

Alexander Comrie  
Dr. A.G. Honig  
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This is the second theological dissertation for which we are indebted to the Free University at Amsterdam. In 1891 Dr. H.H. Kuyper published the first part of his *Opleiding tot den Dienst des Woords bij de Gereformerden*, a comprehensive volume of more than 600 pages. Besides their ability, which does honor to the young institution, under whose auspices they were published, both books have it in common, that they deal with historical subjects. It is characteristic of this young Calvinism, that it seeks close contact with its own glorious past, and cultivates in its disciples a fine quality of the historic sense.

Comrie's name already indicates that he was not a Hollander but a Scotchman, "Scoto-Brittannus" as he liked to call himself. His native place was Perth, the year of his birth 1706. When arriving in Holland he must have been about twenty years of age. Sent thither, as it seems, to pursue a mercantile career, his rare talents and profound piety won him the favor of influential patrons, who enabled him to follow his deeper inclination of studying for the ministry. He attended the Universities of Franeker and Leiden, and in 1735 was ordained minister of the Reformed church in the small village of Woubrugge, in Holland. In this small village, Comrie passed all the thirty-seven years of his pastorate. His death occurred in 1774.

If we except the interesting tradition, concerning the manner in which he first made the acquaintance of his future parishioners,<sup>1</sup> there is nothing extraordinary in Comrie's outward career. His was the uneventful life of a village pastor. In ecclesiastical meetings he hardly ever made his influence felt. A party leader he never became. Only once did he enter the lists as a professed controversialist, even then anonymously. And yet this Scotchman, who continued always to speak and write the Dutch language with difficulty, left his impress upon the hearts of the Calvinistic people, and so endeared his name to their children, that it remained unforgotten through the period of decadence, and even now is held in high honor by a later generation, that have seen the dawn of more auspicious times.

To understand the great influence which Comrie exerted by his writings, one must first of all take into account his Scotch descent. In his youth he had been trained in the vigorous, clearly-cut Calvinism of the Westminster Standards. The period between Dort and Westminster had been highly fruitful for the development of Reformed Theology. Although this development made as rapid strides in Holland as it did in England, its results never received in the former country the seal of confessional statement, which was attached to them by the divines of Westminster. When, therefore, Comrie came to Holland, he had the great advantage of writing to his familiarity with the purest form of Calvinism, a firm conviction that this Puritan theology was the ripest and most legitimate fruit of the old Calvinistic principles. This was of the more value, since Comrie's strife was with a generation that preferred the laxer views of Saumur to the old severity of Geneva; and, to cover its laxity, sought shelter behind the more or less undeveloped forms of dogmatic expression of the Dutch standards. It was comparatively easy for his opponents to prove that some of his views were not explicitly formulated in these symbols. But, after all, this was a mere renewal of the old stratagem, which consists in calling up an earlier statement of some dogma against the later and more definite formula, thus defending the most unhistoric conceptions by an appeal to history.

History is sure to avenge such injustice in after-time. We are glad that for Comrie the day has come in which partiality and willful misrepresentation are bound to make way for a calm and impassionate historical judgment.

Importance must also be attached to Comrie's philosophical grasp upon dogmatic problems. Dr. Honig seems to us to underestimate this element in his mental equipment. Calvinism in general is friendly to clear and high thinking. Some of its problems, and exactly those with which Comrie had chiefly to deal, none but a well-trained logical mind will be able to follow into their more intricate and abstract ramifications. With unparalleled subtlety of mind Comrie traced the Pelagian and Arminian errors to their ultimate principles, and pursued them into their furthest results. He never failed to do philosophic justice to God's revealed truth. It causes some surprise that he should have preferred the doctorate of philosophy to that of theology, but at all events it must be acknowledged that the former stood him in excellent service for his lifework.

A third characteristic, and one which alone will account for his influence on the common people, is the spirit of deep piety that pervades his writings. In this respect he reminds us of Perkins, as in the foregoing respect he bears a strong resemblance to Twisse. Comrie possessed the unction which brings the mysteries of faith very near to the heart of God's people. Theology never degenerated with him into a mass of abstruse questions. His work furnishes a clear example of how those truths, which many are at present accustomed to look down upon as scholastic quibblings, are in their very essence profitable for godliness.

To the elucidation of four doctrines, at least, Comrie has made valuable contributions. They are those of predestination, the covenants, justification, and the nature of faith. Here also Dr. Honig adheres closely to the historical method, and describes objectively, mostly in the author's own words, his distinctive views. This method has the advantage of being exempt from the danger of subjective misrepresentation. On the other hand, dogmatic questions are the last to which it should be rigorously applied. They are not like parts of a map to be spread out before us section by section, but rather an organic growth, in which the parts bear the most intimate relation to the whole. In order to understand Comrie fully we must be made so see the vital internexus of the parts of his system. It is not difficult to show, for instance, how his view of justification has influenced his conception of faith, and on other points a similar interdependence is traceable.

In his doctrine of the covenants, Comrie does not materially advance beyond his British predecessors. He insisted upon the parallel between Adam and Christ as federal heads, and made Christ represent the elect as the contracting party. More interesting is the attitude he took in regard to justification. The view had become prevalent in those days that faith was not merely a prerequisite, but also a predisposing condition, more or less the judicial ground of justification; a renewal of the Arminian error in its more subtle Neonomian form. In opposition to this, Comrie wished to emphasize the free, sovereign character of the act of God in justifying the sinner. At the same time in certain quarters the imputation of Christ's active obedience was being assailed. In view of this, he thought it necessary to maintain that faith in one aspect of it is not the condition but the result of God's gracious imputation of the mediator's active obedience, from which flows all subjective grace, regeneration and faith not excluded. Comrie sought to combat both errors by positing justification as an eternal act in the mind of God, thus making it anterior not only to faith, but likewise to the

decree concerning Christ's mediatorial work. Dr. Honig appears to agree with this, and we do not, of course, dispute his right to do so. But we think he is hardly justified in representing it as the most common view of the older Calvinists. At any rate it would have been no superfluous labor to furnish the proof of this either from Comrie's works, or by direct quotation from the sources. In the main, however, Comrie was right in the motives that led him to this conception. The question is merely whether he did not go too far in placing this so-called eternal justification before the sponsio of Christ, and whether he was exegetically right in claiming for it the name of justification. No Calvinist will deny that there is a certain imputative act of God preceding regeneration and faith, but not many will be prepared to call it justification. It is only fair to add that Comrie's intention was not to deny justification in time. He held that the justifying act of God passes through four stages—in the eternal decree, in the resurrection of Christ, in regeneration and in *foro conscientiae*.

In regard to faith, Comrie laid great stress on the element of assurance, which he held to be the very essence of faith. Over against the reviving Arminianism of his day, he once more called attention to the fact that assurance is exactly that element in which faith most clearly reveals its nature as the subjective counterpart of the scheme of grace. Only by throwing off his self-righteous doubts and fears, *i.e.*, by allowing himself to be fully persuaded and assured, does a sinner fully appreciate the grace of God. At the time of the Reformation this same element of *fiducia* had been placed in the foreground as a protest against the Romanist spirit of self-righteousness, and consequently we find strong utterances on the subject in Calvin and others. Comrie agreed with them in this respect also, that he was unwilling to derive assurance from the reflex action of faith exclusively. Furthermore, he generalized his ideas on this point into the statement that faith belongs to the genus of persuasion. To him it is preeminently a noetic act, rather than an act of the will. Here especially the influence of his doctrine of justification makes itself felt. Faith after justification had gone before, could hardly escape becoming a mere receptive act, a receiving of the message that we have been justified. Finally Comrie brought into full view the potential and habitual character of faith, in opposition to those who limited it to a mere act, ascribing to the latter moreover the power of uniting the believer with Christ.

Of course, Comrie took the highest ground in reference to predestination. Still the supralapsarianism of Perkins and Twisse, of Gomarus and Voetius seems to have repelled him. He chose a middle view. Predestination, originally and anterior to the decree of permitting sin, had reference to the elevation of definite persons to a supernatural state of glory in union with the Theanthropos, and correspondingly reprobation consisted in the decree to leave certain definite persons in their natural state, without sin, without glory, and without union to Christ. Thereupon the decree to permit sin follows and makes out of this supralapsarian predestination an infralapsarian decree to save from sin in Christ, and to leave in sin. It will be observed how this scheme involves that the Logos would have become incarnate, apart from the fall of humanity, a curious case of coincidence with certain modern notions, though of a wholly different origin. Comrie could not escape this incongruity, because the Scriptures so uniformly represent election as having taken place in Christ, the Mediator.

(Footnotes)

<sup>1</sup> The outlines of this tradition, as they were communicated to him orally, are given by Dr. Kuyper in the *Catholic Presbyterian* of 1882. Dr. Honig, we are sorry to say, is not able to vouch for the accuracy of the tradition.