Building Your Theology

LESSON TWO

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

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Exploring Christian Theology

INTRODUCTION

I remember once going to a friend with some things I wanted him to do, but I acted as if I just wanted to chat, to have a casual, friendly conversation. Well, it didn't take long before my true agenda came out. And as it did, tensions rose, and the time didn't go so well. I remember my friend saying to me, "I wish you had told me your real agenda. I would like to have come here with my eyes open."

Well, in many respects that's the way it is with theology. Many times Christian theologians discuss theology as if they have no agenda. "I'm just telling you the truth," they say, "I'm just telling you what the Bible says." But I've learned through the years that it's usually better to discuss Christian theology with as much openness as possible. That way everyone can come to the conversation with their eyes open.

This is the second lesson in our series on *Building Your Theology*. And in this lesson, we will lay out the basic orientations that will guide this entire study. We have entitled this lesson, "Exploring Christian Theology," and we will set forth some of the more important presuppositions that will guide us as we explore how to develop a distinctively Christian theology.

We will look at this subject in three ways moving from broader to narrower concerns. First, we will define our perspective on what kind of theology is Christian. Second, we will explore how specific theological traditions give shape to Christian theology. And third, we will look into some of the basic tenets of Reformed theology, the specific branch of Christian faith that undergirds these lessons. Let's turn first to the general idea of a Christian theology. What will we mean in these lessons when we use this terminology?

CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Unfortunately, we often speak of "Christian theology," but it isn't altogether clear what we mean. Sometimes people use the terminology to refer to what Christians actually believe. But Christians often affirm all kinds of beliefs that are not genuinely Christian. Others use the terminology to speak of theology that Christians ought to believe. But most Christians can't agree on what they ought to believe. Because of these and other ambiguities, we need to clarify what we will mean when we use the term "Christian theology" in these lessons.

We will touch on three matters: first, we will look at some of the problems with defining Christian theology; second, we will propose a working definition; and third, we will take note of the unity and diversity that Christian theology entails. Let's look first at some of the problems we encounter as we try to define Christian theology.

PROBLEMS WITH DEFINITIONS

One of the greatest problems we have is finding ways to distinguish Christian theology from non-Christian theology. Sometimes the differences aren't hard to see, but many times it's extremely difficult to separate Christian theology from others.

Think about it this way. When we consider Christianity alongside other major religions of the world, there are a number of theologies that are easily distinguished from Christian beliefs. For example, despite the fact that some people have tried to combine Christianity and Hinduism, the polytheism of Hinduism makes it very different from Christian faith, so much so that it is hard to confuse the two systems of theology.

Islam, on the other hand, is much closer to Christianity than Hinduism is. Like Christianity Islam traces its heritage back to Abraham. And more than this, the prophet of Islam interacted with Christian teachings as he and his followers composed the Quran. So, there are a number of similarities between Christianity and Islam. Yet, for the most part we do not have great difficulty distinguishing Islam from Christian faith because there are pronounced and fundamental differences between them, such as Christianity's affirmation of the deity and supremacy of Christ, in contrast to Islam's denial of these truths.

And consider Judaism. Judaism is even more closely connected and similar to Christianity because Christianity grew out of Judaism. Nevertheless, Judaism denies that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, so that few people confuse it with Christian faith.

The theological perspectives of these and other major world religions are so different from Christian theology that most people have little difficulty separating them. We can erect fairly solid boundaries between our theology and theirs.

At the same time, many schools of theology blend Christian and non-Christian thought, making it difficult at times to separate genuine Christianity from other faiths. We see such syncretism in our day in popular Christian cults, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, Christian Science, the faith of Sun Myung Moon. It can even be found in many churches and denominations that have abandoned the theological stances of their forbearers in favor of modern liberalism. Now, some aspects of these syncretistic religions are easily distinguished as non-Christian, but other elements are very close to true Christianity. For this reason, in these cases we have difficulty drawing sharp lines between Christian and non-Christian theologies.

To make matters worse, think about the theological landscape among faithful believers in Christ. Even within the realm of genuine Christianity, it is often easier to speak of Christian theologies in the plural than Christian theology. There are so many different forms of Christianity that it is impossible to identify to everyone's satisfaction which forms of Christianity should be considered genuine. Does true Christian theology include the teachings of the Eastern Orthodox churches? How about Roman Catholic doctrines? Which is the purest form of Protestant faith: Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian? Nearly every segment of the church evaluates the purity of the various branches of Christianity in its own way, and almost every branch believes that its theology is the purest version of all. When we think about it in terms of these Christian intramural disagreements, it becomes even more difficult precisely to define "Christian theology."

I frequently ask students in one of my classes to help me distinguish Christian theology from all other theological systems in the world by giving me a list of doctrines that people must believe in order to be counted as Christians.

It does not take long for his students to come up with a very long list of essential Christian beliefs. They include statements such as: Jesus is the Lord; Jesus is the Savior; Jesus is the only way of salvation; Jesus died for our sins; Jesus was resurrected from the dead; God is Triune; Jesus is fully God and fully man; all people are sinners; justification is by faith alone; Christians must be holy; the Bible is the inerrant Word of God. Well, as you can see, a person would have to be very well-educated and informed even to understand all these concepts, much less believe them all.

After receiving such answers from the class, I usually turn from the board and ask them a crucial question: How many of you believed these teachings when you first became a Christian? And, of course, most of them have to admit that, at best, they only believed a handful of them. So I ask them, "Well, weren't you a Christian and didn't you have a Christian theology? Even when you didn't believe all the rest of these doctrines?

Now of course the doctrines that the students usually include in their list are important Christian teachings. But it should be evident that a person may have genuine Christian faith and Christian theology without even hearing about some of these doctrines, much less understanding or believing all of them.

Which doctrines are absolutely essential for true Christian faith? What is the bare minimum of Christian theology? In truth, only God knows for certain exactly where that line is drawn.

These are the kinds of problems we face as we try to define Christian theology. In relation to some other religions, it is not difficult to distinguish ourselves. But it is very difficult to know precisely what elements are essential for a theology to be genuinely Christian.

These and other difficulties with defining "Christian theology" lead me to propose a working definition that will guide our discussions in these lessons. This definition will not answer every question that may be raised, but it will provide us with a significant and helpful measure of clarity. It will not be a perfect definition, but it will be sufficient to use as we proceed.

WORKING DEFINITION

In these lessons we will orient our definition of Christian theology to the well-known and ancient expression of Christian faith called the Apostles' Creed. This creed existed substantially in its current form from the 2nd century and came to its present form by the 6th century. Christians from all over the world have recited this creed for centuries as a summation of their Christian faith. You know how it goes:

I believe in God the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
Born of the Virgin Mary.

He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
Was crucified, dead, and buried;
He descended into hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended into heaven
And is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
The holy catholic church,
The communion of saints,
The forgiveness of sins,
The resurrection of the body,
And the life everlasting. Amen.

This worldwide expression of Christian faith summarizes Christianity in very simple and essential ways. And it will serve as our basic definition of Christian theology. For our purposes, all theology that accords with this creed will be counted as Christian theology.

Now, we have to admit that the Apostles' Creed includes some beliefs that most of us would not consider essential. For instance, do we really want to say that people must know about Pontius Pilate before they have a Christian theology? And beyond this, I would venture to say that many of us have no idea of what "the communion of saints" even means.

At the same time, it's safe to say that the Apostles' Creed touches on a number of Christian beliefs that are necessary to develop Christian theology beyond its most basic levels. And it lists enough beliefs to allow Christians to begin to work toward building a theology they can share together.

For example, the creed mentions creation. It mentions all three persons of the Trinity: the Father, Jesus Christ, his only Son, and the Holy Spirit. It refers to the incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. It also speaks of the forgiveness of sins, the general resurrection, the final judgment and the hope of everlasting life.

Because it provides such a strong and broad foundation, we will use the Apostles' Creed as our working definition of Christian theology. Although we will speak of doctrines that go far beyond this short list, we will be satisfied that a theology is Christian if it accords with this creed.

UNITY AND DIVERSITY

When we use the Apostles' Creed to define Christian theology, it immediately becomes apparent that theology in the Christian faith is both unified and diverse. We may speak of a single, unified Christian theology because there are many common beliefs, practices and feelings among Christians. But we must also be ready to speak of multiple Christian theologies that differ from one another because Christians hold to a variety of views on subjects that the Apostles' Creed does not address. Let's consider first the unity among Christians.

Unified Theology

When we consider all the different churches and denominations in existence, it seems hard to speak meaningfully of theological unity among Christians. I can't tell you how many times unbelievers have said to me, "You Christians can't even agree on what you believe. Why do you expect me to become a Christian?" And sometimes we have to admit it does seem like followers of Christ can hardly agree on anything. But disunity is only part of the picture.

As the Apostles' Creed puts it, true Christians throughout the world form one "holy catholic church." Despite our divisions, the body of Christ is theologically unified because Christians agree on a number of core beliefs that distinguish them from cults and other world religions. As we explore Christian theology in these lessons, we'll need to acknowledge the unity of faith that joins all Christians together.

The apostles spoke of the unity of the church in this way in Ephesians 4:4-5:

> **There is one body and one Spirit, just as you too were called to the one hope of your calling — one Lord, one faith, one baptism (Ephesians 4:4-5).**

In fact, the doctrinal unity of the church should be a goal that all Christians have. Jesus himself prayed toward this end in John 17:22-23:

> **The glory you have given me I give them, so that they may be one just as we are one: I in them and you in me, that they may be brought to complete unity, so that the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (John 17:22-23).**

When we look more closely at the church, we see that Christians have varying degrees of theological unity with each other. In the broadest sense, according to our definition, all Christians are unified theologically by their belief in the tenets expressed in the Apostles' Creed. This fundamental unity calls on us to show respect, patience and love for all who affirm the creed, no matter what branch of the church they represent, because everyone who affirms the creed is a fellow believer. In this environment, we must learn to "speak the truth in love" as we are told in Ephesians 4:15.

Beyond this, theological unity among Christians increases when we share beliefs that go beyond those mentioned in the creed. For instance, Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants hold in common such beliefs as the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. But Protestant denominations that have remained true to their heritage have much more theological unity with each other than they do with non-Protestant churches.

Although we tend to seek unity with those with whom we have the most in common and then to treat as adversaries those with whom we have little in common, our Lord exhorts us all toward unity. For this reason, we must never allow the differences among Christians to distract us from the vast common ground we have in Christ. Rather than despairing because Christians aren't able to agree on every single doctrine, we need to recognize that to one degree or another Christians agree on the central tenets of the

faith. In this sense, Christian theology is a unified reality. And more than this, it is our responsibility to promote ever increasing theological unity within the body of Christ.

As the apostle Paul put it in Ephesians 4:14-16:

> **Then we will no longer be … blown here and there by every wind of teaching … Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into Christ, who is the Head. From him the whole body, fitted and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:14-16).**

God's desire for his church and the goal he has established for us to pursue is not theological fragmentation, but increasing theological unity according to the teachings of Scripture.

While Christians are unified to varying degrees, it is important also to acknowledge and accept degrees of diversity among us. In this sense, we rightly speak of Christian theologies, rather than simply one Christian theology.

Multiple Theologies

Protestants easily recognize that when they extend their associations to churches other than their own, diversity increases. When different denominations encounter each other, they almost always face diversity. For example, when Eastern Orthodox and Western churches come together, the differences are profound.

Now, as we face the diversity within the church, we have to ask a serious question: Why are there differences among us? We all have the same Spirit. We all believe in the same Christ. We all share many central beliefs in common. Then, what causes diversity among Christians? In addressing this issue, it helps to distinguish at least two kinds of differences among Christian theologies.

In the first place, some differences exist simply because we cannot represent every theological truth with equal force. The limitations we face as creatures make it inevitable that we will select and emphasize some aspects of the Christian faith more than others.

We simply can't give equal attention to all dimensions of our faith at the same time. This limitation on theologians and theology often explains much of the doctrinal diversity among Christians. This kind of diversity from selection and emphasis is wholesome and approved by God. We know God approves of such diversity because even biblical authors differed in what they wrote down and emphasized.

For instance, we have four different gospels because God led Matthew, Mark, Luke and John to concentrate on different aspects of the truth about Jesus' life. Since Christians under the infallible inspiration of the Holy Spirit differed in their emphases, we should be happy that the same is true for Christians today.

Just as God loves different kinds of flowers and trees, delights in mountains as well as valleys and enjoys making different kinds of people, he also enjoys seeing his children develop their theologies in different ways.

We should more than expect Christian theology in rural Africa to select and emphasize different truths than Christian theology in New York City. We should expect South American Christian theology to be different from Christian theology in Beijing. This diversity results from the Lord leading his redeemed people to express different aspects of their faith in accordance with their own cultural settings, and in response to their own particular needs.

In the second place, other forms of diversity are not so innocuous and require much more caution. Rather than being matters of emphasis or selectivity, these differences result when groups or persons stray into false doctrines, practices and pathos.

When diversity of this sort arises in the church, at least one person or group holds an erroneous viewpoint. And in some situations, everyone may be in error. And in these cases, we must humbly and sincerely seek to discern where the error lies.

To discern error, we need on the one hand, to be self-critical, ready to forsake any false beliefs that have entered into our theology. And on the other hand, we need to be ready to help other believers improve their understandings as well. Sometimes this will be fairly easy, but other times this process will be extremely difficult. And we can be sure of this: we will never rid ourselves or others of all error until Christ returns in glory. Yet, it is our responsibility as followers of Christ to work hard at keeping ourselves true to the teachings of Scripture and helping others to do the same. Remember what Paul wrote in 1 Timothy 4:16:

> **Keep a close watch on yourself and your teaching. Persevere in these things, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers (1 Timothy 4:16).**

In the end, when we consider the landscape of the Christian faith, we should avoid extremes in our assessment of theological unity and diversity among the followers of Christ. We must never deny the importance of theological unity — that would reject the unity for which Christ prayed. But we should never go to the other extreme and expect everyone to agree on every issue this side of the return of Christ — that would deny our human limitations and the continuing influence of sin in our lives.

As we work in these lessons toward building a genuinely Christian theology, we will use the Apostles' Creed as our basic expression of our theological unity. This will keep us constantly aware of the enormous common ground we share with all believers. But at the same time, since many doctrines lie beyond the scope of the Apostles' Creed, it will also remind us of the diversity that we should expect to encounter among Christians.

Now that we have seen what we will mean in these lessons by the term "Christian theology," we should turn to our second topic: theological traditions within Christianity. What place do particular theological traditions have as we build a Christian theology?

CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

To answer this question we will touch on three topics: first, we will define the term "theological tradition"; second, we will examine some of the tendencies of

theological traditions; and third, we will investigate the importance of becoming aware of the influence of traditions in our lives. Let's look first at what we mean when we speak of a Christian theological tradition.

DEFINING "TRADITION"

Evangelical Christians employ the term "tradition" in so many ways that we need to specify how we will use it. We will clarify the issue first by providing a negative definition, explaining what we do not mean, and then by offering a positive definition, stating what we do mean. In the first place, we should realize that in many evangelical circles today the term "tradition" has very negative connotations because it is closely associated with what we will call "traditionalism."

Negative Definition

As John Frame recently put it, "'Traditionalism' exists where *sola Scriptura* is violated." In a word, traditionalism bases theological beliefs on human preferences, usually longstanding traditional preferences, rather than on the Scriptures.

It's clear that Jesus opposed traditionalism in his day. Jesus stood firmly against the traditions of the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees because they held their views with far more tenacity than they held to the Scriptures. Jesus said these words to them in Mark 7:8, 13:

> **You abandon the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions … Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like this (Mark 7:8, 13).**

Now, followers of Christ should reject traditionalism because it gives to mere human opinion the authority that rightly belongs only to Scripture. Since human folly rather than divine revelation can easily guide our faith, we should oppose traditionalism in all of its forms, just as Jesus did in his day.

In the second place, although we should oppose traditionalism, we should have a different outlook on tradition per se. What proper role does tradition play in building a theology?

Positive Definition

As strange as it may sound to our modern evangelical ears, the apostle Paul actually affirmed a positive role for tradition in the body of Christ. Listen to what he wrote to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 15:3:

> **For I passed on to you as of first importance what I received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures (1 Corinthians 15:3).**

The expression "passed on" is *paradidome* and "received" is *paralambano*. These terms appear several times in Paul's writings as descriptions of his transfer of Christian teachings.[i]

These observations are important to our discussion because they were terms used in first century Jewish circles to describe the teachings of Jewish traditions. In effect, Paul viewed Christian faith as a tradition to be passed down from person to person, from generation to generation. Even though we may be using the term "tradition" in ways slightly different from Paul's use, we need not be put off by the terminology of "Christian tradition," or "Christian traditions" because Paul himself employed the language of tradition in a positive way.

Now for our purposes, a theological tradition may be defined this way:

> **A relatively longstanding theological doctrine, practice or pathos that distinguishes branches of the church from each other**

Let's break down this definition into two main parts. First, it is "a relatively longstanding doctrine, practice or pathos." That is to say, when we speak of a theological tradition in these lessons, we do not have in mind something that started recently. Rather, a system of beliefs becomes a theological tradition in our terms only when it has existed for quite a while. According to our definition, only beliefs enjoying years of acceptance in the church rightly qualify as traditions.

And second, a theological tradition "distinguishes branches of the church from each other." In other words, we have in mind those features of particular denominations or associations of believers that are identifying characteristics. What makes a Baptist a Baptist? The Baptist tradition. What makes a Methodist a Methodist? The Methodist tradition. When groups of believers share common outlooks over a long period of time, these outlooks become their distinctive theological paths. They find their hearts are more at home in one branch of the church than another.

Now that we have defined what we mean by theological traditions, we should also note that there are tendencies among theological traditions.

TENDENCIES OF TRADITIONS

In the preceding lesson, we noted that theology involves doctrine, practice and pathos. For this reason, it is helpful to note that different theological traditions within Christianity tend to fall into one, or possibly two, of these three categories: those who emphasize doctrine; those who emphasize practice; and those who accentuate pathos. First, some branches of the church are distinguished from each other by their traditional emphasis on doctrines.

Doctrine

We all know of denominations that see their identity primarily in terms of what doctrines they hold. Their teaching ministries and doctrinal stances form the heart of their Christian faith. Unfortunately, these branches of the church can be rather doctrinaire, that is, they can be heavily preoccupied with doctrinal controversies. And they usually insist on a large measure of doctrinal uniformity. This preoccupation with doctrines often leads to intellectualism, where learning and understanding the data of the faith become ends in themselves.

Practice

Second, other traditions in the church distinguish themselves more by their practices. There are many churches that find their distinctive identity in what they do, as opposed to what they teach. Their Christian service and programs of action are their greatest strength. They often have long lists of do's and don'ts for their members. Sadly, however, these branches of the church often reduce the Christian faith to mere activity. Christianity becomes a matter of doing something. And this preoccupation with activity often leads to legalism.

Pathos

And third, still other theological traditions distinguish themselves more by their pathos. The emotional dimension of the Christian faith is the center stage in these churches. Religious affections are so highly valued that many times little else matters. These Christians don't want to be bothered with doctrine. And they do not want to be called to certain kinds of behaviors, unless they make them feel better. For this reason, it is not uncommon for these branches of the church to be characterized by emotionalism.

Needless to say, everyone will have to evaluate the tendencies of Christian traditions in different ways. But it is fair to say that theological traditions generally find their identities by stressing one or two of these orientations.

Now that we have defined the idea of Christian traditions and seen the kinds of tendencies such traditions usually exhibit, we should recognize the influence theological traditions have for these lessons on building theology.

Importance of Traditions

Put simply, awareness of these matters plays two critical roles: first, it helps us understand more about ourselves; and second, it helps us understand more about others. Let's think for a moment about how theological students need to see themselves in the light of theological traditions.

Awareness of Ourselves

All too often, Christians try to build their theologies in ways that are neutral or indifferent to theological streams in the church. I can't tell you how many times I've heard students say that they have no tradition, that they simply read the Bible and the Holy Spirit teaches them.

This kind of outlook was very popular and supported by many of the perspectives of Enlightenment modernism. The goal of serious academic study of the Bible from the Enlightenment forward was to divorce oneself from theological prejudices and traditions.

You will recall this was Descartes' method in his attempt to defend the rationality of the Christian faith. Descartes doubted everything so that he could clearly distinguish knowledge from mere belief. Beliefs, such as superstition and mere religious tradition, were to be discarded in the pursuit of objective rational truth.

Now in many ways, students who seek to divorce themselves from their religious heritage, their particular Christian theological tradition, well, they are applying Enlightenment, Cartesian standards to theology. Sadly, this approach to theology is responsible for much of the apostasy that we have seen in the Western church in recent centuries. Modern liberalism is the result of applying these modernist Enlightenment agenda to theology.

But there is a better way to deal with theological traditions. Rather than trying to divorce ourselves from our theological orientations, it is much more helpful to strive for self-awareness. In other words, it is beneficial for us to know more and more about the heritage that constantly influences us as we build a theology because self-awareness enables us to evaluate and manage some of these influences.

It is very helpful to ask ourselves a few questions. First, what branch of the church do you call home? You may think in terms of a denomination or a movement of some sort, of formal or informal associations. Beyond this, what are the general tendencies of your tradition? Does your branch of the church emphasize orthodoxy, orthopraxis, or orthopathos? With what are you most concerned: doctrine, behavior, or affections? What motivates you in your faith? What energizes your life in Christ? Then begin to identify the character of your tradition even further by asking these kinds of questions: What kinds of doctrines are most important? What behaviors are most emphasized? What emotions are considered acceptable and unacceptable? When you can answer these kinds of questions, you will be in a position to manage the influences of your own background as you develop your own Christian theology.

Now theological tradition is not only important because it has effects on us, but also because of how it influences others.

Awareness of Others

Whenever we discuss theology with other believers, we must always remember that their associations and their traditions heavily influence them, just like ours do. The theological stream to which they belong can explain many of their convictions as well.

This means that other Christians may have agenda very different from your own. They may have different priorities, strengths and weaknesses. And the more we recognize this about others, the more fruitful our interactions can be.

I am convinced that it's very important for Christians to become aware not only of themselves, but of others, so that we can avoid unnecessary divisions and so that our discussions among ourselves can be fruitful.

Having seen what we mean by Christian theology and the importance of becoming aware of how particular theological traditions influence the process of building a theology, we should turn to our third topic: the Reformed tradition. We need to deal with this subject because these lessons will be deeply influenced by the theological perspectives often identified as Reformed or Reformation theology.

REFORMED TRADITION

Unfortunately, there's not much understanding of this branch of the church today. So, to help you interact meaningfully with the lessons that follow, it's important for you to understand the contours of the theological tradition out of which I will be presenting these lessons.

I'm convinced of this: when theological teachers express their own self-awareness, students are better equipped to evaluate and respond responsibly to their teaching. Some things in these lessons you'll find comfortable; others not so comfortable. With some of these things you'll agree, with others you'll disagree. But I hope you'll take these lessons as an opportunity to see how theology is built in a particular branch of the church, even if it's not your own.

Now I should make one thing as clear as possible. These lessons are not designed to cause anyone to affirm Reformed theology. That's not my goal. Some Christians do and others don't, and that will always be the case. But I mention these things simply to clarify the orientation that will guide much of what is said in these lessons.

To explore the contours of the Reformed tradition, we will look into three matters: first, the historical origins and developments of this branch of the church; second, the tendencies of Reformed theology; and third, some of its theological distinctives. Let's look first at the origins and developments of the Reformed tradition.

ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENTS

The term Reformed theology comes from the Protestant Reformation. But many different theological movements comprised the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. Among the more significant groups were the Lutherans in Germany, Zwinglians in Zurich and the Calvinists in Geneva. Although in a broad sense we may speak of all three of these churches as Reformational, the term "Reformed" came to apply primarily to the third group, those Protestants who were deeply influenced by the theology of John Calvin.

Now this branch of the church was not restricted to Geneva by any means. In the days of the Reformation, Reformed churches were very evangelistic and spread throughout and beyond Western Europe. Calvin himself was a Frenchman, and many of his students helped lead the French Huguenot movement. These young ministers suffered much persecution in the early decades of their work. In fact, when the young men went out from Geneva to plant churches in France, their life expectancy was only six months. But the theology of Geneva was so strong that more and more young men kept going into France to build the church of Christ there.

The Reformed movement continued to grow throughout Europe. In Germany, France, Belgium, Holland, Hungary and other nations, churches sprung up by the thousands. Several highpoints of the early continental Reformed theology should be mentioned.

The Belgic Confession in 1561 and the Heidelberg Catechism in 1563: these have great significance in the Reformed branch of the church. These were some of the earliest presentations of the theological system taught in Geneva.

One strong arm of the Reformed tradition in continental Europe was the Dutch Reformed church. It is perhaps best known for the Synod of Dort, which met from 1618 to 1619 to deal with the Arminian controversy. The Canons of Dort, published by the Synod, are famous for outlining and defending the Reformed doctrines that we now call the five points of Calvinism.

The Reformed tradition also grew significantly on the British Isles. John Knox, who lived from 1505 to 1572, studied in Geneva and returned to establish Reformed or Presbyterian churches in Scotland. The Scots Confession of 1560 is a well-known document from that time. The Reformation also took root in England, where the Puritans, along with other groups, drafted the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in 1646 and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms in 1647 to 1648. These documents, known as the *Westminster Standards*, are still used in many Reformed churches today. Many different Baptists groups in the British Isles also considered themselves part of the Reformed tradition and expressed their faith in documents like the London Baptist Confession, first published in 1644.

The Reformed tradition spread to many other parts of the world as well. The English Puritans and later Scottish Presbyterians brought it to North America in force. And missionary efforts carried it to many parts of Africa, Indonesia, Southeast Asia and South America as well.

Now, at each step of the way in its history, there were many developments that gave Reformed theology its distinctive characteristics. As in all other branches of the church, there have been serious failures and apostasy in Reformed churches. Difficulties still plague this part of the body of Christ. But today, vibrant, biblically sound Reformed theology is taught and lived out in nearly every part of the world.

As the Reformation historian David Steinmetz put it in his book *Calvin in Context*:

> **For more than four hundred years Calvin has influenced the way successive generations of Europeans and Americans have thought about religion, structured their political institutions, looked at paintings, written poetry and music, theorized about economic**

> **relations, or struggled to uncover the laws which govern the physical universe.[ii]**

Now that we know a little bit about the history of the Reformed branch of the church, we should look at its theological tendencies.

TENDENCIES

In terms of our earlier discussion about tendencies in Christian traditions, we should ask what Reformed theologians value the most: orthodoxy, orthopraxis, or orthopathos? Throughout the centuries it has been evident that, with some rare exceptions, the Reformed tradition has primarily stressed orthodoxy, with a secondary emphasis on orthopraxis. With the exception of some Puritan writers, orthopathos has not received much attention.

This twofold emphasis on orthodoxy and orthopraxis can be seen in the answer to the third question in the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, a catechism still taught in many parts of the world. In response to the question, "What do the Scriptures principally teach?" the catechism responds: "The Scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man."

Notice that the Shorter Catechism summarizes the teaching of Scripture in terms of orthodoxy and orthopraxis. First, "what we are to believe concerning God". This is right doctrine or orthodoxy. And second, "what duty God requires of man". This is a statement that draws our attention primarily to orthopraxis, doing the right thing. In many respects, the Catechism's twofold emphasis on doctrine and duty reflects and still shapes the main concerns of the Reformed branch of the church. Strikingly absent from the Catechism's answer is any mention of relationship or the emotional bond that the word of God forms between God and his covenant people.

Is it any wonder, then, that Christians in the Reformed tradition are often called "the frozen chosen"? When doctrine and duty are emphasized to the practical exclusion of orthopathos, our emphasis on doctrine tends toward intellectualism and our emphasis on duty toward legalism. Orthodoxy and orthopraxis are the natural tendencies of Reformed theology, and both are strengths and weaknesses for this part of the body of Christ. And for better or for worse, they will likely appear over and over in these lessons both as strengths and weaknesses.

Now, since the Reformed tradition stresses doctrine over other aspects of theology, it should not be surprising that one of the best ways to becoming familiar with Reformed theology is to study its more prominent doctrinal distinctives. Understanding these commitments will help you evaluate more thoroughly the viewpoints presented in these lessons.

DISTINCTIVES

We will mention four doctrinal positions that characterize this branch of the church: first, the so-called *Solas* of the Reformation; second, the unity of Scripture; third,

the doctrine of God; and fourth, a distinctive approach to the relationship between Christianity and human culture. Let's look first at the Reformed view of the *Solas* of the Reformation.

Solas of the Reformation

Along with other Protestants, Reformed theologians have affirmed a set of doctrines commonly called "the *Solas*." These doctrines have traditionally been summarized in Latin statements that all contain forms of the word "*sola*," which means "alone" or "only." Most evangelicals have heard of at least some of these: *Sola Scriptura*, which means "Scripture alone"; *solo Christo*, which means "Christ alone"; *sola fide*, which means "faith alone"; *sola gratia*, which means "grace alone"; and *soli Deo gloria*, which means "glory to God alone."

Sola Scriptura is the doctrine that Scripture is the only infallible rule of faith and life. It stands in contrast to the Roman Catholic belief that the church itself possesses an infallible tradition apart from the Scriptures that may be expressed through the ecumenical councils or through the Pope.

Solo Christo affirms that Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and man in contrast to those who look to the saints or to Mary for mediation. Christ is the only savior, the only one to whom sinners may turn in order to receive pardon from sin and thereby escape the wrath of God.

Sola fide, or "faith alone," is the doctrine that God justifies believers through the instrumentality of faith alone, and not by any other means, such as human effort or human works.

Sola gratia, "grace alone," describes the way God grants us the blessings of salvation. God grants grace to his chosen people from all eternity. He freely justifies us on the basis of Christ's merit and graciously credits that merit to our account. *Sola gratia* asserts that we have no personal merit that contributes to our salvation. The entire process of salvation from eternal election to eternal glorification is based solely on the grace of God.

Soli Deo gloria, meaning "glory to God alone," is the doctrine that all creation and acts within creation should be and ultimately are designed to bring glory to God alone. The Reformers used this slogan because they opposed all doctrines that attributed some measure of merit to human beings and therefore detracted from the honor that rightly belongs to God alone.

Although we have already mentioned the doctrine of *Sola Scriptura*, which focuses on the authority of Scripture, it is important to note that the Reformed tradition is distinct from other branches of the church in its outlook on the unity of the Old and New Testaments.

Unity of Scripture

In recent history, it has become common for many evangelicals in North America and other parts of the world where American missionaries have had significant influence,

to follow some form of a movement called Dispensationalism. Now, to be sure, there are many forms of Dispensationalism in our day, but one thing common to most of these forms is a fundamental separation between the Old Testament and the New Testament. The Old Testament is generally seen as law, while the New Testament is viewed as gospel. The Old Testament is thought to stress works, but the New Testament grace. The Old Testament is perceived as bringing only judgment, whereas the New Testament brings salvation.

I can remember when I was a seven-year-old boy, my Sunday School teacher told us, "Boys and girls, aren't you glad you live in the New Testament times? God was so mean and angry in the Old Testament, and now he's so kind and loving. Back then, people had to earn their salvation. But now we receive it by grace." To one degree or another, most evangelicals today hold views very similar to my childhood teacher.

By contrast, the Reformed tradition looks at the whole Bible as presenting a unified theology. The Old Testament and New Testament are not opposed to each other. Law is in both the Old Testament and in the New Testament. Gospel is in both Testaments. Good works are required in both Testaments. Divine grace brings salvation in both Testaments. There is judgment in both the Old and the New Testament, and salvation comes in both the New and the Old Testament. Now, of course, there are differences between the Testaments, but these differences are simply developmental. That is, they represent developments of biblical faith from earlier stages to later stages — but it is still the same faith.

When we properly consider the differences between Old Testament and New Testament, we conclude with the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in chapter VII, section 6, that the Old and the New Testaments "are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations."

Now to be sure, this emphasis on the unity of Scripture has led to some errors in Reformed theology; sometimes not enough distinction is made between the Old Testament and the New Testament. Yet, this emphasis on the unity of the Bible is one of the greatest strengths of Reformed theology. You will notice that in these lessons we will use the Old Testament as much if not more than the New Testament as we explore how to build our theology. Our goal will be to construct a theology that accords with the whole Bible, not just with the New Testament. The influence of the Reformed tradition on these studies will be evident in this way at nearly every turn.

In the third place, in addition to stressing *Soli Deo gloria*, that all things are for God's glory, Reformed theology has a distinctive emphasis in the doctrine of God.

Doctrine of God

Historically speaking, Reformed theology has given balanced attention both to the transcendence and the immanence of God. Reformed standards like the *Westminster Confession of Faith* speak strongly about both the eternal transcendent decrees of God and the immanent providence of God. This historical balance in Reformed theology reflects the fact that the Bible describes God both as transcendent and immanent. In some passages, he is portrayed as lofty, distant, beyond and above everything. And in other

passages, the Scriptures speak of him as immanent, close and intimately involved with history, especially present with his people.

Even so, when compared to other Christian traditions, the tendency of Reformed theology has been to emphasize the transcendence of God over his immanence. Other Christian traditions often stress divine attributes that are more readily associated with God's nearness, such as God's kindness, mercy, love, his tenderness, his patience and his presence. Now, Reformed theology affirms these divine attributes, but it has tended to emphasize others that are more closely associated with transcendence, such as his eternality, his immutability, his sovereignty, his aseity or self-existence, his omnipotence, his omnipresence.

Listen for instance, to the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*'s characteristically Reformed definition of God. In response to question number 4, "What is God?" the Catechism answers this way, "God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth." This answer is true. It is according to the Scriptures. But it obviously stresses the transcendent qualities of God, those attributes that make him above and over all.

It's very important to understand that since the 1920s, there's been a revival of Reformed theology in many parts of North America and the United Kingdom. New denominations, seminaries, and colleges have sprung up under the banner of Reformed theology. In many situations, the participants in this neo-Calvinistic movement have stressed divine transcendence, or the sovereignty of God, so much that they practically deny the biblical and confessional balance between the transcendence of God and his immanence. When you hear Christians say such things as, "The only reason to pray or evangelize is that God commanded it," you can be fairly sure you're encountering the extremes of neo-Calvinism. When nearly every sentence a theologian says has something to do with the sovereignty of God, it usually reflects an extreme view. When you hear theologians speaking as if human choice and world history are not genuinely significant, this is likely to be neo-Calvinism that has strayed away from the teaching of the Bible and historical Reformed theology.

Still, by comparison with others, even historical Reformed theology has stressed the transcendence of God in notable ways, especially in soteriology, the doctrine of salvation. Reformed theology stresses that salvation is from eternity past to eternity future, entirely the result of God's sovereign grace. Although the transcendence of God can be taken to extremes, a proper understanding of it rightly undergirds many elements of Christian theology, and therefore it will guide these lessons in particular directions.

One final distinctive of the Reformed branch of the church should be mentioned, namely the view of the relationship between Christianity and culture.

Human Culture

From the days of Calvin's ministry in Geneva, the Reformed tradition has taken a fairly consistent approach to these matters. One way to summarize this distinctive point of view is to follow the well-known typology created by Richard Niebuhr in his book *Christ and Culture*. In this book, Niebuhr gathers various Christian approaches to culture into five major groups. "Christ against Culture" is Niebuhr's label for the view that

culture is evil and to be avoided by Christians. Separatist movements such as medieval monastic orders and modern Amish and Mennonite communities are well-known forms of this view.

Niebuhr uses the expression "Christ of Culture" to describe these views that primarily affirm culture and attempt to accommodate Christ to what they find in the world. This approach can be seen in many modern liberal Protestant churches.

Between the two extremes of "Christ against Culture" and "Christ of Culture," Niebuhr describes three views that attempt various ways of reconciling Christ and human culture: "Christ above Culture" is a view that attempts a synthesis between Christ and the world; "Christ and Culture in Paradox" describes views that see a dualism between Christ and the world; and "Christ, the Transformer of Culture" pertains to the opinion that Christianity should influence and in some ways "convert" cultures to biblical norms. In Niebuhr's view, the Reformed position fits within this last category. Now, at different times the Reformed tradition has put this point of view into effect in a variety of ways.

Sadly, some of these efforts were closely associated with European colonialism. But there have also been some generally positive examples of the transformation model in the past. Usually, we point to Puritan England and to Puritan America, as well as to Abraham Kuiper's efforts in Holland, as more positive examples of the attempt to have Christ transform human culture. In all events, the general Reformed position on culture may be summed up in this way: When God first made humanity and placed us in the Garden of Eden, he gave humanity a cultural mandate — those familiar words of Genesis 1:28:

> **Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground (Genesis 1:28).**

Adam and Eve were called to serve as God's vice-regents over the world, managing the earth and its potentials for the glory of God. From the Reformed point of view, this cultural mandate has not been set aside; it is affirmed by the rest of Scripture. In fact, the gospel mandate that Christ gave his church was designed to redeem God's people from sin so that this cultural mandate might be fulfilled.

Because of this, Reformed theology has insisted that every dimension of life must be brought under the Lordship of Christ. Reformed theology rejects the idea that some aspects of life are religious and others are secular. From this point of view, all of life is religious, governed either by true or false religion. The arts, sciences, law, politics, business, family and school — every aspect of human culture should be completed in ways that honor the Word of God and bring glory to God.

As we interact with these lessons on building your theology, some of the concepts may sound familiar and others may sound foreign. In many cases, this will be the result of how much you identify yourself with Reformed theology. But whether or not Reformed theology is your home, it represents a branch of the church that has much to offer all who interact with it.

CONCLUSION

In this lesson we have set forth some of the important outlooks that will guide our exploration of Christian theology. We first defined Christian theology as that which accords with the Apostles' Creed. We also saw that we need to be aware of the fact that within Christian theology a variety of traditions shape and characterize the various branches of the church; and finally, we pointed out that these lessons will be guided by the orientations of the Reformed tradition.

With these basic outlooks in mind, we will be able to avoid many of the pitfalls that students of theology often encounter. Remembering these contours of our study will help us move forward toward the goal of building your theology.

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[i] See 1 Cor. 11:2, 23; 15.3

[ii] Steinmetz, Daivd. *Calvin in Context,* Oxford, 1995. Quoted in *Calvin: A Biography* by Bernard Cottret. Translated by M. Wallace McDonald. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids and T&T Clark: Edinburgh, 2000. xiv.