

**IN MEMORIAM:**

**John Haddon Leith**

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John Haddon Leith, child of the covenant, minister of the word, professor of theology, and dedicated churchman, knew more about the Christian faith, and loved the church more, than anyone else I have ever known. He received a B.A. from Erskine College in 1940, a B.D. from Columbia Theological Seminary in 1943, an M.A. from Vanderbilt University in 1946, and a Ph.D. from Yale University in 1949. In Mobile Presbytery, he started the Spring Hill Presbyterian Church in 1943. He served as pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in Nashville. His longest pastorate was from 1948–1959 at First Presbyterian Church in Auburn, Alabama. Among his many honors he valued especially honorary degrees from: Erskine College, ( D. D., 1972); Davidson College, (D. D., 1978); and Presbyterian College, (D. Litt., 1990).

Albert Outler said of John Leith's doctoral studies in theology at Yale University, "It turned out happily that young Leith was teachable....He brought with him a solid grounding in his tradition in straight succession from Geneva to Edinburgh to Westminster." Leith's doctoral dissertation, "John Calvin's Doctrine of the Christian Life," was published by Westminster/John Knox Press in 1989, forty years after its composition. As Outler has noted, Leith included "the discovery and exposition of a graciousness in Calvin's doctrine of grace that some of us had not recognized there." As an outgrowth of the earlier study, Leith edited *John Calvin—The Christian Life* for Harper and Row in 1984. Beyond these books on Calvin, Leith has written numerous articles about various aspects of Calvin's thought for dictionaries, encyclopedias, periodicals, and volumes of collected essays.

While Calvin was the focus of much of Leith's study, the larger context was the history of Christian theology in general and the Reformed heritage in particular. As Leith himself wrote in *Pilgrimage of a Presbyterian: Collected Shorter Writings*, edited by Charles E. Raynal, (p. xix), "I also owe a great debt to the theologians who shaped my theology: the theologians of Nicea and Chalcedon, Augustine, Martin Luther (especially the writings of 1520), Calvin, William Temple, Emil Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr, and in recent years, Karl Barth." Through his writing and teaching, Leith also introduced all of these and more to his students and, through them, to the Presbyterian Church. That is, John Leith was not only a theologian but also a churchman.

Though John Leith contributed significantly to the academy, he did not intend his writing solely for academics. *The Church: A Believing Fellowship* (1965, 1981), was written over forty years ago for young people in communicants' classes in the Auburn Presbyterian Church. Published in the Covenant Life Curriculum as a Sunday School text for junior high students, this work served as a valuable resource throughout the Presbyterian Church U.S. and more broadly. After the line of curriculum ceased to be published, this book was reprinted individually. It continues to be widely distributed, used for youth, adults, new members, and even church officers.

*Basic Christian Doctrine* (1993) may eventually prove to be Leith's most enduring and important publication. Heiko Oberman, who said he purchased a copy intending only to scan it and found himself reading it through, thanked Leith for it—"the kind of teaching concerned with understanding the student rather than with a display of scholarship." This book continues to be used by pastors and elders, by candidates preparing to take ordination examinations, and by those writing the examinations. Words of comfort from his chapter on the Christian hope for eternal life are widely shared with the bereaved.

*Creeds of the Church: A Reader in Christian Doctrine, from the Bible to the Present* (1963, 1973, 1982) gives the texts of, and introductions to, creeds from throughout the history of the church and around the

world. Another book, *Assembly at Westminster: Reformed Theology in the Making* (1973), focuses on setting forth the context of the writing of the Westminster Confession of Faith

*Introduction to the Reformed Tradition: A Way of Being the Christian Community* (1977, 1981) provides Leith's fullest statement of the Reformed heritage. It has been translated into Korean and Portuguese, and a British edition has also been published. It is useful not only for the education of ministers but also for church officer training. *Reformed Imperative: What the Church Has to Say That No One Else Can Say* (1988), given as a set of lectures at Austin Theological Seminary, sets forth the distinctive affirmations of the Christian faith in a characteristically forceful way. As the subtitle indicates, it makes the case that it is important for the church to say well what no one else in the world knows or is in the position to say. That is, the church is to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ and to leave social analysis and prescriptions to others. *Reformed Reader: A Sourcebook for Christian Theology* (vol. 1, 1993), is an excellent anthology textbook and reference work. This broader project of appropriating the Reformed tradition within the Christian faith, or of appropriating the Christian faith in a distinctively Reformed way, made up the concern of most of the books and articles Leith wrote.

*Crisis in the Church: The Plight of Theological Education* (1997) is, one would hope, an occasional piece, setting forth a sharp critique of the seminaries. It provides evidence of a mellowing, in that the book is gentler than it could have been. Still, many of the charges he leveled there have not been answered. The church and its seminaries neglect them to their detriment.

John Leith must have taught at least fifteen hundred students at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia. Surely that is a conservative figure. He was there for thirty one years, during which time the seminary graduated thousands of students. Most of those would have come through his theology classes. As Leith himself said in his inaugural address as professor at Union Theological Seminary, "The final expression and decisive test of a minister's scholarship is written in the life of the congregation" *Pilgrimage of a Presbyterian...* (p. 200). By extension, the final expression and decisive test of John Leith's scholarship is now being written in the lives of the congregations his students serve as pastors.

Leith himself was an active leader in the Presbyterian Church, serving as moderator of presbyteries where his churches were located and as Moderator of the Synod of North Carolina. He served on four *ad interim* committees of the Presbyterian General Assembly: on Revision of the *Book of Church Order*, 1955–1962; on "Brief Statement of Belief," 1959–1962; on Possible Revision of Chapter III of *Confession of Faith*, 1959–1961; and to Write a Brief Statement of Faith for Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1984–1991. He served on the boards of Presbyterian School of Christian Education, 1957–1959; of Erskine College, 1964–1968; of *Presbyterian Outlook*, 1960–1999; *Presbyterian Survey*, 1961–1970; of the Peter Martyr Library; and of Editorial Consultants for the *Bibliotheca Calviniana* (Meeter Center for Calvin Studies).

In 1982, John Leith founded The Fund for the Explication and Application of Reformed Theology (1982). It may eventually prove to be his most significant contribution to the ongoing education of Presbyterian pastors and, through them, to the renewal of the church by the continuing of the Reformed heritage. Originally, the Fund anticipated purchasing books for seminary libraries and helping graduate students in Reformed theology. However, its program of study seminars for Presbyterian pastors, organized around readings from Reformed theology from a list of topics and books prepared by Leith, has quickly become its most important function in terms of wide spread influence. The Fund has recently been given a more permanent structure as The Foundation for Reformed Theology, organized in Charlotte, North Carolina.

John Haddon Leith was born on September 10, 1919, in Hodges, South Carolina. He died on August 12, 2002, and was buried at Greenville Presbyterian Church in Donalds, South Carolina.

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