

Author's Foreword

In the year 1979, the Lord in his amazing grace and infinite mercy reached down to save another wretch from the wrath to come. It was only after God had saved me that Holy Scripture made any sense; it was as if someone had turned on a bright light in a totally dark room. In the first year of my Christian walk while as yet disassociated with any formal religious framework such as a denomination, local church or other religious affiliation, I began the painstaking effort of studying and learning directly from the Scriptures, all the while praying that the Holy Spirit Himself would be my instructor.

My initial approach was a topical study of God's Word, not chapter-by-chapter or verse-by-verse. I soon discovered, however, that individual topics needed to be placed in the context of all of Scripture. That discovery drove me to a simultaneous study of the entire Bible cover-to-cover. I soon began to expand my notes into an essay format in an effort to express the truths in my own words as they had been revealed to me by the Holy Spirit from the pages of Holy Scripture.

As the number of essays mounted, I soon realized that those miscellaneous essays could possibly be organized to create a complete study of the essential doctrines of the Christian faith. I began to think that my writings could benefit other new believers who found themselves in the same swamp of religion where I had begun lest they continued to sink into the quicksand of popular opinion and church tradition. It was then that I began to arrange those essays into sections and began to link them together for easier reading by others. Over the years, I diligently compared and honed my own analysis of Scripture against the views of many theologians of the past as well as the present.

Having encountered great difficulty in seeking out a local church that interpreted all theological doctrines in a way that was remotely similar to my own view, I became interested in discovering how the wide diversity and divisiveness of modern-day churches had come into being. I found that divisiveness and diversity in thought quite strange considering that all of them claimed Jesus Christ as the source and life-blood of their very existence. In Christ, we should all find unity, not divisiveness. All that we know objectively about Jesus Christ is found in the Holy Scriptures that are universally available to all churches. Yet, there is wide disagreement among them regarding many Christian doctrines and practices about many of which the Bible is quite clear. That perplexity drove me into a broad study of church history from the church's inception on the day of Pentecost to the present day. While doing so, I recorded my findings in my own words, interpreted through the essential doctrines and Christian practices that I had earlier examined, and appended it to my earlier endeavors.

By that time, my work had unfortunately expanded into a large unwieldy tome. In recent years, my efforts have been directed toward combining, editing, and reorganizing this work into three more concise volumes deemed necessary for publication. This first book of the trilogy (Book I) discusses the essential doctrines of the Christian Faith. Those are the core doctrines that define true Christianity. Book II discusses individual Christian living, privilege and practice, about which the Lord has granted much liberty, and also fully defines the Church within that context. Book III discusses the history of the Church on earth from its early beginnings on the day of Pentecost to the present. Moving past the present day, the study then extends onward in time to events of the last days as it is revealed in prophetic Scripture texts and finalized in the book of Revelation.

About the Reformed View Taken

There is an unequivocally reformed approach taken in this work throughout as opposed to the corrupted pre-Reformation dogma that characterized the darkness of the Middle Ages. C. H. Spurgeon stated that Reformed Theology is nothing but another name for biblical Christianity, and so it is. Every effort has been made to incorporate the great truths of Christianity from Scripture that were restored during the Reformation Movement as the foundation of this work.

It must be understood however that most of the early reformers' efforts were directed toward the correction of more egregious errors than present in the existing Roman church not replace the church with another. Since most of the early reformers themselves came from within the same established church structure, reformation often fell short of the ideal because of personal religious bias and tradition that had become deeply established in their own lives from their youth.

It is further evident that reform began to diverge shortly after it had begun. That is, it did not follow a straight line, but branched into various paths that often resulted in dead-ends to continued reform. Much of the reform that had begun so well soon became stagnant thus failing to root out much of the error and corruption still existing in many contemporary church teachings. As a result, the Reformation Movement eventually became polarized, bigoted, and stalled. In some instances, the reform was even reversed out of an excessive desire for religious harmony, and peace.

Still later, in attempts to restore what was perceived to be a first-century church faith, reformation in some quarters was actually cast back into the error from which it came. Excessive, even dogmatic, emphasis placed upon various minor doctrines and traditions resulted in unfortunate division and schisms that is the basis for the separation exemplified in many of our Protestant denominations and churches yet today. That conflict is discussed historically in Book III of this work.

That brings us to consider the overall title of this work, *Comprehensively Reformed Christianity*. The term "reformed Christianity" or "reformed theology" is commonly applied exclusively to the body of Truth as it first came out of the early Reformation Movement without considering the deeply entrenched traditions that had kept the reform from continuing on to its necessary culmination. The word "comprehensively" in the title does not refer to this work's exhaustive study of all topics, but to its overall objective to continue the reform effort beyond that of the early reformers. To prevent compounding existing errors or falling into the snare of progressive liberalism while doing so, it is imperative that we, as did the early reformers, continue to consult Holy Scripture as the *only* valid criteria for judging commonly held doctrines.

For that reason, this work at times transcends the idea of the "reformed view" that many may hold today. With true regard for the efforts of the early reformers, and in the same spirit, the reform effort must continue until biblical Truth stands clear and bright on its own unstained by faulty tradition and error. Unfortunately, religious orthodoxy (unlike Scripture) is not fixed; it varies as decades and centuries pass since it is always based on a currently accepted system of theology. Today's orthodoxy is based upon past doctrine, past tradition, and modern experience. Past doctrine, especially as it was often taught in many of our churches, was often incomplete or faulty, tradition has been infiltrated by superstition and paganism, and modern experience is always biased toward a secular worldview. For that

reason, this work ignores any supposed infallibility of contemporary popular orthodoxy in favor of the true infallibility of Scriptural evidence alone that does not change.

That does not mean that all existing historical doctrines must automatically be thrown out. We must understand that there is a body of Scriptural historical orthodoxy at the very core of Christian belief that must be preserved. What it does mean is that all teaching must stand the test of Scripture as the absolute authority for all sound doctrine. From time to time, it becomes necessary to critically compare our current sense of orthodoxy with Scripture to assure us that we have not wandered. Sound historic doctrines will only be validated once again by a Scriptural evidential test while the dross of today's "popular orthodoxy" will be drawn off and exposed as invalid, harmful, and even destructive.

Basic Doctrinal Foundation for this work

This work totally rejects the liberal view that Scripture is only the early dawn of a larger body of religious tradition as man attempts to intuit a divine being and as such can be ignored or altered as needed to meet the requirements of contemporary man. In fact, Scripture is intended to be the sole basis and test for this work. Without the Bible, we have no common, specific, and durable knowledge of God at all — everything about God then becomes pure personal speculation. For that reason, anecdotal evidence cannot be considered reliable in the establishment of Christian doctrine. While God does often provide us as individuals with personal comfort or encouragement through various life experiences, such personal experiences are not a sufficient basis for establishing sound doctrine that must transcend both the lives of individual believers and centuries of time. Holy Scripture alone must be our only guide for that.

Five basic doctrinal principles, as attested to in Scripture, form the foundation upon which this work rests and they will be echoed throughout its pages. The first of those is that absolute Truth is revealed to us from and through God alone. Secondly, that all doctrinal authority must be based upon God's Word alone. Thirdly, that salvation is received exclusively by grace alone. Fourthly, that our response and appropriation of that grace is through faith alone. Fifth, that the object of that faith is Jesus Christ alone.

1. What we believe to be fundamentally true affects our attitudes and directs our purpose in life. It is apparent that if what we believe is not true, it is of no value whatsoever and in fact will be quite harmful to us since we live a lie. Not only is all Truth a revelation from God, we shall further see in this work that God Himself *is* Truth. Therefore, Truth, as is God, must be absolute in every respect without limitation. To reject Truth is to reject God Himself. God does not want us to be ignorant of Truth and has chosen to reveal it to us. The means that God has chosen to reveal Truth to mankind about Himself and about us as well is through his written Word in the Scriptures of the Holy Bible.

2. By establishing Christian doctrine upon Scripture alone, we are but continuing the work that the great reformers such as Luther and Calvin established as a cure for religious error that had, in their day, infiltrated and overwhelmed the Roman church. The importance of Holy Scripture as the sole basis of true Christian orthodoxy cannot be overstated. Every written work, including this one, must ultimately bow down to the authority of the Bible. Every confession or creed of any church must only echo Scripture as its sole basis at every turn in order to have any validity at all. For that reason such documents, though often

valuable to our understanding of Scriptural truths, are always inferior and subordinate to Scripture itself. Unlike Scripture, they cannot ever be considered inerrant or infallible.

3. Salvation is a work of God, not an effort of man. Salvation is bestowed upon each man or woman by the grace of God alone. That doctrine of an absolutely gracious salvation is central to the teaching of the Apostle Paul, but echoed by the other apostles as well. That one truth sparked the Reformation long ago, and it must continue to be the key element of any attempt to conserve and advance that effort. As soon as mankind forgets grace and resorts to any kind of works to gain salvation, all real hope of receiving it is gone. All of church history is filled with conflicts arising from disputes over this one major doctrine. This work places an emphasis upon that singular truth at every turn. It is woven into each chapter.

4. The appropriation of God's grace is also not of human effort. Faith is the only means we have of receiving God's grace and making it our own. Faith is not something that man achieves by effort; it is not works. Through the exercise of human effort, we cannot make ourselves have total confidence in something that we do not fundamentally believe is true. Faith is a gift from God that we receive freely and without effort through the indwelling Holy Spirit in order that we may respond to God's grace. Our personal response by means of that God-given faith is how we appropriate salvation by grace. This work makes every effort to encourage the exercise of faith to that end.

5. There must be one and only one object of our faith. That object is not a denomination, a church, a ritual, a ceremony, a doctrine, or even the entire body of Christian religion itself. It is a person, and that person is Jesus Christ. The object of our faith is Jesus — acknowledging who He is, and what He has done on our behalf. Faith in any other person or thing, no matter how noble or religious it may seem to be is not saving faith. Christianity is Christ and nothing else. Our eternal salvation rests solely on the merits of Jesus' blood and righteousness. This work seeks to make sure that the reader understands that.

Because many of the topics and doctrines discussed in this work are often related, there is some repetition of certain teachings as they relate to other topics. Be assured that topics have not been intentionally repeated in some attempt to overwhelm the reader with pet notions or merely in order to be tedious, but certain fundamental doctrines do merit repeating in a different light or context so that we may see the various facets of them. Also by doing so, the precise interweaving of individual doctrines into the total fabric of the Christian faith will be recognized. No single Christian doctrine stands alone and separate of all others. Each doctrine is supported by other doctrines such that our faith is strengthened in the completed structure of Truth.

About the Interpretative Method Utilized

All Scripture quotations used in this work are from the *King James Authorized Version* (KJV) of 1611 (as revised) without apology. It was also the underlying text utilized in the preparation of this work along with occasional insight gleaned from other translations and various lexicons to clarify the meaning of its sometimes-nebulous archaic language. It was felt that this particular translation had soundly proven its reliability inasmuch as it had withstood the long test of time.

The interpretative approach taken to Scripture in this work was intended to be cautious as well as conservative. A purely allegorical interpretation of the Bible has been

avoided in exchange for taking a literal sense of all Scripture passages considering both their context and style. Care was taken not to go beyond what Scripture states, or to fall short of it regarding any particular doctrine, as reverence for the Word of God demands of us.

Nevertheless, concerning topics where Scripture is silent, some small amount of cautious sanctified speculation was often necessary, as I have attempted to extract the sense of various passages. In fact, the basis of establishing all doctrine requires interpretation and careful speculation based on that interpretation to clarify a body of Truth that is derived from Scripture. The doctrine of the Trinity, for example, is not expressed directly in Scripture, but by interpretation and careful speculation of many passages of Scripture, it is now well established as a major doctrine of Biblical Theology. Furthermore, every effort has been made to critically reexamine doctrines that are based only upon tradition or general acceptance alone. In doing so, many have been exposed as being false or at best unreliable.

Eschatological Perspective

Uncertain passages of Scripture have been treated carefully in an attempt to ensure that my own personal opinion did not ever over-rule clear precepts or principles that are found elsewhere in Scripture. Because it is precisely in the area of speculation that many have gone over into useless sensationalism, every effort has been made to avoid over-speculation. That tendency toward under-speculation is the very reason some will say that the whole truth has not been told — especially in Book III where we discuss the doctrines of the last days, which is more formally referred to as Eschatology. Others will argue that even my very cautious speculation concerning prophetic Scripture at times violates the direct teachings of certain Scripture passages. Perhaps, that controversy cannot be avoided in attempting a work of this nature and scope in the face of the eschatological pluralism that is so evident in today's churches. Some readers may find the eschatological approach undertaken in this work too unique and even radical to be considered reasonable. That is generally because most churches are already so firmly locked into various philosophical paradigms concerning the last days that they do not allow for an objective reanalysis of the last days based exclusively upon Holy Scripture.

It is sincerely hoped that the effort to take a glimpse into the future in this work will not create further division among believers who may differ with my personal analysis of prophetic Scripture. We must not ever allow Eschatology to divide us into warring camps, always remembering that those who look to Jesus alone for their salvation are redeemed regardless of any personal view of the last days they may hold. After all, salvation is through faith alone not through one's precise mental acuity concerning complex future matters. The important thing is that we whole-heartedly believe in the second coming of Jesus Christ to raise the dead, claim his redeemed, and judge the earth as a future event of monumental significance. Nevertheless, as moral wickedness and corrupt political conditions continue to worsen throughout the world, we increasingly find stark parallels between the warnings found in prophetic Scripture texts and the times in which we are now living. If so, the fulfillment of future prophecy leading up to and including the second advent of Christ to Earth could be very close at hand. Accordingly, Book III of this work unabashedly attempts to bridge the gap between the past, present, and future such that no Christian believer need find himself or herself caught totally unaware of the vast sea changes that are already underway. It is indeed imperative that all believers find themselves increasingly united

eschatologically as well as doctrinally as the time comes nearer for the return of our Lord to judge the Earth and establish his Everlasting Kingdom — beginning on Earth and finally extending into the vast reaches of Heaven itself.

Necessary Refutation of Unscriptural Teaching

At times, it has been necessary in this work to expose blatantly unsound and erroneous doctrines and practices as well as make known sound doctrines and practices of the Christian faith. Various discussions within chapters and even full chapters refuting such errors have been included where it is obvious that those unbiblical teachings are prevalent among the body of believers or that those errors have become deeply entrenched in our contemporary churches as established doctrine. Some will say that I have been intolerant and unkind in doing so. However, it is the doctrines themselves that I have sought to address, not those persons who unfortunately hold to those erroneous beliefs. To ignore such error would be as disastrous as failing to teach the sound doctrine that those errors undermine.

We have also had occasion to refer to various religious organizations as cults throughout this work. In its simplest definition, a cult is a religious organization that has a strict religious ritual or system of worship that is devoted to a single narrow principle. That principle commonly lies outside the bounds of any acceptable Christian doctrine based upon apostolic biblical authority, or it is a severe distortion of one or more widely accepted Christian principles. All too often, that cultic principle is actually devotion to and elevation of a human person who is the sole founder of a particular religious group. Many cults masquerade as mainstream Christianity and for that reason are often referred to as “Christian cults.” When that term is used, it does not intend to imply that such cults are actually sound in the Christian faith of course.

As a consequence of human frailties of mind caused by the sin nature inherited by us all from the fall of Adam, there is considerable variation in the interpretation of various Scripture texts of significance to their effect upon essential doctrine. Much of that variance is only evident in Christian practice that has resulted in the division of Christendom into various denominations. Though satanic intent is undoubtedly at the root of that discord, we find that there is more held in common between those groups regarding essential doctrine than differences. For that reason those disparate subdivisions of Christian believers are properly referred to as sects that should not be confused with cults.

Concluding Remarks

The language in this work was intentionally kept as simple as possible consistent with the need to accurately inform. Where it was necessary to use formal terms in order to be precise, the text is written to explain the meaning of each term as it is encountered.

In the course of this work, the word “man” or “men” has been repeatedly used in the generic sense. That is, the masculine word has been used to represent both men and women. That generic usage implies the entire genesis of mankind that, of course, includes women as well as men. In doing so, that merely follows the example set by Scripture. In addition, it should be clear that this generic usage does not always exclude boys and girls who have not yet reached the age of physical or mental maturity. When a specific rather than generic

usage is intended, that exclusivity has been made very clear by its context. It should be assumed that any rational person would understand that generic approach as reasonable and not take unintended offence based upon a perceived sexual bias that implies that women are inferior to men.

A careful distinction has been made between the Church, which is the body of Christ, both invisible and visible on earth, and temporal institutional churches that have been organized by men on earth yet purport to emulate the true Church. Though I risk considerable criticism from some quarters in doing so, the necessity of making that distinction is explained in Book II in considerable detail as we define the Church. Accordingly, the convention used throughout this work is to capitalize the first letter of the word “church” when referring to the entire body of true believers and to use the lower-case letter when referring to a temporal church or churches, except where the word “church” is found within a title for a particular organization as is dictated by convention.

Finally, it must be made quite clear that no claim is made that this work is inspired. That is, God did not recite nor dictate each word to me. No angel revealed some great “truth” to me. When the Apostle John penned the last word of the Revelation, God had said all that he had to say to a lost world. All other works can but echo what has already been said in God’s Word. There is no revelation in the pages of this writing that is not already contained in Holy Scripture; this work has only sought to bring them out into the open. Yet, I would deny the power of the Holy Spirit if I did not say that I have felt His leading into Truth, and His encouragement and strength as well during times when I despaired of the effort and grew weary.

Since God has used this unusual means over the last quarter century to open my eyes to his wondrous glory, it is my prayer that He will also use this work to awaken a people who now sleep within the ignorance of dead Churchianity, that they may delve deeply into God’s Word for themselves and come to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ while there is still time. Nevertheless, I do not put this work into the hands of Christ with great confidence that He will do great things with it. Rather, I lay it at His feet. It is His to do with, as He will.

Arthur J. Smith, 2008 – 2009