

Sympathy for the Devil

By Rich Lusk

Reformed catholicity is a matter of demeanor, not just doctrine. In other words, Reformed catholics employ a hermeneutic of love, rather than a hermeneutic of suspicion, towards their fellow Christians. Love believes all things, love hopes all things. Love puts the best possible interpretation on another's language. Love *wants* to find another baptized person to be orthodox, and will exercise a holy reluctance in making accusations of heresy. Love listens. Love makes careful distinctions, and patiently looks for nuance and qualifications. Love is slow to make charges and quick to overlook imperfections.

But the Reformed world seems sadly lacking in this sort of love. This, in part, is why so much contemporary Reformed theological discussion — if it can even be called discussion — is extremely frustrating. For example, consider Ligon Duncan's recent article, "True Communion with Christ in the Lord's Supper: Calvin, Westminster and the Nature of Christ's Sacramental Presence," in *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century*, volume 2, 429-475.

I disagree with the minimalist position Duncan takes on the "real presence" of Christ in the sacraments on both exegetical and historical grounds. But that's beside the point here. I know many honorable and reasonable men have held Duncan's view on this matter. As one who has spent a great deal of time working through Reformed sacramental theology, I know these matters are complex, the evidence has numerous strata to dig through, and it's possible for honest scholars to come to different conclusions. But at the very least

we owe one another a careful and sympathetic hearing. We should deal with one another's arguments in detailed fashion, rather than waving a hand and calling other scholars derogatory names.

On page 435, Duncan says,

"Keith Mathison's Given For You: Reclaiming Christ's Doctrine of the Lord's Supper (Phillipsburg: P& R, 2002) is an example of this currently prevailing [mistaken] tendency in Reformed literature on the Supper. However, Mathison's tone and treatment of the subject are significantly different from the works I mention in footnotes below. His work, though I take issue with it at numerous points, is both substantial and pious, and thus deserves sympathetic interaction in a way that much of the material I will cite herein as examples of current mistakes does not."

Personally, I love Mathison's book on the Lord's Supper. I think it's an excellent piece of scholarship and models Reformed thought at its best. I think Mathison accurately captures both Calvin's doctrine of the mystical, real presence, as well as the way later Reformed theologians departed from it. I cannot recommend the book highly enough (and, frankly, I don't think Duncan comes close to refuting its basic thesis). I agree with Duncan that Mathison's masterpiece should be read carefully and engaged sympathetically. Those who disagree will find in Mathison a formidable discussion partner.

However, note that Duncan says the works he will cite subsequently to his mention of Mathison's book are not worthy "of sympathetic interaction." Who does Duncan go on cite? Joel Garver, Mark Horne, Peter Leithart, and myself are among those mentioned. Apparently, unlike Mathison, we are impious and our work on Calvinian sacramental theology is insubstantial. Duncan barely even engages

the mass of evidence that we put together to support our interpretation of Calvin's high sacramental theology. He lists perceived errors, but never shows in detail how these are *our* errors or why our interpretation of the Reformed tradition is off-base. More than that, though, I must ask why Duncan thinks these students of Reformed theology are not worthy of respectful, loving interaction. Elsewhere, Duncan has referred to a similar group of Presbyterian pastors and scholars as "miscreants" (see his essay, "The Attractions of New Perspective(s) on Paul" available at http://www.covopc.org/Attractions_of_New_Perspective.html). Those of us on the receiving end of Duncan's attacks do not feel like he has adequately understood our views or accurately stated what we believe. But surely this is because he has determined from the outset to give us an unsympathetic reading. Why should anyone trust an interpretation that is so admittedly biased? Personally, I would like to know why Duncan thinks Joel Garver and Peter Leithart (to take two examples) are impious scholars. I'd like to know why he finds their theological work less than substantial. Surely it cannot be because these men present themselves in an arrogant, haughty fashion. Anyone who knows them would laugh at the charges. Surely it is not because they lack serious academic credentials. They both have doctorates from top flight institutions. I could further speculate as to Duncan's motivations, but love restrains me.

There is no problem with Reformed theologians disagreeing with one another on the finer points of doctrine. But when we do so, we should exercise love, patience, and humility, expecting and hoping

for the best out of our discussion partners. Who knows: if we do so, we just might learn something!