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A Reform(ul)ational Life of Faith: A review of *Faith Life and Theology: A Reorientation*, John C. Vander Stelt



by Shaun Stiemsma

Reading John C. Vander Stelt’s posthumously published *magnum opus* is not a task for the faint of heart. First, it is enormously ambitious: it attempts, in its nearly six hundred pages, both to dissect the history of Christian theology, with a particular focus on the Dutch Reformed tradition, and to connect theology to the faith lives of everyday Christians, as he intends to cast a vision of theology that will “inspire all students and educators, scholars and professors, and preachers and doctors, newscasters and authors, experts in justice and technology, entertainment and recreation, bank-

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ers and farmers,” and more (582). Second, most of what the book has to say is de-constructive, working through key figures in theology to point out the problems in what he refers to as “accommodational” theology that draws too freely on Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, with only a few chapters dedicated to constructing what he presents as a truer vision of theology, a vision focused on the study of faith life, rather than on abstract, rationalized conceptions of God. Third, the book was not quite complete when Vander Stelt died, and portions of the book show this quite clearly, as long sections of excerpted quotes remain without clear connections or explanation and some portions read more like outlined lists than fully realized analyses. However, the most significant challenge for me as a reader was the sense that the book was an attempt to capture the life’s work, in abstract and abstruse thought and in passionate and loving action, of its author. In writing this last work, Vander Stelt bequeaths his life’s great endeavor in written form: trying to right the ship of reformational thinking and acting to be more obedient to God’s central law of love.

The book’s primary argument is against the influence of pagan thought—particularly that of Plato and Aristotle—on all Christian theology, including what we mean by the study of theology and how we view faith and reason, which impacts all we do as Christians. Vander Stelt opens his book with

a quick claim of what he holds true, and then passes judgement on these philosophers so commonly held as consistent with Christian thought: “God created humans to take care of his creation in a covenant-centered way. Rejection of His ‘covenant’ with the world He created is evident in the ‘religious’ conflict of major Greek thinkers as Socrates (c. 470-399 BC), Plato (428-348 BC), and Aristotle (384-322 BC) in their probing into the nature of such basic terms as reality, truth, certainty, philosophy, epistemology, and even theology” (xiv). After

theology as a field of study. Growing out of a view of humans in which the thinking, or rational, part is the authority, Christians accept a view of God that must be logical and rationalized, leading to a faulty view of the relationship between faith and reason, and theology becomes a rational science with God as its object, as botany is a rational science with plants as its object. According to Vander Stelt, these views result in a theology that is based on speculative claims about the nature of God, a purpose that has no support in Scripture. Thus, Vander Stelt’s

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condemning the Greek philosophical triumvirate, he explains two essential complaints against their ongoing influence on Christian thinking. The first is an acceptance amongst Christians of “faculty psychology,” the view of humans as having the distinct faculties of thinking, willing, and feeling, to which many Christians have simply added “believing” as an additional faculty. Vander Stelt argues that not only is this view of human nature based in pagan—that is, *directionally* or *religiously* disobedient to God’s covenant, in Vander Stelt’s terms—philosophy rather than Scripture, but it also has distorted epistemology and anthropology for Christians ever since. For example, he claims that “implied in any faculty psychology is a questionable, and even unbiblical, view of good and evil. It assumes that the human intellect can know truth and guide the other two human abilities of the soul. Only when both will and feelings obey the truth(s) of the intellect can humans live a good, or virtuous, life. Evil arises when the human will and passions refuse to be guided by the truth(s) of the intellect” (148). Thus, he argues, Christians focus on logically correct action rather than covenantally obedient action.

His second major complaint against the Greek pagan influence is the way in which it has shaped

book intends to sweep away this impact and build instead a new vision: “The truth of God’s ‘Wisdom, Power and Glory’ calls for constant *religious* and ‘structural’ renewal in the way we think, teach, preach, write, . . . by being *religiously* humbler, and in a more radical, Christian study of ‘pisteology’ which aims to replace speculative metaphysical thinking with a form of probing ‘reformational’ thinking” (582). This central claim—that theology ought to be replaced with *pisteology*—gives meaning and purpose to the whole work, and in those portions when he constructs his pisteological claim positively, Vander Stelt is nearly rapturous in exploring the scope and meaning of such a pursuit, which he says is “integral to reforming the *structure* of all faith life” to be more and more in line with God’s design for human flourishing in all things (227).

Vander Stelt structures the book with a clear emphasis on his agenda to deconstruct much of what has come before in theology. In Part I, Vander Stelt establishes his claim by explaining the state of things in theology as an academic field, tracing the problem of the influence of Greek thinking on theology historically, starting with the Roman Catholic tradition from Augustine to Anselm and Aquinas, who establish a heavily Platonic

and Aristotelian “scholastic theology.” Then in the Reformation these emphases are maintained by Calvin and Beza, who miss the opportunity to develop a truly *reformational* (a key distinction for Vander Stelt, as opposed to merely *reformed*) view of theology, ontology, epistemology and more. These same emphases, under what Vander Stelt claims is a too-broad view of Common Grace, are carried forward by Kuyper and Bavinck into the Dutch reformed tradition. In Part II, which he calls “Reform(ul)ation,” he explores the development of thought in Herman Dooyeweerd and Dirk Vollenhoven, using their thought to lead into his own ideas about theology as pisteology—a study oriented toward studying the human expression of faith rather than a theology that focuses on God as an object—about the origin and nature of religious conflict and diversity, and about issues of biblical interpretation. Part III again finds Vander Stelt unpacking views he disagrees with, working through Roman Catholic faith statements of the past 150 years and how leading figures from Calvin College and Calvin Theological Seminary, including entire chapters on Alvin Plantinga and Nicholas Wolterstorff, have taken reformed thought on an “accommodational” path of theology, following scholastic and Roman Catholic teaching more closely than the developments of the reformed ideas he cites in Part II. Finally, in Part IV, he offers an alternative to these figures in a fascinating chapter on H. Evan Runner, a philosophy professor at Calvin whose works and writing are not as well known as those figures he cites in Part III, but whose ideas and life-mission Vander Stelt feels a clear sympathy for. He follows this chapter with a closing chapter of his own view of the path forward, the “Reorientation” his title calls for.

The scope and sequencing of the book are impressive, but the work spends so much time expounding the reasons for disagreeing with significant figures—well over three hundred of the nearly six hundred pages are dedicated to figures he is critical of—that the positive construction of his ideas feels less complete than the articulation of what he disagrees with. From its initial negation of Greek philosophy, Vander Stelt’s book proceeds through most of its figures with a negative bent. Post-Reformation, he complains first of the impact

of Melancthon: “it is not surprising that eventually in Reformed circles ‘doctrines’ were viewed in an objective, intellectual, propositional, and abstract way, and ‘faith’ life was thought of in a primarily subjective, affective, emotional and imaginative practical way” (49). With the establishment of Calvinism, he laments Beza’s continuing impact: “Regrettably, first slowly and tacitly, then subtly and pervasively and, finally, rapidly and destructively, the worm of scholastic thinking wriggled into significant curricular and pedagogical issues in especially philosophy and theology” (52). Dominant Dutch reformed figures are seen as positive developments, but his summary of Bavinck’s impact is still critical: “Unfortunately, his Christian thinking was not sufficiently radical or reformational to reject scholastic anthropology based on the three classic Greek faculties of speculation (mind), ethics (will), and emotion (feelings)” (98), and Kuyper fares no better: he is “still traditional in his (philosophical, anthropological, and epistemological) thinking.” Even Dooyeweerd, whom Vander Stelt cites as a significant starting point for the reformulation he endorses, falls short of his ideal, as he acknowledges, “Regarding ‘the integral role of faith in leading, and integrating, the diversity of life,’ he developed a more refined view of life-encompassing Christian faith. However, he still retained a scholastic remnant about “faith” and “religion” (174). His chapters on more recent figures, especially coming so late in the book, perhaps most thoroughly reflect the negating spirit of the work, as he claims, “both Wolterstorff and Plantinga have advocated a philosophy of scholastic ‘Realism’” (503), accepting and accommodating pagan philosophy in their thought. Further, he suggests that their established Reformed Epistemology accepts “that ‘reason’ (*philosophy* and *epistemology* of Aquinas and Augustine) can be combined with ‘faith’ (*theology* of Augustine and Calvin) without having to ‘reform’ the scholastic reason-faith and faith-reason tradition” (501). Although it is understandable that one must tear down what has been established in order to construct something new, the emphasis on deconstruction in the book, together with its driving idea that previous thinkers are not “reformational” enough, cannot help but suggest the great divisions in our churches and institutions today.

Nonetheless, Vander Stelt intends to create a unifying vision in his book, and he acknowledges and addresses the problem of divisiveness directly in the book, both divisions between groups of Christians and between Christians and non-Christians, and he puts forth his own view of theology as a better way of understanding these divisions. In his view, disagreements over divisive creedal statements or speculative aspects regarding the nature of God are based on a faulty view of what theology is. All humans must respond to the covenant that

book, he draws readers toward a faith—including theology, epistemology, and anthropology—that seeks to understand the proper obedient response to God rather than the proper logical statements about God. He casts a vision for Christian living in a way that is faithful without being “biblicist” or scholastic, celebrating a church that is “focused on Scripture reading, a Spirit-prompted ‘hearing’—not debating and arguing about—God’s liberating Word for life and, especially, for such disciplines (*wetenschappen*) as philosophy, education, socio-

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God offers, and the “antithesis” between true faith and apostasy is clear, as one accepts God’s gift and responds to the call of his law of love with faithful action, while the other rejects the gift and places faith in false versions of God, human agencies, or reason itself. The distinctions between Christians, he says, should form the true basis of theology, which he claims should not be the abstract study of God as a subject of rational scientific inquiry, but should be “pisteology,” the study of faith life, the outgrowth of worship of God, which varies between denominations and congregations, and takes different shape in all different walks of life. With this focus, theology can become a unifying field, one which evaluates faith life relative to the law of love and God’s created, inscripturated, and incarnated Word.

For all its forays into comparative religion, abstract philosophy, and obscure history, the positive assertions that Vander Stelt makes in the book are significant and grounded in the “law of love” that is at the center of God’s covenant with human beings. Thus, Vander Stelt makes clear it is not simply that a theology which accepts Greek “faculty psychology” is something he disagrees with; it is something that distorts people’s ability to respond faithfully to God’s call to love him with all they are and to love their neighbors as themselves. Throughout the

economic and political studies, literature, and Bible conferences” (543).

Perhaps the most engaging chapter of Vander Stelt’s entire work is his analysis of the writings and work of H. Evan Runner, a former Calvin College philosophy professor with whom he finds common ground on theology and faith life. His mode in this chapter is almost narrative, as he tells the life-story and impact of this one faithful follower of Christ and leader of Christians. Runner, like Vander Stelt himself at Dordt, served as a professor for a long time, but did not gain great acclaim as an author and thinker, even within Dutch reformed circles. Vander Stelt emphasizes not merely Runner’s ideas, but his whole life of service and the heart that it grew out of: “What motivated Runner as *philosopher* at CC [Calvin College], *sponsor* of the Groen Club, *public speaker* at certain events, *adviser* to students and organizations interested in integrally Christian living, was that he was *someone* who ... stressed God’s covenant promises fulfilled in Christ Jesus and sealed by the Spirit” (514). Reading his chapter on Runner, one cannot help but feel that Vander Stelt himself seems to be reflecting on his own life’s work and his effort at teaching and developing a reformational worldview and guiding institutions that do the work the Word calls people to. It is the integral faith life he celebrates in Runner,

explaining that he “rejected being a Christian *and* a philosopher, or relying on faith *and* reason, but pressed for being a Christian thinker, philosopher, or teacher” (516) who refuses to accept an “accommodational” theology that draws too much on pagan sources and depends on reason apart from faith for its basis, but also agitates against a world-flight perspective, seen in both a “biblicist” perspective on faith and the traditional Dutch reformed triad of “church-home-school” as the extent of the scope of faith.

Vander Stelt’s book, and particularly his work on *Runner*, represents an opportunity to re-open the kinds of discussions that Vander Stelt and *Runner* were contributors to in their own time. The idea that a truly “reformational” perspective can be developed is one that Vander Stelt calls his readers

to, and one that we can take up in response to the work of his life and book. Vander Stelt insists on the difference between direction and development, as the direction to which our hearts are to be drawn is God-ward, but the development of our institutions, practices, and more is open to constant reformation, as God’s ongoing revelation and development of his creation calls us to continue to develop our faith lives in line with his Word. This faith life is never fully established, never solved, but always developing, and that is what we can strive toward as we live out our faith. This is what Vander Stelt’s book is a call for—though I called it a *magnum opus* in my first sentence, it is more properly called an *opus vitae*, the work of a life—and Vander Stelt’s life’s work calls us to strive to develop our faith life with a reformational spirit.