R. C. SPROUL

WHAT IS REFORMED THEOLOGY?

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In memory of
James Montgomery Boice

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INTRODUCTION

*Reformed Theology **Is** a Theology*

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

In the nineteenth century theologians and historians, busy with a comparative analysis of world religions, sought to distill the essence of religion itself and reduce Christianity to its least common denominator. The term *Wesen* (being or essence) appeared in a plethora of German theological studies, including Adolf Harnack's book *What Is Christianity?* Harnack reduced Christianity to two essential affirmations, the universal fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man, neither of which is espoused by the Bible in the sense articulated by Harnack.[1]

A Theology, Not a Religion

This movement to reduce religion to its essence had a subtle but dramatic effect. The study of religion supplanted the study

of theology in the academic world. This change was subtle in that, to the general populace, religion and theology were the same thing, so people felt no dramatic impact. Even in the academic world the shift was widely accepted with barely a whimper.

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

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

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

My inquiry was greeted by silence and blank stares. At first I thought no one was able to answer my question. Finally an elder statesman of the faculty raised his hand and said, "No, it used to be called the 'Department of Theology.' We changed it about thirty years ago."

"Why did you change it?" I asked.

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

I reminded the faculty that there is a profound difference between the study of theology and the study of religion.

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

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

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

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

The Study of Scripture

We answer this question with one word: "Partially." We study theology in several ways. The first is by studying the Bible. Historically the Bible was received by the church as a normative depository of divine revelation. Its ultimate Author

was thought to be God himself. This is why the Bible was called the *verbum Dei* (Word of God) or the *vox Dei* (voice of God). It was considered to be a product of divine self-disclosure. The information contained within it comes, not as a result of human empirical investigation or human speculation, but by supernatural *revelation*. It is called revelation because it comes from the mind of God to us.

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

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

The burning issue today is this: Were these human authors writing their own unaided opinions and insights, or were they uniquely endowed as agents of revelation, writing under the inspiration and superintendence of God? If we say that the

Bible is a product of only human opinion and insight, we can still speak about biblical theology in the sense that the Bible contains human teaching about God, but we can no longer speak about biblical revelation. If God is the ultimate Author of the Bible, we can speak of *both* biblical revelation *and* biblical theology. If man is the ultimate author, then we are restricted to speaking about biblical theology or *theologies*. If that is the case, we could justly regard biblical theology as a subdivision of religion, as one aspect of human studies about God.

The Study of History

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

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

Of course we could be motivated to study historical theology by a combination of these two or for other reasons.

The point is that we can have either a theological interest primarily, or a religious interest, as long as we recognize that they are not identical.

The Study of Nature

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

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

From the sixteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth, no Reformed theologian I know of denied the validity of natural theology derived from natural revelation. The strong antipathy in our day to theology based on unaided human speculation has brought in its wake a widespread and

wholesale rejection of *all* natural theology.

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

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

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

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

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

The most germane biblical basis for a general or natural

revelation is Paul's statement in Romans:

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

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

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

Paul says that "they *knew* God," making it plain that natural revelation yields a natural theology or a natural knowledge of God. God's wrath is present, not because men fail to receive his natural revelation, but because, after receiving this knowledge, mankind fails to act appropriately. They refuse to honor God or be grateful to him. They suppress the truth of God and, as Paul

later says, “They did not like to retain God in *their* knowledge” (Rom. 1:28).

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

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

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

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

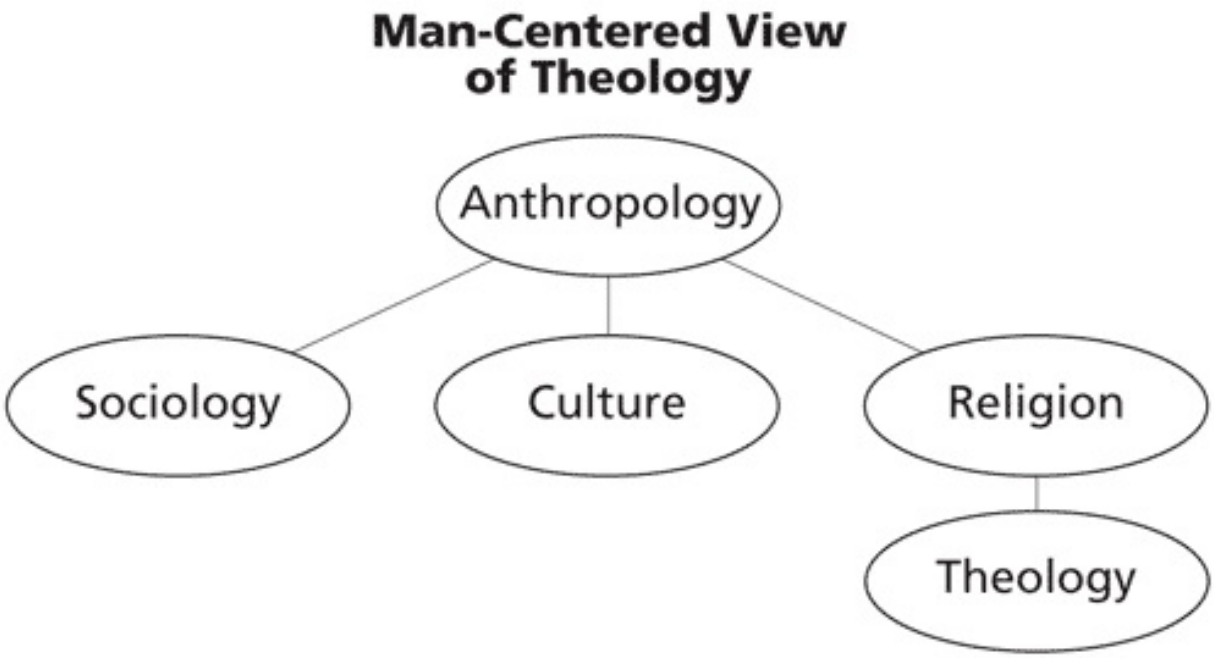
Queen of the Sciences

The study of theology *includes* a study of mankind, but this is

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

Fig. 0.1

Fig. 0.2



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

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

> The disappearance of theology from the life of the Church, and the orchestration of that disappearance by some of its leaders, is hard to miss today but, oddly enough, not easy to prove. It is hard to miss in the evangelical world—in the vacuous worship that is so prevalent, for example, in the shift from God to the self as the central focus of faith, in the psychologized preaching that follows this shift, in the erosion of its conviction, in its strident pragmatism, in its inability to think incisively about the culture, in its reveling in the irrational.[2]

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

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

Theology and Religion at Sinai

To further illustrate the difference between theology and religion, let us examine briefly a famous incident in the history of Israel. In Exodus 24 we read: "Then Moses went up into the mountain, and a cloud covered the mountain. Now the glory of the LORD rested on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day He called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. The sight of the glory of the LORD *was* like a consuming fire on the top of the mountain in the eyes of the children of Israel. So Moses went into the midst of the cloud and went up into the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights." (Exod. 24:15–18)

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

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

redemptive exodus.

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

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

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

There is much wrong here. In the first place, the bull was the sacred image of the heathen gods of Egypt. By making their own bull-idol, Israel conformed their religion to the world around them. Their new religion was now relevant. They had a god that they could control. They made it and they could discard or destroy it. The cow gave no law and demanded no obedience. It had no wrath or justice or holiness to be feared. It was deaf, dumb, and impotent. But at least it could not intrude

on their fun and call them to judgment. This was a religion designed by men, practiced by men, and ultimately useless for men. Theirs was a theology and a religion without God. It had the elements of religious practice, but what was worshiped was not God. The true God had been stripped of his real character by the people's vacuous theology.

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

While Moses was learning sound theology, the first man consecrated as high priest, Aaron, was building an altar to a golden calf. God was instructing Moses in proper religion that is based on a theology of truth.

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

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

The rest of this book will examine why this theology is called Reformed, but not until we repeat once more that it is a

theology, not merely a religion without theology. It is driven first and foremost by its understanding of the character of God.

PART 1

FOUNDATIONS OF REFORMED THEOLOGY

1

CENTERED ON GOD

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

In the modern church the assumptions of the past are not always retained. Many have rejected the divine inspiration of Scripture and with it any commitment to a unified revelation. When one approaches the Bible as purely a human document, one need not reconcile the teachings of its various authors. From this viewpoint, systematic theology usually is an attempt to explain the Bible in light of and under the control of a system

brought to the Bible from the outside. Others eschew systems altogether and embrace a theology that is self-consciously relativistic and pluralistic. They set biblical authors in opposition to each other, and they see the Bible itself as a collection of conflicting theologies.

Table 1.1

The First Foundation Stone

1 Centered on God
2 Based on God's Word alone
3 Committed to faith alone
4 Devoted to Jesus Christ
5 Structured by three covenants

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

Because theology is systematic, every doctrine of the faith touches in some way every other doctrine. For example, how we understand the person of Christ affects how we understand his work of redemption. If we view Jesus merely as a great human teacher, then we are inclined to see his mission as primarily one of moral instruction or influence. If we regard him

as the Son of God incarnate, then this frames our understanding of his mission. Conversely, our understanding of the work of Christ also influences our understanding of his person.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

by us, but a limit God sovereignly imposes on himself.

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

Reformed Theology Is Catholic

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

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

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

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

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

Testament. The term *tradition* here refers to that which is "given over." Paul speaks warmly of the gospel tradition in which he worked. It is the duty of every generation of Christians to pass on a tradition. Just as Israel was called to pass on to their children the traditions instituted by God, so the church is to pass on the apostolic tradition to each successive generation.

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

The Reformers took church history very seriously, and we should do the same today. I teach systematic theology in a Reformed seminary attended by students from a variety of denominational backgrounds. This includes many Baptists. When I teach the sacraments, I know many of my students are Baptists and do not embrace the doctrine of infant baptism. I point out to them that the practice of infant baptism is the majority position in church history among the majority of Christian communions. I remind them that, though theirs is a minority position historically, that by no means makes it false. Indeed, the minority may be and often is right. I do ask my Baptist students to examine the majority position to see why

that tradition holds the view that it does. Likewise I insist that students who disagree with the Baptist position listen carefully to the case the Baptists make for believer's baptism.

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

Reformed Theology Is Evangelical

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

different denominations, agreed on these two basic issues over against the Roman Catholic church.

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

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

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

evangelical in the Protestant sense, believing the Reformation view of the gospel and not the Roman Catholic view.) In any case, when I say that Reformed theology is *evangelical,* I use the term in its classic and historical sense. Reformed theology shares a common, evangelical body of doctrines with other Christian communions.

God Is Incomprehensible

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

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

The doctrine of God's incomprehensibility calls attention to the distance between the transcendent Creator and his mortal creatures. One of the chief axioms taught by John Calvin was expressed by the Reformer in the Latin phrase *Finitum non capax infinitum,* "The finite cannot grasp (or contain) the infinite." Because God is infinite in his being and eternal, and

we are finite and bound by both space and time, our knowledge of him is never comprehensive. We enjoy an apprehensive knowledge of God, but not a comprehensive knowledge.

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

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

Neo-Platonism was a conscious attempt to provide an

alternative philosophy to Christianity. The Christian faith having conquered traditional Greek philosophy, neo-Platonism was an attempt to restore Greek philosophy to preeminence. The most important neo-Platonic philosopher, Plotinus, described God as "the One." Plotinus insisted that nothing positive can ever be affirmed about God. He is unknowable. We can circle around certain ideas about God, but we can never land on any of them. Plotinus popularized the method of speaking about God that is called the "way of negation" *(via negationis),* which defines something by saying what it is not.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> . . . a distinction must be observed when the knowledge or, more precisely speaking, the subject of the Divine Being is under discussion. The dispute must be about either the hidden *(abscondito)* God or the revealed *(revelato)*

> God. No faith in, no knowledge and no understanding of, God, insofar as He is not revealed, are possible. . . . What is above us is none of our business. For thoughts of this kind, which want to search out something more sublime, above, and outside that which has been revealed about God, are thoroughly diabolical. We accomplish nothing by them except to hurl ourselves into destruction, because they propose an object to us that defies investigation, to wit, the unrevealed God. Let God rather keep His decrees and mysteries in hiding.[5]

John Calvin made a similar distinction between what we are able to know about God and what remains unknown to us. "His essence, indeed, is incomprehensible, utterly transcending all human thought; but on each of his works his glory is engraven in characters so bright, so distinct, and so illustrious, that none, however dull and illiterate, can plead ignorance as their excuse."[6]

Earlier Calvin extolled the knowledge of God that we do have: "Since the perfection of blessedness consists in the knowledge of God, he has been pleased, in order that none might be excluded from the means of obtaining felicity, not only to deposit in our minds that seed of religion of which we have already spoken, but so to manifest his perfections in the whole structure of the universe, and daily place himself in our view, that we cannot open our eyes without being compelled to behold him."[7]

Calvin and Luther, with the doctrine of God's incomprehensibility, sought to be faithful to scriptural teaching by holding to both aspects of the knowledge of God, his hiddenness and his self-revelation: "The secret *things belong* to the LORD our God, but those *things which are* revealed *belong* to us and to our children forever, that *we* may do all the

words of this law" (Deut. 29:29).

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

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

> Our wisdom, in so far as it ought to be deemed true and solid wisdom, consists almost entirely of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But as these are connected together by many ties, it is not easy to determine which of the two precedes, and gives birth to the other. For, in the first place, no man can survey himself without forthwith turning his thoughts towards the God in whom he lives and moves; because it is perfectly obvious, that the endowments which we possess cannot possibly be from ourselves; nay, that our very being is nothing else than subsistence in God alone.[8]

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

> On the other hand, it is evident that man never attains to a true self-knowledge until he have previously contemplated the face of God, and come down after such contemplation to look into himself. . . . So long as we do not look beyond the earth, we are quite pleased with our own righteousness, wisdom, and virtue; we address ourselves in the most flattering terms, and seem only

> less than demigods. But should we once begin to raise our thoughts to God, and reflect what kind of Being he is, and how absolute the perfection of that righteousness, and wisdom, and virtue, to which, as a standard, we are bound to be conformed, what formerly delighted us by its false show of righteousness, will become polluted with the greatest iniquity; what strangely imposed upon us under the name of wisdom, will disgust by its extreme folly; and what presented the appearance of virtuous energy, will be condemned as the most miserable impotence. So far are those qualities in us, which seem most perfect, from corresponding to the divine purity.[9]

God Is Self-Sufficient

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

But these adjectives point to the difference between the being of God and the being of man. God and God alone is pure being. He is who he is, the Yahweh of the Old Testament. Our being, by contrast, is derived, dependent, and contingent. We depend on the power of God's being for us to exist or to "be" at all. In a word, we are creatures. By definition a creature owes its existence to another.

One of my favorite anecdotes concerning God's self-existence is a conversation between two children. The first

child asks, “Where do trees come from?”

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

“Where did we come from?”

“God made us.”

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

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

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

One Reformed confession, *The Westminster Confession of Faith,* says of God: “God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness, in and of Himself; and is alone in and unto Himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which He hath made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting His own glory in, by, unto, and upon them. He is the alone fountain of all being, of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things; and hath most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them whatsoever Himself pleaseth.”[10]

God Is Holy

Reformed theology attaches great importance to the Old

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

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

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

> Hence that dread and amazement with which, as Scripture uniformly relates, holy men were struck and overwhelmed whenever they beheld the presence of God. When we see those who previously stood firm and secure so quaking with terror, that the fear of death takes hold of them, nay, they are, in a manner, swallowed up and annihilated, the inference to be drawn is, that men are never duly touched and impressed with a conviction of their insignificance, until they have contrasted themselves with the majesty of God. Frequent examples of this consternation occur both in the Book of Judges and the Prophetical Writings [Judges 13:22; Isa. 6:5; Ezek. 1:28; 3:14; Job 9:4; Gen. 18:27; 1 Kings 19:18]; so much so, that it was a common expression among the people of God, "We shall die, for we have seen the Lord."[11]

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

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

Calling the human heart an idol factory *(fabricum idolarum),* Calvin stressed that the propensity for idolatry is deeply rooted in the heart of sinful humanity. The exchange of the truth about God for a lie occurs in every distortion of God's character that creeps (or perhaps rushes) into our theology. It is a thing to be jealously guarded against. Calvin writes:

> Bright, however, as is the manifestation which God gives both of himself and his immortal kingdom in the mirror of his works, so great is our stupidity, so dull are we in regard to these bright manifestations, that we derive no benefit

> from them. . . . but we are all alike in this, that we substitute monstrous fictions for the one living and true God. . . . almost every man has had his own god. To the darkness of ignorance have been added presumption and wantonness, and hence there is scarcely an individual to be found without some idol or phantom as a substitute for Deity. Like water gushing forth from a large and copious spring, immense crowds of gods have issued from the human mind, every man giving himself full license, and devising some peculiar form of divinity, to meet his own views.[12]

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

2

BASED ON GOD'S WORD ALONE

Unless I am convinced by Sacred Scripture or by evident reason, I will not recant. My conscience is held captive by the Word of God and to act against conscience is neither right nor safe." These immortal words were uttered by Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms. He was on trial for his life before the authorities of both church and state, charged with serious heresy. When commanded to recant his doctrine of justification by faith, he insisted that his doctrine was based on the Bible. In earlier debates with leading Roman Catholic theologians, Luther had been maneuvered into admitting that he thought it possible for both the Pope and church councils to err.

Historians have frequently explained the Protestant Reformation by describing its material cause and its formal cause. Its material cause was the dispute over the doctrine of justification by faith alone *(sola fide)*; its formal cause, the dispute over biblical authority *(sola Scriptura)*.

Table 2.1

The Second Foundation Stone

1 Centered on God

The principle of *sola Scriptura* lurked in the background throughout the debate over justification. Luther's refusal to recant at Worms brought it into the foreground. From that point on, *sola Scriptura* became a battle cry for Protestants.

The term *sola Scriptura* simply means "by Scripture alone." This slogan declared the idea that only the Bible has the authority to bind the consciences of believers. Protestants did recognize other forms of authority, such as church offices, civil magistrates, and church creeds and confessions. But they saw these authorities as being derived from and subordinate to the authority of God. None of these lesser authorities was deemed absolute, because all of them were capable of error. God alone is infallible. Fallible authorities cannot bind the conscience absolutely; that right is reserved to God and his Word alone.

A common misunderstanding is that the Reformers believed in the infallible authority of Scripture while the Roman Catholic church believed only in the infallible authority of the church and her tradition. This is a distortion of the controversy. At the time of the Reformation, both sides acknowledged the infallible authority of the Bible. The question was this: "Is the Bible the *only* infallible source of special revelation?"

Roman Catholics taught that there are two sources of infallible special revelation, Scripture and tradition. Since they attributed this authority to the tradition of the church, they did

not permit any person to interpret the Bible in a way that was contrary to this tradition. That is precisely what Luther did, leading to his excommunication and the condemnation of his doctrine.

The Reformers agreed there are two kinds of divine revelation: *general* and *special*. General revelation, sometimes called *natural revelation,* refers to God's revelation of himself in nature. The Apostle Paul declares this in Romans: "For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse." (Rom. 1:18–20)

As we have seen, this revelation is called "general" because of both its audience and its content. All people receive God's revelation in nature; not all have read Scripture (special revelation) or been exposed to its teaching. General revelation does not reveal the history of redemption or the person and work of Christ; special revelation does.

Though the Reformers distinguished between general and special revelation, they insisted there is only one written source of special revelation, the Bible. This is the *sola* of *sola Scriptura*. The chief reason for the word *alone* is the conviction that the Bible is inspired by God, while church creeds and pronouncements are the works of men. These lesser works may be accurate and brilliantly conceived, capturing the

best insights of learned scholars; but they are not the inspired Word of God.

The Inspiration of Scripture

The Reformers held to a high view of the Bible's inspiration. The Bible is the Word of God, the *verbum Dei*, or the voice of God, the *vox Dei*. For example, John Calvin writes:

> When that which professes to be the Word of God is acknowledged to be so, no person, unless devoid of common sense and the feelings of a man, will have the desperate hardihood to refuse credit to the speaker. But since no daily responses are given from heaven, and the Scriptures are the only records in which God has been pleased to consign his truth to perpetual remembrance, the full authority which they ought to possess with the faithful is not recognized, unless they are believed to have come from heaven, as directly as if God had been heard giving utterance to them.[13]

"As if" does not mean Calvin believed that the Bible had dropped down from heaven directly or that God himself wrote the words on the pages of Scripture. Rather "as if" refers to the weight of divine authority that attends the Scriptures. This authority is rooted and grounded in the fact that Scripture was originally given under divine inspiration. This claim agrees with the Bible's own claim to authority: "All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17).

Paul's declaration of Scripture's inspiration refers to its origin. He uses the Greek word *theopneust,* which means "God-breathed." Though the word is usually translated "inspired,"

which means "breathe in," technically *theopneust* refers to a breathing out, which might more accurately be translated "expired." Paul is saying that Scripture is "expired" or "breathed out" by God. This is not a mere quibble. It is obvious that for inspiration to take place there must first be expiration. A breathing out must precede a breathing in. The point is that the work of divine inspiration is accomplished by a divine expiration. Since Paul says that Scripture is breathed out by God, Scripture's origin or source must be God himself.

When Calvin and others speak of Scripture's inspiration, they refer to the way in which God enabled the human authors of Scripture to function, so that they wrote every word under divine superintendence. The doctrine of inspiration declares that God enabled the human writers of Scripture to be agents of divine revelation, so that what they wrote was not only their writing but in a higher sense the very Word of God. The origin of Scripture's content is found ultimately in God.

Much debate has raged concerning the exact mode or method of this divine inspiration. Some have contended for a mechanical inspiration or dictation, reducing the human authors to robotic machines or passive stenographers who merely record the words dictated to them by God.

But the Scriptures themselves make no such claim. The mode or precise manner of divine inspiration is not spelled out. The crucial point of the biblical claim to authority is that God is the source who breathes out his word. It is clear from a study of the Bible itself that the authors' individual styles remain intact. The inspiration of the Bible refers then to the divine superintendence of Scripture, preserving it from the intrusion

of human error. It refers to God's preserving his Word through the words of human authors.

The Infallibility of Scripture

The Reformers were convinced that, because the Bible has its origin in God and was superintended by his inspiration, it is infallible. Infallibility refers to its indefectibility or the impossibility of its being in error. That which is infallible is incapable of failing. We attribute infallibility to God and his work because of his nature and character. With respect to God's nature he is deemed to be omniscient. With respect to his character, he is deemed to be holy and altogether righteous.

Theoretically we can conceive of a being who is righteous but limited in his knowledge. Such a being could make mistakes in his utterances, not because of a desire to deceive or defraud, but due to his lack of knowledge. His would be honest mistakes. At the human level we understand that persons may make false statements without telling a lie. The difference between a lie and a simple mistake is at the level of intent. On the other hand, we can conceive of a being who is omniscient but evil. This being could not make a mistake due to lack of knowledge, but could tell a lie. This would clearly involve evil or malicious intent. Since God is both omniscient and morally perfect, however, he is incapable of telling a lie or making an error.

When we say the Bible is infallible in its origin, we are merely ascribing its origin to a God who is infallible. This is not to say that the biblical writers were intrinsically or in themselves

infallible. They were human beings who, like other humans, proved the axiom *Errare humanum est,* "To err is human." It is precisely because humans are given to error that, for the Bible to be the Word of God, its human authors required assistance in their task.

At issue in our day is the question of Scripture's inspiration. On this point some theologians have tried to eat their cake and have it too. They affirm the Bible's inspiration while at the same time denying its infallibility. They argue that the Bible, in spite of its divine inspiration, still errs. The idea of divinely inspired error is one to choke on. We shrink in horror at the notion that God inspires error. To inspire error would require either that God is not omniscient or that he is evil.

Perhaps what is in view in the idea of inspired error is that the inspiration, though proceeding from a good and omniscient God, is simply ineffectual to the task at hand. That is, it fails to accomplish its intended purpose. In this case another attribute of God, his omnipotence, is negotiated away. Perhaps God is simply unable to superintend the writing of Scripture with sufficient power to overcome the human authors' propensity for error.

Surely it would make more sense to deny inspiration altogether than to conjoin inspiration with error. To be sure, most critics of the Bible's infallibility take their axes to the root of the tree and reject inspiration altogether. This seems a more honest and logical approach. It avoids the impiety of denying foundational attributes to God himself.

Let us examine briefly a formula that has had some currency in our day: "The Bible is the Word of God, which errs." Now let

us expunge some of these words. Remove "The Bible is," so that the formula reads: "The Word of God, which errs." Now erase "The Word of" and "which." The result is "God errs." To say the Bible is the Word of God that errs is clearly to indulge in impious doublespeak. If it is the Word of God, it does not err. If it errs, it is not the Word of God. Surely we can have a word *about* God that errs, but we cannot have a word *from* God that errs.

That the Scripture has its origin in God is claimed repeatedly by Scripture. One example already noted is found in Paul's Epistle to the Romans. Paul identifies himself as "a servant of Jesus Christ, called *to be* an apostle, separated to the gospel of God" (Rom. 1:1). In the phrase "the gospel *of* God," the word *of* is a genitive indicating possession. Paul is speaking not merely of a gospel that is *about* God, but of a gospel belonging *to* God. It is God's possession and it comes from him. In a word, Paul is declaring that the gospel he preaches is not from men or of human invention; it is given by divine revelation. The whole controversy over the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible is fundamentally a controversy about supernatural revelation. Reformed theology is committed to Christianity as a revealed faith, a faith that rests, not on human insight, but on information that comes to us from God himself.

The Inerrancy of Scripture

In addition to affirming the Bible's infallibility, Reformed theology describes the Bible as inerrant. Infallibility means that something *cannot* err, while inerrancy means that it *does not*

err. Infallibility describes ability or potential. It describes something that cannot happen. Inerrancy describes actuality.

For example, I could score 100% on a spelling test. In this limited experience I was "inerrant"; I made no mistakes on the test. This would not warrant the conclusion that I am therefore infallible. Errant human beings do not always err. They sometimes, indeed often do, err because they are not infallible. An infallible person would never err simply because infallibility as such precludes the very possibility of error.

In our day some scholars have asserted that the Bible is infallible but not inerrant. This creates no small amount of confusion. As we have seen, *infallible* is the stronger of the two words.

Why then have these scholars preferred the word *infallible?* The answer is probably located somewhere in the emotive realm. The term *inerrancy* is frowned on in certain academic circles. It is loaded with pejorative baggage. The term is often associated with unsophisticated and unscholarly types of fundamentalism. On the other hand, the term *infallibility* has a history of academic respectability, particularly in Roman Catholic scholarship. People may reject the Roman Catholic view of infallibility, but they do not identify it with backwoods, primitive theology. Jesuits, for example, do not suffer from a reputation of unsophisticated scholarship. To escape guilt by association with antiintellectual circles, some have retreated from the term *inerrancy* and taken refuge in the term *infallibility*. If in the process *infallibility* is redefined to mean something less than *inerrancy,* however, then the shift in nomenclature is a dishonest subterfuge.

Though both *inerrancy* and *infallibility* have been integral to historic Reformed theology, the modern controversy over the Bible's trustworthiness has led others to argue that the concept of inerrancy was not advocated by the magisterial Reformers, but instead was originated by scholastic or rationalistic theologians of the seventeenth century. Though it may be accurate to say that the term *inerrancy* came into vogue later, it is by no means accurate to assert that the concept is absent from the works of sixteenth-century Reformers. Let us note a few observations from Martin Luther:

> The Holy Spirit Himself and God, the Creator of all things, is the Author of this book.[14]
>
> Scripture, although also written of men, is not of men nor from men, but from God.[15]
>
> He who would not read these stories in vain must firmly hold that Holy Scripture is not human but divine wisdom.[16]
>
> The Word must stand, for God cannot lie; and heaven and earth must go to ruins before the most insignificant letter or tittle of His Word remains unfulfilled.[17]
>
> We intend to glory in nothing but Holy Scripture, and we are certain that the Holy Spirit cannot oppose or contradict Himself.[18]
>
> St. Augustine says in the letter to St. Jerome . . .: I have learned to hold only the Holy Scripture inerrant.[19]
>
> In the books of St. Augustine one finds many passages which flesh and blood have spoken. And concerning myself I must also confess that when I talk apart from the ministry, at home, at table, or elsewhere, I speak many words that are not God's Word. That is why St. Augustine, in a letter to St. Jerome, has put down a fine axiom—that only Holy Scripture is to be considered inerrant.[20]

It is clear that the concept of inerrancy was not a late

invention. It is attested to in antiquity, not only in men such as St. Augustine, but in Irenaeus as well. Luther cites Augustine's view with manifest approval. The same approbation is found profusely in John Calvin's writings.

Clearly inerrancy and infallibility do not extend to copies or translations of Scripture. Reformed theology restricts inerrancy to the original manuscripts of the Bible, or the *autographa*. The *autographa,* the initial works of the writers of Scripture, are not directly available to us today.

For this reason many scoff at the doctrine of inerrancy, saying it is a moot point since it cannot be verified or falsified without access to the original manuscripts. This criticism misses the point altogether. We carry no brief for the inspiration of copyists or translators. The original revelation is the chief concern of the doctrine of inerrancy. Though we do not possess the autographs themselves, we can reconstruct them with remarkable accuracy. The science of textual criticism demonstrates that the existing text is remarkably pure and exceedingly reliable.

Suppose the normative yardstick housed at the National Bureau of Standards were to perish in a fire. Would we no longer be able to determine the distance of three feet with accuracy? With the multitude of existing copies, we could reconstruct with almost perfect accuracy the original yardstick. To restrict inerrancy to the original documents is to call attention to the source of biblical revelation: the agents who were inspired by God to receive his revelation and record it.

Reformed theology carries no brief for the infallibility of translations. We who read, interpret, or translate the Bible are

fallible. The Roman Catholic church adds another element of infallibility by claiming it for the church's interpretation of Scripture, especially when the pope speaks *ex cathedra* ("from the chair" of St. Peter). Though this adds a second tier of infallibility, the individual Roman Catholic is still left to interpret the infallible interpretation of the infallible Bible fallibly. Whereas Protestants are faced with a fallible interpretation of the church's fallible interpretation of the infallible Bible, Catholics assume a double level of infallibility.

What does the Bible's infallibility mean for the average Christian seeking to be guided by Scripture? If the final stage of receiving Scripture rests in our fallible understanding, why is the infallibility of the original documents so important? This is a practical question that bears heavily on the Christian life.

Suppose two people read a portion of Scripture and cannot agree on its meaning. Obviously one or both of them misunderstand the text. The debate between them is a debate between fallible people.

Suppose, however, that the text is clear and that neither person disputes its meaning. If one of them is convinced that the text is God's infallible revelation, then the question of whether he should submit to it is answered. If the other person is persuaded that the text itself (in its original transmission) is fallible, then he is under no moral obligation to be bound by it.

The Authority of Scripture

The issue of Scripture's inspiration and infallibility boils down to the issue of its authority. A famous bumper-sticker reads as

follows: “God says it. I believe it. That settles it.”

What is wrong with this statement? It adds an element that is unsound. It suggests that the matter of biblical authority is not settled until the person believes the Bible. The slogan should read: “God says it. That settles it.” If God reveals something, that revelation carries the weight of his authority. There is no higher authority. Once God opens his holy mouth, the matter is settled. This is axiomatic for Reformed theology.

The question of *sola Scriptura* is fundamentally one of authority. Here the supreme authority rests with the Bible, not the church; with God, not with man. This came home to me in a discussion with a former college roommate. We had lost contact with each other and had not seen each other for twenty years when we met again at a theology conference, where I was speaking on the topic of biblical authority. After the meeting we had dinner together and my friend said to me, “R. C., I don’t believe in the infallibility of Scripture any more.”

I asked him what he did still believe in from our earlier days. He said, “I still believe in Jesus as my Savior and Lord.”

I indicated I was pleased to hear this, but proceeded to ask, “How does Jesus exercise his Lordship over your life?”

My friend, a bit perplexed by my question, asked, “What do you mean?”

“If Jesus is your Lord, then that means he exercises authority over you. How do you know how he wants you to live if not from the Bible?”

“From the teaching of the church,” he replied.

Here was a “Protestant” who forgot what he was protesting. He had come full circle, jettisoning *sola Scriptura* and

replacing it with the authority of the church. He placed the church above Scripture. This is not unlike what occurred in Rome. Though Rome did not deny Scripture's infallible authority as my friend did, she nevertheless in a real and critical sense subordinated Scripture to the church.

The subordination of Scripture was a burning issue among the Reformers. John Calvin said: "A most pernicious error has very generally prevailed—viz. that Scripture is of importance only in so far as conceded to it by the suffrage of the Church; as if the eternal and inviolable truth of God could depend on the will of men. With great insult to the Holy Spirit, it is asked, Who can assure us that the Scriptures proceeded from God[?]. . . ."[21]

Calvin then reminds the reader that the Scriptures themselves (Eph. 2:20) declare that the church is established on the foundation of the apostles and prophets. He continues: "Nothing, therefore, can be more absurd than the fiction, that the power of judging Scripture is in the Church, and that on her nod its certainty depends. When the Church receives it, and gives it the stamp of her authority, she does not make that authentic which was otherwise doubtful or controverted, but, acknowledging it as the truth of God, she, as in duty bound, shows her reverence by an unhesitating assent."[22]

Calvin has in view here the debate over the canon of Scripture. The sixty-six books of the Bible together comprise the *canon* of Scripture. The term *canon* means "measuring rod" or "rule." The Reformers did not recognize the books of the Apocrypha (written during the intertestamental period) as part of the canon. Rome did include the Apocrypha in the canon.

Questions of which books are to be included in the canon were debated in the early church. In the final analysis the church recognized the books that now comprise the New Testament.

Since the church was involved in this process, some have argued that the Bible owes its authority to the church's authority and is therefore subordinate to the church's authority. This is the point Calvin so vigorously disputes. He declares that the church "does not make that authentic which was otherwise doubtful or controverted" but acknowledges it as God's truth. Calvin argues that there is a big difference between the church's recognizing the Bible's authority and the church's creating the Bible's authority. The church used the Latin term *recepimus,* which means "we receive," to acknowledge that books of the Bible are what they already were in themselves, the Word of God.

Luther wrote in a similar vein to Calvin concerning the relationship between the authority of the Bible and the authority of the church: "It is not the Word of God because the church says so; but that the Word of God might be spoken, therefore the church comes into being. The church does not make the Word, but it is made by the Word."[23] Luther goes on to say: "The church cannot give a book more authority or dependability than it has of itself, just as it also approves and accepts the works of the fathers, but thereby does not establish them as good or make them better."[24]

Roman Catholics view the canon as an infallible collection of infallible books. Protestants view it as a fallible collection of infallible books. Rome believes the church was infallible when it determined which books belong in the New Testament.

Protestants believe the church acted rightly and accurately in this process, but not infallibly.

This does not mean that Reformed theology doubts the canonical status of books included in the New Testament canon. Some Protestant theologians believe a special work of divine providence kept the church from error in this matter without imparting to the church any permanent or inherent infallibility.

Table 2.2

The Canon

	Biblical canon	**Biblical books**
Roman Catholic view	infallible	infallible
Protestant view	fallible	infallible

The Reformed doctrine of *sola Scriptura,* then, affirms that the Bible is the sole written authority for the faith and life of God's people. We respect and submit to lesser ecclesiastical authority, but we are not bound by it absolutely as we are by biblical authority. This is the basis for the Reformation principle of *semper reformanda,* which indicates that reformation of the church is an ongoing process. We are always called to seek more and more to bring our faith and practice into conformity to the Word of God.

The Interpretation of Scripture

One great legacy of the Reformation is the principle of *private*

interpretation. The Reformation effectively put the Bible into the hands of the laity. This was done at a great price, as some who translated the Bible into the vernacular paid for it with their lives. The right of private interpretation means that every Christian has the right to read and interpret the Bible for himself or herself. This does not give an individual the right to misinterpret or distort the Bible. The Bible is not a waxed nose to be twisted and shaped to fit one's fancy. With the right of private interpretation comes the responsibility of handling the Bible carefully and accurately. Nor does this right suggest that teachers, commentaries, and so forth are unnecessary or unhelpful. God has not gifted teachers for his church in vain.

The Bible is not to be interpreted arbitrarily. Fundamental rules of interpretation must be followed to avoid subjectivistic or fanciful interpretation, rules developed by the science of hermeneutics. The term *hermeneutics* is etymologically related to Hermes, a Greek god. Hermes was the messenger of the gods, corresponding to the Roman god Mercury. In mythology Mercury is often depicted with wings on his shoes to facilitate the delivery of messages with speed.

Hermeneutics prescribes the process by which we seek to understand a message. The Reformation established crucial rules of hermeneutics for interpreting the Bible. Perhaps the most crucial or central rule is the *analogy of faith*. This is the rule that Scripture is to interpret itself *(Sacra Scriptura sui interpres)*. We are to interpret Scripture by Scripture. If the Bible is the Word of God, then it is coherent and consistent with itself. God is not the author of confusion. He does not contradict himself. We are not, therefore, to set one part of

Scripture against another. What is unclear or obscure in one place may be clarified in another. We are to interpret the obscure in light of the clear, the implicit in light of the explicit, and narrative in light of the didactic.

At a technical level the science of hermeneutics becomes quite complex. The biblical scholar must learn to recognize different forms of literature within the Scripture (genre analysis). For example, some parts of the Bible are in the form of historical narrative, while others are in the form of poetry. The interpretation of poetry differs from the interpretation of narrative. The Bible uses metaphor, simile, proverb, parable, hyperbole, parallelism, and many other literary devices that must be recognized in any serious work of interpretation.

One of the Reformation's chief accomplishments is the principle of the literal interpretation of Scripture. This concept has suffered from serious misunderstanding, having often been equated with a naive or wooden literalism. The actual principle, called the *sensus literalis,* is that the Bible must be interpreted according to the manner in which it is written. *Literal* refers to the literary form of Scripture. Luther comments on this:

> Neither a conclusion nor a figure of speech should be admitted in any place of Scripture unless evident contextual circumstances or the absurdity of anything obviously militating against an article of faith require it. On the contrary, we must everywhere adhere to the simple, pure, and natural meaning of the words. This accords with the rules of grammar and the usage of speech *(usus loquendi)* which God has given to men. For if everyone is allowed to invent conclusions and figures of speech according to his own whim . . . nothing could to a certainty be determined or proved concerning any one article of faith that men could not find fault with by means of some figure of speech. Rather we must avoid as the most deadly poison all figurative language which Scripture itself does not force us to find in a passage.[25]

The principle of literal interpretation was intended to put an end to a method that had become popular in the Middle Ages, the *quadriga*. This was a method of interpretation by which four distinct meanings were sought for each biblical text: the literal, moral, allegorical, and analogical. This led to excessive allegorization and obfuscation of the text. By contrast, *sensus literalis* was designed to seek the plain sense of Scripture and to focus on one meaning. Though a text may have a multitude of applications, it has only one correct meaning.

The principle of the *sensus literalis* is closely related to the *grammatico-historical* method of interpretation. This method focuses on the historical setting in which Scripture was written and pays close attention to the grammatical structure of the biblical text. In a broad sense this method means simply that the Bible is to be interpreted like any other book. Its revelatory nature does not make it unlike any other book in that regard. It must still be read like any other book. In the Bible verbs are verbs and nouns are nouns. The normal structure of literature applies. Again Luther comments:

> The Holy Spirit is the plainest Writer and Speaker in heaven and on earth. Therefore His words can have no more than one, and that the most obvious, sense. This we call the literal or natural sense. But that the things meant by the plain sense of His plain Word may also mean something further and different, and thus one thing signifies another, is more than a question of words and languages. For this is true of all things outside Scripture, since all God's works and creatures are living signs and words of God, as St. Augustine and all the teachers declare. But we should not on this account say that Scripture or God's Word has more than one meaning.[26]

3

COMMITTED TO FAITH ALONE

The doctrine of justification by faith alone *(sola fide)* is the central affirmation of historic evangelicalism. It is a doctrine shared by Reformed theology with many other Christian denominations. Though this doctrine is not unique to Reformed theology, there would be no Reformed theology without it. During the Reformation Martin Luther said this is "the article with and by which the church stands, without which it falls" *(articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae)*.[27] If Luther was correct, then his statement applies not only to the Lutheran church, but to any church.

Luther had this to say about justification by faith alone: "This doctrine is the head and the cornerstone. It alone begets, nourishes, builds, preserves, and defends the church of God; and without it the church of God cannot exist for one hour. . . ."[28]

Elsewhere Luther declared: "The article of justification is the master and prince, the lord, the ruler, and the judge over all kinds of doctrines; it preserves and governs all church doctrine and raises up our conscience before God. Without this article the world is utter death and darkness. No error is so mean, so clumsy, and so outworn as not to be supremely pleasing to

human reason and to seduce us if we are without the knowledge and the contemplation of this article."[29]

Table 3.1

The Third Foundation Stone

1 Centered on God
2 Based on God's Word alone
3 Committed to faith alone
4 Devoted to Jesus Christ
5 Structured by three covenants

The doctrine of justification deals with what may be the deepest existential problem a human being can ever face: How can a sinner, an unjust person, ever withstand the judgment of a holy and just God? As the psalmist put it, "If You, LORD, should mark iniquities, . . . who could stand?" (Ps. 130:3). The question is obviously rhetorical. No one of us could possibly stand because none of us is righteous. For an unjust person to stand in the presence of a just God, that person must first be justified.

The Reformation focused on the question, *How* is a person justified? Clearly justification involves a legal judgment by God, a declaration by him that we are just. Then the burning question becomes this: On what basis or grounds does God ever declare anyone just? Must we first become just inherently before God will make such a declaration? Or does he declare us just before we are in ourselves actually just? John Calvin answered the question this way:

> A man is said to be justified in the sight of God when in the judgment of God he is deemed righteous, and is accepted on account of his righteousness; for as iniquity is abominable to God, so neither can the sinner find grace in his sight, so far as he is and so long as he is regarded as a sinner. Hence, wherever sin is, there also are the wrath and vengeance of God. He, on the other hand, is justified who is regarded not as a sinner, but as righteous, and as such stands acquitted at the judgment-seat of God, where all sinners are condemned. . . . Thus we simply interpret justification, as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favour as if we were righteous; and we say that this justification consists in the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.[30]

We notice some crucial words in this citation from Calvin: *deemed, regarded,* and *as if.* To say we are deemed or regarded as righteous in God's sight is to say we are considered, reckoned, or counted righteous in his sight. This means, as Calvin notes, that we are treated by God "as if" we were righteous.

Forensic Justification

The Reformed doctrine of justification is often called *forensic justification*. The term *forensic* is frequently heard in criminal trials. We hear of forensic evidence and forensic medicine. The word *forensic* refers to legal declarations. Forensic justification means we are declared righteous by God in a legal sense. The ground of this legal declaration is the imputation of Christ's righteousness to our account.

Luther captured the idea of forensic justification with his famous Latin phrase, *simul iustus et peccator,* "At the same time [simultaneously], just and sinner." Luther did not intend to affirm a contradiction. The two assertions, just and sinner,

refer to the same person at the same time, but not in the same relationship. The person considered in himself remains a sinner, yet at the same time, by virtue of the imputation of Christ's righteousness, the person is considered just in the sight of God.

This concept has been sharply criticized by Roman Catholics as involving a "legal fiction." They object that it casts a shadow on God's integrity because he declares a person to be just or righteous when that person is in fact not righteous. For God to turn fiction into fact is for God to be involved in a kind of fraud. For Rome, God can pronounce or declare a person to be righteous only if that person first becomes and is actually righteous. Anything less than this is fiction.

If Rome were correct on this matter, then Luther and the Reformers would say that the gospel itself is a fiction. To be sure, if God were to declare a person just or righteous when that person possesses no righteousness whatever, then God would be implicated in fraud. Rome is correct in insisting that the justified person must *possess* righteousness. The question is, How does the sinner acquire the necessary righteousness? This is the heart of the Reformation controversy.

The Roman Catholic church has emphatically and repeatedly condemned the ancient Pelagian heresy (though many Reformed theologians have claimed that Rome never really escaped it). Pelagius denied the doctrine of original sin, claiming that Adam's sin affected Adam alone and nobody else. Pelagius argued that man can become righteous without the assistance of divine grace. He allowed that grace "facilitates" the attainment of righteousness but is not

necessary for it to be achieved. We may become righteous without grace, though grace helps if we make use of it. In condemning Pelagius, Rome insisted that we cannot become righteous without grace.

For Rome the grace necessary for justification is twofold. In the first instance an atonement is required to satisfy the demands of God's punitive justice. That atonement is made for us, graciously, by Christ. On the cross Christ paid the debt required for our sins. For the full measure of Christ's work to be applied to us, however, something else must take place. For us to be justified we must first be made righteous. The idea of being "made" righteous is tied to the Latin word for justification, *iustificare*.

How then are we made righteous? The Roman Catholic doctrine of justification is complex. Let us summarize this view. Justification begins with baptism, the "instrumental cause" of justification. By this sacrament the grace of Christ's righteousness is infused into the soul. The baptized person is cleansed of original sin and is now in a state of grace. The person must cooperate with and assent to the infused grace in order to become righteous. The grace of justification is not permanent. It may be lost through the commission of mortal sin.

Rome distinguishes between *mortal* and *venial* sin. Venial sin is real sin but is less serious. Mortal sin is called *mortal* because it kills the justifying grace in the soul. Mortal sin destroys grace but not faith. A person can retain true faith and still not be justified.

When a person commits mortal sin and loses the grace of

justification received in baptism, he or she can be restored to a state of justification by the sacrament of penance. This sacrament is described by Rome as "the second plank of justification for those who have made shipwreck of their souls." The sinner confesses his sin to a priest, makes an act of contrition, receives priestly absolution, and then performs "works of satisfaction" to be restored to a state of grace.

These works of satisfaction lay behind much of the controversy in the sixteenth century. The works of satisfaction procure for the penitent congruous merit *(meritum de congruo)*. Congruous merit is not condign merit *(meritum de condigno),* merit so worthy that a just God is obligated to reward it. Congruous merit is rooted in grace and is not so virtuous as to impose an obligation on God. It is instead "congruous" or "fitting" for God to reward this kind of merit.

Martin Luther strongly rejected the concept of congruous merit:

> These arguments of the Scholastics about the merit of congruence and of worthiness *(de merito congrui et condigni)* are nothing but vain figments and dreamy speculations of idle folk about worthless stuff. Yet they form the foundation of the papacy, and on them it rests to this very day. For this is what every monk imagines: By observing the sacred rules of my order I can earn the grace of congruence, but by the works I do after I have received this grace I can accumulate a merit so great that it will not only be enough to bring me to eternal life but enough to sell and give it to others.[31]

Luther's vehemence on this point must be understood against the backdrop of the Reformation struggle. It is fair to say that the whole firestorm was ignited by an aspect of the sacrament of penance. The indulgence controversy that provoked Luther's famous *Ninety-Five Theses* focused on the

concept of works of satisfaction, a concept integral to penance. One work of satisfaction a penitent may perform is the giving of alms. To be sure, alms must be given in a proper spirit to be effective.

In the sixteenth century Rome embarked on a huge building project involving St. Peter's Basilica. The pope made special indulgences available to those who gave alms to support this work. The pope has the "power of the keys," which includes the power to grant indulgences for people who are in purgatory because they lack sufficient merit to enter heaven. The pope can draw on the treasury of merit and apply it to the needs of those in purgatory. This treasury includes merit amassed there by the saints. The saints acquired not only sufficient merit to gain entrance into heaven, but also a surplus for others who had not. This excess or surplus merit is achieved by performing works of supererogation, works that are above and beyond the call of duty, such as martyrdom.

Johann Tetzel scandalized Luther by his crass method (unauthorized by Rome) of peddling indulgences. Tetzel marketed indulgences with the ditty, "Every time a coin in the coffer rings, a soul from purgatory springs." He gave peasants the impression that one could purchase salvation for departed friends and relatives simply by giving alms, with or without the spirit of penitence. At this point in his life Luther himself was keenly interested in these indulgences. He expressed remorse that his parents were still alive, preventing him from insuring their entrance into heaven by securing indulgences for them. Instead he gave alms in behalf of his grandparents.

When Luther raised questions about Tetzel's methods, he

began to reevaluate the entire system of indulgences, including the sacrament of penance itself. He attacked the whole system, paying special attention to the concept of performing works of merit of any kind, whether congruous or condign. He insisted that the only merit that can avail for the sinner's justification is the merit of Christ.

Rome agreed that the merit of Christ is necessary for salvation. Likewise Rome insisted on the necessity of grace and faith for justification. Often the difference between the Roman view of justification and the Protestant view is misstated. Some say Rome believes in justification by merit and Protestants believe in justification by grace. Rome believes in justification by works, while Protestants believe in justification by faith. Rome believes in justification by the church, while Protestants believe in justification by Christ. To state the differences this way is to radically distort the issue and to be guilty of gross slander against Rome.

The Roman Catholic church believes that grace, faith, and Christ are all necessary for the sinner's justification. They are *necessary* conditions, but not *sufficient* conditions. While grace is necessary for justification, it is not enough. Merit (at least congruous merit) must be added to grace.

Rome declares that faith is necessary for justification. Faith is called the foundation *(fundamentum)* and the root *(radix)* of justification. Works must be added to faith, however, for justification to occur.

Likewise the righteousness of Christ is necessary for justification. This righteousness must be infused into the soul sacramentally. The sinner must cooperate with and assent to

this infused righteousness, so that real righteousness becomes inherent in the person before he can be justified.

Missing from the Roman Catholic formula for justification is the crucial word *alone*. It is not an exaggeration to say that the eye of the Reformation tornado was this one little word. The Reformers insisted that justification is by grace alone *(sola gratia)*, by faith alone *(sola fide),* and through Christ alone *(soli Christo)*.

Justification by Faith Alone

To grasp the full significance of the issue of justification, we must turn our attention to the meaning of the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone. While Rome maintains that the instrumental cause of justification is baptism, the Reformers insisted the instrumental cause is faith. An instrumental cause is the "means by which" something takes place. For example, when a sculptor creates a statue, the instrumental cause of the sculpture is the sculptor's chisel. The chisel is the means by which the sculptor fashions his art out of the stone.

In our justification, faith is the means by which we are linked to Christ and receive the benefits of his saving work. By faith we receive the transfer or imputation of the righteousness of Christ. Faith is not only a necessary condition, it is a sufficient condition for Christ's righteousness to be imputed to us. Faith, true faith, is all that is required to be justified by the righteousness of Christ. Faith trusts in and lays hold of a righteousness that is not our own.

"Justification by faith alone" is merely shorthand for "justification by the righteousness of Christ alone." His merit, and only his merit, is sufficient to satisfy the demands of God's justice. It is precisely this merit that is given to us by faith. Christ is our righteousness. God clothes his filthy creatures with the coat of Christ's righteousness. This is the very heart of the gospel, expressed not only in the New Testament but in the Old as well.

We must possess righteousness in order to be justified. The question is, Whose righteousness justifies us? Are we justified by a righteousness that is inherent in us, or by somebody else's righteousness that is imputed to us? Luther and the Reformers insisted that we are justified by a righteousness that is not in us but outside of us *(extra nos)*. Luther said this:

> [A Christian] is righteous and holy by an alien or foreign holiness—I call it this for the sake of instruction—that is, he is righteous by the mercy and grace of God. This mercy and grace is not something human; it is not some sort of disposition or quality in the heart. It is a divine blessing, given us through the true knowledge of the Gospel, when we know or believe that our sin has been forgiven through the grace and merit of Christ. . . . Is not this righteousness an alien righteousness? It consists completely in the indulgence of another and is a pure gift of God, who shows mercy and favor for Christ's sake. . . . Therefore a Christian is not formally righteous; he is not righteous according to substance or quality. . . .[32]

The "alien righteousness" of which Luther speaks is the righteousness of Christ. This righteousness does not adhere *in* us; it is earned *for* us. The Reformers agreed, of course, that Christ dwells in the Christian and so does the Holy Spirit. The ground of our justification is not this indwelling, however, but the merit of Christ wrought in himself, not in us. It is the legal

application of his righteousness to us by which we are declared just. This is no legal fiction because real righteousness is really imputed. There is nothing fictional about the righteousness of Christ.

Imputation is at the heart of the Christian faith. If imputation is fiction, then the atonement is fiction. Christ's cross was real, and the punishment he received in our behalf was likewise real. He was the Lamb of God who bore our sins. How did he do that? As was symbolized in the Old Testament, our sins are transferred to Christ by imputation, not by infusion. God counted Christ's suffering as worthy satisfaction for our guilt.

Our salvation rests not only in Christ's atoning death, but also in his life of perfect, active obedience. If to secure our redemption Christ only needed to make an atonement for us, he could have come down from heaven and gone directly to the cross. But he also had to fulfill all righteousness by submitting at every point to the law of God. By his sinless life he achieved positive merit, which merit is imputed to all who put their faith in him. Christ not only died for us, he lived for us as well.

The dispute between justification by the *infusion* of Christ's righteousness and the *imputation* of his righteousness is no tempest in a teapot. It makes all the difference in the world whether the ground of my justification rests within me or is accomplished for me. Christ fulfilled the law for me and gained the merit necessary for my justification. This is the ground not only of my justification, but also of my assurance of salvation. If I must wait until I cooperate with the righteousness of Christ infused within me, to the degree that I become inherently righteous, I despair of ever attaining salvation. This is not

gospel or "good news"; it is bad news.

I love the church. It is the body of Christ. It nurtures my soul and aids in my sanctification. But the church cannot redeem me. Christ and Christ alone can save me. The sacraments are precious to me. They edify and strengthen me, but they cannot justify me.

Saving Faith

When Martin Luther declared that justification is by faith alone, serious questions arose about the nature of saving faith. Rome appealed to James 2:24 to repudiate the Reformation doctrine: "You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only."

At first glance it seems that the Bible could not repudiate the doctrine of justification by faith alone more clearly than this. Then we read Paul's words in Romans: "Where *is* boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law." (Rom. 3:27–28)

On one hand, James says a man is justified by works and not by faith only. On the other, Paul says we are justified by faith *apart* from works of the law. The problem is exacerbated when we see that both James and Paul appeal to Abraham to prove their points.

Though both Paul and James use the same Greek word for "justify," they are not using it in the same sense. They are dealing with different matters. Paul is clearly expounding the doctrine of justification, making it clear that it is by faith, not

works. He appeals to Genesis 15, where Abraham is counted righteous by God the moment he believes. Paul argues that Abraham was justified *before* he performed any works of obedience.

James appeals to Genesis 22, where Abraham offers Isaac on the altar. Here Abraham is "justified," but in another sense. The question James is addressing is found earlier in chapter 2: "What *does* it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?" (James 2:14)

James is asking what kind of faith is saving faith. He makes it clear that no one is justified by a mere profession of faith. Anyone can say he has faith. But saying it and having it are not the same thing. True faith always manifests itself in works. If no works follow from faith, then the alleged faith is "dead" and useless. Abraham demonstrated his faith by his works. He "showed" he had true faith, thus "justifying" his claim to faith. Abraham's profession of faith is vindicated in his demonstration of his faith in Genesis 22.

Paul argues that Abraham was already justified before God in Genesis 15 because he had true faith. Abraham did not need to prove the authenticity of his faith to God. God is able to read the heart. We are not. The only way I can see another person's faith is by observing his works. John Calvin remarks:

> If you would make James consistent with the other Scriptures and with himself, you must give the word *justify,* as used by him, a different meaning from what it has with Paul. In the sense of Paul we are said to be justified when the remembrance of our unrighteousness is obliterated, and we are counted righteous. Had James had the same meaning it would have been absurd for him to quote the words of Moses, "Abraham believed God," *etc.* The context runs thus: "Was not Abraham our father justified by works when

> he had offered Isaac his son upon the altar? Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect? And the Scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness." If it is absurd to say that the effect was prior to its cause, either Moses falsely declares in that passage that Abraham's faith was imputed for righteousness, or Abraham, by his obedience in offering up Isaac, did not merit righteousness. . . . What then? It appears certain that he is speaking of the manifestation, not of the imputation of righteousness, as if he had said, Those who are justified by true faith prove their justification by obedience and good works, not by a bare and imaginary semblance of faith. In one word, he is not discussing the mode of justification, but requiring that the justification of believers shall be operative. And as Paul contends that men are justified without the aid of works, so James will not allow any to be regarded as justified who are destitute of good works.[33]

At issue here is the question of genuine faith. The Reformers taught that "justification is by faith alone, but not by a faith that is alone." True faith is never alone. It always manifests itself in works. Works that flow out of faith, however, are in no way the ground of our justification. They contribute nothing of merit before God. The only ground or basis of our justification is the merit of Christ. Nor is faith itself a meritorious work or the ground of our justification. Faith is a gift of God's grace, so it possesses no merit of its own.

Like James, Luther opposed antinomianism. Saving faith is not dead. It is a vital or living faith *(fides viva)*. Live faith produces real works. If no works follow from our profession of faith, this proves that our faith is not alive, but is what Calvin called an "imaginary semblance."

Luther's *simul iustus et peccator* is open to misunderstanding if this point is not made clear. Though we are justified and counted righteous before we are righteous in ourselves and while we are still sinners, we are nevertheless

sinners who are in the process of becoming righteous. Our sanctification *begins* the moment we have faith and are justified. We must remember that a justified person is a changed person. One who has real faith is regenerate and indwelled by the Holy Spirit. The effect of this change is not only necessary and inevitable, but immediate. If no fruit follows, then no faith is present. If no faith is present, then there is no justification.

For Rome justification is the result of faith plus works. In Reformed theology justification is the result of faith alone, a faith that always produces works. Antinomianism teaches justification by faith minus works. Reformed theology rejects both the Roman and the antinomian views.

Early Reformed theologians customarily distinguished among various elements or aspects of saving faith. For the most part they discerned three chief aspects known as *notitia, assensus,* and *fiducia*.

Noticia refers to the content of saving faith. Faith has an object. It is not empty or a faith in nothing. Christianity rejects the maxim, "It doesn't matter what you believe if only you are sincere." Though sincerity is a virtue, it is possible to be sincerely wrong and to put your faith in something or someone that cannot save. People can sincerely worship or have faith in idols. Such faith is repugnant to God and cannot save. Certain information must be known, understood, and believed in order to have saving faith. For example, we must believe in God and in the person and work of Jesus to be saved. This is the data *(notae)* of faith. Without belief in the essentials of Christianity, saving faith is absent.

In addition to this data or content, one must also assent mentally *(assensus)* to the truth of this information. Saving faith gives intellectual assent to the truth of Christ's deity, atonement, resurrection, and so forth. We do not believe in what we believe to be a myth. If we reject the truth claims of the gospel, we cannot be justified.

The presence of both *notitia* and *assensus* is still insufficient for justification. Even the devil has these elements. Satan is aware of the data of the gospel and is more certain of their truth than we are. Yet he hates and despises the truth of Christ. He will not rely on Christ or his righteousness because he is the enemy of Christ. The elements of *notitia* and *assensus* are necessary conditions for justification (we cannot be justified without them), but they are not sufficient conditions. A third element must be present before we possess the faith that justifies.

This element is *fiducia,* a personal trust and reliance on Christ, and on him alone, for one's justification. *Fiducia* also involves the affections. By the power of the Holy Spirit the believer sees, embraces, and acquiesces in the sweetness and loveliness of Christ. Saving faith loves the object of our faith, Jesus himself. This element is so crucial to the debate over justification. If a sinner relies on his own works or on a combination of his righteousness and that of Christ, then he is not trusting in the gospel.

Synthetic Justification

The Reformed doctrine of justification has been called

"synthetic justification"; the Roman Catholic doctrine, "analytical justification." An analytical statement is true by definition. It is a tautology. "A bachelor is an unmarried man" is true by definition or by analysis, because the idea of "unmarried man-ness" is already contained in the word *bachelor*. The predicate adds nothing that is not already present in the subject. The same is true of the proposition "A triangle is a three-sided figure" and of the equation 2 + 2 = 4.

A synthetic statement, on the other hand, does add information in the predicate that is not inherent in the subject. In the statement "The bachelor is bald," baldness is new information. Though all bachelors are unmarried men, not all bachelors are bald. Here an idea is added in the predicate that is not present in the subject.

How does this apply to theology? When we say the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification is "analytical," we mean that God declares the believer just because, under analysis, the person is just. God only justifies those who have already been made just. God only declares just those who are just. He adds nothing to their inherent righteousness to make them just. To be sure something has been added, the infused grace of Christ's righteousness. This addition did not effect righteousness, it only made it possible through the believer's cooperation.

In the Reformed view of justification, something is added to the predicate that is not found in the subject. There is a "synthesis" because of the addition of Christ's righteousness by way of imputation. God does not declare the sinner just because the sinner, considered in himself, is just. God deems

him just because of what is added to his account, the merit of the righteousness of Christ.

Although justification is by *faith,* if considered from another angle it may be proper to say that justification is by *works*. Ultimately justification is by works in the sense that we are justified by the works of Christ. Here the word *by* has a different reference. Normally the word *by* refers to the instrumental cause of justification, which is faith. It is by faith that the merit of Christ is appropriated to us. When we say we are justified "by" works, then *by* refers to the works of Christ, the meritorious ground or cause of our justification. We can combine these two concepts by saying that we are justified by faith in the works performed in our behalf by Christ.

The Remission of Sins

Justification involves the forgiveness and remission of our sins. We commonly use the word *remission* in two ways. When a cancerous tumor shrinks or disappears, we say the cancer is in remission. When we pay a bill, we say we have remitted payment. The root of the word *remission* means "to send." We derive the words *mission* or *missionary* from this root. (The words *missive* and *missile* derive from the same root.) In a basic sense the remission of sins involves the sending away of sins. It is a kind of removal of sin from our account. In the remission of sins, God blots out our transgressions from the divine ledger and removes our sins from us. This remission is integral to divine forgiveness.

John Calvin says: ". . . justification by faith is reconciliation

with God, and . . . this consists solely in the remission of sins. . . . For if those whom the Lord hath reconciled to himself are estimated by works, they will still prove to be in reality sinners, while they ought to be pure and free from sin. It is evident, therefore, that the only way in which those whom God embraces are made righteous, is by having their pollutions wiped away by the remission of sins, so that this justification may be termed in one word the remission of sins."[34]

The Apostle Paul stresses this aspect of justification:

> . . . For if Abraham was justified by works, he has *something of which* to boast, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt.
>
> But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: "Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin."
>
> Romans 4:2–8

Here the apostle explains clearly how the remission of sin relates to imputation. He speaks of the blessedness that attends God's imputing Christ's righteousness to the believer. This is the positive aspect of imputation. He also speaks of the blessedness that attends God's *not imputing* something, namely our sin. This is the negative aspect. In justifying us God does impute something (the righteousness of Christ) and does not impute something (our sin).

Martin Luther summarizes the idea of remission of sins:

> A Christian is at once a sinner and a saint; he is wicked and pious at the same time. For so far as our persons are concerned, we are in sins and are sinners in

> our own name. But Christ brings us another name, in which there is the forgiveness of sins, that for His sake sins are remitted and pardoned. So both statements are true: There are sins, for the old Adam is not entirely dead as yet; yet the sins are *not* there. The reason is this: For Christ's sake God does not want to see them. I have my eyes on them. I feel and see them well enough. But there is Christ, commanding that I be told I should repent, that is, confess myself a sinner and believe the forgiveness of sins in His name. For repentance, remorse, and knowledge of sin, though necessary, is not enough; faith in the forgiveness of sins in the name of Christ must be added. But where there is such a faith, God no longer sees any sins; for then you stand before God, not in your name but in Christ's name. He adorns you with grace and righteousness, although in your own eyes and personally you are a poor sinner, full of weakness and unbelief.[35]

The remission of sins is tied to the atoning work of Christ. In the atonement both propitiation and expiation are involved. Propitiation refers to Christ's satisfaction of God's justice, making it "propitious" for God to forgive us. Propitiation may be seen as a vertical act of Christ directed to the Father. At the same time, Christ is an expiation for our sins, removing or carrying away from us our sins. As the Lamb of God, Jesus is our sin-bearer, taking our sins away and bearing them for us. On the cross Christ fulfills what is symbolized both by the slain lamb of Old Testament sacrifices and by the scapegoat on whom the sins of the people are transferred. The scapegoat was not sacrificed, but was sent into the wilderness to take far away the sins of the people. This action symbolized the remission of sins.

One Gospel of Christ

The controversy over the doctrine of justification in the

sixteenth century focused on the nature of the gospel itself. Both sides understood that something essential to Christianity was at stake. The church must always struggle with errors, but this controversy involved an article that is both central to the gospel and essential to it.

The Apostle Paul frequently admonishes and instructs Christians not to be quarrelsome, divisive, or combative. He extols the virtues of patience, charity, and tolerance. Yet when it came to the gospel itself, this same apostle was uncompromising. He considered some things utterly intolerable, and one is the distortion of the gospel. He wrote to the church in Galatia:

> I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed. For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a servant of Christ.
>
> Galatians 1:6–10

Here the apostle uses strong language to condemn the perversion of the gospel. He insists there is only one gospel. The gospel he belabors in his letter to the Galatians is the gospel of justification by faith. The Judaizers were corrupting that gospel by adding works to it. Twice Paul pronounces an apostolic curse on this distortion, using the Greek word from which we get the English word *anathema*.

At the Roman Catholic Council of Trent in the sixteenth century, Rome condemned the Reformed doctrine of

justification by faith alone and declared it anathema. They did this because they were convinced that the Reformed doctrine was “another gospel,” a distortion of the biblical gospel.

The Reformers believed that in condemning justification by faith alone, the Roman communion was in fact condemning the biblical gospel itself. If justification by faith alone is indeed the biblical gospel, then Rome, by condemning it, condemned herself. Although Rome has maintained a strong commitment to many essential truths of the Christian faith, at Trent she rejected the article on which the church stands or falls, and Rome therefore fell as a church.

In table 3.2 differences between the Roman Catholic and Reformed doctrines of justification are listed. The list is not exhaustive, but it reveals that the approaches are not only different, but also systemic. The entire concept of salvation, including the role played by Christ and the role played by us, is different. The two views are fundamentally disparate and incompatible. Attempts to harmonize them are doomed to failure at the outset.

Table 3.2

Justification

Roman Catholic View	**Reformed View**
Instrumental cause: baptism	Instrumental cause: faith
Infused righteousness	Imputed righteousness
Inherent righteousness	Alien righteousness
Analytical justification	Synthetic justification
Grace plus merit	Grace alone

Faith plus works	Faith alone
Christ's righteousness plus ours	Christ's righteousness alone
No assurance of salvation	Assurance of salvation

The doctrine of justification by faith alone is relatively easy to grasp with our minds, but to get it firmly in the marrow of our bones and in our very bloodstreams we must be ever vigilant. It is easy to forget it or to allow its clarity to be obscured. Martin Luther made this observation:

> There are few of us who know and understand this article, and I treat it again and again because I greatly fear that after we have laid our head to rest, it will soon be forgotten and will again disappear. . . . And indeed we cannot grasp or exhaust Christ, the eternal Righteousness, with one sermon or thought; for to learn to appreciate Him is an everlasting lesson which we shall not be able to finish either in this or in yonder life.[36]

4

DEVOTED TO THE PROPHET, PRIEST, AND KING

Just as Reformed theology shares a common foundation with Catholic Christianity with respect to the doctrine of God, so also it shares a common faith with respect to the person and work of Christ. The great Christological councils of the fourth and fifth centuries, the Council of Nicea (325) and the Council of Chalcedon (451), form the historic basis of Reformed Christology.

In the early centuries the Son of God's relationship to God the Father was a hotly disputed issue. Monotheism is so important in the Old Testament that it was important for the church, while confessing its faith in Christ's deity, not to compromise historic monotheism.

Serious heresies emerged that threatened the church's confession of Christ's deity. Two major heresies were based on the concept of *monarchianism*. The term *monarch* in our language describes royalty. Originally, however, the word was more directly linked to its Greek origin. The word *monarch* is a hybrid composed of a prefix and a root. The prefix *mono* means "one." The root *arch* means "beginning" or "chief, ruler." When combined, *mono-arch* or *monarch* means "one or single

chief or ruler." The idea of monarchianism, therefore, refers to God as the one or single ruler.

Table 4.1

The Fourth Foundation Stone

1 Centered on God
2 Based on God's Word alone
3 Committed to faith alone
4 Devoted to Jesus Christ
5 Structured by three covenants

The first type of monarchianism to threaten the church was called *modalistic monarchianism*. This view was linked to an old form of pantheism that saw all of the world or reality as a mode or level of God's being. This view was popular in both gnosticism and neo-Platonism. The heretic Sabellius argued that Christ was of one essence with God but was a lower mode of being than God himself. As the rays of the sun share a common essence or substance with the sun but may be distinguished from the sun itself, so Christ shares the same essence with God but is not God.

In this modalistic schema, everything can be said to be a part of God's essence. His being "emanates" from the center of his pure being. The further from that center the emanation is, the less purely it manifests God. Inert matter such as rocks are distant from the core of divine being, while angels, demiurges, and other spiritual beings are closer to the core of divine being. Jesus is a spirit being or demiurge, close to the core of divine

being, of the same essence or the same being, radiating or emanating from the divine being, but he is not the divine being. Jesus partakes of "divinity" but is not really God.

At the Council of Antioch in 267 the church rejected Sabellius and his formula that Jesus is *homoousios* with the Father. *Homoousios* means "of the same essence, substance, or being," so Sabellius was declaring that Jesus is of the same essence as God, but he was still lower than God in his modalistic order of being. In place of *homoousios,* the church declared that Jesus was *homoiousios*, "of similar or like substance." The church rejected the term *homoousios* because it was loaded with the gnostic idea of modalism.

The Council of Nicea

In the fourth century the church faced a new heresy cloaked in a different form of monarchianism, called *dynamic monarchianism.* It was "dynamic" in that it involved a kind of movement or change. In this view Jesus was not eternal God, but he "became" God via adoption. This view was championed by the heretic Arius, who had been influenced by the teachings of Paul of Samosata and Lucian of Antioch.

Arius was jealous to preserve pure monotheism. He saw Christ as the most exalted creature, indeed the first creature made by God. Christ was created first and then he, as a creature, created the rest of the world. Arius appealed to biblical texts that refer to Christ as "begotten" and the "first-born of all creation." In Greek the term *begotten* means "to be, become, or happen." In biological terms, to have been begotten

is to have a beginning in time. If Christ was begotten, then he must have had a beginning in time and is not eternal. If he is not eternal, then he cannot be God.

For Arius, Jesus is preeminent and exalted, but originally he was not God. He was adopted into the godhead by virtue of his perfect obedience, by which he demonstrates his "oneness" with the Father. He is "one" with the Father in purpose and mission, but not in being. Arius embraced the formula accepted earlier at Antioch, that Jesus is *homoiousios* with God, that he is "like" God.

Arius and his followers were condemned as heretics at the Council of Nicea in 325. The Nicene Creed declares that Jesus was "begotten, not made." Here Jesus was believed to be eternally begotten of the Father. The Greek word *begotten* was taken not in a biological sense or in any sense that implies Christ had a beginning in time. Rather the term *begotten* has a filial sense, calling attention to the Son's unique relationship with the Father. The New Testament refers to Christ as the "only-begotten" of the Father, the *monogenēs,* a term that emphasizes the singular, once-for-all relationship between the Son and the Father.

One of the most ironic developments at Nicea is the council's affirmation of the term *homoousios* as the new benchmark of Christian orthodoxy. Nicea declared that Christ was coeternal and cosubstantial with the Father, using the term *homoousios*. Here the church declared that Jesus is not merely of like essence with the Father, but that he is of the same essence or substance with the Father.

At first glance it may seem that the church retreated to the