

Grasping the mystery

by [John M. Mulder](#) in the [November 18, 1998](#) issue

By Jan Rohls. Translated by John Hoffmeyer, Reformed Confessions: Theology from Zurich to Barmen. (Westminster John Knox, 328 pp.)

Jan Rohls's first sentences capture the nature of Reformed confessionalism: "In Lutheranism, the process of confessional development came to a conclusion with the Formula of Concord (1577) and the Book of Concord (1580). On the Reformed side there is nothing that corresponds to this conclusion." Rohls's goal is to explicate how each of the "old Reformed" confessions of the 16th and 17th centuries handled basic doctrines of the faith. In successive chapters on each doctrine he explores the discussion of these theological statements.

Rohls, professor of theology at the University of Munich, succeeds in his careful and intricate explication of the texts of each confession (this in itself is a major challenge, since in many cases there are no "official" texts or translations accepted by all Reformed churches). If you want to know what the Reformers and Reformed Orthodoxy believed about Christology, the Trinity, justification, word and sacrament and the like, this work is the place to turn.

Do not, however, look to Rohls to provide insight into debates about the meanings of the various confessions. His is an exegesis of texts, not a history of interpretation. This comment is not a criticism; his focus on the texts themselves is the genius of the book.

Several questions emerge from his brilliant theological exposition. First, there is a fascinating contrapuntal theme in Reformed confessional writings. On the one hand, Reformed churches have no definitive creed, no consensus on which confessions are based; consequently, Reformed Christians keep writing theological analysis. On the other hand, there are remarkable continuities in the confessions--common affirmations that may not make Reformed Christians unique but that give their language of confession distinctive accents. Some still insist upon a precise, exact and particular statement of Reformed theology, and others see the tradition as so diverse as to be formless. Rohls suggests that this is a continuing conversation

within a family; the characters change, the terms of the conversation shift, but the family is still bound by ties of faith and allegiance.

Second, Rohls's focus on the "old Reformed confessions" of the 16th and 17th centuries is a refreshing reminder that neo-orthodoxy and other schools of thought have not obliterated the theological inheritance of Reformed Christians. Some aspects of the Westminster, Heidelberg or other early confessions may not be adequate for proclaiming the faith today. But the same critique can be leveled at Barmen and other 20th-century confessions. The older ones retain a beauty, majesty and rigor that reveal theological creativity and integrity.

Third, Rohls's book appears amidst a climate that disparages the very idea of confessions as alien to the contemporary quest for religious experience. Some people also reject confessions as needlessly constricting the boundaries of Christian faith and discipleship. Rohls is convinced that there will always be " creedless" Christians--the lay liberals and "Golden Rule Christians" we all know. But he is equally persuaded that within the Reformed tradition lies a basic spiritual impulse leading it to try to grasp, in words accessible and acceptable to the community of faith, the mystery of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. We Reformed Christians are a wordy bunch, sometimes given to excessive precision and order. But, in Calvinistic terms, God made us this way, and the way we are is part of our gift and God's gift of us to the Christian family.

There is only one serious flaw to this book; it has a pitifully sparse index, arranged only by subject. The confessions themselves do not even appear, and neither do the names of any of the theologians and important figures associated with them. Perhaps this problem can be addressed in a reprinting of the book. In any case, Rohls's work should be part of every Reformed pastor's and teacher's library, and it will become a staple of teaching and research in the Reformed tradition.