

Major Themes
in the
Reformed Tradition

Major Themes *in the* Reformed Tradition

Edited by

Donald K. McKim

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To C. Kenneth Hall

*A Reformed pastor whose ministry has blessed us
and whose witness to the gospel has blessed the church*

Dedicated with appreciation and affection

Contents

Foreword	xi
Introduction	xiii
<i>Donald K. McKim</i>	
Acknowledgments	xvi
Contributors	xviii

FOUNDATIONAL ISSUES

The Ethos of the Reformed Tradition	5
<i>John H. Leith</i>	
The Confessional Nature of the Church	19
<i>Presbyterian Church (USA)</i>	
Confessional Documents as Reformed Hermeneutic	28
<i>Edward A. Dowey Jr.</i>	
The Nature of Revelation in the Christian Tradition from a Reformed Perspective	35
<i>Presbyterian Church (USA)</i>	

The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible in the Reformed Tradition	51
<i>Jack B. Rogers</i>	
The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology	66
<i>Alvin C. Plantinga</i>	

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

God as Creator and the World as Createdness	79
<i>Hendrikus Berkhof</i>	
The Providence of God in Reformed Perspective	87
<i>Benjamin W. Farley</i>	
The Concept of Covenant in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth- Century Continental and British Reformed Theology	94
<i>William Klempa</i>	
Karl Barth's Doctrine of the Covenant	108
<i>Arthur C. Cochrane</i>	
Models of the Atonement in Reformed Theology	117
<i>H. D. McDonald</i>	
Justification by Faith in the Reformed Confessions	132
<i>G. C. Berkouwer</i>	
Being in Christ	142
<i>Lewis B. Smedes</i>	
The Christian Life: Perseverance and Renewal	155
<i>Hendrikus Berkhof</i>	

ECCLESIOLOGICAL EXPRESSIONS

The Church in Sixteenth-Century Reformed Theology	169
<i>John T. McNeill</i>	
Church and Politics in the Reformed Tradition	180
<i>Eberhard Busch</i>	

Reformed Faith and Religious Liberty	196
<i>David Little</i>	

SACRAMENTAL STUDIES

The Sacraments as Signs and Seals	217
<i>G. C. Berkouwer</i>	
The Meaning and Scope of Baptism	234
<i>Geoffrey W. Bromiley</i>	
The Lord's Supper in the Reformed Confessions	245
<i>Brian A. Gerrish</i>	
A Theology of the Lord's Supper from the Perspective of the Reformed Tradition	259
<i>Robert M. Shelton</i>	

LITURGICAL DIMENSIONS

The Reformed Liturgy	273
<i>Nicholas Wolterstorff</i>	
Reflections on Liturgy and Worship in the Reformed Tradition	305
<i>LindaJo H. McKim</i>	
Worship and Justice	311
<i>Nicholas Wolterstorff</i>	
A Brief Theology of Preaching	318
<i>David Buttrick</i>	
Toward a Theology of Christian Marriage	326
<i>Shirley C. Guthrie Jr.</i>	

MISSIOLOGICAL MOTIFS

The "Call" in the Reformed Tradition	335
<i>Donald K. McKim</i>	

The Offices of Elders and Deacons in the Classical Reformed Tradition	344
<i>Elsie Anne McKee</i>	
Reformed Churches and Evangelism: Historical Background	354
<i>Robert S. Paul</i>	
A Reformed Perspective on the Mission of the Church in Society	361
<i>Donald K. McKim</i>	

THEOLOGICAL INTERACTIONS

The Charismatic Movement and the Reformed Tradition	377
<i>I. John Hesselink</i>	
Process Theology and Reformed Theology	386
<i>Donald G. Bloesch</i>	
The Reformed Tradition and Liberation Theology	400
<i>Albert Curry Winn</i>	
Reflections on Liberation Theology from the Reformed Tradition	412
<i>Jorge Lara-Braud</i>	
Black and Reformed: Contradiction or Challenge?	416
<i>Allan Boesak</i>	
Feminist Theologies and the Reformed Tradition	426
<i>Cynthia M. Campbell</i>	
The Reformed Family Today: Some Theological Reflections	433
<i>Alan P. F. Sell</i>	
Index of Names	442

Foreword

We have long needed a substantial resource for studying major theological themes in the Reformed tradition. The following essays are collected to meet that need.

The best way to study Reformed theology is to read Reformed writings. To understand these and place them in context, we also have to study the historical developments and expressions of the Reformed tradition. The essays in this volume fall into two categories. Some trace the development of major themes historically through the writings of various Reformed theologians, while others deal with a theological topic from a Reformed perspective. Thus this book has a theological focus with a historical orientation. Both perspectives are needed.

The essays have been grouped into several sections in an attempt to provide some order in the volume, though the order is to some extent artificial. Certainly other sections could have been established, and some of the essays might properly be placed in more than one of the sections that were selected. Nevertheless, the selected categories do provide an indication of some of the important Reformed emphases and prominent theological topics.

It is also apparent that this collection is not comprehensive. Many aspects of Reformed theology and struggles within the Reformed tradition are not represented, and others are underplayed. Candidates for inclusion in the volume grew rapidly from the inception of the project, and there was not nearly room enough for all of them, so regrettably some clusters of concerns are not treated.

The following pieces are primarily historical/theological studies drawn for the most part from previously published sources. I am grateful to authors, editors, and publishers who have granted permission to reprint these pieces. Wherever possible, changes have been made to reflect more inclusive language. I also wish to thank those who wrote new essays for this volume. Throughout, the primary thrust of the pieces is positive; they deal with what the Reformed tradition has to say as an expression of its study of “theology” — study of God. The works do not delve into psychological or sociological analyses of the tradition, nor do they provide detailed descriptions of how the tradition spread historically.

The Reformed tradition has taken shape

locally in thousands of places. It has done so not only through theological writings and the confessions of its churches but also in the lives of Reformed Christians. The primary context of these essays (and essayists) is European and North American. Yet today there are many other areas throughout the world where the Reformed tradition is vibrant. As theological contributions emerge from these contexts, and from heretofore marginalized voices everywhere, from women and nonwhite cultures, it will be important that they take their place in volumes like this.

This book represents for me an ongoing attempt to provide resources for the study of Christian theology. While I have recently tried to tell the story of how foundational doctrines developed early in the church,¹ in this volume, which draws together the work of others, I try to focus directly on developments in Reformed theology.²

I am a Reformed theologian by commitment. An important part of that commitment is to acquaint not only scholars but also seminarians, pastors, and laypeople in local churches with this Reformed heritage and legacy. Part of that heritage and legacy involves growth in the Christian faith. Part of that growth involves knowing where the church has been and what it has believed and taught so that we can proceed to listen obediently to the will of God in the present. This book is offered with that

aim. Many of the selections are fully documented scholarly articles. Others offerings, written more informally, provide helpful points of departure for group discussion and personal reflection. I could scarcely hope to illuminate the full Reformed tradition in all its diversity in a book of this sort, but I do think these selections make an interesting beginning for such a project.

Others besides the writers have helped me. I would like to thank Prof. Neal Plantinga of Calvin Theological Seminary, who, through Jon Pott, Editor-in-Chief of the William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, offered significant suggestions to strengthen the range and depth of the book's offerings. Jon Pott himself has been a constant support and has greatly enhanced the scope of the book by his own suggestions. His encouragement and support are a true joy. My wife LindaJo and sons Stephen and Karl also provide true joys for living. Without their love and support, the Reformed tradition would mean less to me, I'm sure.

This book is dedicated to the Rev. Dr. C. Kenneth Hall, Moderator of the 200th General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA). A long-time pastor, Ken has modeled for me the best of the Reformed tradition. His care and friendship have meant much.

DONALD K. MCKIM

NOTES

1. See Donald K. McKim, *Theological Turning Points: Major Issues in Christian Thought* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1988).

2. This has also been my intention in *The Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992).

Introduction

The Reformed theological tradition has had a long and important history. International in scope and comprehensive in interest, this tradition has been vitally involved in theological reflection and action since the days of the sixteenth century. At its best, the Reformed tradition has tried to relate theology meaningfully to life. It has sought to combine right thinking about God and God's revelation with right living and the obedient discipleship of Christian living.

The Reformed tradition traces its historical roots to the life and work of John Calvin (1509-1564). The French Reformer who made such an impact on the city of Geneva and the developing Protestant theology of the Reformation has continued to exert an important influence to the current day.¹ The earliest Swiss Protestant Reformer was Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531). His views developed apart from Calvin's but also had a significant role in the development of Reformed theology. Those who have followed these Swiss reformers and carried on their insights have stressed the need for rigorous intellectual thought as well as faithful Christian devotion. The Reformed

tradition developed throughout Europe and spread to the Americas as a Protestant alternative to Lutheranism and Anabaptism.² In its wake, churches, schools, and other institutions developed as Reformed Christians sought to witness to their faith.³

Calvin's heavy stress on the need for a coherent theology was a major concern of subsequent Reformed Christians as well. Early indications of this concern are found in the numerous confessions of faith produced by Reformed churches in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The churches worked hard on these formulations of their theological understanding to clarify as much as possible exactly what they believed.⁴ The Reformed tradition has produced a number of notable theologians who have contributed significant theological works about virtually every aspect of Christian faith and life.⁵ Reformed theologians have written important systematic theologies expounding Christian doctrine and showing the relationships among the various concepts of theology. In the nineteenth-century, Heinrich Heppé gathered together source documents around the different theological doctrines to

show what a Reformed dogmatics would look like.⁶ In the twentieth century, the works of Karl Barth — especially his *Church Dogmatics* — constitute a vigorous restatement and interpretation of the Reformed faith for the present day.⁷ Other major dogmaticians of this century such as Emil Brunner, Otto Weber, Hendrikus Berkhof, and G. C. Berkouwer have also given the Reformed tradition new directions and emphases.

The term *Reformed* arose from the emphasis of the Swiss Reformers on the reform of the church according to the Word of God. During the sixteenth century, the term applied to all Protestant churches, as did the term *evangelical*. But the Swiss Reformers, because of their thorough commitment to Scripture as the source of authority for the church and their emphases on simplicity in worship and discipline both in private and public life, came to be called “Reformed” in a particular way. The desire to reform all life according to the Word of God was a comprehensive commitment and the underlying foundation for those who went on to develop the Reformed theological tradition.⁸

After several centuries, the Reformed tradition continues to unfold. The essays in this volume indicate a number of dimensions with which Reformed theology has dealt. Their purpose is not only to inform and provide theological data but also to show how the Reformed faith can be a vital source of comfort and challenge in today’s world as it springs from theological insights and takes shape historically through the lives, thoughts, and actions of Christian believers. As with any tradition, it may be received with gratitude and assessed critically. This book has been assembled for both these purposes. As John Leith has put it,

the Reformed tradition does not claim to be the only Christian tradition. It does claim to be *one* way the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church has lived, handing on its faith and life to every new generation. It does claim to be an authentic form of the Christian community that has its special strength and also its weaknesses and problems. It intends to be the people of God in all their fullness. On the basis of this claim, it asks for both acceptance and criticism.⁹

SOLI DEO GLORIA!

NOTES

1. On Calvin’s theology, see *Readings in Calvin’s Theology*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984). On his influence, see *John Calvin: His Influence in the Western World*, ed. W. Stanford Reid (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

2. For a fine one-volume comparison of the thought of Zwingli, Calvin, Luther, and Menno Simons (the Anabaptist leader), see Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988).

3. On the spread of the Reformed faith, see John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (1954; reprint, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), and *International Calvinism 1541-1715*, ed. Menna Prestwich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

4. For examples of these confessions, see the following collections: *Reformed Confessions of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Arthur C. Cochrane (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966); *The Faith of Christendom: A Source Book of Creeds and Confessions*, ed. Brian A. Gerrish

(Cleveland: World Publishing, 1963); *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, ed. John H. Leith (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1973); and the standard work by Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom, with a History and Critical Notes*, 3 vols. (New York: Harper, 1877), which has appeared in several editions.

5. For information on some of these figures, see chapter 4 of John H. Leith’s *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1977). A valuable bibliographical source for studying Reformed thought is “The Reformed Traditions, 16th-19th Centuries: A Bibliography Selected from the ATLA Religion Database,” ed. Thomas J. Davis (Chicago: American Theological Library Association, 1986).

6. See Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics Set Out and Illustrated from the Sources*, ed. Ernst Bizer, trans. G. T. Thomson (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1978).

7. On Barth and the Reformers, see Eberhard Busch,

Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976). On Barth's theological influence, see *How Karl Barth Changed My Mind*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986).

8. On the term *Reformed*, see Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, p. 34; Jack B. Rogers, *Presby-*

terian Creeds: A Guide to the Book of Confessions (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), p. 20; and M. Eugene Osterhaven, *The Spirit of the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1971), pp. 171-78.

9. Leith, *Introduction to the Reformed Tradition*, p. 31.

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FOUNDATIONAL ISSUES

A significant characteristic of Reformed theology and the Reformed tradition has been an emphasis on establishing the bases or foundations on which theological understandings are built. In works of systematic theology this is often seen in “prolegomena” discussions that precede theological exposition. These clarify underlying principles and presuppositions that ground what follows.

The essays in this first part of the volume serve a similar purpose, outlining some of the fundamental ideas on which Reformed theology is constructed. These include discussions of basic motifs of the Reformed tradition, the nature and purpose of confessions of faith, the ways in which God’s revelation is understood and the nature of that revelation in Scripture, and the ways in which the tradition has dealt with the issue of natural theology.

John Leith’s essay entitled “The Ethos of the Reformed Tradition” identifies nine motifs characteristic of a Reformed style of being Christian. These themes recur throughout the tradition and underlie the ways in which Reformed Christians have understood their specific identity as Reformed believers in Jesus Christ.¹ The implications of many of these motifs are taken up in later essays in this volume. Thus discussions of the guiding lights by which the Reformed faith has done its theology, worshiped, and governed churches through its polity, how it has related to culture and viewed life itself — all these are helpful orientation points from which a study of major themes in the Reformed tradition can begin.

The Reformed tradition has always been a confessional tradition. Confessions of faith have played a major role in defining the tradition and been crucial documents as Reformed churches in their various locales have identified themselves first as members of the church catholic and secondarily as distinctively Reformed bodies. Confessions of faith serve as open, declarative affirmations of what the churches

believe to be God's truth and explications of how they currently understand themselves to be bound by the church's earliest confession: "Jesus Christ is Lord." The essay entitled "The Confessional Nature of the Church" explores the nature and purpose of confessions in the Christian tradition and specifically in the Reformed tradition. It also addresses such key issues as the historical limitations of confessions and the authority of confessions for the contemporary church.

Reformed confessions play a crucial role in the life of Reformed churches because they function as guides to the interpretation of Scripture. As Edward Dowey makes clear in his essay "Confessional Documents as Reformed Hermeneutic," confessions have always been understood as "containing biblical teaching in brief form, focused on the essentials; truly stated so as to ward off erroneous construal and heretical distortion." These documents were meant to be "the formal, authoritative interpretation of Scripture in the church, the end product of a churchly hermeneutic." As the church is led by the Holy Spirit, new insights break forth from Scripture, and so new confessional documents are needed.²

The church's engagement with Scripture is one aspect of the broader theological issue of God's revelation. "The Nature of Revelation in the Christian Tradition from a Reformed Perspective" deals with various aspects of this complex issue. Revelation is understood as the "self-disclosure of God" which is received in faith as God acting "as the incarnate Lord and Savior in Jesus and as the Holy Spirit inspiring prophets, apostles, and every generation of God's people." Revelation as centered in Jesus Christ and made known through the work of the Holy Spirit is key to the Christian understanding. A central feature of the church's experience of God's revelation is hearing God's voice through the canonical Scriptures. This document focuses on the authority and interpretation of the Bible as theological aspects of how God's revelation has been given and how the church today continues to experience and respond to the Word of God in Scripture.³

A historical approach to the issue of biblical authority is found in Jack B. Rogers's "The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible in the Reformed Tradition," a paper prepared for the Biblical Authority Task Force of the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (now the Presbyterian Church [USA]). This work examines how the authority and interpretation of the Bible have been understood in the Reformed tradition and explains the various approaches that have been prominent in various historical periods. A diversity of expression — which at times erupts into heated conflict on the issue of the nature of Scripture — has been characteristic of the tradition. This is because the question of authority is so important and has far-reaching implications for the church's faith and practice. If Scripture is a primary revelational source for our knowledge of God, the church must come to grips with the nature of this revelation and how God is known through it.⁴

A philosophical orientation to the question of authority and the knowledge of God is found in Alvin Plantinga's essay "The Reformed Objection to Natural Theology." Citing Reformed theologians, including Calvin, who reject attempts to prove or demonstrate the existence of God ("natural theology"), Plantinga argues that the

Reformed objection rests philosophically on the rejection of classical foundationalism and positively entails that “belief in God can properly be taken as *basic*” to human life.⁵

These essays on foundational issues provide a framework out of which other major themes in the Reformed tradition can emerge. The tradition has centered in theology as reflection and statement of its understanding of God’s revelation, and hence “Theological Themes” are prominent. This theology takes shape in the context of the church, which, as the people of God through all the ages, has had many “Ecclesiological Expressions,” some of which have focused on the important issues of church and politics and the Reformed faith and religious liberty. Reformed churches have also dealt theologically with the sacraments, and essays in the section entitled “Sacramental Studies” focus on historical and theological themes relating to baptism and the Lord’s Supper. These aspects of the church’s life are part of the larger “Liturgical Dimensions” of the Reformed faith, including concerns about liturgy, worship, justice, preaching, and marriage. Reformed churches have seen themselves as servants of God, and selections in the “Missiological Motifs” section explore various facets of the church’s mission as it lives out its vocation, orders itself through its polity, does evangelism, and ministers to society and culture. Finally, Reformed theology as an ongoing, developing stream of thought is involved in “Theological Interactions” with other contemporary theological movements.

NOTES

1. For a further exposition of basic Reformed thought, see Leith, *The Reformed Imperative: What the Church Has to Say That No One Else Can Say* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988). Also helpful in outlining a Reformed way of being Christian is I. John Hesselink’s *On Being Reformed: Distinctive Characteristics and Common Misunderstandings* (Ann Arbor: Servant Books, 1983).

2. A most helpful contemporary resource on Reformed confessions is *Reformed Witness Today: A Collection of Confessions and Statements of Faith Issued by Reformed Churches*, ed. Lukas Vischer (World Alliance of Churches, 1982). See also the Presbyterian Church (USA) “Brief Statement of Faith.”

3. Some guidance through the vast literature on this topic can be found in the selected bibliography in *The Authoritative Word: Essays on the Nature of Scripture*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1983).

4. Further pictures of the current view of the nature and interpretation of the Bible can be found in Donald K. McKim, *What Christians Believe about the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), and *A Guide to Contemporary Hermeneutics: Major Themes in Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1986), as well as Jack B. Rogers and Donald K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible: An Historical Approach* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979).

5. An important debate concerning natural theology in the Reformed tradition took place between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner in 1933. The key documents — Brunner’s “Nature and Grace” and Barth’s reply, “No!” — can be found in *Natural Theology*, trans. P. Fraenkel (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1946). See also chaps. 2-3 of G. C. Berkouwer, *General Revelation* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1968).

The Ethos of the Reformed Tradition

John H. Leith

The faith of a people is written in theological books, structured in organizations, and expressed in worship. It is also embodied in style and manner of life. In fact, style of life always betrays basic theological and ethical convictions. "There is an intimate but seldom-seen connection between a person's thought and his style, which Alfred North Whitehead defined as the 'ultimate morality of the mind.'"¹ Hence it is appropriate to place at the beginning of a study of the Reformed tradition an analysis of those motifs that have given a particular style and manner to Reformed theology, worship, polity, culture, and life. Even though life-styles are never pure and never subject to precise definition, certain themes can be specified and substantially verified. At least nine identifiable motifs have significantly shaped the Reformed style of being a Christian.

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THE MAJESTY AND THE PRAISE OF GOD

Popular estimates of the Reformed tradition have always identified it with the sovereignty of God and with predestination. This popular estimate has good basis in fact. While efforts to identify Calvinism with a central doctrine from which others are deduced have all failed, a case can be made that the central theme of Calvinist theology, which holds it all together, is the conviction that every human being has every moment to do with the *living* God.

The God with whom humanity has to do is the Creator of heaven and earth who maintains all things in their being and who governs them by his will. God is energy, force, and life. God is purpose, intention, and will. God is the Lord God who "comes with might," "who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span," and before whom "the nations are as nothing" and "are accounted . . . as less than nothing" (Isa. 40:10, 12, 17). This is the Creator God who works mightily in human history to accomplish

divine purposes. The chief end of humanity is to glorify God.

H. R. Niebuhr has brought out the peculiar characteristics of this motif by setting it over against another motif that has been widely influential in the Christian community, the vision of God. Thomas Aquinas gave classic statement to this understanding of the Christian life: "man's ultimate felicity consists only in the contemplation of God."² The divine attribute that impressed Calvin, H. Richard Niebuhr observed, was not the eternal perfection of goodness, beauty, and truth, but God's forceful reality and power.

To call the vision man's greatest good is to make contemplation, however prepared for by activity and however issuing in action, the final end of life; to put the sovereignty of God in the first place is to make obedient activity superior to contemplation, however much of *theoria* is necessary to action. The principle of vision suggests that the perfection of the object seen is loved above all else; the principle of the kingdom indicates that the reality and power of the being commanding obedience are primarily regarded. The first term may also be interpreted to mean that the initiative lies with the one who seeks to see while the object is conceived as somehow at rest; and indeed Roman Catholicism has always been inclined toward a Christian or "other-worldly humanism" which believes that man's rational sight is almost, though never quite, sufficient to pierce through to the divine truth. The term "kingdom of God" puts all the emphasis on the divine initiative. The distinction must not be pressed so as to obscure the fundamental agreement between the Christianity of the vision and that of the kingdom. Whether we say *visio dei* or *regnum dei*, "God's first," in Thomas More's phrase. Whether end or beginning be stressed, God remains both end and beginning; whether Christ be called revealer or Lord, he is the mediator; whether one be Greek or Jew, in Christ he is a new creature. Yet it remains true that the differences between the two types of Christianity have been important in the past

and are likely to be so in the future, though in no other way than as complementary views of a reality which refuses to be imprisoned even in the forms of a reason that has been enlightened by revelation.³

The consequences of this emphasis on the majesty of God are very vivid in the religious life that flows from it. As Troeltsch points out, the tone of the Christian life is not tied to "the level of self-preservation in the state of grace," and therefore "a constant preoccupation with personal moods and feelings is entirely unnecessary."⁴

To Calvin the chief point is not the self-centered personal salvation of the creature, and the universality of the Divine Will of Love, but it is the Glory of God, which is equally exalted in the holy activity of the elect and in the futile rage of the reprobate.⁵

The glory of God and God's purposes in the world are more important than the salvation of one's own soul. Personal salvation can be a very selfish act. Berdyaev paints a horrible picture of those who trample over their neighbors in the crush to get through the gates of heaven.⁶ Those Calvinists who asked candidates for the ministry if they were willing to be damned for the glory of God were trying to root out the last element of self-seeking in religion. Human beings are religious, the Calvinist asserts, not to satisfy their needs or to give meaning to their lives but because God has created them and called them to God's service. Karl Barth puts it this way:

It seems to me that if we want to keep the order of the New Testament we must say: God has ordained and chosen them into his temporal and eternal service, and, consequently, into everlasting life. The notion of service should not be missing. In the New Testament, they did not come to the Church merely so that they might be saved and happy, but that they might have the signal privilege of serving the Lord.⁷

Calvin's own life illustrates this point. He

thought he was best equipped by nature and inclination to be a scholar. Yet he gave himself with no self-pity to the demands of church organization, to the challenges of civil and ecclesiastical politics, and to the pastoral care not only of Geneva but also of Reformed Protestantism. When Farel invoked the judgment of God and Bucer reminded him of Jonah, Calvin did not hesitate to accept unpleasant responsibilities. His letter to Farel on his return to Geneva in 1541 reveals the personal dimensions of his theology:

As to my intended course of proceeding, this is my present feeling: had I the choice at my own disposal, nothing would be less agreeable to me than to follow your advice. But when I remember that I am not my own, I offer up my heart, presented as a sacrifice to the Lord. Therefore there is no ground for your apprehension that you will only get fine words. Our friends are in earnest, and promise sincerely. And for myself, I protest that I have no other desire than that, setting aside all consideration of me, they may look only to what is most for the glory of God and the advantage of the Church. Although I am not very ingenious, I would not want pretexts by which I might adroitly slip away, so that I should easily excuse myself in the sight of men, and shew that it was no fault of mine. I am well aware, however, that it is God with whom I have to do, from whose sight such crafty imaginations cannot be withheld. Therefore I submit my will and my affections, subdued and held fast, to the obedience of God.⁸

The emphasis on the majesty and lordship of God has always been a theme of Reformed theology, but there have been variations in the experience. The increasing knowledge and awareness of the physical environment of human existence, as well as changes in the expected forms of Christian experience, led to theological changes. In the time of the Enlightenment and of the Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards gave expression to the way in which

the beauty of God had grasped him, which is different from the experience of Calvin:

The first instance that I remember of that sort of inward, sweet delight in God and divine things that I have lived much in since, was on reading those words, 1 Tim. i:17. *Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory forever and ever, Amen. . . .*

After this my sense of divine things gradually increased, and became more and more lively, and had more of that inward sweetness. The appearance of every thing was altered; there seemed to be, as it were, a calm, sweet cast, or appearance of divine glory, in almost every thing. God's excellency, his wisdom, his purity and love, seemed to appear in every thing; in the sun, and moon, and stars; in the clouds and blue sky; in the grass, flowers, trees; in the water, and all nature; which used greatly to fix my mind. . . . And scarce any thing, among all the works of nature, was so sweet to me as thunder and lightning; formerly, nothing had been so terrible to me. Before, I used to be uncommonly terrified with thunder, and to be struck with terror when I saw a thunder storm rising; but now, on the contrary, it rejoiced me. I felt God, so to speak, at the first appearance of a thunder storm; and used to take the opportunity, at such times, to fix myself in order to view the clouds and see the lightnings play, and hear the majestic and awful voice of God's thunder, which oftentimes was exceedingly entertaining, leading me to sweet contemplations of my great and glorious God.⁹

This emphasis upon God the Creator and Lord gave depth to life. We do not live on the surface of universal history. Human life is not the simple product of history and of natural forces. Personhood is rooted in the will and the intention of God. God thought of every person before he or she was called into being and gave that person individuality, identity, and a name. Human existence is rooted in eternity, and its end is the praise of God. Hence the Christian lives in the quiet confidence that God is greater

than all the battalions of earth and that life is at God's disposal. *The Book of Common Prayer* expresses the dialectic of the Christian life, as Calvin understood it, with remarkable clarity: "in the time of prosperity, fill our hearts with thankfulness, and in the day of trouble, suffer not our trust in thee to fail."¹⁰

THE POLEMIC AGAINST IDOLATRY

More than a century ago Alexander Schweizer observed that Calvinism is distinguished from Lutheranism by its emphasis on the majesty of God and by its assault on all forms of paganism in the medieval church, whereas Lutheranism had been primarily concerned with "judaistic" lapses into salvation by works.¹¹ Reformed theology has resisted every effort to get control of God, to fasten the infinite and indeterminate God to the finite and the determinate, whether it be in images or the bread and wine of the sacraments or the structures of the church. God is free, and God acts and speaks when and where he chooses.¹²

Calvin never seriously contemplated the possibility of unbelief or no-faith. The human options were exhausted by faith in the living God and idolatry. "God himself is the sole and proper witness of himself."¹³ Humanity's responsibility is to listen to the word of God and to correct what one thinks one has heard by continuing to listen. The human starting point is not one's own existence but the will of the Creator or Lord. Therefore every effort to domesticate God, to shape God according to humanity's own understanding of what the Deity should be, to fasten God to some finite and determinate object and thus to control God must be firmly repudiated.

The practical consequence of this polemic against idolatry was an iconoclasm that held in question every human achievement and refused final loyalty to any human being or any

human endeavor. As H. Richard Niebuhr has put it, "the converse of dependence on God is independence of everything less than God."¹⁴ This iconoclasm was not merely negative; it also contributed to the strength of many human endeavors. In his perceptive biography of John Knox, Lord Eustace Percy has written that the best servants of the state are those whose highest loyalty is not to the state but to God.¹⁵ The Reformed polemic against idolatry prevents human endeavors from overreaching themselves, claiming too much for themselves, and thus destroying themselves. Only God is great enough to answer to humanity's highest and total loyalty without destroying the truly human. Every lesser loyalty when made absolute is abortive and destructive.

THE WORKING OUT OF THE DIVINE PURPOSES IN HISTORY

God the Creator and Governor is Lord of history and nature. Paul Lehmann's use of the metaphor "politician" to refer to God is surely in line with early Reformed theology.¹⁶ God is working out a divine purpose in human history. God calls God's people to be the instruments of God's purpose. God's purposes entail more than just the salvation of souls; they also involve the establishment of a holy community and the glorification of God's name through all the earth.

John Calvin stands out in the history of the church as one who was more vividly aware than almost any other of the mighty working of God in human history and of God's call to God's people for service in the world. Christopher Dawson, a Roman Catholic historian of culture, has suggested that

behind Western democracy there lies the spiritual world of Calvinism and the Free Churches, which is . . . completely different in its political and social outlook from the world

of Lutheranism, and which has had a far greater influence and closer connexion with what we know as Western civilization without further qualification.

This divergence was only fully manifested in the course of centuries, but it was not simply a result of historical circumstance. It had its root in the very origins of the two confessions and in the personality of their founders. At first sight this may seem difficult to maintain. For there is in the teaching of Calvin the same pessimism with regard to human nature and human will, the same other-worldliness and the same exaltation of divine power and even arbitrariness that is to be found in Luther. Nevertheless, all these conceptions were transformed by the intense spirit of moral activism which characterized Calvin and Calvinism. The genius of Calvin was that of an organizer and legislator, severe, logical, and inflexible in purpose, and consequently it was he and not Luther who inspired Protestantism with the will to dominate the world and to change society and culture. Hence though Calvinism has always been regarded as the antithesis of Catholicism to a far greater extent than Lutheranism, it stands much nearer to Catholicism in its conception of the relation of Church and State and in its assertion of the independence and supremacy of the spiritual power. In this respect it carries on the traditions of medieval Catholicism and of the Gregorian movement of reform to an even greater degree than did the Catholicism of the Counter-Reformation itself.

In an age when the Papacy was dependent on the Hapsburg monarchies and when Catholics accepted the theories of passive obedience and the divine right of kings, the Calvinists asserted the Divine Right of Presbytery and declared that "the Church was the foundation of the world" and that it was the duty of kings to "throw down their crowns before her and lick the dust off her feet." But these theocratic claims were not hierarchic and impersonal as in the medieval Church, they were based on an intense individualism deriving from the certainty of election and the duty of the individual Christian to co-operate in realizing the divine purpose against a sinful and hostile world. Thus

Calvinism is at once aristocratic and democratic; aristocratic in as much as the "saints" were an elect minority chosen from the mass of fallen humanity and infinitely superior to the children of this world; but democratic in that each was directly responsible to God who is no respecter of persons. Calvinism is, in fact, a democracy of saints, elect of God, but also in a sense self-chosen, since it is the conscience of the individual which is the ultimate witness of his election.¹⁷

Calvin's intention in Geneva was not simply the salvation of souls but a Geneva that was reformed by the Word of God. John Knox in a well-known statement exclaimed, "in other places, I confess Christ to be truly preached; but manners and religion to be so sincerely reformed, I have not yet seen in any other place."¹⁸

In Scotland and in England the Reformed community sought to build the New Jerusalem. The Puritans who came to New England were not simply seeking freedom to worship God as they liked. They were going on an errand into the wilderness to establish a Christian society and to demonstrate to the decadent society of Europe the possibilities of a Christian community.¹⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr has persuasively argued that this awareness of the powerful activity of God working itself out under the rubrics of the sovereignty of God, the kingdom of Christ, and finally as the coming kingdom is the motif most characteristic of the Christian movement in America.²⁰

The Calvinist saint was responsible for the world. The Calvinist was a soldier of the Lord in conquest of the world, the flesh, and the devil, God's elect instrument to fulfill God's purposes. In his study of radical politics, Michael Walzer contends that it did not enter into the thought of Machiavelli or Luther or Bodin "that specially designated and organized bands of men might play a creative part in the political world, destroying the established order and reconstructing society according to the Word

of God or the plans of their fellows." He argues that

it was the Calvinists who first switched the emphasis of political thought from the prince to the saint . . . and then constructed a theoretical justification for independent political action. What Calvinists said of the saint, other men would later say of the citizen: the same sense of civic virtue, of discipline and duty, lies behind the two names. . . .

The saints saw themselves as divine *instruments* and theirs was the politics of wreckers, architects, and builders — hard at work upon the political world. . . . They treated every obstacle as another example of the devil's resourcefulness and they summoned all their energy, imagination, and craft to overcome it.²¹

Calvin, it must be clearly understood, did not think of himself as a "change agent" but as a servant of God. His goal was the kingdom of God, not a human utopia — the glory of God, not humanitarianism — though he did insist that love of neighbor is the truest test of orthodoxy and doctrine. Yet Calvin set in motion movements that did change society because he united his own theology and its peculiar emphases with an awareness of the modern world. W. Fred Graham has put it very well:

What he did was stand more surely than any other thinker of his time within this new world. . . . He approved of the city and its activities. He was not instinctively disgusted with business and trade, as were medieval churchmen. . . . And he had the sure instinct to perceive the place of religion within this new age, and to curb the worse instincts of the age by the Word of God and godly discipline. . . . Neither Calvin, nor Huguenot, nor Puritan of Old or New England thought for a moment that riches were good or business holy. But they had decided to live in this world, and did their utmost to leash it to the Word of God.²²

Roland H. Bainton, an astute church historian, has summarized the Calvinist outlook as follows:

The early Calvinist . . . did not eat his heart out and consume his energies in concern as to his salvation. This point significantly sets off Calvinism alike from Catholicism and Lutheranism. . . .

Their commission was to establish a theocracy in the sense of a Holy Commonwealth, a community in which every member should make the glory of God his sole concern. It was not a community ruled by the Church nor by the clergy nor even in accord with the Bible in any literalist sense, because God is greater than a book even though it contains His Word. The holy community should exhibit that parallelism of church and state which had been the ideal of the Middle Ages and of Luther, but had never been realized and never can be save in a highly select community where the laity and the clergy, the Town Council and the ministers, are all equally imbued with the same high purpose. Calvin came nearer to realizing it than anyone else in the sixteenth century.²³

The holy community was never realized, however remarkable in any relative judgment some achievements were. Human freedom and proclivity to sin made any achievement partial and precarious. Pietism, the definition of Christian life in terms of personal piety, and evangelism, conceived as plucking individual souls from the burning pit, were sometimes substitutes for the primal vision. In more recent years a pluralistic, secular, mobile society has rightly magnified human freedom in regard to faith and life-style and has made the possibility of the holy community even more remote. Yet the vision lives on in the conviction that the very existence of the Christian community in the larger community does shape history. Moreover, the Christian movement today still has the essential weapons of Calvin's warfare — namely, the power of the preached Word, the strength of a Christian personality, and the testimony of the Christian community's life. These, when undergirded by the power of the Holy Spirit, are not inconsiderable. Furthermore, Reformed Christians in the tradition of

the prophets have always believed that God used the Cyruses of the world to do God's will.

Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920), a Dutch Calvinist, gave a distinctive formulation to the vision of the holy community in terms of the principle of sphere sovereignty. This concept continues to be used in fruitful ways, especially by Dutch Calvinists. Kuyper believed intensely that all of life is lived under the sovereignty of God but that different spheres, such as the state, the church, marriage, and education, have an independence from one another. Sphere sovereignty stands in contrast to sphere subsidiarity, which holds that various spheres — the state and science, for example — are subsidiary to the church. The terms of sphere sovereignty allow the sovereignty of God to be realized in a total society without some spheres of the society being subjected to the tyranny of other spheres in hierarchical subordination.²⁴

ETHICS: A LIFE OF HOLINESS

John Calvin insisted that Christians should approve their Christianity by a life of holiness. While an exposition of the Ten Commandments was characteristic of most catechisms, the Reformed gave very detailed attention to this exposition in their catechisms and systematic theologies. The polity that American Presbyterianism adopted in 1788 had in its preface the declaration that "truth is in order to goodness."²⁵ The end of the Christian life, according to Calvin, is to be conformed to the will of God. Therefore, any theology or worship that does not edify must be reexamined.

The Christian life is, on the one hand, justification by grace through faith and, on the other, sanctification. To put it in other words, salvation is both forgiveness and renewal, both God's grace as mercy and God's grace as power. The proper unity of these two aspects of the one experience of salvation is the art of

the Christian life and is never easy to achieve. Some are tempted to overemphasize the experience of forgiveness. The awareness, so vivid to Luther, that we have to be forgiven our best deeds as well as our worst can lead to an indifference to the various levels of goodness and various degrees of sin. Yet on the human level, these differences between forgiven sinners are very significant. Moreover, it is cheap grace that presumes upon forgiveness and refuses to strive to be perfect as the Father in heaven is perfect. Others overemphasize sanctification. They forget that salvation is by grace and not by merit, that humans sin in their best as well as in their worst deed. The Christian life becomes obedience to laws. John Calvin, as Reinhold Niebuhr observed, put these two aspects of salvation together theologically as well as and perhaps better than any other in church history.²⁶ The Westminster Larger Catechism likewise exercises great care in answer to the question "Wherein do justification and sanctification differ?"

Although sanctification be inseparably joined with justification, yet they differ, in that, God in justification, imputeth the righteousness of Christ; in sanctification, his Spirit infuseth grace, and enableth to the exercise thereof; in the former, sin is pardoned; in the other, it is subdued; the one doth equally free all believers from the revenging wrath of God, and that perfectly in this life, that they never fall into condemnation; the other is neither equal in all, nor in this life perfect in any, but growing up to perfection.²⁷

This is a remarkably balanced statement. In practical life, however, Calvin and the Reformed tradition often failed to maintain the tension and overemphasized sanctification. One result has been legalism, which in the end always lacks grace. Another result has been self-righteousness, especially when sin is reduced to sensuality, which is more manageable than pride or apathy, especially in old age. A

third consequence has been obscurantism when the will of God is prematurely identified with some human pattern of conduct. The proper balancing of forgiveness and holiness in Christian life is not simple.

The Reformed community's mistakes have admittedly been on the side of sanctification. This fact must not, however, obscure the strength of the tradition that has insisted that the Christian is not only a forgiven person but an ethical person. This emphasis is reflected in the theology, worship, and polity of the church. It is especially true of the ethos of the church's life. The elect person is called to a life of service and obedience. The forgiven person is summoned to live by the law of God after having heard the comforting words of the liturgy and the declaration of forgiveness. The first use of the law for Calvin was not to bring sinners to repentance or to restrain public behavior but to stimulate and to guide the Christian.²⁸ Whatever else Reformed Christians may be concerned about, they are concerned about ethics, the law, and morality.²⁹

THE LIFE OF THE MIND AS THE SERVICE OF GOD

Zwingli received a first-rate humanist education in preparation for the priesthood. John Calvin also was a humanist and a scholar before he became a Reformer. The humanist tradition of the sixteenth century left an indelible imprint upon the whole future of the Reformed tradition.³⁰ Wherever the Reformed community went, it established schools alongside the churches, not only to teach the Bible or to teach reading and other skills necessary for studying the Bible but also to teach the whole range of liberal arts in order to liberate the human spirit. Furthermore, Reformed theology has always been careful in the historical study of the sources of the faith, especially the

Bible and the intention of Jesus Christ for the Christian and the church.

The Academy at Geneva was in many ways the crowning achievement of Calvin's work there. Its roots were in the *Institutes* and the church ordinances. In the *Institutes* Calvin wrote that those who have "tasted the liberal arts penetrate with their aid far more deeply into the secrets of the divine wisdom."³¹ In the *Ordinances* he declared,

The office proper to doctors is the instruction of the faithful in true doctrine, in order that the purity of the Gospel be not corrupted either by ignorance or by evil opinions. As things are disposed today, we always include under this title aids and instructions for maintaining the doctrine of God and defending the Church from injury by the fault of pastors and ministers. So to use a more intelligible word, we will call this the order of the schools. . . .

But because it is only possible to profit from such lectures if first one is instructed in the languages and humanities, and also because it is necessary to raise offspring for time to come, in order not to leave the Church deserted to our children, a college should be instituted for instructing children to prepare them for the ministry as well as for civil government.³²

Thus from the beginning the Reformed sponsored learning as a Christian duty. They placed value on the skills of language, reading, writing, and speaking. They also prized clarity, logic, and precision in mental procedure. They valued the ability to analyze a problem and to formulate an answer. The sermon was an intellectual exercise and a mental discipline that had a significant cultural impact. Yet the Reformed were not intellectualistic. Calvin warned against idle curiosity and speculation. The learning that was joined to piety had a strong pragmatic and utilitarian quality.

The life of the mind as the service of God had special reference to the church. Calvin made knowledge as well as personal commitment a condition for admission to the commu-

nion table.³³ He was convinced that Christians should know what they believed and why they believed it. In his letter to Somerset on the reform of the church in England, he left no doubt about the importance of catechetical instruction:

Believe me, Monseigneur, the Church of God will never preserve itself without a Catechism, for it is like the seed to keep the good grain from dying out, and causing it to multiply from age to age. And therefore, if you desire to build an edifice which shall be of long duration, and which shall not soon fall into decay, make provision for the children being instructed in a good Catechism, which may shew them briefly, and in language level to their tender age, wherein true Christianity consists. This Catechism will serve two purposes, to wit, as an introduction to the whole people, so that every one may profit from what shall be preached, and also to enable them to discern when any presumptuous person puts forward strange doctrine. Indeed, I do not say that it may not be well, and even necessary, to bind down the pastors and curates to a certain written form, as well for the sake of supplementing the ignorance and deficiencies of some, as the better to manifest the conformity and agreement between all the churches; thirdly, to take away all ground of pretense for bringing in any eccentricity or new-fangled doctrine on the part of those who only seek to indulge an idle fancy.³⁴

Catechetical instruction simply focused a general passion for knowledge. Solidly written books and pamphlets and learned sermons delivered in plain style without the ostentation of learning were indispensable marks of Reformed churchmanship. As Calvin put it, "the tongue without the mind must be highly displeasing to God."³⁵

PREACHING

The Reformation, writes James Nichols, was

the greatest revival of preaching in church history.³⁶ There is good basis for this judgment. The Reformation began in Zurich as Zwingli undertook to preach through the book of Matthew. Preaching was at the very center of the Reformation in Geneva, with sermons scheduled for different hours on Sunday and on most of the days of the week.

In his famous letter to Somerset, Calvin stressed preaching as well as catechetical education. There was too little preaching in England, Calvin feared, and the greater part of that, he chided, was read from a written text.

Preaching ought not to be lifeless but lively, to teach, to exhort, to reprove. . . . You are also aware, Monseigneur, how he [Paul] speaks of the lively power and energy with which they ought to speak, who would approve themselves as good and faithful ministers of God, who must not make a parade of rhetoric, only to gain esteem for themselves; but that the Spirit of God ought to sound forth by their voice, so as to work with mighty energy.³⁷

Even if Calvin himself spent little time on the preparation of particular sermons but drew resources out of his general theological work, and even if he frequently repeated what he had said or written previously, preaching was still a most important part of his life's work. It was the means of grace above all others by which he expected God to transform Geneva. To this end he preached more than three thousand sermons in his fifty-five-year lifetime.³⁸

The Reformed community sometimes dared to speak of preaching as the word of God. Bullinger declared in the Second Helvetic Confession that "when this Word of God is now preached in the church by preachers lawfully called, we believe that the very Word of God is preached, and received of the faithful."³⁹ Yet the Reformed were careful not to bind the Spirit of God to the word in preaching as they believed the Lutherans did. As Bullinger wrote in the *Decades*, a book of sermons,

whom he meaneth to bestow knowledge and faith on, to them he sendeth teachers, by the word of God to preach true faith unto them. Not because it lieth in man's power, will, or ministry, to give faith; nor because the outward word spoken by man's mouth is able of itself to bring faith: but the voice of man, and the preaching of God's word, do teach us what true faith is, or what God doth will and command us to believe. For God himself alone, by sending his Holy Spirit into the hearts and minds of men, doth open our hearts, persuade our minds, and cause us with all our heart to believe that which we by his word and teaching have learned to believe.⁴⁰

Calvin sometimes used language that seems to bind the Spirit to the preaching of the word. The minister, he said, is the very mouth of God.⁴¹ Yet he, like Bullinger, knew that preaching is the word of God only in a subordinate sense, and he insisted, as few have, in his exposition of the doctrine of predestination that the Spirit is not bound to preaching. God is still sovereign. Yet this did not diminish Calvin's estimate of preaching as the usual means of God's grace and power. Calvin's position is very well summarized in this statement from the *Institutes*:

For first, the Lord teaches and instructs us by his Word. Secondly, he confirms it by the sacraments. Finally, he illumines our minds by the light of his Holy Spirit and opens our hearts for the Word and sacraments to enter in, which would otherwise only strike our ears and appear before our eyes, but not at all affect us within.⁴²

Puritanism was also a preaching movement. The Puritan, like Calvin, had great confidence in the power of the written and spoken word. Puritans worked to arrive at a style that was appropriate to the preaching of the Word of God. This style, as expounded by the Calvinist theologian William Perkins and as written into the *Westminster Directory of Worship*, was plain, but it was not ineffective or unimaginative. It was designed to be understood and

to move the hearer, which, the evidence indicates, it did in a remarkable way. The reaction against the ornate, witty, rhetorical style of the orthodox Anglican became a mark of the Puritan's conversion.⁴³ The preaching style of the Puritan was plain and powerful and in the tradition of Calvin. Its influence lingered long in Britain and in the United States, where it was tempered by the frontier revival.

Preaching has also been the great theme of the two best-known Reformed theologians of the twentieth century, Emil Brunner and Karl Barth. Each thought of himself as a preacher, and each wrote his theology for preachers. Brunner preached to large congregations in the Fraumünster in Zurich, and Barth took delight in preaching in the jails.

The Reformed community has always had great confidence — perhaps too great a confidence — in written and spoken words and, in particular, in the power of preaching, when blessed by the Holy Spirit, to change human life and to create a godly public opinion. The demand for simplicity, directness, authenticity, and sincerity that has been emphasized generally in the tradition applies especially to preaching. The Calvinist sermon is not ostentatious or pretentious but plain, rough-hewn, and powerful. In considerable measure, the content, clearly and distinctly presented, is the rhetoric as well as the message. Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the great preachers of the twentieth century, tells in his diary that very soon in his ministry he had to decide if he was going to be a "pretty" preacher. He decided against "pretty" in favor of the rough-hewn and plain-spoken sermons that the Reformed tradition has so much admired.⁴⁴

THE ORGANIZED CHURCH AND PASTORAL CARE

Calvin believed that the organization of the Christian community was critically important

for the nurturing of the life of faith and obedience. The human phenomena of church structures and procedures of worship are means of grace and must be appropriate for the work of the Spirit. Hence Calvin and his successors were by no means indifferent to structures. Yet the structures were not important in themselves but as means of grace.

The focus of Calvin's concern with church organization is pastoral care and the "cure of souls." Calvin not only wrote the office of pastor into his church structure but was himself a pastor above all. In the official order for the church's existence in Geneva, he provided for visitation of prisoners and of the sick and for catechetical instruction and examination prior to admission to the Lord's Supper. The confession of sins and the promise of forgiveness of sins, which are in the Sunday liturgy, can also take place in the meeting of Christian with Christian and, in particular, in the pastoral work of the ministers. The deacons were constituted as the church's ministry of compassion to the needy. Yet pastoral care is not only comfort for the bereaved, forgiveness for the guilty, and help for the sick and needy: it is preeminently the renewal of life in the image of Christ. Pastoral care has as its purpose not only the giving of comfort but also the redirection of life.⁴⁵ In his voluminous correspondence, Calvin exercised pastoral care all over Europe, not only giving comfort but also calling Christians to the heroic, demanding, and dangerous service of Almighty God.

In a substantial study entitled *Calvin: Director of Souls*, Jean-Daniel Benoit contends that Calvin was first a pastor and then a theologian, or, better, that he was a theologian in order to be a pastor. He also concludes that it was as a pastor rather than as a theologian, church organizer, or powerful personality that Calvin significantly influenced history. For in the care of souls, Calvin was not only concerned for the salvation of the individual but went on to unite this salvation with the advancement of the reign of Jesus Christ.⁴⁶

THE DISCIPLINED LIFE

Personal discipline was a characteristic of the early Protestant reformers of all persuasions, as it is of most persons who accomplish much. Yet even among highly disciplined people, Calvin stands out not only in his personal achievement but also in his insistence that discipline should characterize the Christian life and community. He attempted to make discipline a part of the structure of the organized life of the church, especially in the work of the elders in the consistory or session.⁴⁷

Discipline, as the Reformed tradition has advocated it, can best be understood as the deliberate and economic use of the energies and vitalities of human existence in the pursuit of loyalty to God and the advancement of God's cause in the world. John T. McNeill has suggested that *economy* is a word that is descriptive of the Puritan.⁴⁸ It is certainly descriptive of Calvin's personal life and churchmanship. Yet neither Calvin nor the Puritans turned to asceticism in an attempt to escape an evil world. They were ascetic or disciplined only to the extent that they believed in the economical use of a good world. They exulted in the vitality of existence, but they also believed that momentary desires must sometimes be denied for the sake of a later good. Within a disciplined life there is a place for fun and even frivolity, but this place is fitted into a larger order.

German sociologist Max Weber and historian of the social teachings of the churches Ernst Troeltsch were both impressed by Calvinist self-discipline as it applies to work. Troeltsch has written that

to a people who have been educated on Calvinistic principles the lazy habit of living on an inherited income seems a downright sin; to follow a calling which has no definite end and which yields no material profit seems a foolish waste of time and energy, and failure to make full use of chances of gaining material profit seems like indifference towards God.⁴⁹

Calvin rejected the monastery, but he made the whole world the place of disciplined living and the pursuit of goals that have their end in God and his cause on earth. The discipline of work applied not simply to the productivity of business or labor but also to political and social reform.

The early Calvinist was too reserved to be an exhibitionist in personal feelings or in personal piety. Yet here too Calvin and his followers stood for the discipline of private and public worship. Reformed life can never be reduced to private piety, but it is never without it.⁵⁰

The discipline of the Reformed tradition, especially as illustrated by Calvin and the Puritans, was not regarded as a burden. It was a manner of life that was freely chosen and that they believed to be the means of the joyful and responsible freeing of life's energies and vitalities.

SIMPLICITY

Simplicity is a recurring theme in all of Calvin's writings, and it was a characteristic of his practice.⁵¹ He opposed all redundancy. He was the enemy of the ostentatious, the pompous, the contrived, and of needless spending and consumption, but he also opposed other forms of waste. Simplicity is closely related to Calvin's emphasis on authenticity and sincerity. Every activity or device that covers up reality must be rejected.

Simplicity was a general principle with Calvin. He applied it to liturgy, polity, and style of life. He also applied it to literary style, and this application serves well as an illustration of the way this motif shaped his own life. Early in his professional life, when writing his commentary on Romans (1539), Calvin deliberately set out to write with "lucid brevity," and he did not hesitate to rebuke his elder the distinguished Bucer for being verbose and lacking

in clarity.⁵² He deals with style in greater detail in his commentary on 1 Corinthians 1:20. As Calvin understood the situation, Paul's method of preaching was plain, and he objected to "wicked and unfaithful ministers" at Corinth who sought to recommend themselves with a show of words and masks of human wisdom. The simplicity of the gospel was disfigured; the Corinthians themselves "were tickled with a silly fondness for high-sounding style." Hence Calvin speaks approvingly of Paul's "rude, coarse and unpolished style." Yet Calvin does not reject human eloquence. God is its author, and every person ought to rejoice in it, but only as it is used to convey truth and to uncover reality. It must never be an end in itself. Eloquence can get in the way of truth. "In a plain and unpolished manner of address, the majesty of truth might shine more conspicuously." Language is the servant of truth, of reality.

That eloquence, therefore, is neither to be condemned nor despised, which has no tendency to lead Christians to be taken up with an outward glitter of words, or intoxicate them with empty delight, or tickle their ears with its tinkling sound, or cover over the cross of Christ with its empty show as with a veil; but, on the contrary, tends to call us back to the native simplicity of the gospel, tends to exalt the simple preaching of the cross by voluntarily abasing itself, and, in fine, acts the part of a herald to procure a hearing for those fishermen and illiterate persons, who have nothing to recommend them but the energy of the Spirit.⁵³

Simplicity is very close to sincerity. It clears away the ornaments, the ostentations, the contrivances, the pretenses that obscure the real.

There is no one model of the Reformed life-style or personality. Furthermore, the characteristics of the Reformed ethos listed in this discussion are not exclusively Reformed or necessarily even exclusively Christian. Yet they have persistently and frequently

characterized the Reformed community. In a variety of patterns they have been embodied in personalities and communities that are Re-

formed. Furthermore, they have been integrally related to Reformed theologies, politics, and worship.

NOTES

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2. Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 3:37, 125.
3. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1937; Harper Torchbook, 1959), pp. 20-21.
4. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 4 vols., trans. Olive Wyon (New York: Macmillan, 1931), 2: 589.
5. Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, 2: 583.
6. Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Destiny of Man* (New York: Scribner's, 1937), p. 146.
7. Karl Barth, *The Faith of the Church: A Commentary on the Apostles' Creed according to Calvin's Catechism*, ed. Jean-Louis Leuba, trans. Gabriel Vahanian (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), p. 137.
8. Calvin, letter to Farel, August 1541, in *Letters of John Calvin*, 4 vols., ed. Jules Bonnet, trans. D. Constable and M. R. Gilchrist (1855-58; rpt., New York: B. Franklin, 1974), 1: 280-81.
9. Edwards, *The Works of President Edwards*, 4 vols. (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1879), 1:16-17.
10. "Prayer for Our Country," in *The Book of Common Prayer* (Greenwich: Seabury Press, 1952), p. 36.
11. Schweizer, *Die Glaubenslehre der Evangelisch-reformierten Kirche dargestellt und aus den Quellen belegt*, vol. 1 (Zurich: Orell, Füssli, 1844-47), p. 45.
12. See John H. Leith, "John Calvin's Polemic against Idolatry," in *Soli Deo Gloria*, ed. J. McDowell Richards (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1968), pp. 111ff.
13. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Library of Christian Classics, vols. 20-21, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.11.1.
14. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, p. 69.
15. Percy, *John Knox* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1937).
16. See Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), p. 85.
17. Dawson, *The Judgment of the Nations* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1942), pp. 44-46.
18. Knox, in *The Works of John Knox*, ed. David Laing (Edinburgh: Johnstone & Hunter, 1855), 4: 240; spelling changed by author. Cf. *John Knox: A Quatercentenary Reappraisal*, ed. Duncan Shaw (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1975), p. 26.
19. See Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1956), p. 11.
20. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*.
21. Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), pp. 1-3. Walzer also criticizes Calvinism on a number of points, especially for its repressiveness — see pp. 302ff.
22. Graham, *The Constructive Revolutionary: John Calvin and His Socio-Economic Impact* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1971), p. 198.
23. Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), pp. 116-18. John T. McNeill has suggested that Calvinist piety is "not much identified with peculiar words and rites of worship. It is characterized by a combination of God-consciousness with an urgent sense of missions. . . . The Calvinist may not know how it happens; he may be a very simple-minded theologian; but he is conscious that God commands his will and deed as well as his thought and prayer. This is what makes him a reformer and a dangerous character to encounter on moral and political issues. He is a man with a mission to bring to realization the will of God in human society" (*The History and Character of Calvinism* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1954], pp. 436-37).
24. See Gordon Spykman's excellent study "Sphere-Sovereignty in Calvin and the Calvinist Tradition," in *Exploring the Heritage of John Calvin*, ed. David E. Holwerda (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), pp. 163-208.
25. "Preliminary Principles," chap. 1 of "The Form of Government, United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America," in *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Office of the General Assembly by the Board of Christian Education, 1954).
26. Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1943), 2: 200.
27. Westminster Larger Catechism, Q. 77, *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America*, pp. 131-290.
28. See Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.7.12.
29. Robert Kingdon has argued that the Calvinist concern with morals was assimilated into the tradition more through the attempt to enforce morality than through theology ("The Control of Morals in Calvin's Geneva," in *The Social History of the Reformation*, ed. Lawrence P. Buck and Jonathan W. Zophy [Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1972], pp. 3-16). Kingdon's point is well taken, though he underestimates the significance of theology.

30. See Josef Bohatec, *Budé und Calvin* (Fraz: Bohlaus, 1950).
31. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.5.2.
32. Calvin, "Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances: September and October (1541)," in *Theological Treatises*, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 22, ed. J. K. S. Reid (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), pp. 62-63.
33. Calvin, "Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances," p. 63.
34. Calvin, letter to the Protector Somerset, 22 October 1548, *Letters of John Calvin*, 2: 191.
35. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.20.33.
36. Nichols, *Corporate Worship in the Reformed Tradition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), p. 29.
37. Calvin, letter to the Protector Somerset, 22 October 1548, *Letters of John Calvin*, 2: 190.
38. Texts of 1,460 sermons are now available. Records in Geneva indicate that the texts of more than 1,000 sermons have been lost. Hence, 3,000 sermons seems a fair estimate, considering Calvin's ministry in Strasbourg and the possibility of unrecorded sermons. See Bernard Gabnebin, "L'histoire des manuscrits de sermons de Calvin," *Supplementa Calviniana*, vol. 2, ed. Erwin Mulhaupt (Neukirchen Kreis Moers: Neukirchener Verlag, 1961), p. xxviii.
39. The Second Helvetic Confession, chap. 1, in *Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, ed. John H. Leith (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1973), p. 132.
40. Bullinger, *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, vol. 1, ed. Thomas Harding (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1849), pp. 84-85.
41. Calvin, sermon on Deuteronomy, in *Ioannis Calvinii Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, 59 vols. (vols. 29-87 of *Corpus Reformatorum*), ed. Guilelmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, and Eduardus Reuss (Brunswick: C. A. Schwetschke, 1863-1900), 25: 713.
42. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.14.8.
43. See John F. Wilson, *Pulpit in Parliament: Puritanism during the English Civil Wars, 1640-1648* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 138, 142.
44. Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic* (Hamden, Conn.: Shoestring Press, 1956), p. 9.
45. See Jean-Daniel Benoit, *Calvin, Directeur d'Ames* (Strasbourg: Editions Oberlin, 1944), p. 11.
46. Benoit, *Calvin, Directeur d'Ames*, p. 11.
47. See Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.12.1-15. Cf. "Draft Ecclesiastical Ordinances," p. 70.
48. McNeill, *Modern Christian Movements* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954), p. 47.
49. Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, 2: 611.
50. See Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.20.19.
51. See Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.15.19; 4.14.18; 4.10.14.
52. See Calvin's preface to *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, trans. and ed. John Owen (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1955), pp. xxiii, xxvi.
53. Calvin, on 1 Cor. 1:17, in *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, trans. and ed. John Pringle (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1948), p. 77. Cf. Francis M. Higman, *The Style of John Calvin in His French Polemical Treatises* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), pp. 153ff.

The Confessional Nature of the Church

Presbyterian Church (USA)

I. THE NATURE AND PURPOSE OF CONFESSIONS

29.113 Many people are confused by talk of “confessing,” “confessions,” and “confessional” churches. Both inside and outside the church confession is ordinarily associated with admission of wrongdoing and guilt: criminals “confess” that they have committed a crime; famous people write “true confessions” about their scandalous lives; persons visit a “confessional” to tell of their sin. In Christian tradition, however, confession has an earlier, positive sense. To confess means openly to affirm, declare, acknowledge or take a stand for what one believes to be true. The truth that is confessed may include the admission of sin and guilt but is more than that. When Christians make a confession, they say, “This is what we most assuredly believe, regardless of what others may believe and regardless of the op-

position, rejection, or persecution that may come to us for taking this stand.”

29.114 A distinction must be made between confession as an act of Christian faith and a confession as a document of Christian faith.

29.115 On the one hand, all Christians are by definition people who confess their faith — people who make their own the earliest Christian confession: “Jesus Christ is Lord.” The Christian church, called and held together by Jesus Christ himself, lives only through the continual renewal of this fundamental confession of faith that all Christians and Christian bodies make together.

29.116 On the other hand, a confession of faith is an officially adopted statement that spells out a church’s understanding of the meaning and implications of the one basic confession of the lordship of Christ. Such statements have not always been called confessions. They have also been called creeds, symbols, formulas, definitions, declarations of faith, statements of belief, articles of faith, and other similar names. All these are different ways of talking about the same thing, though “creed”

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has ordinarily been used for short affirmations of faith, while other names have been used for longer ones.

29.117 While the first and primary meaning of confession as an act of faith must always be kept in mind, this paper will concentrate on the second meaning, confession as an officially adopted church document.

29.118 Presbyterian and Reformed churches are not the only churches with confessional standards. The Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, and to a lesser extent the Anglican, Episcopal, and Methodist churches are also confessional bodies. Even so-called “free” churches that acknowledge only the Bible as their creed have often made semiauthoritative confessions of faith. Most Christian churches officially or informally share the faith of the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds. Therefore what is said in this section about the role of creeds and confessions is applicable not only to Presbyterian and Reformed churches but to the Christian church as a whole. Most of the examples cited come from the Reformed tradition, but similar examples could also be drawn from other traditions.

A. The Three Directions of Confessions of Faith

29.119 A confession of faith may be defined more precisely as a public declaration before God and the world of what a church believes.

29.120 A confession is a public declaration of what a church believes. Individual Christians may and should confess their own personal faith, but a confession of faith is more than a personal affirmation of faith. It is an officially adopted statement of what a community of Christians believe. This communal character of confessions of faith is made explicitly clear in confessions such as the Scots and Second Helvetic Confessions and the Bar-

men Declaration, which speak of what “we” believe. But it is also implicit in such confessions as the Apostles’ Creed and Heidelberg Catechism, which speak of what “I” believe, and in other confessions such as Westminster and the Confession of 1967, which speak more objectively. Whatever their form, confessions of faith express what a body of Christians believe in common.

29.121 These affirmations of the church’s faith always have three reference points: God, the church itself, and the world. Confessions of faith are first of all the church’s solemn and thankful response to God’s self-revelation, expressed with a sense of responsibility to be faithful and obedient to God. Secondly, in a confession of faith members of a Christian community seek to make clear to themselves who they are, what they believe, and what they resolve to do. Finally, Christians confess their common faith not only to praise and serve God and not only to establish their self-identity but to speak to the world a unified word that declares who they are and what they stand for and against. Confessions thus have a social and political as well as theological and ecclesiological significance.

B. The Time for Confession

29.122 Throughout the history of the Christian movement, churches have written confessions of faith because they feel that they must do so, not just because they think it would be a good idea. Confessions of faith may result from a sense of urgent need to correct some distortion of the truth and claim of the gospel that threatens the integrity of the church’s faith and life from within the church. They may result from some political or cultural movement outside the church that openly attacks or subtly seeks to compromise its commitment to the gospel. Sometimes the urgency to confess comes from the church’s conviction that it has

a great new insight into the promises and demands of the gospel that is desperately needed by both church and world. Frequently, all three occasions — internal danger, external threat, and great opportunity — are behind the great confessions of the church at the same time. In any case, the church writes confessions of faith when it faces a situation of life or a situation of death so urgent that it cannot remain silent but must speak, even at the cost of its own security, popularity, and success. Or, to put it negatively, when all the church has to say is the restatement of what everyone already knows and believes, or when it has no word to speak other than safe generalities that ignore or cover over the concrete, specific issues of a crisis situation — then it is not the time for confession even though what is confessed might be true in itself.

C. The Content of Confessions of Faith

29.123 At the heart of all confessions is the earliest confession of the New Testament church, “Jesus is Lord.” (Strictly speaking, therefore, Christians confess not what but in whom they believe). But the church discovered very early that in order to protect this simple confession from misunderstanding and misuse, it had to talk about the relation between Jesus and the God of Israel, and between Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The earliest christological confession became a trinitarian confession. That led to further reflection on the biblical witness to the reality and work of God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the past, present, and future history of the world in general, in the particular history of the people of God, and in the life of every individual Christian. Moreover, the church could not talk about the “lordship” of Jesus without also talking about the claim the triune God has on the lives of people in their personal and social relationships in the church and in the world. The confession “Jesus is

Lord” necessarily led to the development of a full theology and ethic.

29.124 The length and focus of the church’s confessions have varied according to which elements of this developing and expanding faith it has believed should be emphasized to meet the needs and challenges of particular situations.

29.125 Sometimes the situation has called not for a summary of everything Christians believe but for a short pointed confession dealing with one or more specific issues. The Nicene and Chalcedon Creeds, for instance, were the church’s response to fundamental heresies in the ancient church concerning the identity of Jesus Christ. The Barmen Declaration was the response of some Reformed and Lutheran churches in Germany to what they believed was the one most critical issue in their situation in 1933, the relation between loyalty to Jesus Christ and loyalty to the state. The Confession of 1967 reformulated important themes of Christian doctrine in confessional literature and showed their social ethical implications.

29.126 Other confessions such as the Apostles’ Creed are short summaries of elements of the whole of Christian faith.

29.127 The Lutheran and Reformed confessions of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries tended to be longer and more comprehensive summaries of faith. In reforming the church, they dealt with the most critical theological and political issues that divided Roman Catholics and Protestants — and Lutheran, Reformed, and Anabaptist Protestants — in the Reformation and post-Reformation period.

29.128 In every time and place the church is called to make the implications of its fundamental confession of the Lordship of Jesus Christ unmistakably clear and relevant. But in order to do that, it has had in every new situation to decide afresh what to say and what to leave unsaid, how much and how little to say, what to emphasize and what for the time

being to pass over, which internal and external dangers are critical and which are less critical.

D. The Functions of Confessions

29.129 The shape of confessions has been determined not only by the historical situation in which they were written but also by the uses for which they have been intended.

29.130 1. *Worship.* Like the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds, some creeds and confessions have been used as acts of worship in the church's liturgy. This use is a reminder of the fact that the church's confessions are first of all acts of praise, thanksgiving, and commitment in the presence of God.

29.131 2. *Defense of Orthodoxy.* Most confessions have been intended as polemical defense of true Christian faith and life against perversion from within as well as from attacks from outside the church. They are the church's means of preserving the authenticity and purity of its faith.

29.132 3. *Instruction.* The confessions have been used for the education of leaders and members of the church in the right interpretation of Scripture and church tradition and to guard against the danger of individuals or groups selecting from the Bible or church tradition only that which confirms their personal opinions and desires. Confessions in question-and-answer form (e.g., the Heidelberg and Westminster Catechisms) were written to prepare children and adult converts for baptism and participation in the fellowship of believers.

29.133 4. *Rallying Point in Times of Danger and Persecution.* Confessions have often prepared and strengthened Christians to stand together in faithfulness to the gospel when they have been tempted to surrender to powerful forces of political, racial, social, or economic injustice.

29.134 5. *Church Order and Discipline.* Some churches, such as the Presbyterian

Church (USA), have sought to preserve the purity and unity of the church by requiring its ministers and church officers to accept the teachings of its confessions in order to be ordained. The government of these churches is also determined by their confessions of faith.

29.135 Some confessions were originally intended to serve more than one of these purposes. Others have in fact served multiple purposes though their writers may not have foreseen how they would be used.

E. The Historical Limitations of Confessions

29.136 Confessions address the issues, problems, dangers, and opportunities of a given historical situation. But confessions are related to their historical situation also in another way. Even when their writers have believed they were formulating Christian truth valid for all time and places, their work has not only been directed to but limited by their particular time and place. Throughout the history of the church — and also in our time — confessions have been deliberately or unconsciously expressed in the language and thought forms that were commonly accepted when they were written. God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ has sometimes been clarified but also distorted by the language and presuppositions of this or that ancient or current philosophy. The great classical confessions were written before the discoveries of modern science and reflect an outdated understanding of the structure of the world and its natural processes (just as our "modern" confessions will one day seem outdated and "primitive" to a later world). The theology and ethics of confessions of every age are shaped by what seem to be the normative or preferable sexual, familial, social, economic, cultural, and political patterns of a particular period of history. Even those confessions that have sought to be grounded exclusively in bib-

lical revelation have often confused the revelation itself with various historically conditioned thought forms and cultural patterns in which it was received and preserved by people who lived in the ancient Near East. Modern scholarship has shown how extensively earlier confessions of faith saw in Scripture only the confirmation of what they thought they already knew about God, the world, and human life in it (just as future scholarship will reveal how we have done the same thing in our time).

29.137 The confessions of the church, in other words, have indeed interpreted, defended, and preserved biblical Christian truth. They have united the Christian community in its one task of bearing witness to the one Christian confession that Jesus is Lord. But at the same time, despite all good intentions, they have also distorted the truth revealed in Jesus Christ, been unable to grasp parts of the biblical witness to God's presence and work in Christ, and divided the church into churches with conflicting views of what Christian faith and life are all about. Is there any way to distinguish between the truth to which confessions of faith seek to bear witness and their inadequate witness to the truth? Christians in the Presbyterian-Reformed tradition believe they know at least how to go about this task. Their solution will be discussed in the proper place in the following section of this paper.

II. CONFESSIONS OF FAITH IN THE REFORMED TRADITION

29.138 Everything we have said about confessions in general applies also to Reformed confessions. But now we turn to some of the most important characteristics of the Reformed understanding of the nature and purpose of confessions that distinguish it from other confessional traditions and theological movements.

A. The Ecumenical Character of Reformed Churches

29.139 From the very beginning and throughout their history, the Reformed churches have sought to represent the church catholic. Their confessions do not speak only of what Reformed churches or Presbyterians believe but seek to confess what Christians believe. They have not claimed to be the only true church, with a monopoly on Christian faith and life, but have always been open to learn from other churches and traditions and eager to participate in conversations with them that could lead to mutual correction and reconciliation.

29.140 We must not exaggerate this ecumenical openness, of course. Individuals, groups, and whole denominations who claim to be Reformed have sometimes assumed or openly declared that only this or that particular Reformed church is the true church, that all other churches (including other Reformed denominations) are false or at least fatally corrupted, and that conversation with them can only compromise the true understanding of Christian faith and life which is completely, infallibly, and unchangeably contained in this or that particular Reformed confession. But such an attitude is itself un-Reformed and contrary to the very confessional documents used to support it.

29.141 Characteristic of the ecumenicity of the genuine Reformed tradition and its confessions is this statement in the confession of the Synod of Berne in 1528:

But where something is brought before us by our pastors or by others, which brings us closer to Christ, and in accordance with God's word is more conducive to mutual friendship and Christian love than the interpretation now presented, we will gladly accept it and will not limit the course of the Holy Spirit, which does not go backwards towards the flesh but always forward towards the image of Jesus Christ our Lord.

B. Faith and Practice

29.142 It is typical of confessions in the Reformed tradition that they emphasize not only what Christians believe but also how Christians live, not only orthodox Christian faith but also thankful and obedient Christian “practice,” not only justification by grace through faith but also sanctification by grace evidenced in “good works.” All Christian traditions acknowledge the fact that faith without works is dead. But in Reformed confessions the active Christian life is given special and unique emphasis.

29.143 1. *The Claim of God on All of Life.* Reformed confessional tradition follows Calvin in emphasizing the authority of God over every area of human life: over personal and familial relationships, over the organization and government of the Christian community, and over social, economic, and political “secular” communities as well. Reformed confessions therefore contain both personal and social ethics, a gospel of salvation and a social gospel. (See, for instance, the comprehensive and detailed exposition of the Ten Commandments in the Westminster Larger Catechism.)

29.144 Reformed confessions of different periods differ in their understanding of precisely what God requires. Sometimes they have been too certain that the will of God was identical with the historically and socially conditioned presuppositions of Reformed Christians in a particular time and place. Sometimes they have confused the rule of God in the world with the rule of the church. But however they differ and whatever mistakes they may have made, a consistent theme in Reformed confessions of all periods and places is the responsibility of individual Christians and the Christian church to seek to order all of human life according to the sovereign will of the God who is known in Jesus Christ through Scripture. No room is left for the belief of Christians in some other traditions that there are some areas of

individual and social life that are not claimed by God and in which they are excused or prohibited from serving God.

29.145 2. *Grace and Law.* Reformed confessional tradition follows Calvin in believing that because the meaning and purpose of God’s sovereign will is made known in Jesus Christ, and because sin separates humanity from God and each other, God’s rule over and in the world must be understood as gracious rule exercised for our good. God gives us commands and requirements in order to guide and help us to the achievement of wholeness and happiness in our individual lives and justice, freedom, and peace in human society. The Heidelberg Catechism therefore expresses the theology of all Reformed confessions when it puts its exposition of the law of God under the heading “Thankfulness.” The demands of God are understood in the Reformed tradition as the good gift of God to be received with gratitude, exercised for the welfare of all human beings, and obeyed in confidence that God’s grace gives us the ability to do what God’s law requires. Law, in other words, is a part of the gospel of saving grace, not something opposed to it or some alternative to it.

29.146 This theology of grace and law is one of the most important things that distinguishes the Reformed tradition from other traditions and theologies. (a) It distinguishes Reformed Christians from other Christians who understand obedience to God’s commandments as a means of earning or cooperating with the saving grace of God rather than as a thankful response to saving grace already freely given and powerfully at work. (b) It distinguishes Reformed Christians from other Christians who believe that the law of God serves primarily the negative purpose of exposing sin, leading to repentance, and leading to the gospel of God’s saving grace rather than the positive purpose of guidance offered by the gospel. (c) It distinguishes Reformed Christians from some other Christians who believe

that Christian freedom is freedom from rather than freedom for obedience to the commands of God. (d) It distinguishes Reformed Christians from other Christians for whom obedience to the law is an end in itself rather than a means of loving and serving God and other people. (e) Finally, it distinguishes Reformed Christians from those who use the law of God to justify oppressive "order" in society for the benefit of a few rather than to achieve a free and just society for all.

29.147 One can of course find in the present as well as in the past individuals, groups, and whole denominations of Christians who call themselves Reformed yet understand and use the law of God in all of the un-Reformed ways we have mentioned. But insofar as they do so, they have misunderstood and misused the very theology of grace and law based on God's gracious sovereignty that is one of the most distinctive elements of their own Reformed confessions.

C. The Authority of Confessions in the Reformed Tradition

29.148 The Reformed tradition is unique in its understanding of the authority of its confession. The most revealing clue to this unique understanding is the great number of confessions it has produced. Other Protestant confessional traditions have been content with only a few confessional statements written by a few people within narrow geographical or historical limits. All the Lutheran confessions, for instance, were written by a few Germans in Germany between 1529 and 1580. Authoritative Roman Catholic teaching comes from church councils or from the pope. But from beginning of the Reformation, wherever the Reformed church spread, Reformed Christians made new confessions of their faith, first city by city, then country by country. The confessions of Bern, Basel, Zurich, Geneva, and other

Swiss cities were followed by one or more confessions written for Germany, Switzerland, Belgium, Holland, Hungary, and Scotland. The great period of confession writing came to an end for two centuries after the seventeenth century (because under the influence of Protestant orthodoxy the Reformed churches lost sight of the reason for multiple confessions and because the liberal theology that dominated the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was suspicious of confessional restraint). But the twentieth century has seen a revival of Reformed confessional writing. Reformed churches have participated in the preparation of well over thirty new confessions that have been completed or are in process.

29.149 This multiplicity of confessions, written by many people in many places over such a great span of time, obviously means that the Reformed tradition has never been content to recognize any one confession or collection of confessions as an absolute, infallible statement of the faith of Reformed Christians for all time. In the Reformed tradition confessional statements do have authority as statements of the faith of Reformed Christians at particular times and places, and there is a remarkable consistency in their fundamental content. Some have had convincing power for a long time. Nevertheless, for Reformed Christians all confessional statements have only a provisional, temporary, relative authority.

29.150 Reformed confessions themselves provide three interrelated reasons for this unique attitude toward confessional authority:

29.151 1. Confessions have a *provisional authority* (and are therefore subject to revision and correction) because all confessions are the work of limited, fallible, sinful human beings and churches. In our time we have perhaps become more aware than most of those who wrote and adopted Reformed confessions in the past that even when confessions intend to serve only the revealed truth and will

of God, they are also influenced by the sexual, racial, and economic biases and by the scientific and cultural limitations of a particular situation. But from the very beginning and throughout their history, Reformed Christians and their confessions have acknowledged with the Westminster Confession of 1646 that “all synods or councils since the apostles’ times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith and practice, but to be used as a help in both” (chaps. XXIII-XXXII).

29.152 2. Confessions have a *temporary authority* (and are therefore subject to revision and correction) because faith in the living God present and at work in the risen Christ through the Holy Spirit means always to be open to hear a new and fresh word from the Lord. As the multiplicity of Reformed confessions indicates, Reformed Christians have never been content to learn only how Christians before them discerned and responded to the word and work of God; they have continually asked in every new time, place, and situation, “What is the living Lord of Scripture saying and doing here and now, and what do we have to say and do to be faithful and obedient in our time?” The Barmen Declaration speaks for the best intentions of the whole Reformed tradition when it says, “Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one Word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death.”

29.153 3. Confessions have a *relative authority* (and are therefore subject to revision and correction) because they are subordinate to the higher authority of Scripture, which is the norm for discerning the will and work of God in every time and place. A frequently repeated theme in Reformed confessions is their subjection of their own theological and ethical thought — including their interpretation of Scripture itself — to this higher authority, or to the authority of the Holy Spirit who speaks through it:

We protest that if any man will note in this confession of ours any article or sentence repugnant to God’s holy word, that it would please him of his gentleness and for Christian charity’s sake to admonish us of the same in writing; and we upon our honor and fidelity, by God’s grace do promise unto him satisfaction from the mouth of God, that is, from his holy scriptures, or else reformation of that which he shall prove to be amiss. (Preface to the Scots Confession).

The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scriptures. (Westminster Confession, 6.010).

Confessions and declarations are subordinating standards in the church, subject to the authority of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, as the Scriptures bear witness to him. No one type of confession is exclusively valid, no one statement is irreformable. Obedience to Jesus Christ alone identifies the one universal church and supplies the continuity of its tradition. (Preface to the Confession of 1967, 9.03).

29.154 Reformed Christians are put in a difficult position with their self-limiting, self-relativizing confessions. On the one hand they are bound: so long as they are faithful members of a Reformed church, they are not free to interpret Christian faith and life (or even Scripture itself) however seems best to them personally, but are committed to submit themselves to the authority and guidance of the confessional standards of their church. On the other hand they are free: the very confessions to which they are bound allow — require — them to remember the human limitations and fallibility of their church’s confessional standards, to be open to hear a new and perhaps different word from the living Lord the standards confess, and to examine critically the church’s teachings in the

light of further study of Scripture. It is not surprising, then, that Reformed Christians and whole Reformed denominations have sometimes been unable to maintain this balance between authority and freedom. Some have contradicted the very Reformed tradition they confess by claiming for this or that confession the absolute, infallible, unchangeable truth and authority that the Roman Catholic Church has traditionally claimed for its official teaching. Others, while calling themselves Reformed, have acted as if they were members of a nonconfessional "free" church, insisting on their freedom to interpret Scripture for themselves without regard for the guidance and restraint of their church's confessional consensus. Those who choose confessional authority over personal freedom make impossible the continual reformation of the church called for by Re-

formed confessions themselves. They run the risk of idolatrously giving to the church the ultimate authority that belongs alone to the living God we come to know in Jesus Christ through the Bible. On the other hand, those who choose personal freedom over the confessional consensus of the church destroy the church's unity, cut themselves off from the guidance of the church as they interpret Scripture, and run the risk of serving not biblical truth but the personal biases they read into Scripture.

29.155 Difficult as it is to find the way between church authority without personal freedom or personal freedom without church authority, a distinctive mark of the Reformed tradition is the belief that it is only by seeking this difficult way that the church can be a united community of Christians who are both "reformed and always being reformed."