

# Editorial: It's Too Complicated!

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## A Simple Argument

I have occasionally heard a simple argument made against the Reformed faith: “It’s too complicated.” Sometimes this is presented as an excuse for a lack of interest in studying theology generally. Often this argument is just made implicitly and the underlying assumption is that surely the truth could not be complicated. Superficially, it is a good argument, since a Christian (and especially a Reformed Christian) knows that the truth is indeed inherently simple. The *Belgic Confession* begins, “We all believe with the heart, and confess with the mouth, that there is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God.”

The argument is frequently made by those who claim to be more spiritual than others (especially those with charismatic leanings), as if to make a careful study of theology were somehow unspiritual. After all, “knowledge puffeth up,” they say, as if that were the end of all controversy on the matter (without providing any contextual explanation about where they lifted that quote from, nor recognizing the irony of their uncharitable and prideful accusation). Surely, when faced with this argument, it would be the height of spiritual pride to point out that the Bereans were called “noble” for searching the Scriptures daily (Acts 17:11). Or perhaps learning the simple truth about election is considered suspiciously as “the [too] deep things of God,” as if it were really “the depths of Satan,” notwithstanding the apostle Paul says (concerning the election and salvation of Jews and Gentiles) that he “would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery” and that God has revealed these “deep things” to us by His Spirit (Rom. 11:25; I Cor. 2:10; Rev. 2:24).

This superficial argument often leads to misguided and harmful attempts to oversimplify (or simplify in the wrong way) various doctrines based on a lack of proper understanding. It also leads to confusing a love of ignorance with humility and true piety. There are at least four reasons why the truth may

seem complicated to us, despite its inherent simplicity. I could add a significant fifth reason, considering the effects of the events at Babel on language and communication.

## **Our Difficulty With the Truth**

The first reason is the distinction between the creature and the Creator. God is indeed simple but also limitless. Unlike God, little creatures of the dust like us cannot expect to entirely and simply comprehend the infinite as God knows Himself in perfection. Even in natural things, a subject may seem complicated only because we have not grasped the breadth of it, but when we learn more then we begin to see the simplicity which was previously obscure to us. When building a jigsaw, we cannot always figure out what the picture is supposed to represent until more of the pieces are in place. Considering the infinity of God, we can begin to appreciate the wonder of His revelation of Himself to us. God is simple, but “O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!” (Rom. 11:33). There are depths and riches to the knowledge of God about which, if we had any shred of humility at all, we would recognize that we have barely begun scratch the surface.

The truth is simple, yet God has given us sixty-six inspired books in His infinite wisdom and love, along with the general revelation of His power and Godhead from the creation (which we readily recognize to be full of things which we scarcely understand—and do we really expect the Creator to be easier to comprehend than His creation?). The Bible is a lengthy book. We typically use “Bible-in-a-year” reading plans, not “Bible-in-a-day” plans. Even the Bible itself admits that it has some parts which are “hard to be understood” (II Pet. 3:16). Yet we have the gall to complain against the Reformed faith (summarized in comparatively simple and short creeds) that it is too complicated!

As limited creatures, who must take time and effort to read and understand God’s Word, we also grow and mature. We are not born into this world, as Adam was created, but we are born as helpless immature babies, even as Christ had to grow and learn (Luke 2:40; Heb. 5:8). We are not born into this world with fully developed minds or even the ability to read. We must learn language, logic and letters, in order to read God’s Word. We must mature and grow, both

naturally and spiritually, in order to grow in our understanding of God's Word. We also have both natural and spiritual limitations, some dramatically more so than others. To each of us is given different natural gifts and also different measures of grace, so that we must help and learn from one another. In humble recognition of this, we seek to have Bible studies together because what may be too complicated for us (or even passed by unnoticed) may be more simple to another (Rom. 12:4-6; I Cor. 12:14-25).

The second reason is our natural darkness and ignorance. We are born into this world in ignorance. We may grow in our natural understanding (even in a natural understanding and erudite articulation of theological subjects) yet, without a spiritual birth, we cannot even begin to have spiritual understanding. How often Scripture speaks about this darkness in us: "The light of the body is the eye: therefore when thine eye is single, thy whole body also is full of light; but when thine eye is evil, thy body also is full of darkness" (Luke 11:34). Does the truth seem too complicated? Surely it is hard for a blind man to comprehend the description of the beauty of a sunset. He may be able to reiterate that description accurately, even with a certain fondness, but he has not really been touched by the true beauty of that sunset.

Adam was created in the image of God, with true knowledge of God (Col. 3:10), but we are born instead with original sin from our first parents. We who know Jesus Christ give thanks, "For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (II Cor. 4:6). Yet we must not think that the illumination of this new birth eradicates entirely or instantly all our natural darkness and ignorance. We surely grow in spiritual understanding (II Pet. 3:18), yet in this life we always carry with us our natural darkness. This darkness wars against the light of the knowledge of God which the Spirit creates in us, so that we cannot understand things as clearly, as simply or as consistently as we would like. False, foolish and ignorant ideas rise up within us, against which we must struggle all our life long (II Cor. 10:3-5).

This brings us to the related third reason, lies. The devil, as the father of lies, wants to confuse us and make the truth unclear. We have the natural tendency not only to believe lies but also to produce them (Ps. 58:3; John 8:44). Being regenerated and illuminated by the Spirit, we can battle against

this natural tendency, but we can only fight imperfectly against it and cannot eliminate it (Eph. 4:20-25; Col. 3:5-9). We sometimes think that the danger of falsehood is “out there” in the wicked world or perhaps in the false church (and it most certainly is), but it is also in ourselves. We ought to consider the danger to be not so much in other brothers and sisters in our church, but first of all in ourselves personally (Ps. 19:14; Jer. 17:9; I Tim. 4:16). Because of the proliferation of lies abroad in the world, even lies that have not yet been taken captive and rooted out of our own hearts, true doctrine can seem much more complicated. The truth can certainly seem impossible to understand, if we are trying to reconcile it with cherished false beliefs or even an entire system of falsehood. Many think that the Reformed faith is complicated at first exactly for this reason. They have to unlearn a lot of nonsense before they begin to appreciate the simplicity of the truth.

The fourth reason is again very closely related. Considering the above, we live in an age which is characterized by evil and imperfection (Gal. 1:4). In this age, we live as part of the church militant. We must always battle against lies and the natural inclinations of our own sinfulness. In this age, we are growing and the church is being built up, yet we only ever have a beginning of that glory which awaits us. We have not yet received the promised inheritance in full, but only an “earnest” (Eph. 1:14). As the faithful saints of Hebrews 11, we still see the complete fulfilment of the promise afar off (Heb. 6:11-12). As the Old Testament saints were “kept under the law, shut up unto the faith which should afterwards be revealed,” so we are kept under faith and patience and hope, shut up unto the glory which should afterwards be revealed (Gal. 3:23; Rev. 14:12-13):

Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ (I Pet. 1:13).

For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us ... For we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it (Rom. 8:18, 24-25).

In accordance with the incompleteness of this age and of ourselves, even with the revelation of God through Jesus Christ in the gospel and the illumination of His Spirit within us, so that the living and spiritual Word of God dwells in us richly, we see the full glory of the truth only in part (John 6:63; Col. 3:16):

But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away. When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things. For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known. And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity (I Cor. 13:10-13).

The apostle Paul was speaking here first of all about the temporary nature of the revelatory spiritual gifts such as tongues and prophecies, so that these are “done away” when the foundation was laid with the completion and establishment of the New Testament Scriptures (I Cor. 13:8). But he proves his doctrine by appeal to a general principle, which is that things that are only necessary during the stage of immaturity or imperfection are discarded when maturity is realized. And by extending this principle through and past the entire New Testament age (rather than simply the apostolic time with its revelatory gifts), he concludes that charity or love is greater even than faith and hope, when we consider that it remains even after the apocalypse of Christ. His analogy for this present age is that we are looking upon the true glory of God in Jesus Christ indirectly and obscurely, as looking through a dark mirror. When we see “face to face,” then we will not be tempted to think that the truth is complicated, although we will still know that it is far deeper than we could ever fathom.

From this consideration too, we should understand that in this life some truths will still seem complicated. It is God’s purpose in this life that He should be glorified through our faith, as we see what cannot be seen with the natural eyes. God is glorified as we are strong even in this weak and imperfect faith (Rom. 4:20; II Cor. 12:9). Because we do not see fully, we must trust in God all the more (John 20:29). In this life, so plagued by falsehoods and our natural sinful pride, God humbles us by the incompleteness of our knowledge, and teaches us not to lean on our own understanding, but always to look to

and carefully to study His Word (Ps. 119:130; Prov. 3:5). In this life, we must not proudly scorn, "It's too complicated," but diligently seek after the wisdom which God richly provides.

How long, ye simple ones, will ye love simplicity? and the scorers delight in their scorning, and fools hate knowledge? Turn you at my reproof: behold, I will pour out my spirit unto you, I will make known my words unto you (Prov. 1:22-23).

## **Simplicity and the Reformed Faith**

Is then the Reformed faith too complicated? Unlike many other systems of doctrine, the Reformed faith makes sense of the Scriptures, systematizing, reconciling and fitting the parts together into one *simple* whole. One can read Scripture and understand how it fits into this system of doctrine, because this system arises from the Scriptures themselves. There is no need for taking verses or passages out of context to twist and torture them to make them fit. The ninth chapter of Romans, for example, is quite incomprehensible and complicated for one labouring under the false Arminian system of salvation by the will of man (or well-meant offer theology), but it is altogether simple in the biblical framework represented by the Reformed faith.

Those who claim to be so spiritual, yet accuse the Reformed faith of being too complicated should consider whether they really believe in the *power* of the Word and Spirit to enlighten us and give us understanding. Do we sometimes imagine that the study of theology is a purely natural intellectual exercise and that God's grace is not sufficient in our weakness? The simplicity of true doctrine is seen in that Jesus Christ Himself is the chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:20-22). One who knows Jesus Christ, who therefore has the anointing of the Spirit of truth, has the whole truth in principle (I John 2:20-27). Such a person, in the way of humility before the Word of God, according as their understanding grows, will ordinarily acknowledge the truth as it is in Jesus Christ. And this is the ordinary experience of those who raise covenant children in a Reformed church. The children do not find the Reformed faith too complicated (not as if a catechism teacher does not have to teach patiently at their level) but those who come from other backgrounds, having been indoctrinated with various

wrong ways of thinking, can naturally experience more difficulty at first. Paul speaks about this with reference to the advantage Jews have over Gentiles and, in a sense, how much more difficult it is for a Gentile to be saved (Rom. 3:1-3; 11:24; cf. Isa. 49:6). How important it is to cultivate within ourselves a teachable heart!

The complaint of those who expect everything to be immediately easy misses the necessity and blessedness of growth in the Christian life. The first Psalm describes the blessedness of the man who meditates upon God's law day and night. Time and effort is involved in this meditation. He meditates because it does not all come so immediately simply to him. And this man is described as a vivacious bountiful tree that never withers. The complainant really wants to remain like a child in understanding, but Scripture tells us that we must mature and grow in understanding (I Cor. 14:20; I Pet. 2:2). This growth occurs necessarily, even organically, like a tree bearing fruit.

Something is deeply wrong if this growth does not occur as it ought to. The writer to the Hebrews admonishes these Jewish Christians that they ought already to have been prepared for stronger nourishment but they were still too immature (Heb. 5:12-14; cf. I Cor. 3:1-2). Like mathematics, Christian doctrine has its "first principles" and, as in mathematics, finding some truth too complicated should direct us to make sure we have correctly understood these first principles. Paul explains to us that Christ's purpose in giving us pastors and teachers is precisely for this growth in the knowledge of the Son of God (Eph. 4:11-16). By this growth, through the ministry of pastors and teachers, the whole body is grounded and kept from the winds of false doctrine, and, speaking the truth in love, the body builds itself up in love. This growth is fundamental for the whole Christian life (Rom. 12:1-2). Knowledge certainly "puffeth up," but not the true knowledge of God through Jesus Christ which is eternal life and manifests itself in charity (John 17:3; I John 2:4; 4:7-8).

The Reformation was a return to the centrality of preaching and teaching in the church. The recovery of the priesthood of all believers necessitated the recovery of the office of pastor-teacher. The preaching was understood as the chief means of grace by which every believer is equipped to exercise their own office. This spirit of Reformation is captured in William Tyndale's zealous words to a certain learned papist: "If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause

a boy who drives a plough to know more of the Scriptures than you do.” The Reformed pastor does not aim to demonstrate his learning, eloquence, cleverness or rich vocabulary (though all these gifts may certainly help him carry out his office). He aims to explain the truth simply so that all the congregation can understand and can grow (Neh. 8:2-8; Mark 10:14; John 21:15).

There is one more word to say about the Reformed faith being considered too complicated. In many cases, this is the result of the twofold effect of true preaching, no matter the efforts of the minister in bringing clarity (it certainly ought not to be for a lack of clarity on the part of the minister). The Lord’s purpose is that the same light which gives sight and life to us should blind and harden others (Matt. 11:25; Luke 8:10; John 12:39-40; Rom. 11:8-10).

But the word of the LORD was unto them precept upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little, and there a little; that they might go, and fall backward, and be broken, and snared, and taken (Isa. 28:13).

I mention this last because charity demands that every other consideration ought to be first when someone complains that the Reformed faith is too complicated. Those who despise the knowledge of true faith ought to carefully consider this warning, for themselves and also for their children (Hos. 4:6; II Thess. 2:9-12).

## **Reformation and the *BRJ***

This subject is of great importance for this journal also. This journal is not intended to be purely theoretical and academic. It is intended to promote and defend the Reformed faith, so that the readers (who are not all expected to be Oxford graduates) can grow in understanding, and better promote and defend the Reformed faith themselves. As the new editor, I am less well formally educated on these subjects than most (if not all) of our previous editors. I hope this lack at least helps me to ensure that the articles in this journal continue to be at a beneficial level for our readers. As when this journal was first published, our concern is to publish articles which are distinctively Reformed, which explain, apply, promote and defend the great truths of the Reformation as expressed in our official Reformed confessions. We want to publish about



the five *solas* of the Reformation, about the five points of Calvinism, about the absolute sovereignty of God in all things. God must be at the centre and must be all in all through the gospel of Jesus Christ by which we are saved, and out of which we live and worship in a new and godly Christian life in the company of God's people in the true church and holy covenant (Rom. 11:36). In all things, God alone must be glorified (I Cor. 1:26-31).

It is the conviction of the editor of this journal that our need in the current state of affairs in the church world today is reformation, reformation according to which we can enjoy true fellowship and communion in the body of Christ. It is a call to return to the old paths of the Reformed creeds as faithful summaries of the central truths of Scripture. Only in this way can we begin to practice true uncompromising ecumenism. The Reformed faith is not the reason for the division in the church world of our day; it is the answer to it. Only by being rooted and grounded and built up in the truth can we be kept from being blown about in every direction by the billows of falsehood. Holding to the head, Jesus Christ, walking in the light as He is in the light, we can all speak the same thing, and walk in the bonds of true fellowship and love and fullness of joy (I Cor. 1:10; I John 1:3-7). In this way, we can pursue our aim of supporting and encouraging one another as we look for our hope, the coming of Jesus Christ (Heb. 10:23-25). In this way, we can remind one another of that lesson taught to Elijah, that not he only was left but the Lord has His seven thousand which have not bowed the knee to Baal, even as in this day God has His elect whom He preserves in love (John 17:11; Rom. 11:4-5).

Do you want to see more of this reformation too? Permit me to make some requests of our readers to join in these efforts. We are looking for articles and writers for the *BRJ*. If we had more, we could even perhaps publish more often. Could you be one of our writers? Do you know someone who could write an article such as we are looking for, as described above? Contact us to receive a copy of our guidelines and advice on whether your writing ideas are suitable. We are also looking for readers for this journal. I am convinced that there are many more people scattered throughout the British Isles and elsewhere who could greatly benefit from this publication. Do you know anyone who might be interested? Have you shared the journal with them yet? Would you like to request additional copies to share with others? Have you subscribed to the

journal yet yourself? We are also greatly interested to hear from our readers. Was there anything that you found particularly helpful? Do you have questions or requests for articles on particular topics? Do you have any comments or suggestions, even constructive criticisms? Do you have any encouragements to share with us? Most of all, we are interested in your prayers for God's blessing. Pray for our readers, our writers and our editor, and pray that this journal may continue to be used by God for the good of His people in Jesus Christ throughout the British Isles and further afield.