

What does it mean to be Reformed?

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I appreciate very much the Dean of the Chapel's initiative in convening this series of discussions on the theme *What does it mean to be Reformed?* I confess that, as a professional economist and only an amateur theologian, I feel as bit as if I've been asked to do card tricks for Houdini. But I can give a tour of the things I have been thinking about since being asked to be here today.

I could, of course, simply tell you what I think on this subject. But the social scientist in each of us also wants to ask about the bigger, social context of such remarks: Why are we all gathered at an indoor meeting on a lovely October afternoon to ask and answer this question?

Let me try to address both topics by listing a few of the ways we might answer the question *What does it mean to be Reformed?*

1. We could give a *demographic* answer: Being Reformed means being a member of a historically Reformed denomination, and/or being a member of a historically Reformed subculture. I am told by some of my more senior colleagues that this was often the default answer at Calvin until, say, twenty years ago. For example, those with these "markers" had relatively less to answer for in their job-appointment interviews.

I recall being told the story of the job interview process for a former faculty member who went on to fame as a national legislator. Some colleagues were not sure how this Wheaton graduate from a conservative Evangelical background with an Anglo last name would fit in. "But at the restaurant after his job seminar, the first thing he did was order a beer, and the second thing he did was bum a cigarette. Then we knew he would be fine."

2. By the mid-1980s, it was becoming relatively common to interview faculty-position applicants who were not demographically Reformed. This led, I think, to a good bit of worry about what it actually meant to be Reformed. There was more than a little concern that Calvin would at least lose its Reformed identity, and perhaps its entire Christian identity, if its core distinctions could not be better expressed. I came, for example, as a German-ancestry Lutheran for a one-year visiting position in 1987, and was interviewed very carefully—pointedly—by the full college Board. At that time the Board consisted of one representative from each Christian Reformed Classis, the large majority of whom were Christian Reformed ministers. It was not an easy or "pleasant" experience, but it *was* inspiring. I was delighted that the College took its calling so seriously.

In the mean time, John Stott had recently completed his two-volume work *Engagement*. In the first two chapters he presents the need for evangelicals to

engage, not separate from, culture; he shows that this requires clear theological thinking about the relationship between culture and the Christian tradition; he reviews the main contenders for such thinking (including Arthur Holmes' books). Then he lays out a four-fold "story-line" narrative account of the themes of scripture, identifying this as his preferred framework for engaging culture. The four "acts" in that narrative are Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation. I am not certain that this account was entirely original to Stott, as some trace the same notions back at least to the sixteenth century (and some back to Paul's letter to the Romans...). But Stott's rendering was certainly influential. Several years later (1985) Al Wolters picked up the same approach and ornamented it with comments directed to various Reformed subcultures in *Creation Regained*. (Significantly, Wolters deletes Stott's fourth category, which may not be unrelated to the Reformed tradition's sometimes-temptation toward triumphalism...) When Nick Wolterstorff gave a series of talks to new faculty in the fall of 1988, sections of his talks closely resembled Wolters' exposition, including an emphasis on the Creation-Fall-Redemption plot of scripture. Wolterstorff refers to a particular, interlocking understanding of these creation-fall-redemption themes as "the genius of the Reformed tradition."

Thus was born, so I understand, a particular understanding at Calvin College of its own tradition. It was seized upon, so I understand, as a handy, concise expression of the core of "what it means to be Reformed."

There is much to commend in this understanding of being Reformed. For example, it is a *theological* definition, mainly. That is a big advance from reliance on a demographic or cultural definition.

But there are things that give me pause about an over-reliance upon this definition, and in the interest of time I will have to emphasize those issues. Consider these five concerns:

- This framework is not contested among orthodox believers. There's nothing distinctively Reformed about it, so it's not necessarily a helpful way of defining and maintaining our distinctives. You might think it's distinctively different from, say, Fundamentalism, which might be why some Reformed people like it—maybe they think it distances them from people they don't admire. But spend some time with Fundamentalists, and you'll find this isn't so. They are all about transforming a world created good but marred by sin. Hence the popularity of Neil Plantinga's *Engaging God's World*, written for Calvin's introductory course on the Reformed tradition, at colleges with no particular connection to that tradition. (Tellingly, the book is issued under two different subtitles: "A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning and Living," and "A Reformed Vision of Faith, Learning and Living.") Of course, most Calvin sorts are engaging culture with a different set of questions, aims and sensitivities than the median American Fundamentalist. But that only emphasizes the point that it's not the creation-fall-redemption framework *per se* that

defines being Reformed. That framework, and the questions/ aims/ sensitivities that have developed around it in our subculture, are symptoms of something deeper, the level at which we should be defining our identity.

- The creation-fall-redemption framework is easily dumbed-down to “there is some good in everything.” It tends toward a permissive culture that can’t give a clear moral “no” to anything. Sorry, but some things are not to be engaged. That should be self-evident, but I seem to often hear creation-fall-redemption language used as a bludgeon on people who would like to maintain some boundaries in the name of avoiding temptation or impurity. As the aphorism goes, “Responsible Freedom: We say responsible, they hear freedom.” No wonder.
- Moral permissiveness has a close cousin, whose outward resemblance is weak despite the common ancestry. How does a College do strategic planning if its mission is *to engage all of culture*? Only with great difficulty. It becomes very hard to say “no” to any good idea. So no matter how much we do, we are not succeeding at our mission. There is more that should be done. Run faster, jump higher, and do both in more places.

It seems that most of my colleagues begin their conversations not with how much they love their work, or how much they are learning, or how fairly they are treated, or how much they care for their colleagues and students, but rather with an expression of how tired they are. How hard it is to accept the fact that we are limited creatures with specific vocations. This problem was the focus of the original temptation.

Setting some strategic limits on ourselves, being focused about our vocation, would not be inconsistent with the creation-fall-redemption storyline, though restoring a fourth category—consummation—might help us to remember our place in the grand scheme of things.

- Though the creation-fall-redemption scenario is a theological framework rather than a demographic one, our way of using it can still be rather confusing to many who are not demographically Reformed. When that happens, the framework loses its chief advantage. Some of our communication with newcomers to the College feels more to me like forced acquisition of “in-speak” than education. It would be better to learn to clearly say the things we mean to communicate, free of jargon.
- The creation-fall-redemption framework helpfully teaches us that as we walk through life we constantly encounter things consisting of normative, intended good that has been marred due to the fall. But the framework doesn’t give much help or discipline in identifying *which* elements of culture are normative and which others are anti-normative. The framework may be helpful for broad, big-picture perspective, but it is incomplete; it is relatively silent on the fine-grained decisions that must be made when a person actually encounters culture in any depth. So there is some danger that the framework binds us to a shallow set of connections between the Christian tradition and the academic vocation.

What should we do? I've suggested that the creation-fall-redemption framework, and the questions/ aims/ sensitivities that have developed around it in our subculture, are symptoms of deeper prior commitments; this deeper lever is the place at which we should be defining our identity. The good in the college's use of this framework came from Reformed commitments in the traditional categories of systematic theology. By contrast, a story-line theology can be a vivid way of re-shuffling theological ideas. But the underlying theological ideas have to be present first.

So what does it mean to be Reformed? Try this answer: *Being Reformed means being conformed to the orthodox Christian tradition and the distinctives of the Reformed confessions.*

There are (of course!) many things I like about that definition. For example, it acknowledges that we *have* confessions. They give us guidance in separating the many academic issues we encounter into *confessional* issues, about which we must not flinch, and *contingent* issues, about which we must not close off discussion. That is a tremendously helpful distinction if you are trying to form a wonderful College, and I would not want us to be without it, as many other creation-fall-redemption colleges are.

The confessions, and the church polity organized around them, also give us an orderly process for learning about confessional issues and adjusting our understanding over time. We are not left to make up our understanding of the Christian tradition as we go along. Just as nations need constitutions, Christian colleges need confessions.

The Reformed confessions bristle with the building blocks of a splendid academic culture with real distinctiveness from the generic academic culture of the twenty-first century. An articulate Reformed anthropology challenges the tendency to think of persons as either isolated, self-interested individuals or animalistic accidents of time. Reformed polity argues for principled political pluralism--neither libertarianism nor statism, nor a vague compromise between the two. Reformed epistemology takes both special and natural revelation seriously, as non-contradictory revelations of the same God—an attitude toward revelation and observation that will refresh many a tired academic discussion that has hit a dead end.

Some might object to this definition because it might seem to understate the importance of personal piety and social transformation. That's why I chose the verb "conform." It subsumes both piety and large-scale transformation. See Romans 12.

Calvin has helped to lead some Christian academic circles toward a good conversation, by popularizing the creation-fall-redemption framework. It is time

for the conversation to go on to the next stage. Our Christian academic colleagues from other traditions may not, in the end, agree with all of the Reformed confessional distinctives. But I do believe that they crave a deeper conversation, and I believe that conversation would best be organized around the categories and ideas of systematic theology.