

Issues in Reformed Theology

Ecumenism

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The last class in our series on Issues in Reformed Theology will deal with why Reformed Theology is significant enough to warrant a series of classes. The reason we have discussed these issues is because of the influence of them among those to whom we minister. People who promote the topics we have looked at are respected and have been promoted as those who ought to be listened to when they teach.

The purpose has not been to stop anyone from learning from Reformed teachers but rather to understand the theological system that is foundational to their teaching. If we understand not only what they believe but also why they believe it, we will see the connection between many other things that may be spoken to in the ministry of Reformed pastors.

Furthermore, when we understand Reformed thought, we will see when those who are not overtly Reformed begin to advocate certain problematic Reformed positions. Likewise, we will see when those who are Reformed in certain doctrines regarding salvation begin to incorporate other types of Reformed beliefs. This spread of Reformed beliefs comes through the connection that Reformed leaders have with other types of Christian church leaders. Hence this final class on ecumenism, where we will examine the spread of Reformed Theology today.

1. Ecumenism defined

Ecumenism refers to the attempts by churches and denominations from different theological traditions within Christianity to join together in mutual understanding and cooperation toward some common goals. Interdenominational initiatives that seek greater collaboration between differing churches are considered part of the Ecumenical Movement.

The Ecumenical Movement has long been associated with theological liberalism. Presbyterian and Reformed churches split along this line in the first half of the twentieth century, leading to some of the largest Presbyterian denominations to join the ecumenical National Council of Churches in 1948. Since theological liberalism is a departure from a literal belief and application of the biblical text, conservative Reformed leaders have long viewed the Ecumenical Movement quite negatively.

However, this negative viewpoint regarding ecumenical organizations has not stopped Reformed leaders from engaging in other ways with more likeminded and biblically oriented Christian leaders of non-Reformed denominations. This is also a form of ecumenism and is part of why this series on Issues in Reformed Theology is needed.

2. Reformed organizations

The twentieth century saw a large rise in many organizations that were outside of any denomination. Churches arose which were non-denominational and para-church organizations started that were accepting of many different denominational backgrounds. These religious organizations were formed for a wide variety of specific purposes, such as ministry to students, military, teaching, etc. Gradually, these organizations became respected in their own right, on par with denominations in the mind of the Christian public. We are now to the point that many churches are removing their denominational affiliation from the church name in favor of a name that does not identify them with any denomination.

This movement away from denominations has served to make theological distinctions more vague. Now more than ever, theological perspectives are advanced without an identifier that provides a context for the learner. This results in those engaged with theological ideas to be more astute than ever before and able to recognize the theological basis for much of what is spoken or written.

Reformed leaders have followed this lead and are heavily involved with many organizations that serve the spread of Reformed doctrine. The spread of Reformed doctrine occurs in a variety of ways, most commonly via the Internet through blogs and web sites. These organizations are divided between ones founded by a group and ones founded by essentially one person.

a. Organizations founded by a group of people

The most notable organization that is broadly Reformed and very influential is the Gospel Coalition. The Gospel Coalition is notable in the breath of its council members, almost five dozen of which are pastors and leaders from a Calvinist perspective. Many are Reformed in the full sense but many are Reformed Baptists. The Gospel Coalition's primary means of influence is through its web site and blog. It is one of the most popular Christian web sites and where Reformed topics of all types appear.

The Gospel Coalition is a prime example of the ecumenical joining of pastors from a diversity of theological perspectives with each getting the opportunity to publish their teaching to a broad base of people. The result is that many begin frequenting the Gospel Coalition because a person who they are particularly close to is a part of it. They then encounter an abundance of teaching from a Presbyterian and Reformed perspective.

While a great many articles appearing are very solid and helpful, there have been numerous articles published by the Gospel Coalition on practically every one of the issues that we have addressed in this series on Reformed Theology. In fairness, they in large part will also publish articles on both sides of issues that divide Baptists from Presbyterians, but there is a slant toward the Reformed view of the Old Testament. Also, a person could easily only see the article from the Reformed theological perspective and think this is the viewpoint that they ought to hold.

There are other collaborative efforts among organizations that adhere to a Calvinist perspective. The Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, which publishes “Reformation 21” as a means to spread Reformed doctrine. The Founders Ministries, which is a Southern Baptist coalition of pastors from a Reformed perspective, is another such organization.

b. Organizations founded by an individual

Most Christian organizations are founded by a person so it is no surprise that the majority of the organizations connected to Reformed thinking are such as well.

1) Ligonier Ministries

R. C. Sproul, who became arguably the leading conservative Reformed voice of his generation, founded Ligonier Ministries in 1971. Sproul was a pastor in the Presbyterian Church in America and through this ministry reached a national audience until his recent passing. Ligonier Ministries continues to teach a strict Reformed Presbyterian doctrine through their magazine, *Tabletalk*, through their website, through their radio ministry (the Reformation Network) and through conferences and other printed material.

Ligonier was strictly Reformed but has more recently included Reformed Baptists such as Al Mohler and Steve Lawson among its “teaching fellows.” Its ministries join with conservative Evangelicals in teaching Reformed theology.

2) Other Reformed ministries

There are other strictly Reformed ministries and blogs that have a wide reach. Monergism.com is one of these Reformed websites with a lot of material. Westminster Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, Covenant Theological Seminary in Missouri and Reformed Theological Seminary in Mississippi are the three most prominent conservative Reformed Seminaries. Certain high profile pastors have been active in their ecumenical involvement with those who have Reformed leanings. Many could be listed but this has increased not only with the Internet but also through the Christian publishing industry that provides networking opportunities to spread the broad distribution of teaching.

3) Reformed ministries from a Baptist perspective

While there are many Calvinists who do not fully believe in the totality of Reformed doctrine, some of them have adopted a number of the Reformed perspectives that we have addressed in this class. Also, due to their influence and willingness to connect themselves in ministry partnership with those who are fully Reformed, they become complicit in the expansion of Reformed teaching to a degree. There are quite a few that have been influential in the validation of Al Mohler, the President of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, John Piper, a Reformed charismatic who leads *Desiring God* ministries, and Tim Challies, a leading web blogger.

The one Reformed leader from a Baptist perspective that is worthy of greater attention is John MacArthur, Pastor of Grace Community Church in California and President of the Masters Seminary. He is worthy of special attention due to:

- The sheer volume of his teaching available combined with his close proximity to our church
- His respected status though decades of ministry,
- His disproportionate influence on our church compared to other Bible teachers
- His cooperation with Bible teachers that are not in doctrinal agreement with either him or our church
- The perspective of his complete reliability in ministry
- His being the most biblically centered of all in this category so that whatever is true of him is also true of the others.

There has been an increasing acceptance of Reformed Theology in the ministries that MacArthur leads. For example, Grace Community Church holds an annual pastors conference at Grace Community Church each spring that has included various Presbyterian pastors. The most frequent of these Reformed teachers have been Ligon Duncan and R.C. Sproul. From 2001-2007, the General Sessions included 11% completely Reformed teachers. From 2008-2014, the general sessions had no one of a Presbyterian doctrinal persuasion. Over the past four conferences, 27% or 14 general sessions were taught by a fully Reformed theologian and while the 2015 topic of the inerrancy of the Bible drew more Presbyterian speakers, the trend is unmistakable. Ligon Duncan, Chancellor of Reformed Theological Seminary taught at this conference in 2006, 2007, 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018.

What happened between 2008 and 2014? Without any inside information, it is apparent that 2007 was the first and only time a doctrinally Charismatic pastor taught at a general session, namely C. J. Mahaney. Mahaney holds to a Reformed Charismatic doctrinal view, similar to John Piper who was to fill this slot but was unable to due to the passing of his father. This surely caused some doctrinal consternation and an examination of the doctrinal views of speakers must have resulted in a much more Grace Community focused adjustment to be made. This adjustment seems to have faded recently and it appears the advancement of Reformed Theology has resumed.

Regarding the issues of this series, MacArthur himself has become increasingly dogmatic in favor of Limited Atonement over the second half of his ministry lifetime. He has come to commonly refer to Sunday by the Reformed designation of “the Lord’s Day” in spite of the Reformed meaning of the term. He is sympathetic to the Reformed regulative principle of worship. Several of the issues that we have covered he has not been active in arguing against, mostly related to sanctification issues.

It is not surprising to see some correlation between welcoming more Presbyterian church leaders and becoming increasingly Reformed in theology. Where is this trend going? Only time will tell as others will lead the ministries of Grace Community Church in the years to come.

3. Ecumenism analyzed

At face value, since all Christians will be a part of God's kingdom and are united as brothers and sisters in Christ, any division within Christ's universal Church is not God's will. Christ's prayer for His disciples in John 17:22, "that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them, and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity," was fulfilled with the coming of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:12-13; Ephesians 2:14-22).

Practically speaking, we ought to seek unity and are commanded to "preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3). There is one body of Christ (Ephesians 4:4). However, until we enjoy the full manifestation of this unity, we are challenged with sinfulness. This explains the Church as we see it today.

It is important to note that organizational unity does not necessarily equate to godliness. When it was organizationally united during the second half of the first millennium we find the church adrift both doctrinally and in terms of its mission. The formation of most of the reasons for the Protestant Reformation was developed during this time period. Evangelism of the world gave way to the church joining with the state to support church leaders.

Unity is important but this unity must be real and genuine. It cannot come at the expense of the truth of the Word of God. Beyond the sinfulness of man, the primary reason for division in the Church has been over the teaching of the Bible. Those who value organizational unity see the various denominations as only a problem. Those who value the revelation of God in the Scripture view the various denominations as both a manifestation of man's sinfulness and as a necessary consequence of maintaining the teaching of the Bible.

Few conservative Reformed leaders are interested in broad ecumenism. Those who are conservative in their view of the authority and integrity of the Bible are quite united in opposition to the Ecumenical Movement as a whole. But ecumenism occurs not only between people who are liberal in their theology and people who are conservative, but also between people who are conservative but hold a variety of different doctrinal views. Different people will draw different lines regarding how far to take cooperation.

There are many reasons that move people toward ecumenical cooperation across theological beliefs. The human desire for the external appearance of unity is common. The value placed upon the outcome of such cooperation has been present in areas of cooperation regarding social issues. One overlooked reason is that there are significant financial incentives as well. It behooves authors and speakers to broaden the reach of their teaching not only for greater impact but also for a higher profile and sales. This is not meant to disparage any single person's motivation for joining in ministry with those with whom they have doctrinal disagreements, but the fact remains that access to a different segment of the Christian population is attractive to many.

They are strongly in favor of upholding the Gospel even at the expense of organizational unity. The premise of unity surrounding the Gospel has given rise to such broadly Reformed organizations such as the Gospel Coalition and Together For The Gospel.

Even the premise that the only truths worthy of separating in ministry are those that undermine the Gospel relies on a narrow understanding of the Gospel. The Gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ (Mark 1:1), not merely a list of propositional truth statements. Many of these issues surrounding Reformed Theology that we have covered in this series of classes relate to the Gospel:

- Limited Atonement: Did Christ die for the whole world or only for the elect?
- The Old Testament Law: Did Christ's death free us from bondage to the Law?
- Infant Baptism: Is faith necessary to be baptized?
- Covenant Children: Should we evangelize children of believers?
- Government: How does political activism negatively affect evangelism?
- The Regulative Principle: How do restrictions in worship affect outreach?
- Determinism: Does God cause sin to occur?
- Supralapsarianism: Does regeneration precede faith?
- Sacramentalism: Does God uniquely impart His grace through the sacraments?
- Double Predestination: Did God create people in order to send them to hell?
- Kingdom of God: What hope do we have for God's promised rule in the future?
- The Sabbath: Are Christians obligated to specially honor the "Lord's day?"
- Liturgy: Is God worshipped better by the formality in a church service?
- Confessional statements: Are catechisms necessary when we have the Bible?
- Forgiveness: Are others required to repent before we can forgive them?
- Counseling: Are credentials necessary to counsel others from God's Word?

Most of these issues involve the Gospel directly and all of them do so at least indirectly. To join together for ministry with the thought that we are together in the Gospel with completely Reformed leaders is viewing the Gospel in a narrower sense. Conversely, those who believe they are joined together for the Gospel in its narrower sense of propositional truth statements rarely limit their ministry to that understanding of the Gospel. For example, in the recent Reformed Together For The Gospel conference in April of 2018, main sessions included topics of sanctification, holiness, racial reconciliation, and living in a fallen world. It is common among these ecumenical conferences to teach a variety of doctrinal issues for which there may or may not be full agreement.

Churches have a responsibility for more than just unity surrounding various tenets of a Gospel statement. There is a reason why not many ought to be teachers since error abounds and God's judgment upon teaching His truth is strict. When we allow people to teach on our behalf we share responsibility for this (1 Timothy 5:22). Church leaders cannot allow the promotion of doctrinal error since exhorting in sound doctrine is a qualification of an elder (Titus 1:9).

The error of Reformed Theology is not random. There are underlying reasons why Reformed thought has come to where it is today. Teaching that is inconsistent with the Bible is rarely in complete isolation but comes from a faulty approach to the Bible. We have seen this in three substantial ways with Reformed Theology:

- a. The adherence to confessional statements in support of a theological system. The Reformed leadership structure of the church and affinity toward its historical context makes this even more challenging.
- b. The flawed approach to Bible interpretation that fails to see the distinction between the Old and New Testaments and between Israel and the Church. This failure is supported by a willingness to use a non-literal approach to biblical interpretation when prophecy is considered.
- c. The overvaluing human reasoning in inferring doctrinal conclusions in spite of clear Bible texts that teaches the opposite.

These problems are frequently seen in the issues that we have addressed in this series of classes. What future doctrinal issues may arise from them remains to be seen but we cannot view the teaching of Scripture as inconsequential or that one opinion is just as good as another. Each of us must study the Scripture and think for ourselves and not submit this process to the will of any church or earthly individual. Churches are likewise responsible for their teaching and there is a cause and effect relationship between bad teaching, bad ministry and bad conduct. The fruit of Reformed Theology has been too much unrighteous judgment based many of these issues.

4. Conclusion

Conservative Christians who believe in the sovereignty of God in salvation often consider themselves to be a Calvinist rather than an Arminian. However, full breadth of Calvinism is far beyond only the doctrine of election and predestination. If we simply view Reformed doctrine as good and Arminian doctrine as bad, we can become vulnerable to many issues that are associated with a Reformed Calvinist theological system. Having real knowledge of Reformed Theology helps us to be aware of the presuppositional perspectives that may affect both doctrine and practice.

While Reformed leaders provide much good teaching, there are significant reasons to proceed with caution. It is all too common for Christians to consider people with the right labels as reliable. We even tend to trust those who are recommended or who associate with those who we trust. This is a problematic road since there are admonitions regarding those who put their trust in man (Isaiah 2:22). Many teachers may be helpful but the Scripture alone directs our faith.