

**Book Title: Reformation Sketches**  
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Robert Godfrey has the gift of explaining church history in a plain and simple style. He seldom writes. But when he does, you can be sure that it will be easy reading with lots of vital information packed with practical reflections and lessons. In this Sketches, he writes about Luther, Melancthon, Calvin, and the lesser know Peter Martyr Vermigli. He looks briefly at their life and achievement, but discusses extensively about the issues that they faced. Luther had to face the false charge that he was antinomian. Calvin had to face a disunited church and many enemies who detested his doctrine of sovereign predestination. But the book is not all about controversies. And it is good that the book also includes two lesser know reformers – Philip Melancthon and Peter Martyr Vermigli.

Godfrey helps us to understand Luther by explaining many of his theological concepts found in his writings. Luther, said Godfrey, can be hard to understand. Indeed, many have misunderstood him. Some Reformed people think that Luther was too antinomian, or against the law. Those who read Luther can easily think that Luther overemphasized the gospel at the expense of the law.

Some of Luther's statements are indeed confusing. Most of these confusing statements are found in his famous treatise, "The Freedom of the Christian Man". It is in this treatise that he explains the relationship between the law and the gospel. It is also in this treatise that Luther set forth his key concepts of justification by faith alone. One statement from this book has always been confusing. Luther said, "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." When I first came across this statement in my seminary days, I thought it was profound. Far from being confusing, Luther here emphasized the freedom of the Christian. He is free from the law. But at the same time, because his faith is like boiling water, always bubbling with zeal to serve all (Luther's own figure). Was Luther here against the law? Godfrey clarifies this by saying that we ought to read Luther entirely. In his commentary on Galatians, Luther had clearly explained that the law was given for two purposes. The first was to order civil righteousness, and the second was to condemn our sins and drive us to Christ for salvation. It is this latter use of the law that is the most primary. Luther never preached a lawless gospel. What he did preach was a fruitful and lively faith. According to Luther, faith does not need the law to drive a believer to love God and serve others. This is because those who have faith will love God and serve all. Luther never dismissed the continuing use of the law. Rather, he had a very high view of faith. Faith is always active, according to Luther. Saving faith always produce love and obedience.

There are other things about Luther that are worth reading. Godfrey mentions in the book about the forgotten 97 theses. I am glad that he did this. Most of us are familiar with Luther's 95 theses that attached the Romish doctrine indulgences. But not many, even Lutherans, are familiar with his earlier 97 theses that attached the medieval scholastic theology. I concur with Godfrey that these 97 these "are much more interesting and important from a theological point of view than the 95 theses." Luther's main concern in these theses was to bring the church back to Augustine, and to rely less on Aristotle.

So much for Luther. Godfrey also wrote about another Lutheran in his sketches. Philip

Melanchthon was a more quiet figure, one who was less boisterous compared to Luther. In a sense, he was the scholar, the thinker, one was a systematic theologian. I find Godfrey's evaluation of Luther interesting when he said that Luther was "an occasional theologian". But by contrast, Melanchthon was more organized in his thinking. It was Melanchthon who wrote the first systematic theology of the Reformation, the *Commonplaces*. Godfrey gave him the highest comment when he said that it was Melanchthon who really taught Luther the legal concept in the doctrine of justification by faith. Melanchthon, however, was not without errors in his theology. Most of us are aware of the fact that he conceded too much to the doctrine of free-will, a synergy which later on plunged Lutheranism into a confused system. Godfrey's concluding remarks about this young reformer is important. "Melanchthon's life and theology were not perfect, but no theologian's ever are."

The next figure in the *Sketches* is John Calvin. To understand this French reformer, we need to know his *Institutes* as well as take a peek into his life and works in the city church of Geneva. This is because, says Godfrey, "Calvin was a churchman. He not only proclaimed a theology of the church but also labored to build, teach, and preserve the church."

What Godfrey writes about Calvin's concern for church unity is instructive and important. Calvin promoted ecumenical conferences with the other reformers. It was in his letter to Hugh Latimer, the English reformer, that he poured his soul out about his deep longing for the church of Christ to be one. After saying that he was willing to cross even ten seas to promote this unity, Calvin wrote, "I think it is right for me, at whatever cost of toil and trouble, to seek to obtain this object."

The Presbyterian and Reformed churches today, having many things in common, ought to follow and continue this vision of Calvin for church unity.

At the same time, Calvin was also concerned about the purity of the Church. "For Calvin unity could not be purchased at the expense of cardinal truths of the faith." Godfrey says that Calvin did not give us a list of cardinal truths that should be agreed upon to foster unity. But Calvin did give to his posterity the spirit in which they are to do this. There must be submission to biblical authority, a concern for the historicity of the church, and an honest and straightforward spirit. Those of us who labour for church unity will appreciate this. There will always be things that we will disagree about. But the spirit of unity should prevail, and unity itself must even be established amongst Reformed people who share many things in common.

Calvin was a controversial figure, perhaps far more than Luther. This perhaps was owing to his strict church order and his predestinarian theology. Luther taught these too. But Calvin had more enemies in these matters. Godfrey discusses these controversies in two chapters. Again I thank Godfrey for bringing up the Bolsec controversy. Bolsec was a fierce theological foe, who distorted Calvin's theology, discredited his reputation and spread lies about him. It is important to know Bolsec's attack on Calvin's doctrine of predestination. Let me mention two reasons from the book (although they were not presented as reasons as such). The first is that predestination was a pivotal doctrine in Calvin's theology. Godfrey writes, "Calvin is insistent that his God, the God of the Bible, is just and holy in all his doing, not some arbitrary Jupiter. He is also passionate about the need for sinners in humility to recognize that their salvation comes from God alone, planned from eternity and applied sovereignly to them." The second reason is practical. Using Calvin's own words, Godfrey writes, "This matter is not a subtle and obscure speculation, as they falsely think, which wearies the mind without profit. It is rather solid argument excellently fitted to the use of the godly. For it builds up faith soundly, trains us to humility, elevates us to admiration of the immense goodness of God toward us, and excites us to praise this goodness."

One unique part of this book is its discussion on the confessions and creeds of the Reformation. This forms the last part of the book. This discussion is an important conclusion to all the themes and issues discussed in the Sketches. The Reformation was a theological movement. Very early in the book, Godfrey referred to Luther's impetus for bringing reforms in the Church. His motive, said Godfrey, was not to bring about a moral reform. His concern was a theological reform, a doctrinal revival in the church. Calvin continued this work, and showed that the church could only mature if theology, biblical government and liturgy were taught and implemented in the church. The Reformation creeds do not only contain merely ancient documents. Godfrey argues convincingly for their use today in the modern Church. He says, "They pull us together and help us overcome the corrosive individualism of our time. As we cherish and preserve our confessions, they will help protect us from the fads and novelties that beset the church today."

A wonderful book!