

Protestant Orthodoxy

May orthodoxy prevail; may piety flourish. We are going to be talking about what is called Protestant orthodoxy or sometimes Protestant scholasticism. For the prayer I will turn to a Dutch Calvinist theologian pastor named Hermann Vitsius. This is the prayer that he used following an address on the character of a true theologian, which I will mention later in the lesson. When Vitsius prays in this prayer for God's blessing upon our beloved country he means the Netherlands. We can pray for the Netherlands today, and we can pray for our own countries as well. As we come to that portion of the prayer you can pray for your own country. Those of you from other lands should pray especially for those different countries. This is a longer prayer than I usually use to begin the class with, but it is a very wonderful prayer that we can join together in praying. So follow as I read these words and as we pray them together in our hearts.

“Oh God, Who art the teacher and giver of all wisdom, be Thou present by Thy Spirit with us as we engage. Yeah, that we may engage together in these seminary studies. Open Thou our eyes that we may behold wondrous things out of Thy Law. May Thy Holy Scriptures be our pure delight. May we neither be deceived in reading them nor handle them deceitfully. Sanctify us through Thy truth. Thy Word is truth. Preserve, defend, and enlarge this seminary; consecrate it to Thy glory. Let envies, strifes, divisions, and heresies be forever at a distance. May orthodoxy prevail; may piety flourish. Let mercy and truth meet together. Let righteousness and peace kiss each other. Our beloved country, rescued by Thy wonder-working right hand from so many evils, do Thou preserve in safety and peace. After our days in this life have been spent in prolonged felicity, do Thou at last transfer us with all Thine elect to heaven itself. This is the sum of our prayers. This is the sum of our hope. Hear and accept us, Oh triune Jehovah. Amen.”

I am going to read the first paragraph of a very famous book. Listen to these words. “Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves. But while joined by many bonds, which one precedes and brings forth the other, is not easy to discern. In the first place, no one can look upon himself without immediately turning his thoughts to the contemplation of God, in whom he lives and moves, for quite clearly the mighty gifts with which we are endowed are hardly from ourselves. Indeed, our very being is nothing but subsistence in the one God.” That is the famous first paragraph of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, written by John Calvin of Geneva. Actually some of those words were written as early as 1536. But he kept revising his *Institutes* until 1559.

Now I will read the first paragraph of another very famous book.

First topic: theology. First question: should the word “theology” be used in the Christian schools, and in how many ways can it be understood? Point one: since according to the laws of accurate method, the use and true sense of terms are first to be explained as the philosopher Aristotle has it. For words are the types of things. Some words must be premise concerning the word “theology” before we come to the thing itself. But although the proposed question may seem hardly necessary in the common sense and in that received by almost all who should think it retained as a technical term and word, properly and emphatically declaring its subject, yet we must meet the opinion of those who dislike it because it does not occur in Scripture and is used to denote the false system of the heathen who judged that it would be more suitable to use other words drawn from Scripture.

It sounds very much like the *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas, and that is a good answer. The style of this book is very much in the scholastic academic style of Thomas' *Summa*. It is actually another famous book called the *Institutes* by another famous Genevan theologian named Francis Turretin. There is quite a difference between those two books. Turretin wrote his book over 100 years after Calvin wrote his *Institutes*. Something had happened in the way theology was being done between Calvin and Turretin.

My purpose in this lesson is very simple, although it might not be easy to do it. My purpose is to explain what Protestant scholasticism is all about. What is Protestant orthodoxy or Protestant scholasticism? Those expressions are used synonymously. The best way to try to understand what we already have sensed in comparing Calvin and Turretin is to use four words to describe Protestant orthodoxy. The words "orthodox," "scholastic," "polemic," "practical," and we can add the word "pastoral." The Protestant orthodox were the theologians who came after the Reformers. They came after Luther and the other Reformers on the Lutheran side and after Calvin and his associates on the Reformed side. The concern of these theologians for the next century or so was to preserve as carefully and as accurately as they possibly could what the Reformers had taught. The later theologians sought to preserve unimpaired what they received from the Reformers—on the Reformed side from Calvin and on the Lutheran side from Luther. They wanted to transmit it to their successors. Francis Turretin, in his own great work, wrote, "Let other books, then, be commended by their novelty. I do not want this statement to justify mine." He was attempting to come up with anything new or different but to preserve and pass on to other generations the teaching of his predecessors.

There is a very popular misunderstanding at this point that I want to address. Some of it is reflected in our textbook. It is reflected everywhere. That is, there is a huge gap between Calvin and the Calvinists. There are many books that have that as their theme. The worst of those is a book called *John Calvin Versus the Westminster Confession of Faith*. I do not recommend that you read that; I mention it because it is such a bad book. Richard Muller, who teaches at Calvin Seminary in Grand Rapids, has done more than anybody to rescue the reputation of the Calvinists. He tries to show that they were not deliberately, or even without deliberation, distorting or changing the theology of the Reformers in a dramatic and major way. He calls his thesis "Calvin Versus the Calvinists: A Caricature of Orthodoxy." We can make a mistake on the other side if we think that everybody after Calvin agreed exactly with Calvin and said it exactly the same way. There certainly is development; there always is in theology. Nothing really stands still. There is development from Calvin to Westminster and on down to the present. But there is not a recasting of Calvin's teaching during this period. Later there would be a kind of wholesale abandonment of Calvin's teaching. The orthodox people, like Francis Turretin, did not recast Calvin's teaching. They simply passed it on, and in passing it on, made some changes, but not major changes, in Calvinism.

That particular thesis that there is a huge gap, a great chasm between Calvin and the Calvinists, usually sees Theodore Beza, Calvin's successor at Geneva, as the culprit. Beza moved from the more biblical and devotional theological emphasis of Calvin to something very rigid, predestinarian, and scholastic. In recent years Beza's reputation has undergone a recovery in the work of Muller and others who have now shown that Beza was not dramatically altering Calvin's teaching. In fact, rather than harden Calvin's doctrine of predestination, which is the usual view, Beza actually softened it somewhat. He stressed, far more than Calvin did, the concept of divine permission and the role of secondary causality. Orthodox is our first word. And by orthodox I mean they believed, accepted, taught, and passed on the theology of the Reformers. There is certainly a difference, though. You sense that immediately when you hear the Turretin beginning just after Calvin's beginning. The atmosphere or method is different, but the content is not different. The content is orthodox.

The method is not the informal approach to theology that we have in John Calvin, but the method now goes back to the scholastic approach of the Middle Ages that we saw in Thomas Aquinas. Scholasticism has to do with a method, not with content. People can teach anything with scholasticism: Augustinianism, semi-Pelagianism, etc. It is simply the academic method of the schools from the Middle Ages. The scholastic method was used again by the followers of the Reformers, and it usually went the same way. There would always be a question. It is a very formal, academic method. If you are in seminary somebody is going to ask you a question. I do this on exams. That is my method. I ask you a question; you give an answer. That is how schools work most of the time, and it is certainly the way schools worked back in the Middle Ages. You start with a question. The first question in Turretin's *Institutes* is "Should the word 'theology' be used in the Christian schools, and in how many ways can it be understood?" Calvin does seem to get right into things much sooner: all knowledge is composed of two parts, knowledge of ourselves and knowledge of God. Which one comes first and which one follows is not easy to say. That is not a scholastic method. That is a very informal method. People would have looked upon Calvin's *Institutes* as more devotional literature. It is not real scientific theology because it does not follow the scholastic approach.

The question is asked, and then the state of the controversy is delineated. After the question is asked, in the scholastic method, the theologian would review what everybody had said on both sides of the question. Then finally a resolution is made. "This is how to reconcile these different views, or this group is right and this group is wrong. This is the right answer." It sounds like Thomas Aquinas, and it is very much the same in Francis Turretin. What I would like to say, however, is that the scholastics, in using that method, do not subvert Scripture to reason or to Aristotelian philosophy. It is sometimes claimed that the scholastics elevate human rationality and the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas so that it controls what they are saying. But this is not what controls what they are saying. It simply gives shape to the way they say what they are saying. They do refer to Aristotle quite a bit. You would have to read a long way in Calvin's *Institutes* to find Aristotle. When you found him it would not be a compliment. Luther actually called Aristotle a "damn pagan!" But in the first sentence of Turretin there is a quote from Aristotle. What Turretin is doing is not saying that Aristotle is up there with Scripture. He is saying that this is the philosophy that people are using in the schools. To communicate what he has to say he will use the definitions and terminology of Aristotle. Aristotelian philosophy was certainly not an end in itself. It was a means to communicate clearly in understandable philosophical language the content of the Reformed faith.

Let us come to a third word, "polemic." Certainly the Protestant orthodox were polemical. The Reformers were too—Luther and Calvin were very polemical. In the *Institutes* you will see Calvin teaching some doctrine of the Bible, and then he will say, "and unfortunately now we have to answer some people who do not agree with this." The polemics tend to follow the initial emphasis that Calvin brings forth in his theology. In the Protestants' orthodox, you sometimes have the impression that polemics come up front. This was an age of theological battles, and everybody was engaged in them: Catholics, Protestants, the Reformed. There were high scholars and high scholarship vying for supremacy. There was a man named Johannes Maccovius. He was originally from Poland and was a strict Reformed theologian. He moved to the Netherlands and married the sister of Saskia, who was Rembrandt's wife. He was a specialist in theological polemics. All the scholastics were. One Dutch scholastic said of Maccovius that he was like "a dog who dutifully barked at the enemies but then went on barking at friends." With scholastics you can get a very definite refinement of theological positions and people taking sides on smaller and smaller issues. There was another theologian, this time on the Lutheran side, named Abraham Calovius. Gonzalez calls him a computer programmed for controversy. He entered into practically every controversy of the period. He not only condemned Calvinists and Catholics as being lost, but he also condemned Lutherans who deigned to believe that Calvin, Calvinists,

and Catholics might be saved. So you can see how polemical the theology had become. Francis Turretin wrote, “The purpose of my writing is not to produce a full and accurate system of theology but only to explain the importance of the principle controversies which lie between us in our adversaries, both ancient and modern.” As you go through the three volumes of Turretin you will enter into the theological polemics of that period. There is much attack on ancient heresies and contemporary heresies as well.

There were two people who tried to develop a different outlook. The opposition was not now just Catholic and Protestant. It was often Lutheran and Reformed. The tension between those two major Protestant bodies was every bit as determined and bitter as the tension between Protestants and Catholics. The Lutheran George Calixtus and the Reformed Benedict Pictet both tried to say to the other side, “We have so much more in common than we have that divides us that we should be united and not divided.” They were voices crying in the wilderness, and not too many people in that period were willing, ready, or able to hear voices of an ecumenical peace-making nature. It was still a very polemical period. Not all of that is bad because it does show that these people believed that truth was truth, and you cannot compromise with it. They could not say, “It does not matter.” Before too long we are going to come to theologians who will say it does not matter what you believe. That is not the attitude of the seventeenth-century orthodox. This should not be our attitude either, although we do not want to repeat and continue the bitterness of the polemics that marked this post-Reformation period.

The last of the four words in defining Protestant orthodoxy is “practical.” Most people would say that I have made a mistake here. They would say practical and pastoral does not explain orthodox. The stereotype of Protestant orthodoxy is an academic, scientific, dry-as-dust theology. I believed that for a long time. I was so enamored with Calvin that I did not care to dip into the Orthodox. I would skip from Calvin to the Princetonians and pass over this whole period. Pretty soon in studying Princeton, I realized that Princeton was studying the scholastics. The textbook at Princeton Seminary for many years was Francis Turretin in Latin. The students had to know Latin in order to read their 30 pages of Turretin every day, and they had to be able to recite it almost from memory. Finally they were rescued by Charles Hodges’ three volumes in English. Let me refer to several of these dry-as-dust scholastics. Gisbertus Voetius is another one of the Dutch theologians. Among the Protestant scholastics they are almost always Dutch. Voetius is talking about practical theology and says, “What does practical theology mean? It may mean, in a broad sense, all theology that follows Scripture or is based upon it, whether expressed in commentaries, *loca communi* [common places], or catechisms. Because all theology among pilgrims on earth is, in its nature, practical and no portion of it can be correctly or completely discussed unless it is developed practically, that is applied to the practice of repentance, faith, hope, and love or to consolation or exhortation.” That does not sound dry as dust; it sounds like he is beginning to preach in his theology. Indeed he does.

I already read the first paragraph of Francis Turretin’s three-volume theology, *The Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. Elenctic means something like polemic. It might be a little softer, but it has that same meaning. Listen now to the last paragraph, “Since by the supreme kindness of God it has now happened that, having entered upon the most extendedcy of theology, I now joyfully reached the harbor under His guidance. And what is more just than that, an altar being erected, I pay my vows on the shore.” He ends his theology with this prayer, “To Thee therefore, Thou triune God, the best and the greatest, most merciful Father in Christ, I give thanks. But because to no purpose does anyone plant and water unless Thou givest the increase grant, Thou best Father, that these endeavors of mine, whatsoever they may be, may contribute to the glory of Thy most holy name and the benefit of Thy church. Amen.” That is a wonderful way to end the theology. It gives us a glimpse into the heart and concern of this man, Francis Turretin.

When Hermann Vitsius, whose prayer I used at the beginning of the lecture, Dutch pastor and theologian, was inaugurated at the University of Fronecur in 1675, he gave an address called “The Character of the True Theologian.” This is a wonderful treatise. Vitzour says in that address, “The theologian is one imbued with a knowledge of God and divine things under the teaching of God Himself, who celebrates His adorable perfections, not by words alone but by the ordering of his life and is thus entirely devoted to his Lord.” In the outline of that address to the assembled dignitaries of the university and the church he talks about the theologian’s learning, his teaching, and his life. You cannot be a true theologian unless you are able to communicate God’s truth and exhibit something of the reality of it in your own life. I could not help thinking of the purpose statement of Covenant Seminary. The purpose of this seminary is to train servants of the triune God in walking with God, in interpreting and communicating God’s Word, and in leading God’s people. That is very much in the spirit of Vitsius.

Let me now give you a few names of important orthodox Protestants. The list could go on and on because there are many important theologians, but it is good to be able to recognize a few of them. On the Lutheran side there are three: Johann Gerhard, Abraham Calov, and the greatest, Johann Andreas Quenstedt. Robert Proise, who has taught us about the Lutheran orthodox, says, “Although Quenstedt’s system of theology would have cost a pastor many weeks’ salary [it went through five editions between 1685 and 1715], Quenstedt’s lifework, his system of theology, is so big, so complete, so concise and systematic and so excellent, that no later Lutheran ever came close to equaling it.” That is the book to read if you want to read for a long time in Lutheran scholasticism.

On the Reformed side there are many names. Let me go back to Francis Turretin, who is the most important name on that list. The others are very significant as well, some of whom I have referred to in different parts of this lesson. Turretin was the most systematic and thorough theologian on doctrinal issues in the Reformed camp after Calvin. His *Institutes* should be ranked next to Calvin’s *Institutes*. Francis Turretin interestingly was an Italian by descent. He was the third-generation Italian theologian by the name of Turretin. His grandfather and father were both theologians in Geneva. They fled from Italy, went to Geneva, and Francis Turretin was the third generation of Italian Reformed theologians in Geneva. I mentioned that his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* were published in Latin until 1847 and formed the text at old Princeton Seminary. J. W. Alexander, one of the teachers there, wrote, “Turretin’s adherence to the received body of the Reformed church is so uniform and strict that there is no writer who has higher claims as an authority as to what that doctrine was.” If you want to know Reformed orthodoxy, read Turretin. Now you can do it in English! For the first time, just in recent years, Turretin has been published in English. The translation was from the nineteenth century from a professor of Latin at Princeton University. It was not published until recently, and the three volumes of Turretin are now available in English. James Montgomery Boice in Philadelphia, in his recommendation for these books, wrote, “Let us all knock off for a month from our regular work and study Turretin.” That would be very valuable, I am sure, but we can hardly afford to do that because we do not have the time. We have to keep going in this survey class. My motto in this class is always keep going, do not stop, do not even slow down!

Let us talk about the value of Protestant orthodoxy for us. I want to make two points. Certainly in these big, old books, originally written in Latin and many of them still only in Latin, we have a careful and precise theology. Let me read tributes from three very different theologians. The conservative Presbyterian Charles Hodge said, “Whatever the faults of the scholastics they have one great merit: they always let us know what they mean. Their atmosphere, if wintry and biting, is clear.” Certainly you can hone a theological mind by reading these scholastics. You can learn terminology; you can learn clarity of definition. There is great value in all of that. The neo-orthodox Karl Barth said, “In reading the old

orthodox you realize that at one time Protestant dogmatics was a careful, orderly business.” It is not that way altogether today. Barth was right in saying it would be good to go back to the older tradition so that modern theology might become, once again, a careful, orderly business. The liberal Paul Tilley says the same thing, “Modern theology is so vague because of a lack of knowledge of Protestant orthodoxy.” Liberal, neo-orthodox, and conservative are all saying that to do theology in the modern world we should give attention to how it was done in the seventeenth century. That is one point: careful, precise theology.

A second point of the Protestant orthodoxy is spiritual nourishment. I had a professor at Princeton Seminary who, if he heard me say that, would have thrown up his hands in horror. He would have asked, “Did I not teach you anything?” So I am going to dedicate the rest of this lesson to him! Whenever he talked about the orthodox, he would say, “This is deadly stuff.” But it is not. Even though it is going to take discipline, diligence, and hard work to get to it, there is spiritual nourishment there. True theology does edify, as Karl Barth recognized in the quotation I gave. Barth recognized that for the sake of life it is necessary to be quite serious about the question of truth. We are not dealing with two ideas in opposition. If we are serious about the question of truth it is going to lead us to life. If we are serious about practical living for God, it is going to lead us to a search for truth. The Protestant orthodox were fallible human beings and sometimes failed in what they attempted to do. If we say that they did not fully succeed on either front, life or truth, we still honor them as theologians who aimed for both.

Let me end the lesson with the concluding words of Francis Turretin’s preface to the reader as he introduces his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. He says, “May the God of truth and of peace cause us to walk always in truth and charity. May we grow every day in Him who is the head until we all arrive at the unity of faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, perfected in power and to the measure of the maturity of Christ. Amen.”

Some have asked how Turretin differed from Calvin. The first answer is that they differed in scholastic method. I would say they differed very little in content, though there is a gloomy eschatology that you do not find in Calvin and certainly do not find in Charles Hodge. Turretin felt that a few would be saved. Calvin does not really speculate on how many will be saved. And Charles Hodge thinks a lot of people will be saved; there would be a major triumph of the Gospel. In Hodge you get the impression that almost everybody will be saved. Perhaps Calvin has the best view—do not try to determine how many will be saved. Turretin has a gloomy eschatology partly because at this time the Reformed were struggling for their very existence, particularly in Geneva. Catholicism was prevalent, and new rationalism was also beginning to emerge. At just about the time the scholastics were doing their work, there were people like Descartes and others who were casting great doubt on all of this. The issue was not Catholic versus Protestant and Lutheran versus Reformed but Cartesianism versus Christianity. We will come to that pretty soon.

Turretin had a great deal of confidence, and perhaps there were places where Turretin, and all the scholastics, should leave room for more mystery and uncertainty. Calvin leaves room for that. At the same time they are attempting to base what they say on Scripture. We can be either overly certain or overly uncertain. If the scholastics were overly certain it is not going to be long before too many theologians says, “We just do not know,” when we do know. We know the heathen are lost. Later people will not know that. There is a certain confidence and certainty. I do not see it as pride or triumphalism. If Calvin could have read through all of this he would occasionally say, “I do not think we can know that.” Learned ignorance was Calvin’s aim. The scholastics go beyond that. Calvin was not saying that he knew everything. At certain points he might say, “I did not think of this, and I am glad you did.” At other places he might wonder if we could know as much as we think we can during this period. It is a

period of theological confidence. Catholics think they are right, Lutherans think they are right, and the Reformed think they are right. That is why it is such a political period. Nobody is willing to recognize the greater limits of our knowledge in theology.

Calvin did not actively reject scholasticism; he did he know as much about it. Calvin was trained in a humanist tradition and in law, which had its own scholasticism and humanism. Calvin's major education was not in the scholastic mode. Luther's training was in the scholastic mode. That is why Luther says a lot about it, but it is very negative. Calvin is more like the humanists. Rhetoric is more important for Calvin than tight, rigid organization. In Calvin you get a wonderful flow of language that is so moving. Then you go into the scholastics, and it is rather dry and crabbed in its style. Calvin was not using rhetoric as an end in itself as beautiful language, but he realized that rhetoric was a very effective tool. Scholasticism was also effective but in the context of the university. Calvin did not operate in that context. He was writing his systematic theology in the manse against the background of teething trouble. He was in the midst of an active life as a pastor with people all around and babies crying. Turretin wrote his *Institutes* in the university, so it has a different setting and serves a different function.

The scholastic method is continued and recovered for several reasons. For one thing the Catholics continued to do it and to engage in an anti-Catholic polemic. The Protestants felt it was necessary to do it the same way. Otherwise they would not be respected or even listened to. It was an attempt to find a means into the culture. This was the way it was done. A parallel today would be how we speak to post-modernists. There is a certain language we can use, a certain apologetic approach, and a way we can accommodate ourselves to the way they do things so that we can speak to them and they can understand us. It was not a bad motive; it was certainly a good motive. Scholasticism is not something we would want to reproduce today; we are more comfortable going back to Calvin's stuff. But for its time the final product served its purpose, and it enriched theology down to the present.

The interesting thing about scholasticism is that the people who wrote these great tomes were pastors. They tended to be pastors and professors, but they were always active pastors. Turretin served the Italian congregation in Geneva. The Dutch orthodox were all pastors. It was not viewed as just for the university, it was for the school and for the church. I doubt the average person read much of this. Pastors would read it because it was in Latin, and they were trained in Latin. They had to read it, assimilate it, and pass on the significance of it to the people in their congregations. This was their task. It was not irrelevant theology; it was reaching a very broad spectrum of learned clergy. The clergy were learned in those days. They knew the language, they knew theology, and they were well trained in all of this. They could handle it, and it was valuable to them.