An Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism

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Introduction

When we see the words Reformed and Scholasticism next to one another we might scratch our heads and think we are reading an oxymoron like jumbo shrimp. The two terms do not seem to belong together. Just as Tertullian (160-220) once asked what Jerusalem had to do with Athens when wondering what Greek philosophy had to do with Christianity, we might wonder what Reformed theology has to do with scholasticism? Are these terms like proverbial oil and water? After all, was it not medieval scholastic theologians who debated inane subjects such as how many angels could dance on the head of a pin? Is not scholasticism associated with philosophical speculation that was swept away by the Reformation? The simple answer to these questions is, No. More often than not, there is more myth than truth surrounding the term scholasticism. However, with all of the names just mentioned we find a great variety of theological and philosophical views. Additionally, the terms speculative or philosophical can not be applied to all of them. Therefore, how should scholasticism be defined?

Strictly speaking, scholasticism is not a set of beliefs or doctrines but rather a theological method. Scholasticism is a method of doing theology that sets out to achieve theological precision through the exegesis of Scripture, an examination of how doctrine has been historically defined throughout church history, and how doctrine is expounded in contemporary debate. Scholastic theological works bear several identifying characteristics:

1. Presenting an issue in the form of a thesis or question.
2. Ordering the thesis or question suitably for discussion or debate, often identifying the state of the question.
3. Noting a series of objections to the assumed correct answer.
4. Offering a formulation of an answer or an elaboration of the thesis with due respect to all known sources of information and to the rules of rational discourse, followed by a full response to all objections.
We see this type of *modus operandi* at work in Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*; he states a doctrinal issue in the form of a question: “Whether the Son Is Equal to the Father in Power?” After stating the question he lists the following three objections:

1. It would seem that the Son is not equal to the Father in power.

2. Further, greater is the power of him who commands and teaches than of him who obeys and hears.

3. Further, it belongs to the Father’s omnipotence to be able to beget a Son equal to Himself.

Following these three objections Aquinas then refutes each of them using Scripture, reason, and historical theology to support his arguments.6

We can see that this is simply a way of doing theology and that it does not determine theological content. It does, as you can imagine, produce theology that is very precise because it thoroughly considers all the evidence when answering a doctrinal question; it takes into consideration Scripture, historical theology, contemporary theology, as well as objections to the stated answer. As a result of using this method scholastic theologians often established minute distinctions and precise definitions in their expositions of doctrine.5

Now, let us turn to the pen of a Reformed Scholastic theologian to see how he employs this method.

**Francis Turretin: A Reformed Scholastic**

Francis Turretin, born 17 October 1623, studied at Geneva, Leiden, Utrecht, Paris, Samur, Montauban, and Nimes. After his studies he was called to be the pastor of the Italian congregation in Geneva in 1648 and later followed in the footsteps of John Calvin (1509-64), Theodore Beza (1519-1605), and his father, Benedict Turretin (1588-1631) and was appointed a professor of theology at the Academy of Geneva in 1653.7 He continued as both a pastor and professor of theology in Geneva until his death in 1687. The theological work that Turretin is best known for is his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*.8 He titled his work as an *Institute* as Calvin did before him, a common title for works that served the purpose of instruction in theology. He also titled his work with the word *Elenctic* which is derived from the Greek word for that which uncovers error. Hence, the overall thrust of his work is positively to state theological truth and also to refute theological errors.9 Turretin accomplishes his theological goal by use of the scholastic method.

As we saw with our definition of Scholasticism and with the example from Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* we can see that Turretin follows the same pattern. For example, in his discussion on predestination Turretin asks the following question: “Is election made from the foresight of faith, or works; or from the grace of God alone? The former we deny; the latter we affirm.”10 Turretin then goes on to clarify the nature of the question, or identifies the “state of the question,” and then identifies the theologians with whom he disagrees. He identifies some of the “more ancient Scholastics,” semi-Pelagian Roman Catholic theologians, Lutherans, and Arminians as those with whom he disagrees. In this process of identifying his opponents, he also quotes from many of their works to illustrate their disagreement with his own position.11 For example, he quotes the following statement from the Arminians: “It is absurd to place the absolute will of God in the decree of election as the first cause, going before the remaining causes, to wit, Christ, faith, and all the other.”12 Now, with his question clarified and his opponents identified, Turretin then gives his own positive answer to the question.

Turretin cites numerous passages of Scripture to support his position. Keep in mind, when he cites Scripture he does not merely place the reference in parentheses at the end of a sentence as is common with twentieth-century theological works. On the contrary, Turretin often exegetes passages to demonstrate how they support his position. For example, regarding Romans 9:11-12 Turretin writes:
1. It treats of twins who had done nothing good or bad by which they might be distinguished from each other.

2. Election is said expressly to be of him that calleth, not of works.

3. In verses 15 and 16, it is wholly ascribed to the mercy of God alone . . .

4. If foresight were granted, there would be no place for the objections of scruples proposed by Paul (Rom. 9:14) . . .

Hence, Turretin relies heavily upon the exegesis of Scripture as a source for his doctrine. In addition to Scripture, Turretin also turns to both historical and contemporary theologians to support his explanation. He turns to works such as Luther's *Bondage of the Will*, *The Canons of Dort*, Saint Augustine's *On the Predestination of the Saints*, and two of his own contemporaries Louis Capellus (1585-1658) and Paul Testard (d. 1660). All of this points to the fact that the scholastic method in the hands of a Reformed theologian produces a very thorough exposition of theology—no rock goes unturned. We can also see yet another aspect of scholastic theology in Turretin's work with his use of theological distinctions.

Twentieth-century theological works often lack the precision and circumspect doctrinal expositions that are found in works like Turretin's *Institutes*. For example, note how one theologian explains the idea of the love of God: "The Scriptures know of only one grace of God and one love of God, His grace and love in Jesus Christ. This is the grace and this is the love revealed in the gospel." Turretin, on the other hand, is very precise in his theological statements and especially in his use of theological terminology. For example, note how Turretin carefully demarcates between different nuances when explaining the love of God:

From goodness flows love by which he communicates himself to the creature and (as it were) wills to unite himself with and do good to it, but in diverse ways and degrees according to the diversity of the objects. Hence is usually made a threefold distinction in the divine love: the first, that by which he follows creatures, called 'love of the creature' (*philoktisia*); the second, that by which he embraces men, called 'love of man' (*philanthropia*); the third, which is specially exercised towards the elect and is called 'the love of the elect' (*eklektophilia*).

Turretin then goes on to subdivide the love of God into three more types of love:

A threefold love of God is commonly held; or rather there are three degrees of one and the same love. First, there is the love of beneficence by which God willed good to the creature from eternity; second, the love of beneficence by which he does good to the creature in time according to his good will; third, the love of complacency by which he delights himself in the creature on account of the rays of his image seen in them . . . Jn. 3:13 refers to the first; Eph. 5:25 and Rev. 1:5 to the second; Is. 62:3 and Heb. 11:6 to the third.

Now, when Turretin's explanations of the love of God are compared with the first example we see a massive difference: in the former a broad sweeping statement whereas Turretin's statements are precise and thorough. With Turretin's statements we can distinguish how God can love the creation, mankind in general, and how the elect are the recipients of God's special love. Some might think that Turretin borders on being excessively pedantic but this is not the case especially in the light of Scripture. For example, we see God the Father's special love for His Son (John 3:35, 5:20), His providential love for the creation (Matt. 6), His salvific stance toward the fallen world (John 3:16), and God's particular love for the elect (Eph. 5:25). Distinctions like those of Turretin, therefore, are quite necessary when refuting theological errors; the opponent, or reader, knows exactly what Turretin is saying. Now, having seen Reformed Scholasticism from the pen of one of its most able expositors we should determine what benefit this theological method has for the church?
The Benefits of Reformed Scholasticism for the Church

We do not simply want to admire Reformed Scholasticism and then return it to the dusty library shelf. On the contrary, Reformed Scholastic works can be quite helpful to the church for several reasons. First, the church can benefit from the precision of Reformed scholasticism and use the scholastic method in new theological works. It was Karl Barth (1886-1968), no champion of traditional orthodoxy, who recognized this insight some sixty-five years ago:

I had come to be amazed at the long, peaceful breathing, the sterling quality, the relevant strictness, the superior style, the methods confident at least themselves, with which this ‘orthodoxy’ had wrought. I had cause for astonishment at its wealth of problems and sheer beauty of its trains of thought. In these old fellows I saw that it can be worth while to reflect upon the tiniest point with the greatest force of Christian presupposition, and, for the sake of much appealed-to ‘life,’ to be quite serious about the question of truth all along the line. In other words I saw that Protestant dogmatics was once a careful, orderly business, and I conceived the hope that it might perhaps become so again, if it could reacquire its obviously wandered nerves and return to a strict, Church and scientific outlook.19

Within the last fifty years there are very few works on systematic theology that scratch the theological surface. Introductions to systematic theology abound. Where are the systematic theologies that wrestle with doctrine with the degree of precision and research that mark Reformed Scholastic works?

Second, the church can benefit from the thorough nature of Reformed Scholastic works. It was Paul Tillich (1886-1965), another unorthodox theologian, who recognized this benefit:

It is a pity that very often orthodoxy and fundamentalism are confused. One of the great achievements of classical orthodoxy in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was the fact that it remained in continual discussion with all the centuries of Christian thought… These orthodox theologians knew the history of philosophy as well as the theology of the Reformation. The fact that they were in the tradition of the Reformers did not prevent them from knowing thoroughly scholastic theology, from discussing and refuting it, or even accepting it when possible. All this makes classical orthodoxy one of the great events in the history of Christian thought.20

As we saw with Turretin’s explanation of predestination, Reformed Scholastic theologians paid careful attention to the history of a doctrine. They were conversant with the theology from every age of the church. This type of thoroughness is something that Reformed theology currently lacks. While many in Reformed circles are familiar with the Reformation and post-Reformation eras, there is an ignorance of Patristic and Medieval theology. Why should we be aware of Patristic and Medieval theology? There are several reasons:

1. The Reformation has been called a revival of the theology of Saint Augustine, the Patristic era’s greatest theologian. Moreover, many Reformers such as Calvin, esteemed the theology of the Patristic age.21

2. Reformed Scholastic theologians used the insights of Medieval theology in writing their own doctrinal works. Turretin’s use of the scholastic method is certainly evidence of an appreciation for Medieval theology.

3. If we believe that “there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl. 1:9; NAS) then we can learn from the mistakes of the past and ensure that we do not repeat them. This can only be done by a study of historical theology from every age of the church.

4. If we believe that the Holy Spirit blows as the wind (John 3:8) then we must acknowledge the fact that God has saved people in every age. This means that there are saints from the Patristic and Middle Ages that we can read and profit from.

These are all facts that Reformed Scholastic theologians such as Turretin recognized.
Third, we can benefit from the piety and devotion of the Reformed Scholastics. True, while many of the works of Reformed Scholastic theologians are highly technical and geared for academic debate, there are still those works that have a good blend of scholastic precision and warm devotionalism such as Wilhelmus a Brakel’s *The Christian’s Reasonable Service.* These three points are certainly things that the church can benefit from in reading and studying the works of Reformed Scholastic theologians. Now, while the scholastic method has many benefits, we should not think that it is the end all cure for all theological problems. No theological method will prevent heterodoxy from rearing its ugly head.

Just because a theologian uses the scholastic method is no insurance policy against error. It was Richard Baxter (1615-91), for example, who was one of the most knowledgeable Reformed Scholastic theologians of the seventeenth century. Yet, this did not prevent him from allowing the philosophy of Tommaso Campanella (1568-1639), an Italian philosopher who was critical of Aristotelianism, to influence his theology. More specifically, Baxter argued that the doctrine of the Trinity could be seen in the creation. This was a radical break with traditional Reformed theology which had made the doctrine of the Trinity the exclusive property of special revelation. In similar manner, Jean-Alphonse Turretin (1671-1737), the son of Francis Turretin, gave a greater place to natural reason in his theology. Although he “did not replace revelation with natural religion, he gave rational arguments an equal footing with biblical revelation.” This was a distinct break from his father’s opinions on the subject. It was these types of subtle theological shifts that eventually imploded Reformed theology in Europe. By the mid-eighteenth century professors at Calvin’s Academy were denying doctrines such as the Trinity and the Incarnation because they did not square with human reason. This demise of Reformed theology should not be attributed to the scholastic method but rather the users of the method. Any time human reason is relied upon to excess, heterodoxy is bound to ensue. The Church, however, can use the scholastic method with great profit so long as they do so with the heart of a Berean (Acts 17:10-11) and, as Francis Turretin would argue, with reason held in check by the authority of Scripture.

**Conclusion**

We have seen the nature, benefits, and even the dangers when misused, of Reformed Scholasticism. Moreover, we have seen Reformed Scholasticism receiving the praise from two theologians who carry no brief for orthodoxy theology, Karl Barth and Paul Tillich. Yet, if these unorthodox theologians have positive things to say about Reformed Scholasticism we can only imagine what orthodox theologians have to say about it, especially about the theology of Francis Turretin. Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) highly esteemed Turretin. Charles Hodge (1797-1878) made numerous references to Turretin’s *Institutes* in his *Systematic Theology.* W. G. T. Shedd (1820-94) cites Turretin more than any other theologian in his *Dogmatic Theology.* We can also see the influence of Turretin in the theology of R. L. Dabney (1820-98) in his *Systematic Theology.* Now, if both unorthodox and orthodox theologian alike admire and profit from Reformed Scholasticism, especially that of Turretin, what message does this send to us? It tells us that if we ignore this period of Reformed theology we do so to our own folly and impoverishment. So many in the Reformed church are familiar with the writings of Calvin and his *Institutes.* It seems like it would behoove us to weigh anchor and sail into the waters of Reformed Scholasticism not only to appreciate its work but also to apply its insights to our own theological work all *soli Deo gloria!*


4 Muller, “Scholasticism and Orthodoxy,” p. 4.
6 Muller, *Christ and the Decree*, p. 12.
10 Turretin, *Institutes*, vol. 1, 4.11.1; p. 355.
14 Turretin, *Institutes*, vol. 1, 4.11.1-36; pp. 355-64.
16 Turretin, *Institutes*, vol. 1, 3.20.4; p. 241.
17 Turretin, *Institutes*, vol. 1, 3.20.5; p. 242.