

Robert E. VanderVennen,
A University for the People:
A History of the Institute for Christian Studies
(Sioux Center, Iowa: Dordt College Press, 2008),
viii+273 pages.

Doing a major in philosophy (my B.A.) in the early 1970s at the University of Toronto (I received my B.A. in 1974) and then becoming a student at the fledgling Toronto School of Theology has made me aware of the existence of the Institute of Christian Studies on College Street in Toronto for nearly some four decades. And so I was deeply interested to read this recent volume that details the history of this graduate school with “a difference.” VanderVennen wisely takes a couple of chapters to outline the early days of the school and its philosophical roots in the thought of Herman Dooyeweerd (1894-1977). Dooyeweerd’s philosophical convictions were not followed slavishly, but his convictions that philosophy is foundational to all other scholarship, that religion is at the centre of every human enterprise, and that Christians need to engage in spirited socio-cultural reformation gave a distinct shape to this graduate school.

As with any history of this nature, space is given to details of the teachers at the school (p. 73-119), the use of books to spread the distinct philosophy of the Institute (p.123-150), financial challenges (p.217-224, 260-261), and the attempts to grant accredited degrees (p.225-245). There is little doubt that the school has had a number of brilliant teachers over the years, men such as Bernard Zylstra, C.T. McIntire, Al Wolters, George Vandervelde, Hendrik Hart and James Olthius. I distinctly remember attending a scintillating Institute conference on the person and work of the Holy Spirit in the 1980s that eventuated in a book on the Spirit edited by Vandervelde in 1989.

What is refreshing is that VanderVennen is honest with some of the challenges that the Institute has faced: for example, the difficulties the faculty found in working together (p.106, 191-192); the theological turbulence generated positions taken by faculty at the school (p.55-72, 187-201); and the challenge the school has faced in recruiting students from the broader evangelical community in Canada (p.216).

A critical note that comes through again and again in the book has been the desire of the scholars at the school to make the Word of God the primary referent in their thinking. Yet, it seems to this reviewer that the radicalism of the early years (see, e.g., p.63-66) increasingly became a radicalism directed by the winds of culture rather than by the Scriptures. This is especially clear, for instance, in the promotion by Hart and Olthius in the early 1990s of homosexuality as a legitimate lifestyle (p.190-191, 199-201). Only when this position became increasingly favoured by the Canadian cultural Left was it proposed as a “radical” implication of a true reading of the Scriptures. This reviewer distinctly remembers hearing of the argumentation for this position and feeling that the Institute had betrayed its Reformed heritage of living under the sovereign authority of the Word of God. In light of such a perspective argued by two key faculty members

it should not be surprising that the school has had trouble recruiting from the larger Canadian evangelical community.

Michael A.G. Haykin
Professor of Church History
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary
Louisville, Kentucky.