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0521540739 - Reformed Theology and Visual Culture: The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards - William A. Dyrness

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REFORMED THEOLOGY AND VISUAL CULTURE

The Protestant Imagination from Calvin to Edwards

With the walls of their churches bereft of imagery and color and their worship centered around sermons with carefully constructed outlines (as opposed to movement and drama), Reformed Protestants have often been accused of being dour and unimaginative. Here, William Dyrness explores the roots of Reformed theology in an attempt to counteract these prevailing notions. Studying sixteenth-century Geneva and England, seventeenth-century England and Holland, and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Puritan New England, Dyrness argues that, though this tradition impeded development of particular visual forms, it encouraged others, especially in areas of popular culture and the ordering of family and community. Exploring the theology of John Calvin, William Ames, John Cotton and Jonathan Edwards, Dyrness shows how this tradition created a new aesthetic of simplicity, inwardness and order to express underlying theological commitments. With over forty illustrations, this book will prove invaluable to those interested in the Reformed tradition.

WILLIAM DYRNESS is Professor of Theology and Culture in the School of Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California. He is the author of over a dozen books on theology and culture including *The Earth is God: A Theology of American Culture* (1997) and *Visual Faith: Art, Theology and Worship in Dialogue* (2001).

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*To the memory of Hans R. Rookmaaker and Anna Marie
Rookmaaker-Huitker, mentors, friends and models.*

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Preface

This book seeks to explore a way of thinking about God and the world that developed in Reformed theology between 1500 and 1750. It is not only concerned with theological reflection, but also with the mental habits and cultural practices that resulted – with the imagination that developed. The concerns addressed grow out of very personal and lifelong questions: Why have the walls of my own (Protestant) churches always been bereft of imagery and color when the churches of my friends have frequently been crowded with images and carvings? Why has my worship experience centered around sermons and studies with carefully constructed outlines, while that of my friends has often focused centrally on movement and drama? Of course these questions are too large for anyone to answer and even posing them in this way is misleading. But these are questions I *felt* even before I was able to verbalize them. And I have subsequently learned that many other people, especially those with various artistic gifts, have similar discomfort about their own worship experience.

Given that these questions are general and oversimplified, this study makes no claim to answer them. Indeed in exploring the roots of this tradition more general theological and historical issues arose. But the present work may be considered a series of probes that might illumine the context in which present Protestant and Reformed worship experiences were formed. It is addressed to students of this period and pastors and theological students with an interest or background in this tradition. Addressing such questions at this time may be important for at least two related reasons. First the period that I explore, roughly from 1500 to 1750, against all odds, continues to influence large swaths of the Christian population. It manifests itself not only in the aesthetics of worship, which are a primary concern of this book, but also in the way theology continues to be taught and studied and in attitudes toward contemporary culture. Influences from this period are evident, for example, in dominant Christian attitudes toward the visual arts and visual culture more generally – movies, TV and videos.

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To Christians nurtured by attitudes I explore, images in various forms are seen largely as entertainment which may be enjoyed or avoided. They are for better or worse a kind of “distraction” from the serious business – the reading, writing and arithmetic – of life. In any case they are seldom allowed to invade the time and space of worship. One result of our study is to show that these views are not “natural”; they may be contested or at least refined. And they carry with them particular assets and liabilities.

The second reason these probings might be important is that most Christians have no clear sense of what this tradition, for better or worse, has contributed to life and worship today. In the culture at large attitudes toward the Reformed tradition – especially in its Puritan forms – are as uninformed as they are negative. Even those influenced by this tradition are frequently unable to specify either the source or the contours of the values they are supposed to hold. And their children are, if anything, even more indifferent to such institutionalized traditions. The historical soundings presented here might then be considered a work of retrieval. They may provide resources for persons to evaluate their own contemporary worship life and cultural engagement. In the light of the so-called postmodern shift in sensibilities and the so-called visual turn in culture, such retrieval is all the more important.

These excursions are necessarily limited not only in the period studied but in the areas explored. Beginning in sixteenth-century Geneva with Calvin, I trace the Reformed heritage through its influence in Puritan England, in early seventeenth-century Holland, and in Puritan New England up to Jonathan Edwards. Other persons and places could easily have been included – Scotland being the most obvious example. But these constitute a central progression in this tradition, especially for Protestant North America, and may be taken as typical and even constitutive for the developing Reformed imagination.

A project like this accrues many debts that I am happy to acknowledge. Fuller Theological Seminary provided support through its generous sabbatical program, and I am grateful to former Provost Russell Spittler for his support. An earlier version of Chapter Four was given in March 2001 at a conference sponsored by the Institute for Theology, Imagination and the Arts at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, and I thank Dr. Trevor Hart for his invitation and hospitality on that occasion. The Huntington Library in San Marino, California has proved to be an invaluable research home for work on this project and I would like to thank librarians Christopher Adde, Jill Cogen, Beth Green, Susi Krasnoo, Mona Shulman and Anne Mar for their generous assistance. Additionally I have

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