

EXPERIENCING
the TRUTH

*Bringing the Reformation
to the African-American Church*

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AND MICHAEL LEACH

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An Introduction

by ANTHONY J. CARTER

Are you attending the wrong church? This question was the topic of an article in *Gospel Today Magazine*.¹ According to the article, much has been written addressing the absence of men in most churches today. Yet, little attention has been paid to the men who are in church and the reasons why they attend the church they do. There is a nonchalant, almost disinterested quality to the men who are in church. The reason, according to the journalist, is that many of these men are in churches not of their own choosing. Consequently, they may be in the wrong place for the wrong reason. What are these reasons? Topping the journalist's list:

1. It was the church of your childhood or the church where you first received Christ.
2. It's where you found the love of your life.
3. It's conveniently located.
4. The music is good.
5. The pastor is cool.
6. It was recommended by a friend.²

Contrary to what many might think, these are not sufficient grounds for attending a church. The selection of a church home is an important and life-impacting decision. Therefore it should be done soberly, intentionally, and with prayer and counsel. Apparently, the author of the aforementioned article agrees. He offers six answers to the question, what should a man look for when selecting a church?

1. Look for a church where other men are actively involved in the ministry, and not just the men's ministry.
2. Look for a church where you can find purpose and significance for your life.
3. Look for a church where manhood is celebrated and not desecrated.
4. Look for a church where there is a connection between the pulpit and the pew.
5. Look for a church where opportunities for leadership exist.
6. Look for a church where the needs of the rest of your family are met.³

Honestly, a man could just as well find the above listing fulfilled in a national fraternity or a local golf club. In reading the journalist's suggestions, one is struck by the accuracy with which he unknowingly demonstrates the malady and even calamity that is the church in general and the predominantly African-American church in particular. In setting forth his suggestions for determining one's church home, the author prioritizes issues of felt needs and a self-serving agenda. He fails to demonstrate the biblical knowledge and discernment that is needed to inform such an important decision, yet rarely does.

Sadly, there is no mention of the single most important aspect of any decision to attend a church. The first and fundamental question should be: Is the Word of God faithfully and clearly expounded? Closely related to the first question are subsequent important questions: Are the sacraments faithfully administered? Is God the focus

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of the worship in word and song? Are faithfulness and holiness in life promoted? Ultimately: Are the theology of the pulpit and the practice of pew consistent with biblical, historic, experiential Christianity? These are the questions every Christian should be asking. These are the questions rarely raised in the predominantly African-American church today. These are the questions that precipitate the writing of this book.

The dearth of biblical truth among Christians today is caused by their search for places that serve them and meet their perceived needs rather than places where God is exalted and Christ is trusted because the Word of God is faithfully proclaimed. Yet, it is not only because people are looking for churches that will focus on their perceived felt needs; churches who are advertising themselves as places where people can get whatever they want, when they want it, and how they want it are equally responsible. This has created a chasm between Christianity in predominantly African-American churches and true, biblical Christian experience. Into this chasm we seek to posit historic, Reformed theology.

In *On Being Black and Reformed*, I argued for the legitimate correlation of the African-American Christian experience and historic, Reformed theology.⁴ While some have thought that these two perspectives are antithetical, I suggested that they are inherently complementary, and when brought together they reveal a beautiful symphony of truth and experience that God desires for his people to know. In fact, Reformed, biblical theology should serve as the foundation of all experiential truth, particularly the experience of African-Americans.

To see the African-American Christian experience apart from an intentional application of Reformed theological principles is like reading a book by the moonlight. We can see the page well enough to make out the story, but it is so much easier and indeed enlightening to read by the direct light of the noonday sun. Reformed theology shines the noonday sun upon Christian experience so that we see more and further than we could by moonlight. By understanding Reformed theology, the history of African-Americans (and any other people for that matter) is enriched because the biblical God as un-

derstood in Reformed theology is big and gracious. He is sovereign and sophisticated. He is to be celebrated and feared.

In this present work, I have enlisted the help of some friends in bringing the truth of Reformed theology not simply to African-American history and experience, but also in bringing it to the church today—the whole of Christianity in general and the predominantly African-American church in particular. It is our hope that you will see that biblical, Reformed theology is not only essential in accurately discerning what God has done, but it is imperative if we are to understand what God is doing and what he is calling his people to be in our time. Though the times may seem bleak, we are convinced of the illuminating power of the gospel of truth.

It was Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who reminded us that only when it is dark enough can one see the stars. The state of the church in general and the African-American church in particular is dark. The darkness is not due to a lack of attendance on Sunday mornings at places that call themselves churches. It is not due to a lack of interest in spiritual things. No. Black men and women go to church. Black men and women want to know about God. George Barna, in his research for *High Impact African-American Churches*, posed the following questions after analyzing his data:

Do you know that we tested 22 common goals that people pursue, the top rated goal among black adults is to have a close relationship with God, while the same goal is ranked fifth by whites? Or that being actively involved in a church is a goal pursued by three-quarters of all black adults but by less than half of all white adults?⁵

The growth of the mega-church among African-Americans in recent years is staggering. There is no lack of buildings opened in the name of God. Our neighborhoods are littered with places of worship, with more being built and bought every day. Again, Barna makes the point when his research reveals that:

There is a higher percentage of large black congregations than there is among white or Hispanic congregations. In fact, while Willow Creek and Saddleback are regularly touted by the media as the biggest

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churches in North America, there are at least a dozen black churches whose attendance exceeds either of those well known congregations by at least a couple thousand people per week!⁶

No, the problem and the darkness in predominantly African-American churches are not from a lack of construction or the absence of congregants, but rather a lack of content. The problem lies in the character and quality of the Christianity that these places promote and export.

Open-Bible Reformation

In a much talked about article in the *Washington Post*, journalist John Fountain lamented the present state of the predominantly African-American church. In Fountain's own testimony, he has lost confidence in the church. He has become disillusioned with the direction the predominantly African-American church has taken. He has found the drive for wealth and success that is popularized by the mega-church movement to be distasteful and offensive. According to Fountain:

I am angered by the preacher I know, and his wife and co-pastor, who exacted a per diem and drove luxury vehicles, their modest salaries boosted by tithes and offerings from poor folks in a struggling congregation of families, a number of them headed by single women. This at a time when the church didn't own a single chair and was renting a building to hold worship services.⁷

Yet every Sunday large churches and small ones are filled with men and women seeking to drive luxury vehicles and boost their financial worth because the preacher told them that Jesus was rich and they should be rich too. Too many of these places are filled with men and women who know too little of the truth contained in Scripture and too little of the truth about the God of Scripture, because they spend too much of their time ingesting the error dispensed by preachers and teachers who fancy themselves apostles, prophets, bishops, and pastors.

In the growing black mega-church movement, there is an overwhelming emphasis upon the sensational, excitable, and experiential. There is an unbiblical infatuation with the miraculous and the fanciful. This produces a vacuum where objective biblical truth is sucked up and finds little place in the life of the church or the Christian. Again, Fountain's disillusionment is due in large part to this experience-driven type of Christianity, which he experienced. According to Fountain:

I am the grandson of a pastor and am myself a licensed minister. I love God and I love the church. I know church-speak and feel as comfortable shouting hallelujahs and amens and lifting my hands in the sanctuary as I do putting on my socks. I have danced in the spirit, spoken in tongues, and proclaimed Jesus Christ as my Lord and savior. I once arrived faithfully at the door of every prayer meeting and went to nearly every Bible study and month-long revival. I attended umpteen services, even the midnight musicals and my church's annual national meetings, like the one held two weeks ago in Kansas City. Yet I now feel disconnected. I *am* disconnected. Not necessarily from God, but from the church.⁸

Unfortunately for Fountain and many with similar testimonies, church has become nothing but a heavy dose of emotional stimulation. And when the emotional high has worn off, he begins looking for meetings to attend to find that energy. He begins looking for work to do to make him once again feel significant. Here is a glaring and sad illustration of a man who thinks he experienced God, when perhaps all he experienced was religious experience itself.

So, what is needed in this malaise of Christianity that is commonly experienced on Sunday mornings? What should our answer be to this celebrity-driven, glitter and glory brand of Christianity? What is the answer to John Fountain and many more who find popular Christianity in the predominantly black church shallow and uninspired? Fountain could use a Christianity that does not simply accentuate the novel and promote the excitable, but seeks to articulate and demonstrate a faith grounded in historical theology and proclaimed with contemporary relevance. Such Christianity

is not popular in our day, yet it is most needed. Such has been the Christianity articulated in the historic Reformed tradition.

In speaking at a pastor conference in Miami in 2005, Ken Jones said that a reformation is needed, but not like those reformations in the past.⁹ In Josiah's day (2 Kings 23) the people needed a reformation because the Word of God was lost. Josiah led the people of God in finding and restoring the Word in their midst. The Second Reformation was under Martin Luther (1483–1546). This Reformation was not needed because the Word of God was lost, but because the Word of God was closed. Luther led the people of God in the rediscovery of the truth by opening the Bible to all people. In our day, the Word of God is not lost nor is it closed. We have open Bibles every Sunday all over the country. We need a reformation today because the Word of God is misinterpreted and misappropriated. In other words, we need an open-Bible Reformation!

Why Reformed Theology?

Why is it necessary that Reformed theology be posited as the answer to much of what plagues the church, particularly the predominantly African-American expression of the church? Two reasons come to mind.

A Biblically-Grounded Faith

Christianity in America, and particularly the predominantly African-American expression of Christianity, has sought to be a biblical faith, and Reformed theology has presented the most biblically consistent expression of Christianity and Christian thought known to the world.

I know, some will find that statement a bit exaggerated and may want to charge it to unfettered enthusiasm. Yet I don't state it out of sheer enthusiasm (though I am enthusiastic). Rather I say it with the settled conviction that it is a matter of substantiated fact. You see, no other expression of Protestant Christianity has been as careful to make sure its understanding and expression of theology has been consistently biblical than has the Reformed tradition.

No one would argue that rigorous theological study and proclamation has been a distinctive of Reformed Christianity. And thus the Reformed tradition has served the church best in this regard. The Reformed tradition has produced the great confessions and catechisms of the Faith. From *Luther's Catechisms* to the *Heidelberg Catechism*; from the *Canons of Dordt* to the *Belgic Confession*; from the *Westminster Confession and Catechisms* to the *Thirty-nine Articles* to the *1689 Baptist Confession* and *Philadelphia Confession*; even to the more contemporary documents of the *Cambridge Declaration* and the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* and the recent affirmations and denials of the *Together for the Gospel Statement*—Reformed theology has led the way in making sure that the theology articulated by the church is biblical theology. It has sought to guard the parameters of said theology with biblical confessions and to pass along to the next generation those theological commitments through the catechisms. Each of these confessions and catechisms is filled with references to Scripture and seeks to articulate the faith with the Bible—and the Bible alone—serving as the authority and foundation.

The great theological works in the history of the Protestant church and the men who produced them further demonstrate the influence of the Reformed tradition. Make a short list of the most influential and substantial theological works in the history of the church and you will find it dominated by Reformed preachers and theologians. Consider the works of Martin Luther (*Bondage of the Will*) and John Calvin (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*). It could be said of Calvin's seminal work that all theology subsequent to Calvin has in one way or another been a response to or a furthering of Calvin. How about John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, Thomas Watson, and John Bunyan? Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* is arguably the most recognizable and read piece of literature in the world next to the Bible. Read Bunyan's masterful work and you will see nothing but the richest, most experiential and pastoral Reformed theology you'll find anywhere. The list would also include preachers like Charles Spurgeon and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones and theologians like B. B. Warfield, Louis Berkhof, J. I. Packer,

and R. C. Sproul. The list could go on and on; the impact that the writings of Reformed preachers and theologians have made upon the world is incalculable.

No one could honestly argue against this. What other Protestant tradition can set forth confessions and statements of faith even remotely comparable to those of the Reformed tradition? And why is this the case? Why has the Reformed tradition been so rigorous in its theological commitments? It begins with the Reformed commitment to the inspiration and authority of Scripture.

Reformed theology has led the way since the time of the Reformation in defending and promoting the veracity of the Scriptures. It is committed to the Reformation's slogan, *sola Scriptura* (or "Scripture alone"), which means that the Bible alone is the final and only infallible authority for faith, life, and conduct in the church and the Christian life.

In the often recurring battle for the Bible, Reformation-minded Christians have always been on the front lines. Even those who are not particularly sympathetic to Reformed theology would have to admit that the Protestant church owes a debt of gratitude to Calvinists and the Reformed thinkers for their ready and consistent defense of the Bible's inspiration and authority. From the Reformation's call to put a Bible in the hands of the people, to B. B. Warfield's *Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, to the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, the history of Reformed theology has been one of defending the inspiration and inerrancy of the Scriptures.

Consequently, for the Reformed Christian the Bible serves as the foundation of truth and submission to the Scriptures; as the Word of God, it guides all of life, particularly preaching and worship. In Reformed thought God is sovereign; he is in control of and the Lord over all creation. Nothing in all of creation moves or breathes or acts outside of his providential hand. Why? Not because some theologians got together in a dark, smoke-filled room and decided to think of ways to express God so he would seem to be all-powerful and all-knowing even though he's not. It is because the Bible says it's true:

[The Lord's] dominion is an everlasting dominion,
and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;
all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,
and he does according to his will among the host of heaven
and among the inhabitants of the earth;
and none can stay his hand
or say to him, "What have you done?" (Dan. 4:34–35).

The second reason why Reformed theology is the answer is like the first.

An Experiential Faith

Christianity is an experiential faith. That is to say that the God the Bible proclaims is a God who can not only be known, but can and should be experienced. Reformed theology, when rightly understood and proclaimed, is the most truly experiential form of Christianity.

This might sound strange and even laughable to opponents of Reformed Christianity, because one of the most common and frequently expressed charges against Reformed theology is that it is an emotionless, life-killing, and passionless expression of Christianity. This characterization has led to the commonly used expression "the frozen chosen."

Admittedly, the reason why this characterization is so prevalent is because at times those who have advocated Reformed theology have been men and women who have emphasized its theological rigor and intellectualism, but not its life and passion.

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, the late Reformed theologian and pastor of Westminster Chapel in London, once said that the Calvinist always lives with the threat of being too theoretical. This was due, according to Lloyd-Jones, to the fact that the more intelligent a man or woman was, the more likely he or she was to be a Calvinist, because Calvinism demands thought and study. You've got to read books and consider doctrine. And so there is always the danger, according to Lloyd-Jones, of becoming an intellectualist.¹⁰

Unfortunately, honesty compels us to admit that this charge too often has proven true. Too often Reformed theology produces ad-

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herents who are dry and cold in their affections. Too often it has been preached from pulpits that were dry and cold. In fact, one of the reasons why Presbyterians and the Reformed do not have a long and fruitful history among African-Americans is because of this dry intellectualism. According to the testimony of Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church:

The Methodist were the first people that brought glad tidings to colored people . . . for all the other denominations preached so high flown that we were not able to comprehend their doctrine.¹¹

What do we say to such charges? First we admit that from time to time we have been cold. And among some Reformed churches and Christians this is still true. Yet we also assert that this is not necessary to a true expression of Reformed theology. Historically Reformed theology has been highly experiential, emotionally stimulating, and passionately preached. True Reformed preaching is not simply a scholastic pursuit. The Reformed preacher, according to Wilhelmus à Brakel, will make “his astute theological acumen subservient to the glory of God and the spiritual welfare of His church.” He makes this point when he instructs ministers:

He [the minister] ought to use all his scholarship to formulate the matters to be presented, in order that he might express them in the clearest and most powerful manner. While using his scholarship, however, he must conceal his scholarship in the pulpit.¹²

Wilhelmus à Brakel is one of my favorite theologians. Most people today are not familiar with him, but during the Second Reformation of the seventeenth century, à Brakel was among the most respected and most read Dutch Reformed pastors and theologians. He wrote my favorite treatise on systematic theology titled *The Christian's Reasonable Service*. I believe it sets forth Reformed theology in its most biblical, historical, and most importantly, experiential form. One à Brakel biographer writes:

The uniqueness of àBrakel's work lies in the fact that it is more than a systematic theology . . . àBrakel's intent in writing is inescapable: He intensely wishes that the truth expounded may become an experiential reality in the hearts of those who read. In a masterful way he establishes the crucial relationship between objective truth and the subjective experience of that truth.¹³

Experiencing the truth—that is what Reformed theology is all about! True Christian experience is not experience for experience's sake. That type of Christianity is the error too often found in Pentecostalism and neo-Pentecostalism, where the experience with the truth (namely the Spirit of Truth) supposedly only occurs when some excitable, emotional, and even spasmodic outburst has been seen or heard. And yet, often this is nothing more than an experience with experience, which is satisfactory for a moment but ultimately produces no lasting fruit and leaves its adherent in a worse spiritual and intellectual state. Indeed, this was the case with John Fountain.

Unfortunately for Fountain and many with similar testimonies, church has become nothing but a heavy dose of emotional stimulation. What is the answer for Fountain and others like him? What is the hope for a Christianity today that is nothing more than men and women chasing one emotional high after the other?

The answer to this subjective, irrational approach to the Christian faith, interestingly, is not the dry, rational intellectualism that is popularly portrayed in Reformed American thought. Rather, it is the experiential Christianity that is objectively based but subjectively experienced. Biblical Christianity is always establishing the relationship between objective truth and subjective experience. And as a projection of biblical Christianity, true Reformed theology is always seeking to do the same. According to à Brakel, the end of true Reformed theology is an experience with the Spirit of Truth to the end of:

the conversion of the unconverted, the instruction of the ignorant, the restoration of the backsliders, the encouragement of the discouraged, as well as to the growth of faith, hope, and love in all who have become partakers of a measure of grace.¹⁴

The best Reformed biblical theology is not found in ivory towers or monastic huddles, but in the everyday experiences of life in a fallen world being redeemed by God. Understanding this, we say, without apology, that Reformed theology is the hope of Christianity. It has been the hope of Christianity since the Reformation, and it continues to be the hope today.

Calling the African-American Church Back

By positing Reformed theology as the truth worth experiencing in the predominantly black church, we are not attempting to re-invent the theological wheel. Instead we want to call the church back to the faith that has been articulated in the Scriptures and has long been advanced by the church (much of this truth has been ascribed in the church's historic creeds and confessions). The Reformation was successful not because it was new or promoted new revelatory knowledge. On the contrary, it was successful because in bringing back the glorious gospel of grace it sought God's glory through the recovery of his Word.

Michael Leach and Kenneth Jones have joined me in an effort to re-present Reformed theology to the predominantly African-American church.

Biblical Theology (by Michael Leach). Mike begins the body of this book by laying the theological foundations for our proposal. He defines what biblical, experiential theology is. He then systematically and biblically sets forth the case for Reformed biblical theology and demonstrates how this theology is inherently experiential and best articulates the biblical view of what the church is and what it should be.

Biblical Preaching (by Anthony Carter). I define what biblical preaching is and how important it is to the church. I make the case for preaching that is Reformed, historical, and experiential. I also express the correlation between historic black preaching and Reformed theology and how the two naturally complement each

other. In addition, appendixes 1 and 2 include some practical steps in sermon preparation, as well as a sample sermon.

Biblical Worship (by Anthony Carter). I address the subject of worship—its form and content in the church today. I define what biblical worship is and what it is not. I provide the case for Reformed, experiential, biblical worship within the predominantly African-American church and issue a plea to see the Word of God as central to all we do in worship. I also offer samples of orders of worship from predominantly black churches that hold to Reformed theology in appendix 2.

Biblical Spirituality (by Kenneth Jones). Ken Jones answers, How now should we live? In other words, Ken speaks of biblical sanctification. He looks at the development of African-American spirituality, its downturn, and the need for a biblical recovery. For this recovery, Jones sets forth true, biblical, Reformed, experiential spirituality that is based in a trust in the sufficiency of the inerrant Word of God.

A Reformation for This Generation

Our goal in this book is to add fuel to the fire that is this generation's glorious reformation. And this one must be summed up in the two Latin phrases that found prominence during the sixteenth-century Reformation: *Post tenebras lux* and *non nobis Domine*.

Post tenebras lux is translated "after darkness, light." This slogan identified the essence of the Reformation. Luther and the other reformers were not attempting to reinvent the church, only to shed light upon the darkness of its doctrine and worship. It was their belief that truth would win out over error, if truth would be known. Today we have the same conviction. The church does not need to be reinvented, God forbid. It once again needs the light of the truth that is the glorious and biblical doctrines recovered during the Reformation. The darkness that has enveloped the church will by God's grace and in his providence give way to a light—brilliant and wonderful. It is a light that is beginning to shine through this

present darkness. What a great light it will be! As the prophet said, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined” (Isa. 9:2).

Non nobis Domine, translated “not to us, Lord,” is taken from the first line of Psalm 115. The Reformers understood that if God were going to restore his glory and majesty to the church once again, it was going to be for his name and for his glory alone. And if God would visit his people, he would do so for his name and his glory alone. They knew that the glory of God was in the Gospel of Christ. Subsequently, they all with a singular voice wrote and preached, “Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory” (Ps. 115:1). Today will be no different. The reformation that we pray and labor for in the church in general (and the African-American church in particular) is a reformation that will only come because God determines to glorify himself through us and to us, not for our glory, but for his alone. So we, like the magisterial reformers, proclaim and pray *non nobis Domine*. It is my prayer that it will be the undercurrent and foundation of all we write, preach, and pray.

Today, we find ourselves in a dark place, yet the light of the truth of the Scriptures continues to shine brightly. All over this country, and indeed around the world, men and women, particularly those of African descent, are falling out of love with the world and the worldliness of popular television-driven Christianity, and falling in love with the biblical, historic faith that was and is found in Reformed theology. As we write this book, we are full of optimism and hope. We are witnessing the rise of a new generation of African-American Christians who see through the fading glory of the empty way of life advocated by the false prosperity gospel, and are seeing more clearly the faith that has once and for all been delivered to the saints—the faith rediscovered during the Reformation and being reenergized in our time. This book is part of our ongoing dedication to this move of God. We believe that God is always reforming his people according to his Spirit by his Word.

It is our sincerest desire to see God move by his Spirit to revive the church in our day according to the old paths of heart-felt and

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head-intoxicated experiential Christianity. To this end we have written this book, and to this end we do pray that all those who read the thoughts contained here will be moved to preach, promote, and practice a historic, biblical, and experiential Christianity to the glory of God in Christ Jesus and the good of his people called by his name.

Soli Deo Gloria!

NOTES

Chapter 1: Experiencing the Truth: An Introduction

1. Leonard Smith, "Did a Woman Choose Your Church?" *Gospel Today*, January 2006, 52.

2. *Ibid.*, 54. The author of the article admits, "This is by no means an exhaustive list; it is only the beginning of a lengthy litany of wrong reasons, many of which are primary among men's justification for attending the churches they do."

3. *Ibid.*, 55.

4. Anthony J. Carter, *On Being Black and Reformed* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003).

5. George Barna and Harry R. Jackson Jr., *High Impact African-American Churches: Leadership Concepts from Some of Today's Most Effective Churches* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2004), 23.

6. *Ibid.*, 28.

7. John W. Fountain, "No Place for Me," *Washington Post*, July 17, 2005, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/07/15/AR2005071502194.html?referrer=emailarticle>.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Ken Jones, "The Dangers of Not Guarding Your Hermeneutic," African-American Pastors Conference, Glendale Baptist Church, Miami, 2005.

10. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Justification by Faith: Historical Analysis*, Westminster Theological Seminary tape series.

11. Quoted in Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 102.

12. Wilhelmus à Brakel, *The Christian's Reasonable Service* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 1992), 2:132.

13. *Ibid.*, 1:xx.

14. *Ibid.*, 1:cxv.