

LETTERS TO A
Young
CALVINIST

An Invitation to the Reformed Tradition

James K. A. Smith



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Introduction

Who would have guessed that in our postmodern culture something as austere as Calvinism would be both hip and hot? Quite apart from the five-hundredth anniversary of John Calvin's birth in 2009, over the past several years what has been described as the "new Calvinism" has generated increasing interest and devotees—chronicled most fully in Collin Hansen's journalistic account, *Young, Restless, Reformed: A Journalist's Journey with the New Calvinists*. Associated with noted pastors such as John Piper and Mark Driscoll—as well as scholars such as Al Mohler and D. A. Carson—attention to the new Calvinism reached a crescendo when *Time* magazine, in an admittedly curious claim, designated it as

one of the “Ten Ideas Changing the World Right Now” (March 12, 2009).

I experienced some of this newfound interest in Calvinism in an unlikely place: an Assemblies of God church in inner-city Los Angeles. While my wife and I served as directors of the college and career ministry at Del Aire Assembly of God in Hawthorne, California (which is a long way from *Bel Air*, just to clarify!), I witnessed an increasing hunger for rigorous theological reflection amongst the (mostly Latino/a) twenty-somethings in our group. Looking to develop Christian minds with theological depth, and casting about for an intellectual tradition they couldn’t find in their Pentecostal heritage, these young people, not surprisingly, were attracted to the riches of the Reformed tradition. Anecdotally, this seems to be a common trajectory for many evangelicals.

Indeed, this is my own story. I was converted and formed through an evangelical tradition marked by a strange kind of biblicist yet antitheological atmosphere that engendered a generally anti-intellectual ethos. But then I discovered the Reformed tradition of “Old Princeton” while in Bible college—the rich theological heritage of Princeton Theological Seminary in the nineteenth century (helpfully outlined in Mark Noll’s anthology, *The Princeton Theology*). I can still remember an all-nighter that I spent immersed in the works of Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield, and W. G. T. Shedd. I drank in

their wisdom and erudition with an almost giddy sense of excitement and renewal, constantly whispering to myself, “Where have you been my whole life?” It was as if I had finally discovered why I had a brain.

Having dived into this deep river of theological reflection, it didn’t take long for me to begin devouring the work of more contemporary authors such as Francis Schaeffer, J. I. Packer, and John Piper, who in turn pointed me *back* to giants like Augustine, John Calvin, John Owen, and Jonathan Edwards. In the Reformed tradition I found a home I’ve never left, even if I might now spend most of my time in other rooms of this sprawling estate that is “Calvinism.”

However, in looking back at the enthusiasm of my younger, newly Calvinist self, I also cringe at the rough edges of my spiritual hubris—an especially ugly vice. The simple devotion of my brothers and sisters became an occasion for derision, and I spent an inordinate amount of time pointing out the error of their (“Arminian”) ways. How strange that discovering the doctrines of grace should translate into haughty self-confidence and a notable lack of charity. I had become a caricature of the unforgiving servant in Jesus’s parable (Matt. 18:23–35). At times, I saw creeping versions of the same pride in these young folks I spent time with in Los Angeles—an arrogance I understood but also abhorred. And in this particular case, there seemed to be something in their Calvinism that gave comfort to wider cultural notions

of machismo that did not reflect the radical grace and mercy of the gospel. Calvinism became a sophisticated theological justification for patriarchal attitudes and practices. The collective shape of the “Calvinism” they had found was not pretty—and certainly not a winsome witness to God’s coming kingdom. I sometimes encounter the same in the “new Calvinists” I bump into.

Looking back at my own enthusiastic induction into Calvinism, I can see another unfortunate aspect that often seems to characterize the “new Calvinism”: my fascination with the Reformed tradition was largely truncated, fixated on issues of election and predestination and on parsing the arcane aspects of the acronym TULIP, which claimed to capture the so-called five points of Calvinism: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance (or preservation) of the saints. And while that fixation seemed to come with a swagger and confidence that was quick to dismiss other Christian traditions, it also failed to really plumb the depths of the Reformed tradition itself. If we imagine the Reformed tradition as a great, sprawling mansion, it was as if I entered through the door of “Calvinism” into an ornate foyer, but then became so fascinated with that particular room that I never ventured into other rooms. When you’ve spent time wandering through the wonders of the Biltmore Estate, the bedazzlement of the foyer is put in context. (The title of Daniyal Mueenuddin’s story collection, *In*

Other Rooms, Other Wonders, seems suggestive in this respect.) Only later was I invited (well, pushed!) into other rooms where I began to appreciate the full richness not just of Calvinism but of the wider Reformed tradition.

These letters are meant to be just such an invitation. The “Jesse” to whom they are addressed is an amalgam of those young men and women from Los Angeles who re-energized my own interest in, and appreciation of, Calvin and Edwards and Kuyper. But “Jesse” is also a bit of a stand-in for my younger self, such that, in an important sense, these are a collection of letters to myself—not just what I wish I’d known then, but also the counsel I wish someone had offered me. They are, I hope, first and foremost pastoral. At least, that was their origin—the concern and counsel of a mentor and friend to a young person beginning to tread water in this deep river. The letters don’t at all pretend to be a comprehensive introduction to the Reformed tradition, but I do hope they offer a certain “education” in the sense of Friedrich Schiller’s *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*: the process of inviting and inducting someone into a tradition by meeting them where they are and then walking alongside them. To stick with our mansion metaphor, then, I hope these are the letters of an enthusiastic tour guide—or maybe even the letters of a longtime resident of this great estate that is “Calvinism”—who is eager to show a new visitor

the riches of the mansion that might otherwise have remained hidden and unappreciated.

But the interest and concern of these letters is not just theological information; it is also spiritual formation. I hope the letters reflect a pedagogical process of growth, slowly walking the reader from room to room without rushing too quickly. As such, it is important that the letters be read in order, since each letter presumes a context and an ongoing conversation. I imagine the reader being in a certain place, at a certain starting point. So these letters don't offer an apologetic defense of Calvinism, trying to defend it against all comers; rather, I envision the addressee of these letters as someone who has already become interested in this tradition and is looking for a guide into unfamiliar territory. In fact, I generally imagine that the addressee of these letters might be a very enthusiastic convert to a newfound Calvinism, and so the letters for the most part assume that interest (though I hope they also prove helpful for other readers who may be in a different place). But above all, I imagine this correspondence as a kind of apprenticeship at a distance between two friends. That foundation of friendship is crucial and is assumed as the context in which these missives are traded. And so, at times, the pastoral concern of the letters will require some tough love and honest critique, words of caution and even admonition. But I hope the reader will keep in mind that, at these moments, I envision myself writing to a

friend. In fact, I'm also writing to myself as much as anyone. Herein lies a critique of my younger (and even my older) self.

Finally, while these letters are written as an invitation to the Reformed tradition, such an invitation can only be instrumental, a way station of sorts. For the fount and end of the Reformed tradition is God himself as revealed to us in Jesus Christ and present with us in the person of the Holy Spirit. In other words, these letters are an invitation to the Reformed tradition only because the Reformed tradition is itself an invitation into the life of God. In his fifth-century manual for preachers, *Teaching Christianity (De doctrina christiana)*, Augustine notes how strange it would be if a traveler to a distant country became so enamored with his means of conveyance that he never got out of the boat, even though the whole purpose of the ship was to convey him to another shore. The Reformed tradition is a way, not a destination; it is a means, not an end; it is a way onto the Way that is the road to and with Jesus. It is a ship that conveys us to the shore of the kingdom of God and propels us to an encounter with the Word become flesh. These letters are just little brochures spreading the news about the journey.

LETTER I

Welcome to the Family

Dear Jesse,

It was such a treat to receive your letter and hear the things God is doing in your life. It's hard to believe it's been four years since we made our move to Grand Rapids. It seems like just yesterday that our "theology group" was gathered together in room 10 at the church. Remember how intense the conversation was on that last night when we were discussing open theism? When we next get together, remind me to tell you how important that conversation was in my own walk and my theological pilgrimage.

What was most intriguing about your letter was the news of your recent immersion in Reformed theology. I'll be honest with you: I'm not surprised, and I'm more

than a little thrilled by the whole development. As you've already said, this represents the beginnings of a harvest whose seeds were planted while we were studying together. I was glad—and a bit relieved—to hear you say that you felt like you “discovered” the Reformed tradition for yourself, from your own engagement with Scripture. I wouldn't want you to feel like you had to conform to some intellectual mold that I had created.

Given where you and I came from—the charismatic side of the evangelical tradition—I can certainly see why you are so animated with such a plethora of questions! That the Reformed tradition gives birth to such baptized curiosity is, I think, one of the best testimonies of its spiritual vitality. I love the way you put it: the Reformed tradition has helped you to discover deep wells in Scripture that you didn't know were there before. Indeed, we might say that what the Reformed tradition offers is a kind of “witching rod” that helps you find some of the deep spots in God's self-revelation—pointing out the places where you need to go do the hard work of *digging*.

So it would be both a pleasure and an honor for me to help orient you to this new path of discipleship—the path trod by the likes of Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards. It will be fun for us to keep up this correspondence as you continue to plumb the depths of Reformed theology. And I definitely think there's good reason to carry this out in writing (aside from the

fact that we're 2,500 miles apart). Putting down your thoughts and questions in writing will help you articulate the issues, express your doubts (don't be afraid of doubts!), and start to get a handle on Reformed faith and practice.

Let me encourage you to take some risks as you set out on this pilgrimage to deepen your faith and your relationship with Christ. Don't be afraid to ask hard questions. As I always said in our Sunday school class, God isn't scared of our questions. Indeed, I think it is one of the hallmarks of the Reformed tradition that it has a long history of encouraging curiosity about creation. (Remind me to talk later about Kuyper's Stone Lectures at Princeton over a century ago, especially his account of the Reformed tradition's role in the development of science.) Unlike some of the places you and I have been, which really discourage questioning in order to get people to toe the party line, the Reformed tradition has long encouraged a kind of holy intellectual riskiness.

And don't worry about sounding silly or ignorant—as if someone asking questions was supposed to already have the answer (which would make asking questions pretty stupid, wouldn't it?). Sometimes you'll hear fellow Christians using terms or talking about ideas that it seems like you should know and that you might be embarrassed to admit you don't. Don't be intimidated: we have to start where we are. Above all, know how

much I love you, and please count on me to be your guide. Let me be your Samwise in this Frodo-like quest you're on.

I'll be looking forward to hearing your questions.
Strength to your arm,



P.S. I've included here for you a great little book, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, that collects both the early Christian creeds (the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athanasian Creed) and three key Reformed confessional documents: the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort. We'll talk about these more later, but you might find it helpful in the next week to read through the Belgic Confession. It's a wonderfully evangelical summary of Reformed faith and practice.

LETTER II

On Religious Pride

Dear Jesse,

I'm glad to hear that you've connected with a group of fellow Christians who are also exploring the same questions as you. As with any aspect of Christian discipleship, the pilgrimage of faith should never be a private, solitary affair. There should be no Lone Rangers in the Christian life. To play on the analogy I hinted at last time, the most important lesson Frodo learned in his quest is that he could never have done it alone. So I hope your band of brothers and sisters will be a kind of Reformed fellowship of the ring (yes, I'll try to stop with the Lord of the Rings tropes! ☺).

But I must also admit, Jess, that the tone of your letter seems a little different somehow. In your first let-

ter I sensed a sanctified excitement about a renewed engagement with the Lord in his Scriptures—a sense of a deepened relationship that was taking you back to the Word with new eyes and a reanimated joy. But the way you talk in this most recent letter seems more concerned with pointing out what’s wrong with all of the other Christians around you—especially our friends at church. I’ll be honest with you: it sometimes sounds like you think you’ve achieved some new secret knowledge, which somehow gives you license to mock those who don’t have it. I hope you’ll receive this in love, but I’m not very thrilled with your posture here.

I wonder: do you think this is something that stems from this new group of “Reformed brothers,” as you put it?

Now is as good a time as any to warn you about one of the foremost temptations that accompanies Reformed theology: *pride*. And the worst kind of pride: *religious* pride (one of Screwtape’s letters speaks quite eloquently about this). This is an infection that often quickly contaminates those who discover the Reformed tradition, and it can be deadly: a kind of theological West Nile virus.

I know this because I’ve been there; I know the feeling, and the temptation. Having come from the same anti-intellectual Christian background, when I discovered Reformed theology it was like coming over that crest on Sandpiper Street near LAX: you know, where all of a sudden the car crests the hill and the ocean seems to just

explode across the horizon. It's like seeing the Pacific for the first time all over again. The water is so inviting you can't help diving in. And then you can't understand why the Christians around you aren't doing the same thing. You become puzzled that they're not seeing what you see. And slowly but surely you find yourself looking down your nose at them, treating them with something less than Christian charity—all the while becoming puffed up with the kind pride that stems from knowledge (as Paul puts it in 1 Cor. 8:1).

Indeed, despite this tendency amongst young Calvinists, humility should in fact be the primary Calvinist virtue. Consider what Calvin himself says in the *Institutes* (2.2.11): “A saying of Chrysostom’s has always pleased me very much, that the foundation of our philosophy is humility. But that of Augustine pleases me even more: ‘When a certain rhetorician was asked what was the chief rule in eloquence, he replied, “Delivery”; what was the second rule, “Delivery”; what was the third rule, “Delivery”; so if you ask me concerning the precepts of the Christian religion, first, second, third and always I would answer, “Humility.”’” This is why I think only Scots Calvinists could have invented the great Calvinist spiritual discipline of golf, that most humiliating of all games. If you're ever feeling haughty, just go out and try to hit a 3-iron from deep rough. (Note: this can be a very “spiritual” way to justify four hours on the course. You'll thank me for this later.)

But more seriously: if you don't recognize the temptations of hubris early, the infection of religious pride soon spreads, and you'll find that Reformed theology is reduced to polemics—and the worst kind of polemics: directed only at other Christians. There's a legitimate place for polemics, but you need to be wise about picking your battles. And for the most part, battling other Christians should not be a very high priority. We can talk more about this later. Unfortunately, this is a common malady in the Reformed tradition, and we would do well to be honest about this up front (sort of like knowing your family's medical history helps you to be aware of what could happen to you). I recently read an enlightening—if also a bit disheartening—essay by John Frame called “Machen's Warrior Children.” In this cautionary tale he chronicles the history of Reformed schisms, fights, and debates throughout just the twentieth century in America. The list includes twenty-one (!) areas of debate; and as he notes, this doesn't even include the full spectrum of issues (such as women in office, etc.). This type of polemical religious pride almost seems like a kind of genetic defect of the Reformed tradition, one that threatens to perpetuate itself.

Now, I may be wrong, but it sounds to me like the group of “Reformed brothers” that you speak of has a serious case of this infection. My hunch about this was confirmed when you told me that they were devotees of that radio program “Saints and Infidels.” (As you

know from our time together, I have very little good to say about talk radio, even Christian talk radio, which seems to be a kind of breeding ground for the most uncharitable, unchristian polemics—like stagnant water is a breeding ground for West Nile virus.)

The fact that a mentor like José has also expressed concern to you about this group (and program) will, I hope, give you reason to think carefully about this cadre of newfound friends. Of course, I want you to find sisters and brothers who will help you on this journey: nothing is more important for discipleship and theological maturity than good friends. But friends are something that you *choose*, and not all acquaintances are *good* friends. True friends are those who encourage in you the fruit of the Spirit. I fear that this group of people will bear only bitter (yea, poisonous) fruit.

I hope you don't think I'm being too hard on you. I love you enough to take the risk of you thinking that.

Choose wisely,

