THE ACADEMIZATION OF REFORMATION TEACHING IN JOHANN HEINRICH ALSTED (1588–1638)

Byung Soo Han

Based on his survey of visitation records, Gerald Strauss made a provocative argument that the reformers just superficially realized their aims and failed to indoctrinate the common people with Protestant beliefs.1 This argument prompted a fierce debate and further research into the spiritual and pedagogical effect of the Reformation on the popular religious culture. The research has largely been defensive of a successful reformation.2 By examining the theological education of the Reformed clergy in Basel of the first century after the Reformation, Amy Nelson Burnett showed that the Protestant church leaders, who played a crucial role in teaching the Reformation and were responsible for the solidification of confessional identity, were well trained in Reformation theology and successfully carried out their pedagogical task of transmitting the central beliefs of the Protestant Reformation to the next generation.3 She viewed the success of

---


the Reformation as a composite result of education for the ministry, the evolution of preaching, and the practice of pastoral care. She pointed out that “the development of the institutional structure and curriculum of the theology faculty parallels the developments in personnel.”

With this educational continuity of reformational doctrine in mind, Richard A. Muller characterizes the orthodox or scholastic era of the first two centuries following the Reformation as “the creation of institutional theology, confessionally in continuity with the Reformation and doctrinally, in the sense of the larger system of doctrine, in continuity with the great tradition of the church.” The theology of the period, he continues, was not developed in isolation from the Protestant confessions and the ongoing Western intellectual and academic tradition but “a product both of the confessional solidification and of the institutionalized academic culture of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.” For the sake of both positive teaching and polemical defense, the theology ought to have been associated with the school method or scholasticism that was being gradually developed in European gymnasia, academies, and universities from the twelfth to the seventeenth century and was characterized “by a thorough use and technical mastery of the tools of linguistic, philosophical, logical, and traditional thought.” But this academization of Reformed orthodoxy should not be seen as a departure from Reformation theology.

As a blend of theological orthodoxy and methodological scholasticism and a quite complex phenomenon of the intellectual world of the period, the scholastic Reformed orthodoxy of the two centuries after Reformation is almost best illustrated by the most active encyclopedist of Herborn, Johann Heinrich Alsted (1588–1638), especially in his encyclopedic works,