

SUMMARY OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE

A Systematic Guide to Reformed Christian Teaching

Ligature Edition

Louis Berkhof



Ligature

Hardcover ISBN: 9798872570806

Paperback ISBN: 9798872570981

Artwork and design by Ligature.

The original text of *Summary of Christian Doctrine*, first published in the United States in 1938, is in the public domain in the United States.

Ligature claims copyright only in its original publisher's preface, editorial method, indexes, references, biography, typography, artwork, and edition design.

Scripture quotations preserve the wording of Berkhof's text and the 1901 American Standard Version.

This edition preserves Berkhof's original text while correcting recorded typographical and Scripture-reference errors.

First Ligature edition, 2026.

ligaturepress.com

Printed in the United States of America.

Copyright © 2026 Ligature Press

CONTENTS

Publisher's Preface	1
Part I Introduction	3
I Religion	5
1. The Nature of Religion	5
2. The Seat of Religion	5
3. The Origin of Religion	6
II Revelation	9
1. Revelation in General	9
2. General Revelation	9
3. Special Revelation	10
III Scripture	15
1. Revelation and Scripture	15
2. Scripture Proof for the Inspiration of Scripture	15
3. The Nature of Inspiration	16
4. The Extent of Inspiration	16
5. The Perfections of Scripture	17
Part II The Doctrine of God and Creation	21
IV The Essential Nature of God	23
1. The Knowledge of God	23
2. The Knowledge of God as Known from Special Revelation	23
V The Names of God	27
1. The Old Testament Names of God	27
2. The New Testament Names of God	27
VI The Attributes of God	31
1. The Incommunicable Attributes	31
2. The Communicable Attributes	32
VII The Trinity	39
1. Statement of the Doctrine	39
2. Scripture Proof for the Trinity	39
3. The Father	40
4. The Son	40

5. The Holy Spirit	40
VIII The Divine Decrees	43
1. The Divine Decrees in General	43
2. Predestination	44
IX Creation	47
1. Creation in General	47
2. The Spiritual World	48
3. The Material World	49
X Providence	55
1. The Elements of Divine Providence	55
2. Misconceptions of Divine Providence	56
3. Extraordinary Providences or Miracles	56
Part III The Doctrine of Man in Relation to God	59
XI Man in His Original State	61
1. The Essential Elements of Human Nature	61
2. The Origin of the Soul in Each Individual	61
3. Man as the Image of God	62
4. Man in the Covenant of Works	63
XII Man in the State of Sin	67
1. The Origin of Sin	67
2. The Essential Nature of Sin	67
3. Sin in the Life of the Human Race	68
XIII Man in the Covenant of Grace	73
1. The Covenant of Redemption	73
2. The Covenant of Grace	74
Part IV The Doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ	81
XIV The Names and Nature of Christ	83
1. The Names of Christ	83
2. The Natures of Christ	83
XV The States of Christ	87
1. The State of Humiliation	87
2. The State of Exaltation	88
XVI The Offices of Christ	93

XVII The Atonement Through Christ	99
1. The Moving Cause and Necessity of the Atonement	99
2. The Nature of the Atonement	99
3. The Extent of the Atonement	100
Part V The Doctrine of the Application of the Work of Redemption	103
XVIII The Common Operation of the Holy Spirit: Common Grace	105
1. Nature of Common Grace	105
2. Means of Common Grace	105
3. The Effects of Common Grace	106
XIX Calling and Regeneration	109
1. Calling	109
2. Regeneration	110
XX Conversion: Repentance and Faith	115
1. Conversion in General	115
2. Repentance, the Negative Element of Conversion	115
3. Faith, the Positive Element of Conversion	116
XXI Justification	121
1. The Nature and Elements of Justification	121
2. The Time of Justification	121
3. Objections to the Doctrine of Justification	122
XXII Sanctification and Perseverance	125
1. Nature and Characteristics of Sanctification	125
2. The Imperfect Character of Sanctification in This Life	125
3. Sanctification and Good Works	126
4. Perseverance of the Saints	126
Part VI The Doctrine of the Church and the Means of Grace	131
XXIII Nature of the Church	133
1. General Description of The Church	133
2. The Attributes and Marks of The Church	135
XXIV The Government and Power of the Church	141
1. The Officers of The Church	141
2. The Ecclesiastical Assemblies	143
3. The Power of the Church	144

XXV The Word of God and the Sacraments in General	149
1. The Word of God	149
2. The Sacraments in General	150
XXVI Christian Baptism	155
1. The Proper Mode of Baptism	155
2. The Proper Subjects of Baptism	156
XXVII The Lord's Supper	161
1. The Lord's Supper as Sign and Seal	161
2. The Presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper	161
3. The Persons for Whom the Lord's Supper was Instituted	162
Part VII The Doctrine of the Last Things	165
XXVIII Physical Death and the Intermediate State	167
1. Physical Death	167
2. The Intermediate State	167
XXIX The Second Coming of Christ	173
1. Great Events Preceding The Second Coming of Christ	173
2. The Second Coming Itself	174
3. The Question of the Millennium	174
XXX The Resurrection, the Last Judgment and the Final State	179
1. The Resurrection	179
2. The Last Judgment	179
3. The Final State	180
Scripture Index	185
General Index	205
References and Further Reading	207
Louis Berkhof	209

PUBLISHER'S PREFACE

Louis Berkhof (1873–1957) was a pastor, professor, seminary president, and one of the most widely read Reformed theologians of the twentieth century. His clear organization helped generations of ministers, teachers, and students see Christian doctrine as one connected body of teaching.

First published in 1938, *Summary of Christian Doctrine* distills Berkhof's classroom teaching into thirty short chapters. Its course moves from revelation and the doctrine of God through creation, humanity, Christ, salvation, the church, the sacraments, and the last things.

Ligature preserves Berkhof's seven parts, thirty chapters, Scripture passages, memory work, further-study questions, and chapter reviews. We corrected recorded transcription faults and clear printer errors without changing his argument.

This edition adds a detailed contents section, live indexes, references, and a sourced biography with a selected bibliography. These additions help readers follow the book and continue their study. They remain separate from Berkhof's original text.

—The Editors
Ligature Press

PART I INTRODUCTION

I RELIGION

I. THE NATURE OF RELIGION

The Bible informs us that man was created in the image of God. When he fell in sin, he did not entirely cease to be the image-bearer of the Most High. The seed of religion is still present in all men, though their sinful nature constantly reacts against it. Missionaries testify to the presence of religion in some form or other among all the nations and tribes of the earth. It is one of the greatest blessings of mankind, though many denounce it as a curse. Not only does it touch the deepest springs of man's life, but it also controls his thoughts and feelings and desires.

But just what is religion? It is only by the study of the Word of God that we can learn to know the nature of true religion. The word 'religion' is derived from the Latin and not from any word that is found in the original Hebrew or Greek of the Bible. It is found only four times in our translation of the Bible, Gal. 1:13, 14; Jas. 1:26, 27. The Old Testament defines religion as the fear of the Lord. This fear is not a feeling of dread, but of reverent regard for God akin to awe, but coupled with love and confidence. It is the response of the Old Testament believers to the revelation of the law. In the New Testament religion is a response to the gospel rather than to the law, and assumes the form of faith and godliness.

In the light of Scripture we learn to understand that religion is a relation in which man stands to God, a relation in which man is conscious of the absolute majesty and infinite power of God and of his own utter insignificance and absolute helplessness. It may be defined as a conscious and voluntary relationship to God, which expresses itself in grateful worship and loving service. The manner of this religious worship and service is not left to the arbitrary will of man, but is determined by God.

2. THE SEAT OF RELIGION

There are several wrong views respecting the seat of religion in man. Some think of religion primarily as a sort of knowledge, and locate it in the intellect. Others regard it as a kind of immediate feeling of God, and find its seat in the feelings. And still others hold that it consists most of all in moral activity, and refer it to the will. However, all these views are one-sided and contrary to Scripture, which teaches us that religion is a matter of the heart. In Scripture psychology the heart is the central organ of the soul. Out of it are all the issues of life, thoughts, feelings, and

desires, Prov. 4:23. Religion involves the whole man, his intellectual, his emotional, and his moral life. This is the only view that does justice to the nature of religion.

3. THE ORIGIN OF RELIGION

Particular attention was devoted during the last fifty years to the problem of the origin of religion. Repeated attempts were made to give a natural explanation of it, but without success. Some spoke of it as an invention of cunning and deceptive priests, who regarded it as an easy source of revenue; but this explanation is entirely discredited now. Others held that it began with the worship of lifeless objects (fetishes), or with the worship of spirits, possibly the spirits of forefathers. But this is no explanation, since the question remains, How did people ever hit upon the idea of worshiping lifeless or living objects? Still others were of the opinion that religion originated in nature-worship, that is, the worship of the marvels and powers of nature, or in the widespread practice of magic. But these theories do not explain any more than the others how non-religious man ever became religious. They all start out with a man who is already religious.

The Bible gives the only reliable account of the origin of religion. It informs us of the existence of God, the only object worthy of religious worship. Moreover, it comes to us with the assurance that God, whom man could never discover with his natural powers, revealed Himself in nature and, more especially, in His divine Word, demands the worship and service of man, and also determines the worship and service that is well-pleasing to Him. And, finally, it teaches us that God created man in His own image, and thus endowed him with a capacity to understand, and to respond to, this revelation, and engendered in him a natural urge to seek communion with God and to glorify Him.

MEMORIZE

a. The Nature of Religion:

- Deut. 10:12, 13: "And now, Israel, what doth Jehovah thy God require of thee, but to fear Jehovah thy God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve Jehovah thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul, to keep the commandments of Jehovah, and His statutes, which I command thee this day for thy good."
- Ps. 111:10: "The fear of Jehovah is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all they that do His commandments: His praise endureth for ever."

- Eccl. 12:13: "Fear God and keep His commandments; for this is the whole duty of man."
- John 6:29: "This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent."
- Acts 16:31: "And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus, and thou shalt be saved, thou and thy house."

b. The Seat of Religion:

- Ps. 51:10: "Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me." Also vs. 17: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise."
- Prov. 4:23: "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life."
- Matt. 5:8: "Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God."

c. The Origin of Religion:

- Gen. 1:27: "And God created man in His own image, in the image of God created He him."
- Deut. 4:13: "And He declared unto you His covenant, which He commanded you to perform, even the ten commandments."
- Ezek. 36:26: "A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you; and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh."

FURTHER STUDY

1. What elements of true religion are indicated in the following passages: Deut. 10:12; Eccl. 12:13; Hos. 6:6; Micah 6:8; Mark 12:33; John 3:36; 6:29; Acts 5:31; Rom. 12:1; 13:10; Jas. 1:27.
2. What forms of false religion are indicated in the following passages: Ps. 78:35, 36; Isa. 1:11-17; 58:1-5; Ezek. 33:31, 32; Matt. 6:2, 5; 7:21, 26, 27; 23:14; Luke 6:2; 13:14; Gal. 4:10; Col. 2:20; II Tim. 3:5; Tit. 1:16; Jas. 2:15, 16; 3:10.
3. Name six instances of true religion. Gen. 4:4-8; 12:1-8; 15:17; 18:22-33; Ex. 3:2-22; Deut. 32:33; II Kings 18:3-7; 19:14-19; Dan. 6:4-22; Luke 2:25-35; 2:36, 37; 7:1-10; II Tim. 1:5.

REVIEW

1. Is religion limited to certain tribes and nations?
2. How can we learn to know the real nature of true religion?
3. What terms are used in the Old and New Testament to describe religion?
4. How would you define religion?
5. What mistaken notions are there as to the seat of religion in man?
6. What is the center of the religious life according to Scripture?
7. What different explanations have been given of the origin of religion?
8. What is the only satisfactory explanation?

II REVELATION

I. REVELATION IN GENERAL

The discussion of religion naturally leads on to that of revelation as its origin. If God had not revealed Himself, religion would have been impossible. Man could not possibly have had any knowledge of God, if God had not made Himself known. Left to himself, he would never have discovered God. We distinguish between God's revelation in nature and His revelation in Scripture.

Atheists and Agnostics, of course, do not believe in revelation. Pantheists sometimes speak of it, though there is really no place for it in their system of thought. And Deists admit the revelation of God in nature, but deny the necessity, the reality, and even the possibility of any special revelation such as we have in Scripture. We believe in both general and special revelation.

2. GENERAL REVELATION

The general revelation of God is prior to His special revelation in point of time. It does not come to man in the form of verbal communications, but in the facts, the forces, and the laws of nature, in the constitution and operation of the human mind, and in the facts of experience and history. The Bible refers to it in such passages as Ps. 19:1, 2; Rom. 1:19, 20; 2:14, 15.

a. Insufficiency of general revelation. While Pelagians, Rationalists, and Deists regard this revelation as adequate for our present needs, Roman Catholics and Protestants are agreed that it is not sufficient. It was obscured by the blight of sin resting on God's beautiful creation. The handwriting of the Creator was not entirely erased, but became hazy and indistinct. It does not now convey any fully reliable knowledge of God and spiritual things, and therefore does not furnish us a trustworthy foundation on which we can build for our eternal future. The present religious confusion of those who would base their religion on a purely natural basis clearly proves its insufficiency. It does not even afford an adequate basis for religion in general, much less for true religion. Even gentile nations appeal to some supposed special revelation. And, finally, it utterly fails to meet the spiritual needs of sinners. While it conveys some knowledge of the goodness, the wisdom, and the power of God, it conveys no knowledge whatever of Christ as the only way of salvation.

b. Value of general revelation. This does not mean, however, that general revelation has no value at all. It accounts for the true elements that are still found in heathen religions. Due to this revelation gentiles feel themselves to be the offspring of God, Acts 17:28, seek after God if haply they might find Him, Acts 17:27, see in nature God's everlasting power and divinity, Rom. 1:19, 20, and do by nature the things of the law, Rom. 2:14. Though they live in the darkness of sin and ignorance, and pervert the truth of God, they still share in the illumination of the Word, John 1:9, and in the general operations of the Holy Spirit, Gen. 6:3. Moreover, the general revelation of God also forms the background for His special revelation. The latter could not be fully understood without the former. Science and history do not fail to illumine the pages of the Bible.

3. SPECIAL REVELATION

In addition to the revelation of God in nature we have His special revelation which is now embodied in Scripture. The Bible is preeminently the book of God's special revelation, a revelation in which facts and words go hand in hand, the words interpreting the facts and the facts giving substance to the words.

a. Necessity of special revelation. This special revelation became necessary through the entrance of sin into the world. God's handwriting in nature was obscured and corrupted, and man was stricken with spiritual blindness, became subject to error and unbelief, and now in his blindness and perverseness fails to read aright even the remaining traces of the original revelation, and is unable to understand any further revelation of God. Therefore it became necessary that God should re-interpret the truths of nature, should provide a new revelation of redemption, and should illumine the mind of man and redeem it from the power of error.

b. Means of special revelation. In giving His special or supernatural revelation God used different kinds of means, such as

1. Theophanies or visible manifestations of God. He revealed His presence in fire and clouds of smoke, Ex. 8:2; 33:9; Ps. 78:14; 99:7; in stormy winds, Job 38:1; Ps. 18:10-16, and in a "still small voice," I Kings 19:12. These were all tokens of His presence, revealing something of His glory. Among the Old Testament appearances those of the Angel of Jehovah, the second Person of the Trinity, occupied a prominent place, Gen. 16:13; 31:11; Ex. 23:20-23; Mal. 3:1. The highest point of the personal appearance of God among men was reached in