions his indebtedness to Dr. H. Bavinck (1854-1921), who confronted the spirit of his time with the Bible in his *Reformed Dogmatics*. He also refers to Dr. A.D. Polman (1897-1993), author of a four volume commentary on the Belgic Confession<sup>2</sup>, who was an authority on Augustine and Calvin. Wentzel says that Polman taught him faithful adherence to Scripture, discipline and self-limitation. And Dr. K. Schilder convinced him that the Bible is not a collection of loose pages in a binder, but it is an organized binder; the 66 books bound together by the covenant. The door of history opens on the hinges of the covenant. Without the covenant of grace, Israel and the church would not have existed and no book of the Bible would have come about. All the books of the Bible are bound together structurally through this covenant.

Wentzel notes we must accept the full inspiration of Scripture. We may not add to God's Word nor subtract from it. The Bible is also remarkably correct in details. There is no Biblical basis for denying the historicity of Adam and Eve as our first parents. The Christian faith does not rest on rumours but on facts, not on myth but on revelation. The author argues that denying Adam as the head of the human race is no small matter. God made a covenant with Adam in paradise. We have our origin in our first parents – Adam and Eve, who were created in the image of God. The historicity of our first parents is clearly demonstrated in the chronological list of ancestors of Noah and his sons (Gen.5). Furthermore, Luke traces the genealogy to Adam (Luke 3:23-38).

Wentzel observes that evolution is not an innocent matter. He calls it a surrogate religion, an ideology. According to the Bible there is no conflict between faith and science. Faith and science form a unit, and unbelief and foolishness is also a unit (Ps.14). He also points out that the current battle against the deity of Christ is nothing new; it is being fought throughout history. He explains that Satan – precisely through prominent persons – attacks the deity of the Son. Christians are involved in intense spiritual warfare (Eph. 6:10-20). There is a tremendous resistance to the Gospel. But even Satan is not outside of God's reach. In the end (Rev. 5-21), the Lamb of God will triumph over Satan and his demons.

Wentzel rightly states that the church is not a hotel with many rooms, but the household of faith; not a debating club, but the pillar and foundation of truth (1 Tim.3:14-16). When a church

allows false teachings, the basis of the church becomes undermined; churches either fold-up as they no longer have a message, or turn into sects with selections of truths. He warns, therefore, against false teachers. He says they play with fire and sow discord. They are also intolerant toward those who remain faithful to Scripture and the confessions. But when they are confronted personally or in public of the error of their ways, they accuse the faithful of intolerance and try to silence them. But Wentzel warns that whoever dishonours Biblical truth, eventually loses his faith.

### **Coram Deo (Before God)**

Theology is not a private hobby for the academic specialist. It is more than gathering information without personally knowing God. It belongs in the household of faith, to those who know God and worship and love His Name. Consequently, a theologian is a servant of the church. Furthermore, there should be a unity of faith, prayer and knowledge. With a mixture of reverence, trust, obedience and awe before the grandeur of the Holy Triune God, a theologian must study the Scriptures thoroughly, as well as some of the classics such as Calvin's *Institutes*. Church and theology are both bound by the Word. A theologian may not invent new truths, but must attempt to shed light on difficult questions raised by the complex issues and challenges of our times. The Holy Spirit leads us into all truth (John 16:13).

Wentzel is a praying theologian. He notes that prayer presupposes the omnipresence of a loving Father, Who is able to concentrate on the millions who call on His Name. Most chapters in his two volumes begin with a prayer, which makes it clear that he thinks through his theology in the presence of God. He states that intercessory prayers change the course of history. Moses' plea on behalf of Israel influenced God so strongly that He changed His plan to destroy the Israelites (Ex.32:32). Wentzel's intense longing is to see believers deepen their relationship with God with his theological work. He testifies that "only through Him was I able to write this work. Soli Deo Gloria."

### **Unity of the Church**

Wentzel's dogmatics is not narrowly denominational. He is within the broad Reformed tradition of Calvin. In our world of many denominations, he seeks the unity of the church. It is not man, but God Who laid the basis for the unity of all His people out of every nation and tribe in the covenant of Abraham and his descendants (Eph.2:11-22). We are the people of God, called to serve the Church in the Kingdom of God. But we may not seek unity at the expense of essential truths. Liberty of doctrine results in divisions and confusion; it destroys the solidarity of the church, whose hallmark is to follow Christ in obedience to His Word. But when we stand steadfast in the truth, we can approach believers from other traditions without fear, and travel together toward the full understanding of God's truth which we will not get until the Lord comes again in glory to usher in the new heaven and earth.

Why seek the unity of the church? Are we not busy enough keeping the flock together, let alone seek unity with other churches? Wentzel argues that for the sake of mission, the churches must become serious about the unity of the visible church. They should seek fellowship with each other or unity, at least help each other to remain steadfast in the faith and correct each other when necessary. How do we relate to each other? What do non Christians observe in us? Do they see love or animosity? A divided, quarrelling, church blemishes the Triune God and repels unbelievers. A loving church wins hearts for Him.

## **The Church and Israel**

Does the church still have a special link with Israel? The church is engrafted into the Israel and shares its covenant in a spiritual sense (Rom. 4:9-11). After Pentecost, believing Gentiles became fellow citizens of the Kingdom and share in the promises of the covenant. They are heirs of the covenant promises, and belong to the same household of God. Through Christ's sacrifice, God overcame the enmity between both Jew and Gentile (Eph. 2:16-17). Israel as the people of the covenant has rights to the land promised to Abraham. As an ethnic unit, it has a right to its own territory. The reinstatement of a remnant of Jews in the state of Israel in 1948 is a revelation of God's plan of redemption on the way to the second coming. It is one of the signs of the times. God decided the twentieth century was ripe for the reinstatement of the Jewish nation in the promised land. But what rights do the Palestinians have? The state of Israel ought to consider their rights. Palestinians in turn should recognize that the Jews according to the promises of God have historic rights to Canaan.

Wentsel is a strong supporter of missions to the Jews. Because of Pentecost, the church must pass on the gospel of salvation to Israel, God's first love. Therefore, there is a special urgency to introduce the Jewish people to their Messiah. There will be a remnant of Jews, who will follow Jesus as the Messiah (Rom. 11:1-10). Messianic congregations play a vital role in proclaiming the Gospel to Jew and Gentile. By the year 2000 there were about fifty Messianic congregations in Israel who confessed Jesus as King.

## **Contextual**

Wentsel is not an ivory tower theologian. He points to the consequences of holding the truth of Scripture. Don't hide your faith in a closet. Don't privatize the Gospel. We are not from the world, but we may not withdraw from public life. Show your faith through works. The Gospel is for the world. The service of the Lord has also social-economic consequences. Our convictions should control what we think and do. Christ is Lord and King over all of life – the state, work, education. Wentsel observes that a secular public school which does not acknowledge God is "strange, peculiar, abnormal." Normal is the Christian school, which confesses man as the image bearer of God and stresses the honour of God and the coming of His Kingdom in accordance with God's original intention. Wentsel also notes that as stewards of God's creation, we must take care of the environment. But social involvement doesn't mean being a silent witness. He also asks: How do we overcome world hunger? How do we confront social injustice? We are called to love our neighbour, **and** to preach the Gospel of reconciliation through Jesus Christ.

## **Islam**

The Middle East issues have strong religious dimensions to which the military and diplomatic efforts must pay attention. Islam is more than a religion of private devotion. Many in the West don't have the faintest idea about the central place the Koran has in public life in the Middle East. For example, all the radio broadcasts in Egypt begin and end with a reading from the Koran. Wentsel, therefore, believes that a theologian cannot act as if Islam does not exist. Islam, being a theistic religion that proclaims the God of creation and providence, requires a theological approach. But Christians will stumble when they accommodate Muslims by surrendering the content of their faith. Wentsel's dogmatics show his in-depth knowledge of

Islam. Throughout his two volumes he constantly engages Islam, compares its teachings with the teachings of the Bible. What does the Koran have to say about Biblical doctrines? Is Allah the same as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? How does a Muslim desiring democracy square it with the Islam doctrine of theocracy? Why the persecution of Christians in Islamic nations? Does it make any difference whether someone is a Muslim or a Christian? Why is it so difficult for Muslims to break with Islam? Some of the reasons are family pressure, shunning by the community, death threats, or loss of a job.

We should try to win Muslims to the Lord. Islam is spreading rapidly in Europe also and in North America. If we want to see Muslims come to Christ, we must know their mindset. We must become acquainted with the teachings of Islam but also know what our own faith teaches. We must also preach the Word. Muslims come to Christ through personal contact, through the Scripture or Christian literature, through a Christian school, or modern communications – such as the internet, TV, and radio. And we must demonstrate the Gospel through life style evangelism. Muslims rarely read the Bible, or not at all. For them, Christians are the living Bible. They read about God through the love Christians have for fellow Christians. the help they offer when in need. They rejoice with those who are rejoicing and weep with those who are weeping.

Wentzel's discussion of Islam is a marvellous contribution to the ongoing questions raised by this religion since 9/11. Considering the many Muslims in the Netherlands, and also in North America, his apologetic is more than welcome. I hope, therefore, that the sections on Islam will find a translator. They are profound, insightful, and educational. It would be unfortunate if Wentzel's exposition of Islam remains limited to Dutch readers.

## **Missions**

Should the church still support missions? Are Christians not arrogant with their claim that not all roads lead to God? The Sender made Abraham and his people a blessing for all nations. Their election had a missionary purpose. God chooses His own to witness to His name. The Lord of Easter mandated the church through the Trinitarian Great Commission to go into all the world to proclaim that there is only one way to God, and to make disciples (Matt28:18-20). Jesus is not one of the ways; Jesus said that He is **the only way to the Father** (John 14:6). The Jew, Peter, proclaimed that whether Jew or Gentile, there is **only one way** to come to God, the way of Christ (Acts 4:11-12). Truth and falsehood cannot mix into a false synthesis. The Bible teaches the twofold continuation of life – either in heaven and the new earth or in hell and perdition. In other words, the heart of the Gospel is the salvation of believers and the damnation of the godless. Therefore, witnessing is more than passing on information. It also consists of making an appeal to the heart and conscience, and a call to repentance. In our multicultural and pluralistic society, the church as a minority may not withdraw out of fear for intimidation and withdraw into isolation. The Gospel has never been popular. The Trinity, uniqueness of Christ, the cross, and the doctrine of hell are still the greatest stumbling blocks. The proclamation of Jesus Christ as the only way to salvation has always been fiercely resisted in one way or another. It even leads to martyrdom.

## **Evaluation**

Wentzel's work is valuable for theological instruction and personal reflection. With brief but pointed summaries he sketches the positions of various theologians and offers his evaluation.

The author inclines to perfectionism. He is so thorough. His bibliography of theological works consulted is phenomenal. He positions himself in the European multicultural society. He touches upon historical events, and on contemporary political, as well as, social issues. He often refers to current events in the Netherlands, and makes use of statistics to illustrate his case. But this also means that his work is time bound.

I have great admiration for Wentsel's dogmatics and have been blessed by it, but I am disappointed that he accepts as a matter of fact women in ecclesiastical office. He states that the spirit of Pentecost breaks down hierarchy and discrimination between brothers and sisters, although it does not mean that everyone is qualified for office. Sadly, Wentsel does not interact with theologians, who disagree with his position from a Biblical perspective. There are numerous studies both in English and in Dutch, which clearly demonstrate that women may not serve in ecclesiastical office.

Wentsel hopes his dogmatics will be a blessing to many, foster the growth of the church and the blossoming of theology to the praise and glory of His holy name. He declares that theology is amongst the most rewarding, fulfilling, and genuinely exciting subjects anyone can ever hope to study. And so it is.

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