



Reformation
& **REVIVAL**
JOURNAL

CHRISTIAN
ONENESS

A Quarterly for Church Leadership

VOLUME 13 · NUMBER 1 · WINTER 2004

FINAL THOUGHTS

John H. Armstrong

For some years now I have been on a journey of faith that has led me to confess, with my whole heart and soul, that I have believe in "one holy, catholic and apostolic Church." I have discovered many fellow servants of God who believe the same truth. The late Eugene Osterhaven, and his former student John Hesselink, represent two of those God brought into my life. Here are two men who represent the finest minds in the Christian Church. They have also modeled a deep and firm conviction about Christian oneness throughout life.

In *The Spirit of the Reformed Tradition* (Eerrdmans, 1971) Gene Osterhaven wrote, "That the Reformed Church took seriously the characterizations of the church found in those ancient creeds is evident from a study of its confessional statements written during the Reformation period" (39). He further notes that the Belgic Confession, in its first article on the Church which carries the caption *De Ecclesia Catholica*, says that "this holy Church is not confined, bound, or limited to a certain or to certain persons, but is spread and dispersed over the whole world; and yet is joined and united with heart and will, by the power of faith, in one and the same spirit (Article 27).

Osterhaven later states that "Calvin so emphasizes this truth throughout his writings that he may properly be called the most catholic of the Fathers of the Church in the Reformation era. He felt it to be so important that he included it in a catechism written for children" (40). The Genevan Catechism reads, "This signifies that as there is only one head of the faithful so also all ought to be united in one body; so that there are not many churches, but only one, which is spread throughout the world (Ephesians 4:3; 1 Corinthians 12:12, 27)" (cited by Osterhaven, 40).

The Reformed side of the Protestant Reformation, contrary to the popular confusions and separatism of more recent eras, stressed that even though the Church militant has many particular churches, it is still one Church. Osterhaven is again correct. He wrote:

Indeed, the Reformation was needed and continues to be needed because of the lack of catholicity in the church. The Reformers' work was necessary because the church had become too "Roman" in some areas, and too "Greek" in others. The church was no longer "catholic," or universal, in its breadth, outlook, and teachings, but had become provincial and errant. The Reformers sought to restore it to true catholicity (40).

This means that ideally the Church in a particular region, nation or city is *not* "American" or "Dutch." Nor is it "black" or "Hispanic." It is not even "Western" or "Eastern." The Church of Jesus Christ is *one* Church built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20).

What has replaced this view of the Church, plainly held by John Calvin? The Reformed confessions and creeds held the same view. What replaced this theological affirmation was a deficient ecclesiology. This newer doctrine of the Church is sectarian and stands in sharp contrast with the broadly catholic doctrine held by Calvin and his heirs.

Osterhaven further challenged the modern notion that something other than repentance and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ is required for membership in a Christian church. To add to this requirement is to add to the biblical basis for membership in the Church. Does this mean that all other doctrine does not matter? Of course not. It means that the spiritual leaders of a church are responsible to teach the faith to those young and old and to bring all to maturity in faith and practice. But to raise the bar for membership higher than the Word of Christ warrants it to be raised is to move toward sectarianism and away from holy catholicity and thus the doctrine of Christian oneness.

I have personally been misunderstood for many things I

have taught over the years. It is my responsibility to seek, as much as it lies within me, to make myself clear and my words plain. I find this a great challenge, but in no case is my task more difficult than when I am trying to show Christians in our separated and divided churches that our present posture toward other Christians is scandalous and outright rebellion against the will of the Lord.

To my mind, the primary reason earnest and doctrinally serious Evangelicals react against this Reformed doctrine of the Church is fear. We fear that we will stop being faithful to Christ if we associate with Christians we disagree with in some point of doctrine. We fear that we will compromise the faith entrusted to us, all the time forgetting that this fearful distrust and antagonism toward other Christians is itself a denial of a basic and fundamental Christian truth, that Christ's Church is really one! I have decided to accept the misunderstanding, to work harder at careful explanation, and to pursue personal and ongoing relationships of trust and love with Christians from all traditions and backgrounds that are rooted in the ancient catholic creeds. By this step of faith, I seek to live out my deep affirmation of the mystery of godliness and real faith.



Within a matter of a few years, the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation was divided by various issues that strong personalities and independent minds would not submit to a process of reconciliation and unity. For all the talk today, among very conservative Reformed and Lutheran folks, about unity in the Reformation creeds, the facts are really otherwise.

Germany, in the sixteenth century, seemed to be especially rooted in doctrinal discord and ecclesiastical politics. There was a synergist controversy, an antinomian conflict, and a struggle over the depth and nature of sin for starters. Added to this was a major debate about whether man is justified by an infusion of Christ's divine nature or an infusion of his human

nature. (This error so divided German Christians that some adherents were denied communion and even Christian burial!) In the words of Andrew Landale Drummond, written in *German Lutheranism Since Luther* (Epworth Press, 1951), "The theologians remembered every jot and tittle of 'sound doctrine'; they forgot Christ's new commandment 'that ye love one another'" (20).

The struggles that finally divided evangelical Christian from evangelical Christian, the most seriously, were ultimately about worship. (Yes, they had their own version of the "worship wars" that we know so much today.) The Lutherans were particularly unhappy with how the Calvinists reversed two words in the Lord's Prayer, and thus in 1592 you could actually hear people singing in church the polemical hymn:

*Guard Thou Thy Saints with Thy Word, O Lord,
And smite the Calvinists with Thy sword!*

A hunt was undertaken, over the course of time, to find and root-out the "crypto-Calvinists." Augustus the Second, Elector of Saxony, was especially ruthless in driving out the Calvinists and in having them executed. He finally "had himself represented in a medal as a victor in shining armor, holding a balance, with the infant Savior in one scale, and in the other the Devil with four Calvinists" (Drummond, 21).

When Melancthon died, completely weary of trying to get Christians to live out their oneness, he was said to have regularly repeated the prayer, "From the rage of the theologians, good Lord deliver us." I have come to understand something of that burden. I remain grateful that such zealotry is generally seen as repugnant in our day. I am also grateful that such Christians do not have the power of the state to bear the sword in our various religious struggles. I only wish that some of the most conservative Reformed and Lutheran confessionalists of our time would work harder at the oneness we share in Christ alone.



When the life of Eugene Osterhaven was remembered in a memorial service on January 28 at the First Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan, his longtime friend, John Hesselink, was asked to speak. A more fitting conclusion to this issue on Christian Oneness could not be given than the words Dr. Hesselink spoke on that cold January day in western Michigan.

"THE GLORY OF REFORMED THEOLOGY"

INTRODUCTION

After I called on Dr. Osterhaven last Thursday (January 22) at the Inn of Freedom Village, his son, David, and David's wife, Jean, drew me aside and said that their father and mother had already worked out the liturgy for the memorial service and that I was to have a role in it. Then David said, "I don't recall exactly what the subject was to be, but Dad wants you to say something about theology." I couldn't help but smile, for I thought, how curious to have someone speak about theology at a funeral service! And yet, how typically Eugene Osterhaven, for what could be more appropriate than to reflect on the significance of theology at a service honoring "the" theologian of our church of the past sixty years. The next day I received the liturgy with the precise assignment, viz., that Dr. Osterhaven wanted me to speak on "The Glory of Reformed Theology."

Eugene Osterhaven was many things: a devoted and loving husband, father and grandfather, an active and faithful churchman, a lover of nature, a skilled canoeist and bold and fearless voyageur (the French term, now English, for "an expert guide in remote regions of Canada), an enthusiastic and generous supporter of all kinds of good causes, particularly missions and the academy in Sarospatak, Hungary, a supportive friend and colleague—the list could go on and on—but he was above all a theologian. That was his calling and he lived it out with distinction and grace. He was blessed

with a brilliant intellect and a fabulous knowledge of languages. An illustration of the latter, well-known to his close friends, was his love of doing his devotions by reading the Scriptures in Hebrew or Greek, and then Latin, Dutch, German or Hungarian. When I called on him in the hospital shortly after his prostate surgery when he was aware of the fact that there was a tumor on his bladder, he said to me, "Do not be anxious" (Luke 12:22), and he then proceeded to recite it in Greek!

Eugene Osterhaven was a great scholar and teacher, but what made him so distinctive and so lovable was the joy and the passion with which he did everything. He had firm convictions and was not hesitant about making them known, but he was also gracious and irenic when involved in theological debate. He was no armchair theologian. His classroom lectures were punctuated with stories from personal experience, but in all his activities his concern was to glorify Christ and be a faithful witness to him.

THE GLORY OF REFORMED THEOLOGY

So much could be said, but my assignment was not to glorify Eugene Osterhaven, but to say something about the glory of Reformed theology. I shall do that briefly and largely in terms of Gene's own theological writings. In a word, the glory of Reformed theology is that it seeks to give all the glory to God. That may sound like a truism, but most theologies, especially in practice, hedge in this regard and try to give some credit to human activity, human decisions and human accomplishments. Herman Bavinck, the great Dutch theologian whom Gene admired so much, expressed the distinctiveness of Reformed theology in contrast to Lutheran theology in this way:

The primary question asked by Lutherans is anthropological: "How can I be saved?" . . . The Reformed, by contrast, sought to explore the foundations of salvation in the electing counsel of God and asked the theological question: "How is the glory of God advanced?" (*Reformed Dogmatics Prolegomena*, 175. Gene

had a significant role in the publication of this volume which just came out in October 2003).

Or, in the words of Eugene Osterhaven, in regard to the doctrine of election, it is the Holy Spirit, he points out, who applies Christ's saving work to us, and this is "another proof of the theocentric character of the teaching of the Reformed Church." In response to the question as to how people are saved, Gene answers:

By God, say all Christians. [But] how is the salvation that has been accomplished by Jesus Christ outside a person applied to his heart so that he becomes a new man in Christ? Here answers differ. Some hesitate to give all the glory to God but desire to keep some, perhaps a very little, to themselves. The Reformed faith, however, ascribes all to God . . . to the sovereignty of grace (*The Spirit of the Reformed Tradition*, 102-03).

There is, of course, much more to Reformed theology than this, but it has been expressed succinctly in an answer Gene gave to his niece, Nancy Miller, when she asked him several years ago how he would define what it means to be Reformed. Here was his answer:

To be Reformed is to believe in the sovereignty of the one true God, who has manifested himself and his purpose for salvation in the Scripture of the Old and New Testaments; and, in spite of their sinful rebellion, has justified his covenant people by grace through faith in Jesus Christ, and has sanctified them by the Holy Spirit, so that they seek to live unto him according to his will as expressed in his law. It means to believe in an ordered church, which ministers the Word and sacraments as true means of grace; to endeavor to apply Christian principles to every area of life; and to witness everywhere that the Lord reigns, that he calls all people to repentance and faith, and that someday all will appear before his judgment seat.

A key phrase in this definition is "to endeavor to apply Christian principles to every area of life." In his books, *The Spirit of the Reformed Tradition* and *The Faith of the Church*,

Gene develops this theme. In the latter book he says that to be Reformed means, among other things, "yielding all of life to the lordship of Jesus Christ and acknowledging the Holy Spirit as the source of all gifts and graces" (xii). In *The Spirit of the Reformed Tradition* he puts it differently. Here he refers to a Latin expression used by Luther to express the "sense of standing in the presence of God," viz., *coram Deo* (90, literally, "before the face of God"). "Reduced to a minimum," Gene says later, "the spirit of the Reformed tradition . . . is a consciousness of being in God's presence with a call to live unto him" (168).

How beautifully Gene Osterhaven lived out that calling. For in his work and in his play, in his family relationships and in his professional relationships he lived in the presence and consciousness of God. Not only in his teaching and preaching, in his worship or devotions, but also when he was canoeing in the Canadian wilds, writing to missionaries, helping needy folk, collecting books for the library in Sarospatak, proofreading the manuscript for *Bavinck's Dogmatics*, or making apple pies with Margaret for various friends.

Coram Deo, a life lived in the presence of God—to the glory of God.