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Gisbertus Voetius
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Joel R. Beeke



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CHAPTER ONE

◆

Introduction

Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676) ranks among the most influential Dutch Reformed theologians of all time. He represents the mature fruit of the so-called Dutch *Nadere Reformatie* — a primarily seventeenth and early eighteenth century movement that paralleled English Puritanism in both time and substance.

Voetius was to the *Nadere Reformatie* (usually translated as the Dutch Second Reformation) what John Owen, often called the prince of the Puritans, was to English Puritanism.¹ Though largely unknown and ignored by English-speaking scholarship,² Voetius is nearly as much an in-house name to students of Dutch Post-Reformation orthodoxy as Owen is to students of English Puritanism.³ Nonetheless, little of Voetius' Latin

¹ For a summary of the *Nadere Reformatie* and a discussion of the term, see Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), 383-413. Heartfelt appreciation is extended to Ray B. Lanning and Arthur Blok for translation assistance.

² The only major work on Voetius in English is Thomas Arthur McGahagan, "Cartesianism in the Netherlands, 1639-1676: The New Science and the Calvinist Counter-Reformation" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1976). For articles on Voetius, see Johannes van Oort, "Augustine's Influence on the Preaching of Gisbertus Voetius," in *Collectanea Augustiniana*, vol. 2, ed. Bernard Bruning, Mathijs Lamberigts, J. van Houten (Louvain: University Press, 1990); Herman Hanko, "Gijsbert Voetius: Defender of Orthodoxy," *The Standard Bearer* 72 (February 15, 1996):229-32.

³ Secondary Dutch and German sources on Voetius include: Arnold Cornelius Duker, *Gisbertus Voetius*, 3 vols. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1897-1914), which remains the definitive biography, though it is of limited value due to datedness and a lack of extended analysis of Voetius' teachings; H.A. van Andel, *De zendingsleer van Gisbertus Voetius* (Kampen: Kok, 1912); Jan Anthony Crame, *De theologische faculteit te Utrecht den tijde van Voetius* (Utrecht: Kemink, 1932); Marinus Bouwman, *Voetius over het gezag der Synoden* (Amsterdam: S.J.P. Bakker, 1937); C. Steenblok, *Voetius en de Sabbat* (Hoorn, 1941); L. Janse, *Gisbertus Voetius, 1589-1676* (Utrecht: De Banier, 1971); C. Steenblok, *Gisbertus Voetius: zijn leven en werken*, 2nd ed. (Gouda: Gereformeerde Pers, 1976); A. de Groot, *Gisbertus*

corpus has been translated into Dutch, and even less into English.⁴

This booklet aims to introduce Voetius to an English readership and to show how he wed a Reformed scholastic methodology to a heartfelt piety. Standing at the pinnacle of scholasticism immediately prior to its disintegration, Voetius illustrates how orthodox Reformed theologians used scholasticism as a methodology which, contrary to the oft-repeated caricature, promoted neither a departure from Calvin's theology nor a dead orthodoxy. Voetius serves as proof that historically the expression "dead orthodoxy" is a misnomer, for such orthodoxy has never been orthodox. Orthodox Reformed scholastics like Voetius have always resonated with a vital warmth and heartfelt piety.

Voetius: Godzaligheid te verbinden met de wetenschap (Kampen: Kok, 1978); idem, "Gisbertus Voetius," in *Gestalten der Kirchengeschichte*, vol. 7 of *Orthodoxie und Pietismus*, ed. Martin Greschat (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1982), 149-62; Willem van't Spijker, "Gisbertus Voetius (1589-1676)," in *De Nadere Reformatie: Beschrijving van haar voornaamste vertegenwoordigers* (The Hague: Boekencentrum, 1986), 49-84; F.A. van Lieburg, *De Nadere Reformatie in Utrecht ten tijde van Voetius: Sporen in de Gereformeerde Kerkeraadsacta* (Rotterdam: Lindenberg, 1989); Johannes van Oort, "Augustinus, Voetius, und die Anfänge der Utrechter Universität," in *Signum Pietatis: Festgabe für Cornelius Petrus Mayer zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. A. Zumkeller (Warzburg: Augustinus-Verlag, 1989); Johannes van Oort, et al., *De onbekende Voetius* (Kampen: Kok, 1989); W.J. van Asselt and E. Dekker, eds., *De scholastieke Voetius: Een luisteroefening aan de hand van Voetius' 'Disputationes Selectae'* (Zoetermeer: Boekencentrum, 1995); Cornelis Adrianus de Niet, "Voetius en de literatuur: Een korte verkenning," *Documentatieblad* 19 (1995):27-36.

⁴ Voetius' major writings include: *Selectarum disputationum theologiarum*, 5 vols. (Amsterdam: Waesberge, 1648-69)—hereafter *SDT*; *Politicae Ecclesiasticae*, 4 vols. (Amsterdam: Waesberge, 1663-76)—hereafter, *PE*; *Ta asketika sive Exercitia Pietatis* (Gorinchem: Vink, 1654)—hereafter, *EP*—now available in Dutch, Cornelis Adrianus de Niet, ed., as *De Praktijk der Godzaligheid...met inleiding, vertaling en commentaar*, 2 vols. (Utrecht: De Banier, 1996). Additional Voetian treatises in Dutch include *Catechisatie over den catechismus der Remonstranten* (Utrecht: E.W. Snellaert, 1641); *Geestelijke Verlatingen* (Utrecht: Lambert Roeck, 1646); *Proeve van de Kracht der Godzaligheyd* (Utrecht: Simon de Bries, 1656); and a few sermons, letters, and short polemical extracts from Latin works. The only Voetian material in English is a small portion of volume 3 of *SDT* in *Reformed Dogmatics: Seventeenth-Century Reformed Theology Through the Writings of Wolebius, Voetius, and Turretin*, ed. and trans. John W. Beardslee III (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 263-334.

CHAPTER TWO

Life and Ministry

Gisbertus Voetius was born on March 3, 1589 at Heusden, the Netherlands, to a prominent family of Westphalian descent and Reformed persuasion. His grandfather had died in a Spanish prison for the sake of the gospel; his father narrowly escaped a similar fate the month Gisbertus was born, only to be killed eight years later while fighting for Prince Maurice. Not surprisingly, Gisbertus imbibed Reformed doctrine and convictions from early childhood.

Voetius studied theology at the University of Leiden from 1604 to 1611, during those years when it was the focal point of the Arminian crisis. He was particularly influenced by the lectures of Franciscus Gomarus, a staunch Calvinist. He also attended lectures of James Arminius and other professors whose orthodoxy was called into question, such as Scaliger, Merula, Salmasius, Lipsius, Jacchaeus, Bertius, and Larlaeus.¹ He would later write, "I shall be Gomarus' grateful disciple to the end of my life."²

Appointed lecturer in logic while a student at Leiden, Voetius defended orthodox Reformed theology in his teaching. In terms of methodology, he leaned on the new, humanistic Aristotelianism of Leiden rather than on Ramism, which insisted on the purely instrumental and non-autonomous role of philosophy. Voetius did not accept the conviction of other Calvinists, such as William Ames, who felt that Peter Ramus was a safer guide than Aristotle for methodology in doing theology. He was con-

¹ McGahagan, 33-35.

² *SDT*, 5:100.

vinced that the new Aristotelianism had absorbed everything of value in Ramism and consequently regarded the Ramistic controversy as superfluous.³

Already in his Leiden years, Voetius showed a keen interest in a more pietistic form of theology. He read Thomas à Kempis' *The Imitation of Christ* with deep appreciation. From that time on, two elements strove for preeminence in his life and work: an intellectual Reformed scholasticism and a piety resembling the *devotio moderna* spirit.⁴

The temporary victory of the Arminians in 1610 had far-reaching consequences for Voetius. His mentor, Gomarus, was forced from the faculty, Arminians were hired, and Voetius' own hopes for an academic career were dashed. For supporting Gomarus and opposing Arminius, he was put out of his dormitory and had to take up lodging with friends. After finishing his studies and returning to Heusden, he attempted in vain to obtain a grant from the magistrates to study in England or other foreign centers of Reformed theology. Instead, he accepted a call from an unorganized group of Reformed-minded folk at Vlijmen, a small town near 's-Hertogenbosch, to whom he was recommended by Gomarus. He was ordained to the ministry on September 25, 1611 at the age of twenty-two. The following year he organized the Vlijmen flock with the installation of elders and deacons. His first pastorate was not easy, for the village was predominantly Roman Catholic. Though he was instrumental in bringing some Roman Catholics to the Reformed faith, the Vlijmen church remained small during his six years of ministry there.

During these years, however, Voetius was not idle. He became deeply involved in battling Arminianism. He also continued to apply himself to diligent study, mastering Arabic and reading the works of numerous divines, including a special study of the popular works of William Perkins. In 1612 he married Deliana van Diest (1591-1679), with whom he had sixty-four years of marriage and ten children — two of whom would become professors of philosophy at Utrecht.

³ *SDT*, 3:753.

⁴ Van't Spijker, 49.

On May 24, 1617 Voetius commenced a seventeen-year pastorate in Heusden. His call there was opposed by the senior minister, Johannes Grevius, as well as by Johan van Oldenbarnevelt, a leading statesman, both of whom were partial to the Remonstrants. By 1618 Heusden's internal difficulties were catapulted to national prominence. An attempt made by the national government to send Hugo Grotius, a well-known jurist, statesman, and theologian, to Heusden to influence the local magistracy during an election failed, and the consistory of Heusden took revenge by dismissing Grevius. The government then compelled the reinstatement of Grevius, which led to an open schism that was only ended by the Orangist revolution. Ultimately, Johannes Cloppenburg, whom Voetius came to regard as his *alter ipse*, was called to assist him in pastoring.⁵

Voetius' hard work in combatting the errors of Romanism and Arminianism earned him an appointment to the international Synod of Dort (1618-19) despite his youth.⁶ Two items of interest surface in his attendance at Dort: First, his most prominent action was his able defense of Johannes Maccovius, whose supralapsarian conception of predestination was of a more logically rigid nature than that of most other delegates. Voetius appealed to the authority of William Ames, who had expressed confidence in Maccovius' intentions, though he regretted some of his terminology. Interestingly, Voetius' later thought was marked by an attempt to reconcile the experiential piety of Ames and the neo-Aristotelianism of Maccovius.⁷ Sec-

⁵ In earlier years, they had met together as students on a daily basis to practice conversing in Greek (D. Nauta, "Gisbertus Voetius," in *Biografisch Lexicon voor de Geschiedenis van het Nederlands Protestantisme* [Kampen: Kok, 1983], 2:443).

⁶ Unfortunately the journal he kept during the Synod has been lost. We do know that Voetius was disappointed by the results of the Synod in several practical areas, especially by the influence that the government had upon the Synod, such as refusing to permit discussion of the system of appointment to clerical posts by lay patrons; insisting that the political magistrates have a right to send deputies to local church councils and to provincial synods to observe and deliberate; and tolerating the continued observance of church feast days. Voetius would later comment that the more the church conceded to the government, the less it could hope for in the way of serious reform from the government (*PE*, 3:559).

⁷ See John Hales, *Golden Remains* (London: Tim Garthwait, 1659), 159, and William Ames, *Opera* (Amsterdam: Joannem Janssonium, 1658), 9. See also Abraham Kuyper,

ond, Voetius later wrote appreciatively of close friendships established with a number of English delegates noted for their emphasis on Puritan theology and practice.⁸

Voetius' influence and stature increased after Dort. On several occasions in the 1620s, the Provincial Synod of South Holland appointed him as deputy in situations that related to the Synod of Dort, such as caring for the archives of the Synod; involvement with the final approval of the Church Order of Dort; membership in the commission charged with purging Leiden of Arminian influence; dealing with the holding of conventicles by the Arminian faction in various places; and dealing with Gerhardus Vossius, rector of the Latin school at Dordrecht, whose book on Pelagianism gave the Arminians fodder for their unreformed convictions.

Then, too, Voetius gained renown as a writer during his Heusden years. His pamphlet wars against Roman Catholics and Arminians raised his stature among the Reformed as a first-rate scholastic theologian. His work against the Arminian, Daniel Tilenus, influenced Grotius.⁹ Even more importantly, his *Prove van de Cracht der Godsalichheydt* (1627; Proof of the Power of Godliness) and *Meditatie van de Ware Practijcke der Godsalichheydt of der goede Wercken* (1628; Meditation on the True Practice of Godliness or Good Works) established him as a writer of practical piety, who insisted on a converted life as the attestation of an orthodox faith.

One of Voetius' most important accomplishments during his Heusden years was his major role in assisting the reformation of the city of 's-Hertogenbosch. This reform, which he served as an army chaplain, led him into debates and pamphlet

Johannes Maccovius (Leiden: Donner, 1899), 82ff., 357ff.; Michael Bell, "*Propter Potestatem, Scientiam, Ac Beneplacitum Dei: The Doctrine of the Object of Predestination in the Theology of Johannes Maccovius*" (Th.D. dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1986).

⁸ *SDT*, 2:409.

⁹ Hugo Grotius, *Briefwisseling van Hugo Grotius*, ed. B.L. Meulenbroek (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1940), 3:385-90. Grotius would comment later in 1637 that he saw no hope of reunion with the Calvinists "while such popes as Voetius rule in every consistory" (*ibid.*, 7:665-66).

wars with Cornelis Jansenis and Samuel Maresius. His debates with Maresius, concerning virtually every theological issue of the day, were to last four decades until the two theologians united to battle the emergence of Cartesianism in the late 1660s.¹⁰

While pastoring in Heusden, Voetius revealed his heart for missions. He was influential in persuading various trading companies to send missionaries with the Dutch ships to distant parts of the world. Moreover, as H.A. Van Andel points out, “Voetius attempted not only to sketch the outlines of a solid theology of missions, but he was also the first who attempted seriously to give missiology a legitimate scientific place in the whole of theology.”¹¹ It is remarkable that the greatest Dutch scholastic of Reformed orthodoxy developed the first comprehensive Protestant theology of missions. As Jan Jongeneel describes it: “[Voetius’] Protestant theology of mission properly subordinated all concrete missionary activity to the praise, honor and adoration of God and precisely for this reason was able to develop a broad vision which makes possible a worldwide, non-coercive mission to convert people from every race and plant the church of Christ everywhere.”¹²

For seventeen years Voetius kept up a rigorous schedule at Heusden. He preached eight times a week, and pastored faithfully and incessantly, especially by giving counsel to weak and disturbed consciences. Meanwhile, he continued to study avidly, keeping up with his Arabic and tutoring students in theology, logic, metaphysics, and oriental languages. After declining calls to other, larger churches, including Rotterdam, Dordrecht, and The Hague, Voetius accepted a professorial post in the new Academy of Utrecht, where he taught for forty-two years until his death in 1676.

¹⁰Doede Nauta, *Samuel Maresius* (Amsterdam: H.J. Paris, 1935).

¹¹*De Zendingsleer van Gisbertus Voetius* (Kampen: Kok, 1912), 19.

¹²“The Missiology of Gisbertus Voetius: The First Comprehensive Protestant Theology of Missions,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 26, 1 (1991):79.

CHAPTER THREE

Professorship

Voetius' ideals for theological teaching were clearly set forth in his inaugural address, *De Pietate cum Scientia Conjugenda* (On Piety Joined with Knowledge). He argued vehemently that piety and knowledge are not to be separated. They are to promote each other's welfare, for they are wedded together. Knowledge is not to be an intellectual game. The mind must assist the heart and life, and the heart and daily living ought to reinforce the mind. Knowledge and science are always to be of practical benefit by directing us to our Creator: "There is no part of your studies, which does not conduct the mind upwards, through the stages of creation, to higher things."¹ According to Voetius, any attempt to weaken the link between knowledge and piety by claiming an absolute autonomy of science and knowledge is unbridled libertinism. Therefore he regarded his task at Utrecht to "practically treat of the solid and orthodox science of theology, which is by its nature practical."²

Voetius never became an "ivory-tower" theologian. His concern for the church, for its soundness and piety, never diminished. All his scholasticism had the edification of the church as its ultimate goal. When the newly founded "Illustrious School" at Utrecht received the status of an academy in 1636, Voetius was appointed rector. The title of his sermon preached in the Cathedral Church of Utrecht was, *Sermoen van de nutticheyt der academiën en de scholen* (Sermon on the Usefulness of Academies and Schools). His goal was to integrate the

¹ EP, 857.

² EP, 3.

Utrecht church with the academy. The church should send her youth to this academy, and live in love and unity with all who were linked with the academy. On the other hand, the faculty should not only promote learning, but also piety, both in the public lectures and in the private lives of the professors. All human sciences must remain subordinate to the study of theology for the sake of the church. The students should appreciate this instruction, for which their parents and others had to make great sacrifices. They should not be lazy or spend their time in worthless activities.

In his lectures, Voetius focused particularly on systematic theology, ethics, and church polity. He also taught logic, metaphysics, and the Semitic languages: Hebrew, Arabic, and Syriac. In his lectures on theology, he followed the Leiden *Synopsis purioris theologiae*, compiled by Leiden professors (1625), together with the dogmatic works of Gomarus, Maccovius, Ames, and, of course, Calvin's *Institutes* and Thomas Aquinas' *Summa theologica*.

For thirty-six of his forty-two years as professor in Utrecht, Voetius carried a part-time preaching and pastoral schedule. He refused to relinquish visiting the sick and regularly catechized Utrecht's orphan children. Meanwhile, Voetius' private study and his literary output continued apace. In 1664 he published *Exercitia et Bibliotheca studiosi theologae* (The Exercises and Library of a Studious Theologian), a comprehensive 700-page introduction to theological literature and a four-year program of theological study. Its theme is one with his overall vision: theology must be known and practiced. Voetius' most academic works were published over a twenty-two-year span in his five volumes of selections from his theological debates, *Selectarum disputationum theologicarum* (1648-1669). These volumes are the outgrowth of his famous Saturday seminars. These seminars took the following form: Voetius himself composed theses, especially touching on the pressing issues of the day, and appointed debaters who were instructed on how to defend them. Other students sought to challenge the debaters. The five volumes of these debates, similar to medieval debate texts, do not contain verbatim reports, but the final redaction of the whole by Voetius himself. Reporting 358 debates, they are a prime example of

the scholastic method of teaching practical Reformed orthodoxy.³ In addition, Voetius published four volumes on church polity, *Politicae Ecclesiasticae* (1663-76), which also grew out of the Saturday debates. He evidenced a working knowledge of all the literature on church government of his day, including polemical works and works dealing with the ancient creeds. More than any other major work, *Politicae Ecclesiasticae* represents the ecclesiastical ideals of the Dutch Second Reformation. Together with these works, Voetius wrote his *Te asketika sive Exercitia Pietatis* (1654; "Ascetica" or the Exercises of Godliness), a detailed manual of piety in theory and practice.

In all these works, Voetius reveals himself as a scholastic, practical theologian who did not fear conflict. In typical Victorian style, J.J. van Oosterzee wrote: "He was a pupil of Gomarus, and, like his master, he assumed the attitude of an ecclesiastical Hercules, cleansing the Arminian Augean stable.... Arminianism...he considered as the greatest danger to the Dutch Reformed Church, and he waged war against it to the bitter end."⁴ While at Utrecht, he also unceasingly opposed Johannes Cocceius, the Bremen-born theologian who taught at Franeker and Leiden, and whose covenant theology, in Voetius' opinion, overemphasized the historical and contextual character of specific ages. He believed that Cocceius' new approach to the Scriptures would undermine both Reformed dogmatics and practical Christianity.⁵ He battled the philosophy of René Des-

³ W.J. van Asselt, *Vera philosophia cum sacra theologia nusquam pugnat: Een inleiding in de Gereformeerde Scholastiek* (Utrecht: n.n., 1995), 62.

⁴ J.J. van Oosterzee, "Gysbertus Voetius," in *Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1883), 3:2464. Cf. Voetius' contra-Remonstrant works, *Thersites heautontimorumenos* (Utrecht, 1635); *Catechisatie over den catechismus der Reomonstranten* (Utrecht, 1641).

⁵ For Voetius, Cocceius' devaluing of practical Christianity culminated in his rejection of the Sabbath as a ceremonial yoke no longer binding on Christians. See H.B. Visser, *De Geschiedenis van den Sabbatstrijd onder de Gereformeerden in de Zeventiende Eeuw* (Utrecht: Kemink en Zoon, 1939); Steenblok, *Voetius en de Sabbat*; Charles McCoy, "The Covenant Theology of Johannes Cocceius" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale, 1957). Cf. Jonathan Neil Gerstner, *The Ten Thousand Generation: Dutch Reformed Covenant Theology and Group Identity in Colonial South Africa, 1652-1814* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), 75-82, who subtitles his discussion of the Voetian-Cocceian controversy, "The Battle of Two Scholastic Systems," and shows that Cocceius also used a substantial amount of scholastic methodology in his biblical theology. The Voetian-Cocceian controversy racked the

cartes, which he was convinced placed reason on a par with Scripture at the expense of faith, and therefore was destructive for the church. He recognized the danger in Cartesianism that ultimately man becomes the measure of all things.⁶ He resisted Jean de Labadie, whose preaching had been the source of spiritual revival in Swiss Reformed churches, for promoting notions of mystical subjectivism and of separation from the instituted church.⁷ He spoke out against the government when the rights of the church were at stake, rejecting Erastianism and demanding that the church be completely independent of the state and of all patronage.⁸

As a polemical theologian, Voetius' firm position and vehement attacks isolated him. Loneliness assailed him on such occasions, but he viewed it as part of the price he was called to pay for taking a stand for biblical, Reformed truth. Over the decades at Utrecht, however, a group of friends and students, nicknamed the "Utrecht circle," came to appreciate and support his convictions. By the time of his death on November 1, 1676, dedicated Voetians were to be found in every university and ecclesiastical province of the Netherlands. He was mourned by thousands, especially by the Utrecht circle, and was buried in what is now the Roman Catholic cathedral of Utrecht.

Dutch Reformed Church until long after the death of both divines; eventually both factions compromised, agreeing in many places (e.g. Amsterdam) to rotate their pastors between Voetians and Cocceians (S.D. van Veen, "Gisbertus Voetius," in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* [1912; reprint Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977], 12:220-21).

⁶ Cf. McGahagan for a thorough treatment of the debate between Voetius and Descartes; see also Theo Verbeek, "From 'Learned Ignorance' to Scepticism: Descartes and Calvinist Orthodoxy," in *Scepticism and Irreligion in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Richard H. Popkin and Ardo Vanderjagt (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993).

⁷ Cf. Cornelis Graafland, "De Nadere Reformatie en het Labadisme," in *De Nadere Reformatie en het Gereformeerd Pietisme* ('s-Gravenhage: Boekencentrum, 1989), 275-346.

⁸ W. Robert Godfrey, "Calvin and Calvinism in the Netherlands," in *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World*, ed. W. Stanford Reid (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 112-13.

CHAPTER FOUR

◆

Theology

Gisbertus Voetius is widely acknowledged as both the greatest Dutch Reformed scholastic theologian and one of the greatest representatives of the practical, experiential movement of the Dutch Second Reformation.¹ Although to the modern mind there appears to be a conflict between faith and reason, Voetius experienced no tension between detailed scholastic analysis and experiential warmth. From his perspective, theology, both systematic and practical, consistently supports his inner conviction that the marriage between Reformed scholasticism and Reformed piety is a happy one.

Voetius thus cast all his theology and writing in a scholastic mold. He was intent on developing Reformed thought by careful analysis, detailed definition, thorough development of each theological concept, careful repudiation of every heresy, and logical organization which was intended to show the relations among all the truths of Scripture. This method of thinking represented how he had been trained and how he thought all his life. In his *Disputatio de Theologia Scholastica*, he defined scholasticism simply as a method of doing theology — a method first found in the four volumes of Peter Lombard's *Sententiarum Libri Quatuor* (*Four Books of Sentences*) and subsequently developed in Thomas Aquinas' *Summa theologica*.² Notwithstanding the reference to medieval scholastics in his initial definition,

¹ For Voetius as a Reformed scholastic theologian, see Cornelis Graafland, "Voetius als gereformeerd theoloog," in *De onbekende Voetius*, 12-31; W.J. van Asselt, *De scholastieke Voetius*.

² *SDT*, 1:13-14.

Voetius asserted that the true (i.e., Reformed) scholastic method vastly differs from theirs in content though not in method. Echoing Renaissance objections, he charged the medieval scholastics with dwelling on “useless, vain, dangerous, absurd, and even blasphemous questions and problems.” In line with Luther and Calvin, he argued that their knowledge of Scripture and theology was weak at best; consequently, their principles are based on human authority, which they often misread, be it Aristotle or the Fathers. They were too prone to mix theology and philosophy: “Most are guilty of confusion of categories, and continually attempt to demonstrate the mysteries of faith by reason and natural light, or by philosophy and philosophical authority.”³ All of these faults made the medieval scholastics seriously defective in *praxis*, both in the exercise of piety and in the care of the church. They were “purely speculative doctors, men of the shadows,” exalting reason at the expense of faith.⁴

Voetius insisted on the superiority of faith over reason in order to protect the purity of faith. Reason has lost its purity in the fall. Though reason remains a critical instrumental faculty, even after it is liberated through regeneration it remains imperfect, so that we ought not let it act as an autonomous judge but only as the servant of faith.⁵ If reason were to be the judge of faith, would not all distinction between nature and grace be erased, and the scriptural insistence on regeneration be rendered meaningless? The principle of objectivity in matters of faith is not reason but the Holy Scriptures. Together with Scripture, we need a subjective principle to move us to receive the doctrines of faith, i.e. the illumination of the Spirit.⁶ Also our reason needs to be illumined, for though faith is superior to reason, faith itself involves the intellect as well as the will. Reason is critical, not as the principle of doctrinal truth, but as that

³ Ibid., 1:23-24.

⁴ Ibid., 1:24-26.

⁵ In heaven reason will finally be perfectly illumined (ibid., 1:2).

⁶ Ibid., 1:4.

faculty which is instrumental in exegeting such truths from Scripture and casting them into propositional form.⁷

For Voetius, both theology and philosophy are to be continually subjected to the test of edification: Does whatever is being discussed contribute to the life of faith as revealed (1) in the Scriptures, (2) for the believer's salvation, and (3) for the welfare of the church? Both faith and reason must serve to promote genuine piety. He fully concurred with Calvin that all genuine knowledge of God is lacking where true piety is lacking.⁸

Despite his criticism of the content of medieval scholasticism, Voetius was fully aware that he stood in the scholastic tradition. Scholasticism as a methodology is profitable, even necessary, he argued, in order adequately to defend "hidden and divine things against those who oppose them." In fact, the medieval scholastics themselves ought to be studied in order to defend the Reformed faith against Roman Catholicism, since "in elenctic [polemical] theology adversaries must often be convinced by their own, domestic witnesses."⁹ Moreover, the practical and experiential dimensions of theology can be enhanced by scholasticism, for, in the words of Johannes Hoornbeeck, who expressed the Voetian position poignantly, "There is no practice without theory."¹⁰ Theory and practice must be distinguished but never separated. Theory, whether theological or philosophical, is itself a practical issue.

Thus, scholasticism and philosophy can coexist well with true theology. If rightly subjected to Scripture, the demands of faith, and the light of the Spirit, then scholastic methodology and theology, despite their dangers, bear good fruit. In fact, according to Voetius, one cannot be an able and learned theologian without making use of scholastic methodology, for the content of Scripture is, from both a religious and ethical perspective, reasonable truth. That is not to say that reason be-

⁷ Cf. McGahagan, 55-63.

⁸ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.2.1.

⁹ *SDT*, 1 [vi].

¹⁰ "Praxis nulla absque scientia est" (*Theologiae Practicae* [Utrecht: Versteegh, 1663], 1:85).

comes the basis, law, or norm of what we should believe. We do not come to know the Trinity, sin, the incarnation, and the atonement by reason or natural revelation. We must receive what Scripture says by faith — faith which has its origin in the illumination of the Spirit. The secret of faith lies beyond the reach of reason.¹¹ Thus, notwithstanding considerable deference shown to reason and to quotations from medieval scholastics throughout his corpus, Voetius' theology did not succumb to reason but remained in its genius a theology of revelation.

A brief perusal of the Voetian corpus confirms that his first love was for *theologia practica* — the practice or exercise of theology which procures a personal piety that glorifies God. By “practical theology,” Voetius intended what we would call a theology of Christian experience rather than our current usage referring to the pastoral ministry of preaching, counseling, and teaching. For Voetius, no division of theology can be handled effectively without personal and practical application for daily living, nor have the Reformed ever aimed to do so:

Are Reformed theologians concerned over practical theology, and do they discuss it, or is their theology purely speculative?

Our reply: Affirmative to the first, and negative to the second, against the calumnies of the Remonstrants and the papists.... The very light of the facts is enough to destroy this calumny, since the sermons of the more distinguished of our preachers and an almost infinite number of writings of the Reformers breathe *pure practice* [emphasis mine], so that our theologians, like Socrates, may be said to have brought theology from heaven down to earth, or, better, to have raised it to heaven from the earth and scholastic dust.¹²

All theology must be practical, being used to encourage the spiritual exercise of divine graces — particularly the graces of repentance, faith, hope, and love.

All theology must be rooted in faith. Faith consists of intellectual knowledge of truth, hearty assent to the truth, and

¹¹*SDT*, 1:3.

¹²Beardslee, 268-69.

childlike trust in the truth.¹³ Though faith is often mysterious and incomprehensible in its operations, there is nothing uncertain about its sources or its effects. Its sources are the objective truth of Scripture and the subjective illumination of the Spirit. Its effects are affirmation of the Scriptures, sanctification, assurance of salvation, and perseverance — all of which, together with faith itself, are not conditions for salvation, but results of election. Faith is the terminus and effect of regeneration, not the cause or internal instrument of regeneration.¹⁴

Rooted in election, faith works itself out in the progress of the elect from rebirth to conversion, justification, sanctification, and perseverance, finding its terminus in glorification.¹⁵ To this experiential process from rebirth to glorification, Voetius, in typical Puritan fashion, devoted a great deal of energy and attention. These steps of grace, involving inward experience wrought in the soul by the Holy Spirit which in turn will show itself outwardly in the believer's walk of life, form the heart of his *theologia practica*. His concern with the stages of inner experience, however, never was divorced from his more intellectual and scholastic understanding of faith. For Voetius, faith is both an explicit intellectual act and a supernaturally infused *habitus*. Faith is both intellectual and emotional, both dogmatic and personal, both a matter of mind and soul. His morphology of conversion was intended to conjoin the intellec-

¹³*SDT*, 2:516. Voetius viewed the element of knowledge in faith as intellectual, historical faith that is not necessarily saving in its nature. In discounting the *saving* nature of knowledge, Voetius parted ways with Calvin and Olevianus and followed in the footsteps of Melancthon and Ursinus (see Joel R. Beeke, "Faith and Assurance in the Heidelberg Catechism and Its Primary Composers: A Fresh Look at the Kendall Thesis," *Calvin Theological Journal* 27, 1 [1992]:45-47).

¹⁴*SDT*, 2:442.

¹⁵For Voetius' views on election, see Cornelis Graafland, *Van Calvijn tot Barth: Oorsprong en ontwikkeling van de leer der verkiezing in het Gereformeerd Protestantisme*, 2nd ed. (The Hague: Boekencentrum, 1987), 223-31. Though a supralapsarian, Voetius fully supported the Canons of Dort which were largely set in an infralapsarian framework. He asserted that though the Canons could have been more predestinarian in character, their pastoral and evangelical character are of inestimable value. Consequently, he wrote *De uitnemendheid van de leer der Gereformeerde Kerk* [The excellence of the doctrine of the Reformed Church] to show that, contrary to the Remonstrant charge, the Canons of Dort were not dominated by speculation and scholastic theory but by practical usefulness (ibid., 223).

tual and emotional dimensions of faith; indeed, the concept of faith as intellectually dogmatic was reinforced, not annulled, by this morphology.¹⁶

Voetius' scholastic and theological agenda was set by his emphasis on *theologia practica*. This agenda was fleshed out in three major areas through his writings: ethics (treated in *Selectarum disputationum theologicarum*, all five volumes, but especially volumes 3 and 4), piety (treated in *Ta asketika sive Exercitia Pietatis*), and church polity (treated in his four volumes of *Politicae Ecclesasticae*, the work for which he became best known).

¹⁶ Cf. McGahagan, 66-69.

CHAPTER FIVE



Ethics

In volumes 3 and 4 of *Selectarum disputationum theologiarum*, Voetius used the Decalogue as his framework for debating a wide variety of ethical questions. He provided a clear rationale for doing so, arguing that ethics is a critical science that ought not to detract from systematic theology or apologetics; rather, it ought to assist systematics and other subjects in focusing on the practical exercises of the life of faith. For support, he pointed to William Perkins, whom he called the Homer of *theologia practica*, as well as William Ames, Jean Taffin, and Willem Teellinck. Besides, Voetius noted, the Particular Synod of North Holland (1645) requested the Leiden faculty to devote more attention in their lectures to “cases of conscience” (*casus conscientiae*), which included particular and practical applications of the Ten Commandments to various cases.¹

Voetius then raised and answered fifteen objections to focusing on *theologica practica* in an ethical setting.² He asserted that opposition is to be expected, for wherever Reformed ministers speak to the conscience and admonish against specific sins, such as Sabbath-profanation, drunkenness and carousing, theater-attendance, mixed dancing, gambling, vain and immoral dress, illicit usury, and worldly parties, they will be charged with being pharisaical, legalistic, or anabaptistic.³ These charges are altogether ungrounded, said Voetius, for

¹ On Voetius as an ethicist and the role of the Ten Commandments in his ethics, see Steenblok, *Voetius en de Sabbat*, 9-46.

² Beardslee, 276-89.

³ *PE*, 4:680, 699.

wherever repentance and faith are dealt with scripturally and faithfully, practical guidelines for daily life and warnings against specific sins cannot be avoided. Preaching and teaching that does not touch on practical, daily living, is not faithful to the primary doctrines of Scripture. Moreover, it is not the goal of practical ethics to introduce a purity of life that exceeds the agenda of the Reformers. Ethics is simply teaching people how to live out Reformed doctrine. When rightly presented, ethics is not a system of works-righteousness to earn salvation. It is a set of guidelines on how to live out of the righteousness of Christ — that righteousness which has saved and does save, but also compels a lifestyle of gratitude for so great a salvation. Works-righteousness results in burdened consciences, as evidenced in Roman Catholicism; Reformed ethics calls the believer to live wholly unto God in every detail of life in order to glorify Him for His gift of salvation.

In working out his system of ethics, Voetius naturally focused more on the law than the gospel. The gospel, however, is not neglected. Gospel means the good news of salvation in Christ alone; it is the joyful message of the New Covenant, but it comprehends the Old Testament as well. The conditions of the gospel are faith and repentance, but these conditions are fulfilled by God's grace in Christ for us and in us. Strictly speaking, the gospel and its promises are absolute and unconditional. Receiving eternal life, however, involves more than the gospel. Salvation by the gospel will be evidenced by the keeping of the law out of gratitude to God. Voetius quoted Augustine with approval: "Our works do not precede us to justify us, but they follow our being justified." Under "law" Voetius comprehended all edifying doctrine revealed by God in the Old and New Testaments. Here Voetius, as a student of Hebrew, correctly interpreted the full meaning of Torah as "instruction" in living, a rule of life. Consequently, Psalms 1 and 119 speak of the law as *doctrina salutaris* — i.e. salutary, beneficial, edifying doctrine.

Voetius subsumed both law and gospel under the covenant of grace. Whereas Luther had taught law and gospel as standing in an *ordo salutis* relationship, i.e. first law and then gospel, both Bucer and Calvin, whom Voetius followed, carried this

ordo salutis relationship a step further by developing the so-called third use of the law — hence, law, gospel, law. That is to say, the law drives me to Christ for salvation, and the gospel drives me back to the law to foster a grateful and moral life of sanctification.⁴ Thus, the believer lives practically and daily out of the covenant of grace, trusting in God’s covenantal promise of grace, and acknowledging His covenantal demand for whole-hearted obedience to His law.

According to Voetius, the law is more difficult to understand and preach than the gospel. Preaching is always a difficult task, but the preaching of the law in particular demands a wide spectrum of gifts and abilities, such as profound meditation, clear judgment, good memory, and extensive experience, as well as a mastering of biblical languages and a broad acquaintance with religious literature which deals with laws and customs, individual cases and spiritual counsel. Three “books” in particular must be continually read if pastors are to be effective preachers of the law: the Bible, the “book” of their own conscience, and the “book” of their parishioners’ lives.

Thus for Voetius, faith must become visible. The Christian must strive to please the Lord in every circumstance and detail of his life. He serves a holy and precise God. A key word in Voetius’ vocabulary of the Christian life is “precision,” which he defined as “the exact or perfect human action conforming to the law of God as taught by God, and genuinely accepted, intended, and desired by believers.”⁵ In other words, the believer desires to do nothing less or other than the will of God expressed in His law as a rule of life. Such precision compels the believer to live carefully, and to obey God exactly; or, in Paul’s phrase, “to walk circumspectly” (Eph. 5:15). If this means being ridiculed with false labels, so be it. It is more important to please God than man. Voetius wrote: “The labels of being a precisianist, a zealot, a pigheaded person have always been applied to Christians whenever they have refused to be lukewarm and

⁴ Cf. Joel R. Beeke and Ray B. Lanning, “Glad Obedience,” in *Trust and Obey* (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1996), for the Reformed development of the third use of the law.

⁵ Beardslee, 317.

compromising.... We must not pay much attention when devotion is decried as superstition, soberness as hypocrisy, tenderness of conscience as strictness, puritanicalness, obstinacy, etc., in order to try to make us seem ludicrous.”⁶

Voetius did not deny that one can adhere to a precise form of piety out of legalism, hypocrisy, or superstition. All errant forms of precise living, however, should not detract from living in a biblically precise manner, being zealous for good works, with a heart that is earnestly devoted to the fear of God and a conscience that is intent on obeying His commandments. This kind of precisianism God regards as a “heroic excellence of virtue.”

Voetius proceeded, in a scholastic manner, to explain what biblical precisianism is. He listed all the synonyms in Scripture that promote precise living, defined them carefully, and concluded that precisianism is the outworking of internal holiness. In the inner recesses of the soul, the believer makes decisions *coram Deo* — decisions which demonstrate themselves by an outward lifestyle that reflects heartfelt obedience to the law.

Voetius cited numerous Scriptures, Reformed doctrinal standards, and a large number of Reformers and Puritans to support his case for precisianism. He concluded that Scripture and all sound Reformed confessions and divines “speak in unison that the outcry against real [biblical] precisianism lacks all foundation entirely.”⁷

CHAPTER SIX

Ascetics

Voetius' stress on the inner life of grace did not bring him into sympathy with either the medieval mystics or the modern enthusiasts. Even in his handbook on the godly life, *Tē asketica sive Exercitia Pietatis*, in which he emphasized the need for habitual meditation, he declined to separate the contemplative and the active life. He insisted even here that his concern was with the "pragmatics" of the interior life.¹ Meditation, according to Voetius, did not lead to immediate knowledge nor to the experience of the essence of God; rather, mystic surrender is "the road to delirium and enthusiasm."² The knowledge of God we receive by meditation is not irrational; rather, reflexive knowledge is an essential component in spiritual knowledge. Though others regarded prayer and devotion as acts of the will, Voetius insisted that even in these devotional means the intellect was deeply, concurrently involved.³

Voetius understood "ascetics" to be the systematizing of that part of theological doctrine which describes how genuine, biblical piety is to be experienced and practiced. Hence much more than meditation is involved. Voetius dealt with how to cultivate a continual life of prayer, repentance, faith, and conversion; how to approach and attend and reflect on the Lord's

¹ *EP*, 68.

² *EP*, 73. Cf. Izaak Boot, *De Allegorische Uitlegging van Het Hooglied Voornamelijk in Nederland* (Woerden: Zuijderduijn, 1971), 155-63. With regard to interpreting the Song of Solomon, Boot concludes that though Voetius frequently quoted Bernard in his expositions, he stopped short (unlike some of his followers) of embracing Bernard's "highest peaks of mysticism."

³ *EP*, 23.

Supper; how to pray and give thanks, both at stated times and extemporaneously. He dwelt in depth on several facets of conversion: contrition, reconciliation, and renewal. He discussed spiritual sorrow and joy, various difficulties in the life of faith, and a host of cases of conscience. He explained how God's Word should be read and heard. He dealt with an array of practical subjects of concern to those truly converted to God: Sabbath-keeping, daily life, spiritual strife, temptation, spiritual desertion, and communion of saints. He provided guidance on how to face martyrdom and how to die well.⁴

In each branch and topic of "ascetics," Voetius pursued a scholastic method. He provided definitions, arranged concepts in a positive and negative sense, answered objections, posed potential questions and gave detailed answers. Throughout he quoted a seemingly endless number of authors, including numerous medieval Roman Catholic mystics.⁵ Though one might now think that the thoroughness of his method dampens its liveliness, and perhaps even tends to reduce subjective experience to objective analyzable data, no one can doubt that those in the Dutch Second Reformation found a great deal of help in this work for their spiritual pilgrimage.

⁴ For an excellent overview of this work, see the introduction and detailed table of contents in Gisbertus Voetius, *De Praktijk der Godzaligheid*.

⁵ E.g., de Niet's detailed table of contents of Voetius' work reveals sixty-four citations of various authors, and cites Bonventura more than any other author (five times); Augustine and Gerson are cited three times; Calvin only once. Van't Spijker speculates that his free and liberal quotations of numerous authors unsympathetic to the Reformed faith may have been the reason he warns against translating his treatise on the exercise of piety into Dutch (65-67) — a warning finally disobeyed in 1996 (see p. 8, note 4 above)!

CHAPTER SEVEN



Polity

Voetius' massive four-volume *Politicae Ecclesiasticae*, edited from his Saturday debates on church government, is divided into three major sections. The first section consists of debates relative to ecclesiastical matters and actions. Voetius wrestles with the nature of the instituted church, the concepts under which church government operates, and the character of church discipline. Under "actions" he discusses the church's handling of liturgy, psalmody, church organs, administration of the sacraments, catechesis, fasting, days of contrition and thanksgiving, marriages, and funerals. He also includes a treatise dealing with ecclesiastical liberty, church property, pastoral remuneration, and church administration.

The second section concentrates on persons in the church, including pastors, elders, deacons, church members, women, and martyrs. He also addresses the call to bear office, its prerequisites and training. At this juncture, he also discusses Roman Catholic hierarchy, and includes a number of debates about monastic orders and spiritual brotherhoods.

The final section deals with the duties of the church. He addresses the significance of making profession of faith and how the office-bearers ought to examine candidates for profession. He covers conducting family visitation; understanding the reason for, and the work of, classes and synods; reforming a backsliding church; and reuniting with the church. He delves deeply into the issue of Roman Catholic and Protestant unity, addressing the boundaries of toleration and the freedom of prophecy. The work concludes with an extensive discussion of

church discipline, administration of the power of the keys, and the answering of a host of related questions.

For Voetius, as for Calvin, the authority of the church is not autonomous, but derived from Scripture. Voetius wrote: “[Ecclesiastical authority] is *anypauthunos*, but it is required to supply its reasons, in dogmatizing, in imposing laws, in polity. It does not immediately and directly oblige in conscience, but only hypothetically, that is to say, as much as and insofar as the act of its exercise agrees either formally and explicitly or reductively and implicitly with the prescriptions of the Sacred Word.”¹ Because the authority of the church is grounded in Scripture, Voetius felt justified, as did Calvin, in attributing to the institutional church a central role in the definition of dogma and in the exercise of Christian discipline. The power of the church, however, must be defined rightly. Voetius wrote that the church is “ministerial, not dominating or autocratic. If it abuses its power, proposing belief or action outside of and against the word of God, it is to be treated in the manner of parents, heroes, teachers, kings and princes commanding such things. [Read] Acts 4 & 5, and Daniel 3 & 6, where the authority and order constituted by God are recognized, but their abuse is condemned.”²

The source of the church’s authority is not in itself, nor is its goal its own maintenance. Its goal is the glory of God and the salvation of its own members. In Voetian ecclesiology the church is not definable in terms of any of its institutions, but only as a gathering of believers for the purpose of mutually edifying one another in matters pertaining to salvation.³ Voetius

¹ PE, 1:122.

² PE, 3:247-48.

³ PE, 1, 12. Voetius’ descriptions of the church were so free of references to institutions that Robert Baillie feared he was too indulgent to Congregationalists and Independents (*Letters and Journals of Robert Baillie* [Edinburgh: Bannatyne Club, 1842], 2:115, 165, 205). Van’t Spijker (78), however, judges these fears to be unfounded, as Voetius was only following the practical effect of the ecclesiology of Dort. McGahagan agrees, asserting that for Voetius the power of the church resided, under Christ, in the church’s entire body, composed of both Synod and people: “The Synod was invested with the directive power, the people with the liberty and power of following and approving or of refusing to approve. Voetius never confused the question of the locus of power with the questions

followed Martin Bucer's emphasis that care for the church must be motivated by the moral ideal of the living church building itself up in love in order to glorify God.⁴ His goal was to bring about a further reformation of the church and its members through bringing the Dutch nation under the biblically loving, firm, and practical discipline of the church — i.e. discipline not only through admonition and censure but especially through preaching.

For Voetius all ecclesiastical authority must be subservient to Christ. The litmus test of a church is whether Christ would be able to exercise His lordship through His Word. Consequently, we are not surprised to find embedded in Voetius' treatise on church government a compendium on homiletics, in which he detailed his thoughts about preaching.⁵ Preaching should expound God's Word clearly and practically, taking into account the current needs of the congregation. Voetius supported the consecutive exposition of chapters and books of the Bible, but stopped short of prescribing one method of preaching as mandatory for all occasions. He criticized the lectionary system as falling short of declaring the whole counsel of God.

Voetius held broad views of Christ's lordship over the church. He felt strongly that the civil government had no right to interfere with the rule of the church of Christ. The "fencing off" of the authority of the church from the civil government, however, ought not "fence in" the church. The church's clear trumpet should sound throughout every sphere of society. An intense focus on faith and piety ought to magnify, not limit, the church's role in society. Due to the world-encompassing lordship of Christ, Voetius had great hopes for the success of the gospel in his own homeland and among foreign pagans. To assist the church in carrying out its mission mandate, he wrote a

of the source or goal of that power. The liberty or power...attributed to both Synod and people was not an absolute principle in itself, as the Independents and Anabaptists would have it, but was the liberty and power conceded by Christ to the church for the purpose of edification and salvation" (73; cf. *PE*, 1:20, 117, 220-21).

⁴ Van't Spijker, 75-76. See also Ephesians 4:13-16.

⁵ *PE*, 1:598-631.

300-page treatise on the planting of churches (*De Plantatione Ecclesiarum*).⁶ He held debates on how the church should relate to Judaism, Paganism, Islam, and even atheism, hoping that such discussions might be used to bind the mission call on young men to serve in foreign lands.⁷

When dealing with the reform of a backslidden church, Voetius' stress was on the practice of piety and good works. He used the example of Puritan ministers in London who called their people to a more thorough reformation. Reformation was necessary everywhere, but it must begin in the church. The church must not only be Reformed in doctrine but also in genuine piety.⁸

Even in dealing with church polity, Voetius' scholastic methodology and practical piety were consistently bound up. Throughout this massive work he used the scholastic method, amassing literally thousands of quotations from hundreds of sources to affirm his points. Christiaan Sepp rightly noted that the wealth of knowledge contained in these volumes is almost limitless.

⁶ *PE*, 2:252-579.

⁷ Cf. Van't Spijker, 75-82; McGahagan, 70-81.

⁸ *PE*, 4:430-87.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Influence

The life and work of Gisbertus Voetius affirms the thesis of Richard Muller that post-Reformation orthodoxy often disagreed with the content of medieval scholasticism, but advantageously used its organizational structure. As the seventeenth century wore on, many Reformed theologians, including Voetius, increasingly relied on scholastic methodology to sustain the vigorous polemics in which they were engaged against Roman Catholicism, Arminianism, and the new philosophical challenges of Cartesianism. Though Reformed scholastic orthodoxy stood in some methodological discontinuity with Calvin, it retained strong affinity with Reformation teaching; indeed, the Reformation is incomplete without its confessional and theological codification.¹ It cannot be denied that Voetius and seventeenth-century Reformed scholastics discussed issues which at times moved beyond the Reformation principle of *sola scriptura*,² yet it is a serious error, as Jonathan Gerstner has noted, to confuse this weakness “with the broader Reformed effort to build a consistent theological system and thus miss the remarkable and real progress of seventeenth-century Reformed theology.”³

¹ Richard A. Muller, *Christ and the Decree: Christology and Predestination in Reformed Theology from Calvin to Perkins* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988); *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vols. 1-2, vol. 3 forthcoming (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986-). Cf. Martin I. Klauber, “Continuity and Discontinuity in Post-Reformation Reformed Theology: An Evaluation of the Muller Thesis,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 33 (1990):467; Willem J. van Asselt, “Herwaarding van de gereformeerde scholastiek,” *Kerktijd* 7, 3 (1995):1-12.

² McGahagan, 56.

³ *The Thousand Generation Covenant*, 70.

Voetius has been underestimated as a Reformed scholastic and experiential theologian in the Netherlands and throughout Europe, and even more so by British and North American scholarship. Though not a creator of a new theology, he was a competent systematizer who influenced thousands. Moreover, he was instrumental in training hundreds of ministers who, following in his footsteps, strove to maintain a harmonious union between scholasticism and godliness. His teaching also attracted many Presbyterian Scots and nonconformist English students.⁴ To many of his students, his theology became a program. His ideals were formulated into what became known (contrary to his wishes) as “the Voetians” or “the Voetian party.”⁵ With their powerful combination of orthodox doctrine and vital piety, the Voetians were far more successful at reaching the common people than the Cocceians.⁶

Cornelis Gentman rightly said of Voetius at his funeral that he was “a giant among trail blazers.” Through his two important offices as professor and preacher, Voetius made Utrecht a stronghold of orthodoxy.⁷ His writings disseminated his thought throughout and beyond the Netherlands. His influence was so widespread at the university that it was frequently called the *Academia Voetiana*.⁸ M’Clintock and Strong put it this way:

⁴ “Thomas Cawton, preacher of Rotterdam, was one of many fathers who sent their sons to study at Utrecht precisely because of the orthodox presence of Voetius” (Keith Sprunger, *Dutch Puritanism* [Leiden: Brill, 1982], 359).

⁵ This was fostered in part by Voetius’ recommendation of *gezelschappen*—i.e. conventicles or organized group meetings of the godly for the purpose of cultivating personal faith and spiritual edification. Gradually, these gatherings, usually identified as Voetian, tended to become *ecclesiolae in ecclesia*—small churches within the territorial church (cf. Martin H. Prozesky, “The Emergence of Dutch Pietism,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 28 [1977]:29-37; Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999], 296).

⁶ Gerstner, *The Thousand Generation Covenant*, chaps. 2, 5, 9 for how this was borne out in the Dutch South African colonists.

⁷ F.G.M. Broeyer, “William III and the Church in Utrecht after the French Occupation,” in *Church, Change and Revolution*, ed. J. van den Berg and P. G. Hoftijzer (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), 180.

⁸ Godfrey, 112.

“Few men have in any age exercised greater influence over the church of their time and country.”⁹

Several factors, however, curtailed Voetius’ influence on succeeding generations, not the least of which were his wordy tomes and his often laborious Latin. Then too, his students often carried his ideals further than their teacher; their excesses contributed to the ultimate disintegration of both Reformed scholasticism and the Dutch Second Reformation. Furthermore, the increasing secularization of the Dutch people influenced the leading *Nadere Reformatie* divines of subsequent generations to abandon Voetius’ vision for reforming all of society; instead, they focused largely on his emphasis on internal piety. By the eighteenth century, the Dutch Second Reformation had become reminiscent of the *Devotio Moderna* in its emphasis on thorough separation from the unredeemed world. The movement continued to strive zealously for the inner experience of Reformed doctrine and personal sanctification through the ministries of its last great lights, Alexander Comrie (1706-74) and Theodorus van der Groe (1704-84).¹⁰

Through notable exceptions, such as Wilhelmus à Brakel — who, though primarily a Voetian theologian, sought to combine the best of Voetius, Cocceius, and Herman Witsius — Voetian theology lives on today in the Dutch Reformed experiential tradition still flourishing in parts of the Netherlands, South Africa, and North America. Brakel’s famous work, *De Redelijke Godsdienst*, recently translated into English as *The Christian’s Reasonable Service*,¹¹ did much to keep alive in the Netherlands throughout the centuries that balance of systematic and experiential theology which John Murray has aptly called “intelligent piety.”¹²

⁹ *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1894), 10:809.

¹⁰ Beeke, *Assurance of Faith*, 390ff.

¹¹ 4 vols., trans. Bartel Elshout, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Morgan, Pa.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1992-95).

¹² F. Ernest Stoeffler also notes Voetius’ influence on F.A. Lampe and German Pietism (*The Rise of Evangelical Pietism* [Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971], 170).