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## The theology of Hendrikus Berkhof

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## SUMMARY

Methodologically, my starting point was to place Berkhof within the context of the story of his life and the story of his theology. While the former is far more than the latter, at times not even as closely connected as at other times, the fact remains that they can certainly not be absolutely isolated from each other. To understand his theology, one must necessarily take into consideration the formative effect that people and events, influences and trends had on his theology. Thus the first chapter is devoted to the exploration of: *The Background of Berkhof's Theology*.

How does one characterize the theology of Hendrikus Berkhof? There are so many features. Is there a common denominator? Is there an underlying design, and if so, what would that design be? Thus in chapter two, *The Design of Berkhof's Theology*, I consider and evaluate possible designs: salvation-historical, cultural, covenantal, kerygmatic, etc. While there are signs of all these elements in Berkhof's theology, the investigation led me to the conclusion that Berkhof's theology stands firmly in the tradition of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century German *Vermittlungstheologie* and its counterpart in the Netherlands, the *Ethische Theologie*.

As a mediation theologian Berkhof seeks synthesis. He wants to bridge the gap between the Gospel and modern thought in a vastly secularized age, between a strange Gospel and a situation estranged from it, and consequently even between apparently contradicting elements in theology itself. This he aims to accomplish by reinterpreting the Gospel in a manner which is as up-to-date and as lucid as possible, stripped of all the ingrained misconceptions which obscure it to so many, so that it steers its own course between rigid traditionalism and rudderless modernism. The question is: did he achieve a meaningful synthesis between all these elements and thereby contribute to make the Gospel more acceptable for modern man? Thus, in chapters three to six, I survey how he attempts to bridge the gaps between that which present themselves as the salient contra-elements between Christian faith and modern thought: chapter three: *Religion, Faith, and Atheism*; chapter four: *Revelation and Experience*; chapter five: *Christianity and Secularization*; chapter six: *Jesus — man and (also?) God*.

The final chapter, seven, is *An Attempt at Evaluation*, critical indeed, yet not unsympathetic, in which I point out that Berkhof's presuppositions prevent him from bridging the gaps and render his mediation theology vulnerable, controversial, and unconvincing.