



The Eight Pillars of Reformed Methodist Theology

by

Rev. Roderick O. Ford, Esq.

Upon the death of my dear friend, mentor, and academic advisor, the Reverend Dr. Kenneth Talbot,¹ I am reminded of what drew us together back in 2019 in the first place: life in Jesus Christ. During calendar years 2020 and 2021, thanks to the COVID restrictions which opened up services to the Zoom platform, Dr. Talbot was a frequent visitor at my church in Gainesville, Mount Olive A.M.E.

At that time, Dr. Talbot and I had commenced very interesting discussions regarding the life and work of George Whitefield, John Wesley, and the group of Anglican clergy who founded the Methodist movement at Oxford University during the 18th century. I had read Calvin's four-volume *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and had come to appreciate his genius, but I honestly had no idea that the Reformed theologians still held Arminians such as John Wesley and Richard Baxter—two men whose voluminous writings I had also read and greatly admired—in such low stature.

I do not consider myself to be an Arminian or a Calvinist. Instead, I am, like both Luther and Calvin, an “Augustinian” theologian.² As an Augustinian theologian, I can find common ground between Lutheranism, Calvinism, and Arminian-Wesleyanism. As a church historian, I can also trace their historical roots to the Church of England, and to Article 17 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion. Indeed, for it was through my dialectical debates with Dr. Talbot in 2019 that I decided to embark upon postdoctoral work at the Whitefield Theological Seminary, namely, *Practical Problems in Law and Ministry: Puritanism and the Presbyterian Enlightenment, or The Religion of Nature as the Foundation of the United States Constitution*. This dissertation sets forth what I have called “Reformed Methodist Theology” or “Oxford Methodism.”

Below, I have provided a quick outline of the eight pillars of Reformed Methodist Theology.

¹ Dr. Kenneth Talbot (1954 – 2022), President of Whitefield College and Theological Seminary and Senior Pastor of the Christ Presbyterian Church in Lakeland, Florida, passed away today on August 18, 2022.

² I lean more towards the presbyterian from of church government. To that degree, I will accept the title “neo-orthodox Calvinist.”

AUGUSTINIANISM

I. Reformed Methodist Theology (RMT) holds that orthodox Methodism originated in the 17th-Century nonconformists Puritan Movement and its focus was ordered around purifying the Church of England.³ Reformed Methodist Theology, or Oxford Methodism, is neo-orthodox Calvinism that is based on an Augustinian soteriological view of justification and predestination.

- The Methodism which originated at Oxford University during the 18th century was a “second” generation movement which had many similarities to the theological ideas of a group of 17th-century Puritans who were called “New Methodists.” Both groups were proponents of the doctrine of “general atonement,” which was certainly a deviation from the orthodox Calvinism of Theodore Beza and other close associates of Calvin.
- The New Methodists’ spiritual leader was the Reverend Richard Baxter (1615-1691), whose works *Methodus Theologiae Christianae* (London, 1681) and the *Christian Directory* (1673) exemplified this New Methodism. Baxter’s New Methodism was not Arminianism but rather it was a sort of quasi-Calvinism or a neo-orthodox Calvinism. Theologically, Baxter’s New Methodism rejected limited atonement, irresistible grace, and doctrine of perseverance of the saints.⁴ Baxter’s theological views were similar to theological views that later adopted by Rev. John Wesley (1703 – 1791),⁵ who openly embraced the Arminian doctrine.⁶
- According to Church historian Tim Cooper, the English Calvinists (i.e., Puritans) experienced a growing rift between two burgeoning groups: the conservative

³ See, e.g., C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), p. 78 (“Methodism was originally a part of the Puritan movement within the Anglican Church...”) and Goldwin Smith, *A History of England* (New York, N.Y.: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1957), p. 455 (Methodism “united with the great thrusts of Puritanism to produce the important ‘Nonconformist conscience.’”).

⁴ Tim Cooper, “John Own, Richard Baxter and the Battle for Calvin in the Later Seventeenth-Century England,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology*, 20.4 (2016): 63-78. Tim Cooper, John Owen, *Richard Baxter and the Formation of Nonconformity* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Co., 2011).

⁵ See, e.g., Joseph W. Cunningham, “‘Justification by Faith’ Richard Baxter’s Influence Upon John Wesley,” *The Asbury Journal* 64/ 1:55-66 (2009). From a soteriological viewpoint, the “Methodism” of the Rev. John Wesley (1703 – 1791) was the same as the “New Methodism” of the Rev. Richard Baxter (1615 – 1691). However, historically, Wesleyan Methodism’s focus on social holiness, the amelioration of social injustices, and the melioration of oppressed groups throughout the British empire rendered it to be somewhat distinct from Baxter’s Puritanism.

⁶ *Ibid.* (Oxford Methodism seeks to align the soteriological doctrines of Baxter and Wesley to the those of Augustine of Hippo, who is the spiritual father of both Luther and Calvin.)

Calvinists who were led by John Owen and the liberal Calvinists who were led by Richard Baxter.⁷

- According to church historian Tim Cooper's theory, Baxter's group became the most predominant group of Calvinists in England, as the conservative genre of orthodox Reformed Theology lost traction in England during the latter half of the 1600s.⁸
- Oxford Methodism considers Augustine of Hippo's soteriological perspective on predestination to be most authoritative and persuasive.⁹ Richard Baxter's views on predestination appear to be similar to Augustine's.
- The difficulty arises from the fact that John Calvin considered himself to be "Augustinian" and believed that his soteriological views were no different than Augustine's.¹⁰ If this is true, then Oxford Methodism is Calvinism; but if this is not quite true, then Oxford Methodism is also not quite Calvinism.¹¹
- I surmise that the later is closer to the truth, and that Augustinian soteriology does not go so far as to endorse limited atonement, double predestination, and the like, because Augustine of Hippo himself believed that *all men are born in a reprobate state of sin* but that *they need not necessarily remain in that state*.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Augustine of Hippo held generally in *The City of God* that "all" men were born in a state of sin, but "need not remain" in that state. "For in each individual," wrote Augustine, "as I have already said, there is first of all that which is reprobate, that from which we must begin, but in which we **need not necessarily remain**. Not, indeed, that every wicked man shall be good, but that no one will be good who was not first of all wicked; but the sooner any one becomes a good man, the more speedily does he receive this title, and abolish the old name in the new." *The City of God* (New York, N.Y.: The Modern Library, 1950), pp. 478-479. Also, Augustine's theological statement "**nor did His foreknowledge compel any one to sin...** But God preferred to **leave this in their power**, and thus to show both what evil could be wrought by their pride, and what good by His grace," completely contradicts the orthodox Calvinist doctrine of "limited atonement." Ibid., pp. 476-477. (NOTE: Oxford Methodism seeks to align the soteriological doctrines of Baxter and Wesley to the those of Augustine of Hippo, who is the spiritual father of both Luther and Calvin.)

¹⁰ T.H.L. Parker, *John Calvin: A Biography*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press (2006).

¹¹ (NOTE: this is where Dr. Talbot and I left the discussion, just before he fell ill and passed away on August 18, 2022. Dr. Talbot was of the view the Calvin's views were aligned with those of Augustine's but, for the very reasons which I have cited in footnote 7, I was never fully convinced. In *On Grace and Free Will and The City of God*, Augustine never asserted that some men were predestined to eternal damnation and thus unable to receive Christ's salvation. Augustine's predestination is more subtle, multidimensional, and just that some extreme forms of Calvinism. Oxford Methodism is thus Augustinianism).

- Augustine of Hippo also believed that even though the foreknowledge of God includes the knowledge of who will be saved and who will be lost, that His foreknowledge does *not compel men to sin* or to remain as reprobates.
- Augustine of Hippo believed the human beings had *a voluntary will* sufficient seek God’s divine grace. Oxford Methodism thus holds that Augustine’s position was closer to the “New Methodist” position of Richard Baxter. Oxford Methodism also holds that John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in every other respect, is most authoritative and persuasive.
- Therefore, the need to reconcile both the Augustinian view of predestination and the orthodox Calvinist view of predestination has resulted in a sort of theological settlement called “Reformed Methodist Theology.”
- Oxford Methodism holds that Article 17 of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion accurately reflects the Augustinian theological view of predestination as well as that of Reformed Methodist Theology.
- Oxford Methodism seeks to reconcile both orthodox Calvinists and orthodox Arminians to a common “Augustinian” soteriological view of justification and predestination.

THE TWO TABLES

II. Reformed Methodist Theology (RMT), or Oxford Methodism, upholds the “Two Tables” Theory of Civil Government. Within that framework, RMT embraces several ecclesiological perspectives, including the episcopacy of the Anglican Church Communion; the congregational structures of Baptists, Independents, and Congregationalists; and the Presbyterian form of ecclesiastical governance. RMT holds all religious denominations in common under a “broad church” doctrine, whereby freedom of religious practice and liberty of conscience are constitutionally guaranteed through fundamental law, but whereby the sovereignty and providence of the God of Nature, Reason, and Justice (i.e., the American Declaration of Independence) are acknowledged as the *supreme civil religion* for the body politic.

- In colonial British North America, neo-orthodox Calvinism was able to add a political dimension to its covenant theology.
- At the first, its leading proponent was the Reverend Roger Williams (1603 – 1683), founder of the colony of Rhode Island and of the first Baptist Church in North America.

- Rev. William’s work, *The Bloody Tenet for the Cause of Conscience* (1644) laid the political groundwork for a civil polity which guarantees the fundamental human right to civil justice, liberty of conscience, and the freedom of religion. Rev. Williams devised a “Two Tables” theory of civil government.
- Under the “First Table,” only the individual, or groups of like-minded, private individuals (i.e., churches) may determine their own religious beliefs, religious methodologies, and liturgical practices. From the perspective of Oxford Methodism, this creates a “broad-based,” ecumenical Christian churches. Here, the body of Christ is truly “catholic” and diverse. And yet, in order for these diverse churches to vindicate the Christian faith and to bring justice to bear upon the civil society, they must develop an ecumenical, legal framework whereby the collective voice of Christ may be communicated to the civil magistrates, who govern the “Second Table.”
- Under the “Second Table,” the civil magistrates are called to mete out civil justice. From the perspective of Oxford Methodism, the very act of meting out civil justice is a religious action; it is a commandment of the Noahic “Covenant of Nature” to “do justice and judgment” (Genesis 18: 18-19; Leviticus 19: 17-18). Rev. Williams adopted the viewpoints of both the Apostles Peter and Paul who described the civil magistrate as a vicegerent of God. Reformed Methodist Theology holds the same position.

THE COVENANT OF NATURE

III. Reformed Methodist Theology, or Oxford Methodism, holds that the “Second Table,” which is the domain of the civil magistrates, is limited by a divine “Covenant of Nature,” as reflected in the American Declaration of Independence. This divine “Covenant of Nature” is the law of reason, which consists of the sum of all principles and natural laws that hold the universe together and which all human laws are subordinated. The golden rule is a law of reason and a law of nature. Oxford Methodism holds that no human law may violate the law of reason or the law of nature; and such laws should be deemed voidable or void. Furthermore, the Decalogue and the Christian religion are republications of these laws of reason and laws of nature.

- The Noahic “Covenant of Nature” is a political theory developed by the 17th-century Puritans to understand the nature of God’s sovereignty and providence.
- Under this Covenant, all human laws and government on earth are subordinate to certain principles of natural law or the laws of Nature.
- The unwritten constitution of England evolved over several centuries under this theory of God’s sovereignty over nature and human laws. The Church of England

adopted this viewpoint as per John of Salibury's *Policraticus* (1159) and Dr. Richard Hooker's *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1594).

- The American Declaration of Independence (1776) manifests the express principles of this Noahic dominion covenant of nature.
- Oxford Methodism holds that the Christian religion is inherently manifest within secular human laws through the laws of reason and nature (i.e., equity jurisprudence and fundamental law)

SUBORDINATION OF CIVIL GOVERNMENT TO DIVINE PROVIDENCE

IV. Reformed Methodist Theology, or Oxford Methodism, holds that the “Covenant of Nature” which God gave to Adam, Noah, and their posterity, requires all human laws and governments be established upon the foundation of the law of General Equity¹²

- The Covenant of Nature has been made manifest to all peoples and nations upon the earth, and it requires all human laws and governments to implement the principles of general equity.
- The Covenant of Nature is the laws of Nature, natural law, or natural moral law.
- The American Declaration of Independence (1776) is an exemplification of the Covenant of Nature.¹³

¹² This is the standard tenet of the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647).

¹³ The American *Declaration of Independence* (1776) reflects the theology of the Noahic “Covenant of Nature” which authorizes all nations on earth to establish sovereign governments on the basis of natural law and natural justice, to wit:

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which *the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them*, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are *Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness*.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, —That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government.... And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on *the protection of divine Providence*, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

GENERAL EQUITY

V. Reformed Methodist Theology, or Oxford Methodism, holds that the laws of General Equity were made manifest to Noah and to all of his posterity (i.e., to all peoples and nations upon the earth).

- The laws of general equity have not been hidden from mankind nor revealed only to a limited group.
- The laws of general equity have been revealed to all peoples and nations of the world.
- These laws of general equity are also called the laws of Nature, natural law, and the law of reason.
- Aristotle of the ancient Greeks expounded upon the definition of general equity.
- Cicero of the ancient Romans expounded upon the definition of general equity, moral law, and justice
- The Apostle Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* describes "nature" in the same manner as the ancient Greeks and Romans. And it would through Paul's letters that pagan Greco-Roman natural law became the established Christian law of the church.
- General equity is the "law of God."¹⁴
- General equity is the "law of Christ."¹⁵
- General equity has been called by different names by different peoples and nations around the world, such as the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, etc.; but it means the same thing: "justice, and judgment, and equity." Proverbs 1:3.
- Lawyer and Reformed theologian John Calvin (1509 - 1564) fully endorsed the view that all civil governments and human laws must implement "general equity" as its fundamental law.
- The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647) holds "general equity" to be the fundamental basis for all civil laws.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Genesis 18: 18-19; Leviticus 19: 17-18; Proverbs 1:3.

¹⁵ The Law of Christ is to "love ye one another" (John 15:12); to do justice and judgement (Genesis 18:18-19; Proverbs 21: 1-3); to judge not according to appearance but to judge righteous judgments (John 7:24); and to do justice, judgment, and equity (Proverbs 1:2-3).

- Therefore, Oxford Methodism holds that “general equity” is mandated in the Noahic “Covenant of Nature” and, as such, it is the principal foundation of Anglo-American constitutional law and jurisprudence.
- Oxford Methodism holds that Greco-Roman natural law (i.e., general equity) is in essence a form of “Christian” jurisprudence. (Of course, Christ fulfills this law of nature, as Christianity is made part and parcel of secular legal systems through the implementation of general equity.)
- Oxford Methodism also holds that within Anglo-American jurisprudence, the Christian religion has been thoroughly sewn into secular jurisprudence through the various doctrines of equity, such as equitable remedies; equitable principles that govern the various rules of procedure; and constitutional doctrines such as substantive and procedural due process of law.

SACRED HISTORY OF THE GENTILES

VI. Reformed Methodist Theology, or Oxford Methodism, holds that the rise and fall of the Greek and Roman empires exemplify the sacred histories of all the Gentiles

- God’s “Covenant of Nature” has been bestowed upon all peoples and nations (i.e., the Gentiles). It is the foundation of political science, political theory, and constitutional law. This is the divine law which God has given to the Gentiles.
- The *Book of Job* is clear evidence that the history of the Gentiles is also Sacred History.¹⁶
- Therefore, God is concerned with the political and secular affairs of all nations, not just the Jewish nation or Christian nations. God has a unilateral covenant with all nations of the earth, and it is called the “Covenant of Nature.”
- Edward Gibbons’ *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and St. Augustine’s *The City of God* (which addresses the same subject) are exemplifications of human pontifications and extrapolations of the “Covenant of Nature.”
- The law whereby all nations must govern is that of general equity, and general equity is the law of God (or the law of Christ) and reflects the “Covenant of Nature.”
- The American Declaration of Independence (1776) is fundamental law that represents this Noahic “Covenant of Nature.”

¹⁶ Job was not a Hebrew, not did he live within the Israelite nation.

- Oxford Methodism holds that all nations of the world, whether nominally Christian or not, are therefore subordinated to the “Covenant of Nature.”¹⁷

PROPHETIC HISTORY OF THE KINGDOM OF ENGLAND

VII. Reformed Methodist Theology, or Oxford Methodism, holds that the kingdom of England emerged from the Roman Empire as a Christian nation and that, through the Church of England, the Christian religion became the foundation of England’s common law, constitutional law, equity jurisprudence, and general jurisprudence.

- For nearly a thousand years, the Sacred Scriptures were treated as “law” in England. See, e.g., Richard Hooker’s *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1594).
- The Christian religion was sewn into the English Common Law over the course of several centuries.
- Thomas Wood’s *Institutes of the Laws of England* (1720) plainly demonstrate that the revealed religion of Christianity attained the status of “law” in both England and Great Britain.
- William Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765) plainly demonstrate that the revealed religion of Christianity attained the status of “law” in both England and Great Britain.
- England’s common law and law of equity were transported intact to the colonies of British North America. These laws are Christian in both their origin and essence. Although conditions in North America mandated that these laws evolve, their Christian nature and objectives have not been modified.
- Oxford Methodism holds that the Christian religion is deeply rooted in Anglo-American law and jurisprudence. For this reason, Oxford Methodism is committed to promoting the Christian practice of law and the support and professional development of Christian law students, lawyers, judges, theologians, and pastors.

¹⁷ For Christian theologians and pastors this idea is easy enough, but for the American legal profession this can be a difficult pill to swallow. Here Oxford Methodism aims at its most important work.

CONSTITUTIONAL STATUS OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION

VIII. Reformed Methodist Theology, or Oxford Methodism, holds that the Christian Church is historical, constitutional, and superior in rank to every other branch of the civil government.

- Finally, Oxford Methodism holds that, within the West (including Europe, England and the United States) the Christian Church, as an institution, is superior in rank to every other branch of the civil government. In Africa, where the Christian religion has taken root, and particularly in those countries where British colonialism was most prevalent, the tendency is view the Christian Church as superior in rank to the civil government.
- However, although the Christian Church is *superior in rank* and controls the “First Table,” it does not have the authority to exercise the civil sword (i.e., the “Second Table”), but instead the churches’ roles the civil government are limited to one that is “prophetic” in nature; that is to say, churches must serve in an “advisory” capacity that forewarns civil magistrates against permitting evils to fester or failing to mete out natural justice which is true justice.
- In the United States, the First Amendment permits Christian churches to fulfill their “prophetic” missions which includes chastising the civil government or civil magistrates whenever they violate the natural moral laws of God (e.g., the manner in which King George III was “chastised” for violating the natural moral laws of God in the American Declaration of Independence (1776).)
- Oxford Methodism is organized around revitalizing and nourishing the Christian character of Anglo-American constitutional law and jurisprudence.
- Oxford Methodism is also committed to promoting the Christian practice of law and the support and professional development of Christian law students, lawyers, judges, theologians, and pastors. Oxford Methodism holds that the Christian application of practical law and jurisprudence is absolutely essential to the health and prosperity of the body politic.

August 18, 2022

Rev. Roderick O. Ford
Mt. Olive AME Church
Gainesville, Florida