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Best of “The Reformed Journal” (Book Review)

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America” were especially helpful for me in this regard). In recovering the meaning of the basics of being Reformed, he is then able to trace out, from that basis, a Reformed approach to cultural issues. This sometimes leads to surprising conclusions, such as the distinctly Reformed *rapprochement* with Anabaptist thought that he offers, in critique of many in the Reformed tradition (including his earlier self; see 111).

The book is not perfect. Organizationally, the connection between the essays is not always clear, and the overall collection is not neatly organized or thematically unified (beyond the general relation to “public theology” broadly defined). The lack of a meaningful introduction to the volume (the one that exists is a little over two pages in length, and is more of a forward or preface than a real introduction) is emblematic of this difficulty. Further,

several important passages from Kuyper, Schilder, and others are directly quoted in different chapters and, hence, get repeated multiple times over the course of the book. While not in itself problematic, this repetition does contribute to the feeling that the book is a collection of disparately published papers (which it is), rather than one coherent volume on its own.

Still, it is a testament to Richard Mouw that such a collection of essays can so poignantly drive home the importance of thinking “in the line of” Kuyper for us today. All those who fancy themselves as thinking, working, and living in that same “line” will find out more about themselves and their community by attending to the articles contained in this book. Hopefully, this will help us stay true to the Spirit we love while we engage meaningfully with our culture.

Bratt, James D., and Ronald A. Wells. *The Best of “The Reformed Journal.”* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012. 321 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8028-6702-5. Reviewed by David Schelhaas, emeritus professor of English, Dordt College.

What surprises the reader who picks up this collection is the sheer brilliance of the writing. Good writing, first of all, requires good thinking, and most of the essays in this volume are models of clear thought presented in elegant prose—prose that is not stylistically flashy or gaudy with metaphor and imagery but measured and balanced. Spanning forty years, from 1951 to 1990, and covering most of the social and theological concerns of Christian Reformed people living in that time period, the essays in this collection remind us that during this time, Calvin College had a cluster of brilliant scholar-writers who were eager to give to Christian Reformed laity a Christian perspective on the important issues of the day. The list of contributors reads like a Who’s Who of CRC intellectuals: Boer, Daane, Smedes, Stob, Zylstra, Wolterstorff, DeKoster, Mouw, Timmerman, Plantinga, and many more. Not many women wrote in the *Journal*, especially in the fifties and sixties—theology and philosophy departments, and college faculties in general, being largely male conclaves.

What might surprise the younger reader of this review is that *The Reformed Journal* was read by the laity of the church. My parents and uncles and aunts—none of them college educated—had copies of *The Banner*, *Torch and Trumpet*, and *The Reformed Journal* lying on their coffee tables, and they read them, for they took seriously the concept of a “world and life view.” I don’t think this was especially unusual in the rural homes of CRC-dom in the fifties and sixties.

The pledge that the *Journal* editors made in the first issue states that “as servants of Christ and of his church, we shall endeavor in all our writing to serve the church and her communion.” You will not find many footnotes in the articles of the *Journal*, probably because of this pledge to serve the church community. The articles are

never long, and the writers use a scholarly prose intended for non-scholars—prose that is neither condescending nor pretentious yet accessible to the reader of good will. None of the essays are over four pages long—though some have been abridged to attain this brevity.

The ninety articles of this collection are organized into three chronological sections: 1951-1962, 1963-1977, 1978-1990. Within each of these “time capsules,” the essays are arranged in thematic units that are similar though not identical as we move from one time period to the next, units such as “Education,” “Religion and Society,” “On Evangelicalism,” “Politics,” “Education and the Arts,” “Church and Theology,” and “On Gender.” The essays cover many subjects, and, not surprisingly, some of the same subjects come up in every time period—“the arts,” for example, and “politics” and “education.” Some are more decade-specific: race in the sixties and gender in the eighties. Interestingly, since the *Journal* stopped publication in 1990, there is not an article—at least in this collection—about homosexuality.

Perhaps the most striking thing to me about the early articles is how relevant they are to issues of our time. Here’s Harry Boer in his essay “The Cathedral,” which uses the cathedral as both a literal manifestation and a metaphor for human appreciation for history:

It [the cathedral] says that God is the Lord of History. Therefore it cuts the never-aging rock out of the eternal hills and fashions it into an enduring structure. [. . .] In such a cathedral one never stands alone. One stands in the consciousness of communion with and indebtedness to the past, and of a stewardship to discharge in the present and transmit to the future. It is this sense of his-

tory, the sense that builds cathedrals of stone or stately mansions of the soul, that we have lost in the Christian Reformed Communion.

Here's Henry Stob in "Fundamentalism and Political Rightism," skewering free-will Arminian theology:

It means that there are in the world a multitude of personal centers into which God cannot enter until man "sovereignly" opens the door to Him. God can knock at the door, but it will be opened to him only when the individual autonomously decides it shall be opened. Man is "free." The human soul is "inviolable." No one may enter it—not even God—except by permission. The human soul is basically impervious to grace; it is "independent" of God. It is impregnable in its unqualified liberty and individuality. Man in this view, just as in modernity and Communism, is basically autonomous.

Or observe how Lester DeKoster demonstrates how John Calvin's policies in Geneva as well as his writings "have stood, in the large, for the positive intervention of the state in the social and economic life of the people for the general welfare" and that this (at least up until 1958) "has been both the intent and result of much legislation devised, sponsored and in large measure enacted by the Democrats" (of the United States Congress).

Reading these essays is not simply a journey down nostalgia lane but an opportunity to re-engage key issues by encountering solid, biblically based wisdom from thirty, forty, and fifty years ago. Is your Christian college struggling with issues of academic freedom? Henry Stob's

essay on the subject might enlarge your understanding. Does evangelicalism still drive you crazy from time to time? Read Smedes and Wells and Henry. Do you have questions about our nation's continuing obsession with waging wars? Read Mouw and Smedes and Juhnke and read Van Der Weele's poignant "Twenty Years after the Bomb." Is the Palestinian Question still a question? Read DeVries and Wolterstorff. Do you wonder what the Dekker "Love of God" issue was all about during the early sixties? Read Harold Dekker himself and Peter De Jong in rebuttal.

There are lovely essays on baseball and golf, portraits of Buechner and Solzhenitsyn and Schaeffer, analyses of classic films, and advice on looking at art. You will encounter thoughtful reflections on grand-sounding topics of the kind we seldom see attempted today: John Timmerman on "The American Way of Life" and Roderick Jellema on "Who Is Twentieth-Century Man?"

The brevity of the essays makes the book an ideal airplane companion. For anyone who was Christian Reformed during the early decades covered in this collection, it would be a fetching gift. Taken all together, these essays are a moveable feast, the most enjoyable collection of non-fiction I have read in a long, long time.

Yet I also feel sort of melancholy as I finish the collection. These essays were written by writers and for readers who cared deeply about how the Reformed faith worked itself out in daily life. I sense that those days have passed. Many CRC folk today have completely bought into the agenda of Evangelicalism and the Religious Right, an agenda which is sometimes in direct conflict with a Reformed perspective and sometimes simply neglectful of significant issues that involve living faithfully before the face of our God.