

# Theology Matters

Vol. 29, No. 2

Spring 2023

## Characteristics of Reformed Theology

by John H. Leith

*John H. Leith was one of the most influential teachers of Reformed theology in the twentieth century. A new book containing selections of his writings was published a few weeks ago under the title, An Introduction to Reformed Theology. It contains the following essay, which is a bold attempt to do what few theologians have dared to do, namely, to identify and to summarize the most basic features of Reformed theology. It is not the first attempt to do so. It may not be the last. But it opens up a conversation that Theology Matters thinks we need to have.*

*Richard Burnett, Managing Editor*

### 1. A Theology of the Holy Catholic Church

Reformed theologians have built upon the work of the ancient church. It is worth noting that the formulation of Christian theology in the comprehensive way that one finds in the Reformation confessions or in Calvin's *Institutes* would not have been possible in the early church. Theology always builds upon the work of the past, and comprehensive statements of the faith are achieved only with the passing of time. The Protestant Reformation accepted with little modification the great formulations of the ancient catholic church, namely, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Chalcedonian Definition of the person of Jesus Christ. The Nicene Creed defines the decisive and final character of the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. All who affirm it are united in the basic Christian affirmation that God is defined by Jesus Christ. On this point the Protestant Reformation and the Reformed tradition had no doubts.

Protestantism and the Reformed tradition in particular had grave misgivings about many of the doctrinal developments of the medieval church. The doctrines of the church and sacraments were greatly elaborated in the period between the fall of Rome (410) and the Protestant Reformation (1517). During that time, the church had to deal with barbarians of northern Europe who could neither read nor write and who had no traditions of either Christian or classical ethics. It is understandable that the church placed increasing emphasis on sacraments, on representation of Christian truth and data in pictures and statutes, and on church discipline. The doctrine of transubstantiation received official formulation at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, and yearly confession was made obligatory at the same time. The doctrine of the seven sacraments (baptism, confirmation, penance, the mass, marriage, ordination, and extreme unction) was made official at the Council of Florence (1439). All of these doctrines of the church and sacraments were radically revised by the Reformers. The Apocrypha, gradually accepted into the Old Testament canon by inclusion in the Vulgate, was rejected. Even the doctrine of man as formulated at the Council of Orange (529) was revised to place more emphasis on the invincibility of

### Table of Contents

Characteristics of Reformed Theology.....	p. 1
What All Christians Should Know.....	p. 9
Moses, Death, and the Continuation of Ministry.....	p.12

divine grace and the bondage of human sin. In particular, the Protestant Reformation concentrated upon God's way of salvation and insisted that salvation is wholly by the grace of God and not by any merit of man.

## 2. A Theocentric Theology

The central theme of theology, as Reformed theology has understood it, is not man and his plight or his possibilities, nor even Jesus Christ, but God, who is the Creator and who is uniquely present in Jesus Christ. To put it more exactly, Christian theology has to do with the triune God, who is the unfathomable Creator of all things, who has made himself known in Jesus Christ, and who, as the Holy Spirit, is the Lord and Life-Giver and speaks by the prophets.<sup>1</sup>

Unitarianism of the Father, of the Creator, leaves out of account the Redeemer and Sanctifier. The unitarianism of the Son forgets the Creator and the Sanctifier. Finally, the unitarianism of the Spirit becomes absorbed in the work of God in the inner life of the believer to the exclusion of his other works. Each unitarianism distorts the understanding not only of God but also of the Christian life, which is a response to God's claim. Christian theology has to do with the one God who is personally and always related to his creation in three ways.

Writing some sixty years ago, a great Calvin scholar, Émile Doumergue, insisted that Calvin was theocentric, not Christocentric, in his theological work.<sup>2</sup> The significance of Jesus Christ is so great for Christian theology that Christian piety has always been tempted to believe that no theology can be too Christocentric. For the Christian, God is defined by Jesus Christ; and Jesus Christ is centrally important for all Christian theology. The Nicene Creed, which affirms that in Jesus Christ the believer confronts God himself, is the basic Christian confession. Jesus Christ is the decisive clue to the nature of the Creator and the Spirit. Our knowledge of the Father and the Spirit would be most diffused and thus not Christian without the Son who was incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth. Yet it is equally true that in his works God is indivisible and his works cannot be separated from his unity. It is a fundamental Christian affirmation that the God who redeems is also the God who creates and who gives life and speaks by the prophets.

The insistence that the object of faith is the triune God has been a characteristic of Reformed theology. This theology has had little patience with any Jesusology type of piety, as is seen in sentimental, self-oriented hymnology. It has likewise had little sympathy with so-called charismatic movements that become absorbed in the introspective analysis of one's own psyche.<sup>3</sup> The God whom Christians worship is the Lord God who created the heavens and the earth and the Holy Spirit who gives comfort, as well as the God who encounters his people

and redeems them in Jesus Christ. A unitarianism of the Father leads to an austere, creativistic faith. A unitarianism of the Son leads to the sentimentalism of Jesusology. A unitarianism of the Spirit leads to emotional irresponsibility. Reformed theology acknowledges the triune God.

The triune God is the Lord of heaven and earth. On this point Reformed theology has never been in doubt, and this conviction has given a distinctive character to the faith of the Reformed community. H. Richard Niebuhr has, as well as any contemporary theologian, analyzed faith in a way that is compatible with Reformed theology.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, faith is trust in God. It is more than mental assent. It is the confidence that is born of the personal assurance that God is sovereign. Calvin loved the Psalms because of the assurance that they give that God is the Ruler of nature and history and the Protector of his people. Significantly, the Psalms that first attracted the attention of Calvinist worship were those that affirmed trust in God amid the turbulence of life. Faith is also, H. Richard Niebuhr insisted, loyalty to God and his cause in the world. Here too Niebuhr has given contemporary expression to a fundamental theme of Reformed faith. The Christian life for Calvin was in no small measure loyalty to God and his cause.

The theocentric character of Reformed faith sets it over against every ethic of self-realization, against inordinate concern with the salvation of one's own soul, against excessive preoccupation with questions of personal identity. The great fact is God, and the true vocation of every human being is trust in him and loyalty to his cause. Again, H. Richard Niebuhr has expressed with great insight this Calvinist conviction that the final fact with which any person has to do is God.

We may call it the nature of things, we may call it fate, we may call it reality. But by whatever name we call it, this law of things, this reality, this way things are, is something with which we all must reckon. We may not be able to give a name to it, calling it only the 'void' out of which everything comes and to which everything returns, though that is also a name. But it is there—the last shadowy and vague reality, the secret of existence by virtue of which things come into being, are what they are, and pass away. Against it there is no defense.<sup>5</sup>

God, I believe, is always in history; he is the structure in things, the source of all meaning, the 'I am that I am,' that which is that it is. He is the rock against which we beat in vain, that which bruises and overwhelms us when we seek to impose our wishes, contrary to his, upon him. That structure of the universe, that creative will, can no more be said to interfere brutally in history than the violated laws of my organism can be said to

interfere brutally with my life if they make me pay the cost of my violation.<sup>6</sup>

There is no Reformed theology that does not articulate the majesty and the glory of God. Likewise, there is no Reformed piety that does not experience the otherness of God. The God of Reformed faith cannot be domesticated or commanded by any human being. He is the living God.

### 3. A Theology of the Bible

Reformed theology has always been intensely biblical. The first theses that Reformed theologians presented for debate with medieval Catholicism declared without equivocation that in theology the Bible is the decisive authority. The first two theses of Berne (1528) declare:

- a) The holy Christian Church, whose only head is Christ, is born of the Word of God, and abides in the same, and listens not to the voice of a stranger.
- b) The Church of Christ makes no laws or commandments apart from the Word of God; hence all human traditions are not binding upon us except so far as they are grounded upon or pre-scribed in the Word of God.

Zwingli, whose work began the Reformation in Zurich, deliberately set out, as has been noted, to preach through books of the Bible so as to present the Christian gospel in its fullness. He brought all of his skills as a humanist scholar to the explication of the biblical text in its literary or natural meaning.

There can be no question that John Calvin intended to be a biblical theologian.<sup>7</sup> In his will, he identified himself as “I, John Calvin, Minister of the Word of God in the church of Geneva.”<sup>8</sup> One of the most striking characteristics of Calvin’s work as theologian is his synthesis of the work of the exegete, the systematic theologian, and the preacher. This synthesis was rooted in Calvin’s conviction that all theology stands under the Word of God and also in his insistence that theology is a practical science. In a perceptive article, “The Modernity of Calvin’s Theological Method,” Gilbert Rist has written that Calvinist theology is located between the biblical text and preaching.

It is necessary to recognize that with Calvin theological effort is not the final consideration; it gives way to what precedes it and what follows it; it is only the discourse that permits preaching to take root in Holy Scripture; it is only a key, an opening, an entrance to the profitable reading of both the Old and New Testaments. Theology is a service for all men and not a purpose in itself, intelligible only to clerics. Doctrine is contained in Holy Scripture, not in dogmatics, and this is why

theology is only able to echo the biblical text, to reflect it constantly without being able to add anything to it.<sup>9</sup>

The interaction of theology, sermon, and commentary was carefully thought out by Calvin and programmatically developed. In the preface to the 1539 edition of the *Institutes*, Calvin stated that his object was to prepare students for the sacred volume. The *Institutes* had the modest purpose of being a manual for the reading of Scripture in contrast to the grandiose design of summaries. As such, the *Institutes* were intentionally related to the reading and study of the Scriptures and the commentaries. This purpose persisted even with greater emphasis through all the editions of the *Institutes*. The 1559 preface declares again, “it has been my purpose in this labor to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word . . .” In the preface to the French edition of 1560, which was meant for a more popular audience, Calvin expressed the hope that the *Institutes* would be a “key to open a way for all children of God into a good and right understanding of Holy Scripture. . . . Although Holy Scripture contains a perfect doctrine, to which one can add nothing.”<sup>10</sup> Most readers, Calvin knew, would need some guidance. Calvin’s *Institutes* were not designed for the theologically elite but for the Christian as a reader of Scripture.

It is significant that the development of the *Institutes* paralleled the writing of the commentaries. In the years between the Romans commentary in 1539 and his death in 1564, Calvin commented on every book in the New Testament except Second and Third John and Revelation. He also published commentaries on the book of Genesis and a harmony of the rest of the Pentateuch, Joshua, Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel 1–20, Daniel, Jeremiah, Lamentations, and all the Minor Prophets. In addition, Calvin preached frequently. This enabled him to comment on many books on which he did not produce commentaries, including Job, Judges, First Kings, and Second Samuel. The only books not commented on in the *Institutes* are Esther, Nahum, Second John, and Third John. It is wrong therefore to think that the *Institutes* developed simply as a result of theological controversies or demands for theological coherence and completeness. The section on predestination, for example, was enlarged as a result of Calvin’s study of the Gospel of John, not simply because of his controversies on the subject.

Theology has the task of clarifying the biblical message. Theology is more than the repetition of biblical words. In justifying the terminology of Trinitarian theology, Calvin wrote,

If they call a foreign word one that cannot be shown to stand written syllable by syllable in Scripture, they are indeed imposing upon us an unjust law which condemns all interpretation not patched together out

of the fabric of Scripture . . . we ought to seek from Scripture a sure rule for both thinking and speaking, to which both the thoughts of our minds and the words of our mouths should be conformed. But what prevents us from explaining in clearer words those matters in Scripture which perplex and hinder our understanding, yet which conscientiously and faithfully serve the truth of Scripture itself, and are made use of sparingly and modestly and on due occasion?<sup>11</sup>

Calvin's theology can properly be described primarily as commentary upon Scripture as a whole and secondarily as commentary upon the way the church had read Scripture in its theology and creeds. Theology clarifies and focuses the message of Scripture in the idiom of a particular situation. Explaining Scripture in "clearer words" meant, in practice, explaining it in conversation with humanist culture and in controversy with scholastic theology. Calvin was a participant in the humanist culture of his day, and every paragraph of theology that he wrote reflects this fact. His theology was worked out in dialogue with the thought forms of his age, even though he wrote no programmatic essays proposing to do this. The theological basis for a theology alive to its culture is found in the universal activity of the Logos. Those who have "even tasted the liberal arts penetrate with their aid far more deeply into the secrets of the divine wisdom."<sup>12</sup>

Wencelius in *L'esthétique de Calvin* has demonstrated how Calvin used poetry in his theological task.<sup>13</sup> Calvin as a theologian was very much in conversation with humanist culture, and he posed the question of faith sharply for his humanist friends, who refused his Protestant and Christian commitments.

Theology, however, has the task not simply of clarifying Scripture but also of ordering the message of Scripture. This problem, apparently, was a major concern for Calvin. In the preface to the 1559 edition of the *Institutes*, he declared that he had never been satisfied until then with the arrangement of his theology. He takes satisfaction in the conviction that "I have so embraced the sum of religion in all its parts, and have arranged it in such an order, that if anyone rightly grasps it, it will not be difficult for him to determine what he ought especially to seek in Scripture, and to what end he ought to relate its contents."<sup>14</sup> In this sense, Calvin was a systematic theologian, providing in the *Institutes* the "system," the coherent statement of Christian faith, that was mirrored in his commentaries.

Another characteristic of Calvin's use of Scripture is the emphasis upon the whole canon of Scripture. Calvin had his favorite books: Romans, Psalms, Matthew, John, First Corinthians, and Genesis, for example; but as much as any major theologian ever has, he attempted to

establish his theology upon the whole of Scripture. Critics have contended that one of his faults as a theologian was the failure to distinguish adequately between the lights and shadows of Scripture, and the tendency to treat all Scripture as on the same level.<sup>15</sup>

From the beginning in the sixteenth century to Karl Barth in the twentieth century, Reformed theologians have been in intention and in fact theologians of the Bible. Reformed theology has always been more biblical than philosophical, just as it has been more practical than speculative. This has been its strength and its weakness. While Reformed scholars have not always been the most venturesome biblical scholars, they have been unexcelled in steadfastness and solid work. They have been in the forefront in the work of the Bible translation societies, in the study of the original texts of Scripture, and in commentaries upon them.

#### 4. Predestination

Reformed Christians are universally associated with predestination. This association is well grounded in the theologies, confessions, and the controversies of the tradition. Hence, predestination can be taken as a special mark of Reformed theology. All Christians have some doctrine of predestination, but Reformed Christians have been unique in their emphasis on it and in the rigor with which they have developed it. Predestination brings the Reformed understanding of God to focus upon the believer and the church. God, as has been indicated, has been understood by Reformed theologians in a very dynamic way, as activity, force, will, intentionality. God is the Lord, the all-governing Creator. The origin of the faith of the believer and of the church must be found first in the action of God, not in any human effort. Reformed theologians have always known that psychologically and historically the life of faith and the life of the church were the work of the people of God. Yet, they also insisted that the root of this life was not first the decision of individuals or of the community but the election of God.

Predestination means that human life is rooted in the will and the intention of God. Reformed theologians used to speak of the decrees of God. In more modern language, they were speaking of the purpose of God and declaring that behind everything that exists is the will and purpose of God. No human life is ever the simple result of the forces of biology and history. Every human life has its first source in God's intention. God thought of each person before he was and called him into being, giving him his name, his individuality, his identity as a child of God, and his dignity that no man should dare abuse. In view of the historical, biological, and psychological factors involved in the birth of babies, this is a tremendous affirmation of faith. Yet, the Reformed were so overwhelmed by the power and activity of God that they dared to make this affirmation.

Reformed theologians went further and declared that God not only called all people into being, but he had also elected them, or at least some, to a high and holy destiny. The human predicament, as Reformed theology has understood it, is that every person, as the result of sin, is self-centered when he ought to be God-centered. There is no way for a self-centered person to become unself-centered by trying hard any more than he can forget himself by trying hard. Many of the deepest experiences in life are beyond the power of the human will. We cannot by trying hard feel grateful or even love someone else. Gratitude, love, and self-forgetfulness are always elicited by something that happens to us. So it is with faith. Human beings do not believe in God by their own efforts but as a result of the outreaching grace of God, perhaps in the maturation during childhood, perhaps in a crisis experience, that elicits trust and confidence.

Reformed theologians have known that faith, as well as gratitude, love, and self-forgetfulness, are psychologically and historically completely human acts, but they have also insisted that faith is first of all the act of God that elicits the human response. Predestination was Calvin's most emphatic way of saying that salvation is the work of God's grace, just as justification by grace through faith was Luther's most emphatic way of saying the same thing.

Calvin was confronted by the fact that some persons apparently did not respond to the claim of God on their lives.<sup>16</sup> With his powerful sense of God's activity and governance of the world, Calvin could not leave this fact in mystery. He had to root unbelief in the will of God, and he believed that he had biblical justification for this. Hence, he said that God in his sovereignty and for the glory of his justice passed over some people and in condemnation of their sin ordained them to eternal death. This was hard doctrine, though logically satisfying; and Reformed theologians, including Calvin himself, have had difficulty living with it.

Several special emphases in Calvin's theology help to relieve but do not solve the difficulties of Calvin's doctrine of predestination. First of all, Calvin insisted that the God who elects is the God whom we know in Jesus Christ.<sup>17</sup> Secondly, Calvin insisted that God does not deal with human beings as though they were sticks and stones but as persons.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, predestination must be understood in personal rather than mechanical metaphors. Love, the most unique human act, is the best human clue to what happens in predestination. No person ever falls deeply in love through his own efforts. The primary fact in love is the impact of another life that elicits love. "We are elected into love." Yet love is also wholly one's own act. Furthermore, when a person loves another person, he is never so free as when he does the will of the person he loves. Thirdly, Calvin insisted that

Christian people are elected not to privilege but to the service of God.<sup>19</sup> Finally, Calvin preached the doctrine of predestination as a source of comfort. Salvation does not depend upon faltering human efforts but upon the mercy and power of God.<sup>20</sup>

Calvin located the doctrine of predestination in the ordering of his theology after his discussion of the Christian life. This suggests that predestination can best be understood not at the beginning but at the conclusion of the life of faith. It is the testimony of the believer that what has happened in the life of faith has not been the result of one's own efforts about which one can boast but of the grace of God.

Predestination is never a source of arrogance or of presumption. It may be, as Calvin believed it was, a source of comfort in the dark night of the soul. The same can be said of the related doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. This doctrine cannot, when rightly understood, be a source of arrogance or presumption, but it too can be for the believer in the dark night of soul or for the parent whose baptized child rebels a source of comfort and hope. Predestination and the perseverance of the saints are most likely to be helpful to believers when they are appropriated as prayers, as hope based on faith in God; and this is the way Calvin at least intended for them to be appropriated.

Calvin's formulation of the doctrine was never fully satisfactory. In later centuries Arminius (1560–1609) in Holland, Amyraut (1596–1664) in France, Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) in America, and Karl Barth (1886–1968) in Switzerland would all seek a more satisfactory statement of the Reformed doctrine; and none would wholly succeed. The paradox, which is grounded in Christian experience as well as Scripture, remains. From the perspective of human history and psychology, salvation and the life of faith is wholly a human act and achievement. Yet it is also a fact of experience that faith is a response to a power that has grasped a person and elicited the response. The Reformed never tire of insisting that God's act is prior to man's act, that God first loved us and that his grace is "prevenient"; that is, it goes before. And more than this, they dare to trust that God's grace is invincible.

Calvin once said that predestination is nothing less than the knowledge of the adoption of God, a love that persistently and invincibly pursues the distraught and the alienated.<sup>21</sup> This was and is the saving meaning and power of the doctrine. Francis Thompson, a Roman Catholic poet, has given the essence of it powerful expression in his poem.

"The Hound of Heaven."<sup>22</sup>

I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;  
 I fled Him, down the arches of the years;  
 I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways  
 Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears  
 I hid from Him, and under running laughter.  
 Up vistaed hopes I sped;  
 And shot, precipitated  
 Adown Titanic glooms of chasmèd fears,  
 From those strong Feet that followed, followed after.  
 But with unhurrying chase,  
 And unperturbèd pace,  
 Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,  
 They beat—and a Voice beat  
 More instant than the Feet—  
 “All things betray thee, who betrayest Me.”

. . . . .  
 Ah! must—  
 Designer Infinite!—  
 Ah! must Thou char the wood ere Thou canst limn  
 with it?  
 My freshness spent its wavering shower i’ the dust;  
 And now my heart is as a broken fount,  
 Wherein tear-drippings stagnate, spilt down ever  
 From the dank thoughts that shiver  
 Upon the sighful branches of my mind.  
 Such is; what is to be?  
 The pulp so bitter, how shall taste the rind?  
 I dimly guess what Time in mists confounds  
 Yet ever and anon a trumpet sounds.  
 From the hid battlements of Eternity;  
 Those shaken mists a space unsettle, then  
 Round the half glimpsèd turrets slowly wash again;  
 But not ere him who summoneth  
 I first have seen, enwound  
 With glooming robes purpleal, cypress-crowned;  
 His name I know, and what his trumpet saith.  
 Whether man’s heart or life it be which yields Thee  
 harvest, must Thy harvest fields  
 Be dunged with rotten death?  
 Now of that long pursuit  
 Comes on at hand the bruit;  
 That Voice is round me like a bursting sea;  
 “And is thy earth so marred  
 Shattered in shard on shard?  
 Lo, all things fly thee, for thou fliest Me!  
 Strange, piteous, futile thing!  
 Wherefore should any set thee love apart?  
 Seeing none but I make much of naught” (He said),  
 “And human love needs human meriting:  
 How hast thou merited—  
 Of all man’s dotted clay the dingiest clot?  
 Alack, thou knowest not  
 How little worthy of any love thou art!  
 Whom wilt thou find to love ignoble thee  
 Save Me, save only Me?  
 All which I took from thee I did but take,  
 Not for thy harms,

But just that thou might’st seek it in My arms.  
 All which thy child’s mistake  
 Fancies as lost, I have stored for thee at home:  
 Rise, clasp My hand, and come.”  
 Halts by me that footfall:  
 Is my gloom, after all,  
 Shade of His hand, outstretched caressingly?  
 “Ah, fondest, blindest, weakest,  
 I am He Whom thou seekest!  
 Thou dravest love from thee, who dravest Me.”

## 5. The Distinction Between Creator & Creature *(finitum non est capax infiniti)*

Calvin’s theology and Reformed theology in general are significantly shaped by a radical distinction between the Creator and the creature, between the self-existent being of God and the dependent being of the creature. This distinction is another way of stating the doctrine of the sovereignty of God, and it also helped to shape Calvin’s entire theology. It accounts for a strong emphasis upon history and ethics in his doctrine of salvation, upon the humanity of Jesus Christ in his doctrine of the person of Jesus, upon liturgy as a human work, and upon the rejection of any confusion of the bread and the wine in the sacrament with divine reality. It results in the capacity to accept things as things and to rejoice in the “thingness” of existence, without divinizing or unduly exalting any created object. It frees the individual and the church from claiming either too much or too little for human achievements.

This emphasis on the distinction between Creator and creature was at the center of the Reformed-Lutheran debates of the seventeenth century concerning the nature of the presence of Christ in the sacrament and the problem of the relation of the divine and the human in the person of Jesus Christ.<sup>23</sup> In this debate the Reformed distinction between the Creator and the creature was refined as the theological principle *Finitum non est capax infiniti*, “The finite cannot contain the infinite.” This formulation of the principle does not seem to be found in Calvin’s writings, but it has its basis in the distinction that he did make between Creator and creature. His own vivid apprehension of the presence of God as the almighty Father, Creator of heaven and earth, no doubt guided his reading of Scripture; but this is something less than a principle to which every theological statement is referred for development. Nevertheless, the distinction between Creator and creature is one of the most pervasive motifs of his theology, polity, and worship.

Calvin’s emphasis on the distinction between Creator and creature is balanced by his emphasis on the immanence of God. God is purposefully at work in his whole creation. The divine reality and the human reality do unite in one acting subject in Jesus Christ. The Holy

Spirit does dwell in the church and in the person of the Christian. The infinite and indeterminate God does work in his finite and determinate creation. God “accommodates” himself, Calvin continually emphasized, to the human condition.

## 6. Theology as a Practical Science

At the beginning of his great *Summa Theologica* (ca. 1265–ca. 1274), one of the theological masterpieces of Christian history, Thomas Aquinas, the thirteenth-century theologian, asks whether sacred doctrine is a practical science. He concludes that it is both speculative and practical, but his emphasis lies on the side of the speculative.<sup>24</sup> The vision of God rather than the kingdom of God is the controlling motif. The emphasis in Reformed theology is precisely the reverse. Calvin tried as best he could to limit speculation, and he made the capacity to edify a basic test of sound theology.

Theology is not an end in itself. The *Institutes of the Christian Religion* had practical purposes. First of all, it was a guide for readers of the Bible, so that they would be able to see individual texts in the light of the whole of Scripture and so that the words of Scripture would be explained in language readers would better understand. Secondly, Calvin’s theological work was closely related to preaching and pastoral care. Calvin was a theologian in order to preach and to do the work of a pastor. Thirdly, theology had as its purpose the formation of human life and society in conformity to the will of God. Calvin had no use for theology that answers idle questions. He put his position with biting clarity in the question he posed to Sadoleit:

Do you remember what kind of time it was when the Reformers appeared, and what kind of doctrine candidates for the ministry learned in the schools? You yourself know that it was mere sophistry, and so twisted, involved, tortuous, and puzzling, that scholastic theology might well be described as a species of secret magic. The denser the darkness in which any one shrouded a subject, and the more he puzzled himself and others with nagging riddles, the greater his fame for acumen and learning.<sup>25</sup>

Calvin was aware that Augustine had been faced with the question about what God was doing before he created the world. Augustine thought such a question deserved a serious answer, not the flippant popular response, “Making hell for those who ask such questions.” Calvin had sympathy with this latter response.<sup>26</sup> Again when faced with the questions about the incarnation, Calvin replied:

My answer is brief: Since the Spirit declares that these two were joined together by God’s eternal decree, it is not lawful to inquire further how Christ became our Redeemer and partaker of our nature. For he who is

tickled with desire to know something more, not content with God’s unchangeable ordinance, also shows that he is not even content with this very Christ who was given to us as the price of our redemption.<sup>27</sup>

This practical outlook and theological method may in part have been due to the fact that Calvin was a busy man with much to do. Life was too real, too demanding for the luxury of speculation. It is difficult, however, to account for so pervasive an outlook in terms of the pressures of the moment. The practical bent is rooted in Calvin’s personality and in his understanding of the nature of theology. He was himself a humanist scholar before he was a reformer.<sup>28</sup> His interests were historical and literary. He was a graduate in law. The experience of the authority of God speaking through the Bible had been an important element in his conversion to Protestantism. Finally, God’s will as the law of human life was basic to his whole understanding of the Christian life. Hence the metaphysical concerns and cosmic dimensions of Christian faith received very little attention from Calvin. In this Calvin set the pattern for later Reformed theology. Calvin placed great emphasis upon the test of fruits. By its fruits a theology reveals its fundamental character. Theology that is written in textbooks must be written in lives. Calvin insisted that the truest test of a person’s faith is love for the neighbor. The emphasis on theology as a practical science robbed the theological tradition of its full measure of intellectual creativity and richness, but it did give theology a focus in the everyday life of people and nations that has distinguished it from other theological traditions.

## 7. Theology as Wisdom

Word and Spirit are the basic and essential factors in Calvin’s interpretation of Scripture and in his theology.

For by a kind of mutual bond the Lord has joined together the certainty of his Word and of his Spirit so that the perfect religion of the Word may abide in our minds when the Spirit, who causes us to contemplate God’s face, shines; and that we in turn may embrace the Spirit with no fear of being deceived when we recognize him in his own image, namely in the Word.<sup>29</sup>

The study of the natural meaning of the words of Scripture, which Calvin advocated, leads by itself to an objective knowledge of Scripture and religion, as does the scientific study of any object. Dependence on the Spirit alone leads to irrational aberrations ranging from snake-handling to sacred sex. The combination of word, the objective study of Scripture and of the faith, with Spirit, and the personal assimilation of the data by the self under the illumination of the Spirit, leads, as Lucien Joseph Richard has pointed out, to wisdom.<sup>30</sup> Theology, to a far greater degree than any other area of scientific knowledge, grows out of the interaction of the critical

reflection of the mind with the profound experience of the presence of God in personal life and with a life of obedience. A person who has lived deeply and experienced the presence of God is a better judge of the reality of God than a person who has studied about God, even in the Bible, but who has not experienced God's presence. John Calvin, who lacked the critical tools of modern biblical scholars, is still one of the masters of Biblical interpretation.

The separation of theology as objective knowledge from the life of devotion and obedience may result either from the intention of the theologian who wishes to divorce technical skill from commitment and obedience or from the desire of the believer who wishes to adore God without bothering to understand.<sup>31</sup> Theology without commitment and devotion without intellectual understanding are alike ruled out by Calvin's insistence on the indissoluble unity of word and Spirit in the study of the Bible and of theology. In the twentieth century Karl Barth has declared that theology without prayer is inconceivable.<sup>32</sup> Theology is, therefore, neither technical knowledge nor emotion, but wisdom; for it is the judgment of the whole self, uniting the critical reflection

of the mind with the experience of the presence of God and with the life of obedience. As there is a wisdom of human maturity, reason, experience, and perception, so there is a theological wisdom of Christian maturity, experience, reason, and revelation. The words and propositions of systematic theology cannot be separated from their embodiment in individual lives and in community life. For this reason, parable and biography are proper forms of theology, and for this reason systematic theology, with its concerns for greater precision and clarity, still uses the concrete, parabolic language of human and Christian experience.

This essay, "Characteristics of Reformed Theology," has been reprinted in *An Introduction to Reformed Theology*, edited by William P. Wood (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2023), 39–55. It originally appeared in John H. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 96–112. The endnotes have been taken from the latter. This essay is published with permission from Westminster/John Knox Press.

---

*John H. Leith (1919–2002) served as the Pemberton Professor of Theology at Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia, from 1959 to 1990.*

---

<sup>1</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Unity of the Church," *Theology Today*, 3 (October 1946), 371–384.

<sup>2</sup> Émile Doumergue, *Jean Calvin, Les hommes et les choses de son temps*, Vol. IV: *La pensée religieuse de Calvin* (Lausanne: Georges Bridel & Cie Éditeurs, 1910), 428.

<sup>3</sup> I. John Hesselink, "The Charismatic Movement and the Reformed Tradition," *Reformed Review*, 28, no. 3, (Spring 1975), 147–156, clearly presents the emphasis on the Holy Spirit in Reformed theology.

<sup>4</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture* (New York: Harper, 1960), 16 ff.

<sup>5</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, "Faith in Gods and in God," *ibid.*, 122.

<sup>6</sup> Copyright 1932 Christian Century Foundation. Reprinted by permission from the April 6, 1932 issue of *The Christian Century*, 447.

<sup>7</sup> In this section the author has made use of material that he published in an article entitled "John Calvin—Theologian of the Bible" in *Interpretation*, vol. 25, no. 3 (July 1971). See also the author's article "Theology and the Bible" in *Interpretation*, vol. 30, no. 3 (July 1976), 227–241.

<sup>8</sup> *CR* [Corpus Reformatorum] 20:299.

<sup>9</sup> Gilbert Rist, "Modernité de la méthode théologique de Calvin," *Revue de théologie et de philosophie*, 18 (1968) ; 1, 20.

<sup>10</sup> The prefaces are printed in the English translation of the *Institutes*.

<sup>11</sup> *LCC* [Library of Christian Classics], XX: 124 (I, xiii, 3).

<sup>12</sup> *LCC*, XX: 53 (I, v, 2).

<sup>13</sup> Léon Wencelius, *L'esthétique de Calvin* (Paris : Société d'Édition "Les Belles Lettres," n.d.).

<sup>14</sup> "Preface to the *Institutes*," 1559 ed., XX:4.

<sup>15</sup> E.g., James Mackinnon, *Calvin and the Reformation* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1936) and E. Choisy, *La*

*théocratie à Genève au temps de Calvin* (Geneva: J.G. Fliek, 1897).

<sup>16</sup> *LCC*, XX: 719–720 (III, xxi, 1).

<sup>17</sup> See the author's dissertation, "John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life" (Yale University, 1949), 171 ff.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.190 ff.

<sup>19</sup> *LCC*, XXI: 960–961 (III, xxiii, 12).

<sup>20</sup> "The Eternal Predestination of God," *CR* 8:260.

<sup>21</sup> "Antidote to the Council of Trent," *CR* 7:479.

<sup>22</sup> Francis Thompson, *The Poems of Francis Thompson* (London: Hollis and Carter, Ltd., 1947), pp. 101, 104–106.

<sup>23</sup> See E. David Willis, *Calvin's Catholic Christology* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966), for a discussion of the so-called *extra calvinisticum*.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (London: Burns Oates & Washborne Ltd, 1920) pt.1, q.1, art. 4, 6.

<sup>25</sup> "Reply to Sadolet," *CR* 5:396–397; *LCC* 22:233.

<sup>26</sup> *LCC*, XX: 160 (I, xiv, 1).

<sup>27</sup> *LCC*, XX: 469 (II, xii, 5).

<sup>28</sup> Bohatec, *Budé und Calvin*. Quirinus Breen, *John Calvin, a Study in French Humanism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1931) Humanistic sources of Calvin's thought ought not to be emphasized at the expense of other sources, such as the theologians of the Ancient Church and his dialogue with the scholastic theologians.

<sup>29</sup> *LCC*, XX: 95 (I, ix, 3). Cf. Bohatec, *Budé und Calvin*, pp. 119ff.

<sup>30</sup> Lucien Joseph Richard, *The Spirituality of John Calvin* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1974), 91ff.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, trans. Ronald Knox and Michael Oakley (London: Burns & Oate, 1959).

<sup>32</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958), IV/3.2:882.



# What All Christians Should Know

By Heinrich Bullinger

Heinrich Bullinger (1504–1575) is widely known as the author of the *Second Helvetic Confession* (1566). But his series of fifty sermons entitled *Decades* (1549–1551) was as well-known and has been often compared to Calvin's *Institutes* as an early, comprehensive, and similarly influential statement of Reformed theology. Timothy Slemmons offers to us here for the first time in English Bullinger's famous and influential summary of his *Decades*.<sup>1</sup> Dr. Slemmons has also translated the works of other Reformers, notably the Basel Reformer Johannes Oecolampadius: *Sermons on the First Epistle of John (A Handbook for the Christian Life)* (2017) and *Sown on Rock: The Sermon on the Vernacular and the Correspondence with Hedio* (2022).

## **Article 1: The holy biblical writings of the Old and New Testaments.**

All Christians should trust the Holy Bible, the Old as well as the New Testament, without any objection. It is the true Word of God, inspired by him. It has authority, that is, standing and trustworthiness in itself and, therefore, has no need to be declared as credible by the church, by humans. They should all know that the Bible has been written truthfully and unadulterated by the holy prophets and apostles and presented to the world, and that it expresses comprehensively and teaches clearly all that is needed for a proper attitude before God.

All people should read the Bible or have it read to them. Everything that relates to the life of faith is to be tested and judged by it, as to whether it is right or wrong. Whatever does not agree with it or even runs counter to it is to be rejected, whether it is now called “tradition” or “teaching of the fathers” or otherwise, whether it is introduced or recognized now by many or by few, learned or unlearned, and even if it has continued for a long time in general unanimity. For God's Word justifiably precedes all things because he is the truth and the almighty God.

## **Article 2. God and his glorious works. Of legitimate, proper service according to God.**

All Christians should know that the Holy Bible mentioned above is, first of all, about God and his faithfulness and glory, but it is also about the duty and obligation of people, as well as about their salvation. It teaches us to believe this about God: He is one according to his essence, but threefold in Persons; he is Spirit,

infinite and incomprehensible, almighty, wise, eternal, true, sincere, and gracious, that is, merciful; yes, he is a fountain of everything good. He created heaven and earth and all that is in them, and he still preserves all this with his providence and administration; he reigns for our well-being and benefit.

Concerning humanity, it teaches: God created man good, well done, and honorable, with a body and a soul, and he is set as protector over all creatures. When he then fell away, by his own guilt and by the instigation of the devil, he was nevertheless raised up again by God and lovingly accepted. God has announced to the human race, which is bound to him for its own salvation and for continual service: Christ is needed for participation in eternal life. One is to honor, worship, invoke, and serve God alone, the Creator and Lord of all things, and indeed, not with physical but spiritual service (since God is, after all, of spiritual nature), as well as with faith, love, hope, and similar virtues. The ancient fathers have done all this as loyal servants of God, and they have been God's friends and allies.

## **Article 3. Sin, and the intervention after sin.**

All Christians should know: Sin is neither created by God nor commanded by him; it displeases him and is therefore forbidden. It has emerged in humanity by the instigation of the devil; the first time out of distrust and disobedience, and then it has come upon all people. For the hereditary sin is passed on from Adam to all people; from this hereditary sin arise sins of commission that are contrary to God's commandment, and from there comes the wrath of God, the discipline against sin, dread, distress, shame, misery, every form of desolation and sorrow, and finally death and eternal condemnation.

## **Article 4. The law of God.**

All Christians should know: God announced his will to his people Israel in the wilderness on Mount Sinai, what to do and what not to do. He has said all that was completely necessary, and indeed partly with his own mouth, partly through the mediation of Moses. We call this statement the law, in which God set his will once for all time, and thus has specified what his servants should do and not do at all times. This law of God, which is also called the law of Moses, has three parts. It is, above all, given by God for this reason: to inform humankind of sin, together with the condemnation; yes, to lead him

entirely to the knowledge of himself and to cast out from him all self-confidence. So then the law is given to us for this: to be a rule, a guideline for our life, by which we learn what pleases or displeases God. Further, it is given for the sake of transgressors, in order to discipline or reprimand them, and therefore in order to plant and maintain peace and tranquility among the people.

**Article 5. The grace of God, which he has shown the world through Christ. The reinstatement.**

All Christians should consider particularly well the following word of John from the holy Gospel: “The law was given by Moses; grace and truth has come through Christ Jesus” [John 1:17]. Therefore, they should know that through the law of Moses man is not pleasing to God, but through the grace of God in Christ is, thus, free from reproach and blessed with eternal life. Now this is the grace of God: that he by himself, from pure goodness and mercy, without any human merit, has received the sinner in goodwill, forgiven him his sin, and has made him an heir of eternal life. From eternity he has intended to show this grace to the world at the appointed time through our protector Jesus Christ; he has come into this world, has in himself all the treasures of heaven and salvation, has satisfied the law of God, has willingly and obediently let himself be martyred for the sin of the world and died for it, has therefore paid and put down the ransom that our sins may be forgiven and no longer be charged toward our condemnation, but that his perfect righteousness may be reckoned to us as blamelessness, provided that we trust [him]. For by the confidence of faith we gain a share in the freedom from guilt and in the perfect righteousness of Christ. That is why the holy apostolic scriptures testify and teach often and unanimously: We only become free from reproach before God, and thus pardoned from guilt and punishment, by faith and not by works; therefore, believers possess everything in Christ alone.

**Article 6. Faith. The proclamation of the Holy Gospel and of repentance.**

All Christians should know: The faith by which we are pleasing to God is not only knowledge—an understanding of the mind—but also a firm trust and secure reliance of the heart on God and his true Word, especially on the promise that is given to us by God in Christ, and on all that which is contained in the articles of the holy Christian confession of faith. The true believer perceives Christ and lives in Christ.

But this confidence of faith is taught and planted by the preaching of the true Word of God, given and increased through the living Spirit of God, sought with diligent prayer, and shown visually and sealed with the holy Sacraments. In order to plant and to preserve this confidence of faith, our protector Christ has appointed

his own and the servants of the Church, to whom the keys to the kingdom of heaven are given; this means that they should preach the holy Gospel, the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins in the name of Jesus Christ, and of repentance, i.e., of improvement and of the repenting of sins. One should, indeed, whenever one falls into sin, be able to come back into order and draw hope, and to be admonished, encouraged, and strengthened for a new struggle against the devil, against the world, and against the flesh, so that, in the future, throughout one’s entire life, one may serve God in all honor and righteousness. In this sense, he commanded the servants to administer the sacraments.

**Article 7. The invocation, the prayer of believers.**

All Christians should know: The invocation of the name of God, prayer, is a consequence of deep trust, a particular effect of the confidence of faith and the worship of God. The faithful should pray, and, indeed, in their prayers, they should not at all, in any of their requests, call upon the creature, but only upon God. For God is the cornucopia [*Füllhorn*] of all gifts, and he [alone] gives to people all gifts and whatever they need.

It should also be that they call upon God only through Jesus Christ. For God has appointed only Jesus Christ in the heavens as mediator and intercessor for people. He calls all poor sinners to himself and promises them all goodwill and all gifts. He also teaches us the best of all forms of prayer, namely, the holy “Our Father.”

**Article 8. The holy sacraments of Christ and his holy Christian church.**

All Christians should know: Our Lord has put the sacraments, namely, baptism and the Supper of Christ, alongside the preaching of the holy Gospel. These sacraments are holy actions of faith in the church of Christ; the Lord himself has appointed them as signs and seals of the truthful teaching. This teaching says first, that he is our God, adopting us into a covenant for our well-being, purifying us from our sins, giving birth to us again, making us new and adopting us as his children into his fellowship, and we should cultivate only this, fellowship, and live blamelessly before him; second, it says, as God promised the Messiah to the ancient patriarchs from the beginning, so he has now truly given to the Christian church Jesus Christ, who has truly given his flesh and blood in death, in order to be our Savior and in order to feed us and give us drink for eternal life; and third, that we, as his ransomed congregation, should hold this death of our Lord at all times in fresh memory, praise him, and thank him. In addition [besides this institution as signs and seals of the teaching], the sacraments are appointed for this: that we might be reminded of our duty and obligation and walk accordingly in the unity of the body of Christ in proper

fear of God and brotherly love, and that we might wisely keep ourselves solely in this faith, by the sacrament of which we are distinguished from all other religions.

**Article 9. The good works of believers.**

All Christians should know: Although the good works of the faithful do not lead to acquittal, but faith alone, they are nevertheless a consequence of true faith; they are neither unnecessary nor to be dismissed. For whoever, by grace through faith in Christ, becomes blameless, thus, has been acquitted, shows righteousness as its effect, namely, good works. These works please God in such a way that he wants to reward them and even does so.

However, believers never forget the merit of Christ; they do not argue their own merit before the merit of Christ; they do not let this be obscured by anything. For they very well recognize their own stupidity, and therefore they do not ascribe to their works that which only the suffering of Christ provides.

They also do not recognize as good works all that which is generally considered to be so. For just as faith relies solely on God's Word, so the believer does not imagine for himself what is to be done as a good work, but he recognizes it from the Word of God. So he then serves God with spiritual worship, has good trust in God, prays to him, calls upon God in everything he holds dear, thanks God, keeps body and soul pure at all times; and therefore he practices renunciation and tolerates and suffers willingly what God gives him to suffer; in short, he walks in the commandments of God, serves the neighbor in love, makes great effort in his whole life of

---

<sup>1</sup> According to the late Edward A. Dowey, Jr., after the *Decades* were published, Bullinger was asked for "a briefer, more accessible instruction for the adult layperson." In 1556, then, Bullinger produced his *Summa Christlicher Religion* as "a brief summation of essential material." As Dowey puts it, quoting from the title page of the *Summa*: "Bullinger has one goal here: 'A summary of the Christian religion in which we present briefly and correctly, without wrangling and scolding, such matters drawn from Holy Scriptures as are necessary for every single Christian to know, believe, do and allow, and also

duty and obligation in the service which God has prescribed for him, and he knows what he owes to God.

**Article 10. The blessed death. The end of all things.**

All Christians should know: They are born mortal and must die once and just as nothing is more uncertain than the hour of death, so nothing is more certain than death itself. Therefore, they should always keep death in mind and prepare themselves for death at any time, but especially in sickness. Then anyone can pass away to God in peace, into eternal joy and blessedness, when death comes one day, whether expected or suddenly.

Likewise, all believers should await the end of all things and the last judgment of our Lord Jesus Christ. For although the ignorant world considers this a fable, and the hour of judgment and the end cannot be declared, there are nevertheless clear and reliable prophecies and witnesses concerning the judgment and end of all things. In addition, the signs that shall precede the judgment and the end are fulfilled. Therefore, all believers should rightly live with heads held high and wait with vigilance and prayer for the judgment and the end and for the eternal reign of Christ.

*Compendium Christianae Religionis* (Zürich, 1556); G: *Summa Christenlicher Religion* (Zürich, 1556); Modern GT: *Christliches Glaubensleben. Summa christenlicher Religion* 1556. Translated by Siegfried Müller; Foreword by Jochanan Hesse-Recher (Basel: Limache Verlag, 1995).

---

*Timothy Matthew Slemmons is Professor of Homiletics and Worship and Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program at the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary.*

to suffer and to die in blessedness.' It advertises also on the same title page that this material includes short explanations for the Decalogue, Creed, Lord's Prayer, and Sacraments. This was an opportunity for the adult to recall catechism instruction and advance to necessary and appropriate maturity." Edward Dowey, "Heinrich Bullinger as Theologian: Thematic, Comprehensive, and Schematic," in *Architect of Reformation: An Introduction to Heinrich Bullinger, 1504–1575*, eds. Bruce Gordon and Emidio Campi (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 35–65, esp. 53.

# Moses, Death, and the Continuation of Ministry

By Andrew J. Dearman

Deuteronomy brings the Pentateuch and Moses' life to their respective conclusions. These two important things are interrelated. Deuteronomy's conclusion (34:1–12), in which Moses dies, is expected and yet odd. It is expected in that his upcoming death has been mentioned several times in the book. Several details in the conclusion mark it as odd, including the feel of an anticlimax—if one can say that about a person's death. Moses had central roles in the dramatic events of exodus, covenant-making, law-giving, and wilderness-wandering, as Israel moved toward a promised inheritance in Canaan. These are, after all, major parts of the biblical storyline including their roles in pointing forward to Christ as the ultimate Passover lamb, the Church as the New Covenant people of God, and the new Jerusalem, come down from heaven to form the eternal promised land, the inheritance of all God's people. But just as the Pentateuch ends without an entry into the promised land, so too Moses dies without an entry into the promised land. The final chapter is also anticlimactic in a counterintuitive, but theologically rich way. Although it has a brief encomium prompting readers to reflect on Moses' great achievements in God's good timing, it also has a mysterious, open-endedness to it that points readers to ways that Moses' ministries continue post-mortem.

So pervasive is the fact of his upcoming death in Deuteronomy, some interpreters have described the book as a "last will and testament" of Moses (cf. 32:44–33:29). Before he dies, Moses reminds Israel of the dramatic events that brought them to the cusp of the promised land and elaborates on the covenant status a last time as the younger generation prepares for life in the promised land without him. Perched on the panoramic edge of that land, Moses is affirmed for his roles in leading Israel to this point, but denied entrance to it in response to one of his failures (3:23–28; 32:51–52). How human of Moses! The Pentateuch moves from the creation of the world to a chosen people, not yet in possession of all of God's promises, but freed from slavery and gifted with a covenantal mandate for life that is good for future generations wherever they find themselves. This already/not-yet dynamic shapes both the Pentateuch and the life of Moses.

The location of Moses' grave is specified, but it is unknown to Israel, an odd fact noted explicitly in 34:6. This is something to be contrasted with the traditions of the burial places of the patriarchs and matriarchs in the book of Genesis (e.g. Gen 23:1–20; 25:7–11; 35:16–21; 49:29–32; Josh 24:32). Millennia later their reputed tombs in Hebron, Bethlehem, and Shechem are places of pilgrimage and prayer for Jews and Muslims. Medieval rabbis proposed that the hidden status of Moses' burial was God's way to keep Israel from making it an idolatrous shrine. A straightforward reading of the Hebrew text in 34:6a mysteriously implies that the "He" who buried Moses in the valley near Beth-Peor is God. In any case, Moses died in the hands of God.

The brevity of the account of his death became the seedbed of elaborations to fill in the details. Over the centuries, traditions arose in Judaism about God weeping and kissing Moses before he died, and about disputes over his body (cf. Jude 9), perhaps over the question of whether Moses' corpse would be assumed to heaven or remain in the hidden tomb. There was even speculation that he didn't really die, but was assumed to heaven like Elijah, one of the prophets who followed the profile of Moses and who sought to bring the hearts of Israel back to their first love. Elijah was assumed into heaven in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:1–12). The later prophet Malachi paired Moses and Elijah together in his visionary instructions to Israel (4:4–6). The people should take to heart the instruction that Moses had provided Israel and be prepared for Elijah to return to renew their hearts before the climactic Day of the Lord.

Before his death, Moses announced that God would raise up a prophet in his stead (Deut 18:15–22) to bring authoritative interpretation to bear in future situations. And just before he dies (34:9), Moses confirms Joshua as his first successor. These are ways that the work of Moses continued past his death. Not only would the Sinai covenant and its statutes be passed along, aspects of his role as authoritative interpreter would also be passed on for subsequent prophets to follow. A prophetic succession of covenant mediators would accompany the people to the advent of the Messiah (Acts 3:22–26; 7:37). Whether we call it a Mosaic office

or more generally a model of prophetic leadership, God raised up a series of prophets to instruct his people under the old (Mosaic/Sinai) Covenant and to prepare them for the advent of the New Covenant (cf. Jer 31:31–34).

We can see the importance of the prophetic office in the question that Jewish leaders asked John the Baptist, namely, whether he was Elijah or “*the prophet*” (John 1:19–28). These two figures reflect expectations based on Deut 18:15–22 and Mal 4:5–6. Here is where it gets very interesting. John’s self-understanding led him to answer negatively. He was neither Elijah nor the Prophet, perhaps a messianic new Moses expected by some Jews. The role that John did affirm for himself, that of preparing the way for a greater one to come, meant that others would indeed see in him Elijah and the mantle of prophecy (below).

We should also put the fate of Moses and the subsequent succession of prophets in the context of Jesus’ famous comments about a prophet’s “reward” (Matt 5:11–12; cf. 10:41). Over the centuries various kinds of opposition struck at those who were God’s prophets and faithful followers, sometimes including even their death, but their reward in heaven would be great. One of those “rewards” granted in heaven was the continuing vibrancy of their ministries here on earth, regardless of their personal fate (cf. Luke 4:24). Reward in this sense does not mean an earned payoff, but the continuing fruit of actions taken.

Consider Matthew’s rendition of the conversation between Jesus and the disciples near Caesarea Philippi (Matt 16:13–20). When Jesus asks the disciples, “who do people say that I am?,” they reply that he is thought of as John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or another of the prophets (16:14). Those named are an interesting list. John, of course, had been recently executed by Herod Antipas, who subsequently worried that John had been raised from death and come again in the person of Jesus (Matt 14:1–12; note Mark 6:14–16 and the similar list of prophets). I used to think that Herod was guiltily superstitious to worry that John had somehow reappeared. Perhaps that is right about Herod, but if so, he was nevertheless on to something theologically significant, even if he didn’t grasp it correctly. God has mysterious ways of keeping faith with departed servants and the ministries they faithfully performed. Jesus confirmed elsewhere that Elijah did mysteriously continue in John the Baptist’s ministry (Matt 17:9–13). John was faithful to the ministry to which God called him and God would multiply that ministry in ways that he might not anticipate. Ditto for Elijah. God may have swept him up in mid-ministry, but that did not mean the end of his ministry or God’s faithfulness to him.

So what had happened to Jeremiah? The latest thing recorded about him in the book of Jeremiah is that he was taken against his will to Egypt and there he continued to prophesy (Jer 42–44). Only God knows the time and place of his demise; a late, non-canonical tradition has him martyred for his faith. Those first century Jews who wondered if Jesus might be Jeremiah come again were, like Herod Antipas, on to something about God and his servants. No matter the earthly fate of John, Elijah or Jeremiah, they had their place in the divine economy and the reward of having their work continue.

In this context, we can also appreciate the account of Jesus’ transfiguration (Matt 17:1–13; Mark 9:2–8; Luke 9:28–36). A select number of disciples with him on a high mountain are transfixed by his blinding effulgence and his conversation with Moses and Elijah. Previously at Mt. Sinai, God had revealed himself through a blazing fire (Exod 24:17; Deut 4:11–12, 33). After repeated encounters with God, Moses’ face shown with reflective light (Exod 34:29–35). Elijah would later hear a low voice at Sinai and then undertake prophetic tasks until God separated him from Elisha and other prophetic colleagues by a fiery chariot. In the transfiguration on a different mountain, it was not just the face of Jesus reflecting divine light, he was himself divine light. Luke tells us that the three figures discussed Jesus’ upcoming departure, literally his “exodus,” a term rich with biblical imagery and intended to connect Israel’s earlier exodus from Egypt with the upcoming Passover events in Jerusalem when the true lamb of God would be sacrificed. Moses had played a central role in those earlier events and in the transfiguration event his ministry is confirmed in a new key.

So, Moses and Elijah stand with Jesus on a high mountain in the promised land. Their appearance is frequently interpreted as confirmation that the Torah and the Prophets bear witness to Jesus, Israel’s Messiah. Surely this is correct. Moses and Elijah eventually depart, but Jesus remains with the disciples to bring to fruition what those two had undertaken centuries before. The great succession of prophetic ministry which Moses began reaches its conclusion in the revelation of God’s Son. However great is the reward of Moses and Elijah in heaven, on earth their reward is that their work continues to instruct God’s people. And finally, although Moses only viewed the promised land before his death, he stands in it with Jesus, a tangible illustration that with Christ, all of God’s promises are “yes” (2 Cor 1:20).

The anonymous writer to the Hebrews offers a long list of witnesses under the Old Covenant who died without seeing the resolution of all that God had promised (11:1–40). Their lives are one form of that already/not-

yet dynamic that pervades Scripture. Their lives were an “already” of faithful responses regardless of circumstance and their “not yet” meant that they too would die and that they would “not be made perfect apart from us” (11:40), that is, the “us” who are the beneficiaries of cross and resurrection and whose life is bound up with the risen Lord. That was true of Moses, who died before entry into the promised land, but who through Christ, entered both the terrestrial and the heavenly kingdoms. In God’s providence both Moses and his work find their

completion in Christ. For the “us” who are alive and part of the new creation (2 Cor 5:17), there is still a not-yet as we anticipate the second advent of the Lord. And we should all take heart that, as with Moses, God may extend our ministries until that day.

---

*J. Andrew Dearman, Ph.D. is Professor of Old Testament Emeritus, Fuller Seminary, and a Teaching Fellow for the Institute for Theological Education.*

## *A Letter to our Friends*

For the last several years, the Board of *Theology Matters* has sought the Lord’s guidance about how we can better fulfill our mission “to equip the saints for the work of ministry” (Ephesians 4:12). Our journal, conferences, seminars, and teaching resources continue to equip, encourage, and inspire congregational leaders throughout the world. But we have been especially concerned about theological education, namely, about who will lead our congregations in the future and what will they know.

The Lord has heard our prayers and opened a wide door for us to through our new Institute for Theological Education and our partnership with the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary to offer a new Master of Arts in Reformed Theology, which you can read more about in the following pages.

*Theology Matters* has also recently entered another relationship. In 1982, John H. Leith established a fund for “the enhancement of the mainstream of Reformed theology for the building up of local congregations” and, specifically, to bring “ministers together for the study and reading of classical Reformed theology.” On June 29, 2023, “the Board of the Foundation for Reformed Theology announced the addition to [its] Board of ten new members from the Board of *Theology Matters*, resulting in a union of the two Boards to collaborate on and enhance the mission of the Foundation.”

*Theology Matters* believes our work and the work of The Foundation for Reformed Theology have much in common and we believe this collaboration will strengthen both organizations in the future. We are honored to have this relationship and we are grateful for the wonderful opportunity it represents.

In his last book, *Crisis in the Church: The Plight of Theological Education*, Dr. Leith wrote: “Every church building stands because of the labors of ministers and church members, sometimes at great sacrifice, sometimes at great risk, demanding courage, and sometimes with great vision among people with little vision. Congregations do not just happen.”

We believe that congregational leaders need help. They need encouragement, insight, wisdom, and vision. They need, above all, good theology. That is why the ministry of *Theology Matters* is so important.

For twenty-nine years, *Theology Matters* has sought to provide encouragement, insight, wisdom, and vision for congregational leaders. It has been an important resource for those seeking to think through various challenges of our times. This ministry is growing and simply would not be possible without you. Please know how grateful we are for you. Please also know that we need your support as much as ever.

Managing Editor, Richard Burnett

# *Theology Matters*

## Introduces

### **The Institute for Theological Education**

Our goal is to equip the next generation of pastors and congregational leaders for Presbyterian and other Christian congregations. We seek to provide theological instruction that is biblical and from the mainstream of the Reformed tradition, and we begin by offering three programs:

1. A Master of Arts in Reformed Theology in partnership with the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary (for more details, see below);
2. A continuing education program that offers seminars and retreats for pastors, elders, teachers, and other congregational leaders; and
3. An adult education program that offers courses, lectures, and seminars to all interested in the subject matter, whether for academic credit, a certificate in theological studies, or as auditors.

Theology Matters and the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary announce a M.A. in Reformed Theology, beginning in August 2023. It is a 36-credit degree offered in a hybrid format that includes both face-to-face and online learning. This degree does not itself normally lead to ordination, but it is transferrable to one that does and is offered to disciples of various callings.

#### **Required Courses**

*Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*  
*Interpretation of the Old Testament in the Reformed Tradition*  
*Interpretation of the New Testament in the Reformed Tradition*  
*Reformed Theology I*  
*Reformed Theology II*  
*Capstone Project in Reformed Theology*

#### **Elective Courses**

*Early & Medieval Church History*  
*Reformation & Modern Church History*  
*Presbyterian History and Confessions*  
*American Puritanism through Edwards*  
*The Theology of Augustine*  
*The Theology of John Calvin*  
*The Theology of Karl Barth*  
*The Theology of T.F. Torrance*  
and many more on *Worship & Preaching*

Dr. Randal Working is President of *Theology Matters*. Dr. Richard Burnett is Executive Director and Managing Editor. The Board of Directors consists of ruling and teaching elders in various Presbyterian denominations. *Theology Matters* exists to equip, encourage, and inspire, members of the Presbyterian family and the wider Christian community through the clear and coherent articulation of theology that is reformed according to God's Word. It is sent free to anyone who requests it. You can reach us at 864-378-5416, at this email address, [admin@theologymatters.com](mailto:admin@theologymatters.com) or at our website: [www.theologymatters.com](http://www.theologymatters.com)

Theology Matters  
P.O. Box 50026  
Greenwood, SC 29649

NON-PROFIT  
ORGANIZATION  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
AUTOMATED  
MAILING  
SYSTEM

**Electronic Change Service Requested**

## **Announcing a New Master of Arts in Reformed Theology**

Theology Matters and the University of Dubuque Theological Seminary announce a new Master of Arts degree in Reformed Theology, starting Aug. 6, 2023. Focusing on classic texts and practices valued by the Reformed tradition, it offers instruction from pastor-scholars whose knowledge has been tested in the academy and significant pastoral ministry. The M.A. in Reformed Theology is a fully accredited, 36-credit degree offered in a hybrid format that includes both face-to-face and online learning. In-person instruction will be held at Providence Presbyterian Church, Hilton Head Island, South Carolina.

**We seek to identify, to attract, to recruit, to gather, to train, to educate, and to help raise up the next generation of pastors and leaders for the congregations where we all worship every Sunday morning. And we need your help.**

Please recommend qualified students to us: students who have faith in Jesus Christ, desire to be his disciples, and seek to understand God's Word; who exhibit intellectual and moral courage; are spiritually curious and eager to learn; have a solid Bachelor's degree, a strong academic record, a serious work ethic, a good recommendation from a teacher and pastor or church leader, and a growing sense of call.

Please give generously to help provide scholarships for these students. To give by check, please make it out to Theology Matters, write Scholarship Fund on the "For" or "Memo" line, and mail it to: Theology Matters, P.O. Box 50026, Greenwood, SC 29649-0018. To give electronically, please go to our website at <https://www.theologymatters.com/institute/> and click on the "Donate Now" button.

For more information, please email us at [institute@theologymatters.com](mailto:institute@theologymatters.com) or call us at 1-864-378-5416. **We thank you for your prayers, support, and encouragement!**



