

Introduction to the Reformed Faith

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When I first came to Westminster Seminary as a student (1961), the student body was largely Reformed in background. Many of the students had been trained in Calvinistic¹ schools and colleges; even more had studied the Reformed catechisms and confessions. Today, that is rarely the case. More and more, students have come to Westminster from non-Reformed backgrounds, or even from recent conversion experiences. And those from Reformed backgrounds don't always know their catechism very well.

Many Westminster students, when they first arrive, don't even understand clearly what Westminster's doctrinal position is. They know that Westminster maintains a strong view of biblical authority and inerrancy; they know that we hold to the fundamental doctrines of evangelical Christianity. And they know that we explain and defend these doctrines with superior scholarship. But they are sometimes not at all aware of the fact that Westminster is a *confessional* institution, that it adheres to a definite historic doctrinal tradition-- the Reformed Faith.

I am very happy to have all these students here! I am very pleased that Westminster is attracting students from far beyond our normal confessional circles. But their presence necessitates some teaching at a fairly elementary level concerning the seminary's doctrinal position. It is essential that students be introduced to the Reformed faith early in their seminary career. That Reformed faith energizes and directs all the teaching here. Students must be ready for that. Hence this essay.

I also have another reason for providing this introduction: When you have begun your seminary study, you will come to see that there are a number of variations within the general Reformed tradition. You will learn about "hyperCalvinism," "theonomy," "antinomianism," "presuppositionalism," "evidentialism," "perspectivalism," "traditionalism," etc., the various names we call ourselves and call each other. It will not always be easy to determine who is "truly Reformed" and who is not-- or, more important, who is "truly biblical." In this paper, I would like to show you, at least, where I stand within the Reformed tradition, and to give you a bit of guidance, helping you to find your way through this maze.

This is, of course, only an "introduction" to the Reformed Faith, rather than an in-depth analysis. The in-depth analysis is to be found in the entire Westminster curriculum. Particularly, the doctrinal points expounded here will be expounded at much greater length in your later courses in systematic theology and apologetics. Still, there are obvious advantages in your having a general overview at an early point in your studies. Together with this document, I suggest you read the Westminster Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms, also the "three forms of unity" of the continental European Reformed churches: the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort. These are wonderful summaries of the Reformed doctrinal position, thorough, concise, and precise. The Heidelberg is one of the great devotional works of all time. I also believe there is much to be gained from the opening summary of the Reformed theology in Cornelius Van Til's *The Defense of the Faith*.²

Before I get to substantive doctrinal matters, allow me to address the question, "Why should we subscribe to any confession at all, besides the Bible?" This is a good question. In my heart, I wish there were no need for creeds or for the denominations that subscribe to them.

¹ In this paper, I will be using "Calvinistic" and "Reformed" synonymously.

² Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975), abridged edition, pp. 7-22.

Denominations are always to some extent the result of sin, of party spirit.³ I wish that when someone asked me my religious affiliation, I could simply say "Christian," and that when someone asked me my religious beliefs, I could simply say, "the Bible."

Unfortunately, such simple answers are no longer sufficient. All sorts of people today claim to be Christians, and even Bible-believers, who are actually far from the kingdom of Christ. Liberals, cultists, and new-age syncretists abound. When you visit a neighbor, inviting him to church, he has a right to know what you believe. If you tell him you are a Christian and believe the Bible, he has a right to ask the further question, "what do you (and your church) think the Bible teaches?" That is the question which creeds and confessions are designed to answer. A creed is simply a summary of an individual's or church's beliefs as to the teachings of Scripture. And there can be no objection, surely, to placing such a summary in writing for the convenience of members and inquirers.

Confessions are not Scripture, and they should not be treated as infallible or as ultimately normative. Indeed, I believe it is important that in a church fellowship it be possible to revise the creeds, and for that purpose, it must also be possible for members and officers to dissent from the creed within some limits. Otherwise, the creed will, practically speaking, be elevated to a position of authority equivalent to Scripture. A "strict" view of subscription in which ministers are never permitted to teach contrary to any detail of the creed might be seen as a way to protect the orthodoxy of the church. However, in my view, such a view is actually subversive of orthodoxy, because it is subversive of biblical authority and sufficiency. Under such a form of subscription, Scripture is not given the freedom to reform the church according to God's will.

But creeds themselves are perfectly legitimate-- not only for churches and individuals, but even for seminaries like Westminster. For seminaries, too, need to be able to tell supporters, students and prospective students what kind of doctrine is taught in the curriculum.

The Reformed faith is a wonderful discovery for many Christians. I have heard many people testify that when they began to study Reformed theology they saw for the first time that the Bible really made sense. In other forms of theology, there is a lot of artificial exegesis: implausible divisions of verses, rationalizing "hard passages," imposing extra-scriptural schemes on the text. Reformed theology takes Scripture very naturally, as the authors (human and divine) evidently intended it to be taken. There are, of course, difficulties within the Reformed system as in others. But many people, when they begin to read the Bible under Reformed teaching, experience an enormous increase in comprehension and in confidence. The Word of God speaks to them in greater power and gives them a greater motivation toward holiness.

To be sure, many oppose the Reformed approach. Westminster does not require its students to have Reformed convictions, either when they enroll or when they graduate. Thus, you will have to make up your own mind. But my experience is that when Westminster students from non-Reformed background give the Reformed approach a fair shake, they generally find themselves embracing it. In my thirty-five year association with Westminster, I can count on one hand the number of students who have, to my knowledge, graduated holding an Arminian position. That is not because the school pressures students to conform to its doctrinal position. Most of us professors will go out of our way to avoid doing that. It is rather that we will provide you the fullest possible opportunity to expose yourself to Reformed theology, and to compare it to non-Reformed theologies. When you complete that study, I believe that you will rejoice as we do in the Reformed faith.

What, then, is the Reformed faith? In what follows, I will argue that (1) the Reformed faith is evangelical, (2) the Reformed faith is predestinarian, and (3) the Reformed faith teaches the comprehensive covenant Lordship of Jesus Christ.

³ See the condemnation of parties in I Cor. 1-4. I expound this issue in my *Evangelical Reunion* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991).

1. The Reformed Faith is Evangelical

It is often difficult for Bible-believing Protestant Christians to know what to call themselves. "Christian" itself, even "Bible-believing Christian," can be too vague, even misleading (see above discussion). "Orthodox" suggests priests with beards. "Conservative" sounds like a political position or a temperamental stodginess rather than a religious conviction. "Fundamentalist" today is a reproach, suggesting anti-intellectualism, though it has in the past been applied to some very great Christian scholars.

I think the best term to describe all Bible-believing Protestant Christians is the term "evangelical," though that term also has become somewhat ambiguous through history. It was used by the Lutheran reformers to indicate the character of their movement, and to this day in continental Europe the word "evangelical" is more or less a synonym for "Lutheran." In the English-speaking world, however, the predominant use of "evangelical" stems from the revivals of the "evangelical awakening" in the eighteenth century under the preaching of John Wesley, George Whitefield, and others. Wesley's theology was Arminian, Whitefield's Calvinist; so the evangelical movement itself had both Arminian and Calvinistic elements. Many denominations in the English-speaking world were profoundly influenced by this movement.

In the nineteenth century, many denominations which had earlier been influenced by the evangelical movement became liberal. It was not unusual to hear people like the liberal Charles Briggs described as "evangelical;" "liberal evangelical" was not at that time considered an oxymoron. One still hears that phrase in reference to the English theological scene, though their usage is not consistent on that point. But in America, the term has since World War II been generally limited to theologically conservative positions. After that war, a number of conservative Christians came to the conclusion that "fundamentalism" was a discredited concept, and they adopted the term "evangelical" as a self-description, reverting to something like the eighteenth-century usage. Many of these, such as Carl F. H. Henry, Harold John Ockenga, and J. Howard Pew were Calvinistic in theology; others were not. Thus "evangelical" became an umbrella-term, covering both Reformed and non-Reformed Christians who held high views of Scripture and adhered to the "fundamentals of the faith."

Not all Reformed people have been willing to accept the label "evangelical." For one thing, Reformed people have sometimes opposed revivalism, although some great revival preachers, like Whitefield, have been Reformed. Thus some Reformed people have been reluctant to accept a label which arose out of a revivalist context. For another thing, many Reformed people do not want to be joined to Arminians under a common label, believing that the differences between the two types of theology are too great. Thus, for some Calvinists, including Cornelius Van Til,⁴ "Evangelical" means "non-Reformed Protestant."

I reject this usage, despite the example of my mentor Van Til. That usage is unhistorical, because the word has, historically, included Calvinists. More important, it seems to me that we do need some term which unites Bible-believing Protestants, and the only label suitable for that purpose is "evangelical."⁵

⁴ *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (N. P.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969), p. 194 and elsewhere.

⁵ It is true that, even in the United States, the lines dividing evangelicals from others have become blurred. Some have denied the total inerrancy of Scripture, while claiming to be evangelicals. In my view, this is inappropriate. Still, it seems to me that the term evangelical has not entirely outlived its usefulness, and I know of nothing better for my present purpose.

And in my view, the Reformed and the Evangelicals are united on many significant doctrinal points, arguably on the most important ones. Thus, I maintain, the Reformed faith is evangelical.

What are the main beliefs of evangelical theology? An evangelical, in my definition, is one who professes historic Protestant theology. That includes the following beliefs:

(1) God is a person, infinitely wise, just, good, true and powerful, the ultimate reality, exclusively deserving religious worship and unquestioning obedience, who made the world out of nothing.

(2) Man, made in the image of God, willfully disobeyed God's command, and thereby became worthy of death. From that time on, all human beings save Jesus Christ have been guilty of sin before God.

(3) Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, became man. He was (literally, really) born of a virgin. He worked miracles. He fulfilled prophecy. He suffered and died for our sin, bearing its guilt and penalty. He was raised physically from the dead. He will come again (literally, physically) to gather his people and to judge the world.

(4) Salvation from sin comes to us not by our good works, but by receiving the free gift of God by faith. Saving faith receives the sacrifice of Christ as *our* sacrifice, as our only basis for fellowship with God. And such saving faith inevitably motivates us to obedience.

(5) Scripture is the word of God, which makes us wise unto salvation.

(6) Prayer is not mere meditation or self-improvement, but a genuine conversation with our creator and redeemer. In prayer we praise God, give thanks, ask forgiveness, and make requests which bring concrete changes in the world.

These statements might be called "the fundamentals of the faith." They represent the central biblical gospel, and on that gospel, Reformed people are united with all evangelicals. It hurts me when I hear Reformed people saying that "we have nothing in common with Arminians." In fact, we have the biblical gospel in common with them, and that is a great deal. I would certainly argue that Arminian theology is not consistent with that gospel. But I cannot doubt that most of them believe that gospel from the heart.

In this respect, Reformed people not only stand with their Arminian brothers and sisters in confessing biblical truth, but they also stand with them against common corruptions of the faith. We stand with all evangelicals against secular humanism, the cults, the New Age movements, and the liberal traditions in theology. By "liberal" I mean any kind of theology which denies any of these "fundamentals." In this sense, I include as "liberal," not only the modernists of J. Gresham Machen's day,⁶ but also the neo-orthodox tradition (Barth and Brunner, the "new modernists" according to Van Til) and the more recent movements such as liberation theology, process theology, and pluralist theology. The more recent movements are often contrasted with liberalism, but just as I believe we need a term to describe all Bible-believing Protestants, so I believe we need a term to describe professing Christians who deny the one or more of the fundamentals; and "liberalism" is the best term for that purpose.

Let me summarize some formulations typical of the liberal tradition in categories corresponding to statements (1)-(6) above:

⁶ See Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism*, still the best account of the fundamental differences between the two ways of thinking

(1) God is "beyond personality," "beyond good and evil," does not demand obedience or punish sin or answer prayer.

(2) Sin is not disobedience to a law external to man, but alienation from others and from one's own true humanity.

(3) Jesus was a man who was in various ways aligned with God. Literal miracles and resurrection are impossible, but they are symbolic of some higher reality.

(4) Salvation comes not through the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ, or through faith in Christ as the exclusive way of salvation. Either all are saved, or the "saved" are those who adhere to various ethical and political programs.

(5) Scripture is a human writing, fallible and prone to error, which somehow communicates a divine message.

(6) Prayer is essentially self-referential.

As we see the evangelical gospel in stark contrast to the liberal denial of that gospel, it is important that we take a clear stand. I would especially urge students who are starting their course of theological study to take these issues personally. This is the time when you must be clear as to your own relation to God. Do you believe that the God of Scripture really exists? that he is the majestic Lord of heaven and earth? Do you believe that you are personally guilty of sin and deserve only his fierce anger and eternal punishment? Are you trusting in your own works (which may include church attendance, Christian service, intellectual correctness) to save you, or only in the perfect righteousness of Christ?

If you have never answered this sort of question, I implore you for Christ's sake to answer it now! Not everyone who comes to seminary is a believer in this sense. It is easy to deceive yourself when you have been going through the motions of the Christian life. As you study at seminary, it will become more and more difficult to go back to basics in this way. As you become yourself a theological expert, you may become proud of your achievement, and therefore impatient with anybody who suggests that you need to become as a little child and put your whole trust in the wisdom of another. "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast," Eph. 2:8, 9.

2. The Reformed Faith is Predestinarian

The term "Reformed," for some reason, early became attached to the Swiss branch of the Reformation (Zwingli, Bucer, Bullinger, Calvin), and eventually became synonymous with "Calvinist." The most controversial teaching of these men was their doctrine of predestination, and that is often seen as the chief distinctive of Reformed teaching as over against other forms of evangelicalism. In 1618-1619, an international Reformed synod meeting at Dordrecht (or Dordt) in the Netherlands was presented with five "points" summarizing the teachings of Jacob Arminius ("Arminianism"). In opposition to those, the synod adopted what have been called the "five points of Calvinism," summarizing its doctrine of predestination. These points are popularly summarized by the initials of that fine Dutch flower, the TULIP: Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, Perseverance of the Saints.

We should not look at the five points as a summary of the Reformed system of doctrine. At Dordt, the five topics were in effect selected by the Arminians, not the Calvinists. The five points are actually a summary of "what Arminians don't like about Calvinism," rather than a

summary of Calvinism itself. They summarize, not Calvinism as such, but the controversial aspects of Calvinism. I suspect that had the synod been asked for an actual summary of the Reformed faith, they would have structured it rather differently-- more like the Belgic and Westminster Confessions.

Controversial points are not necessarily the most fundamental concerns of a system. In the case of the Reformed faith, the doctrinal system is far more than five points; it is a comprehensive understanding of Scripture, and thus a comprehensive world-and-life view. I shall try to summarize that in the next section.

Here, however, I would like us to look briefly at the "five points." Although their centrality can be exaggerated, they are nevertheless certainly important, and often misunderstood. My treatment here will not begin to anticipate the detailed analyses of your later courses in systematic theology, but I trust it will start you in the right direction. Let us look at the five in turn:

(1) *Total Depravity*: Although fallen persons are capable of externally good acts (acts that are good for society), they cannot do anything *really* good, i.e., pleasing to God (Rom. 8:8). God, however, looks on the heart. And from his ultimate standpoint, fallen man has *no* goodness, in thought, word, or deed. He is therefore incapable of contributing anything to his salvation.

(2) *Unconditional Election*: When God elects (chooses) people for salvation, therefore, he does not choose them because of anything in them. He doesn't choose them because of their own goodness, or even because he foresees they will believe, but simply out of his totally unmerited favor-- out of grace (Eph. 2:8, 9).

(3) *Limited Atonement*: This is the most controversial of the five, because of Bible passages *apparently* teaching that Christ died for every individual. See, for example, 2 Cor. 5:15, 1 Tim. 4:10, 1 John 2:2. There are "universal" dimensions of the atonement: (a) it is for all nations, (b) it is a recreation of the entire human race, (c) it is universally offered, (d) it is the only means for *anyone* to be saved and thus the only salvation *for* all people, (e) its value is sufficient for all. Nevertheless, Christ was not the substitute for the sins of every person; else, everybody would be saved. For the atonement is powerful, efficacious. It does not merely make salvation possible; rather it actually saves. When Christ "dies for" somebody, that person is saved. One of the apparent "universal atonement texts," 2 Cor. 5:15, makes that point very clearly. Thus he died only for those who are actually saved. The biblical concern here is more with the *efficacy* of the atonement than with its "limitation;" perhaps we should call it "efficacious atonement" rather than "limited atonement," and, having then lost the TULIP, develop through genetic engineering a flower we could call the TUEIP. But of course efficacy does imply limitation, so limitation is an important aspect of this doctrine.

(4) *Irresistible Grace*: Grace is not like a box of candy that you can send back if you don't want it. Grace is divine *favor*, an attitude of God's own heart. We cannot stop him from loving us, if he chooses to do so. Nor can we stop him from giving us blessings of salvation: regeneration, justification, adoption, sanctification, glorification. His purpose in us will certainly be fulfilled, Phil. 1:6, Eph. 1:11.

(5) *Perseverance of the Saints*: If you are born again by the Spirit of God, justified, adopted into God's family, you cannot lose your salvation. God will keep you: John 10:27-30, Rom. 8:28-29. Perseverance does not mean that once you profess Christ you may sin all you please and still be saved. Many people have professed Christ hypocritically and have later renounced the Christian life. Those who apostatize, and do not return to embrace Christ from the heart, die in their sins. But if you have confessed Christ from the heart, you will certainly persevere, for you will not be dominated by sin, Rom. 6:14.

3. The Reformed Faith Teaches the Comprehensive Covenant Lordship of God

Let me now proceed to a more comprehensive summary of the Reformed system of doctrine. What I will argue is this: the Biblical God is the "covenant Lord," and all his work in creation and salvation is a working out of his covenant Lordship. "God is covenant Lord," therefore, summarizes the biblical message. The Reformed faith can also be summarized in this way: all the essential elements of the Reformed faith can be seen as outworkings of God's covenant Lordship. The fact that "covenant Lordship" is central to Scripture and also to Reformed theology is a major argument in favor of Reformed theology as the best formulation of scriptural teaching.

You will discover that "covenant" has been defined differently by different theologians, even within the Reformed camp. But the following seems to me to capture the essential elements of the biblical covenants between God and man. A "covenant" is a relationship between a "Lord" and a people⁷ whom he has sovereignly called to be his. The people may be called the Lord's vassals or servants. He rules over them by his power and law and brings upon them a unique blessing (or, in some cases, a unique curse). To better understand "covenant," therefore, we must better understand "Lordship."

The Meaning of Lordship

"Lord" represents, first of all, the mysterious Hebrew term YHWH (generally pronounced "Yahweh," sometimes found as "Jehovah" or "Lord" in English translations). It is somehow related to the verb "to be," as in the "I AM" of Ex. 3:14 (note the presence of YHWH in verse 15). Besides Ex. 3:12-15, there are several other passages in the Scripture that seem in some measure to be expounding the meaning of that mysterious name. See Ex. 6:1-8, chapters 20, 33, and 34, Lev. 18-19, Deut. 6:4ff, Isa. 41:4, 43:10-13, 44:6, 48:12f. In the New Testament, Jesus takes the name *kurios*, a Greek term used to translate YHWH in the Greek Old Testament. As He takes that name, he takes the *role* that Yahweh had in the Old Testament as the Lord, the head of the covenant. In my mind, that is one of the most powerful Scripture proofs of the deity of Christ. Therefore, certain passages in the New Testament are also important to our understanding of the biblical concept of Lordship, such as John 8:31-59, Rom. 10:9, 1 Cor. 12:3, Phil. 2:11.

In my lectures on the Doctrine of God, I shall examine these passages in some detail to show you how they combine to teach a certain concept of divine Lordship. In this paper, however, I shall merely present the conclusions of my study. You will find it edifying, however, to examine these passages, to see how the following concepts are interwoven through them.

My conclusion is that Lordship in Scripture involves three aspects: Control, Authority, and Presence.

(1) *Control*: The Lord is one who is in total control of the world. When God redeems Israel from Egypt he does it with a strong arm and mighty hand. He controls all the forces of nature to bring curses upon Egypt and to defeat the forces of the greatest totalitarian ruler of the time. See Ex. 3:8, 14, 20, 20:2, 33:19, 34:6, Isa. 41:4, 43:10-13, 44:6, 48:12f.

I have already expounded this biblical theme in connection with the doctrine of predestination. It should also be mentioned that, not only salvation, but also the entire course of nature and history, is fully in God's control. Eph. 1:11 and Rom. 11:36 state this truth specifically, and many passages of Scripture relate various happenings to God's direction.

⁷ Contrary to dispensationalism, Reformed theology teaches (following Scripture, in my opinion) that there is only one people of God, embracing all of God's elect, receiving the same blessings in Christ, the blessings promised to Abraham and his seed.

That includes such details as the falling of the sparrows and the number of the hairs of our heads.

Sin and evil also are part of God's plan. This is very mysterious, and we must be cautious in our statements. Nevertheless, Scripture does ascribe human sins to God's purposes. See, for example, Gen. 45:7, 50:20, 2 Sam. 24:1, 10 (cf. 1 Chron. 21:1), 1 Kings 22:19-23, Acts 2:23, 4:27-28, Rom. 1:24, 26, 28, 9:11-23.

How can we reconcile these facts with God's righteousness and goodness? I have discussed this "problem of evil" in some detail in my *Apologetics to the Glory of God*, pp. 149-190. I do not believe that we can fully understand God's reasons for incorporating evil into his plan. Clearly, he does so for a purpose which in the total context of history is a good purpose (Gen. 50:20). Beyond that, it is best to emulate the silence of Job in the face of the mystery of evil, Job 40:4, 5, 42:1-6. Certainly we may not compromise God's sovereignty by appealing to ideas like the Arminian concept of "free will," i.e. human acts which are not foreordained by God.⁸

Divine control does not, of course, imply that secondary causes, human choices, etc. are unimportant. God generally achieves his great purposes by using finite agents. Thus it is his purpose to spread the gospel throughout the world, not by miraculous revelation, but by human preaching and teaching Matt. 28:19ff. And there is no salvation (at least among adults) without human faith and repentance, John 3:16, Acts 2:38. Those who argue on the basis of divine sovereignty that evangelists should never call for "decisions" do not understand the biblical balance. God's sovereignty does not negate secondary causes; rather it empowers them, gives them significance.

The God of Scripture is not a kind of abstract opposite to the world, so that everything ascribed to him must be denied to creatures and vice versa. Rather, God is a person, and he has created the world according to his plan. Some divine prerogatives are denied to creatures, such as God's right to exclusive religious worship and his right to do as he pleases with human life. But most events in the world have both divine and creaturely causes; the one does not annul the other. Both Arminians and hyper-Calvinists err at this point.

(2) *Authority*: Authority is the right to be obeyed. The Lord supremely has that right. When he speaks, his word must be followed. Covenants always involve words, as we shall see in our study of the Doctrine of the Word of God. The covenant Lord speaks to his covenant people concerning his holy name, his past blessings to them, his requirements for their behavior, his promises and threats. The words are written in a document; and to violate the Lord's words in the written document is to violate the terms of the covenant itself.

When God comes to Moses in Egypt, he comes with an authoritative word for Israel and for Pharaoh-- a word which they disobey at their peril. See Ex. 3:13-18, 20:2ff, Lev. 18:2-5, verse 30, 19:37, Deut. 6:4-9, Luke 6:46ff. His authority is *absolute* in three senses: (a) He cannot be questioned, Rom. 4:14-20, Heb. 11, Job 40:1f, Rom. 9:20. (b) His covenant transcends all other loyalties, Ex. 20:3, Deut. 6:4f, Matt. 8:19-22, 10:34-38, Phil. 3:8. (c) His covenant authority covers all areas of human life, Ex.-Deut., Rom. 14:23, 1 Cor. 10:31, 2 Cor. 10:5, Col. 3:17, 23.

(3) *Presence*: The Lord is the one who takes a people to be his. He becomes their God, and they become his people. Thus he is "with them," Exod. 3:12. This presence of the Lord with his people is a wonderful theme which pervades the Scriptures: See Gen. 26:3, 28:15, 31:3, 46:4, Ex. 3:12, 33:14, Deut. 31:6, 8, 23, Judges 6:16, Jer. 31:33, Isa. 7:14, Matt. 28:20, John 17:25, 1 Cor. 3:16ff, Rev. 21:22.

⁸ There are, however, other concepts of free will which are fully biblical; see *Apologetics to the Glory of God*.

Thus Yahweh is *near* his people, unlike the gods of any other nation: Lev. 10:3, Deut. 4:7, 30:11-14 (Rom. 10:6-8), Psm. 148:14, Jer. 31:33, Jonah 2:7, Eph. 2:17, Col. 1:27. He is literally "near" to Israel in the tabernacle and temple. Later he draws near in Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit. And in his omnipotence and omniscience, he is never far from anybody: Acts 17:27-28. For in one sense, the whole creation is bound to him by covenant. See Kline, *Images of the Spirit*.

God's presence is a means of blessing, but it can also be a means of curse, when the people break the covenant. See Ex. 3:7-14, 6:1-8, 20:5, 7, 12, Psm. 135:13f, Isa. 26:4-8, Hos. 12:4-9, 13:4ff, Mal. 3:6, John 8:31-59.

I shall refer to these three categories as the "Lordship attributes." They are not separable; each involves the other two. The Lord's control is exercised through his authoritative speech to the creation (Gen. 1); therefore "control" involves authority. That control is comprehensive and thus amounts to a divine presence throughout creation. Similarly, each Lordship attribute includes the other two. Each, therefore, presents, not a "part" of God's Lordship, but the whole of it, from one particular "perspective."⁹

The Centrality of Lordship in Scripture

"Lord" is the basic covenant name of God, Ex. 3:13-15, 6:1-8, John 8:58, Rom. 14:9. There are other names of God, but this is the name he bears as head of the covenant with his people. This is the name by which he wishes to be known by his covenant people.

It is found in the basic confessions of faith of God's people within Scripture. See Deut. 6:4ff, Rom. 10:9, I Cor. 12:3, Phil. 2:11. The basic confession of the Old Covenant is "The Lord our God is one Lord." The basic confession of the New Covenant is "Jesus Christ is Lord."¹⁰

All of God's mighty acts in creation and history are performed "so that they may know that I am the Lord," Ex. 14:18, I Kings 8:43, Psm. 9:10, etc. Again and again in Isaiah, the Lord announces that "I am the Lord, I am He" (e.g. Isa. 41:4, 43:10-13). The "I ams" recall Ex. 3:14.

The Centrality of Covenant Lordship in the Reformed Faith

The Reformed Faith also emphasizes God's covenant Lordship over his people. The concept of covenant was not used systematically by Calvin, though the idea, particular the constituent ideas of control, authority, and presence are quite prominent in his thought. It was natural that among Calvin's successors there was a very thorough development and application of the covenant idea, and that concept has been a major concern of Reformed theologians down to the present day.

(1) *Control*: Obviously, Reformed theology has emphasized God's control, which "works all things after the counsel of His will," Eph. 1:11. We have already expounded this emphasis in our discussion of predestination, and Reformed theology also emphasizes the sovereignty of God in creation and providence. With Scripture, it also maintains the importance of secondary causes.

⁹ Such "perspectival" relationships are common in Scripture, and I will introduce you to many others in your courses with me.

¹⁰ It should be obvious, then, that the Bible teaches "Lordship salvation," as does the Reformed Faith. Those are saved who confess Christ's Lordship from the heart. This does not, of course, mean that those who confess Christ's Lordship must be perfect from the start in their devotion to Him. The *application* of Jesus' Lordship to the Christian life is a process which is not complete until we get to heaven.

"Hyper-Calvinists,"¹¹ verging toward fatalism,¹² have sometimes denied the importance of creaturely decisions and activity; but this does not represent the main Reformed tradition.

(2) *Authority*: The Reformed have always stressed, more than most other branches of Christianity, that human beings are subject to God's law. Some professing Christians have said that law and grace, or law and love, are always opposed, so that Christians have nothing to do with the law. The Reformed recall, however, that if we love Jesus we will keep his commandments, John 14:15, 21, 15:10, 1 John 2:3f, 3:22f, 5:2f, 2 John 6, Rev. 12:17, 14:12. Of course, keeping the law does not bring us salvation. It does not justify us before God. Only the righteousness of Christ can do that. But those who are saved will keep God's commandments.

The Reformed have also stressed the continuing normativity of the Old Testament law, specifically, over the New Testament believer, Matt. 5:17-20. There is a controversy in Reformed circles over "theonomy," which is essentially a controversy *over how the OT law is to be used* in the Christian life.¹³ Both "theonomists" and Reformed critics of theonomy agree that the Old Testament law has an important, edifying, governing role in the Christian life; both parties also agree that some OT commandments no longer are literally binding, because we now live in a different situation from that to which these commands were addressed. The argument is over which commands belong in which category. All Calvinists believe that the Old Testament laws are the Word of God and profitable for "teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work," 2 Tim. 3:16-17.

Particularly in the area of worship, the Reformed have stressed the authority and sufficiency of God's word. While Lutherans and Roman Catholics have argued that anything is permitted in worship which Scripture does not condemn, the Reformed maintain that nothing is permitted in worship which Scripture does not authorize. That is known as the "regulative principle of worship." There have been some debates within Reformed circles as to the concrete implications of this principle. Some have argued that it requires the exclusive use of Psalms in worship and prohibits the use of musical instruments, soloists and choirs. Others have argued that it requires a worship service modeled after the worship services used among the 17th century Puritans. My own analysis is different.¹⁴ I am not persuaded by the hermeneutics which has been used to reach these restrictive conclusions. And in line with the principles of the Reformation, I see the regulative principle essentially as a principle which grants to us *freedom* from human tradition, binding us only to the Word of God.

That raises an important point of a more general nature. Reformed theology is not only a theology of God's Lordship, but also a theology of human freedom. Reformed theology rejects, of course, the Arminian concept of "free will," discussed earlier. But it recognizes the importance of creaturely decisions, as we have seen earlier. And it also sets us free from bondage to human tyrannies, so that we may be slaves only of God Himself. To be sure, God does ordain

¹¹ It is hard to define hyper-Calvinism. Often I am inclined to say that a hyper-Calvinist is somebody who thinks I am not Calvinistic enough! But it is probably best to associate hyper-Calvinism with the historic tradition which is represented in our century especially by the teaching of Herman Hoeksema and the Protestant Reformed Church.

¹² Fatalism is the view that "what will be will be" no matter what we do. Biblical Christianity is not fatalistic, because it teaches an orderly relation between first causes, second causes, and eventual results. God's plans will certainly be successful; but they will be successfully because God will provide the finite means necessary. It is not the case, for example, that the elect will be saved apart from the preaching of the gospel.

¹³ See the WTS symposium, @UN(Theonomy: a Reformed Critique), edited by W. Robert Godfrey and Will Barker, especially my essay in that volume!

¹⁴ See my *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1996).

legitimate authorities among human beings, and he calls us to honor and obey those authorities. But when those authorities command something contrary to God's word, or when they place their own ideas on the same level as Scripture, we may and must dishonor their claims. We must obey God rather than man. Hence, you can see that the covenant authority of God is not a burdensome doctrine. It is the most sublime liberation.

The Reformed faith, therefore, is not in essence "traditionalist," although some Reformed people have had, in my estimation, an unhealthy reverence for tradition. There is a Reformed slogan, "*semper reformanda*," "always reforming." Hence, "*fides reformata semper reformanda est*," "the Reformed faith is always reforming." There is some division in Reformed circles between some who emphasize *reformata* (Reformed) and others who emphasize *reformanda* (reforming). Both are important, and both should be kept in balance. Our faith should be "Reformed," that is in agreement with the fundamental principles of the Scriptures, as summarized in the Reformed confessions. However, it should also be "Reforming," seeking to bring our thought and practice *more* in line with Scripture, even if that process requires the elimination of some traditions. The Reformers were both: conservative in their adherence to biblical doctrine, radical in their critique of church tradition. We ought to do the same. Beware, therefore, of people who tell you that you must worship, or think, or behave, in accord with some historical tradition. Prove all things by God's word, 1 Thess. 5:21. Search the Scriptures daily to see if what you hear is really true, Acts 17:11.

Because the Reformed faith has, at its best, been critical of human traditions even within its own circles, the Reformed faith has the resources for effective *contextualization*. Contextualization is the attempt to present scriptural truth in terms understandable to cultures different from our own and different from the culture in which the Scriptures were written. Reformed preaching has been remarkably successful through history in the work of contextualization. Calvinism has profoundly affected cultures very different from the Swiss culture in which it began: Dutch, German, British, Hungarian, Korean. Calvinism had large followings in France and Italy until it was largely snuffed out there by force.

It is, therefore, entirely Reformed, to say as I do in *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* that theology is the application of scriptural truth to human situations. Progress in theology is the continual *application* of Scripture to new situations and contexts as they arise. It is not the mere repetition of doctrinal formulations worked out in past generations, as some "traditionalists" might suppose. Rather, the work of theology engages our creativity, without compromising the authority and sufficiency of Scripture.

Calvinism has been a very "progressive" kind of theology. Reformed theology, typically, has not simply reiterated the statements of Calvin and the confessions. It has gone on to develop new applications of Scripture and Reformed doctrine. In the seventeenth century, there was a significant development in Reformed thinking about God's covenants. In the eighteenth century thinker Jonathan Edwards, there is new teaching on the subjective dimensions of the Christian life. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was the remarkable development, under Vos and others, of "biblical theology," the analysis of Scripture as a history of redemption. In the twentieth century there was Van Til's apologetics and Meredith Kline's *Structure of Biblical Authority*.

The work of "Reforming" under God's authority is not limited, either, to theology and the church. Calvinists have often emphasized the "cultural mandate" of Gen. 1:28-30, that God commands the human race to take dominion of all the earth in his name. This means that all spheres of human life must be Reformed by the word of God. Abraham Kuyper, the great Dutch genius who made enormous contributions to theology, philosophy, journalism, education, and politics, argued that there should be distinctively Christian politics, art, literature, as well

as theology.¹⁵ God's word governs all areas of life, 1 Cor. 10:31, 2 Cor. 10:5, Rom. 14:23, Col. 3:17, 23. Thus Reformed people have stressed the need for distinctively Christian schools, labor movements, businesses, universities, philosophy, science, political movements, economic systems.

Understandably, then, Reformed theology is concerned, not only about individual salvation and piety (see below), but also about the structures of society. "Covenant," after all, has to do with corporate relations to God more than merely individual ones.¹⁶ In covenant, God chooses a *people*. And Scripture makes clear that God chooses households, families. Therefore, Calvinists have typically believed in infant baptism. Infant baptism says that God when God claims a parent, he claims the whole household to be his, Acts 11:14, 16:15, 31-34, 18:8, 1 Cor. 1:11, 16.

Considering the doctrine of divine authority helps us to see how from another direction¹⁷ the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Human beings are responsible, because they are subject to God's commands. Therefore, Reformed teachers do not present human responsibility as some grudging concession to Arminianism. Rather, they *emphasize* human responsibility and *rejoice* in it. Human responsibility is a *Calvinistic* doctrine. It presupposes the meaningful structure of God's sovereign plan and the normative authority of God's sovereign law.¹⁸

Historically, people have sometimes wondered why Calvinists, believing as they do in the sovereignty of God, do not take a passive attitude toward life. In fact, Calvinists have been hard workers, zealous missionaries, eager to transform themselves and society into God's image. This remarkable energy is not a contradiction of their belief in divine sovereignty, but an implication of it. Calvinists serve a Lord who calls us to the utmost effort in His service. The results are in his hands, but we have the privilege of serving him in the greatest of tasks, that of bringing all of life captive to Christ.

(3) *Presence*: Reformed theology at its best has been profoundly devotional, aware of the intimate closeness of God to us at every moment of life. Of course, some Reformed thinkers have been, by their own profession, "intellectualist," and have disparaged any Christian concern with human subjectivity or inwardness. But that intellectualism does not, in my opinion, represent the best or the most typical Reformed mentality. Calvin began his *Institutes* by saying that the knowledge of God and the knowledge of self are interrelated, and "I know not which comes first." He was aware that since we are made in his image, we cannot rightly know ourselves without knowing God at the same time. God is, in other words, found in every corner of human life, including the subjective. He also insisted that the truths of God's word be written deeply on the heart, rather than merely "flitting about in the head."¹⁹ His emblem shows a heart in a hand, extended to God, with the inscription, "My heart I give you, promptly and sincerely."

¹⁵ See his @UN(Lectures on Calvinism), a wonderfully moving, challenging, life-transforming book, which every Christian should read.

¹⁶ Although there are certainly individual aspects to salvation and the Christian life: God calls on individuals to repent and believe.

¹⁷ We have mentioned already the @UN(importance) of human decisions and actions within God's overall plan.

¹⁸ Arminian "responsibility" amounts to the power of the human will to perform uncaused events. But uncaused events are accidental, possibly bizarre, events without any connection to a pre-ordained rational structure. Performing actions which are sheer accidents is hardly "responsible." Further, responsibility in Scripture is always responsibility to God, not oneself. Therefore it presupposes God's law.

¹⁹ Calvin, therefore, is the source of the "head/heart" contrast that is so often belittled by Reformed "intellectualists." Calvin does not, nor would I, advocate an *anti*-intellectualism. The "heart" in Scripture is a heart which thinks. But there is a kind of intellectual knowledge which is

Thus Reformed people have spoken of living all of life *coram deo*, in the presence of God. This intense sense of God's reality encourages a rich piety, as well as energetic obedience in all areas of life.²⁰

Conclusion

You can see that the Reformed Faith is exceedingly rich! Understandably there have been controversies among Reformed people, some of which I have mentioned here. There have also been many different emphases among Reformed theologians and churches. Some have focused more on the "five points," the "doctrines of grace." This emphasis is especially prominent among Reformed Baptists, but is found in other circles as well. Others ("theonomists") have focused on the authority of God's law. Still others (Kuyperians, Dooyeweerdians) have emphasized the application of God's truth to social structures.

Wolterstorff and others have suggested a way of distinguishing various theological mentalities within the Reformed churches (especially those of Dutch background). They speak of "piets, Kuyps and docts." The piets, somewhat influenced by pietism, seek above all a deeper personal relation to Christ. The docts are concerned above all with maintaining theological orthodoxy. The Kuyps are concerned to bring great changes in society.²¹

It seems to me that there is room in the Reformed movement for all these different emphases. None of us can maintain a perfect balance of emphasis. And different situations require of us different emphases, as we "contextualize" our theology to bring God's word to bear on the situations we are in. Also, God gives different gifts to different people. Not all are gifted in the area of political action, or the formulation of doctrines with precision, or in personal evangelism. We all do what we can do, and we do what seems most to need doing in a situation. Within the boundaries of the Reformed faith sketched here, we should be thankful for the different emphases, not critical of them. The different emphases supplement one another and complete one another.

2-17-01: See Kuyper, Lectures, 16-17 on freedom in Cal'sm.

171: Don't just copy the past.

accepted superficially, a knowledge that doesn't actually *rule* one's life. That is not the knowledge which Calvin and Scripture would urge upon us.

²⁰ ²⁰The Reformed attitude toward revivalism is somewhat divided. A. Hofferker in his *Piety and the Princeton Theologians* argues that the professors at Old Princeton were much influenced by revival and were, along with their intellectual emphasis, aware of the need for a deep subjective relation between the believer and God. See also Jonathan Edwards on the *Religious Affections*. Some Reformed thinkers, especially in more recent years, have been opposed to talk of "emotions" and "subjectivity" in the Christian life. But as I said earlier I think this pattern of thought does not represent Reformed theology at its best.

²¹ In my terminology, these three movements are existential, normative, and situational, respectively.