1 Introduction

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This collection of chapters provides a broad orientation to the theology of the Reformed tradition – to its core doctrines and its significant figures, and to its historical development in diverse contexts. The motivation for such a volume at the present time is threefold. First, there is the desire to indicate some of the ways in which the Reformed tradition of theological thinking emerged and developed to articulate an identifiably distinct array of doctrinal concerns within a series of diverse contexts. Second, there is the desire to explore some of the ways in which the resultant Reformed sensibilities in theology had a significant impact not only on the theological landscape in particular but also on various societal landscapes at large. And third, there is the desire to suggest that theological thinking from within the Reformed tradition continues to have much in its generative and constructive modes to offer the contemporary ecumenical enterprise of systematic theology.

Yet the term 'Reformed theology' itself is not one that is amenable to easy or quick definition. While Roman Catholic theology is regulated by magisterial teaching and papal authority, and while Lutheran theology is delineated by the *Book of Concord*, theology in the Reformed churches has always – and by no means capriciously – been a more diverse affair. Certainly, an important series of Reformed confessional and catechetical documents, many written in the sixteenth century (though with others produced in more recent times), articulate a variety of clear and careful theological positions spanning a broad range of theological loci. Yet without ever losing contact with these foundational documents, the Reformed theological tradition has developed at different times and in different places to the extent that there have emerged positions significantly removed from those advanced by the first generations of magisterial Reformers.

Against this background, perhaps it may be questioned whether the Reformed tradition has any theological coherence at all – whether

it is simply too diverse to have any discernible centre(s) of gravity in terms of method deployed, form invoked, or content posited. Such a concern is exacerbated in light of two consistent (if not always realised) impulses of the tradition of the Reformed churches. The first is a foundational attentiveness to the witness of Scripture, which – precisely in its commonality across Christian traditions – can struggle to identify any particular uniqueness of the Reformed. The second, not unrelated to the first, is a foundational openness to the witness of other churches, which – precisely in its hospitality to other views – again risks rendering the particularity of the Reformed tradition rather aporetic. Yet precisely these difficulties should offer impetus – and encouragement – to those both within and outwith the Reformed theological tradition seeking to identify its characteristics.

In the first place, it is important to recognise the historical dimension of the meaning of the term 'Reformed'. In its original sixteenth-century use, the term simply referred to the churches and doctrines of the Reformation in general, as having departed in whatever way from the existing practices and beliefs of the Roman Catholic Church. But as the different factions of the Protestant movement began to identify themselves as distinct from each other, the term took on a rather more technical meaning. In time, it came to refer to the theology and practice held broadly in common by a particular series of churches which claimed to be 'reformed according to the Word of God' (*die nach Gottes Wort reformierten Kirchen*). This ecclesiastical movement had its roots in some major cities of the Swiss Confederation, such as Zürich, Basel and Bern, but rapidly expanded to the cities of southern Germany, to Geneva and Strasbourg, and beyond to the west, north and east.

This Reformed group of churches came in time to be distinguished ever more clearly not only from the Roman Catholic Church but also from both the Lutheran churches and the more radical movements of the Reformation. Individual places were often closely identified with particular Reformers – for example, Huldrych Zwingli in Zürich and John Calvin in Geneva. Yet the documents which crystallised the theology of this early period, and which form the starting-point for all later trajectories of Reformed thought, were generally ecclesial in nature, particular to and subscribed by the whole church in a given location. Sixteenth-century texts such as the the Scots Confession (1560), the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Second Helvetic Confession (1566) were thus primarily local documents, albeit some had a profound impact on the wider tradition. In the same way, later documents such as the Canons of Dort (1618–1619), the Westminster

Confession (1647), and the Barmen Declaration (1934) had both local and wider impact.

At the same time, such documents do not in themselves define Reformed theology. First, given that they serve the church in one location, the confessional texts make no claim to being universally binding; indeed, they often explicitly recognise their fallibility and their openness to correction in light of Scripture. Second, the documents themselves are regularly open to different interpretations; and furthermore, the texts do not always materially concur – there are tensions and even contradictions at different points. And then there are the wider issues: many Reformed churches no longer require subscription to the letter of their historic standards of faith; the documents themselves could never realistically claim to be doctrinally comprehensive; and – perhaps most significantly – further developments in systematic theology have sometimes challenged and even overtaken original confessional positions. It is the nature of any living tradition to change, develop, and evolve.

In the second place, then, it is important to recognise the theological dimension to the meaning of the term 'Reformed' – if, for the reasons noted earlier, the idea of a confessional uniformity is unpersuasive. In the absence of any single confessional standard or any diachronic doctrinal consistency in the churches, the very concept of Reformed theology appears to be under threat of evacuation. At this juncture, it may be helpful as a point of orientation to bring to mind the familiar clarion calls of the Reformation: *sola scriptura*, *sola fide*, *sola gratia*, *solus Christus*, and *soli Deo gloria*. These calls offer an alternative way of identifying a common shape of theological commitment and doctrinal formulation that might serve to recognise the continuity and commensurability of very different expressions of Reformed theology. Yet precisely in their comprehensiveness of instinct, they could also be said to be shared by many other expressions of Christian faith – particularly other Protestant traditions such as Lutheranism.

A further way of identifying the particularity of the Reformed tradition is to speak of five-point Calvinism, famously encapsulated in the formulation TULIP (Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the saints). Such a determinant certainly encompasses a wide swathe of what would be considered Reformed theology. But to rest here risks three oversights. The first is to identify the Reformed tradition with the legacy of Calvin alone, as if no other thinker contributed to the formation of the tradition and its theology. The term 'Reformed' needs to be recognised as being more

inclusive than simply 'Calvinist'. The second is to assume that the legacy of Calvin is uncontroversial and uncontested, a view which a series of interpretative controversies has rendered untenable. And third – in line with the idea of using confessions as markers noted earlier – it cannot be assumed that all Reformed thinkers would assent to this particular characterisation of their theology. Indeed, several theologians in the tradition have explicitly denied that the Canons of Dort provide an authoritative development of Calvin's theology. So while a formulation such as TULIP has some merit, it fails to account adequately either for the diversity of the Reformed tradition or for the theologies advanced within it. If the five *solas* provide too capacious a definition of 'Reformed', it seems that five-point Calvinism is too narrow.

Yet another way of attempting to characterise the term 'Reformed' is in terms of a distinct set of intellectual habits – these might be described as respectful but critical of tradition, open to fresh insight, and both practical and evangelical in orientation. Doubtless, there is much in this depiction of Reformed theology and plenty of historical material to illustrate the value of such dispositions; these are worthy of continued attention. But it is not easy to account for a distinctive set of habits independently of the normative theological commitments which have traditionally fostered and sustained them. Convictions about God, Scripture, the Christian life, and the world have all been closely allied to the way in which Reformed theologians traditionally understood their task as doctors of the church. While these habits could persist amidst significant doctrinal modifications, it is not clear that they can formally identify a discrete approach without some continuity of material concerns and principles.

The way in which Reformed theology is characterised in this volume is thus rather different. At its core is the idea that the Reformed tradition sets forth a particular agenda of theological discourse in a remarkably symphonic way. If there cannot be said to be univocity across all its expressions, there can at least be said to be material and thematic resonances across its diverse texts at a most profound level. Even in the absence of a single authoritative text or body of doctrine, there are sufficient common emphases and family resemblances to validate the notion of a discrete tradition. The originating documents of the sixteenth century are thus more the starting-point of a trajectory – or series of trajectories – than a set of timeless criteria, albeit a starting point that takes its foundations from Scripture and its bearings from apostolic tradition and patristic theology. They evidence an identifiable set of theological instincts, of doctrinal impulses – a certain Christian

sensibility. This particular pattern of thinking carries forward in time; but as it does so it finds new instantiations and expressions evolving in new contexts. And this is true not only in form: on occasion such development can also lead to revision, even correction, of the content of previous views. Not only the manner but also the matter of this theology can change.

The practical context and concerns of the Reformed churches also contribute to these theological variations on common themes. From the outset, the regular preaching of the Word of God was accompanied by a commitment to adult Christian education, often in the form of catechising and sustained study of the Bible in the vernacular. Such a commitment correspondingly gave rise to a strong impulse towards literacy, and the consequent devotion of time and resources towards parish education in the broadest sense. Such a practical setting bred a suspicion of unduly speculative patterns of thought that could not readily be communicated to wider audiences. Most of the theologians studied in this volume were committed to the task of preaching and could readily move from lectern to pulpit, sometimes with striking effect.

In addition, the strong emphasis on social transformation in the Reformed churches generated a context in which ethics and politics were often dominant concerns. The close partnership of church and state in Geneva and Zürich may have been inflected in different ways in different places, especially after the spread of the Reformed churches to the New World. But the commitment both to the unity of Scripture and to a programme of individual and social sanctification ensured that systematic theology, practical theology, and ethics were often closely intertwined. Later divisions in the theological syllabus should not occlude the centrality of this holistic view in the Reformed tradition. A social vision was never far from the concerns of Reformed theology, even as that vision was adjusted to diverse circumstances.

It is the task of the first section of this book, 'Theological Themes', to articulate against the backdrop of certain doctrinal loci some of the most significant of these instincts and impulses that first shaped the tradition. To do this is to explore what makes a theology 'Reformed' and thus to set forth the sensibility – one might even say, the spirit – which remains broadly constant across all those expressions of faith and all those trajectories of development which sit within the Reformed tradition. This section therefore explores the core loci in respect of which the distinctiveness of Reformed theology comes to unique expression: the doctrine of Scripture, the place of confessions, the doctrine of election, Christology, the doctrine of the sacraments, and the Christian

life. These chapters consider how this doctrinal particularity emerged in the sixteenth century, analyse the theological developments in each locus within the Reformed tradition, and reflect constructively on the doctrine in contemporary systematic theology.

The second section of the volume, 'Theological Figures', turns to some of the most significant theologians in the emergence and development of Reformed theology. There are five figures whose work in the tradition is engaged here: Huldrych Zwingli, John Calvin, Jonathan Edwards, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Karl Barth – the constraints of space sadly exclude the possibility of considering further worthy figures. Each chapter considers one of these individuals, focussing particularly on the way in which they contributed to the discipline of Reformed theology and on the way in which they instantiate its core doctrinal sensibilities. In each case, the aim of the chapter is to offer an account of the relationship between the theologian and the Reformed tradition, to present a consideration of the specific emphases and trajectories within Reformed theology which result from their work, and to provide an evaluation of the contribution that each one has made to Reformed theology.

In the final section of the volume, 'Theological Contexts', the different contexts – historical and geographical – within which Reformed theology has been undertaken are examined. The initial chapters offer an exposition and analysis of two genuinely trans-national movements of the seventeenth century which had a significant impact on the shape and influence of Reformed theology – puritanism and scholasticism. Thereafter, a series of chapters explore the very diverse geographical contexts within which Reformed theology has been influential in the period from the eighteenth century to the present day. Though space precludes being fully comprehensive, these chapters explore some of the key developments which have occurred in Reformed theology in these diverse locations, the relevance of these developments for Reformed theology and the Reformed churches, and the present and future prospects of Reformed theology in these contexts and beyond.

By means of this structure, the volume aims to provide – as the title suggests – a genuine companion to explorations in Reformed theology. It seeks to represent something of the scope and breadth of the theology undertaken in the Reformed tradition across time and across borders, delineating some of its most significant contours and some of its most prominent writers. But it also seeks to capture something of the vibrancy and excitement which are hallmarks of the best theological work in any tradition, to indicate and to evidence the generative and

constructive contributions which Reformed theology, in all its rich history and proud diversity, continues to make to ecclesial and ecumenical dialogues today. From the beginning the Reformed tradition has revealed strong impulses towards church unity, and today its contribution needs to be located in this broader ecumenical context. If the Reformed church is truly *semper reformanda* (always to be reformed), then so too its theology sits under the same mandate. For theological work undertaken in the Reformed tradition, as this volume attests, this command is not a challenge to be feared but an opportunity to be seized in each and every generation.

Part I

Theological topics