

WHAT IS
REFORMED
THEOLOGY?

UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS

R. C. SPROUL



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In memory of
James Montgomery Boice

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INTRODUCTION

Reformed Theology Is a Theology

What is Reformed theology? The purpose of this book is to provide a simple answer to this question. *What Is Reformed Theology?* is not a textbook on systematic theology, nor a detailed, comprehensive exposition of each and every article of Reformation doctrine. It is, instead, a compendium, a shorthand introduction to the crystallized essence of Reformation theology.

In the nineteenth century theologians and historians, busy with a comparative analysis of world religions, sought to distill the essence of religion itself and reduce Christianity to its least common denominator. The term *Wesen* (being or essence) appeared in a plethora of German theological studies, including Adolf Harnack's book *What Is Christianity?* Harnack reduced Christianity to two essential affirmations, the universal fatherhood of God and

the universal brotherhood of man, neither of which is espoused by the Bible in the sense articulated by Harnack.¹

A Theology, Not a Religion

This movement to reduce religion to its essence had a subtle but dramatic effect. The study of religion supplanted the study of theology in the academic world. This change was subtle in that, to the general populace, religion and theology were the same thing, so people felt no dramatic impact. Even in the academic world the shift was widely accepted with barely a whimper.

Several years ago I was invited to address the faculty of a prominent midwestern college with a rich Christian and Reformed tradition. The school was without a president, and the faculty was engaged in a self-study to define the college's identity. They asked me to address the question, "What are the distinctives of a uniquely 'Christian' education?"

Before my lecture the dean showed me around the campus. When we entered the faculty office building, I noticed one office with these words stenciled on the door: Department of Religion.

That evening as I spoke to the faculty I said: "During my tour of your facility I noticed an office door that announced 'Department of Religion.' My question is two-fold. First, was that department always called the Department of Religion?"

My inquiry was greeted by silence and blank stares. At first I thought no one was able to answer my question. Finally an elder statesman of the faculty raised his hand

and said, “No, it used to be called the ‘Department of Theology.’ We changed it about thirty years ago.”

“Why did you change it?” I asked.

No one in the room had any idea, nor did they seem to care. The tacit assumption was, “It doesn’t really matter.”

I reminded the faculty that there is a profound difference between the study of theology and the study of religion. Historically the study of religion has been subsumed under the headings of anthropology, sociology, or even psychology. The academic investigation of religion has sought to be grounded in a scientific-empirical method. The reason for this is quite simple. Human activity is part of the phenomenal world. It is activity that is visible, subject to empirical analysis. Psychology may not be as concrete as biology, but human behavior in response to beliefs, urges, opinions, and so forth can be studied in accordance with the scientific method.

To state it more simply, the study of religion is chiefly the study of a certain kind of *human behavior*, be it under the rubric of anthropology, sociology, or psychology. The study of theology, on the other hand, is the study of God. Religion is anthropocentric; theology is theocentric. The difference between religion and theology is ultimately the difference between God and man—hardly a small difference.

Again, it is a difference of subject matter. The subject matter of theology proper is *God*; the subject matter of religion is *man*.

A major objection to this simplification may arise immediately: Doesn’t the study of theology involve the study of what human beings say about God?

The Study of Scripture

We answer this question with one word: “Partially.” We study theology in several ways. The first is by studying the Bible. Historically the Bible was received by the church as a normative depository of divine revelation. Its ultimate Author was thought to be God himself. This is why the Bible was called the *verbum Dei* (Word of God) or the *vox Dei* (voice of God). It was considered to be a product of divine self-disclosure. The information contained within it comes, not as a result of human empirical investigation or human speculation, but by supernatural *revelation*. It is called revelation because it comes from the mind of God to us.

Historically Christianity claimed to be and was received as *revealed truth*, not truth discovered via human insight or ingenuity. Paul begins his Epistle to the Romans with these words: “Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God . . .” (Rom. 1:1). What does the phrase “gospel of God” mean? Does the word *of* indicate possession or does it mean simply “about”? Is Paul saying that the gospel is something *about* God or something *from* God? Historic Christianity would consider this question an exercise in the fallacy of the false dilemma or the either/or fallacy. Classical Christianity would say that the gospel is a message that is both *about* God and *from* God.

At the same time the church has always recognized that the Bible was not written by the finger of God. God did not write a book, have it published by the Celestial Publishing Company, and then drop it to earth by parachute. The church has always acknowledged that the Scriptures were composed and written by human authors.

The burning issue today is this: Were these human authors writing their own unaided opinions and insights, or were they uniquely endowed as agents of revelation, writing under the inspiration and superintendence of God? If we say that the Bible is a product of only human opinion and insight, we can still speak about biblical theology in the sense that the Bible contains human teaching about God, but we can no longer speak about biblical revelation. If God is the ultimate Author of the Bible, we can speak of *both* biblical revelation *and* biblical theology. If man is the ultimate author, then we are restricted to speaking about biblical theology or *theologies*. If that is the case, we could justly regard biblical theology as a subdivision of religion, as one aspect of human studies about God.

The Study of History

A second way we study theology is historically. Historical theology does involve a study of what people who are not inspired agents of revelation teach about God. We examine historical councils, creeds, and writings of theologians such as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, Karl Barth, and others. We study various theological traditions to learn how each one understood the content of biblical theology. On the one hand this may be called a study of religion in the sense that it is the study of religious *thought*.

We may be motivated to study historical theology merely to understand the history of religious thinking. In this scenario the subject matter is human opinion. Or we may be motivated to study historical theology to learn what

others have learned about God. In this scenario the subject matter is God and the things of God.

Of course we could be motivated to study historical theology by a combination of these two or for other reasons. The point is that we can have either a theological interest primarily, or a religious interest, as long as we recognize that they are not identical.

The Study of Nature

A third way of studying theology is by studying nature for clues it gives about God's character. This we call *natural theology*. Natural theology refers to information about God that is gleaned from nature. People approach natural theology from two distinct vantage points. First there are those who view natural theology as a theology derived from sheer human speculation—by unaided reason reflecting philosophically on nature. Second are those who, in accord with the historic approach to natural theology, see it as the product of and based on natural revelation. Revelation is something God does. It is his action of self-disclosure.

Natural theology is something *we* acquire. It is the result of either human speculation, viewing nature as a neutral object-in-itself, or of human reception of information given by the Creator in and through his creation. The second approach views nature not as a neutral object-in-itself that is mute, but as a theater of divine revelation where information is transmitted through the created order.

From the sixteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth, no Reformed theologian I know of denied the validity of natural theology derived from natural revelation.

The strong antipathy in our day to theology based on unaided human speculation has brought in its wake a widespread and wholesale rejection of *all* natural theology.

This departure, in part a reaction against Enlightenment rationalism, is a departure from historic Reformed theology and from biblical theology.

Both Roman Catholicism and historic Reformed theology embraced natural theology gleaned from natural revelation. The reason for this substantial agreement is because the Bible, which both sides regarded as a special revelation, clearly teaches that, in addition to God's revelation of himself in Scripture, there is also the sphere of divine revelation found in nature.

Classical theology made an acute distinction between *special revelation* and *general revelation*. The two kinds of revelation are distinguished by the terms *special* and *general* because of the difference in content-scope and in the audience of each.

Special revelation is special because it provides specific information about God that cannot be found in nature. Nature does not teach us God's plan for salvation; Scripture does. We learn many more specifics about the character and activity of God from Scripture than we can ever glean from creation. The Bible is also called special revelation because the information contained in it is unknown by people who have never read the Bible or had it proclaimed to them.

General revelation is general because it reveals general truths about God and because its audience is universal. Every person is exposed to some degree to God's revelation in creation.

The most germane biblical basis for a general or natural revelation is Paul's statement in Romans:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, because, although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God. (Rom. 1:18–21)

God directs his wrath to mankind because of their repression of natural revelation. God may be known because he has “shown” what may be known about himself. This showing or revealing is “manifest” or clear. In creation God's invisible attributes, though invisible, are “clearly seen”—that is, they are seen by or through the things that God made. This is almost universally understood to mean that God clearly reveals himself in and through nature, that there is a general or natural revelation.

Does this manifest revelation “get through” to us and yield any knowledge of God? Paul does not leave us in doubt. He says this divine revelation is “seen” and “understood.” To see and understand something is to have some kind of knowledge about it.

Paul says that “they *knew* God,” making it plain that natural revelation yields a natural theology or a natural knowledge of God. God's wrath is present, not because men fail to receive his natural revelation, but because,

after receiving this knowledge, mankind fails to act appropriately. They refuse to honor God or be grateful to him. They suppress the truth of God, and as Paul later says, “They did not like to retain God in their knowledge” (Rom. 1:28).

People reject the natural knowledge they have of God. This rejection, however, does not annihilate either the revelation or the knowledge itself. The sin of mankind is in refusing to *acknowledge* the *knowledge* they have. They act against the truth that God reveals and they clearly receive.

The believer who acquiesces in special revelation is now in a posture to respond properly to general revelation. In this regard the Christian should be the most diligent student of both special and natural revelation. Our theology should be informed by both the Bible and nature. The two come from the same revelatory source, God himself. The two revelations do not conflict; they reflect the harmony of God’s self-disclosures.

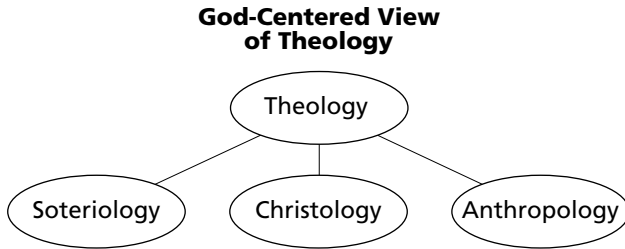
A final way we study theology is through speculative philosophical theology. This approach can be driven either by a prior commitment to natural revelation or by a conscious attempt to counter natural revelation. The first is a legitimate reason for the Christian; the second is an act of treason against God, based on the pretense of human autonomy.

In all these various approaches there can be a study of theology rather than a mere analysis of religion. When we engage in the quest to understand God, it is theology. When our quest is limited to understanding how people react to theology, it is religion.

Queen of the Sciences

The study of theology *includes* a study of mankind, but this is from a theological perspective. We could order our science as in figure 0.1. There are many subdivisions of the discipline of theology, one of which is anthropology. The modern approach looks more like figure 0.2, in which theology is a subset of anthropology. These two paradigms illustrate the difference between a theocentric view of man and an anthropocentric view of religion and God.

Fig. 0.1



In the classical curriculum theology is the queen of the sciences and all other disciplines are her handmaidens. In the modern curriculum man is king and the former queen is relegated to a peripheral status of insignificance.

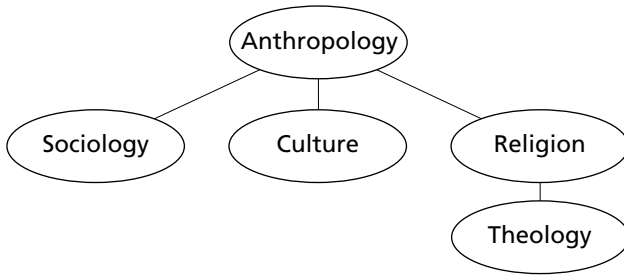
In his monumental work *No Place for Truth*, David F. Wells writes,

The disappearance of theology from the life of the Church, and the orchestration of that disappearance by some of its leaders, is hard to miss today but, oddly enough, not easy to prove. It is hard to miss in the evangelical world—in the vacuous worship that is so prevalent, for example, in the shift from God to the self as the central focus of faith,

in the psychologized preaching that follows this shift, in the erosion of its conviction, in its strident pragmatism, in its inability to think incisively about the culture, in its reveling in the irrational.²

Fig. 0.2

**Man-Centered View
of Theology**



Citing Ian T. Ramsey, Wells speaks of our present condition as a church without theology and a theology without God.³

A church without theology or a theology without God are simply not options for the Christian faith. One can have religion without God or theology, but one cannot have Christianity without them.

Theology and Religion at Sinai

To further illustrate the difference between theology and religion, let us examine briefly a famous incident in the history of Israel. In Exodus 24 we read: “Then Moses went up into the mountain, and a cloud covered the mountain. Now the glory of the LORD rested on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day He

called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. The sight of the glory of the LORD was like a consuming fire on the top of the mountain in the eyes of the children of Israel. So Moses went into the midst of the cloud and went up into the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights” (Exod. 24:15–18).

In this episode Moses ascends the same mountain he formerly visited amid smoke, thunder, and lightning. He was summoned to a meeting with God. The glory of God was manifest to the people as a consuming fire. But God himself was hidden from them, concealed by clouds.

Moses entered the cloud cover. His mission was one of pure theology. He was pursuing God himself. In light of this display, we must assume that the people left behind were not atheists. Aware of God’s reality and his saving work, they were neither secularists nor liberals. They were the evangelicals of the day, recipients of special revelation and participants in the redemptive exodus.

Later in this narrative, however, we read of a startling shift in their behavior: “Now when the people saw that Moses delayed coming down from the mountain, the people gathered together to Aaron, and said to him, ‘Come, make us gods that shall go before us; for as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him’” (Exod. 32:1).

What follows is an unprecedented act of apostasy: the making and worshiping of a golden calf. This was an exercise in religion, one that focused its worship on a creature. When they made their priceless, state-of-the-art calf, they said, “This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!” (Exod. 32:4).

Notice that this is a theological affirmation. They claimed that the golden calf was God and that the calf had delivered them from bondage. This theology was blatantly false. It was also evidence that false religion flows out of false theology. Their calf was an idolatrous graven image, which exchanged the truth of God for a lie and traded the glory of God for the glory of an artistic creation.

There is much wrong here. In the first place, the bull was the sacred image of the heathen gods of Egypt. By making their own bull-idol, Israel conformed their religion to the world around them. Their new religion was now relevant. They had a god that they could control. They made it and they could discard or destroy it. The cow gave no law and demanded no obedience. It had no wrath or justice or holiness to be feared. It was deaf, dumb, and impotent. But at least it could not intrude on their fun and call them to judgment. This was a religion designed by men, practiced by men, and ultimately useless for men. Theirs was a theology and a religion without God. It had the elements of religious practice, but what was worshiped was not God. The true God had been stripped of his real character by the people's vacuous theology.

A further irony is seen in the reason for Moses's delay in returning from the mountains—from chapter 24 until this moment in chapter 32, Moses was receiving detailed instructions from God. These instructions focused on one thing: true worship. God was giving detailed commandments concerning the tabernacle, the Aaronic priesthood, the liturgy of worship, and the sanctity of the Sabbath.

While Moses was learning sound theology, the first man consecrated as high priest, Aaron, was building an altar

to a golden calf. God was instructing Moses in proper religion that is based on a theology of truth.

David F. Wells notes, “In the past, the doing of theology encompassed three essential aspects in both the Church and the academy: (1) a confessional element, (2) reflection on this confession, and (3) the cultivation of a set of virtues that are grounded in the first two elements.”⁴

When we speak of Reformed theology, we will view it from this historical perspective. We begin our study by asserting that Reformed theology is first and foremost a *theology*. As a theology it has confessional, reflective, and behavioral aspects.

The rest of this book will examine why this theology is called Reformed, but not until we repeat once more that it is a theology, not merely a religion without theology. It is driven first and foremost by its understanding of the character of God.

PART 1

FOUNDATIONS
OF REFORMED
THEOLOGY

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1

CENTERED ON GOD

Reformed theology is systematic. The science of systematic theology is so called because it attempts to understand doctrine in a coherent and unified manner. It is not the goal of systematic theology to impose on the Bible a system derived from a particular philosophy. Rather its goal is to discern the interrelatedness of the teachings of Scripture itself. Historically the systematic theologian assumed that the Bible is the Word of God, and as such is not filled with internal conflict and confusion. Though many themes are treated by many different human authors over a vast period of time, the message that emerges was thought to be from God and therefore coherent and consistent. In this case consistency is not considered to be the “hobgoblin of little minds.” God’s mind is by no means a little one.

In the modern church the assumptions of the past are not always retained. Many have rejected the divine inspiration of Scripture and with it any commitment to a unified

revelation. When one approaches the Bible as purely a human document, one need not reconcile the teachings of its various authors. From this viewpoint, systematic theology usually is an attempt to explain the Bible in light of and under the control of a system brought to the Bible from the outside. Others eschew systems altogether and embrace a theology that is self-consciously relativistic and pluralistic. They set biblical authors in opposition to each other, and they see the Bible itself as a collection of conflicting theologies.

Table 1.1

The First Foundation Stone

1 Centered on God

2 Based on God's Word alone

3 Committed to faith alone

4 Devoted to Jesus Christ

5 Structured by three covenants

Classical Reformed theology, on the other hand, does regard the Bible as God's Word. Though it recognizes that the Scriptures were penned by different writers at different times, the divine inspiration of the whole carries with it the unity and coherency of the truth of God. Therefore the Reformed quest for a systematic theology is an effort to discover and define the system of doctrine taught internally by the Scriptures themselves.

Because theology is systematic, every doctrine of the faith touches in some way every other doctrine. For example, how we understand the person of Christ affects how we understand his work of redemption. If we view Jesus merely as a great human teacher, then we are inclined

to see his mission as primarily one of moral instruction or influence. If we regard him as the Son of God incarnate, then this frames our understanding of his mission.

Conversely, our understanding of the work of Christ also influences our understanding of his person.

Perhaps no doctrine has greater bearing on all other doctrines than the doctrine of God. How we understand the nature and character of God himself influences how we understand the nature of man, who bears God's image; the nature of Christ, who works to satisfy the Father; the nature of salvation, which is effected by God; the nature of ethics, the norms of which are based on God's character; and a myriad of other theological considerations, all drawing on our understanding of God.

Reformed theology is first and foremost theocentric rather than anthropocentric. That is, it is God-centered rather than man-centered. This God-centeredness by no means denigrates the value of human beings. On the contrary it establishes their value. Reformed theology has often been characterized as having a low view of mankind due to its insistence on humanity's fallenness and radical corruption. I have argued that Reformed theology has the highest possible view of humanity. Because we have such a lofty view of God, we care so much about the one created in his image. Reformed theology takes sin seriously because it takes God seriously and because it takes people seriously. Sin offends God and violates human beings. Both of these are serious matters.

Reformed theology maintains a high view of the worth and dignity of human beings. It differs radically at this point from all forms of humanism in that humanism assigns an

intrinsic dignity to man, while Reformed theology sees the dignity of man as being *extrinsic*. That is to say, man's dignity is not inherent. It does not exist in and of itself. Ours is a derived, dependent, and received dignity. In and of ourselves we are of the dust. But God has assigned a remarkable value and worth to us as his creatures made in his image. He is the source of our life and our very being. He has cloaked us with a robe of value and worth.

Sometimes a dispute arises concerning the goal or purpose of God's plan of redemption. The question is posed: Is the goal of redemption the manifestation of the glory of God? Or is it the manifestation of the value of fallen humanity? Is the goal man-centered or God-centered? If we were forced to choose between these options, we would have to opt for the primacy of God's glory. The good news is that we are not forced to choose. In God's plan of redemption, we see both his concern for the well-being of his creation and his concern for the manifestation of his own glory. God's glory is manifested in and through his work of redemption. It is even manifested in the punishment of the wicked. God displays with startling majesty both his ineffable grace and his righteous judgment. Even in God's judgment he vindicates the value of man by punishing the evil that so despoils human life.

Though I am not enamored with the use of paradox in theological discourse, I will not shrink from stating one now. Though there is not much in the Reformed doctrine of God that differs significantly from the doctrine confessed by other Christian communions, the most distinctive aspect of Reformed theology is its doctrine of God. How can this statement be true? Though the Reformed doctrine

of God is not all that different from that of other confessional bodies, the way this doctrine functions in Reformed theology is unique. Reformed theology applies the doctrine of God relentlessly to all other doctrines, making it the chief control factor in all theology.

For example, I have never met a confessing Christian unwilling to affirm that God is sovereign. Sovereignty is a divine attribute confessed almost universally in historic Christianity. When we press the doctrine of divine sovereignty into other realms of theology, however, it is often weakened or destroyed altogether. I have often heard it said, “God’s sovereignty is limited by human freedom.” In this statement God’s sovereignty is not absolute. It is bounded by a limit and that limit is human freedom.

Reformed theology indeed insists that a real measure of freedom has been assigned to man by the Creator. But that freedom is not absolute and man is not autonomous. Our freedom is always and everywhere limited by God’s sovereignty. God is free and we are free. But God is more free than we are. When our freedom bumps up against God’s sovereignty, our freedom must yield. To say that God’s sovereignty is limited by man’s freedom is to make man sovereign. To be sure, the statement that God’s sovereignty is limited by human freedom may simply express the idea that God does not in fact violate human freedom. But of course this is a different matter. If God never violates human freedom, it is not because of any limit on his sovereignty. It is because he sovereignly decrees not to. He has the authority and power to do it if he wants to. Any limit here is not a limit imposed on God by us, but a limit God sovereignly imposes on himself.

In Reformed theology, if God is not sovereign over the entire created order, then he is not sovereign at all. The term *sovereignty* too easily becomes a chimera. If God is not sovereign, then he is not God. It belongs to God as God to be sovereign. How we understand his sovereignty has radical implications for our understanding of the doctrines of providence, election, justification, and a host of others. The same could be said regarding other attributes of God, such as his holiness, omniscience, and immutability, to name but a few.

Reformed Theology Is Catholic

In the seventeenth century a dispute arose in the Reformed community in Holland. A group of theologians became known as the Remonstrants because they remonstrated (protested) against five articles of Reformed theology. These five points later became known as the “Five Points of Calvinism,” which have been summarized by the popular acrostic TULIP. This acrostic (which we shall examine more closely in part 2) stands for total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints. The Synod of Dort condemned the Remonstrants and reaffirmed the five points as integral to orthodox Reformed theology.

Since this synod it has become increasingly popular to view Reformed theology exclusively in light of these five points. Although these five points may be central to Reformed theology, they by no means exhaust this system of doctrine. There is much more to Reformed theology than the five points.

Reformed theology is not only systematic but also *catholic*, sharing much in common with other communions that are part of historic Christianity. The sixteenth-century Reformers were not interested in creating a new religion. They were interested, not in innovation, but in renovation. They were reformers, not revolutionaries. Just as the Old Testament prophets did not repudiate the original covenant God had made with Israel, seeking instead to correct the departures from revealed faith, so the Reformers called the church back to its apostolic and biblical roots.

Though the Reformers rejected church tradition as a source of divine revelation, they did not thereby despise the entire scope of Christian tradition. John Calvin and Martin Luther frequently quoted the church fathers, especially Augustine. They believed the church had learned much in her history, and they wished to conserve what was true in that tradition. For example, the Reformers embraced the doctrines articulated and formulated by the great ecumenical councils of church history, including the doctrines of the Trinity and of Christ's person and work formulated at the councils of Nicea in 325 and of Chalcedon in 451.

In the New Testament itself we see a conflict concerning tradition. Jesus was frequently locked in controversy with the Pharisees and scribes over the tradition of the rabbis. Jesus did not regard the rabbinic tradition as inviolate. On the contrary he rebuked the Pharisees for elevating this human tradition to the level of divine authority, which compromised the latter. Because of this stern rebuke of human tradition, we tend to miss the positive aspects of tradition articulated in the New Testament. The term *tradition* here refers to that which is "given over." Paul speaks

warmly of the gospel tradition in which he worked. It is the duty of every generation of Christians to pass on a tradition. Just as Israel was called to pass on to their children the traditions instituted by God, so the church is to pass on the apostolic tradition to each successive generation.

In this process, however, there is always the danger of adding accretions to the apostolic tradition that are contrary to the original. That is why the Reformers insisted that their work of reformation was not complete. The church is called to be *semper reformanda*, “always reforming.” Every Christian community creates its own subculture of customs and traditions. Such traditions are often extremely difficult to overcome or abandon. Yet it remains our task in every generation to examine critically our own traditions to insure they are consistent with the apostolic tradition.

The Reformers took church history very seriously, and we should do the same today. I have taught systematic theology in Reformed seminaries attended by students from a variety of denominational backgrounds. When I teach the sacraments, I know many of my students are Baptists and do not embrace the doctrine of infant baptism. I point out to them that the practice of infant baptism is the majority position in church history among the majority of Christian communions. I remind them that, though theirs is a minority position historically, that by no means makes it false. Indeed, the minority may be and often is right. I do ask my Baptist students to examine the majority position to see why that tradition holds the view that it does. Likewise I insist that students who disagree with the Baptist position listen carefully to the case the Baptists make for believer’s baptism.

I do this for more than one reason. This issue divides earnest Christians, both sides of which clearly desire to please God. At least one of these two groups is in error. The baptism of infants is either in accord with the divine will or it is not. Somebody is wrong, yet both believe they are right. By examining the historical debates on this issue, we may be persuaded to change our thinking. At the very least we will acquire a deeper understanding of the issues involved. This creates an environment of mutual understanding even in the midst of serious disagreement.

Reformed Theology Is Evangelical

The term *evangelical* came into prominence during the Reformation, when it was virtually a synonym for *protestant*. Historians have often suggested that the two chief causes of the Reformation were the issues of authority and justification. Frequently the issue of authority is called the Reformation's *formal cause*, while the issue of justification is called its *material cause*. By this is meant that the core issue was justification, while the backdrop to the controversy was authority. The twin slogans of *sola Scriptura* and *sola fide* became the battle cries of the Reformation. We will examine these two matters more fully later. We note them now in passing to say that the term *evangelical* was the broad term applied to many groups that, despite their separation into different denominations, agreed on these two basic issues over against the Roman Catholic church.

When we declare that Reformed theology is evangelical, we mean that Reformed theology shares with other Protestant groups a commitment to the historic doctrines

of *sola Scriptura* and *sola fide*. Since the sixteenth century the term *evangelical* has undergone a significant development, so that today it is difficult to define. In the twentieth century both the concept of biblical authority and the nature and significance of justification by faith alone have been challenged from within the community of confessing evangelicals. It is no longer safe to assume that if a person calls himself an evangelical that he is committed to either *sola Scriptura* or *sola fide*.

In a recent book a Roman Catholic writer described himself as an “evangelical Roman Catholic” and affirmed his commitment to orthodox Romanism. He claimed the label *evangelical* because he too believes the “gospel.” This author understands the root meaning of the term *evangelical*.

The Reformers called themselves evangelicals because they believed the doctrine of justification by faith alone is central and essential to the gospel. Since the biblical word for gospel is *evangel*, they used the term *evangelical* to assert their conviction that *sola fide* is the gospel. Of course the Roman church of the sixteenth century disagreed with the Reformers and argued that *sola fide* is a serious distortion of the gospel. In light of the historic debate, it is not surprising to find adherents on both sides of the issue calling themselves *evangelicals* today. (Of course it must also be acknowledged that there are people within the Roman Catholic church who are *evangelical* in the Protestant sense, believing the Reformation view of the gospel and not the Roman Catholic view.) In any case, when I say that Reformed theology is *evangelical*, I use the term in its classic and historical sense. Reformed

theology shares a common, evangelical body of doctrines with other Christian communions.

God Is Incomprehensible

We have seen that Reformed theology is systematic, catholic, and evangelical. In all of these respects it seeks to be God-centered in its doctrine. When Reformed theologians confess their faith or teach courses in systematic theology, they usually begin the study of theology with either the doctrine of revelation or the doctrine of “theology proper,” that is, the doctrine of the nature and character of God himself.

The study of theology proper normally begins with the doctrine of God’s incomprehensibility. This term may suggest to the reader that we believe God is fundamentally unknowable or unintelligible. Indeed this is not the case at all. We believe Christianity is first of all a revealed religion. We are committed to the idea that God has made himself known to us sufficiently for us to be redeemed and to experience fellowship with him.

The doctrine of God’s incomprehensibility calls attention to the distance between the transcendent Creator and his mortal creatures. One of the chief axioms taught by John Calvin was expressed by the Reformer in the Latin phrase *Finitum non capax infinitum*, “The finite cannot grasp (or contain) the infinite.” Because God is infinite in his being and eternal, and we are finite and bound by both space and time, our knowledge of him is never comprehensive. We enjoy an apprehensive knowledge of God but not a comprehensive knowledge.

To know God comprehensively we would need to participate in his attribute of infinity. Infinity is a divine attribute rightly called “incommunicable,” which means that God cannot make us gods ourselves. Even God is not capable of “creating” a second god. The second god could not really be a god because it would be by definition a creature. It would be dependent on and derived from the original God. Even in our glorified state in heaven, in which we will understand the things of God much more fully than we presently do, our knowledge of God will not be comprehensive. Our glorification does not mean deification. We will still be creatures; we will still be finite. Even in heaven the axiom applies: *Finitum non capax infinitum*.

Though we lack a comprehensive knowledge of God, we are not reduced to skepticism or agnosticism. We do apprehend God. The early church faced a virulent heresy in the form of so-called gnosticism. The gnostics, who derived their name from the Greek word for “knowledge” (*gnosis*), believed we can have no proper knowledge of God from the normal means of rational apprehension or the senses. The only channel of this knowledge is a mystical intuition possessed only by a gifted elite of *Gnostikoi*, or “those in the know.” The gnostics claimed a superior level or type of knowledge to that of the apostles and sought to supplant their authority. The gnostic problem was exacerbated later with the rise of Neoplatonism.

Neoplatonism was a conscious attempt to provide an alternative philosophy to Christianity. The Christian faith having conquered traditional Greek philosophy, Neoplatonism was an attempt to restore Greek philosophy to pre-eminence. The most important Neoplatonic philosopher,

Plotinus, described God as “the One.” Plotinus insisted that nothing positive can ever be affirmed about God. He is unknowable. We can circle around certain ideas about God, but we can never land on any of them. Plotinus popularized the method of speaking about God that is called the “way of negation” (*via negationis*), which defines something by saying what it is not.

Christian theology rejects the skepticism of gnosticism and Neoplatonism. The way of negation, however, is sometimes employed in theology. For example, we speak of God’s infinity and immutability. Both are negative terms. To say God is infinite is to say he is not finite. To say he is immutable is to say he is not mutable, unchanging. In this respect we are pointing to dissimilarities between God and creatures. If there were only dissimilarities between God and man, we could have no knowledge of God at all.

It has become fashionable in our day to speak of God as being “wholly other.” This phrase was coined to safeguard the transcendence of God against all forms of pantheism that seek to identify God with or contain him within the universe. If taken literally, however, the term “wholly other” would be fatal to Christianity. If there is no sense in which God and man are similar, if there is no analogy of being between God and man, then there is no common basis for communication between us. Utterly dissimilar beings have no way of discourse between them.

Scripture teaches that we are created in the image and likeness of God. This does not mean we are little gods. The image does not obscure the difference between God and man. It does assure, however, some point of likeness that makes communication possible, however limited it may be.

Though the church employs the way of negation in her statements about God, her confession is not, as in Neoplatonism, limited to this method. We also use the “way of affirmation” (*via affirmatas*) and the “way of eminence” (*via eminentia*). The way of affirmation makes positive assertions about God, such as “He is holy, sovereign, and just.” The way of eminence describes God by elevating creaturely categories to the nth or ultimate degree.

For example, we are familiar with the categories of power and knowledge. We exercise power, but our power is limited. God’s power over his creation is not limited; it is absolute. So we say God is all-powerful or omnipotent. Likewise, though our knowledge is limited, God’s is not. We say that he is omniscient or all-knowing.

Our language about God takes into account both the similarities between him and us and the dissimilarities. The incomprehensibility of God seeks to respect that sense in which God is known by us and the sense in which he remains unknown to us.

Martin Luther distinguished between the “hidden God” (*Deus absconditus*) and the “revealed God” (*Deus revelatus*):

A distinction must be observed when the knowledge or, more precisely speaking, the subject of the Divine Being is under discussion. The dispute must be about either the hidden (*abscondito*) God or the revealed (*revelato*) God. No faith in, no knowledge and no understanding of, God, insofar as He is not revealed, are possible. . . . What is above us is none of our business. For thoughts of this kind, which want to search out something more sublime, above, and outside that which has been revealed about

God, are thoroughly diabolical. We accomplish nothing by them except to hurl ourselves into destruction, because they propose an object to us that defies investigation, to wit, the unrevealed God. Let God rather keep His decrees and mysteries in hiding.¹

John Calvin made a similar distinction between what we are able to know about God and what remains unknown to us. “His essence, indeed, is incomprehensible, utterly transcending all human thought; but on each of his works his glory is engraven in characters so bright, so distinct, and so illustrious, that none, however dull and illiterate, can plead ignorance as their excuse.”²

Earlier Calvin extolled the knowledge of God that we do have: “Since the perfection of blessedness consists in the knowledge of God, he has been pleased, in order that none might be excluded from the means of obtaining felicity, not only to deposit in our minds that seed of religion of which we have already spoken, but so to manifest his perfections in the whole structure of the universe, and daily place himself in our view, that we cannot open our eyes without being compelled to behold him.”³

Calvin and Luther, with the doctrine of God’s incomprehensibility, sought to be faithful to scriptural teaching by holding to both aspects of the knowledge of God, his hiddenness and his self-revelation: “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law” (Deut. 29:29).

We have already seen that Reformed theology is God-centered, not man-centered; theocentric, not anthropocentric. At the same time we realize that our understanding

of God has radical implications for our understanding of humanity, which he created in his image. The knowledge of man and the knowledge of God are interrelated. They are bound up with one another. In one sense, by becoming aware of ourselves we become aware of our own finitude and creatureliness. We realize that we are dependent creatures. These things point us to the Creator, though in our fallen nature we seek to avoid or ignore this signpost. In another sense, it is not until we understand who God is that we adequately understand who we are.

In the very beginning of his classic work, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John Calvin says:

Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes, and gives birth to the other. For, in the first place, no man can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves; because it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves; nay, that our very being is nothing else than subsistence in God alone.⁴

Later Calvin turns his attention to the other side of the coin:

On the other hand, it is evident that man never attains to a true self-knowledge until he have previously contemplated the face of God, and come down after such contemplation to look into himself. . . . So long as we do not look beyond the earth, we are quite pleased with

our own righteousness, wisdom, and virtue; we address ourselves in the most flattering terms, and seem only less than demigods. But should we once begin to raise our thoughts to God, and reflect what kind of Being he is, and how absolute the perfection of that righteousness, and wisdom, and virtue, to which, as a standard, we are bound to be conformed, what formerly delighted us by its false show of righteousness, will become polluted with the greatest iniquity; what strangely imposed upon us under the name of wisdom, will disgust by its extreme folly; and what presented the appearance of virtuous energy, will be condemned as the most miserable impotence. So far are those qualities in us, which seem most perfect, from corresponding to the divine purity.⁵

God Is Self-Sufficient

Reformed theology places great emphasis on God's self-sufficiency. This characteristic is related to God's *aseity*, the idea that God and God alone is the ground of his own being. He derives his being from nothing outside of himself. He is self-existent. In popular language we frequently refer to God as the Supreme Being and to ourselves as human beings. The word *being* appears in both designations. We might conclude that the fundamental difference between God and man is found in the adjectives *supreme* and *human*. In one sense this is correct.

But these adjectives point to the difference between the being of God and the being of man. God and God alone is pure being. He is who he is, the Yahweh of the Old Testament. Our being, by contrast, is derived, dependent, and contingent. We depend on the power of God's being for

us to exist or to “be” at all. In a word, we are creatures. By definition a creature owes its existence to another.

One of my favorite anecdotes concerning God’s self-existence is a conversation between two children. The first child asks, “Where do trees come from?”

The second child replies, “God made the trees.”

“Where did we come from?”

“God made us.”

“Well then,” the first child asks, “where did God come from?”

Immediately the second child answers, “God made himself.”

The second child’s first two answers were fine. It was his third answer that got him in theological hot water. God did not make himself. Even God cannot make himself because this would require that he was already there to do the job. The very point of aseity is that God is not made. He has no prior cause. Because he has aseity, self-existence, God is eternal. There never was a time when he was not. He has the very power of being within himself. He not only has being, he is Being.

One Reformed confession, *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, says of God: “God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of Himself; and is alone in and unto Himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which He hath made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting His own glory in, by, unto, and upon them. He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things; and hath most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them whatsoever Himself pleaseth.”⁶

God Is Holy

Reformed theology attaches great importance to the Old Testament and its relevance to the Christian life. One of the Old Testament's great values is its rich revelation of God's character. Since Reformed theology places so much emphasis on the doctrine of God, it is not at all surprising that it pays so much attention to the Old Testament. To be sure, all of Scripture reveals the divine character to us. Yet the Old Testament provides a vivid portrait of God's majesty and holiness.

God's holiness refers to two distinct but related ideas. First the term *holy* calls attention to God's "otherness," the sense in which he is different from and higher than we are. It calls attention to his greatness and his transcendent glory. The second meaning of holiness has to do with God's purity. The perfection of his righteousness is displayed in his holiness.

Running through the works of the great theologians—like Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, John Owen, and Jonathan Edwards—is the grand theme of the majesty of God. These men stood in awe before his holiness. This posture of reverence and adoration is found throughout the pages of Scripture itself. Calvin writes:

Hence that dread and amazement with which, as Scripture uniformly relates, holy men were struck and overwhelmed whenever they beheld the presence of God. When we see those who previously stood firm and secure so quaking with terror, that the fear of death takes hold of them, nay, they are, in a manner, swallowed up and annihilated, the

inference to be drawn is, that men are never duly touched and impressed with a conviction of their insignificance, until they have contrasted themselves with the majesty of God. Frequent examples of this consternation occur both in the Book of Judges and the Prophetical Writings [Judg. 13:22; Isa. 6:5; Ezek. 1:28; 3:14; Job 9:4; Gen. 18:27; 1 Kings 19:18]; so much so, that it was a common expression among the people of God, “We shall die, for we have seen the Lord.”⁷

I know of no other brief statement that so captures the central importance to theology of the doctrine of God. It is said that the driving passion of Calvin’s theology and work in the church was to free the church from all forms of idolatry. Calvin understood that idolatry is not limited to crass or primitive forms like those found in animistic or totemic religions. He realized that idolatry can become subtle and sophisticated. The very essence of idolatry involves the distortion of God’s character.

As Paul declared to the Romans, idolatry consists in exchanging the glory of God for a lie, elevating the creature and denigrating the Creator. Paul says: “Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man—and birds and four-footed beasts and creeping things. Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonor their bodies among themselves, who exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen” (Rom. 1:22–25).

Calling the human heart an idol factory (*fabricum idolarum*), Calvin stressed that the propensity for idolatry is

deeply rooted in the heart of sinful humanity. The exchange of the truth about God for a lie occurs in every distortion of God's character that creeps (or perhaps rushes) into our theology. It is a thing to be jealously guarded against. Calvin writes:

Bright, however, as is the manifestation which God gives both of himself and his immortal kingdom in the mirror of his works, so great is our stupidity, so dull are we in regard to these bright manifestations, that we derive no benefit from them. . . . But we are all alike in this, that we substitute monstrous fictions for the one living and true God. . . . Almost every man has had his own god. To the darkness of ignorance have been added presumption and wantonness, and hence there is scarcely an individual to be found without some idol or phantom as a substitute for Deity. Like water gushing forth from a large and copious spring, immense crowds of gods have issued from the human mind, every man giving himself full license, and devising some peculiar form of divinity, to meet his own views.⁸

Christians are called to preach, teach, and believe the whole counsel of God. Any distortion of the character of God poisons the rest of our theology. The ultimate form of idolatry is humanism, which regards man as the measure of all things. Man is the primary concern, the central focus, the dominant motif of all forms of humanism. Its influence is so strong and pervasive that it seeks to infiltrate Christian theology at every point. Only by a rigorous attention and devotion to the biblical doctrine of God will we be able to keep from tasting and even swallowing this noxious brew.