

THE SCHOLASTIC AWARD 2024

THE CENTER FOR CLASSICAL THEOLOGY

The Center for Classical Theology¹ exists to contemplate God and all things in relation to God by listening with humility to his Word with the wisdom of the Great Tradition. The purpose of CCT is to create a renewed vision for systematic theology today in the spirit of faith seeking understanding. CCT hosts an annual lectureship by a theologian, each of which is published in the New Studies in Classical Theology series (Crossway).

CCT summons the next generation of theologians to exemplify a biblical reasoning, rational contemplation, and reformed catholicity that directs systematic theology to its spiritual end and most blessed hope: beholding the beauty of the Lord. To that end, CCT offers The Scholastic Award. In the spirit of the Protestant Scholastics, candidates for the Scholastic Award retrieve the format of the *Summa Theologiae* by Thomas Aquinas and submit a disputed theological question. That question is followed by a reply designed “to lead listeners into the truth they strive to understand” (Aquinas). An excellent reply will exhibit precision to advance theological clarity, fidelity, and beauty. The winner’s scholastic article is peer reviewed by other theologians.

This year’s recipient of the Scholastic Award is Dr. Ty Kieser (PhD, Wheaton College), Assistant Professor of Theology at Criswell College.

- *Matthew Barrett, Director of the Center for Classical Theology*
- *Timothy Gatewood, Associate Director of the Center for Classical Theology*



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ARTICLE: WHETHER REFORMED CHRISTOLOGY OUGHT TO BE
DISTINGUISHED AND DIFFERENTIATED FROM CATHOLIC
CHRISTOLOGY?

By Ty Kieser¹

Objection 1: Since it is improper to differentiate a position from a more fundamental source of that position, it is improper to differentiate Reformed Christology from Catholic Christology, which is the fundamental source for Reformed Christology. Consider, for example, the explicit dependence upon theologians central to the Catholic tradition (such as John of Damascus, Thomas Aquinas, and John Duns Scotus) within the christologies of Peter Martyr Vermigli, John Owen, and Francis Turretin. Therefore, at most, one can only distinguish Reformed Christology from Catholic Christology as a species from a genus—the way we can distinguish Calvin's view of predestination from Augustine's. However, this mode of distinguishing is more properly called a particularization and, therefore, should not differentiate the two positions any more than “big cat” (*Panthera*) ought to be differentiated from “lion” (*Panthera leo*).

Objection 2: It would seem that if Reformed Christology is to be distinguished from another tradition it would be by virtue of the *extra Calvinisticum*—the doctrine that the Son of God, according to his divinity, exists beyond his human flesh. However, as David Willis rightly argues, the *extra* is better understood as the *extra Catholicum* since it is affirmed throughout history (*Calvin's Catholic Christology*, 153). Therefore, the *extra* doesn't differentiate Reformed Christology from Catholic Christology, rather it reinforces their commonality.

Objection 3: One potential distinguishing feature of Reformed Christology is the threefold office of Christ as prophet, priest, and king. However, this affirmation is present in the medieval tradition (including Thomas Aquinas; ST, III, Q. 31, A. 2) and is followed in contemporary Roman Catholicism (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1546). Further, this threefold distinction occurs infrequently even in Calvin's theology (Parker, “Calvin's Commentary on Hebrews,” 140), missing in his 1536 edition of the *Institutes*. Therefore, this feature does not distinguish Reformed Christology from Catholic Christology, nor does it present Reformed Christology as a unified whole.

Sed Contra: As Herman Bavinck says (addressing Lutheran, Anabaptist, and Catholic christologies), “Reformed theology was able, better than any other [tradition], to maintain in addition to Christ's deity also his true and genuine humanity” (*Reformed Dogmatics*, III:310).

¹ Ty Kieser (PhD, Wheaton College) is Assistant Professor of Theology at Criswell College.

Answer: While Reformed Christology is (in my view) more proximate to Catholic Christology than any other Protestant tradition, Reformed Christology is rightly distinguished from Catholic Christology, especially insofar as it seeks to affirm and emphasize the integrity of Christ's human nature and human capacities in the single mediator. We might enumerate the distinctive commitments and emphases of Reformed Christology accordingly: (1) the distinct and genuine human nature of Christ (i.e., the *extra Calvinisticum*). (2) The distinct and genuine human capacities of Christ (i.e., Christ is a pilgrim or wayfarer [*viator*] prior to the resurrection). (3) The singularity of Christ the covenantal mediator in two distinct natures (i.e., the one person Christ mediates according to both natures).

The first distinguishing point is fundamentally used to distinguish Reformed Christology from Lutheranism.

The second point, Christ's distinct and genuine human capacities, distinguishes Reformed Christology from Catholic Christology insofar as Reformed Christology claims (with broad consensus) that Christ is a pilgrim or wayfarer [*viator*] prior to the resurrection (see Owen, *Christologia*, 1:93; Turretin, *Institutes*, II:13.xiii.12; Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, III:312; Berkouwer, *The Person of Christ*, 221). This frequently implies that Jesus does not possess maximal (or infinite) knowledge according to his human nature and it implies a denial of Christ's beatific vision while on Earth. This Reformed position is contrary to many medieval, Reformation-era, and contemporary Catholic christologies (Aquinas, *ST III*, Q.15, A.10; Eck, "Refutation of the Articles of Zwingli," 71; White, *Incarnate Lord*, 255), which claim that Christ experienced the beatific vision throughout his entire life (including on the cross) and, consequently, it is commonly said that his humanity possesses maximal human knowledge (e.g., Aquinas even calls this conclusion "universally held" [QDV, q.8 a.4 resp]). Reformed Christology emphasizes that Christ exercised genuine human faith (Hb 12:2), finite knowledge (Lk 2:52; Mt 24:36), and sympathizing experiences of grief and fear (Jn 11:35; Hb 2:17–18; 4:14–16).

The third point expounds the significance of Christ's distinct natures and capacities by affirming Jesus' covenantal mediation in both natures. Both historic and contemporary Catholics suggest that Christ only mediates in his human nature (e.g., Daley "A Humble Mediator;" Augustine, *City of God*, 9.15, 378; Aquinas, *ST III*, Q.26, A.1–2). Yet, in contrast, Calvin, Vermigli, and a Reformed synod at Pińczów claim that Christ mediates in both natures (see Tylenda, "Christ the Mediator: Calvin Versus Stancaró;" Vermigli, PML, 5:142–54; Heppel, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 410–87). This allows Reformed Christology to better connect the ontology of Christ with his covenantal work as testified to in the narrative of Scripture (Oberman, "The 'Extra' Dimension in the Theology of Calvin," 60).

Summarily, Reformed Christology is non-trivially distinct from Catholic Christology on multiple points and, therefore, ought to be differentiated from it.

Response to Objection 1: Reformed Christology is not to be understood as distinct from “catholic” (i.e., historic orthodox and conciliar) Christology since it indeed depends upon patristic and medieval accounts but remains distinct from both historic and contemporary Roman Catholic Christology. Because there is generic similarity and proximity, Reformed Christology and Catholic Christology should be viewed as related yet different species within the same genus—analogue to lions (*Panthera leo*) and tigers (*Panthera tigris*). So, for example, Reformed Christology can be Thomistic in multiple relevant senses, but not in each of the ways that contemporary Catholic Christology could be.

Response to Objection 2: The *extra Calvinisticum* differentiates Reformed Christology fundamentally from Lutheranism rather than Catholic Christology. Even so, the Reformed insistence upon the finite humanity of Christ even after the ascension contributes to Reformed distinctives on the intercession of Christ (contra the intercession of Saints) and Lord’s Supper (contra transubstantiation) (see Owen, *WJO*, 21:425).

Response Objection 3: The mediatorial distinction between Catholic and Reformed christologies is not the offices of Christ’s mediation, but the nature of Christ’s mediation (i.e., that he executes his mediatorial works in both natures, rather than in his human nature alone). However, this qualification in Calvin is a helpful reminder that while Reformed Christology does comprise a distinct group with distinct commitments and emphases, it is not monochromatic and possesses distinct “breeds” within the species—as there is diversity within Catholic Christology (e.g., Thomas and Scotus) and Lutheran christologies (e.g., Brenz and Chemnitz).