

C O N V O L O G I C O N S T H E R S A T A L

The First 500 Years

Jerry Andrews

The gift the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has for the next 500 years—for the *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda, secundum verbum Dei*, and the world—is the first 500 years.

Important qualifications must be stated at the start before explaining.

I doubt anyone expects the PC(USA) will be present to give a gift throughout the length of the next 500 years. Thus, it must be a gift given soon, if not now, and then successfully placed in the living constitution of whatever church forms will succeed the PC(USA) and denominationalism. Further, the church itself may not be here. History has an end—a glorious end; after which time, all gifts are given by God to the People of God without end. I do not suppose to advise The Almighty on what gifts are best given. Suffice it to say that the *ecclesia reformata* will need no further reformation. But perhaps, just perhaps, it is not too arrogant to suggest to ourselves what gift we might give for the sake of the church and the world.

This last truth causes me, when considering the next 500 years, first to pray, “Even so. Come, Lord Jesus. Come.” But it also causes me to be grateful, very grateful, for all the saints who have lived and died in the Faith before me and who, considering that the Lord may yet linger before returning, gave gifts to us—gifts which bless us. Now it is our turn.

Each generation—however defined as a generation—best serves the generations that follow if it remembers its vocation as a steward. The temptation to consider the inventions of its own time to be superior is ever present and must be resisted. Instead the gifts it has received from previous generations are to be prized above the unique contributions that it makes itself. They are most tested and found true. Though the requirements of faithfulness press on each generation, and each generation must offer its own life back to God, the Faith is something we have inherited, and which we are to give to those that follow. Indeed, much of faithfulness may be measured by the extent to which that Faith is passed on to those that follow—undiminished, undiluted, further tested, and found true.

And there is one last qualification. The first 500 years of which I speak—as the gift to be given to the next 500 years—is not a reference to our first 500 years of self-conscious identity as a Reformed Church, but the first 500 years of the church itself. Calvin and the Reformers would agree.

Again, while it is tempting to think, especially in this anniversary year, of the unique contributions of the Reformed Faith and our desire to see its best gifts given to the next generations (a virtuous project), it is better to be sure of our faithful stewardship of what the Reformers held as the Faith—the Faith of which they were recipients not designers—which they struggled to apprehend with their contemporaries and pass on to all who followed. Put more simply, while the project of reading those who read Calvin has many blessings attending it, the project of reading those Calvin read has, I believe, even more.

When I was a college and seminary student, I first heard this calling. Things ancient are interesting to me; things long ago cause me to wonder. The inclination became a destination. Good skills in Latin and Greek needed to be developed—skills which tested the limits of my aptitude and perhaps the patience of my teachers. Reading widely and deeply in the literature of the first 500 years of the church, and in the Classics of the pagans, directed the choice of my graduate schools, the building of my library, and the stewardship of my time. All with benefit, I would like to think: benefit to my understanding and appropriation of the Faith, benefit to the congregations I serve, and benefit to the larger church which I have attempted to serve.

J. I. McCord, then President of Princeton Theological Seminary, went out of his way to encourage me in this effort. For him, the day would soon come when ecumenical conversations would become serious, sustained, and thoroughly theological. The conversation, he predicted, would concern the first 500 years. The Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches would be well prepared for this conversation, but the Protestants less so. We think, he said knowingly, that church history began with Calvin. Who will represent us? Will we be ready to make our contribution? Will we be able to hold our own? The irony was not lost on either of us. Calvin, himself, thought that the conversations which mattered most are best held at a table at which the ancients also sit.

What benefit does such a commitment offer—a benefit we in turn can offer to those generations that follow?

One of the great benefits of this commitment is that theology is not a solitary exercise; it is communal. It is also public and to be accountable. Augustine, perhaps the most gifted mind of those first 500 years, was never alone. He did his work in company. He exercised the grace of theological friendships. But surprisingly, for a writer who was at his height about the year 400 A.D., he was thinking with, wrestling with, learning from, and in constant conversation with those who had preceded him—Cyprian and Tertullian, and a host of others. He had a library, and he used it. The church of the first 400 years sat with Augustine at his evening table just as much as did his North African contemporaries. While we think of this time in the church as still formative, he lived and wrote as if the Faith was inherited—not waiting to be invented, but needing to be explicated and applied.

So too Calvin. The Company of Pastors of Calvin's Geneva was generative for him. Those among his contemporaries with whom he lived and ministered, contributed much to his theological output and to his reformation of the church. His letters, writings, and even his disputations reveal this. His contributions to their life's work were significant as well. But pride of place was given to those who had thought through the Faith in the generations before him. Building his library, his thinking, and his writing were done in the company of the ancients.

To be clear: this was not a whole and indiscriminating appropriation of all that had been said and done before his generation. This was, after all, a reformation. Many errors had crept in; several practices were unfaithful and to be discarded. Nor was this a reinvention—a return to an idolized or pristine past. The 500 years of Reformed Church history are not a reincarnation of the first 500 years, nor were they intended to be. These 500 years have been a time of hearing again, by the grace of God, what was said at the beginning, and then, by the Holy Spirit, amending our common life towards a renewed obedience.

Calvin was certain of this. He appreciated, but did not idolize the ancients. He listened to, but did not pray to them. He “wrestled” with them. He agonized over their witness and what of theirs would serve his own generation. Notably, Calvin conversed with and trusted Augustine the most—and the most often. But, what may be more to this point, Calvin disputed with Augustine most of all, and in so doing reveals how greatly he valued their conversation.

For those of us who are Reformed, Calvin is the best reader of Augustine. Likewise, Augustine is for many—not just the Reformed—the best reader of Paul. Or in the words of Peter Brown in his biography of Augustine, “Paul had spoken, Augustine had understood.”¹ And thus we become more profoundly the *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda, secundum verbum Dei*. This is the gift of the PC(USA) to the next 500 years—a church that thinks through, teaches, and tests the Faith expressed in distinctly Reformed terms, appropriated by conversing with those who first thought through the Faith by being the first interpreters of Scripture.

This last statement introduces what I think is the most significant reason for valuing this common conversation. We are not to read the Bible alone; we are to read it with others. Of course, we are to do this often with our contemporaries. But too often, they are the contemporaries of our choosing, and thus a dangerous narrowing of the conversation and an unnecessary limiting of our ability to explore the Faith fully. In contrast, we cannot choose our history or our legacy. The ancients sit at our table and, as it turns out in my experience, are hard to persuade. I have never managed to convince Augustine of a more egalitarian church order, try as I might. Nor, more frustratingly, have I been able to dissuade him from employing allegory as a normative way of interpreting the Scriptures. He is inconvenient; and thus, he is necessary.

Let me put this another way. Discernment is the ongoing work of any disciple of Jesus who asks the questions: Who is this Savior that calls? Where does he now lead me? My contemporaries can be very helpful to me in discovering the faithful answers. They know me and my limitations, and love me enough to hold me accountable to follow through when the answers become known. This is irreplaceable.

But what shall I do when my limitations are generation specific, culturally specific, and shared by my contemporaries? They so often are. Who will help me? Who will help us? And discernment—in contrast to what we most often express as its goal: listening to each other’s voice—is better defined as listening together to the voice of God in the word of God, and doing so in a context where we overhear what God says to another and therefore perhaps to us too.

Reading the Bible with the ancients gives us the best opportunity to read with others who are truly “other.” The past is a foreign country; people do things differently there. For this same reason, reading with our contemporary global partners and intentionally inviting into the conversation those with whom we disagree are to be recommended as well.

But the ancients serve a unique position and thus perspective by being the first interpreters of Scripture. And they are the first generations that the Spirit of God shaped into a People in a variety of places and cultures over the first 500 years. That does not make them in every case more faithful or even better. But it means that they—because they are closer to the time and place of the writings of the prophets and apostles, and are those whom the Spirit first formed into communities of Faith—should be given a privileged seat at the table, perhaps even invited to speak first. Good comes from this.

1. Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1967), 359.

Let me offer an example: a story well known, but incompletely so.

Augustine's *Confessions* are remembered vaguely by many for the telling of a story in painstaking detail—the theft of a pear in his childhood. A gang of boys, out late at night as was their custom, plotted and executed a theft of pears from a neighboring orchard. Augustine among them, they stole an immense load, took a bite of a few, and threw the majority into a nearby hog pit. The boys were neither hungry nor poor, Augustine reports; we did it for the hell of it. I don't even like pears, he confesses. The crime itself was the attraction. "In its commission, our pleasure was purely that it was forbidden."² I did it for the love of evil alone, and I truly loved it.

Augustine considers whether the company of that night influenced his deeds. Did my desire to be with them and please them move me to do what I otherwise would not have done? No and yes, Augustine answers. I remain certain that I did this for the love of theft alone. That is what was in me all along; that is what came from within me that night. But, he says with equal candor, placing no blame on his teenaged companions, I know for certain that I would not have done this if I was alone. By rubbing against my late-night friends, the itch of my desires was inflamed. My accomplices did not put the distorted desire in me; they increased it and drew it out.

We laughed and laughed, he reports, for having played a trick on the owners who knew nothing of it at the time and who, in time, we imagined, would become furious. And, he observes, people seldom laugh alone.

"This, O God, is the still vivid memory of my heart. I would not have stolen alone; my pleasure was not in what I stole but that I stole; yet, I would not have enjoyed it if done alone; I would not have done it alone. O unfriendly friendship, you inscrutable seducer of the soul, you avid appetite to do damage to the other out of sheer sport and silliness without gain or glory, you, with merely the word, 'Hey, let's do it!' make us ashamed not to be shameful." And with "I cannot bear to think of this any longer", Augustine quits the story.³

It is not clear to me where I could turn now to discover such helpful or profound insight into friendship. This category in Christian literature has been loudly silent for centuries. Surely the next 500 years will benefit from the wisdom of the ancients with regard to what will undoubtedly be needed—the testimony of the Scriptures faithfully heard and lived regarding matters of friendship in Christian community. Surely.

We would do the next 500 years well by giving them and the world the gift of the example and fruit of our engagement with the first 500 years because, by this effort, we have gained a confidence in the Faith and a humility in faithfulness we otherwise would have lacked if we had declined the gift offered us. Accepting that gift fully makes more likely the next generations will accept the testimony of the ancients and we who are soon to be added to their number.

Let me respond to a good objection here. The ancients too, were they not also limited by time and space, generation and place, and by culture? Yes, of course. But the first 500 years are not at all monolithic in culture or geography or, therefore, perspective. Latin and Greek was a world of difference. And Jerome's Palestine, Augustine's North Africa, and the Italy of Paulinus, though sharing the Latin language, were culturally oblique to each other. Although these three disciples of the Master lived in one generation, they did not share one cultural point in the empire, and they were at very different places in the economic and social spaces of their generation. The ancient world is a world, not a moment or a point on a map. They argued with, allied with, and interpreted each other.

2. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, trans. John K. Ryan (New York: Doubleday, 1960), 69–75.

3. *Ibid.*, 95–101.

But—and here is the attractive answer—they engaged one another in a sustained and serious conversation about the Faith and the faithfulness to which it calls us all. They did their work in public and together. They conversed across a multiple of differences. They invite us into that conversation. Into that conversation, Calvin came, and we are the better for it. Into that conversation, we are now invited. The generations after us will be the better if we fully engage in it and pass it on.

A second good objection may arise here. The first 500 years are long ago and faraway. In the next 500, they will become more distant still. Yes, and in that distancing, fewer and fewer commonalities will remain. The ability of late antiquity to speak to whatever it is that follows us will become more and more difficult and irrelevant, until it becomes a rigor in excess of the value gained. No, and no for four reasons.

First, distance is a virtue—not a vice—when needing to listen to the “other.” They are “other” and even more valuable to us and those that follow us because of it.

Second, we are still learning more and more about them and from them. Classical, historical, and theological studies are advancing. Further, for example, we have discovered previously unknown letters and sermons written by Augustine in this our generation and have now read them for the first time. No doubt, additional discoveries are to be made. And even further, we are becoming more proficient at hearing their voice clearly for the practice. New publishing ventures place more and more of the body of ancient Christian literature into English (and other languages) at a more affordable price each year. Soon a pastor’s library will be as full of the voices of the ancients, as we now listen to the voices of the Reformers and those of recent generations.

Third, the presumption that the next 500 years will be still more different, and different from the first 500 years, is not known, and, I think, not inevitable. The circumstances of the arrival and growth, tribulations and triumph, and continuing challenges and opportunities of the Faith in the next 500 years will more likely parallel that of the first 500 years than the most recent 500. Think of Africa where the Faith now makes its move, where the contest of world religions will most likely play out, and where the core of the Faith will be most directly challenged. Post-colonial Africa and the late antiquity of the collapsing Roman empire look more alike to each other than either do to the last 500 years. Add what we know of South America, and what we do know yet of Asia, and the prediction that much, very much, of whatever it is that is next sharing many commonalities with what first greeted the new Faith is not a hard one to make. The ancient Africans—Cyprian, Tertullian, Athanasius, and Augustine—will have much help to offer the Africans that will come next. More so, I say, than any invention of the PC(USA). Harare will have more to learn from Hippo, and Kinshasa from Carthage than either from Houston or Chicago. We serve them best by fully engaging in an ongoing conversation with the first 500 years, in which we learned much and made our contribution, and then offer that refreshed and strengthened conversation to the next 500 years.

Fourth, and most importantly, the Scriptures speak to the human soul. This is a soul shared with Adam and Eve, Mary and Joseph, you and me, and everyone that follows. The human is created and spoken to by its Creator in the Scriptures. That speech has been heard by the People of God through the ages; the full word by the first 500 years first. The next 500 years will profit from overhearing how they responded as much as how we have. And they will profit from observing how we engaged the ancients in our own time. This word of God that speaks to the human soul is as shared as the human soul, no matter how distant in time are the hearers from one another. What goes deepest to the human heart goes widest to the world.

The Reformed, I believe, have given the church a great gift these last 500 years. We have self-consciously and without apology been on the mission of loving the Lord our God with all our mind. We have labored to teach the Faith to each new convert and generation. We have often been the teachers of the Faith to the faithful outside our own commitments and traditions. The confessions of the PC(USA) and the well-developed confessional instinct of the Reformed have served us and others well. That commitment and practice owe much to those who lived and died in the Faith before there was a distinctly Reformed Church. That Faith—the one we learned and which we have taught, not of our own making, but of our stewardship these 500 years—is the Faith we are to give as the best gift to the next 500 years. Holding it, having it hold us, and living it out with the help of the ancients as a constituent part of our community of discernment, helps us—and will help those who follow us—to be *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda, secundum verbum Dei*. That Faith is ancient.

The First 500 Years

Conversation starters: Discussion Questions

Michelle Bartel

1. The author holds up study as conversation, and study in our Christian faith as conversation with “the great cloud of witnesses,” (Hebrews 12), those who have gone in the faith before us. Bring to mind a conversation you have had with someone about God or being a Christian: was this person a relative? Pastor? Teacher? Stranger?
2. Andrews asks us to consider people like John Calvin and Augustine as the same sorts of conversation partners. It’s just that we listen to them by reading instead of hearing. What connections can you make between your story and Augustine’s story about stealing pears?
3. In the next 500 years of the Reformation, Andrews argues that it will be even more important to read the authors that Calvin read. What issues in your Christian faith would you long to talk about with our forefathers and foremothers in the faith? What issues in the church?
4. What does “loving God with all our mind” mean to you? The author suggests that one thing this means is that we become stewards of the faith we have received. That means we grow in understanding so that we can teach each new convert and generation the faith we have received. In what ways have you studied the faith you have received? In what ways have you passed it on to a new convert or generation?
5. The word “ancient” comes from roots that mean “before, in front of,” like a forehead is in front of us. This means that our brothers and sisters in the faith that are “ancient” go in front of us into the faith instead of staying in the past behind us. So the great cloud of witnesses leads the way: study of and conversation with the forefathers and foremothers in the faith is like a pillar of fire at night or a cloud during the day. In what ways do you long to be led? What skills or understanding of Christian faith do you long to learn?