

# **“Reformed Theology” From God’s Prophet Jeremiah**

Based on commentary by John Calvin  
Edited by Wabash Bible Ministries

The Prophet Jeremiah teaches us “reformed theology”—the teachings that were taught by Jesus, the apostles of the New Testament, and the Protestant Reformers. The five *solas* (“alones”) of the Protestant Reformation were Christ alone, grace alone, faith alone, Scripture alone, to the glory of God alone. Christ alone is the only Savior of men. We are justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. The Scriptures alone are sufficient for giving us the doctrine of salvation and all that Christians believe and practice in religion. Christians are to live their lives to the glory of God alone. The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Jeremiah deals with two of these *solas* in particular detail—those of Christ alone and Scripture alone. He also gives a few insights into the doctrine of man’s total depravity—the first letter of the famed T-U-L-I-P of Reformed theology, which stands for total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement (i.e., definite or particular atonement), irresistible grace, and the perseverance (or preservation) of the saints. We will begin here.

## **Total Depravity**

We are by nature completely addicted to evil and bring nothing from the womb but depravity (cf. Gen. 6:5).<sup>1</sup> The heart of man is full of every kind of deceit, until it is cleansed by the Spirit of God. When once impiety boils up, there is seemingly no end to what extremes it will proceed; for the men of Jeremiah’s day were not only insolent and reproachful towards Jeremiah but also towards God Himself (Jer. 43:1-3).<sup>2</sup>

As a result of man’s total depravity, all by nature seek to be deceived: Were any one to ask, “does the world wish to be deceived?”, all would cry out from the least to the greatest that they shun and fear nothing so much; and yet from where is it that as soon as Satan gives any sign, he attracts vast multitudes, except that we are by nature prone to what is false and vain? Then there is another evil, that we prefer darkness to light (Jer. 29:8).<sup>3</sup>

## **Christ alone**

The simplicity of faith is our spiritual chastity; for as a wife who regards her husband alone keeps conjugal [marital] fidelity and chaste conduct, so when we continue to cleave to God alone, we are, in a spiritual sense, chaste as He requires us to be; but when we seek our safety from this and that quarter, we violate the fidelity which we owe to God. As soon, then, as we cast our thoughts here and there, it is to act like a woman who seeks vagrant and unlawful connections (Jer. 22:20).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Calvin, *Commentaries on The Prophet Jeremiah and the Lamentations*, Vol. IV, trans. Rev. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 222.

<sup>2</sup> Vol. IV, 506.

<sup>3</sup> Vol. III, 425.

<sup>4</sup> Vol. III, 112.

It was usual with all the prophets, whenever they gave the people the hope of salvation, to bring forward the promise of the Messiah, for in Him have God's promises always been yes and amen (2 Cor. 1:20). This, indeed, appears now, under the Gospel, more clearly than formerly; but the faith of the Fathers could not have been complete except they directed their thoughts to the Messiah (Jer. 23:5-6).<sup>5</sup>

Why is the Messiah called the Son of David? Even because it was necessary that He should be born of that family. Why then is He called Yahweh [the LORD]? Because there is something in Him more excellent than what is human; and He is called Yahweh because He is the only-begotten Son of God, of one and the same essence, glory, eternity, and divinity with the Father (Jer. 23:5-6).<sup>6</sup>

It was also necessary that He [Christ] should become man that He might unite us to Himself; for we have no access to God, except we become the friends of Christ; and how can we be so made except by a brotherly union? It was not then without the strongest reason that the Prophet here sets Christ before us both as a true man and the Son of David and also as God or Yahweh, for He is the only-begotten Son of God, and ever the same in wisdom and glory with the Father, as John testifies in chap. 17:5, 11.<sup>7</sup>

Christ's righteousness is ours because Christ is righteous not for Himself but possesses a righteousness which He communicates to us [by faith alone]. If then we desire to have God as our righteousness, we must seek Christ; for this cannot be found except in Him.<sup>8</sup>

We must always come to the fountain of God's mercy if we would enjoy the blessings of Christ, according to what is said, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16). We shall, indeed, find in Christ whatever is necessary for our salvation; but from where arose Christ, except from the infinite goodness of God? When He pitied us, He designed to save us by His only begotten Son. Salvation then is laid up for us in Christ and is not to be sought anywhere else; but we ought ever to remember that this salvation flows from the mercy of God, so that Christ is to be viewed as a testimony and a pledge of God's paternal favor towards us (Jer. 30:9).<sup>9</sup>

### **Scripture alone**

We must obey the Scriptures alone: How can the common people understand that some speak from God's mouth and that others propound their own glosses? Since God has once given us His testimony, every one ought to obey Him as soon as he knows what is right, what he ought to follow, and what he ought to shun (Jer. 23:16).<sup>10</sup>

We see how precious to God is the honor of His word; for it is not of every kind of sin that God speaks when He extends His vengeance to posterity [children]. It is the same thing as though Jeremiah had said, "It is altogether intolerable when men become irritated and exasperated against God's Word (Jer. 23:34)."<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Vol. III, 136.

<sup>6</sup> Vol. III, 145.

<sup>7</sup> Vol. III, 145.

<sup>8</sup> Vol. III, 146.

<sup>9</sup> Vol. IV, 16-17.

<sup>10</sup> Vol. III, 168.

<sup>11</sup> Vol. III, 208.

The word of God then in itself ought to be deemed sweet and delightful. From where then arises this bitterness and hatred towards it? Even from the wickedness of men alone (Jer. 23:36).<sup>12</sup>

The Old Testament is of great importance and relevance to Christians: "Whatever is written," says Paul, "has been written for our instruction, that through the patience and the consolation of the Scriptures we might have hope." (Rom. 15:4). But what do the profane say? "Ho, you tell us what has been written, but this is remote from us, and through length of time it has vanished away; what is antiquity to us?" (Jer. 31:3)<sup>13</sup>

The Bible is God's inspired, God-breathed Word (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16). What Jeremiah prophesied were God's very words. Jeremiah stood, as it were, between God and Baruch; for God, by His Spirit, presided over and guided the mind and tongue of the Prophet. Now the Prophet, the Spirit being His guide and teacher, recited what God had commanded; and Baruch wrote down and then proclaimed the whole summary of what the Prophet had taught (Jer. 36:4-6).<sup>14</sup>

God has revealed the entirety of His will for humanity in His written word, the 39 books of the Old Testament and the 27 books of the New Testament, which together form the 66 books of the Bible. First, we see what is the benefit of having the Scripture, even that what would otherwise vanish away or escape the memory of man may remain and be handed down from one to another, and also that it may be read, for what is written can be better weighed during leisure time. When one speaks only, every one takes in something according to his capacity and his attention; but as words from man's mouth glide away, the utility of Scripture does hence appear more evident; for when what is not immediately understood is repeated, it brings more light, and then what one reads today he may read tomorrow, and next year, and many years after (Jer. 36:1-2).<sup>15</sup>

Tragically, many of the Anabaptists in Calvin's day downplayed the importance of studying God's Word and did not encourage their followers to meditate on His Word day and night: All those who repudiate the daily duty of learning are profane men and extinguish as far as they can the grace of the Spirit; many such fanatics among the Anabaptists have been in our time, who despised learning of every kind. They boasted that the doctrine of the Law was the Alphabet; and they also indulged in this dream, that wrong is done to the Holy Spirit when men attend to learning. And some dare, in a grosser manner, to vomit forth their blasphemies: they say that a few verses are enough for us, yes, even these two things, "Fear God and love your neighbor." Even so now, they who think it is not their duty at this day to seek knowledge in the school of Christ, and to avail themselves of the hearing of His word, no doubt despise God in their hearts, and set no value either on the Law, or on the prophets, or on the Gospel. Remarkable then is this passage; it shows that the Lord would have His Law to be our leader and teacher, and yet he adds His own prophets (Jer. 26:4-6).<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Vol. III, 211.

<sup>13</sup> Vol. IV, 57.

<sup>14</sup> Vol. IV, 329.

<sup>15</sup> Vol. IV, 326.

<sup>16</sup> Vol. III, 314-315.

In addition to many among the Anabaptists who despised learning and preferred ignorance over the knowledge of God, the Papists (followers of the Pope) even more boldly attacked Scripture, as they attacked its authority, added to it and took away from it. The Roman Catholic church denied that Scripture alone was sufficient for salvation, man's faith, worship, and life: The Papists run to this sort of evasion, "Ho! If we must determine everything in religion by the Law, the Prophets, and the Gospel, what certainty can be found? The Scripture is like a nose of wax, for it can be turned to anything, and no meaning can with certainty be elicited; thus all things will remain perplexed and doubtful, *if authority belongs to the Scriptures alone.*" We then see that *the enemies of truth* at this day, when they cannot otherwise cover their filthiness, *labor to throw all things into confusion and to discredit God's word, and to introduce such darkness, that white cannot be distinguished from black, that light becomes mixed with darkness.*<sup>17</sup> Like postmodern relativists, they say, "There is no true or false, black or white; everything is shades of grey."

The Papists delighted in their manmade inventions; yet God declares that whatever men invent and whatever they devise, which they have not received from His mouth, is only the *deceit of the heart* (Jer. 23:26-27).<sup>18</sup> If then at any time such vain thoughts seem pleasing to us, let us bear in mind what Jeremiah said: whatever proceeds not from God is the *deceit of the heart*; and further, though the whole world applaud falsehoods and deceptions, we ought yet to know that everything is a deceit which has not God Himself as its author (Jer. 23:26-27).<sup>19</sup>

Contrary to what the Pope claimed, it is Scripture alone which brings true Christian unity. God shows us the way to true religion as by the finger; for He says that *those who speak from His mouth can be heard with safety*; but that others are to be rejected, no matter how much they may boast of being prophets, and thus seek under the guise of authority to subject men's minds captive to themselves. And this ought to suffice at this day to put an end to all controversies; for on this no doubt depends almost every question that is now agitated in the world. *The Papists will have their own devices to be taken as oracles, and claim to be the Church*; but we, on the other hand, say that *perfect wisdom is alone to be found in the Law, in the Prophets, and in the Gospel*. Were we then to attend to the mouth of God, it would be easy to settle all the disputes between us. It hence also follows, that the *Papists are deceived because they refuse to ask at God's mouth, but instead choose to become slaves to men and to their own falsehoods, rather than to inquire what pleases God; for He Himself has spoken, and has not spoken hiddenly, neither doubtfully nor obscurely; for there is nothing more clear than His teaching*, provided men do not become willfully blind (Jer. 23:16).<sup>20</sup>

As we conclude, let us meditate on what it means to believe in Scripture alone. The Bible teaches that *God's word* is *God's word*; it is not the word of man. The Bible does not just *contain* the word of God; it *is* the word of God. Therefore, all that Moses, Jeremiah, the apostle Paul, and the apostle Peter, for example, preached, is just as much God's word as if God said it without an human spokesman. To reject the teachings of Moses, Jeremiah, Paul, or Peter, is therefore to reject God's words and therefore it is to reject God Himself.

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<sup>17</sup> Vol. III, 171, emphasis added.

<sup>18</sup> Vol. III, 193.

<sup>19</sup> Vol. III, 193.

<sup>20</sup> Vol. III, 168, emphasis added.

We ought, therefore, to notice this mode of speaking, which occurs everywhere in Scripture—the same thing is ascribed to God and to His servants. Thus we find what may seem strange—the Apostles are said to forgive sins, they are spoken of as bringing salvation; but the reason is, because they were ministers of God's grace and exhorted men in Christ's name to be reconciled to God. They then absolved because they were the testifiers of absolution. So also the words which God dictated to His servant were called the words of Jeremiah; yet, properly speaking, they were not the words of man, for they did not proceed from a mortal man, but from the only true God (Jer. 36:8).<sup>21</sup>

Holding firmly to Scripture alone protects us from falling into either of the two ditches that entrap men and lead them to destruction—the twin evils of legalism and licentiousness. The legalist *adds to* God's word the doctrines, commandments, and traditions of men. The licentious person *subtracts from* God's word those commandments and laws he desires to transgress and ignore.

When we believe in Scripture alone, God keeps us from adding to His word or taking away from it. Scripture regulates how we worship Him, and it also limits our obedience to earthly authorities: For example, when the apostle Paul exhorts children to obey their parents, he modifies his exhortation by saying, "In the Lord" (Eph. 6:1). We then see that Paul commands children to obey their parents, not in everything, or without limitation, but so that God, who is the Sovereign and the only Father of all, may still retain His authority and that earthly parents may not claim for themselves so much authority as to ascend the throne of God as though they were lawgivers to souls (Jer. 35:7).<sup>22</sup>

Reformed theology alone prevents us from falling into the ditches of legalism and licentiousness. Scripture alone is sufficient for God's own glory, man's salvation, faith and life (WCF, 1.6), and Scripture prescribes how we are to worship the one, true God:

We ought to maintain at this day that in the Gospel, clearly discovered to us by the coming of Christ, there is nothing obscure, but that the treasures of all knowledge have been made known to us, as far as it is necessary, so that they who now go astray in vain pretend that they do so because the will of God is hidden from them; for in no other way can they err than by dissembling and willfully closing their eyes, lest the brightness of the sun should reach them. Let us yet know that the more plainly God is made known to us, the more grievously we sin when we turn aside from His true worship and service; for He has omitted nothing in His word which is necessary in order to worship Him acceptably. Since, then, we have before our eyes the rule of a godly life, except we follow it this reproof belongs to us, that God has set before our eyes His statutes (Jer. 44:9-10).<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Vol. IV, 334.

<sup>22</sup> Vol. IV, 312.

<sup>23</sup> Vol. IV, 536.