

Dear Friends of the Foundation:

I had occasion recently, when preparing to visit with one of our ministerial study seminars, to reread board member Charles E. Raynal's excellent Preface to John H. Leith's *Pilgrimage of a Presbyterian: Collected Shorter Writings* (Louisville, Kentucky: Geneva Press, 2001). At one point (p. xiv), he directs the reader's attention to Leith's essay, "**The Liberalism of the Reformed Tradition,**" which appears in the collection (pp. 315-317). It occurred to me that I needed to reread that, also.

The essay was first published in 1952, the year before I was born. At that time, Dr. Leith was a thirty-two year old pastor and not yet a professor of theology. I wondered whether "liberalism" might have meant something different fifty-six years ago than it does now. But, of course, Dr. Leith wrote clearly and precisely what he meant by it.

I probably should not quote the entire essay here—I want you to buy the book and read it there!—but let me quote a little of it here:

For the past two decades it has been almost a fad among theologians, both amateur and professional, to write obituaries for the liberal theology that is now on the wane. Yet no man can seriously contend that liberal theology did not make a genuine contribution to the church or that the church in its theologizing can ever ignore this period in its history. Certainly it challenges us among whom liberalism was seldom known except in anathema to search for the true liberalism of the Reformed faith.

The Enlightenment and the nineteenth century happened whether we like it or not. We ought to be grateful for the liberals who insisted that we as theologians and preachers must take seriously this new knowledge of science, society, and history. My mother knows about the nineteenth century on the top of her mind, but she continues to say her prayers as though this were 1600. For us who are preachers and teachers this is not an option. For us, theological time and chronological time must engage each other.

The very fact that we are a Reformed church means that we are a liberal church. It is our conviction that no human institution, no outlook upon life, no creedal statement is ever absolute and irreformable. The whole of life, within the church as well as without the church, must be continually reformed in the light of the Christian community's apprehension of what God has said in Jesus Christ. This Word of God in Jesus Christ alone is absolute, but our understanding of it is never absolute or final. Jesus Christ, not some creed, not some polity, not some particular institution, is the living Lord of the church and of the conscience. ...

It is time for us who call ourselves disciples of Calvin to rediscover another aspect of his theology that emphasized the necessity for continual reform of life under the word of God. We do not and we cannot possess, manipulate, and control the living

word of God. Rather this word must possess and control us. We cannot lock the living word in a neat, tidy formula. Sometimes we must confess that we stand nearer the word of God amid the tension of opposing views than in the presence of dogmatic pronouncements. The truth manifest in the person of Jesus Christ can never be adequately expressed in abstract propositions. Theology must always remain symbolic.

The question that confronts us is, “Do we have the courage and the energy to be truly liberal in the Reformed tradition?” Do we have the courage to admit that Presbyterianism may not be the last word in polity, that we must continually listen to what God has to say to us in Jesus Christ? Do we have the courage to recognize that the Westminster Confession and Catechisms are not infallible and must be continually reformed? ...

We are under the conviction that God demands of us that we see the daily tasks in which we are engaged under the light of the Word that he spoke to us in Jesus Christ. In this particular Man the mind of the Lord God, creator of heaven and earth, is acted out in human life so that all men can see and understand. But our hearts are never pure enough, nor our minds great enough, to understand completely. So from day to day, indeed from generation to generation, it is our specifically Christian task to listen to the living voice of God.

As heirs of the Reformation we must keep alive the task of reformation. No creed, no polity, no institution, no social conscience is ever final, absolute, or irreformable.

In practice as well as in theory our whole life must be continually reformed in the light of the Christian—not simply the Presbyterian—community’s apprehension of what God says to us today in Jesus Christ, our Lord.

This is the liberalism of the Reformed tradition.

The “liberalism” of which Dr. Leith writes has to do with the freedom of God and with the authority of the Word of God. It has to do with our recognition that the church is not absolute. It does not have to do with advancing a “liberal” ideology. Quite the opposite, it has to do with the ability and responsibility to criticize ideologies of both left and right.

Grace and Peace,

Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, *Executive Director*

Foundation for Reformed Theology

4103 Monument Avenue

Richmond, Virginia 23230-3818

(804) 678-8352

www.foundationrt.org

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