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### A Response to Smith's *Letters to a Young Calvinist*

In his book *Letters to a Young Calvinist*, James K. A. Smith compiles a set of fictional letters between himself and Jesse, who represents both a younger version of Smith himself and mixture of many Assemblies of God Christians at Smith's church in Los Angeles. Smith terms these Christians "new-Calvinists," as they are a part of resurgence in Calvinist thought that has grown popular over the last few years (ix). Prompted by this new-Calvinism, Smith's letters serve to encourage those pursuing Reformed truth by offering a general explanation of what it means to be a Calvinist, painting a picture of Calvinism that encompasses far more than the acronym TULIP. In fact, Smith argues that "Calvinism is not just a doctrine of individual salvation; it's an entire 'complex' or 'world- and life-view' that envisions God's interests more widely than the rescue of souls" (110).

Smith's letters can be categorized into four general sets. The first focuses on vices within the new-Calvinist paradigm, namely unwarranted pride. The second set explains God's grace and its impact on the way Calvinists view God's sovereignty. The third focuses on maintaining tradition, explaining the ramification of the Reformed church and the different uses for Creeds and Confessions. The final set asks, "What are we saved for?" and charges Calvinists to restore creation to its pre-fall form. The use of letters lends to a relaxed, personal tone without detracting from the importance of his points. This is how it should be, yes? Christianity should be easy to understand, but difficult to grasp and actualize. Such truth was surely reflected in Smith's book.

Additionally, throughout the entirety of his letter collection, Smith offers a compelling explanation of Reformed theology, Calvinism, and the purpose of life.

In regards to Smith's first point, the vices found among members of the new-Calvinist paradigm, hubris is most common. Smith admits to falling prey to pride's effects himself, as he became a Calvinist through reading books by Hodge, Warfield, and Shedd, which lead him to Schaeffer, Packer, and Piper, which lead to Calvin, Edwards, and Kuyper – all of the contemporary Calvinists pointed back to the originals! Because he was so well read, Smith began to feel as if he were smarter, more enlightened than his Arminian friends. Smith later recognized, though, that this pride is completely unjustified. One of the primary principles of Calvinism is the T in TULIP (total depravity). Humans, due to the pervasiveness of sin nature, cannot know God or even desire to know Him unless God, by His grace, enables us to pursue truth. Thus, Smith's fascination with Calvinism was a gift of God: "How strange it is that we can become prideful about gifts and can seize possession of what's given as if it was somehow our accomplishment" (12). Jesse seems to have developed hubris identical to Smith's, and Smith rebukes it both early on in his letters and again towards the end, when Jesse finds himself "too Reformed" for any church, as his own church does not teach perfect Calvinist doctrine (87). Smith points out Jesse's hypocrisy here: the Reformed tradition acknowledges sin nature and consequent perversion of most man-made things; thus, to be "too Reformed" to go to church is to condemn the sin nature found within the church, which is also found within oneself. Through addressing the issue of pride, Smith charges Calvinists to humbly pursue truth, remembering that the sincerity of and faithfulness in pursuit, both individually and corporately through a church, matters far more than any outward purity.

In his second point, Smith sums up Reformed theology in one word: “grace,” which “goes all the way down. To merely exist as a creature is to be dependent on the gift of existence granted by a gracious God” (14-15). To work our way from the most important (salvation) down to the most simple (breath) is to find God’s grace in all things. Similarly, sin nature also goes “all the way down,” turning all natural inclinations away from God. To adhere to the Reformed, Calvinist thought that salvation is entirely a work of grace, that humans cannot acknowledge Christ as Savior unless God enables them to, makes perfect sense – we cannot even keep our hearts beating on our own, so why would we be able to choose God on our own? Smith also addresses the primary issue Arminians have with this theology and, thus, makes a distinction between the “theocentric” Calvinism and “anthropocentric” Arminianism (23-24). Because Arminians focus primarily on man’s role in his own salvation (anthropocentrism), they find that the Reformed view of God contradicts God’s character. Why would a loving God only choose to save some people, therefore sending others to Hell by omission? Because Calvinists focus on God’s role in man’s salvation (theocentrism), they argue that, because of sin’s “all the way down” nature, hell is what we deserve. We don’t have the right to ask God why He would save some and not all because He is not required to save any of us. Thus, Smith explains that Calvinists generally have a higher view of God than Arminians, as sin’s radical nature requires the same of grace.

Thirdly, Smith gives a developmental history of the Reformed church, which was truly the original church. When Martin Luther proposed in 95 Theses in 1517, he was calling for the Catholic Church to return to what was Biblical and what was Augustinian. When the Catholic Church refused, the Lutheran Church began in Germany, the Anglican in England, the Dutch Reformed in the Netherlands, and the Presbyterian in Scotland. The European churches (which

Smith terms “continental”), were led by the Lutheran Augsburg Confession, the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, and the Canons of Dort while the English and Scottish churches (which Smith terms “Anglo”) adhered to the 39 Articles, the Westminster Confession of Faith, and the Westminster Long and Short Catechisms. The Reformed Church does not attribute the same authority to these documents as to Scripture; rather, Creeds and Confessions are means of summarizing the gospel, of reminding us what it means to be a Christian. Creeds and Confessions are an important aspect of the Reformed faith, as they create ties between the past and the current Church. God’s work did not stop when Christ returned to Heaven, so, as long as it aligns with Scripture, tradition should not be disregarded.

Smith’s fourth and final point explains the ultimate purpose of life: “to honor God by enjoying him forever” (118). Here, Smith quotes John Piper, who is modifying the answer to the Westminster Shorter Catechism’s first question. Smith argues that, because Creation was inherently good prior to the fall, Christians should work alongside God to restore Creation to its purest, original form. We aren’t saved simply for the sake of being saved; rather, we are saved to be “God’s ambassadors in and for creation, God’s emissaries and vice-regents charged with the task of ‘ruling’ – tending and governing creation – which is why the biblical narrative ends, in the book of Revelation, with humanity ruling alongside Christ” (108). A Calvinist believes that everybody, not just the clergy, has a God-given calling; the array of calling is so diverse, but each seeks to honor Christ through enjoying His creation and restoring it to perfection – this, not TULIP or election or predestination, is the primary focus of Calvinism!

Having come to faith in an Evangelical Presbyterian Church, I found Smith’s book entirely refreshing. The ideologies behind Reformed and covenant theologies are not new to me, though associated terms are. For example, I believe in every aspect of TULIP (total depravity,

unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints), but I had never heard of the acronym prior to reading Smith's introduction. Having now read *Letter to a Young Calvinist* in its entirety twice, I have a firmer intellectual grasp on my faith and renewed confidence in my ability to eloquently and accurately explain it to others.

Ultimately, Smith communicates four main points in his letters: religious pride is unwarranted; God's grace encompasses all aspects of life; traditions of the Reformed faith should be honored, though not to the extent that the Bible is; and a Calvinist experiences bits of Heaven here on earth, working to restore the Kingdom of God here and now. Smith's use of letters enables readers to genuinely relate to Jesse, making *Letters to a Young Calvinist* a compelling, worthwhile read for anyone interested in Reformed, Calvinist theology.

### Work Cited

Smith, James K. A. *Letters to a Young Calvinist: An Invitation to the Reformed Tradition*. Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2010. Print.