

**A MAJOR NEW STANDARD WORK ON POST-REFORMATION  
REFORMED STUDIES**

**RICHARD A MULLER'S: POST-REFORMATION REFORMED DOGMATICS:  
THE RISE AND DEVELOPMENT OF REFORMED ORTHODOXY<sup>1</sup>**

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Richard A Muller, professor of historical theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA, recently published a major work about post-Reformation Reformed dogmatics, *Post-Reformation reformed dogmatics: The rise and development of reformed orthodoxy* (2003). This study is the result of over twenty years of research and publications culminating in this significant four-volume work. This study is an advancement of previous scholarship that has assessed the Post-Reformation reformed sources as 'dead orthodoxy', 'dry', 'ridged', and theologically diverted from the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. Muller attempts to show continuity and discontinuity of intellectual scholastic thought, particularly on the theological prolegomena, the doctrine of Scripture and doctrine of God, from the Medieval time, through the Protestant Reformation to the post-Reformation Reformed period (approximately 1565-1725). He argues, that, (1) partly as a result of the *ad fontes* ideal of Renaissance humanism, the biblical exegesis of the post-Reformed Reformed period was intensified – compared to the Protestant Reformation – and (2) the discriminatory use of the medieval scholastic method (not content) and distinctions contributed to a precise definition of doctrine, which collectively led to formulation of the *praxis pietatis* – the practical implication of the exegesis and doctrine: a living to God. This reviewer attempts to capture – in the verbatim of Muller – the essence of Muller's work in outlining several aspects

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of this major study: designated to become a standard work in post-Reformed Reformation studies.

This comprehensive work of four volumes, with a total of over 2 000 pages, treats in Volume I: *Prolegomena to theology* (463 pages); Volume II: *Holy Scriptures: The cognitive foundation of theology* (537 pages);<sup>2</sup> Volume III: *The divine essence and attributes* (606 pages); and Volume IV: *The Trinity of God* (557 pages). This work may become a standard work for post-Reformation Reformed (PRR) studies. The approach and scope of this work towards the sources of PRR theology demands the attention of scholars of the discipline of historical theology, not only of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Reformed theology but also medieval (scholastic) and the 16<sup>th</sup> century Protestant Reformation theology. Therefore, this review article attempts to outline the structure and content of this important study.

In the opening chapter (The study of Protestant scholasticism) of volume I Muller offers his definition of terms such as 'orthodoxy' and 'scholasticism', and outlines assessments of discontinuities and continuities from Reformation to Orthodoxy – period he defines from ca. 1520 to ca 1725. Here, the author identifies five major issues for the study of (PRR) sources. First, the issue of continuity and discontinuity from Reformation to orthodoxy should include a study of a 'broad spectrum of thinkers and documents' in the Reformed tradition – not merely Calvin and certainly not only Calvin's *Institutes* with or without Beza's *Tabula praedestinationis*. Muller, then, includes a wide variety of 'thinkers' such as Wilhelmus à Brakel, Martin Bucer, André Chandieu, Andreas Essenius, Franciscus Gomarus, Johannes Hoornbeeck, Petrus van Mastricht, Bernardus de Moor, Petrus Ramus, and Christopher Wittich. In addition, the Arminians and the Salmurians and both their opponents are included. Furthermore, the abundant references to more than thirty Anglo-Saxon authors, such as Richard Baxter, Thomas Boston, Stephen Charnock, John Flavel, John Gill, John Owen, William Perkins,

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Samuel Rutherford allude to the focus of the study: the sources of the PRR period rather than a study of, exclusively, sources of Puritan or/and *Nadere Reformatie* (origin\pard lang1033).

The bibliography, listed in Volume IV (424-478), demonstrates the vast number of sixteenth and seventeenth century sources (approximately 650) that have been explored, analysed and utilised. The second aspect of the study concerns the theological method of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Muller argues, that examination of the methods of the Reformers and of the Reformed orthodox reveals that the relationship between exegesis and the topical formulation of theology precludes the creation of either a purely rational or a deductive theology or a theology grounded on topically defined 'central dogmas', such as predestination or 'decretal', and covenant theology. Muller notes, that the central dogma model is not only anachronistic as applied to the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries; it is also simplistic and overlooks numerous contextual issues.

The third aspect concerns older scholarship identifying the work of the Protestant Reformation and their successors with 'centrisms' such as Christo-centric or Theo-centric theology – at least not in a modern sense of identifying Christ as the fundamental cognitive principle for all doctrine – or, for that matter, was their theology centered on the divine decree as a deductive principle. The very method of their theology, Muller argues, the gathering of topics or *loci* drawn out of their exegetical work, stands in the way of such models for theological system.

Fourth, Muller identifies that the 'orthodoxy' and 'scholasticism' of the PRR era must be understood in terms of trajectories of intellectual history that extend through the 16<sup>th</sup> into the 17<sup>th</sup> century. For example, on the issue of scholasticism, Muller argues that this theological discourse, suited to the classroom and altered in the light of changes in logic and rhetoric that

belonged to the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries became a product, in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and through the 17<sup>th</sup> century, of development and changes in method that took place during the Renaissance and Reformation. This example, worked out through Muller's work, repudiates the thought that the Reformation sought a dynamic preaching while the later Protestant orthodox forged a rigid system. Rather, the later orthodox further systemised and developed a Reformation theology that was in its origins Christian orthodoxy.

Fifth, Muller argues for an exegetical continuity. The history of exegesis, it is noted, marks one of the clearest indicators of the nature and character of the continuity in thought between the Reformation and orthodoxy, given that not only do both eras fall within the so-called 'pre-critical' phase of the history of biblical interpretation but that the theologians of both eras were frequently also biblical exegetes whose results belong to an ongoing tradition of interpretation. The latter, it is argued, is particularly relevant to the understanding of the doctrine of God in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. In summary, Muller's main argument throughout this study is the quest for continuity-discontinuity of intellectual (Reformation/post-Reformation) theological thought.

These five aspects may have contributed to the structure of Muller's work. First, and frequently throughout the volumes, there is a concise overview of the intellectual thought of the medieval and Reformation period, preceding an in-depth overview of the PRR thought on a certain *locus* or its sub-content. This approach not only allows the reader, significantly, to follow the development of argument of the author but also provides insight into continuity and discontinuity of thought of the medieval, Reformation and PRR theologians. For example, on the development of the theological prolegomena, Muller demonstrates its beginnings (in early scholasticism) and its further development: from the high scholastic period, including

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reviews of the work of Alexander Hales, Bonaventura and Thomas Aquinas, to the late medieval developments such as Duns Scotus (and the problem of the theological *scientia*) and Ockham. From there, Muller explores the issue in the time of the Reformation – including the contribution of Zwingli, Bucer, Luther, Melancthon, Calvin, Viret, Vermigli, Musculus and Hyperius – and moves in details to the era of early orthodoxy (from Ursinus to Perkins and Lubbertus: ca 1565-1640) and high (ca 1640-1725) and late orthodoxy (ca 1725-1750). Muller's argument is that the development of the prolegomena shows a continuity of the Reformed orthodoxy with the Reformation in and through the use of modified medieval models for a theological system and because of the training of many of the Reformers in the old systems. Just as the Reformation cannot be seen as total break with the Middle Ages, and just as the medieval forerunners of the Reformation bear witness to principles and presuppositions in theology akin to those of the Reformers, so it is an error, Muller states, to argue discontinuity between the Reformation and post-Reformation Protestantism. The latter provides Muller with a venue to be in dialogue with older assessments of the PRR thought. For example on the issue of Reformed orthodoxy and rationalism, the author differs radically with the earlier view as developed by H E Weber and later versions by E Bizer, A Kickel and B Armstrong. Weber argued that the Reformed fell into the rationalistic trap through their use of the doctrine of predestination as the underlying category of logical necessity in all theology. This rationalising tendency, argues Weber, is the problem of all Protestant orthodox dogmatics – as if, Muller responds, one could reduce the varied Protestant views of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to 'fideist' and 'rationalist' camps. Further, Muller counters, that the problem with Weber's analysis is that neither of these developments – a movement from a more or less fideistic position toward the eventual declaration that reason is in fact the *prin-*

*cipium* of theological knowing – ever occurred in the theologies of the Reformed orthodox.

Second, Muller's examination of the development and thought of the PRR theologians parallels the Reformed *loci*. Beginning with the prolegomena to theology, he moves to the doctrine of Scripture and the doctrine of God – whereby the latter is contained in volumes three and four. Here, the inviting question is: Can we expect additional volumes on other *loci* of Reformed theology, including eschatology – a subject of limited research in the discipline of PRR historical-theology?

To further appreciate this extensive study, let us turn by way of example – and to restrict us for the sake of space – to volumes two and four, respectively dealing with the doctrines of Scripture and the Triunity of God. As regards the former, some will find it refreshing and instructive to become (again) acquainted with the rich sources of PRR theology. Muller demonstrates that the theologians of that era well understood Scripture as the Word of God – the *principium* or foundation of theology. In addition, these theologians have wrestled with the meaning and implications of issues such as the inspiration of Scripture, the divinity of Scripture (its authority, authenticity and evidences), the canon of Scripture (its interpretive context, confessional definitions, Tridentine Decrees: a turning point in the definition of canon) and textual, hermeneutical and theological problems in the work of translation. In addition, the interpretation of Scripture in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, Muller argues, showed a movement from exegesis to *doctrina*. Here, from Muller's argument it can be inferred that doctrine arises from (the practice of) exegesis. Concerning the latter, Muller explores, analyses and nuances the methods and rules of interpretation, the approach to the biblical text: language, grammar, scope, circumstances and on a broader scale the canonical interpretation. One aspect in this discussion deserves particular attention: that of proof texts. Previous examination of

the seventeenth century sources such as systematic theology, have often contributed to the so-called proof-text theory: the doctrine, particular after the Synod of Dort (1618/19), was established and biblical texts were searched out to support the doctrine. Muller convincingly shows that the method of exegesis and the movement from text to doctrine or from textual study to homiletic use makes the proof-text theory less probable and most likely no longer tenable. The intensification, compared with the 16<sup>th</sup> century Reformers, of the PRR exegetes to the *ad fontes* ideal of the Renaissance does not justify, in the opinion of this reviewer – following Muller’s argumentation – the fact that little or no exegesis was done after the Synod of Dort. On the contrary, the vast and diverse number of exegetical works of that era attests to a different assessment than the one argued by the proof-text theory.

In regard to volume four, *The Trinity of God*, it should be noted that this is one of the first and most comprehensive studies in the field of PRR scholarship on the doctrine of the Trinity. The introduction of this topic offers an extensive background to this doctrine in the Christian tradition: the medieval background and development from the Reformation to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Against this background, Muller explores the Reformed orthodox doctrine of the Trinity: a treatment of the tri- (individual discussion on God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) unity. The Trinity as a ‘fundamental article’ of faith is believed, defended and practised by these theologians. Particularly the last aspect, the practice of doctrine, including the doctrine of the Trinity – was an important concern, according to Muller, of the PRR writers. In summary, Muller shows that the theology of the PRR period is a continuation of the Reformation (and in certain aspects of the Medieval period) in exegesis, doctrine, polemic and practice. These fourfold ingredients are inseparably and distinguishably present in (post-Reformation) Reformed theology.

Volume four closes with an attempt to describe the character of Reformed orthodoxy. Muller sets out – based on his four-volume study, and for that matter including his other publications, to reappraise older studies of the understanding of PRR theology. The neo-orthodox interpretations of Calvin and the Calvinists stand, according to Muller, in discontinuity of the historical Calvin and his successors. Muller argues that a proper analysis of Calvin and post-Reformation Reformers entails reading the sources and then tracing out the ongoing dialogue that accompanied the entry of Reformed thought into the various later 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century contexts. Further, he argues that the Reformed orthodoxy in its confessional breadth and theological diversity restates issues of development in theology.

In conclusion, this study shows and illumines the identification of the Protestant orthodoxy and scholasticism that followed the Reformation, not as ‘dry’, or ‘rigid’ recrudescences of medieval thought and method, but as aspects of a living and variegated movement situated and contextualised, culturally and intellectually, in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The confessional and exegetical continuities of this later Protestant theology with the thought of the Reformers are clear, as is the variety of the movement, the diversity of its roots in the diverse traditions of the later Middle Ages, Renaissance and Reformation and the multiplicity of its own trajectories. This work of Richard A Muller clearly surpasses older works such as those by Alexander Schweizer, *Die Glaubenslehre der evangelisch – reformirten Kirche* (published in 1844 and 1847 as a two-volume work of 1 200 pages) and Heinrich Heppe *Die Dogmatik der evangelisch – reformirten Kirche* (published in 1861, one-volume work of 500 pages and reprinted, translated into English and edited by Ernest Bizer in 1935) and is at times partly reminiscent of the study of Robert D Preus, *The Theology of post-Reformation Lutheranism* (St Louis: CPH, 1972). Finally, Muller’s comprehensive work invites one to study the relationship – as



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outlined, but not worked out in sufficiently desired detail, if any – of exegeses, doctrine and practice.

**ENDNOTES**

- 1 Richard A Muller, *Post-Reformation reformed dogmatics: The rise and development of reformed orthodoxy, ca 1520 to ca 1725*. 4 Volumes. Grand Rapids, MI: 2003. ISBN 0-8010-2618-0. 2163 pages. List price US \$150.00.
- 2 The first two volumes were published in 1987 and 1993 respectively. The second edition of these volumes (1) offers more footnotes; (2) provides in some cases more nuance on a certain issue (for example the periodisation of the post-Reformation Reformed time); (3) is bound in contrast to the earlier paperback edition, and; (4) always refers to this 2<sup>nd</sup> edition in the volumes three and four.