
Seeking and Finding

Geoffrey Thomas

Professor Gerrit Cornelis Berkouwer will be 90 years of age this year. Retired from his chair as professor of theology at the Free University, Amsterdam, for twenty years, more than two dozen of his books have been translated into English. He lectured in that wonderful stately building where the Free University began, and taught capacity audiences of theological students in the post war atmosphere of Europe.

Every year he brought out a study of some aspect of Biblical teaching, never in any logical order. The doctrine of sin was written the year after a book on election, and a book on the second coming of Christ followed that. In 1949 his first study, FAITH AND SANCTIFICATION, appeared, which was translated into English in 1952.

Shortly after his retirement he wrote A HALF CENTURY OF THEOLOGY which appeared in America in 1977, but in the last few years he has published another book of 436 pages entitled SEEKING AND DOING (which is yet to be translated into English). It is similar in scope to the earlier book of remembrances and assessments of European Christianity. Oh dear, I don't understand Dutch, but I am glad for a synopsis and overview of the book which Dr Raymond Zorn has done in the November edition of *Christian Renewal*.

The Soul at Death

We soon learn that G C Berkouwer has a high regard for Dooyeweerd's Christian philosophy – the so-called *philosophy of cosmonomic law*. He recognises that Dooyeweerd's suspicion of any dualism coming into Christianity (even of man being body and soul) has caused biblical problems. When Dooyeweerd was once asked what if anything remained of the soul at death, he replied "Nothing!" He did not see this being inconsistent with maintaining man's continued existence after death.

There is one position which seems the fatal flaw in Berkouwer's theology. He claims that "the Gospel is not an eternal, timeless truth which, once for all fixed and formulated, can be transmitted without consideration of the period in question" (p 47). This is the virtual thesis of his book, and proves to be the rationale for many of the changes which have taken place in his denomination, eg joining the World Council of Churches, changing their official attitude to the opening chapters of Genesis, modifying the verbal authority of Scripture so that it was binding in what it teaches *concerning the doctrine of salvation*, giving women office in the church, rejecting the Bible's teaching on reprobation, and tolerating homosexuality. His denomination veers ever more to the left, theologically and ethically.

Scripture and Nature - Two Books?

A H de Hartog was a colleague of Berkouwer and a lecturer in the Free University before the war, and he had influenced Berkouwer. Calvin's making Scripture the exclusive spectacles of revelation, de Hartog considered to be unnecessary because "both in Scripture and in nature surprising insight is given of God's unfolding activity in history" (p 105). This idea that God has given us "two books" results in general revelation being given equal authority with Scripture. It also makes man dependent upon "experts" to tell him what is to be regarded as revelation, and what is to be regarded as superseded.

When Berkouwer's book HOLY SCRIPTURE appeared in 1975, J I Packer wrote that the author berated American fundamentalists and others for their *docetic* concept of Scripture (not taking the Bible's humanness seriously, the Dutchman was saying), and their stress on formal biblical inerrancy, a concept which Berkouwer finds needless and unhelpful.

God - Man's Horizontal Partner?

When Berkouwer examines the doctrine of the sovereignty of God he recognises that the church's loss of emphasis upon the transcendence of God has reduced God to the dimension of a mere relationship, with man as a horizontal partner of God. Then how meaningful is prayer, asks Berkouwer, if God is not a supernatural Person, but to be identified with our neighbour? But confusion is served rather than clarity by the use of a quotation attributed to Bavinck by which he is supposed to have said after the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, that it was then difficult "to continue to think about a God who rules the world in his goodness" (p 173). Surely human doubts are found in Scripture in the context of the struggles of faith (cp Psalm 73). But Berkouwer regards texts being quoted in the context of human suffering, as "pat answers", a manifestation of a know-it-all position that forgets Paul's statement that "we walk by faith and not by sight" (p 170). According to Berkouwer, Scripture is full of unanswered questions so that we will not become complacent but rather ever remain busy with the mandate to continue to seek, assured of the divine promise that as we do so, we shall find (p 184).

Jacob and Esau

Berkouwer also rejects the interpretation of Romans 9 that Paul is teaching a decree concerning two persons Jacob and Esau, because the words, 'the older will serve the younger' are a reference to two nations, Israel and Edom, as their subsequent history reveals and to which Malachi 1:2, quoted by Paul in verse 13, makes reference (p 383). But Raymond Zorn has pointed out that while it cannot be denied that Malachi uses the Genesis 25:23 reference to point to the subsequent history of the nations of Israel and Edom, Paul as a matter of fact does not do this. He deliberately calls attention to the two individuals, Jacob and Esau, for the history of these two nations was a consequence of the Lord's action with respect to the two individuals, one whom God chose in his sovereign electing love and the other whom he rejected in his sovereign discrimination. And it is just this approach by Paul that elicits the objections of

his hearers in verse 14, that is, "is there unrighteousness with God" (God can be faulted for being unjustly arbitrary), and in verse 19, (since God does what he pleases) "why does he yet find fault?" (who can oppose his will?) Paul also makes it clear in this passage that Esau, Pharaoh, Israel and humanity are responsible for their sinful actions, so that while God's election is by means of his grace alone, his condemnation of unrepentant and unforgiven sinners is appropriately the result of justice on his part.

The apostle Paul is speaking about peoples and destinies which can be traced back to God's sovereign discriminating electing love which alone was responsible for the choice of Jacob and the preservation of the elect remnant within Israel by which his redemptive purposes in Christ were accomplished. Berkouwer may have his problems with what he calls a little dismissively *decretal theology*, and raises its opponents' claim that it makes God the author of sin, but one is left wondering whether the way of interpreting Scripture chosen by Berkouwer has not paved the way for so many of the ministers in his denomination accepting the universal salvation taught by Karl Barth, which sees all mankind as somehow "in Christ", with eternal retribution and hell having been banished. What is then left of the divine justice, the need of missionary endeavour and the continued antithesis between the kingdom of God and that of the evil one?

Building on a Rock?

When Berkouwer describes contemporary trends in the Roman Catholic Church he writes of the way it has been influenced by the higher critical approach to Scripture. He suggests the question which every conservative would ask, having seen the very way Berkouwer's own thinking and that of his denomination has changed over the years: "Does one in all these new developments, perhaps build one's house upon sand, rather than upon a rock, so that it will not stand against a storm?" (p 402).

Berkouwer in his 90th year is a warning to us of **what happens when one deliberately and progressively chooses the subjective path of the New Hermeneutic**. Only confusion can come into Christian preaching with the arbitrary rejection of things that Scripture teaches. The late Gerald Priestland spent his last hours writing an article for *The Friend*, the Quaker magazine, "It was about how he was teased for pointing out which bits of the Bible he believed and those he did not," said Sally Juniper, editor of that magazine (*The Times*, 22 June 1991). The precise problem is the lack of any authority other than the Lord Jesus Christ to tell us what "bits" of Scripture are the Word of God, and what are not. And the Son of God taught that the Scripture cannot be broken, and that every jot and tittle was exactly how God intended it to be. The infallible Christ has driven us to an infallible Scripture. Our submission to it reflects our devotion to him. A subjective interpretation of the Bible leads to its reconstruction in the reader's own image.

Rev Geoff Thomas is pastor of Alfred Place Baptist Church, Aberystwyth.
