

# Theology Matters

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*Interim editor's note: Hello again! We apologize for the extended absence of this print edition of Theology Matters. The last year has been a time of transition for us. We are grateful to God for so many friends who have stayed with us through this time. Thanks to their gifts, the transition has ended as we had prayed: with the calling of a new executive director, the Rev. Dr. Richard Burnett. You can learn more about Dr. Burnett on the back cover of this issue. Dr. Burnett, like many of us, identifies his theology as "Reformed." But what does it mean to be "Reformed"? To answer that question, it helps to look back at the Reformation from which the term comes. That's what Theology Matters board member Michael Bush does in his article (p. 11) digging into the history of the much-repeated slogan ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda ("a reformed church, always needing to be reformed"). Here's a hint: The phrase does not mean that the church is forever changing to accommodate the culture. Similarly, in the lead article of this issue, fellow board member James C. Goodloe IV asks what insights John Calvin might offer us in situations where the unity and truthfulness of the church seem to be in tension.*

## John Calvin on the Unity and Truthfulness of the Church by James C. Goodloe IV

John Calvin wrote a great deal about the unity and truthfulness of the church in his day. We can continue to learn from him not only about these but also about church councils and constitutions, and especially about how all of these can apply to the faith, polity, and life of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) in our day.

### Introduction

Returning to Calvin is not without difficulty. No less a teacher than Karl Barth, a German-speaking Swiss theologian of the twentieth century, lamented to his friend Eduard Thurneysen, "Calvin is a cataract, a primeval forest, a demonic power, something directly down from Himalaya, absolutely Chinese, strange, mythological; I lack completely the means ... even to assimilate this phenomenon, not to speak of presenting it adequately."<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Barth never let that stop him, and in the second sentence after this he added, "I

could gladly and profitably set myself down and spend all the rest of my life just with Calvin." Moreover, Charles Partee, retired professor from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, appears to have done just that, to have spent his life with Calvin, and with that he assures us, "The theology of John Calvin is not only a *permanent*, but also a *present*, resource for Christian understanding and faith."<sup>2</sup> This encourages us to pursue our study.

We approach this task of learning from Calvin with the larger understanding that the Protestant Reformation

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within which he lived and worked was itself a massive correction in the faith and life of the church. Historical Reformed theology, therefore, was written not for its own sake but in order to serve that larger purpose of the correction of the church. This suggests that any contemporary faithfulness to the Reformed theological tradition on our part would include a similar openness and commitment to being corrected and reformed both in theology and therefore also in the faith and life of the church.

So it was that John Calvin, as the leading theologian of the Reformation, wrote theology not for the joy of theology or for the satisfaction of intellectual curiosity but for the service of the gospel and of the church. And one of the very real and practical problems he faced as a reformer, as a theologian, and as a pastor was the struggle to maintain simultaneously both the unity of the church and the truthfulness of the church. Unity purchased by sacrificing truthfulness was not church unity. Truthfulness attained by forfeiting unity risked not being church truthfulness. How could the oneness of the church and the truthfulness of the church be held together? Even in Calvin's day it was already an old struggle. Paul wrote about it in his letters to the Corinthians as well as to others. Augustine, who lived from A.D. 354 to 430, who helped guide the church through the fall of the Roman Empire, and who therefore helped guide the Empire itself through its fall, had much to say about it. It is not surprising that Calvin, also, had to deal with concerns about both the unity and the truthfulness of the church.

Calvin wrote about these issues not for the sake of theology as such but instead precisely for the sake of the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and for building up the church of Jesus Christ. My hope here is that we can learn what Calvin had to say about the church then in order to apply it to our own struggles to maintain the unity and truthfulness of the church today, especially within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

I realize that this project is complicated by the change in circumstance from the relative unity of the church in Calvin's day, before and during the Reformation, to the almost unimaginable disunity of the church today, with tens of thousands of divisions and denominations around the world. That complication is further tinged by the realization that to a great extent the denominational divisions defining the Presbyterian Church trace their origin to Calvin. This could make it difficult for us to hear his counsels to church unity. But lest we retreat from such apparent contradictions, let me invite us to learn from Calvin what we can both about the doctrine of the church and also about the reality of the church and so learn even from these tensions what we can.

As we shall soon see, Calvin had some hard things to say about the church of his day. And at least some of them continue to apply to the church today. I want to hear the hard things that Calvin says not because I take any joy in bashing the church but because I hope to learn from him what we might do yet today to help the church be more faithful. Regardless of where you stand on the presenting issues of the day, surely it cannot be denied that we, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), have gotten ourselves into a profoundly disturbing situation, particularly when viewed through Calvin's understanding of the unity and truthfulness of the church. What needs to be done to correct the theology, faith, and life of the church?

### Overview

So, in this study I want to look at Calvin's major theological work, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, especially Book Four, which is about the church, in order to hold up four things that he wrote about the church in his day which can continue to help us in the church today. The four points build on each other, so it will be important for us to hold each of them in mind to see what their implications are when taken together and to see what conclusions we may draw.

It is my intention to examine first (1) what Calvin has to say about the one true church with which we must keep unity as he sets this forth in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book Four, chapter one.<sup>3</sup> We shall then look second (2) at his comparison of this one true church with the false church, which he makes in Book Four, chapter two. The point of holding these two together is that it is not enough to seek or to enforce church unity apart from the question of whether the church in which unity is sought is true. Only truthfulness will lead to the unity of the church, so that unity without truthfulness is no church at all. Thus unity and truthfulness cannot be separated, even though they must be distinguished.

It is also my intention to explore two other points of entry into the question of what Calvin says about the church of his day that can apply to the life of the church in our day. So my third (3) point has to do with provincial councils of the church. Calvin writes mostly about general or universal councils and their authority in Book Four, chapter nine. What he says there about provincial councils, geographically limited expressions of the church, can help us understand today's denominations. The fourth (4) point has to do with church constitutions, as dealt with in Book Four, chapter ten. Words matter. Threats to the constitutional order of the church threaten the unity, truthfulness, and very existence of the church, and this danger is exacerbated in provincial denominations.

## The Unity of the Church

Let us begin with Calvin's *Institutes*, Book Four, chapter one. The unity of the church is confessed and affirmed as an article of faith over and against the apparent and all too real disunity of the church. The confessed and actualized unity of the church is threatened by splits within, and by departures from, the church. So it is that much discussion of the unity of the church has to do with questions of leaving the church: Is it possible to leave the church? Is it proper or permissible to leave the church? If so, under what circumstances? If not, why not?

Moreover, might it ever be not only permissible but mandatory to leave the church if the church ceased being the church? Would not the leaving then be not from the church but from what used to be the church? Within the context of these sorts of questions, Calvin's discussion of church unity in the *Institutes* might be understood in this way: Book Four, chapter one, says why we cannot leave the church, and Book Four, chapter two, says when we must leave the church. We should not hear the one without the other, but it is in trying to hear both fairly that we encounter tensions.

Let me elaborate upon what Calvin says, offering first a few quotations about the nature and unity of the church from Book Four, chapter one:

Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists....

If it has the ministry of the Word and honors it, if it has the administration of the sacraments, it deserves without doubt to be held and considered a church. For it is certain that such things are not without fruit. (IV.1.9)

That is to say, if a local congregation exhibits these realities—the pure preaching and hearing of the word, and the right administration of the sacraments—Calvin understands and affirms that such a congregation is a true part of the larger true and universal church of Jesus Christ. Because such a congregation is a true part of the true church, unity with and within it is to be maintained, and disunity or departure from it can be regarded in only a profoundly negative way: “The Lord esteems the communion of his church so highly that he counts as a traitor and apostate from Christianity anyone who arrogantly leaves any Christian society, provided it cherishes the true ministry of Word and sacraments.” (IV.1.10)

Calvin emphasizes the importance of these marks of the church by indicating that even a host of other negative realities cannot be allowed to count against them:

The pure ministry of the Word and pure mode of celebrating the sacraments are, as we say, sufficient pledge and guarantee that we may safely embrace as church any society in which both these marks exist. The principle extends to the point that we must not reject it so long as it retains them, even if it otherwise swarms with many faults. (IV.1.12)

In fact, even if these marks of the church are marred with error, as so often they are, that would not justify leaving:

Some fault may creep into the administration of either doctrine or sacraments, but this ought not to estrange us from communion with the church. For not all the articles of true doctrine are of the same sort. Some are so necessary to know that they should be certain and unquestioned by all men as the proper principles of religion. Such are: God is one; Christ is God and the Son of God; our salvation rests in God's mercy; and the like. Among the churches there are other articles of doctrine disputed which do not break the unity of faith.... Does this not sufficiently indicate that a difference of opinion over these nonessential matters should in no wise be the basis of schism among Christians? (IV.1.12)

This passage raises the issue of what is and what is not an essential doctrine and of what is and what is not a nonessential matter. For our discussion, suffice it to say that even arguments about what is essential and what is nonessential are not a sufficient reason to spurn the unity of the church:

We must not thoughtlessly forsake the church because of any petty dissensions. For in it alone is kept safe and uncorrupted that doctrine in which piety stands sound and the use of the sacraments ordained by the Lord is guarded. In the meantime, if we try to correct what displeases us, we do so out of duty. (IV.1.12)

Turning to the New Testament for an example, Calvin catalogs the vices of the Corinthians and still insists that they are part of the church: “The church abides among them because the ministry of Word and sacraments remains unreputed there.” (IV.1.14) After many such declarations, Calvin summarizes his teaching on the unity of and with the true church as follows:

Let the following two points, then, stand firm. First, he who voluntarily deserts the outward communion of the church (where the Word of God is preached and the sacraments are administered) is without excuse. Secondly, neither the vices of the few nor the vices of the many in any way prevent us from duly professing our faith there in ceremonies ordained by God. For a godly conscience is not wounded by the unworthiness of another, whether pastor or layman; nor are the sacraments less pure and salutary for a holy and upright man because they are handled by unclean persons. (IV.1.19)

### *Observations*

I observe two things here. On one hand, no amount of simple immorality or even wickedness provides an excuse for leaving the church. There has always been sin in the church, and there always will be sin in the church, and the church is about forgiveness. Calvin has no patience with overly strict or harsh discipline.

On the other hand, however, his definitions of the church are laced with a series of qualifiers: purely, honors, true, pure, uncorrupted, and unrepudiated. These are not rhetorical flourishes. Instead, only when these qualifiers are met is the entity being discussed a church. If and when these qualifiers are not satisfied, it is no longer a church with which we are dealing. This is not merely my conclusion. Calvin himself, in setting forth the true church, explicitly acknowledged the possibility of an entity claiming to be the church not actually being so:

We see what great heed we are to take.... In order that the title “church” may not deceive us, every congregation that claims the name “church” must be tested by this standard.... If, devoid of Word and sacraments, [a congregation] advertises the name of church, we must ... scrupulously beware such deceits. (IV.1.11)

Again, Calvin’s definition of what it means to be the church necessarily sets forth at the same time those circumstances under which a group of people is not a church. Moreover, if and when that happens, departure is not only allowed but, we must think, mandated precisely in order to continue to be the church. Calvin, of course, argued strenuously for the unity of the true church. But by that very qualifier, he pointed to the reasons for the departure of the reformers from what was no longer the true church.

### **The Truthfulness of the Church**

This leads to Calvin’s *Institutes*, Book Four, chapter two, where he expands upon the significance of these qualifiers by contrasting the true church with the false.

It is not only the case that the church must be marked by the Word of God but also that the church must be ruled by the Word of God alone: “To sum up, since the church is Christ’s Kingdom, and he reigns by his Word alone, will it not be clear to any man that those are lying words by which the Kingdom of Christ is imagined to exist apart from his scepter (that is, his most holy Word)?” (IV.2.4). If there were a gathering of people with the appearance and perhaps even the intention of being the church, but the Word of God was neither reigning over them nor even present among them—and I, for one, have attended what purported to be Sunday morning services where the Word was neither read nor preached—if people congregate in the form of a church but the Word either is not present or is present but not reigning alone, there, it is not to be doubted, is no church at all.

Calvin saw as much in his day, and for such reasons—despite everything we all know he said about church unity; in fact, precisely because of everything he said about the unity of the true church—those we know as reformers were expelled from, or, as he characterized it, withdrew from, what had been, but what they judged no longer to be, the church:

Now they treat us as persons guilty of schism and heresy because we preach a doctrine unlike theirs, do not obey their laws, and hold our separate assemblies for prayers, baptism and the celebration of the Supper, and other holy activities.

This is indeed a very grave accusation but one that needs no long and labored defense. Those who, by making dissension, break the communion of the church are called heretics and schismatics. Now this communion is held together by two bonds, agreement in sound doctrine and brotherly love. Hence, between heretics and schismatics Augustine makes this sort of distinction: heretics corrupt the sincerity of the faith with false dogmas; but schismatics, while sometimes even of the same faith, break the bond of fellowship.

But it must also be noted that this conjunction of love so depends upon unity of faith that it ought to be its beginning, end, and, in fine, its sole rule.... Apart from the Lord’s Word there is not an agreement of believers but a faction of wicked men. (IV.2.5)

Now let them go and shout that we who have withdrawn from their church are heretics, since the sole cause of our separation is that they could in no way bear the pure profession of truth.... It is enough for me that it behooved us to withdraw from them that we might come to Christ. (IV.2.6)

It is worth noting at this point that Calvin not only protested Rome's exclusive claim to be the true church but also held up the Greek churches as a counterexample (IV.2.2). And it is fascinating that he felt no compulsion to unite with a Greek church but instead was content to withdraw and to form another part of the one true church. Moreover, not only did Calvin and others withdraw from what they no longer regarded as the church, but also he found it important to say explicitly that what they left was no longer a church:

In the same way if anyone recognized the present congregations—contaminated with idolatry, superstition, and ungodly doctrine—as churches (in full communion of which a Christian man must stand—even to the point of agreeing in doctrine), he will gravely err. For if they are churches, the power of the keys is in their hands; but the keys have an indissoluble bond with the Word, which has been destroyed from among them.... Instead of the ministry of the Word, they have schools of ungodliness and a sink of all kinds of errors. Consequently, by this reckoning either they are not churches or no mark will remain to distinguish the lawful congregation of believers from the assemblies of Turks [that is, Muslims]. (IV.2.10)

If we are not willing to say today that churches bereft of the Word are not churches at all, there will be no way to distinguish true churches from any other human assembly, even those of different faiths. If the reformers had not said as much then, there would not have been a Reformation. Surely Calvin teaches us that if we cannot say it now, there is not, and cannot possibly be, any continuing Reformation. Calvin understood that the medieval Roman mass, characterized as a daily repetition of the sacrifice of Christ on the altar, denied the once and for all character of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross and therefore disallowed the preaching of the gospel. The mass is not our problem today. But we do have an even greater problem affecting our preaching of the gospel and therefore interfering with our being the church, and I hope to make that clear with my third and fourth points.

#### *Observations*

Here with the second point we have come to the heart of the matter: *the one true church is tied to the Word of God*. If and when that Word and the Christian faith founded upon it are abandoned, there is no Christian church. Calvin has already pointed out that there are nonessential doctrines, on which disagreement should be allowed. Surely, however, the repudiation of the plain content of the Scripture and therefore the rejection of the authority of the Scripture, the Word of God upon

which all true doctrine rests, would involve nothing less than the rejection of the foundation of the Christian faith, and therefore the rejection of the Christian faith itself, and therefore indeed the very rejection of the lordship of Jesus Christ himself. It could be difficult to determine whether and when such a repudiation had occurred, and I shall return to that difficulty in a moment. For now, if we can agree that it could occur, my point is that such a rejection of the Scriptures, left unremedied, would form the basis for legitimate and necessary separation.

And let us be clear that such a separation from a body committing such an action would not be schismatic. It would be, instead, an acknowledgment that a body which used to be a part of the church of Jesus Christ was, by its own actions, no longer so. Such a separation from what used to be a part of the church, far from being schismatic, would be, instead, an attempt to reunite with the larger body of the church of Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup>

Again, simple immorality is not an excuse for leaving the church. If, however, that immorality were to be compounded by the church declaring it not to be immorality, something different would have occurred. Then a line would have been crossed. Decisions would have been made on a basis alien to the faith of the church and therefore alien to the church itself.

If, for example, a church condoned and promoted gambling, which has become so pervasive in our society, that would be out of accord with the Scriptures. If a church winked at and so endorsed fraud, theft, or embezzlement, the extent and devastation of which have become so obvious around the world, that would be out of accord with the Scriptures. And if a church or churches in the context of, and under the influence of, our sexually charged culture became enamored of, and condoned, sex outside of the marriage of one man and one woman, that would be out of accord with the Scriptures.

If, moreover, this church or some portion of the church, such as a denomination in today's structuring of the church, were to go farther than such condoning to formal approving of the same, such as by knowingly, willingly, and officially removing all barriers to ordination for gamblers, for embezzlers, or for those engaging in sex outside of marriage, that would be an action not only out of accord with the Scriptures but also in flagrant disregard for the Scriptures and in open opposition to the Scriptures. Of course, it is almost certainly the case that the church has always ordained as ministers, elders, and deacons some who gambled, who committed fraud, or who engaged in sex outside of marriage. It is likely that the church always will do so.

That is not the question. The question has to do with official approval of such.

Would it not be the case with Calvin's doctrine of the church that such an action not by an individual but by the duly constituted decision making body of the church would be a knowing and willing rejection of the authority of the Scriptures, a knowing and willing rejection of the content of the Scriptures, and a knowing and willing rejection of the Lord of the Scriptures, even Christ Jesus himself? Would it not be the case that by such an action a body which had once been part of the church would have rendered itself no longer a part of the church? Would it not be the case that departure from such a body not only would not be disallowed but actually would be mandated?

This would not be a light or inconsequential matter. This would not be a matter of indifference. This would not be a nonessential doctrine. This would be an issue that struck at the foundation of the faith. This would be a matter of what used to be a church becoming no longer the church. Such an action, if in fact it occurred, and if it were left uncorrected, would not only permit but would actually require a separation.

## Two Points of Entry

### *Provincial Councils*

Now let us explore two other points of entry into the question of what Calvin has to say about the doctrine of the church that can apply to the life of the church today. One has to do with provincial councils, about which Calvin writes in the context of general councils of the whole church and their authority in his *Institutes*, Book Four, chapter nine. These provincial councils, geographically limited expressions of the church, can help us understand the nature of denominations in the church today. Of the "ancient councils," the general ones, Calvin professes, "I venerate them from my heart, and I desire that they be honored by all" (IV.9.1).

And yet, he is willing to be "rather severe" with them. "Here the norm is that nothing of course detract from Christ. Now it is Christ's right to preside over all councils and to have no man share his dignity. But I say that he presides only when the whole assembly is governed by his word and Spirit" (IV.9.1). That is to say, any teaching even of a general council falls under, and is overruled by, the higher authority of the Scriptures. And while the authority of councils rests in Christ's promise of his presence where two or three are gathered in his name, this qualifier of "his name" disqualifies all councils which take it upon themselves either to add to, or to take away from, his Word (IV.9.2).

Calvin elaborates for some pages on the problem of councils consisting of evil pastors, and he concludes from this that we certainly must not make the mistake of thinking that the church consists of its councils (IV.9.2–7). And while Calvin willingly embraces and reverences as holy some of the ancient and general councils, such as Nicaea, Constantinople, Ephesus I, and Chalcedon, "for they contain nothing but the pure and genuine exposition of Scripture" (IV.9.8), he goes on to show how subsequent councils have contradicted each other and were marred by serious human failings—even Nicaea suffered from accusations and "foul recriminations" flying back and forth among its participants and presented in writing to Emperor Constantine—so that Calvin finally infers this: "The Holy Spirit so governed the otherwise godly and holy councils as to allow something human to happen to them, lest we should put too much confidence in men" (IV.9.11).

This critique of general councils leads to Calvin's observation about provincial councils which is of interest today: "There is now no need to make separate mention of provincial councils, since it is easy to estimate from general councils how much authority they ought to have to frame articles of faith and to receive whatever doctrine pleases them" (IV.9.11). This is downright dismissive! And while it would be anachronistic to ask Calvin questions of our denominations as a way of structuring the life of the church, his lack of regard for provincial councils provides a point of entry for us to explore the question.

If today's denominations—typically defined by geography as well as by confessions and often limited by language, race, and class—if today's denominations can be understood to be part of the church of Jesus Christ but not the whole of the church of Jesus Christ, should we not be as cautious of their status and of their decisions in our day as was Calvin of that of provincial councils in his day? What the church as a whole did poorly acting through its representative general councils, provincial churches did even more poorly acting through their provincial councils.

That is to say, those who insist today that the denomination *is* the true church, as if leaving the denomination would be leaving the true church, miss the mark most widely. Indeed, from what we have read here, those who would most laud the wisdom and authority of denominational so-called "general" assemblies, which are provincial councils of provincial churches, may be the least Calvinist of all.

### *Constitutions*

The other point of entry into the question of what Calvin has to say about the doctrine of the church that

can apply to the life of the church today has to do with church constitutions, with which he deals in his *Institutes*, Book Four, chapter ten. In short, words matter. Threats to the constitutional order of the church threaten the existence of the church, and this danger is exacerbated in provincial denominations. We begin to see the importance of a church being well constituted as early as Book Four, chapter two:

However, when we categorically deny to the papists the title of *the* church, we do not for this reason impugn the existence of churches among them. Rather, we are only contending about the true and lawful constitution of the church, required in the communion not only of the sacraments (which are the signs of profession) but also especially of doctrine.... We by no means deny that the churches under his [i.e., the Roman pontiff's] tyranny remain churches.... But on the other hand, because in them those marks have been erased to which we should pay particular regard in this discourse, I say that every one of their congregations and their whole body lack the lawful form of the church. (IV.2.12)

Moreover, Calvin continues, in such churches not properly constituted, “Christ lies hidden, half buried, the gospel overthrown, piety scattered, the worship of God nearly wiped out.” That is to say, if and when the church is not properly constituted, the truth is obscured, and we have already seen the importance of truth to the church.

So it is that Calvin rails against the Roman Church constitutions as nothing more than a heaping up of traditions, ceremonies, observations, laws, and commandments (IV.10.13). These mandates for worship attempted to bind the conscience apart from and even contrary to the Word of God, and Calvin vehemently rejects them. But that does not mean that he wishes to overthrow all constitutions, for he elevates those kinds of agreed upon structures of organization that we use as constitutions today, understanding them to apply to worship, order, and discipline:

We see that some form of organization is necessary in all human society to foster the common peace and maintain concord. We further see that in human transactions some procedure is always in effect, which is to be respected in the interest of public decency, and even of humanity itself. This ought especially to be observed in churches, which are best sustained when all things are under a well-ordered constitution, and which without concord become no churches at all....

Yet since such diversity exists in the customs of men, such variety in their minds, such conflicts in their judgments and dispositions, no organization is sufficiently strong unless constituted with definite laws; nor can any procedure be maintained without some set form. Therefore, we are so far from condemning the laws that conduce to this as to contend that, when churches are deprived of them, their very sinews disintegrate and they are wholly deformed and scattered. (IV.10.27; see also IV.10.29)

Calvin goes on to clarify that such church constitutions must not be regarded as necessary for salvation, cannot bind consciences, and are not to be venerated. Nevertheless, church constitutions are necessary for good order, and good church constitutions are needed for the church to exist.

#### *The Church Today*

Of the several things at which we have looked in this study, including what Calvin teaches us about (1) church unity, (2) church truthfulness, and (3) provincial councils, this matter of (4) church constitutions may speak to our situation most directly. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has a constitution. This constitution includes two parts: *The Book of Confessions* and the *Book of Order*. This constitution “constitutes” the denomination. That is what a constitution does. It names us, it defines us, it forms us, it structures us, it guides us, and, yes, it constricts us. All of these are good and necessary things. Without some constitution, surely we would, as Calvin says, become no church at all.

At this point, I want to explore with you three bizarre examples—if you will be so kind as to bear with me and to look beyond the immediate content to the much farther reaching implications—three bizarre examples of distortions and corruptions so massive that they threaten to dissolve the constitution and therefore to dissolve the denomination it constitutes, and I am afraid they do far more than threaten to do that. The first of these examples is about eight years old and has been at least partially resolved, though I am convinced that lasting damage has been done. The second and third of these examples are more current, still in effect, and still threaten destruction far beyond—at least I hope it is far beyond—what their perpetrators realized or imagined.

First (1), we begin with the observation, again, that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has a constitution. Within an earlier version of this constitution, in Part II, the *Book of Order*, as recently as 2008, it was indicated that those engaging in sex outside of marriage were not to be ordained.<sup>5</sup> Everyone knew that. Everyone understood what that meant. Not everyone liked it. But even those working hard to overturn it knew what it said and

understood what it meant. In fact, their very efforts to change it were proof that they knew what it said and understood what it meant. So, that was part of the constitution at that time. The *Book of Order* said that those engaging in sex outside of marriage were not to be ordained.

At the same time, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church—which is a council of the church and is not to be confused with the church, but which was acting within its powers granted by the constitution to make decisions for the church—the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in 2008 authoritatively interpreted the *Book of Order* to mean that those engaging in sex outside of marriage could be ordained, that the ordination of those persons could not be ruled out in advance, that each possible ordination had be considered individually, and that each ordaining body could ordain whomever it wished.<sup>6</sup>

But do you see where this left us? Totally apart from the presenting issue of sex outside of marriage, the real and substantive issue was that the provincial council of our denomination had formally, officially, knowingly, willfully, and authoritatively declared that the constitution of the denomination *meant* exactly the opposite of what it *said*. The General Assembly ruled that while the constitution *said* that those engaging in sex outside of marriage could not be ordained, what the constitution *meant* was that they could be ordained.

This ruling applied to many things. The constitution *said* that self-acknowledged gamblers could not be ordained, but the General Assembly ruled that it *meant* that such gamblers could be ordained. The constitution *said* that self-acknowledged thieves, frauds, and embezzlers could not be ordained, but it *meant* that they could be ordained. This list could go on and on. But the application is not the point. The point is the cost of that decision in terms of truth, logic, and the constitution, and that cost is far more serious than any particular application.

By way of background, consider the philosophical rule or law of non-contradiction. The law of non-contradiction states that you cannot simultaneously affirm and deny the same thing in the same regard. Another way of saying this is that you cannot simultaneously affirm both A and not-A. If A is true, not-A is not true. I understand that there are some philosophers today who would argue against this principle, but for the most part this is understood to be part of the foundation of western thought and logic and of how we understand truth and reality. For instance, Barack Obama is not both president of the United States of America and *not* president of the United States of America. He is either one or the other, but he is not, and

cannot be, both at the same time. For him both to be president and not to be president at the same time would violate the law of non-contradiction, and most people understand that such cannot be the case.

Now consider where this law of non-contradiction leaves us in regard to the status of the constitution of the denomination and therefore to the status of the denomination itself. Totally apart from any one of the presenting issues of the day, we have now reached a whole other level of difficulty or impasse. Far beyond any individual act of disobedience or potential immorality, we now have the official declaration of the highest governing body of the Presbyterian Church that words themselves mean the very opposite of what they say. In 2008, the constitution had not been amended. But it had been undone by this single declaration. Language had been utterly debased. A meant not-A, and not-A meant A.

But if and when words mean the opposite of what they say, then they have no meaning at all. And when the constitution means the opposite of what it says, then we have no constitution at all. It is still being printed. It is still available for purchase. But it has no substance. It has no reality. The words swim around on the pages at night, and the letters rearrange themselves when no one is looking. In short, nothing in it can possibly be binding anymore. There is nothing there. In that the words of the constitution have been ruled to mean the opposite of what they say, surely the ordination vows have been rendered null and void, releasing all who have taken them. Structure has been dissolved, discipline has been obliterated, and the confessions of faith are left without content.<sup>7</sup>

We realize, of course, that this earlier situation has been at least partially resolved in that the offending language has been removed from the *Book of Order* if not from *The Book of Confessions*, the ordinations in question have been explicitly approved, and the entire Form of Government has been rewritten. And yet, the breathtaking claim of the General Assembly that it can declare the constitution to mean the opposite of what it says continues unabated if not unchallenged—in fact, there have been subsequent authoritative interpretations applying the same declaration to other parts of the constitution—and that claim leads directly to my second and third more current examples.

Second (2), and more briefly, the General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission, in *Parnell et al. and Walnut Creek Presbyterian Church vs. the Presbytery of San Francisco*, early in 2012, concurred with the decision of the Synod Permanent Judicial Commission, which included this statement:

This vast diversity of interpretation of scripture and the confessions regarding human sexuality evident in the record is also manifest across the churches and members of the denomination. Such thoughtful disagreement among reasonable and faithful Presbyterians is itself an important and faithful part of the Reformed tradition. This range of interpretations reached through thoughtful and prayerful discernment is, in itself, evidence that the candidate's departure cannot be from an essential of Reformed faith and polity. Disagreements over particular passages of scripture and confessions, and their interpretation in light of scripture and confessions as a whole, preclude designating such passages as somehow uniquely central to determining the fitness and faithfulness of a candidate for office. Rather, such disagreements call for the exercise of mutual forbearance toward one another.<sup>8</sup>

But do you see what that decision means for the confessions, for our constitution, for the Scriptures, and even for language itself? The position of the judicial commission is that the sheer multiplicity of interpretations, by itself, means not only that there is no right interpretation but that there cannot possibly be any right interpretation. This is madness! At the very least, the commission should be honest enough to admit that it has thereby ruled out any possibility of any Permanent Judicial Commission ever again reaching any decision on any case. It should be astute enough to realize that no General Assembly can ever again make an authoritative interpretation of anything.

The commission should at least pause to ponder whether its decision means that we have no constitution and that we are no longer a denomination. In fact, if I were to tell them that my interpretation of their decision is that there is a true and right interpretation of Scripture and that we are required to abide by it, they would, by their own argument, have absolutely no way of telling me that I was wrong about them! Again, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), acting through its General Assembly Permanent Judicial Commission, has determined that since there are multiple interpretations, nothing is binding on us. Everyone is free to do whatever he or she wishes. And all the rest of us are supposed to do is to be forbearing. But can what remains any longer be, or even possibly be, a duly constituted denomination of the church of Jesus Christ?

Third (3), consider this: the *Book of Order* acknowledges that *The Book of Confessions* states the current faith of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), that it does so in a coherent fashion, and that it declares both what the church believes and what the church is to do. Moreover, the *Book of Order* also stipulates that

business shall be conducted according to *Robert's Rules of Order*. And *Robert's Rules of Order* specifies that any motion that conflicts with an organization's constitution is out of order.

And yet, on Friday afternoon, July 6, 2012, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) received a motion to amend the *Book of Order*, and despite a point of order being raised that the proposed motion conflicted with at least three documents in *The Book of Confessions*, the Assembly nevertheless voted to consider the motion and so violated *Robert's Rules of Order*. Three-and-one-half hours later, the proposed amendment being considered failed, but that is not the point here. In fact, two years later, at the General Assembly in 2014, a similar proposed amendment was approved and sent out to the presbyteries, which also approved it. That is not the point here either. The point here is that the vote in 2012 to approve the procedural motion to consider a proposed amendment that conflicted with the constitution was a violation of *Robert's Rules of Order* and therefore also a violation of the *Book of Order*. Moreover, this action knowingly and willingly rejected the confessions as having any say so about the faith, life, or government of the church, thus violating not only the *Book of Order* but also *The Book of Confessions*. That is to say, this action set aside both parts of our constitution. But does not this leave the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as both a non-confessional church and also a post-constitutional church? And does not this mean, also, that the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is no longer constituted as a denomination? Must not the question also be raised as to whether the non-confessional and post-constitutional Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) remains any part of the true church of Jesus Christ?

Think together with me about what it means that the General Assembly has arrogated unto itself (1) the authority to declare that language means the opposite of what it says, (2) the authority to declare that multiple interpretations of texts mean there is not and cannot be any right interpretation, and also (3) the authority to set aside all parts of the constitution by a simple majority vote so that we are not ruled by shared commitments but by the feelings of the party in ascendancy. This is not good! In fact, I think we can learn from John Calvin that it is very, very bad, evil, destructive, and deadly.

As you may realize, some scholars today may exult in the claim that there is in effect no text but only interpretation thereof—though we would have to ask, of course, whether their own interpretation is not itself yet another text and therefore without meaning—some may exult in such presumed freedom, but we who live in the real world of the church are left with the harrowing

realization that when we have no constitution, we have no denomination. There is nothing left. There is nothing by which we are properly constituted. That is what a constitution does: constitutes. The denomination still exists in name. Congregations appear to be members of it. The denominational offices are open. Dues continue to be collected, and salaries continue to be paid. But there is nothing there. Without a constitution, there is no remaining substance or reality to what used to be a provincial church.

Surely even those working for the ordination of those engaging in sex outside of marriage and weddings for same-sex persons did not intend the entire deconstruction of the constitution and the concomitant dissolution of the denomination! And yet, when the ends have been determined to justify any means, so that language, thought, truth, and reality are debased, then chaos ensues.

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
Are full of passionate intensity.<sup>9</sup>

We noted earlier that it could be difficult to determine whether one or another decision of the church rises to the level of repudiating a teaching of the Scriptures. These rulings about language, however, leap over that difficulty in a single bound by rendering language itself meaningless and therefore all of Scripture meaningless. This is not point by point repudiation but is instead repudiation writ large. Again, our problem is not the medieval Roman mass and its concomitant disallowance of the preaching of the gospel. That is one of the problems that Calvin faced. And now we no longer have the problem of determining whether one or another decision repudiates Scripture. Instead, our problem has to do with officially adopted rulings that debase language as a whole, that de-constitute the church, that obliterate the faith, and that therefore make preaching of the gospel impossible, since even the words of the gospel are left not meaning what they say. This is how and why these actions are so insidious. We are in far worse shape than, and standing more in need of reform than, the medieval Roman church which Calvin faced. Lord, help us!

## Conclusion

John Calvin wrote a great deal about the unity and truthfulness of the church in his day. It is appropriate that we set ourselves to the task of asking what he has to say about the church that can still be of help to us today. We do so at a time of unprecedented risk in the life of

the church. For a council of the church to rule for the church (1) that words mean the opposite of what they say, (2) that there is no right interpretation of texts, and (3) that our confessions of faith have nothing to say about the government and life of the church is not merely to engage in wishfulness or to win political victory but is also to commit falsehood and untruthfulness. But Calvin knew, “No church can exist where lying and falsehood have gained sway” (IV.2.1). It would no longer be a church. Part of what Calvin has to teach us today is that constitutions matter, that words mean what they say, and that provincial councils of provincial churches err grievously, leaving us orphaned and homeless. Would he not admonish us that so long as deficits in these several areas continue in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), we are not constituted as a church, and therefore we are not, and cannot be, any part of the one, true church? We have a lot of work ahead of us.

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<sup>1</sup> *Revolutionary Theology in the Making: Barth-Thurneysen Correspondence, 1914–1925*, trans. James D. Smart (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1964), 101.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2008), xiii, emphasis added.

<sup>3</sup> John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. from the 1559 Latin ed. by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., in *Library of Christian Classics*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1960), cited by book, chapter, and section.

<sup>4</sup> Compare Carl E. Braaten, “An Open Letter to Bishop Mark Hanson.”

<sup>5</sup> Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Part II. Book of Order, 2007–2009* (Louisville, KY: The Office of the General Assembly, 2007), G-6.0106b.

<sup>6</sup> 218<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2008, Item 05-12.

<sup>7</sup> If a subsequent General Assembly had rescinded this authoritative interpretation, the argument in this section would have been abrogated. The constitution and the denomination could have been restored. Instead, the interpretation became the constitution, so that the falsehood that established the interpretation was allowed to stand.

<sup>8</sup> <http://oga.pcusa.org/media/uploads/oga/pdf/pjc22010.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming,” 1921.

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# Is the Reformation Ever Finished?

by Michael D. Bush

The question of what it means to speak of reform and renewal of the church as a continuing problem and task came alive for me as seminary student in the late 1980s. In a course on Presbyterian polity, we were exposed to one of a family of sayings in Latin that include the future passive participle *reformanda*. The form it took in this case was *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*, best translated, “a reformed church, always needing to be reformed,” which appeared in the Form of Government of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In this context it was used to warrant a position perhaps better expressed in Latin as *ecclesia reformata, semper varians*: “a Reformed church, always changing.” This was the meaning our instructor offered. Indeed something near such an interpretation was made explicit in the Form of Government itself, which translated its Latin phrase, “the church reformed, always reforming.”<sup>1</sup> I did not immediately doubt that such was a good understanding of the saying, and indeed from a strictly grammatical standpoint it is not obviously incorrect, but did wonder both about its origin and its theological meaning.<sup>2</sup>

Within a few days I put the question of the saying’s origin to John H. Leith, thinking he was the most likely member of the faculty to know. He did not, but his best guess was that the origin might be sought in English Puritanism. Since this was his answer, doubt now arose in my mind about the standard interpretation that the faith and order of the church is continuously malleable. If indeed the phrase arose among English precisians in the sixteenth or seventeenth century, it seemed highly doubtful to me that it would have meant to them what the PC(USA) Form of Government suggested.

Leith’s guess as to the origin of the PC(USA)’s *reformanda* saying turned out to be wide of the mark, but not much. The phrase did not arise in English Puritanism, but rather in a Dutch movement—the *Nadere Reformatie* or Further Reformation—at least partly inspired by it. And indeed the meaning of the phrase has changed significantly.

The idea that Reformed churches must continue to be reformed and renewed has had growing currency in European and North American Christianity for several decades. Often writers express this principle in Latin formulas that are built around the future passive

participle *reformanda*. They have become so common that one writer, who believes such phrases themselves need to be reformed, sighs in exasperation that they are used “so extensively” that they appear “nearly everywhere.” Let us call such phrases “*reformanda* sayings” as a term of convenience, even though they sometimes employ other forms of *reformatio* or are composed in a language other than Latin.

In Latin, these sayings trade on the interaction of the perfect passive participle *reformata*, “reformed,” with the future passive *reformanda*, “needing to be reformed.” In most forms of these sayings, *reformata* is a foil for *reformanda*, although, as we shall see, at least one sixteenth century theologian understood them in a strikingly different way.

In this essay I propose first to describe what appears to be the first published use of a *reformanda* saying in something like the modern sense, then to outline briefly what has been suggested before about them, especially in relation to Calvin and the Reformation. Along the way I will describe how the usual modern interpretations of *reformanda* sayings differ importantly from the ways Calvin and others in the sixteenth century viewed reformation as a process, and Calvin’s limited contribution to these interpretations. Through this examination, I hope to begin to straighten some of what is crooked in what has been published about these sayings.

At the same time, I take it that good historical work not only clarifies the past, but it can also evoke its strangeness. Much sentimentality surrounds *reformanda* sayings today. Yet those who used them first were difficult people, hard to please, never content in their ecclesial life to follow Christ’s teaching that one might let the wheat grow up with the tares (Mt. 13:30). At the same time, they were remarkably capable, resilient, and committed Christians, without whose contributions Protestantism today would have a different character.

The sentence out of which later *reformanda* sayings seem to have emerged is a passage from the Dutch pastor-theologian Jodocus van Lodenstein’s 1674 book, *Consideration of Zion*.<sup>3</sup> Lodenstein’s book is written as a set of ten dialogues among three men, a minister named Urbanus, who represents Lodenstein’s point of

view, and two elders of the church, Stephanus and Ahikam. In the passage that concerns us, Urbanus is speaking, responding to something Ahikam has said. He assures Ahikam that he has heard only a small part of how low things have sunk in the church, and goes on, “If we had the time and opportunity for dialogue and were to descend into the details of our doctrines, then you would be shocked at our deformity.”

Here, then, is the problem Lodenstein is confronting with the central word *reformanda*: the Reformed church in which things once had seemed so promising has become deformed. He goes on: “For example, we teach against popery that antiquity as such is not to be respected, and it is not an argument when considering falsehood and evil...” All in Lodenstein’s dialogue agree that the Roman church has become degenerate in faith and practice; however, by now the problem that the Reformed had always recognized in the Roman church had come to be the Reformed church’s own problem. As Urbanus continues, still speaking for Lodenstein, “We have noticed that the good does not exist long (because of depravity), but one must always be working towards restoration.” The constant work of the Reformed church is to be restored to purity. Even when the church makes progress along this line, it “does not exist long.” It is hard even to maintain the gains of the Reformation, let alone to progress beyond the Reformers to an even greater purity.

Then comes the crucial sentence: “Such person of understanding [one, that is, who was busy working toward restoration] would not have called the Reformed Church *reformata*, or reformed, but *reformanda*, or being reformed. What a pure church would that become that was always thus occupied? How precise in truth? How holy in practice?”

If an instance of these participles, *reformata* and *reformanda*, being used in this contrasting way, such that the second is regarded as an ideal and the first is used as a foil for it, had appeared in print before this, no primary evidence for it has yet come to the surface. In this passage from Lodenstein we seem to have the original use in a published source for the Latin terminology that has become familiar. He used it to formulate his vision for restoring the purity and holiness of the church that has been lost to “deformity.”

Lodenstein’s friend and colleague Jacobus Koelman published a similar thought at around the same time. Koelman’s version was entirely in Dutch, and he attributed the thought to his teacher Johannes Hoornbeeck. Koelman says Hoornbeeck “followed in the footsteps of Voetius,” in the sense that he shared Gijsbertus Voetius’s commitment to further reformation. Hoornbeeck sounded “very safe and

reliable” in downplaying the significance of the designation Reformed, saying “[...] we must come to be called Reforming, and not only Reformed, so that we always must be Reforming if we want to be Reformed and be worthy of that name, because that is what we are attempting.”

This passage from Koelman seems especially important because it is similar to Lodenstein’s, but can be read to name a specific source while Lodenstein refers vaguely to an unnamed “person of understanding.” If we think a single source or incident stands behind the two versions, so that Koelman is thought to identify the person of understanding in Lodenstein’s passage, then it becomes possible to attribute the original use of the contrapuntal participles to Hoornbeeck, as some scholars have done. Yet, the available evidence does not warrant such identification. Lodenstein did not write of “a person of understanding” but of “*such* a person of understanding.” By this he means someone who is intentional about spiritual “restoration.”

Lodenstein does not seem to have intended to direct our attention to any one person, then. The “person of understanding” is a rhetorical device. It could be anyone — Urbanus’s dialogue partners, for example, or Lodenstein’s readers — who learns that the Christian life is a permanent process of spiritual convalescence. Therefore, to identify Lodenstein’s person of understanding as Hoornbeeck is to miss his point. He is speaking hypothetically, not thinking of Hoornbeeck, or indeed of any identifiable learned person. So far, no relevant passage in the works of Hoornbeeck has appeared, though the suggestion that he was the originator of *reformanda* sayings appears with growing frequency. The Lodenstein passage remains the earliest documentable source, then.

Lodenstein’s simple and illustrative juxtaposition of *reformanda* with *reformata*, in which *reformanda* suggests constant care for the church’s purity, has flowered and mutated in the hothouse of historical, theological, and devotional writing into an entire genus of aphorisms that are given entirely different interpretations. This development began as the seventeenth century ended, but most of the growth of *reformanda* sayings has taken place since World War II. Recent writers have made claims about alternative origins and significances of *reformanda* sayings, but few of these claims can be substantiated with research. No evidence has yet come to light, for example, for a pre-Reformation origin. Nor has any Huguenot source been found.

Similarly, there is a problem regarding the exact forms *reformanda* sayings take. There never was a definitive form, which means that the modern habit of calling one

or another form a “motto” is misleading. I am not aware of any evidence that a *reformanda* saying served as a motto or slogan for a person, movement, or institution before 1983, when one appeared on the interim seal of the newly created Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). It assuredly was not Calvin’s motto, which is well known to have been “My heart I offer you. O Lord, promptly and sincerely.” Moreover, as preachers and theologians have begun to use *reformanda* sayings as mottos or slogans, the forms have begun to vary even more widely, sometimes in curious and unpredictable ways.

Karl Barth seems to be at the center of the modern development of the sayings in both form and prominence. The form most common in Europe, *ecclesia semper reformanda*, which Barth used in several contexts throughout his life, first appeared in print, as far as I can tell, in his essay “The Concept of the Free Grace of God” in 1947. That same year he gave a lecture in Bonn in which he used the three-word form that was his workhorse, but also said, “The Church is never simply *ecclesia reformata* but *semper reformanda*.” One suspects that the “but” was dropped in use, at least in English, thus providing a source for the form that eventually appeared in the PC(USA) *Book of Order*. Some writers have placed other connecting words in the center of the saying. Thus Jürgen Moltmann, among others, uses the form *ecclesia reformata et semper reformanda*. Willem Visser’t Hooft, M. Eugene Osterhaven and Philip Benedict supply *quia* (“because”) as the hinge.

Professor Edward A. Dowey of Princeton Theological Seminary believed this version of the formula should be completed with the phrase “according to the Word of God.” Indeed, he suggested at least once in writing, and routinely when speaking about it, that these words were “often printed” together, thus in the form *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda, secundum verbum Dei*. Dowey was never able to find an historical instance in print, though he knew and insisted the thought was faithful to the theological ethos and intentions of the continental Reformed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He was assuredly correct in this last point, but it is equally certain that this enlarged version of the PC(USA) *reformanda* saying was never printed anywhere except by Professor Dowey or under his influence. However, it is a partial vindication of Dowey’s statement that the phrase *secundum Verbum Dei* appears as the criterion of reformation within a couple of paragraphs of the two central participles (used in a different way) in a passage of Jerome Zanchius examined below.

In 1959, it was Barth who introduced the theme to the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Küng, who lectured on the theme *ecclesia semper reformanda* at Basel in

that year at Barth’s request. Küng went on soon thereafter to advocate for the saying and his understanding of it at the Second Vatican Council. In the end, a variant, *semper purificanda* (always being purified), found its way into the Council’s Constitution on the Church.

The only sixteenth century theologian I have identified who used the two key participles, *reformata* and *reformanda*, in a single context to speak of the problem of reformation in the church is the Italian Jerome Zanchius. In a short treatise on the reformation of the church based on verses from the first chapter of Isaiah, Zanchius asks a series of analytical questions in which we see clearly how he understood reformation as a task and concept.<sup>4</sup>

Zanchius first concludes from his reading of Isaiah 1 that it is “God himself” (*Deus ipsa*) who reforms the church. Second, God does so at a time of his own choosing, when it is opportune according to divine wisdom. This, in Zanchius’s judgment, is the reason several verbs in the passage are in the future tense. What, then, is the quality of the reformation God brings about? It is “most pure and most sincere” (*purissima et sincerissima*). What will be the mode of God’s reformation? It will be one in which dross and alloy are burned away, as the prophet intimates in v. 25. This means “everything that is not according to the word of God [*secundum Verbum Dei*] is alloy (tin).”

Next, from Isaiah 1:26 Zanchius concludes that leaders like the Pope, who “has first place in the church of Rome, is first in needing to be reformed.” In addition, “everything else,” by which Zanchius means the sacraments and ceremonies among other things, must be restored *sicut ab initio*, “as they were at first.” Like many reformers, Zanchius idealized the primitive church as the model of the purely reformed church he was hoping could be restored.

In discussing the seventh question, “In what elements does the reformation of the church consist?” Zanchius uses the crucial participles in relation to each other. Reformation consists in the reformation of both worship (*religio, cultus*) and morals. Both are necessary. He derives this necessity of twofold reformation from Isaiah’s promise that God will call his restored people a city of both righteousness and faith (Isa. 1:26c). The church’s worship and morals need to be reformed (*reformanda*) until everything is “perspicuum”: *religio* should be “restored” to a “pristine state” and *mores* are to be “perspicuously reformed.” Only when this dream has become reality will the church be worthy of being called “reformed” (*reformata*). Zanchius concludes, “A church that claims it is reformed (*reformata*), while retaining anything of papism,” is not in truth “a city of

faith.” The standard is absolute: if anything of the old way remains, the church is not yet *reformata*. It is merely *reformanda*: needing to be reformed. The Church of Rome was, for Zanchius, the *ecclesia reformanda* without peer. It would be only a little exaggeration to say that, in this sixteenth century text, *reformanda* was a near-synonym for not Reformed.

For Zanchius, then, an *ecclesia reformata* was the ideal church. Such a church was difficult to find, but Zanchius knew how to tell when a church was genuinely reformed: it was reformed when its worship and morals were pristine, according to the Word of God. However, Zanchius did not suggest that this ideal church, the *ecclesia reformata*, was impossible in principle, still less that it was undesirable; for him, it was merely difficult.

As we have seen, Jodocus van Lodenstein and others would later, in the context of the *Nadere Reformatie*, reverse the dynamic, so that *reformanda* became the ideal, while *reformata* came to represent a passive, self-satisfied complacency in the face of lax faith and morals within their allegedly Reformed church. For them, *reformanda* became an apt way to speak of the need for *nadere reformatie*, further reformation, in the face of the original Reformation’s imperfection.

Nothing is more common than to read in books and articles published in the last fifty years than that one or another *reformanda* saying was a motto, a slogan, or a principle for the Reformers in general or for Calvin in particular. I want to make two large claims about this pattern, the second of which has two dimensions. These amount to a case that it would be surprising to find Calvin using a phrase like *ecclesia semper reformanda*.

First, I propose that no *reformanda* saying appears in Calvin as a matter of fact. Second, I argue that it would be unlike Calvin to speak in this way, for two reasons. One is that, while Calvin’s normal way of speaking of the reformation of the church, including his use of these participles, shows that he thought of reformation as a process, nevertheless he saw this process as one that could and should be brought to a sustainable conclusion. The other is that these sayings, as they first appeared, reflect a perfectionism about the church that Calvin did not share with Zanchius, the English radicals of the 1540s, or the later theologians and preachers of Puritanism and the *Nadere Reformatie* who spoke so vigorously of the need for “further reformation.”

My first thesis about Calvin, that no *reformanda* saying appears in his works, I can only assert. Any claim for what is not present in the Calvin corpus must be made with humility, because of the massive volume of material. However, I have sought assiduously, in both

paper and digital documents, and have not found anything that suggests a *reformanda* saying or the thought behind one. I do not believe there are any *reformanda* sayings in the Calvin corpus. Nevertheless, this is a falsifiable thesis: all one must do to show it is mistaken is to find one.

To come to my second claim, then, not only does it appear that there are no *reformanda* sayings in Calvin’s writings, but, in light of the way Calvin speaks of the nature and process of reformation in the church, it would have been surprising if there had been any. While, as we have seen, a good many scholars have attributed such sayings to Calvin or described them as consistent with his theology, Calvin speaks of reformation, with and without these participles, in ways that suggest that it is unlikely Calvin would have composed one.

This begins to become clear, first of all, upon an examination of Calvin’s uses of *reformanda*. His most common use of the term is in participial constructions that are translated with *-ing* in English. In other words, he uses it to speak of “reforming” the church. So, for example, in May of 1539 Calvin wrote to his former colleague William Farel that their successors in Geneva were already in difficulty, and he was prepared to judge from the early going of their ministry “what kind of future success there is to be in reforming (*reformanda*) that church, unless the Lord unexpectedly appears.”

He used *reformanda* similarly in his small book, *The Necessity of Reforming the Church*. The running title of the treatise itself makes use of the word in this way: *De Necessitate Reformandae Ecclesiae*. Near the end, Calvin asks the emperor, to whom the treatise was addressed, “Why then is the charge of reforming [*reformanda*] the church handed over to [the hierarchy of the Roman church], if it is not to expose the sheep to the wolves?” This, it seems, is the way Calvin thinks of the word *reformanda*: it is primarily a participle for him, rather than an adjective.

On the other hand, when Calvin needs to describe a church of the kind he approves, he, like Zanchius later, uses *reformata*. Thus he speaks as straightforwardly as possible of a “reformed church.” For example in the circular letter *Ad Diversos Articulos*, Calvin scolds his readers for impeding the preaching of unauthorized, self-appointed preachers, “even in a place where there is a Reformed church.” He did not raise a question about how well-reformed such a church was, in order to decide whether it deserved the name. His usage is the same in a letter of 31 July 1563.

These participles, *reformata* and *reformanda*, were not constantly on Calvin’s tongue. However, it is clear

enough that his pattern was to use *reformata* as an adjective to describe a church that is more or less free of liturgical and theological abuses, and to use *reformanda* participially describe a task that must be done in situations where that freedom did not yet prevail.

It would be a mistake to conclude from this that Calvin did not view reformation as a process. On the other hand, it is equally a mistake to suppose that he thought this process was open ended, never coming to a point where he might say, as Beza remembered him saying with regard to the reformation of Geneva, “Things, as you see, are not badly constituted,” and going on to charge the pastors not to make a mess of it. Geneva was “a perverse and unhappy nation, [...] perverse and wicked,” yet on the other hand Calvin was confident for the future following his death that “God will make use of this church and maintain it, and assures you that he will protect it.” Moreover, the pastors should support Beza, “for the charge is great, and so weighty that he might well sink under the load.”

Finally, what is most striking of all, Calvin urged the Company of Pastors that they should *change nothing* about the ecclesial arrangements in Geneva! First, according to Pinaut’s account, Calvin said as much in cold prose: “I pray you make no change, no innovation. People often ask for novelties. Not that I desire for my own sake out of ambition that what I have established should remain, and that people should retain it without wishing for something better, but because all changes are dangerous and sometimes hurtful.” Then, he went on to apply this solicitousness toward the Genevan church’s practice in the particular case of the Geneva Catechism: Calvin had written it “in haste” during his sojourn in Strasbourg, and it was not just as he might desire, but it would be best for the pastors to leave it untouched. For Calvin, reformation of the church was a process that could be completed to the point where it could be maintained, a task that he knew was difficult enough in itself.

When Lodenstein and Koelman spoke of the need for the church to be *reformanda*, they were not holding up the *reformanda* ideal as the hopeful possibility that when Christians were tired of something in the church’s faith and practice they could change it to suit themselves. They did not dream of an *ecclesia semper varianda*. The problem for which *reformanda* was a solution to these theologians was not at all that time marches on, the world changes, and so the church must try to keep up. Nor was it a way for the church to remind itself of the need to be humble in theological

self-examination. Rather, the problem for them was that it was impossible to maintain the church’s purity of faith and holiness in practice without constant vigilance. It was an answer for the ecclesial implications of the problem Calvin described by calling human nature “a perpetual factory of idols.” Lodenstein’s word for this vigilance against idolatry and for the church’s purity is *reformanda*.

For Calvin himself, though, the solution to this problem seems usually to have been to get used to it, and then to work patiently as opportunity arose to correct problems that remain once “things [...] are not badly constituted.” Calvin knew that even a reformed church was imperfect, and he was not normally anxious about this fact.

It was this willingness to bear with the inevitable defects even of an *ecclesia reformata*, even as he was bound to disapprove of them, that distinguished Calvin from later, more demanding Reformed thinkers like Lodenstein and Koelman. To these, and even to some degree to certain of Calvin’s contemporaries, such as Zanchius (who was unwilling even to call a church *reformata* unless it was pure in faith and morals), the church’s purity, as well as its influence in society, was a constant task and burden. Thus it was to them, and not to Calvin, that the thought occurred that the *ecclesia reformata* would have to be an *ecclesia reformanda*.

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<sup>1</sup> *Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Part II: Book of Order*. (New York and Atlanta: Office of the General Assembly, 1987-88). G-2.0200.

<sup>2</sup> This article is a simplified form of a more detailed and technical publication: Michael D. Bush, “Calvin and the Reformanda Sayings,” in *Calvinus Sacrarum Literarum Interpres: Papers of the International Congress on Calvin Research*, Herman J. Selderhuis, ed. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008, 286ff. I am grateful for Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht’s permission to simplify and abridge the previous article.

<sup>3</sup> Jodocus van Lodenstein, *Beschouwinge van Zion*, Utrecht, 1674.

<sup>4</sup> Jerome Zanchius, “De Reformatione Ecclesiarum,” in *Omnia Opera Theologicorum*, Geneva, 1649, vol. 3, col. 714.

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The Rev. Randal Working is President of Presbyterians for Faith, Family, and Ministry (PFFM). Alan Wisdom is Interim Editor of *Theology Matters*. The Board of Directors of PFFM includes 12 people, clergy and lay, women and men. PFFM is working to restore the strength and integrity of the church's witness to Jesus Christ as the only Lord and Savior, by helping Presbyterians develop a consistent Reformed Christian worldview. *Theology Matters* is sent free to anyone who requests it. Please donate today to this vital ministry. We can be contacted at [aewisdom@verizon.net](mailto:aewisdom@verizon.net), 703-300-5223, or [www.theologymatters.com](http://www.theologymatters.com).

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## Burnett Is New Executive Director

The Board of Directors is delighted to announce the appointment of Richard Burnett as the first full-time Executive Director of the ministry. We have received applications for this position from across the country and have interviewed a number of highly qualified candidates. We are filled with joy that God has led us to a person so distinguished to help carry the vision of *Theology Matters* into the future.

An ordained pastor, scholar, and author, Dr. Burnett assumes his new role in May 2016. He graduated from King College in Tennessee and received his M.Div. from Princeton Theological Seminary, where he was active in the Theological Students' Fellowship, a ministry of InterVarsity. He spent a year at the University of Tübingen, Germany, returning to be ordained as associate pastor of First Presbyterian Church of Bristol, Tennessee. He earned an S.T.M. at Yale, and a Ph.D. in systematic theology from Princeton Seminary. He has authored and edited several academic books and articles, but he is also committed to the church and has served congregations in New Jersey, North Carolina, and South Carolina. Dr. Burnett is very familiar with the work of *Theology Matters*, having served for over a year on the Board of Directors. He is married to Martha Kirsch, the daughter of a Lutheran pastor whom he met at a conference in Amsterdam in 1986 sponsored by Billy Graham. They have four children.

Dr. Burnett's heart, experience, theological maturity, and pastoral gifts align exceptionally well with the vision of Presbyterians for Faith, Family, and Ministry, and we are thrilled to welcome him to this strategic leadership role at *Theology Matters*.

"Martha and I have a strong sense that the Lord is calling us to [this] and accept it with great joy," he says. "I want to lead TM in a direction that will honor the Lord and serve His church. If a single proposition characterizes my vocational life thus far, it is that *theology matters*."

Burnett was a leader in the Confessing Church movement within the PC(USA) and served on the Theological Task Force of the ECO/Presbyterian Fellowship. He has been Professor of Systematic Theology at Erskine Theological Seminary for the last fourteen years, and also taught theology courses at Columbia Theological Seminary, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and Union Presbyterian Seminary. He writes, "I am firmly committed to the Reformed tradition, have deep gratitude for my Presbyterian heritage, and an abiding love for Reformed theology." He continues, "Given this ministry's past record and future possibilities of bearing witness and doing good, I can think of no calling to which I would rather dedicate my life than to serve as Executive Director of *Theology Matters*."

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