

# Introduction to the Reformed Faith

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## Part 1 of 2: Introduction; “The Reformed Faith is Evangelical”; and “The Reformed Faith is Predestinarian”

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 Calvinistic<sup>1</sup> 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 “hyper-Calvinism,” “theonomy,” “antinomianism,” “presuppositionalism,” “evidentialism,” “perspectivalism,” “traditionalism,” etc., the various names we call ourselves and

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I will be using “Calvinistic” and “Reformed” synonymously.

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 Dordt. 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*.<sup>2</sup>

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. Denominations are always to some extent the result of sin, of party spirit.<sup>3</sup> 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.

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<sup>2</sup> Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1975, abridged edition, pp. 7-22.

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

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 backgrounds 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.

## **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,<sup>4</sup> “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.”<sup>5</sup>

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.

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

<sup>5</sup> 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.

(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,<sup>6</sup> 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

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<sup>6</sup> See Machen’s *Christianity and Liberalism*, still the best account of the fundamental differences between the two ways of thinking

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:

(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? And 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 over against other forms of evangelicalism. In 1618-1619, an international Reformed synod meeting at Dordrecht (or Dort) 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 Dort, 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 Corinthians 5:15, 1 Timothy 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).