

# Theology Matters

## Does Theology Still Matter?

by Richard Burnett

Does theology still matter? It may seem like an odd question to ask in a journal that has asserted for more than two decades with the simple proposition of its title that it does. Yet asserting that theology matters does not make it so. And even if it once mattered does not mean it still matters. Given all that has happened in the last two decades in the ecclesial context from which this journal was born, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), it remains a question whether theology still matters. Has theology really mattered in the major debates of our times within the church let alone our society? Has it mattered in the longstanding debates over human sexuality or the sanctity of human life or in the less controversial issues of massive restructuring and polity revisions within the PCUSA and its *Book of Order*? Or have all these issues been decided more or less on the basis of prevailing political and ideological convictions or by current social convention or pragmatic considerations? Indeed, one might wonder if theology matters less today than when this journal was founded shortly after the so-called “Re-Imagining God” conference of June 1993.

Theology, at least as many of us have understood it, has not seemed to matter much in the great church-dividing issues over ordination standards and the definition of marriage. That one PCUSA General Assembly after another in recent years has chosen to ignore the teachings of *The Book of Confessions*, but also to act contrary to them and, thereby, its own Constitution, suggests that many commissioners have not cared much about the PCUSA’s official theological statements.<sup>1</sup> Nor do many seem to care much about the overwhelming theological consensus of the global church with respect to these issues. On the contrary, advocates of recent changes in ordination standards and the definition of marriage have long dismissed the global church’s consensus on these issues. With reference to African Christians, moderator of the 215<sup>th</sup> General Assembly, Susan Andrews, said in 2004: “They are kind of in their adolescence/young-adult stage of moving out into their own independence, yet still figuring out how to be in relationship with us as their

parent church.”<sup>2</sup> Such attitudes reflect little regard for ecumenical unity or for being “connectional” in any sense other than being compliant with their views. Last month the 2016 General Assembly substituted overtures calling on all to “apologize” for past opposition to these changes, and passed another motion calling us to “deeply regret” how such opposition has made others “feel.”

This is not the first time a group from within the Christian tradition has decided to go against their Christian forebears. Nor, if they were right, would it be the first time Christian forebears had been wrong. But the shores of history are piled high with the whitewashed bones of groups of well-intended and often quite pious people who thought they knew so much better not only than their faithful Christian forebears but also the prophets and apostles of the Old and New Testaments about all sorts of things. It is a familiar pattern, a wide and well-worn path, which is why the zeal of those who have championed such change is so disturbing to many, not least to many readers of this journal. *Yet can we honestly say that theology has not mattered to the advocates of such change within the PCUSA and other denominations in North America?* They, too, speak of God and Jesus Christ, pray, and even make references to Scripture. Those who say all are insincere in doing so only show how few if any they really know. Granted, it may not be obvious to the casual observer how theology has mattered in this context, but it would be a serious mistake to conclude it has mattered not at all or only slightly.

### Different Ways Theology Matters

The Reformed tradition has always insisted that we all tend in one way or another to do theology, at least in the loosest sense of the term, yet we do so on the basis of

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various sources and with varying degrees of coherence and consistency. John Calvin says: “the heart is an idol factory,” which means something fallen human beings do with considerable industry is conjure up false ideas about God. It turns out even atheists do theology, which is why when approached by atheists my father would sometimes say: “So tell me about the god you don’t believe in.” After listening patiently to what they said and did not say, he would reply: “If that’s true, then perhaps I’m an atheist too because I don’t believe in the god you don’t believe in either.” (Christians have often had to assume the role of atheists and in the first century under Rome’s cult of the emperor were among the first groups to be called such). The point is: one can hardly escape theology, which in this broad, loose sense is probably better defined simply as religious thinking. But however narrowly or broadly defined, such thinking has informed the art and literature of practically every civilization. It is latent within almost every philosophy, psychology, or theory of history.<sup>3</sup> It stands behind almost every cultural value or legal system, ancient or modern. And since politics is about moral suasion, convincing others or yourself as a public servant that what you are doing or want to do is right and good, theology has usually played a significant role here, too.

Of course, theology has been often co-opted by politicians and many sorts of social reformers throughout the ages. It has been used to underwrite all kinds of social causes, programs, and agendas. In fact, I know of no modern political philosophy, including Capitalism, Marxism, or National Socialism, which has not derived from or been championed by those without religious convictions, even when those convictions have been denied or when religion as such has been deemed “the opiate of the people.” Many politicians and social reformers fail to recognize or acknowledge the theological or religious content of their claims. Others lace their speeches with theological or religious language to mask or market their cultural beliefs or philosophical commitments. To be sure, since it is a human endeavor, theology is never free from cultural beliefs and philosophical commitments. But various cultural beliefs and philosophical commitments have not only shaped our efforts to do theology, but have often turned out to be the driving force behind them.

Thus, not only have some of the world’s most powerful political and ideological forces been fueled by religious or theological ideas, but, reciprocally, some of the most popular religious and theological movements have been fueled by powerful political and ideological forces, both from ‘the left’ and ‘the right.’ Indeed, some religious and theological movements have become very popular because they have so easily adapted to these political and ideological forces. They not only accommodated the *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times, but they gained

power and authority from it. Sometimes the results seem not so bad. Sometimes they do, which is what lies behind Pascal’s dictum: “Men never do evil so completely or cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.” This is surely no inducement or incentive to study theology. Nor is it intended to be. The point is simply that theology matters.

But is this the only way theology matters? Is it merely a necessary evil to combat evil, a kind of prophylactic intellectual exercise for those who refuse to be duped by the rhetoric of ideologically driven preachers or pious sounding politicians? Is this all theology is good for? Or, even more pessimistically, is it really, as Freud suggested, only a form of pathology? Or was Feuerbach right when he said: “All theology is secret anthropology”—that is, does theology simply come down to man speaking with a loud voice about himself and calling it God? Theology has been often approached with this presupposition, and perhaps not entirely without benefit as it has sometimes served to expose the humanistic sources or foundations of various theological claims and systems, that is, their ultimate basis in merely humanly perceived needs, hopes, dreams, and aspirations. But even when approached without such skepticism and with a positive disposition or openness toward the possibility of some sort of divine reality behind it, is theology merely a means of sorting out better or worse religious ideas on the basis of what seems best to me and my tribe in our particular time and place?

The one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church has sought for nearly two millennia to do theology on a different basis. It has ventured to do theology not on the basis of our own resources or on any foundation we might establish from below, but on the basis of the Word of God incarnate, Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture. It has sought to proceed not on the basis of our own talk about God nor on the possibility that God might speak, but on the basis that God has spoken (*Deus dixit*) and continues to speak and make himself known through his Word and in such a way that human beings can, through the free gift of faith, understand what he has said. Since God gives his Word to be both understood and proclaimed (and not one without the other), theology is important for our thinking and speaking about God’s Word. Theology is an act of obedience whereby the church strives to respond faithfully to God’s Word in its thought and speech. Having heard and been called to attention by God’s Word, the church is ordered to speak. The church (every member and not just some) is commissioned to proclaim the Word of God in its own particular time, place, and language. Theology is the means by which the church calls itself to attention for the faithful execution of this task. Theology is a discipline that

critically examines our speech about God in light of God's speech about himself in order to determine how well the former corresponds to the latter. Understanding God's Word is always a free act of God's grace that occurs through the power of the Holy Spirit, which means it is beyond our control. Nevertheless, a disciplined way of following after God's Word in thought, speech, and action is needed. Theology is that discipline.

### Theology Is A Necessary Tool

Calvin says, "God is not to be sought after in His inscrutable light, but is to be known in so far as He reveals Himself in Christ." "He is our mouth, through which we speak to the Father; he is our eye, through which we see the Father; he is our right hand, through which we offer ourselves to the Father. Unless he intercedes, there is no intercourse with God either for us or for all saints," Calvin says, citing Ambrose. But where do we seek Christ? Calvin says: "Let us not seek him elsewhere than in his Word, let us think nothing concerning him except with his Word, let us say nothing of him except through his Word."<sup>4</sup> Calvin saw theology as "a necessary tool" for reading the Bible, the Word of God written, which is why he wrote his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. In his preface to the 1539 edition (and every edition thereafter), Calvin states: "It has been my purpose in this labor to prepare and instruct candidates in sacred theology for the reading of the divine Word, in order that they may be able both to have easy access to it and to advance in it without stumbling." He claims he tried to embrace "the sum" of its teaching "in all its parts, and have arranged it in such an order that if anyone rightly grasps it, it will not be difficult for him to determine what he ought especially to seek in Scripture, and to what end [*scopus*] he ought to relate its contents."<sup>5</sup>

Like the Ethiopian eunuch who, when asked by Philip, "Do you understand what you are reading?" responded: "How can I, unless some one guides me?" (Acts 8:30–31), Calvin recognized that people who attempt to read the Bible seriously sooner or later need help. He recognized the Bible has many parts and to understand it one must understand the parts in light of the whole and the whole in light of the parts, and that identifying, distinguishing, and relating the parts and the whole in a coherent way was not an easy task. That he revised and re-arranged the contents in each of the five editions of the *Institutes* is testimony to this fact. Calvin certainly did not wish to impose an arbitrarily constructed system or lens upon our reading of Scripture, much less a set of predetermined beliefs which might allow us to dismiss parts of Scripture that did not fit our system. Yet he recognized that any reading of Scripture would require decisions about the whole and the parts, and that in attempting to relate what it said not everything about it

could be said at once, that some things ought to be said before others, and that once said it ought to make some sort of sense. However much he believed Scripture to be self-interpreting and its basic message plain, Calvin knew that reading Scripture without some sort of theological ordering of the parts and whole in mind could be frustrating, which is why he wrote his *Institutes*: "In this way the godly reader will be spared great annoyance and boredom, provided he approach Scripture armed with a knowledge of the present work, as a necessary tool."<sup>6</sup> Did Calvin suggest that reading the Bible without good theology could be greatly annoying or boring? As a matter of fact, he did.

Yet in stating that he had sought "to determine what [the reader] ought especially to seek in Scripture, and to what end he ought to relate its contents," Calvin was not limiting theology's task to rearranging the Bible's internal contents, e.g., its narrative, prophetic, or didactic parts, into a coherent whole. He was saying that determining what we ought to seek in the Bible and in what order we ought to seek it is an important task. It is important because no interpretation of the Bible is possible without it and because what we seek in the Bible has a great deal to do with what we find. Not one to underestimate the corruptions of the human mind, Calvin believed (more so than many of his Anglo-American followers) that readers and hearers of the Bible come to it with all sorts of misguided ideas as to what it is about and what is possible from which they must be disabused. This applies to Christians too because becoming one does not mean the "idol factory" within simply shuts down. The problem is not that the basic message of the Bible is unclear. It is that the minds of its readers are not clear with respect to it. Determining what we ought especially to seek in Scripture means wrestling with all sorts of ideas we bring to Scripture in light of those actually taught there. For Christian readers and hearers of the Bible, this wrestling usually occurs over a lifetime and is an ineluctably theological task.

Calvin did not think what ought to be sought in Scripture was always obvious to readers. Nor did he think to what end they should seek to relate its contents was always clear. But he tried to make it clear, which is why he wrote a prayer for pupils in Geneva to pray at the beginning of each day that included these words: "*In whatever kind of study I engage, enable me to remember to keep its proper end in view, namely, to know thee in Christ Jesus thy Son; and may everything that I learn assist me to observe the right rule of godliness.*"<sup>7</sup> Calvin understood that knowledge can be used in different ways and for different purposes, but without an understanding of its "proper end" it could be futile and destructive. He believed that the proper end, goal, or purpose of all knowledge is to know God in

Jesus Christ and that to pursue all fields of knowledge with this end in view was a means of glorifying God and enjoying him. Convinced that Christ's Spirit leads us "into all the truth" (John 16:13), Calvin placed no limits on the range of study to which this end relates (He says: "Indeed people who have either quaffed or even tasted the liberal arts penetrate with their aid into the secrets of divine wisdom" *Institutes* I.5.2). Nor did he place limits on the ways this end might relate to the subject of any field (his discussion of "secondary causes" brokers no limits on the freedom any subject has within its field or according to its own nature). Yet as Christians read the Bible in view of its proper end and seek to "relate its contents" to "whatever kind of study" we might engage, Calvin believed theology was a necessary tool for keeping our ultimate goal, purpose, and end in life in focus.

The fruit of this focus was enormous and made a profound impact on the church and the world. Calvin founded the Academy of Geneva, which became an intellectual hub and academic haven for refugee scholars from all over Europe. Almost immediately it became a beacon of light and thriving center of intellectual vitality, creativity, and rigor. Congregations and cities sought out its students because they were among the best-trained minds in Europe. All were trained as scholars. Some became pastors. Others became lawyers, doctors, and teachers who excelled in the humanities and the natural sciences. In fact, on the basis of "a large body of sociological research, stretching back more than a century," Oxford theologian, Alister McGrath, who has a doctorate in molecular biophysics, claims that Protestants were "much better at fostering the natural sciences than Roman Catholics" and "As survey after survey indicates, both the physical and the biological sciences were dominated by Calvinists during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This remarkable observation clearly requires some sort of explanation." There are several explanations, but one that seems highly credible, to summarize a highly nuanced discussion, is that Calvin's theology made the difference.<sup>8</sup>

Calvin's teachings transformed Geneva, many parts of Switzerland, France, Holland, Germany, England, Scotland, and Hungary—all within more or less a generation after his death. His *Institutes* was soon recognized as the most elegant and intellectually compelling theological work of the 16th century. It was translated into several languages and followed by the publication of his commentaries and sermons, to which he dedicated most of his time and energy, and many other tracts and treatises. Calvin's influence on Western culture and society, on education, economics, politics, the development of the modern democratic state, etc., is profound. And, for what it's worth, many have noticed.

From Alexis de Tocqueville to Ernst Troeltsch, Max Weber to Marilyn Robinson, many have acknowledged the extraordinary impact of Calvin's contribution. Leon Trotsky claimed that Calvin and Marx were the two most revolutionary figures in Western history.<sup>9</sup>

### The Truth at Stake in Theology

The impact of Calvin's legacy demonstrates to many that theology matters. However, I mention that many have noticed with the caveat, "for what it's worth," to call attention to a temptation that has often beset theology, especially in the last 350 years. Since the Enlightenment's "turn to the subject," when the question of man's ability to know (epistemological method) began to take priority over the object to be known (truth) and man's ability to know on the basis of his own resources or knowledge of himself (e.g., "I think, therefore, I am") became the touchstone of reality and standard of all non-mathematical knowing, many have been tempted to shift the focus of theology's starting point. Instead of beginning with God and the actuality of his speech, many began with man and the possibilities, conditions, or circumstances through which God might reach him. Instead of beginning with and seeking to follow after God's Word, many began with man's needs, questions, and problems and then sought to demonstrate how God's Word meets his needs, answers his questions, and resolves his problems. Increasingly throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, as reason began to supersede and then supplant revelation as a means of knowing, theologians, in order to gain attention or credibility in the eyes of the world, accommodated this anthropocentric starting point.

It must have seemed like a good idea at the time and the best way to be relevant. It also happened with greater intellectual sophistication and subtlety than can be described here. But the result of this shift in theology's starting point was that the Christian faith was increasingly described in terms of its *usefulness*. More and more it was defined *by what it could do for us*, i.e., by the extent to which it could release us from fears, produce health, instill hope, inspire happiness, relieve anxieties, give meaning, engender wholeness or fulfillment, or create other often rather vaguely defined states of consciousness. Today it is typically about empowerment. The problem, of course, is that *the truth* at stake in theology cannot be determined primarily by its *effect* upon us, at least as Calvin and the majority of church theologians have conceived it. It cannot be measured primarily by the degree to which it fulfills our hopes, dreams, desires, and aspirations. It cannot be assessed primarily by its *benefits*, much less by its popularity or the impression it makes on the world. "The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the

world was made through him, yet the world did not know him” (John 1:9–10).

Calvin, to be sure, never minimized the benefits of knowing God nor suggested that knowing God truly was possible without them. He rejected any notion that true knowledge of God was somehow speculative, abstract, or might have little impact on our affections. “What help is it,” he asked, “to know a God with whom we have nothing to do?” Nor did Calvin fail to address all sorts of human needs, questions, and problems. Few theologians have stated more emphatically that knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves are deeply interrelated and that, indeed, “which one precedes and brings forth the other is not easy to discern.” “Yet, however the knowledge of God and of ourselves may be mutually connected,” Calvin insisted, “the order of right teaching requires that we discuss the former first, then proceed afterward to treat the latter” (*Institutes* I.1.1–3). Calvin knew we could not speak of God properly apart from ourselves nor of ourselves properly apart from God, yet, he believed, we must begin with God. He could affirm Melancthon’s proposition: “To know Christ is to know his benefits.” Yet Calvin never allowed the subject of this sentence (Christ) and its predicate (his benefits) to be reversed, i.e., he never allowed soteriology to swallow up or dictate the terms of Christology. He affirmed that in communicating with us God accommodated himself to human capacity, but Calvin never believed as a consequence or in order to reach people ‘where they are,’ supposedly, Christians were authorized to proclaim a god that man deems relevant, necessary, or helpful on the basis of his own wisdom or resources.

No doubt many in the world have noticed and sometimes been impressed by a god deemed necessary by man, but not usually for long. Calvin knew the god that man decides on the basis of his own wisdom and resources to be relevant, necessary, or helpful turns out, sooner or later, not only to be an idol, but one easily replaceable with others. He knew that “a god of the gaps,” a god that begins merely where man’s knowledge of the world ends, is as such silent, passive, and, by definition, a god always on retreat from human knowledge. He knew that such a god’s powers and agency could always be defined under more manageable categories of explanation and that such a god would grow ever smaller and less mysterious in light of scientific progress. He knew a god deemed necessary by man was not free like the God of the Bible but always subject to some sort of higher principle or power hard to distinguish ultimately from fate. Perhaps he would not be surprised to learn that Kant’s god, a god necessary in order to prevent moral anarchy, was now superseded in many societies by more immanent, local authorities. Yet Calvin would not have been

surprised at how easily domesticated such gods could be. “God made man in his image and man decided to return the favor,” Rousseau said. For Calvin this was an old, familiar, and continuing story.

This is why Calvin was so firm about theology’s starting point, namely, the God who speaks to us through the pages of the Old and New Testaments. Calvin did not know everything, of course, nor was he always right. (That he knew this so well is partly why he remains such a good teacher). But he knew who has the last word and who should have the first in our thinking. Unlike the free sovereign subject of the Bible who names and defines himself, Calvin knew a god defined primarily by our questions was still an object under our control. Therefore, he knew that theology must begin, again and again, with the God who has spoken to us once and for all times in Jesus Christ. And since knowing God in Jesus Christ is the proper end of all knowledge, he knew that Jesus Christ is the truth at stake in theology and this truth is not merely one among others and could never be simply assumed or taken for granted. Otherwise he would not have instructed pupils to pray daily “*to remember to keep its proper end in view.*” Thus, theology mattered to Calvin to the extent it kept its proper starting point and end in view.

Theology has mattered, of course, even when this starting point has been forgotten or abandoned or when this end has been lost or confused. Theology has mattered even when knowing *Jesus Christ* has been confused with knowing his *benefits*. It has mattered even when knowing *the truth*, Jesus Christ, has been confused with knowing *truths* about him and the type of life he calls us to live. For example, as Puritans in New England discovered, living according to Christian truths, moral values, or principles can make one healthy, wealthy, and wise in many ways, especially in a relatively safe society with minimal opposition. The problem is: What happens when your children and grandchildren grow up healthy, wealthy, and wise, but forget or become confused about the source or goal of such benefits? What happens when they become confused about the truth at stake in Scripture and theology? It took less than three generations for Harvard to take a Unitarian turn.<sup>10</sup> Smart, self-reliant, and self-sufficient, some became so self-satisfied they no longer needed a personal god to intervene in their affairs. Others were convinced God never had or would, even if he could. Yet few would have denied theology mattered, at least until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. And so it remains today.

Relatively few in America today deny that theology matters. Plenty within and without the church still affirm that it does. Many outside the church seem to know theology matters better than many inside the

church. But what do most mean when they say “theology matters”? Do they mean what Calvin, the reformers, and most church theologians have meant as far as its starting point, end, and object are concerned?

Theological existence in the latter sense has always been threatened. Throughout the ages many have tried to turn theology into philosophy or theology’s object into something useful, relevant, or understandable on the basis of reason alone or common sense. Reason and philosophy are gifts of God, which theologians are obliged to use. The Enlightenment’s critiques of faith actually served the church by forcing it to overcome various forms of superstition, pretense, and sloppy thinking. But the Enlightenment also confused many Christians when it tried to correlate reason and revelation as independent sources of knowledge of God, later tried to subordinate revelation to reason and then, finally, tried to negate the former or relativize it to a matter of feeling. Many Christians became confused about theology’s purpose, starting point, and object, viz., that its object is the one sovereignly free, self-revealing subject. In more recent centuries, many have tried to reduce theology’s object to a phenomenon of history (historicism) or psychology (psychologism), or to a matter of sociology, anthropology, or religion. Most doing so have not denied that theology mattered. Nor have most politicians and social reformers denied that it mattered. But theology has probably been threatened less by those who have denied it mattered than by those who have said it does.

The challenge today for us who say theology matters is to state more clearly and faithfully how and why it matters. Our challenge is to pay more attention to theology’s starting point, end, and object, rather than taking for granted or assuming we all understand more or less, much less agree, what it is. Our challenge, before thinking too hastily about how we can apply it (though not at the expense of applying it either), is to do a better job loving, understanding, honoring, and respecting the truth at stake in theology. Perhaps nowhere today is this challenge greater than in America.

### **Protestantism Without Reformation**

Few deny that theology matters in America, but does that mean many take it seriously? Theological existence is and always has been a struggle, but perhaps especially in America precisely because it has been rarely seen as such. In his essay of August 1939, “Protestantism Without Reformation,” Bonhoeffer claimed this was partly because the first generations of American Christians were fugitives who had fled the confessional struggles of Europe to live out their faith in relative peace and freedom. “A danger arises here, however, for the subsequent generations, who are born into this battle-free situation,” Bonhoeffer says. “The

struggle over the creed, because of which the fathers took flight, has become for the sons something which is itself unchristian. Absence of struggle becomes for them the normal and ideal state of Christianity. . . . Thus for American Christianity the concept of *tolerance* becomes the basic principle of everything Christian. Any intolerance is in itself unchristian.” Attention is consequently focused not on the reason “for a confessional struggle as such, but for the victims of such a struggle.” With “the question of truth” set aside on such virtuous grounds, it is easy to see why the academic study of theology, much less the science of dogmatics, has never really thrived in America.<sup>11</sup>

The fact is theology has been seldom treated seriously as an academic discipline in American universities. It was never recognized as “the queen of the sciences” as it was in European universities since the Middle Ages. Even today there is hardly a comparison between American and European universities in the attention theology receives. No doubt churches in America, not least of all the Presbyterian Church, have struggled at times for a proper theological existence. But theology never gained footing in mainstream American higher education and was almost entirely replaced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially after the Civil War, in most major institutions of higher learning by Moral Philosophy.<sup>12</sup>

This had major consequences that have been not long recognized yet have much to do with our current situation and Bonhoeffer’s basic critique of American theology: “In American theology, Christianity is still essentially religion and ethics. But because of this, the person and work of Jesus Christ must, for theology, sink into the background and in the long run remain misunderstood, because it is not recognized as the sole ground of radical judgment and radical forgiveness.” “American theology and the American church as a whole have never been able to understand the meaning of ‘criticism’ by the Word of God and all that signifies. Right to the last they do not understand that God’s ‘criticism’ touches even religion, the Christianity of the churches and the sanctification of Christians, and that God has founded his church beyond religion and beyond ethics.” Thus, Bonhoeffer concluded: “God has granted American Christianity no Reformation. He has given it strong revivalist preachers, churchmen, and theologians, but no Reformation of the church of Jesus Christ by the Word of God.”<sup>13</sup>

Though Bonhoeffer drew this conclusion after a decade of reflection, perhaps he overstated his case somewhat and overlooked counter evidence. But is there nothing to it? There was certainly much that impressed him and much he thought he could learn from American Christianity, but not our general approach to theology. Bonhoeffer simply did not think we were serious

enough about it. He was astounded by our pragmatism: “the denominations of America are not to be understood primarily from their theology, but from their practical work in the community and their public effectiveness.” But what disturbed him most was how easily the question of truth was set aside. Repeatedly, he remarked: “the question of truth is not the criterion of church communion and church division”; “in the conflict between determination for truth with all its consequences and the will for community, the latter prevails. . . . they do not see the radical claim of truth on the shaping of their lives. Community is therefore founded less on truth than on the spirit of ‘fairness.’”<sup>14</sup> For this and other reasons, Bonhoeffer concluded the church in America was already in the 1930s on the brink of “complete secularization.”<sup>15</sup>

Our struggle for true theological existence is not new yet is somewhat different. In the land that Jesus walked it is said Christianity was primarily a relationship. In Greece it became an idea. In Rome it became an institution. And in America it became an *enterprise*. Theology has been a tough sell in America precisely because it has been so commonplace. Few think they need it. The sheer quantity of theological claims in American public life has often overwhelmed critical, qualitative assessment. This is changing. Yet serious theological questioning is still considered divisive or doctrinaire in many churches. American liberals and evangelicals alike have rallied around the mantra: “doctrine divides, mission unites.” Evangelist Billy Sunday boasted: “I know as much about theology as a jackrabbit knows about ping pong.” We remain dogmatic in our pragmatism. Having taught in a seminary for the last fourteen years, I have tried to teach theology’s importance yet never without resistance from pragmatists. I remember one student dropped my Systematic Theology 01 course after the first hour because he said he already knew about God and wanted a course that would teach him “how to apply it.” Sadly, I watched this young man eventually graduate and, like many others, enter into ministry and soon implode.

Ministers implode for various reasons, of course, like everyone else. Often it happens slowly, quietly, without anyone noticing. Sometimes the extraordinary demands, circumstances, and stubborn realities of congregational life, the enormous complexities of individuals and their problems (not least among those who wish to keep everything so simple), the infinite and bewildering subtleties of the soul and the weight of people’s burdens and expectations, and often other pressures from within and without, can be overwhelming. But usually more overwhelming is the awesome yet regular responsibility of speaking truthfully into the lives of others *about God*. Burn out is sometimes unavoidable. However, most ministers do not *burn out* as much as they *dry up*. They

dry up because the seed once planted has no depth of soil. A deeper relationship to theology’s subject matter goes uncultivated. Weeds come in and choke out the life of their souls and confuse their minds. They lose not only the joy of their salvation but a growing relationship with its source. They dry up because they have not cultivated deep, long-lasting friendships with those who care about things that really matter. They have few battle-tested conversation partners among members of the church militant or triumphant, who could really help them and which the study of theology affords.

### **Great Work, If You Can Get It**

The struggle for theological existence is not particularly urgent for many ministers today. Many congregations simply do not care if their minister knows much theology. Some would prefer an entertaining, motivational, soothing, comforting life coach or manager with a good sense of humor. Others prefer a good marketer, entrepreneur, or schmoozer. I know congregations that will still pay good money to have their egos gently massaged on a weekly basis. They do not want a ministry of the Word but a ministry of schmoozing. To be sure, entrepreneurial, marketing, and schmoozing skills are important. Yet, as Saul Bellow says, “Being a prophet is great work, if you can get it. But sooner or later you’ve got to talk about God.” That is when folk start throwing the heavier rocks. Yet that is also when life and death come.

Theology is supposed to help people speak truthfully about God. Nevertheless, many ministers are wary of it. They fear it is boring (which bad theology is), and that eyes in their congregation will roll or glaze over when they talk about it. Some fear this because the five smooth stones of doctrine they so carefully honed in seminary turned out to be roughly chiseled, blocks of granite that were impossible for their first congregations to chew much less swallow. So in order to be relevant, some turn to pop-spirituality, psychology, or “how-to” books, which have their place and often seem to yield higher and more immediate returns on their investment of time and energy than serious theology. Yet the deeper suspicion is that theology is impractical. It may provide knowledge of God at some theoretical level, but sheds little light on ‘real life.’ Such thinking was completely alien to Calvin and his Company of Pastors, of course. It never occurred to them that theology did not have to do with real life, that knowledge of God could lead to passive contemplation and not activity, or that Jesus Christ was somehow the truth in some abstract sense and not also the way and the life. But perhaps the greatest obstacle to theological existence for most is that theology is so demanding. One often discovers more about oneself than one ever wanted to know (Isa. 6:5f). As my mentor, Dick Ray, often

quipped: “Botany, what a calm, gentle, fascinating field of study, and so much easier on the ego than theology!”

The truth at stake in theology often blinds before it gives sight, cuts before it heals, and kills before it gives life, but it is always good, loving, and holy. I have never honored it sufficiently in my life or teaching. In fact, I have probably accommodated it too readily in introducing my Systematic Theology 02 course. Most students knowing by then ‘where I’m coming from,’ I have tipped my hat to the gods of relevance and pragmatism by announcing:

“You may find the doctrine of the Trinity totally useless. You may never need to know anything about God’s life or being. You can actually go a long way in ministry today with sappy stories and cute metaphors. Besides, thinking about the Trinity can be hard, so I wouldn’t waste too much time or energy on it *except, however*, if you pray. If you pray or are in the habit of praying then sooner or later it’s probably going to come up. It’s a funny thing when folk pray regularly: sooner or later they begin to wonder to whom they are praying. Christology is another pretty lame doctrine. Talk about a can of worms! Nothing has caused more controversy and division in the church and the world. So if you want a nice, peaceful life with lots of friends and fewer enemies, I’d avoid it. I’d leave it alone, *except, however*, if you find yourself wondering about who Jesus Christ is or what he accomplished. The doctrine of justification may not be necessary either. Never mind that Luther called it the doctrine on which the church stands or falls and that if you don’t understand it you might as well be a lawyer. Don’t worry about it, *except, however*, if you think you might die someday or know people who are dying. Then it might be relevant. Otherwise, you really don’t have to know anything about it. The doctrine of sanctification may not be useful either. You can go a long time without knowing anything about sanctification *except, however*, if you happen to struggle living the Christian life. Then it can come in handy. But unless you struggle or know others who struggle, better to forget it. Atonement is another totally irrelevant doctrine. What an odd, primitive idea, especially the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. It’s like something out of a Tarzan movie! You can forget it too, *except, however*, if you sin. If you sin, and especially if you’ve committed ‘big’ sins or even ‘small’ sins in serial fashion, then the doctrine of the atonement can make sense. In fact, if you’ve ever messed up somebody’s life or your own, perhaps by addiction, divorce, abandonment, or just by being an incorrigibly selfish, stubborn, ornery sinner, then even the doctrine of substitutionary atonement can make lot’s of sense. But if none of this *applies* to you, I wouldn’t worry about it. Just learn it for the exam. ...”

Does theology, therefore, still really matter? It depends. Granted, many Christians do fine without much. Granted, God and our thoughts about God (theology) are not the same. Granted, theology is *not* the most important activity in the church’s life. Other activities take priority. There is the worship of God. There is preaching, celebrating the sacraments, Bible study, fellowship, and service. There is faith, hope, and love. All are more important than theology. But theology can sometimes come in handy. It comes in handy when people begin to think more deeply about God, read the Bible more seriously, or try to think through problems in their own lives, and those of family members, or friends. It comes in handy when people try to think about complex issues in the church and world. It comes in handy when people try to worship God according to Scripture instead of their own pleasures, to preach, celebrate the sacraments, have fellowship, serve one another, or ask: What *is faith*? What *is hope*? What *is love*? Theology may not be necessary for the church’s being (*esse*), but it is for its well-being (*bene esse*). And so long as there are congregations dedicated to reading and hearing Holy Scripture (and even when not), there will be people who ask questions, and where there is an attempt to answer them, for better or worse, there will be theology, which is why this journal exists.

### **The Ongoing Task of Doing Theology**

*Theology Matters* exists to inform and encourage, instruct and inspire, members of the Presbyterian family and the wider Christian community through the clear and coherent articulation of theology that is reformed according to God’s Word. *Theology Matters* seeks to teach the faith, encourage the faithful, and discern faithfulness in word and deed, speech and action. We want to recover the teaching office in the church and call pastors (“teaching elders”) back to their posts, as well as ruling elders, Sunday School teachers, and all Christians. We want to take the Great Commission’s words about teaching more seriously and gather doctors of the church to do so. We are committed to *the ongoing task of doing theology for the church with deeper love and greater joy*. Let me be more specific.

1. *the ongoing task*. Testing our talk about God is not primarily about keeping our thinking and speech fresh and relevant or about avoiding spiritual stagnation or intellectual ghettoization, as important as this is. It is an act of obedience. We believe so long as God continues to speak, we are obliged to listen. Hearing God speak is a work of the Holy Spirit. But listening to what he has said, reflecting upon it, and then speaking about it faithfully in our own time and place is also a discipline. God has spoken and we are obliged to respond. While we must always strive to learn more from our forebears, we dare not merely repeat, recapitulate, or hide behind their responses and abdicate our own responsibility to



listen and respond to God's Word. As truthful as past responses remain, we must be willing to listen more closely and respond more faithfully to God's Word. Telling people to read the Bible, believe their confessions, and behave better sometimes helps, but usually it is not enough. Nor is telling people more loudly or enthusiastically to love God or that God loves them. More is needed. Testing the spirits (I John 4:1f) and wrestling against principalities and powers (Eph. 6:12f) are needed. This is the ongoing task of theology.

2. *of doing theology*. It may sound naïve given our challenges, but our aim is simply to do theology. It is not to make a difference or make the world a better place or make the church more attractive. Nor is it to grow, renew, or reform the church, as much as we work and pray for it otherwise. Our aim in this publication is simply to bear witness to the truth, Jesus Christ. Because he promised his Spirit leads into all truth, the scope of our work is not narrow. Nor is doing theology an esoteric retreat into abstractions or blissful way of avoiding conflict. We believe focusing on theology will only deepen and sharpen our critical engagement of concrete issues facing the church and world. We shall not be chirping sweetly in the shade. Neither does our approach limit the range of topics we may discuss. We believe philosophy, ethics, science, politics, economics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and culture also matter. But here theology matters more. Because theology has for us a particular starting point, end, and object that must never be assumed or confused, we cannot approach our task as left-wing theologians of culture or right-wing culture warriors. No doubt theology matters to many, but it matters to us how it matters. Theology is an open, consistent, and self-critical way of keeping clear about the source and norm, content and goal, basis of authority and means, by which we discuss any number of topics as Christians.

3. *for the church*. We are not independent, freelance Christians in general, but servants of the church in a particular tradition. Our board members are ruling or teaching elders in the PCUSA, EPC, and ECO. We have taken vows, are under authority and committed to the Reformed tradition. Our commitment to a particular theological tradition does not mean we are less committed to the whole church. It means we have not avoided concrete doctrinal decisions forced upon us by Scripture. We want to be upfront about it. Moreover, we believe the church does not exist for its own sake but for the sake of the world. To exist as such, however, the church must be clear about its message and mission; and there is precedent to suggest the world has taken the church most seriously when it has been.

Some may see our focus as too academic, others as not academic enough. We will not satisfy everyone, but we

believe theology is too important to be left to theologians in ivory towers. It concerns every Christian. Many understand this, especially in our tradition that has cared so much about the life of the mind. Yet we also believe one of the greatest threats to the church in America today is the "Gerberization" of its speech, i.e., the chopping up and smoothing out of rich, complex, high fiber theological concepts into some thin bland mush that is tasteful and perhaps somehow nourishing to those who wish to be fed forever by teaspoons. Presbyterians have tended to think in paragraphs rather than sound-bytes. We believe many are tired of T-shirt, bumpersticker theology. They are starving to death. We wish to supplement their diet and raise the level of theological discourse.

4. *with deeper love*. Raising the level of theological discourse means, above all, loving more deeply. There is much we cannot understand in life apart from love, and especially in theology, which is why Augustine elaborates his "rule of charity" in his book, *On Christian Doctrine*. Theology is a hopeless endeavor apart from love. So is the effort to understand others at deeper levels. The rule of charity requires listening to others with an openness to the possibility that they could tell us something we did not know but could know if we took their words as seriously as we take our own. It means avoiding stereotypes, caricatures, or creating straw men, evaluating the arguments of others according to their strongest points rather than their weakest, and much more. However, it does not mean agreement or preclude even sharp disagreement, or keeping silent in face of falsehood. Bonhoeffer reminds us: "Nothing can be more cruel than the tenderness that consigns another to his sin. Nothing can be more compassionate than the severe rebuke that calls a brother back from the path of sin."<sup>16</sup> Love, more often than many of us wish, requires that we loyally oppose the views of others. Yet how we do so is crucial (Eph. 4:15). The *ad hominem*, fratricidal, cannibalistic spirit that has destroyed so many communities, especially Reformed communities, not only demonstrates sickness and insecurity, but betrays the Christian faith. Aquinas said: "We must love them both, those whose opinions we share and those whose opinions we reject. For both have labored in the search for truth, and both have helped us in finding it."<sup>17</sup> Thus, while we do not recant, repent, or regret certain positions we have taken and want to understand better why we have been asked to, we regret we have not always loved others deeply enough to understand their concerns or helped them to understand ours. We seek to love more deeply.

5. *and greater joy*. However much it may leave us blind, deaf, and staggering, the truth at stake in theology brings us joy. Unlike raw power or a brute fact, this truth attracts, persuades, and convinces us of its

worthiness and desirability by radiating beauty and evoking pure joy, delight, awe, pleasure, and praise. God is the truth at stake in theology, and who God is — and what he has done for us in Jesus Christ, his surpassing grace, mercy, and love, the glory, majesty, and mystery of his being, triune life, and incarnation — is beautiful. Historically, Protestant theologians have been often reluctant to call God ‘beautiful’ because of secular notions of delight, desire, pleasure, and beauty. Truth and beauty are not the same and we should be careful not to confuse the truth of God with aestheticism or our preconceived notions of beauty. Nevertheless, God is beautiful in his own way and brings joy.<sup>18</sup> Yet why do so many theologians, not least of all Reformed theologians, walk around with such dour faces, as if Christ has not risen or they have been reading Leviticus all day without him? Is it not because they/we harbor heresy in our hearts, focus too much on ourselves or the human condition rather than on God, or forget or take for granted the truth at stake in theology and the supreme privilege it is “to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord and to inquire in his temple” (Ps. 27:4)? We do not deny the struggles of theological existence. Neither are we oblivious to the ecclesial rubble that surrounds us. Nor should our joy be confused with happy talk or whistling by the graveyard. But more than “a necessary tool,” discipline or duty, theology is for us, first and last, doxologically driven, and a joyous privilege. We hope and pray it remains so, and aim, as a consequence, to give more attention to the theme of worship.

Yes, theology still matters. It matters as much today as ever. Perhaps the day is coming when Christians in America, and hopefully Presbyterians too, will awake to the fact that our greatest struggle is, always has been, and shall remain until “*He comes again*,” theological.

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<sup>1</sup> James C. Goodloe IV, “John Calvin on the Unity and Truthfulness of the Church,” *Theology Matters* 22/1 (Spring 2016), 1–10.

<sup>2</sup> Cited in John Azumah, “Through African Eyes,” *First Things* (October 2015), 45. Eva Stimson, “Let’s Talk: An interview with the General Assembly moderator,” *Presbyterians Today* (May 2004) extended website interview.

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<sup>3</sup> As far as theories of history are concerned: “Heavens! to think of the dull rut of the skeptics who go on asking whether we possess a future life. The exciting question for real skepticism is whether we possess a past life. What is a minute ago, rationalistically considered, except a tradition and a picture?” G.K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1937), 37–38.

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *New Testament Commentaries*, eds. David Torrance and Thomas Torrance (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd: 1959–72), II Cor. 4:6, trans. T.A. Smail, 57–58 (CO 50, 53c); *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), III.20.21; *Against Caroli* in (CO) *Ioannis Calvini opera quae supersunt omnia*, eds. G. Braun, E. Cunitz, and E. Reuss (Braunschweig: C.A. Schwetschke, 1863–1900), 7, 311. Cited in Karl Barth, *Theology and Church*, trans. Louise Pettibone Smith (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 113.

<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, “John Calvin to the Reader,” 4–5

<sup>6</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes*, “John Calvin to the Reader,” 4–5.

<sup>7</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin’s Tracts and Treatises II*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1849), 96.

<sup>8</sup> Alistair McGrath, *A Life of John Calvin* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 254.

<sup>9</sup> Lester De Koster, *Light For the City: The Preaching of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), xii.

<sup>10</sup> Harry Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), *passim*.

<sup>11</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, “Protestantism Without Reformation” in *No Rusty Swords*, trans. Edwin Robertson and John Bowden (London: Collins, 1965), 102–103.

<sup>12</sup> George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 99ff.

<sup>13</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Protestantism Without Reformation,” 117f.

<sup>14</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Protestantism Without Reformation,” 114, 96; “Report on a Period of Study at the Union Theological Seminary in New York, 1930–1” in *No Rusty Swords*, 87.

<sup>15</sup> Bonhoeffer, “Protestantism Without Reformation,” 109.

<sup>16</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, trans. John Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 107.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, Book XII, Lecture 9, 901. Cited from Josef Pieper, *Guide to Thomas Aquinas* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1962), 78.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936–62), II/1:640–677.

# Worship Reformed According to Scripture

## Hughes Oliphant Old in Retrospect

by Walter L. Taylor

On Tuesday, May 24, 2016, Hughes Oliphant Old died in his home in White River Junction, Vermont. Known to his friends as “Scoti” (from a nickname he earned at Centre College as an undergraduate), Old had suffered declining health in recent years. He was 83 years old.

Yet, Hughes Old has left us with a great body of work to aid in the renewal (and revival) of worship among Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Seen by many as the foremost American liturgical scholar of the Reformed tradition, Old was one of the few Presbyterian scholars who by his work had access into the various and divided denominations of American Presbyterianism. Old taught courses and was a guest speaker at various Presbyterian seminaries: Princeton Theological Seminary, Reformed Theological Seminary, The University of Dubuque Theological Seminary, Erskine Theological Seminary, and others. That the same individual could be received and respected at such vastly different schools over the past several decades is in itself a notable achievement. In addition, Old had also been invited to lecture at educational institutions overseas.

Old’s exploration into the history, theology, and practice of Reformed worship began as a student at Princeton Theological Seminary, where he graduated with a Bachelor of Divinity in 1958. Toward the end of his time at Princeton, Old observed that while his theological education there had included biblical studies, pastoral care, preaching, and the other areas of theological education, worship had not been a major subject. When he brought this to the attention of his preaching professor, Donald Macleod, Macleod’s advice to Old was that he needed to acquire a copy of the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*. Already then, Old was struck by the thought that surely the Reformed tradition had something to teach ministers about the nature and practice of worship without simply borrowing the worship habits of the Anglicans.

After a year of traveling following his graduation from Princeton, Old became pastor of the Penningtonville Presbyterian Church in Atglen, Pennsylvania. In the regular pastoral work of organizing and leading worship, Old’s interest in the study of worship developed further:

It was in trying to fulfill my responsibilities as a pastor of a Presbyterian Church in the farming country of Pennsylvania that I first became interested in the question of what worship according to the Reformed tradition should be. As I tried to search out the meaning of Reformed worship, I became more and more convinced that I must travel to those lands in

which the Reformation had taken place, learn the languages the reformers spoke and search the documents they left behind. So it was that I found myself living as a foreigner in Europe for almost seven years.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, after five years in Atglen, Old traveled to Europe, where he completed his doctoral studies at the University of Neuchâtel in 1971. In his dissertation, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship*, Old demonstrated that contrary to the assumptions of many, the reform of worship led by the “Reformed” in the sixteenth century was not a rejection of everything that had happened in the past, but was a well-considered program based not only on the Bible but also on insights gained through the study of the church fathers. Thus, Calvin’s claim that the reformed worship of Geneva was “according to the custom of the ancient Church” was not merely bravado, but stemmed from serious study of the church father carried out by the reformers. Old’s dissertation uncovers the familiarity with the theologians of the ancient church demonstrated by Calvin, Zwingli, Bucer, and others. Also, Old discusses worship as it was carried out in the earliest Reformed cities, centering on the regular Lord’s Day worship and the Lord’s Supper. In addition, he gives great attention to the practice of preaching among the Reformed, especially their endorsement of *lectio continua* preaching (that is, preaching through whole books of Scripture, rather than according to a lectionary based upon the church calendar), which we will explore further later in this piece. In the contents of Old’s dissertation, one can already anticipate the direction that his study of Reformed worship would take.

The next major work that Old produced was *Worship That Is Reformed According to Scripture*.<sup>2</sup> First published in 1984, as a part of the Guides to the Reformed Tradition series (published under the editorship of John H. Leith and John W. Kuykendall), *Worship* remains perhaps the best single volume introduction to the study of Reformed/Presbyterian worship. A revised and expanded edition of this work was published in 2002, given its continued popularity. In it, Old presents a historical survey of Reformed worship, covering all the major elements of regular Sunday worship, preaching, and the administration of the sacraments. In many ways, this single volume is a survey of the overall work of Old.

One of the important contributions that Old made to the study of Reformed worship was his understanding of what worship “Reformed according to Scripture” means. In *Worship Reformed According to Scripture*, Old put it this way: “The Reformers did not mean by

this a sort of Bible-pounding literalism—although they have often been accused of this. Much more they had in mind that Christian worship should be in obedience to God’s Word as it is revealed in Holy Scripture” (3).

This does not mean that one is free to worship God however he or she desires, “as though the object of worship were to entertain God with elaborate liturgical pageants and dramas.” Commenting on how this understanding of worship was borne out in the work of the Basel Reformer Oecolampadius, Old points out:

As Oecolampadius well understood, the Bible does not provide us with any ready-made liturgies or services of worship. Nevertheless the church should develop services of worship in accordance with whatever specific directions and examples are found in Scripture. When Scripture does not give specific directions, then we should be guided by scriptural principles. For instance, Oecolampadius taught that Christian worship should be simple and without pompous ritual and sumptuous ceremony, because the manner of life Jesus taught was simple and without pretense (3).

Perhaps the work in which Old gives the most attention to this understanding of “worship Reformed according to Scripture” is his major work on baptism: *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century*.<sup>3</sup> This work is a *tour de force* of liturgical archaeology, in which Old lays out the late medieval context for baptismal liturgies before examining, in detail, how the Reformed baptismal service took shape among the reformers. He also deals at length with the Reformed defense of infant baptism in the face of the Anabaptist challenge. This led Old to conclude:

It was in regard to their practice of baptism that the Reformers were forced to think out more exactly what they meant by ordering worship according to Scripture. The phrase “according to Scripture” had a very specific meaning to them. They did not have in mind a biblicistic literalism, as many have so often imagined. They neither accepted the principle that what is not forbidden is allowed, nor the position that what is not commanded is forbidden (ix).

This understanding of “according to Scripture” takes shape in the understanding of the reformers as they battled with the Anabaptists, who argued that baptismal practice must be determined by the specific examples mentioned in Scripture. While these specific examples were important for the Reformed, they went further and asked the theological question of whether infant baptism was “a practice consistent with the teaching of Scripture” (120).

The insights of Old on the reformers’ understanding that worship must be according to Scripture remains relevant to ongoing discussions today regarding the different approaches to worship taken by, on the one hand, those who are committed to a Reformed understanding of worship, and, on the other hand, those who often appeal to a notion of Christian freedom in ordering the corporate worship life of the church. One does not have to look long and hard to find the assertion that the Reformed approach to worship is that only that which is commanded is allowed, while Lutherans and Anglicans are committed to a notion that whatever is not forbidden is allowed. Old challenges this simple dichotomy, pointing out that it does not reflect what the earliest reformers meant. In many conservative Reformed camps today, this more restrictive notion is often termed “The Regulative Principle of Worship,” though one does not find this term used until the twentieth century.

But in his work on baptism Old demonstrates that this more restrictive approach represents more the view taken by the Anabaptists than the Reformed. The real question involved is how the reformers understood the Bible as being the authority for liturgical reform. Oecolampadius discussed the hermeneutical principle advanced by the Anabaptists. They had appealed to the principle that what is not commanded by Scripture is forbidden by Scripture. The reformers, on the other hand, had appealed to the principle that worship must be “in accordance with Scripture”...

Oecolampadius and his colleagues were trying to find a middle ground between the approaches to liturgical reform. The one was that what is not forbidden is therefore permitted, and the other was that what is not commanded is therefore forbidden. Obviously, many liturgical practices fall in between the two. They are neither forbidden nor commanded. These things, Luther taught, were indifferent, *adiaphora* (119).

Many things about worship did not fall so easily into the category of “commanded” or “forbidden,” and yet these things should also be decided on the basis of something other than simply than the category of *adiaphora*. Again, Old states:

This principle was summed up in the phrase, “in accordance with Scripture.” The High Rhenish Reformers believed that the question of whether children should be baptized or not needed to be decided according to Scripture. In other words, the question ought to be, Was it a practice consistent with the teaching of Scripture? Unlike the Anabaptists, who had to find a specific proof text in Scripture, the High Rhenish Reformers recognized the importance of theological analysis. The weighing of ideas and the

analogy between ideas becomes important to Reformed theology as well as the searching out of the specific commands and examples of Christ and the apostles (119–120).

Thus, in his demonstration of how the reformers defended the practice of infant baptism on the basis of Scripture (by use of such categories as typology, analogy, and the larger category of covenant theology, as well as appealing to the literary devices used in Scripture, like synecdoche), Old shows how “according to Scripture” represents something far more complex than simply the piling up of proof texts. It has to do with the appropriate theological analysis of the text.

This liturgical insight has ongoing significance for Presbyterian worship. In an age when more and more Baptists are recovering their own Reformed roots, it provides a theological foundation for discussion with Reformed Baptists on a Reformed reading of Scripture about baptism. In such a dialogue, Presbyterians need something firmer than simply the appeal to a “Regulative Principle,” given that so often the working out of such a principle looks more Anabaptist than Reformed. It also roots a Presbyterian understanding of worship in an older Reformed understanding rather than a later “Puritan” understanding of worship, which was a somewhat flatter approach than one finds in Calvin, Bucer, Oecolampadius, et al.

After completing his doctoral studies in Europe, Old accepted a call as pastor of Faith Presbyterian Church in West Lafayette, Indiana. Here, he was able to put all that he had learned to work in the weekly task of leading worship and preaching to a living congregation. Given that Old was serving a congregation in the midst of a university community, the thoughtfulness with which he approached his pastoral work was not simply tolerated, but appreciated and encouraged.

One of the discoveries that Old made in the course of his studies that became a characteristic of his work was that part and parcel with the reform of worship in the Reformation was the reform of preaching. At the heart of this reform was *lectio continua* preaching. The main leaders in the Reformed wing of the Reformation were all agreed that the ancient patristic practice of *lectio continua* preaching needed to be restored to the worship of the church. Of course, this change in the schedule of preaching had far-reaching implications for worship.

This return to *lectio continua* meant that the focus of worship itself would change for the Reformed churches. No longer would the flow and theme of worship be determined by a lectionary, based as it was on the various days and seasons of the liturgical year, but by the order and rationale of Scripture itself. Old stated the

issue well in his dissertation, when he stated that the point of this method of preaching is: “to respect the Biblical order and context of a given passage rather than trying to fit smaller units of Scripture into a preestablished theological system set by the church year.”<sup>4</sup> Old saw how the reform of worship and the reform of preaching were cut from the same cloth, that the one must go with the other. Therefore, what one does with worship affects preaching, and what one does with preaching affects worship. One cannot separate the two. Preaching is itself an act of worship.

This insight would place Old on a collision course with developments within his own mainline Presbyterian denomination, as well as within mainline Protestantism in the United States in general. Old returned to the United States just as the so-called “liturgical renewal movement” was taking hold among many Protestants. Many Protestant churches began to embrace the observance of the church calendar, including the penitential seasons of Advent and Lent, in ways that would have caused previous generations absolute shock. With the importation of the church calendar (deeply influenced by Roman Catholic liturgical reforms in the wake of the Second Vatican Council), mainline Protestant preachers began to orient their preaching around the very “preestablished theological system set by the Christian year” that the reformers had rejected. Old saw this development as a serious departure from the insights gained in the Reformation. When the subject of preaching is increasingly determined by the seasons of the liturgical year, the interpretation of the passage preached cannot but be affected. Old saw this happening in Protestant preaching. The liturgical renewal movement may well have made Presbyterian worship look more like that of the Episcopalians, but it did not contribute to a renewal of preaching.

Old took issue head on with the liturgical renewal movement. His most trenchant criticism appears in his primer on Worship, where he states:

The recent effort to bring back the celebration of the old liturgical calendar has suspicious similarities to a revival of the nature religions, natural theology, a cyclical interpretation of life, and the resurgence of the religions of fortune and fertility. One does penance in Advent, when winter sets in, and then one rejoices at Easter, when the flowers reappear in the spring. It is all quite natural, but this fascination with liturgical seasons sometimes seems not much more than a revival of Canaanitism. The primary emphasis of any Reformed liturgical calendar should be the weekly observance of the Lord’s Day. Very significantly, the seven-day cycle of the biblical week is not related to any of the nature cycles! The celebration of the resurrection is primarily the weekly celebration of the

Lord's Day, not the year celebration, which in certain parts of the world is connected with spring. To drape the worship of any Sunday in penitential purple is contrary to the best our tradition teaches us.<sup>5</sup>

Old saw, and rightly so, that in the adoption of the liturgical seasons, especially the two penitential seasons in a cycle that leads to the feasts of Christmas and Easter, a resurgence of a work-righteousness mentality that is inimical to the Reformed faith. In such a cycle, one engages in acts of penitence and self-abnegation in order to get the reward of celebrating the feast. It is not a system based on a gracious understanding of the Gospel. Furthermore, he remained convinced that with more and more attention given to such "seasonal" observances, the weekly Lord's Day itself was and would continue to be shortchanged. Reformed piety is one that is centered on Lord's Day worship, and not on the feasts and fasts, and highs and lows, of the church calendar. With the shortchanging of a piety rooted in the Lord's Day, it was inevitable that serious proclamation of the word of God as a central act of worship would also suffer demise.

This is not to say that Old was opposed to any Christian feast day. For all his love of the Puritans, Hughes Oliphant Old was not himself a Puritan. Old advocated for a return to the way these matters were handled by the continental Reformed, in the celebration of the "the five evangelical feast days: Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension, and Pentecost" (164). Old understood the logic of the earliest reformers who maintained these days even as they dispensed with the liturgical calendar. These days were rooted in specific acts of the Gospel, celebrated the redemption brought about by Christ, and thus passed the test of being "according to Scripture," not by way of a specific command, but in that they commemorated the acts of our salvation in Jesus Christ. They were rooted in the celebrations of the ancient church, before the accretion of tradition that turned them into part of a larger penitential cycle.

Of course, this approach to Reformed worship could not have been more at odds with liturgical developments within Old's denomination, the Presbyterian Church (USA). This in itself may account for the fact that most in the official liturgical circles of the denomination never were truly open to the insights one finds in the work of Old.

When Old completed his ministry at Faith Presbyterian Church, he began a project that the English liturgical scholar Horton Davies himself described as nothing less than "audacious."<sup>6</sup> Old embarked on his project of writing a narrative account of the history of preaching, from biblical times to the present. Given his commitment to the understanding that preaching itself is

a central action of Christian worship, Old wanted to explore how preaching has taken root throughout the history of God's people. He did so in no less than seven volumes, comprising more than 4000 pages! Old followed, historically, the practices of preaching and preachers, beginning with the sermons of Moses in the Old Testament, and following the various movements of preaching to recent times. In many cases, Old makes available to the English reader the story and work of preachers whose works are not otherwise accessible. Old gives expression to the preaching traditions of the medieval church, showing that they are much richer and more developed than Protestants typically assume. Likewise, he deals with the preaching traditions among the Orthodox churches of the East. Old demonstrates a truly "catholic" spirit in this, demonstrating what is evident throughout his work, that the Reformed tradition is truly a movement that is in and a part of the "one holy catholic and apostolic church."

Committed as he was to the renewal of preaching in the worship of the church today, Old encouraged preachers of today to embrace the ancient practice of *lectio continua* preaching, a preaching that is fundamentally expository. Commenting on the need for expository preaching today, Old stated:

This has always been the glory of Protestant worship. At present it seems to have fallen on hard days, but it needs to be revived. The fifteen- and twenty-minute homilies that have become the regular practice on most American Protestant churches today amount to not much more than a surrender of the tradition. Unfortunately, far too few ministers are equipped to do expository preaching. Even worse, few congregations are willing to give their ministers the time to do expository preaching.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, and not surprisingly, Old also advocated a return to the practice of *lectio continua* preaching:

This was one of the most significant reforms of the sixteenth century, resting solidly on the practice of both the synagogue and the early church. Nothing could have a more salutary effect on preaching than the regular, systematic preaching through one book of the Bible after another. It gives a great opportunity for both the preacher and the congregation to study the Scriptures. In time, many in the congregations will develop the habit of reading along with the preacher and will arrive for worship having studied the passage on which the sermon is to be preached. This kind of preaching needs to be done in a sensitive way, with recognition of the capacity of the congregation. It also needs to be supported by good Bible study in Sunday school for both children and for adults. After several years of using the *lectio continua*, the congregation

will discover itself to have learned an amazing amount of Scripture.<sup>8</sup>

In classes that Old taught, he showed great sensitivity to the issues he raises here. In those settings he dealt at length with questions on the practicality of this way of preaching, fully recognizing that one cannot do this in precisely the same way that others have in the past. The preacher must take seriously the capacity of his or her congregation, the fact that we do not have as many occasions in the week to preach before the congregation as Calvin and the other reformers did, as well as the challenges we face today in the culture that surrounds us. Yet, that is ever the challenge of ministry when it comes to enculturating the Gospel in the lives of the people of God.

Having completed his seven-volume magnum opus, Old did not fully retire from his active work of teaching. He joined the faculty of Erskine Theological Seminary in 2004. At Erskine, Old taught primarily students in the Doctor of Ministry program whose focus was in the area of Reformed worship. In the meantime, he was also busy working on his last published work, his study on the Lord's Supper in the Reformed tradition, *Holy Communion in the Piety of the Reformed Church*.<sup>9</sup> In *Holy Communion*, Old provides the reader with a survey study of sorts beginning with John Calvin (to whom Old gives just over 150 pages) and ending with the twentieth century Swiss Reformed liturgical scholar, Jean-Jacques von Allmen, who was Old's dissertation supervisor. In just over 900 pages, Old not only deals with Calvin and Knox (as one would expect), but also includes a chapter on the influence of Reformed thought and practice on the Church of England during the Reformation. Old traces developments in Reformed thought and practice from the time of the Reformation, through Protestant Scholasticism and Pietism, into revivalism, discussing both the Old and New School Presbyterians, Romanticism, and the Victorians, before dealing lastly with early twentieth century developments, including Henry Van Dyke and the first editions of the Book of Common Worship for American Presbyterians. Old concludes his work with his own reflections on the celebration of the Lord's Supper in Reformed life, offering up his own suggestions for a service of Holy Communion.

Though he died a minister-member of the PC (USA), many of Old's former students are found throughout the "alphabet soup" of Presbyterian denominations: ARP, EPC, OPC, PCA, PC (USA), and ECO, among others. While he did not identify himself, typically, as being an "evangelical," he maintained an interesting relationship with the publishers of Maranatha! Music, and theologically shared with Evangelicals their concern for the centrality of the Lordship of Jesus Christ, especially in a day when this central Christian confession has been increasingly downplayed among mainline Protestants. In the "official" circles of his own denomination, Old's work was ignored. The 1993 *Book of Common Worship* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) represents an approach in which that which is Reformed is routinely sacrificed on the altar of "ecumenicity," and represents a complete victory for the "liturgical renewal movement" in official denominational circles.

Yet, what Old offered to his students was an understanding of Reformed worship that not only took the tradition seriously, drawing deeply from the wells of the reformers, but also took seriously the life of the living congregation. Old's study of worship was not limited to the archives and libraries of Europe, but was also rooted in the worship life of a congregation. He understood better than most seminary professors today the demands of local parish ministry. He knew the pressures of preaching weekly and leading worship rooted in the apostolic faith and practices of the Reformed tradition, yet also connected to the realities of modern life. More than once Old described himself as an "Old School Presbyterian."

In the last volume of his narrative account of the history of preaching, Old places himself among those whom he describes as a rising school of preaching in Presbyterian circles, a "new breed" of Presbyterians. However, he makes it clear that this "New Breed" is not "new" because they have forgotten their heritage. Rather, they are new in the landscape of American Presbyterians because they have remembered their heritage, and are actively incorporating it in their own preaching and teaching. Old states:

Dr. Randal Working is President of *Theology Matters*. Dr. Richard Burnett is Executive Director and Managing Editor. The Board of Directors consists of ruling and teaching elders in various Presbyterian denominations. *Theology Matters* exists to inform and encourage, instruct and inspire, members of the Presbyterian family and the wider Christian community through the clear and coherent articulation of theology that is reformed according to God's Word. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it. Please donate to this vital ministry. We want to bless others. We can be contacted at 864-378-5416 or [admin@theologymatters.com](mailto:admin@theologymatters.com), or at [www.theologymatters.com](http://www.theologymatters.com).

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### Change Service Requested

If in the last half of the twentieth century liberal Protestantism lost the ears of the nation, there were nevertheless at the same time some stirrings of life in the American pulpit. One of these was the appearance of a "new breed" of Presbyterians...

I supposed at this point I have to admit that this is where I see myself. This is, at least, the company of preachers with whom I would like to take my stand.

One of the most important characteristics of this breed is its devotion to the classics of both the Protestant Reformation and the ancient church. Even more, the new breed is a "back-to-the-Bible" breed. For the most sophisticated it is an *ad fontes* movement. We really like Dale Bruner's commentary on Matthew and Brevard Child's work on the Christian interpretation of Exodus. ... Here is a breed that is rediscovering its heritage... It is a breed that has rediscovered its progenitors.<sup>10</sup>

Even as Old has now gone from the ranks of the church militant to the church triumphant, he has left behind rich resources for those who would make use of them. Though American Presbyterianism finds itself fragmented not only theologically, denominationally, and in the ways in which it worships, for those who, like Isaac, seek to dig again the wells of their fathers, will find in the legacy of Old's work tools ready for use.

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Patristic Roots of Reformed Worship*, American Edition (Black Mountain: Worship Press, 2004), xi.

<sup>2</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *Worship Reformed according to Scripture*, Revised and Expanded Edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Shaping of the Reformed Baptismal Rite in the Sixteenth Century* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Old, *Patristic Roots*, p. 194, note 2.

<sup>5</sup> Old, *Worship Reformed According to Scripture*, 164.

<sup>6</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol. 1: "The Biblical Period" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 2.

<sup>7</sup> Old, *Worship Reformed According to Scripture*, 172.

<sup>8</sup> Old, *Worship Reformed According to Scripture*, 172.

<sup>9</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *Holy Communion in the Piety of the Reformed Church* (Powder Springs, GA: Tolle Lege Press), 2013.

<sup>10</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol. 7: "Our Own Time" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 87–89.

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