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Abstract

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Do Modern Christians Know God Differently?: A Review of Chapters 4-5 of *Neo-Calvinism*

Geoffrey Fulkerson

February 6, 2023

Title: *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction*

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“When one takes too much time traveling, one eventually becomes a stranger in one’s own country,” commented René Descartes. He spoke in travel images, but he had in mind the danger of studying the past. His *Discourse on the Method* continues, “and when one is too curious about what commonly took place in past ages, one usually remains quite ignorant of what is taking place in one’s own country.”

This early modern thinker in this early modern text seems like a fitting place from which to begin this “orthodox, yet modern” reading of Cory C. Broth and N. Gray Sutanto’s new book, *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction*. In one sense, the book seems to have this sense of contemporariness throughout—both in relation to the authors writing and to the authors being written about. And yet, there is also a significant difference. Unlike Descartes, who sets himself against his past, these neo-Calvinists, both then and now, seek to keep a foot firmly planted in both terrains, or what Brock and Sutanto call “orthodox” and “modern.” Bringing these two threads together and in conversation with Descartes, matters of method, or more generally, knowledge and epistemology, seem to remain a contested part of the terrain. It is with this same spirit that I set out on the task given to me; specifically, to review chapters 4 and 5, on general and special revelation.

Revelation, Scripture, and the Knowledge of God: a brief review

In chapter 4, Brock and Sutanto continue their articulation of the distinctive theological contribution of neo-Calvinism in relation to the doctrine of general revelation. As the title suggests (“Revelation and Reason”), the chapter is about something like the relation between Divine self-disclosure and faculty psychology, specifically as it relates to God’s ubiquitous presence and activity in creation and our response or receptivity to it. As I understand their presentation, the account of revelation is “orthodox” in its affirmation of reason in our reception of and response to revelation; it is “yet modern” insofar as it relocates reason to a

reflective role downstream of what is variously described as our preconscious, affective response, that which “lies beneath all our cognitive and volitional activity.”¹ The “philosophical flexibility” and “eclecticism”² of the Bavincks and Kuyper especially drew upon the Romantic philosophy³, but I presume other philosophical sources might also be invoked. This affective dimension aids their development of a “holistic” account of revelation, recognizing both the dimensions of the human psyche and the sense of “dependence” that we have upon God.

Still attentive to matters of knowledge, chapter 5 turns our attention explicitly to the doctrine of Scripture. While conversations on neo-Calvinism often give attention to common grace and eschatology, Brock and Sutanto note how important the doctrine of Scripture is for both Kuyper and Bavinck. And once again, we find an “orthodox, yet modern” articulation of this central Christian doctrine. In the first major movement of the chapter, special attention is given to the way that Scripture and the theological sciences are related to the other sciences. As it occurs in this first part of the chapter, an “organic” view of Scripture refers to the unity of all knowledge and therefore the distinctive contribution that all fields of inquiry are able to make. If questions about the relations between the disciplines (and, at least implicitly, the university) make up the first movement of the chapter, the second concerns Kuyper’s and Bavinck’s doctrines of inspiration, respectively. And here again, we find an “orthodox, yet modern” account. The classic doctrine is affirmed, but it’s also recut with new categories and new concerns—specifically with greater sensitivity to the humanness of the authors. Whereas the first part of the chapter tied the organic to the unity and diversity in the world, the topic of inspiration focuses our attention on the organic nature of scripture itself—as having a unity but not a mechanistic unicity.

Some ongoing reflections

Considering how fervently various accounts of reason and knowledge have appeared since the enlightenment and continue on to this day, it seems quite reasonable to expect careful appropriation to be found in the area of epistemology and the corresponding theological loci. I have some questions about the actual accounts. Yet, on the whole, Brock and Sutanto synthesize wide bodies of content and an array of rather complex concepts and arguments into succinct summary chapters. We’re given an account of revelation that is orthodox, yet modern, holistic, and organic.

In my brief reflections on these two chapters, I’d like to focus on what I take to be their wider objectives of the book, the place where description meets contemporary engagement. For chapter 5, I’m especially curious what ongoing significance they find in these developments. On the one hand, how have these theologians, in their scholarship and reception, genuinely promoted better interdisciplinary scholarship (something for which the church still struggles)? On the other hand, beyond what’s already happening, what insight does this organic view of Scripture offer that might advance the plethora of scholarly conversations related to Scripture? How does an organic view of Scripture, say, relate to biblical theology, or, more recently, theological interpretation of Scripture, or other new trends like figural interpretation?

For chapter 4, I worry that I might too quickly descend into technical conversations with Brock and Sutanto, but I do wonder about the status of reason in the chapter, and specifically whether the account of revelation has room for pre-reflective forms of (rational) thought. On the one hand, I appreciate their account of revelation, and specifically the form of life and experience to which they tie it. In these moves, they seem quintessentially reformed, recalling not only Calvin's close tie between the knowledge of self and knowledge of God, but also his "seed of religion" and "sense of the divine."⁴ On the other hand, I'm not persuaded that expressions of faith like worship and prayer, for example, or various other ways that we respond to God, are pre-conscious or non-cognitive. This is not to say that I disagree with the authors (then or now). I'm merely trying to understand why an "affective" account of revelation must be unconscious, nonrational, nonconceptual, etc., and what it would even mean to say this.

There might, of course, be a simple answer: the scholarly status of epistemology and related concepts like action, embodiment, perception, emotions, intentionality, etc., are not the same today as they were then. There was a dearth of resources available to them, one might say, and they did well with what they had at hand. Again, this seems like a fair and, indeed, exemplary account of what it means to be orthodox, yet modern. Although many of us may not be very scholastic anymore, I think a charitable reading of Aquinas would say the same of him. But then, I suppose, I'm left with one specific, though quite open-ended question: Assuming that their eclectic philosophical appropriations were not arbitrary, by what criteria or intuitions or concerns (or however we might articulate their intentions) did they select their interlocutors, sources, concepts, and concerns? My question is less about boundaries—when does one cease to be neo-Calvinist—and more about direction—what exactly were the guiding impulses that shaped their theological orientation, and in what sense might that continue to guide the future of neo-Calvinism and reformed and orthodox thought more generally?

I realize that these questions exceed the parameters of the chapters. But I hope that I've also remained in the spirit of the book, not merely through a nostalgic return to old terrain, but rather by following these dedicated guides as we continue on in the pilgrimage of faith. Brock and Sutanto have certainly provided us a valuable work in recalling the theological key to the map, one that hasn't always been given its fair due.

This review is the second in a series of five that will engage "Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction". Neo-Calvinism is a distinctive of Dordt's historical background.

1. pg. 75; similar statements throughout

2. pg. 96
3. two examples are Schleiermacher and Schoepenhauer
4. Although not immediately related to the argument of the book, there is an important adjacent conversation within the reformed tradition related to the status of knowledge in Calvin. For a good summary, see Richard Muller, "Fides and Cognito in Relation to the Problem of Intellect and Will in the Theology of John Calvin," in *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (New York: Oxford Press, 1999), 159-188.