

Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Study of the Faith

By Hendrikus Berkhof

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Richard A. Rhem

Minister of Preaching and Theological Inquiry

Christ Community Church

Spring Lake, Michigan

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With the appearance of this revised edition of Hendrikus Berkhof's *Christian Faith*, we are given not only a serious and thorough articulation of the faith from a Reformed perspective in light of the contemporary world, but we also have a model of how the systematic theologian must continue to be in dialogue with the ongoing developments in the historical arena so that new questions that are raised may elicit new understanding of the faith and the faith may bring new understanding to the present horizon. First published in Dutch in 1973, the work has proved highly popular, with a fifth Dutch edition published in 1985. At that time a significant revision was made. The original English translation based on the fourth Dutch edition appeared in 1979 and is now replaced by the revised edition based on the fifth Dutch edition.

In a "Preface to the Revised Edition," Berkhof tells us how he came to write a systematic theology in the first place. In May of 1969, amid the student revolutions that were common throughout the Western world, Berkhof - always a sensitive listener - heard the cry for greater freedom, equality and brotherhood in society. His response - intuitive at the time - was to determine to write a systematic theology. In retrospect he realizes that his response arose out of his deeply held conviction that what was being demanded in the student revolts could be gained only by going back "to what is firm and unchangeable, to God who makes history with his covenant and wants to involve our history in his covenant." Thus he wrote this introduction to the study of the faith "against the backdrop of secularization and polarization."

Berkhof's treatment of the faith lives and breathes because it arises out of a masterly grasp of the biblical material, the history of the interpretation of the faith, and a passionate engagement with life. An encyclopedic knowledge of the subject matter is obvious; one is confident the most difficult questions have been engaged, questions raised by the explosion of knowledge in the modern world; various options are sympathetically offered demonstrating the genuine openness of the author to a variety of voices and then, simply and straightforwardly, the author's own position is stated.

This is theology written for the serious inquirer. Aimed in the large print sections at a broad audience willing to think seriously about the faith, Berkhof adds small print sections for more detailed and technical treatment of the subjects under discussion with bibliographical references for further study.

This is theology written for the person who would both understand the faith from a Reformed perspective but within a larger ecumenical context in light of modern knowledge and be able to interpret the faith in the contemporary situation. Berkhof digs deeply into the biblical tradition in order to transmit that tradition in new translation. He summarizes his motives in writing,

... as concern for a world which is losing its cohesive power, which is pluralistically and permissively falling apart, and which is losing its sense of meaning, purpose and direction.

That is a serious diagnosis. Yet, Berkhof maintains, and those who know him well confirm, that he is no “prophet of doom.”

If it is true that God watches over his world, the counterforces are also bound to be there. We see these forces in a widespread quest for the *meaning of life*. Precisely in our culture this is a question which consciously or unconsciously occupies the minds of many.

This is hopeful theology; the author is unequivocally committed to the biblical faith, sensitively aware of his own context and the broader world scene and confident in the redemptive purposes of the God of the covenant.

Sensitivity to contextuality marks this revision. Berkhof notes that, about the time the first Dutch edition appeared in 1973, “contextuality” came into vogue. Berkhof recognizes the importance of being aware of one’s own context, but insists each context has its own questions and every context is a proper place to do theology - not only, for example, a context characterized by poverty or oppression. He calls for “a mutual awareness of the limiting significance of our stances” and the necessity of going “beyond the boundaries this imposes upon us ... striving for greater universality and catholicity.”

Berkhof welcomed the opportunity for major revision because “dogmatics does not stand still.” But, he maintains,

That is not the same as “making progress.” But it does mean that new angles regularly present themselves beside the earlier ones, or even dislodge them.

In his preface to the new edition, Berkhof indicates the areas of major revision which is very helpful in tracing his own ongoing understanding and interpretation of the faith and the moving context of our times.

One new paragraph is added: “Revelation and Experience,” paragraph 10. Here he deals with the concern with the experience which precedes the revelational encounter and leads up to it. The last two decades have seen a return to concern with such experience after the sharp reaction against any such consideration in the wake of Karl Barth. In typically balanced fashion, Berkhof presents the subject under three perspectives:

- a. Revelation is directed to people in the world of their concrete experiences.
- b. This approach always both determines and delimits at the same time.
- c. Experience itself can never bridge the gap between the person and revelation.

The contemporary Christological discussion is given lucid and concise treatment in the small print section on pages 291-297. Within the compass of these pages one is brought up to date on where the discussion has come with pages 294-297 rewritten for the revision.

Berkhof suggests that the new nuances of the revision will further be sensed by reference to the subject index, to such subjects as Auschwitz, liberation theology, experience, feminist theology and Pneuma-Christology.

For all the value of the work of revision, the great contribution of *Christian Faith* remains its contemporary statement of the meaning of the faith. For readers not yet familiar with Berkhof’s work, we must point to the remarkable discussion of the attributes of God under the headings “Holy Love,” “The Defenseless Superior Power,” and “The Changeable Faithfulness.” The headings themselves should be enough to demand examination and the examination will not disappoint.

Another great strength of this work is its focus on the history of the covenant. The history of Israel is taken seriously and the Old Testament is allowed to speak for itself before it is understood from the perspective of Jesus Christ.

In contrast to the all too typical dogmatic treatment where, as in the Apostles’ Creed, the exposition jumps from the Creator to Christ with a treatment of the fact of sin interspersed, giving the impression that Jesus drops out of heaven, Berkhof follows the redemptive drama historically.

There are ... not only vertical incursions from eternity, but there is also a horizontal course of God with us through time. Therefore following his treatment of “Revelation” and “God,” Berkhof discussed “Creation,” “Israel,” “Jesus the Son,” and “The New Community.”

The latter discussion of the Church is creative and innovative, challenging the static descriptions of the older dogmatics. In the paragraph on “The Church as Institute,” for example, Berkhof departs from the usual institutionalized means of

transmitting the grace of God - the marks of the Church. He suggests rather nine elements: instruction, baptism, sermon, discussion, Lord's Supper, diaconate, worship service, office and church order. His final paragraph on the Church moves the focus outward, the orientation to the world, as he discusses "The People of God as the Firstfruits."

The final three sections treat "The Renewal of Man," "The Renewal of the World," and "All Things New," handling aspects of the faith that especially address the question of meaning which Berkhof senses as at the heart of the Western context.

Christian Faith is theology at its best: biblically rooted, aware of the transmission of the tradition, written in dialogue with the ultimate concern of the present context. It is up to date but not trendy; it is sensitive to the spirit of the age, but transcending that spirit. It is written out of faith for faith. It is the best available textbook for students of theology. Preachers will find it "preaches" well and congregations who receive it via the sermon will be stimulated, challenged and inspired.