

Review Article:
**A Short Survey of Dutch ‘Evangelical’ New
Testament Scholarship in the Past 25 years¹**

Franklin Jabini²

1. Introduction

The term ‘evangelical’ in a Dutch context needs an explanation. In the Netherlands, this term is used broadly for Christians of different denominational backgrounds, such as Reformed, Pentecostal, Baptist and Brethren. Evangelical in this context is ‘conservative’, or as some prefer ‘faithful to Scripture’.³ In the Dutch evangelical world, scholars from a Reformed background have been the leaders in the area of theological

¹ The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

² Frank holds a DTh from the University of Zululand. He is a senior lecturer at the South African Theological Seminary.

³ The Dutch word used is ‘Bijbelgetrouw’.

scholarship, such as systematic theology,⁴ biblical studies,⁵ Ethics⁶ and missions.⁸ Evangelical scholarship in the Netherlands has made extensive use of the fruits of conservative Reformed scholars.⁸ Prior to the 1980's, Dutch evangelical scholarship was dominated by Reformed scholarship.

In the 1980's, Evangelicals of other Christian traditions and Reformed scholars jointly produced a series of books in the field of Bible and exegesis.⁹ The goal of these monographs was to present an approach to the authority of scripture and exegetical issues in selected books of the Old and New

⁴ E.g., Herman Bavinck's four volumes Reformed Dogmatics (*Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 1906-1911), G.C. Berkouwer's eighteen volumes Studies in Dogmatics (*Dogmatische Studien*, 1949-1972), H. Berkhof's Christian Faith (*Christelijk Geloof*, 1973) and J. van Genderen and W.H. Velema's Short Reformed Dogmatics (*Beknopte gereformeerde dogmatiek*, 1992). A new series of an Evangelical dogmatic was recently started by Willem Ouweneel. Volume one (*The Spirit of God*) and two (*The Christ of God*) appeared in 2007. This will be the first dogmatic series written by a non-reformed theologian in the Netherlands. These two volumes will be followed by five others covering: *The ways and council of God*, *The salvation of God*, *The Church of God*, *The Future of God and the Word of God*.

⁵ E.g., the 63 volumes of Commentary on Old and New Testament (*Korte Verklaring van de Heilige Schrift*), edited by Profs. C.H. Aalders, C. van Gelderen, S. Greijdanus, F.W. Grosheide, A. Noordtjij, J. Ridderbos and other Reformed theologians, which started in the first quarter of the 20th century. The volumes Genesis – Ruth in this series, were published in English as *Bible Student's Commentary* by Zondervan, e.g. *Genesis* 1981, *Joshua, Judges and Ruth*, 1986.

⁶ Especially the 15 volumes *Ethical Reflections* series written by Prof Jochem Douma, between 1970 and 1990. He wrote among others on *Abortion, Homosexuality, Euthanasia, Environment, Peace in society, Politics, Apartheid and Justice*. Volumes 2-4 of this series which dealt with the *ten commandments* were published in one volume in English as *The Ten Commandments: Manual for the Christian Life* by P & R Publishing, 1996.

⁸ E.g. Bavinck's *Inleiding in de Zendingswetenschap*, 1954 (published in English by the P & R Publishing Co. as *An Introduction to the Science of Missions*), Verkuyl's *Inleiding in de Nieuwere Zendingswetenschap*, 1975 (published into English by Eerdmans as *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction*) and *Inleiding in de evangelistiek* (with O. Jager), 1978.

⁸ This article will only focus on the contributions of conservative Reformed scholars.

⁹ The volumes on *Bible and Exegesis* were part of a general series entitled: *Theological Explorations*. The second part of the series was on *the Bible and the Practice* and it dealt with theological and practical subjects, such as: *Heaven and hell; Church and Evangelism; Faith and History; Jesus, the only way*.

Testament that was consistent with Evangelical scholarship.¹⁰ The volumes present alternative interpretation to various New Testament issues, such as the Synoptic Problem.¹¹ These volumes have been used extensively by Evangelicals, who were battling with their own theological identity. The monographs answered some of the challenging questions and created a climate for various new initiatives in Biblical and Theological studies.¹² Some Evangelical publishers joined in distributing books under the umbrella called: *Telos books*, while others translated books into English.¹³ Reformed and 'Evangelicals', joined together as the *Center for Evangelical and Reformation Theology*, linked with the Vrije Universiteit of Amsterdam as an interdenominational and international research and teaching centre for the development of Evangelical Theology at graduate and postgraduate level.

This short review will focus on two Reformed-Evangelical contributions to the study of the New Testament.

¹⁰ The general editor for the series was Drs A. G. Knevel. The New Testament exegetical subjects were: *Explorations in The Synoptic Gospels*, volume 5 (1990) and *Explorations in the Catholic Epistles and Hebrews*, volume 7 (1993). The final volume in this series, volume 8, appeared in 1995 and dealt with the Old Testament messianic expectation. At that time the editor felt that the series served its purpose and that there was no need to continue. The other volumes in the series were: *Explorations in Genesis*. Volume 1 (1986), *Explorations in Exodus*. Volume 2 (1986), *Explorations in the authority of the Bible*. Volume 3 (1987), *Explorations in Proverbs and Ecclesiastes*. Volume 4 (1989) and *Explorations in Isaiah*. Volume 6 (1991).

¹¹ Some books by Eta Linnemann, although not as a part of the series, were also published, e.g. *Historical Criticism of The Bible, Methodology or Ideology?; Is There a Synoptic Problem?*;

¹² Several individuals wrote bible study books or commentaries, e.g. Rev. C. den Boer, who published bible studies based on messages on various Pauline epistles (Reformed); Willem Ouweneel, Henk Medema and Gerard Kramer, who also published on the New Testament (Acts – Revelation), (Plymouth Brethren). Scholars from a Reformed background also published a series of monographs for undergraduate students entitled *Theology in a Reformed perspective*, under the general editorship of Drs. I A. Kole. The series covers an orientation in *Christian Ethics* 1990, *Diaconate* 1991, *Liturgy* 1992, *New Testament* 1993, *Study of Religion* 1994, *Archaeology* 1994, *Philosophy* 1994 – 1997, *History of Dogma* 1996 etc.

¹³ E.g. Fee's *New Testament Exegesis* was published by Boekencentrum in 2001.

2. New Testament Study Bible

In 1986, the first volume of a new series of studies in the text of the New Testament appeared.¹⁴ The final volume in the series appeared in 2003. The series consists of six volumes of word studies, one general introduction to the series and a synopsis of the gospels. The other ten volumes consist of a short introduction to the books of the New Testament, dealing with general background issues, a concise verse-by-verse commentary (from an evangelical conviction), an interlinear Greek-Dutch translation based on the Textus Receptus, with variants from (Nestle-Aland and Hodges-Farstad) and a comparison of various Bible translations. In order to help non-Greek readers, underneath the full text, which appears in Greek characters, a transliteration is provided and is numerically coded to the six word study volumes.

The study Bible has proved to be of great help to college students, pastors and teachers, not only in the Netherlands, but also in the Dutch speaking Republic of Suriname and Curacao. Bible translators in languages in Suriname have used the study Bible as a major reference tool.¹⁵ Since the Dutch speaking evangelical community is small, the price of the complete study Bible series is very high, € 875.00. The 17 volume set appeared in electronic format in 2005.¹⁶ This has been a wise decision for travelling teachers/preachers. The cost of the electronic edition is only € 180.00.

¹⁴ The project was an imitative of the Evangelical Center “In de Ruimte”, after the model of the Norwegian bible teacher, Thoralf Gilbrant. This same model was followed in the USA. A number of scholars worked together on the “Complete Biblical Library”. The first editors for the project were the New Testament scholar Gijs van den Brink and the Classicist Henk Courtz. The project was known as the “In de Ruimte” Study Bible. In 1999, a new organization took over the responsibility of the project, “Centrum voor Bijbelonderzoek” (Center of Biblical Research), and brought it to completion.

¹⁵ Drs. Henk Courtz, who contributed most to the Greek-Dutch interlinear translation, worked on Bible translation in Suriname in the late 1990’s. Most of the translators in the local projects did not have training in Greek and Dutch is the official language of Suriname. Translators therefore prefer to use this Dutch resource instead of English tools.

¹⁶ At the completion of the New Testament the editors launched an Old Testament companion to the project. So far, three volumes have appeared. The editors for the series are now: Gijs van den Brink, Hans Bette, Mart-Jan Paul and Arie Zwiep.

3. Commentary on the New Testament

In 1987, Dr Jakob van Bruggen published *Christ on Earth*, the first volume in a new series of New Testament commentaries.¹⁷ The first edition of this series, in the Reformed tradition, started under the editorship of Seakle Greijdanus and Frederik W. Grosheide in the 1930's.¹⁸ The target audience then was the scholar. The contributors therefore used Greek without transliteration and also quoted Latin and German sources without translation. Although most of the volumes of this old series are still available (antique book stores), they are not helpful to general readers. The specialist will also find scholarly commentaries in other languages that are more up to date.

The new series consists of newly written commentaries on the books of the New Testament and, in addition, three topical studies written by Dr. Van Bruggen. The topical studies are: *Christ on Earth* (1994), *The Gospel of God's Son* (1996) and *Paul* (2001).¹⁹

The target audience of the new series differs from the previous one. The scholar and pastor are not the only focus of these commentaries. The text was written in such a way that even non-theologians and serious Bible students can benefit from it. The authors have avoided technical discussions and learned footnotes. The exegesis is based on the Greek text and the interpretation focused on the meaning of the text for the first readers and the present day Christian community.

¹⁷ Baker Books published the English translation “*Christ on earth. The gospel narratives as history*” in 1998. The full title of the book is: *Christus op aarde. Zijn levensbeschrijving door leerlingen en tijdgenoten* (Commentaar op het Nieuwe Testament. Derde serie, Afdeling Evangeliën, [deel 1]), Kampen, Kok 1987..

¹⁸ Some of the contributors to this first series also wrote commentaries for the old edition of the New International Commentary on the New Testament (e.g. Grosheide, *1 Corinthians* 1953, H. Ridderbos *Galatians*, 1953).

¹⁹ So far 19 volumes appeared in the series, with four more to appear to complete the series in the next three years. Van Bruggen wrote the following commentaries for the series: *The gospel of Matthew* 1994, *The gospel of Mark* 1988, *the gospel of Luke* 1993, *the Epistle to the Romans* 2006 and *the Epistle to the Galatians* 2004.

Most of the contributors to the series received their doctorate at the Theological University of Kampen (Broederweg) under supervision of Professor Van Bruggen, the general editor of the series.²⁰ Dr P.J. Lalleman, Dr J. van Eck and Dr L. Floor are the exceptions.²¹

Besides their theological background, most of them have a strong background in the classical literature. This is one of the main strength of the series. Students of the text will not be disappointed in trying to understand the text in its first century context. Dr Anderson for example compares 1 Corinthians 13 with a textbook use for pre-rhetoric students of those days. The parallels between these two are striking. Throughout his commentary, he refers to and compares the epistle with the Greek literature of that time. The same can be seen in Dr J. van Eck's commentaries on the book of Acts and Colossians/Philemon. According to Van Eck, Paul's style of writing can be compared with the improvised philosophical argument, as can be found in the speeches of Epictetus (written down by one of his pupils, Arrianus). The price per volume is between € 27.50 and € 55.90.

4. Conclusion

Despite the very productive 25 years in Evangelical New Testament scholarship in the Netherlands, there seems to be a concern as far as the future of such publications is concerned. According to a publisher and an editor, the readership of New Testament commentaries and academic studies is declining.²² It is not clear what the reason is for this. With this trend, Reformed Evangelical New Testament scholarship will have to depend on outside sources, such as publications in English and German.

²⁰ Dr Dean Anderson (1 Corinthians 2008), Dr Pieter van Houwelingen (*The gospel of John* 1997, *The epistles to the Thessalonians* 2002, *First Peter* 1991, *2 Peter and Jude* 1993, and the forth coming, *the Pastoral Epistles*), Dr Hendrik van de Kamp (*Revelation* 2000 and forth coming, *Hebrews*), Dr. T.E. van Spanje (forth coming, *2 Corinthians*).

²¹ Van Eck wrote the commentaries on *Acts* 2003 and *Colossians/Philemon* 2007. Lalleman wrote on the *Epistles of John* 2005 and Floor wrote on *Ephesians* 1995, *Philippians* 1998 and *James* 1992.

²² The publisher H. Medema and the editor Prof J. Van Bruggen, personal communication. Books are published in smaller quantities.

The two series surveyed will continue to be an asset to both pastors and serious Bible students. At this moment, they are the best resources for this category. The study Bible is available in electronic format. A further step would be to make both series available on one electronic platform, preferably Libronix. This will reduce the cost of the series and it will enable travelling scholars, such as this reviewer, to use these resources on their laptop while travelling.