# TECHNOLOGY AND THE REFORMED TRADITION

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I AM THE son and grandson of Dutch immigrants to Canada who arrived shortly after the end of the second world war. They took a "kist" across the Atlantic, a large crate containing their modest household possessions. Along with their kist, many Dutch immigrants brought their Reformed Christian tradition. This tradition, sometimes referred to as the neo-Calvinist tradition, emerged from the work of Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck in the early 20th century, but has roots that can be traced back to John Calvin and St. Augustine. The Kuyperian world-and-life-view claims that all creation, including human life and culture, belongs to God. Animated by this worldview, these early immigrants planted Christian schools and colleges, started a Christian labour association and Christian farmers federation – and established the paper you are now reading.

## 'OPENING UP' POTENTIAL

One stream of neo-Calvinist thought that emerged in the mid-twentieth century was developed by Herman Dooyeweerd and Dirk Vollenhoven, both professors at the Free University in Amsterdam. This stream of Christian philosophy was coined Reformational Philosophy by Calvin Seerveld, and is characterized by the claim that all thought is animated by religious presuppositions and that we are called to participate in the "opening up" of the potentials in creation. Technology is one of the potentials in creation that we are called to "open up," and Reformational thought has made fruitful contributions to thinking about technology.

Some of the early work in the philosophy of technology was forged by Reformational scholars like Hendrik Van Riessen, author of The Society of the Future (1957). Van Riessen studied under Vollenhoven and later taught at Delft University. The well-known philosopher of technology, Carl Mitcham, recognized Van Riessen's contributions in his classic book, *Thinking Through Technology* (Mitcham later delivered the first Van Riessen Memorial Lecture at Delft University).

One of Van Riessen's graduate students, Egbert Schuurman (no relative of mine), worked as an engineer before going on to do further studies in the philosophy of technology. His thesis was later published in 1980 under the title *Technology and the Future: A Philosophical Challenge.* He eventually took over Van Riessen's position at Delft and went on to train another generation of Christian philosophers in technology. He also served as a member of the Dutch Senate for many years, demonstrating the relevance of Reformed philosophical thinking for making political and social decisions about technology. I have crossed paths with Egbert, who has lived for many years in the same Dutch town where my late wife (Carina) grew up.

One of the landmark technology books informed by Reformational thinking was *Responsible Technology: A Christian Perspective (1986)*, a book project funded by the Calvin Center for



Arrival of the Kist for Opa and Oma Groenewegen.

Christian Scholarship (Egbert Schuurman was a contributor). This book helped inspire some to establish a Christian Engineering Society, which started in 1992 with a modest gathering of 40 engineering educators on the campus of Calvin College. This book also inspired many subsequent writings on the intersection of faith and engineering, including a book I co-authored titled *A Christian Field Guide to Technology for Engineers and Designers.*

## TECH IS NOT NEUTRAL

Reformational thinking continues to inform computer science and engineering education at Calvin University (and at other places, like Dordt University), using concepts such as "design norms," which are directly informed by insights from Reformational philosophy. These "design norms" help students see that technology is not neutral, but rather has substantial cultural, social, lingual, economic, aesthetic and justice issues.

One of my dreams is to establish a Center for Faith and Technology at Calvin to ensure that the Reformed tradition continues to speak into modern technological developments, such as Artificial Intelligence. I remain grateful my grandparents brought their Reformed tradition along with their kist, a tradition with many fruitful insights that can help guide us in the world of technology. ✄