

Issues in Reformed Theology

Sanctification

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This class is unique in our series on the Reformed faith because the subject is not one of fundamental disagreement but rather of certain aspects that are either erroneous or problematic. There is indeed a large degree of biblical truth in the Reformed ministry to serve believers in the pursuit of holiness. Reformed ministers have rightfully opposed much error in the teaching of sanctification. But there remain topics that are worth consideration regarding how they affect our walk with God.

1. The vast agreement with Reformed theology's view of sanctification

There is a good deal of confusion among Christendom regarding how a Christian becomes holy and conformed to the image of Christ. Fortunately, Reformed teachers have been very helpful in opposing much bad teaching regarding sanctification. Reformed theology believes a great deal of biblical truth on this subject:

a. No Christian achieves sinless perfection in this present life

The sanctification view of the holiness/Methodist perspective that the struggle with sin can be completely overcome has been rightly opposed by the Reformed faith. Many Bible passages indicate that Christians continue to struggle with sin (James 3:2, Matthew 6:12, for example). The belief that we can overcome sin in its totality ends up vastly underestimating the depravity of man and the nature of sin. Only when your view of sin is limited to certain types of external behavior can there be any possible consideration of the doctrine of entire sanctification.

b. Sanctification does not require a crisis experience to occur

Much of the 20th century "Keswick" view of sanctification surrounded a special moment of commitment to Jesus as the Lord of our life in order for sanctification to occur. There is no doubt that many people see significant progress in their walk with God in obedience as a result of a personal realization of their complete responsibility to God as their sole authority. This may even involve their emotional state as well as their intellectual commitment. However, this cannot be considered a normative experience if the Bible does not view it as such.

Indeed, our commitment to Christ in salvation includes faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Faith is not a negotiated settlement with God but an earnest desire to follow Jesus. Following necessarily connotes the lack of following something else, for no one can serve two masters (Matthew 6:24).

c. Sanctification is the work of God with the involvement of man

This Reformed view of sanctification is fundamentally the work of God but includes the response of man (Philippians 2:12-13). The Calvinistic view of the sovereignty of God is reflective of biblical truth as all good things come from above (James 1:17), including our sanctification. God's work in our lives produces conformity to Christ. In this sense, sanctification is referred to as "monergistic," that is something done by God.

Yet our sinfulness brings a failure in our response, which is why the doctrine of entire sanctification is in error. God is at work in us, but we are responsible for acting on God's work in us. Through this process, God providentially guides our good works (Ephesians 2:10). There is a real sense that our sanctification is "synergistic," that is something man is an active participant in with God.

Much of the teaching of Reformed theology regarding sanctification is very good. The problem arises in specific areas, not the general theology of growing in Christ. The Bible is upheld as being the source of authority for spiritual growth. God is viewed as the one bringing this growth about since like justification, sanctification too is by faith. Sanctification is viewed as progressive, developing over time. It begins with faith and our positional deliverance from sin will continue by God's grace as the Holy Spirit works in our lives to bring us to maturity.

2. The Reformed view of the Old Testament Law

John Calvin advanced the Reformed perspective of the use of the Old Testament Law. He noted the use of the Law in revealing the sinfulness of man. He also noted a second value to the Law, which is the civil use of the Law. That is, that the Law constrains evil in the world and makes people tend to conform due to its consequences.

It was Calvin's third use of the Law that is most significant in the area of sanctification. According to Reformed Theology, the third use of the Law is that it instructs us on what we ought to do. It reveals God's will and is the primary use of the Law according to Calvin.

Reformed theology has developed the third use of the Law as meaning the moral Old Testament Law is mandated for Christians to obey. The moral law is understood to be that which is in the Old Testament Law that reflects the character of God and is binding on mankind. Since the Old Testament does not identify which laws are moral, it is left to interpretation which laws are binding.

We studied the Reformed view of the obligation to the Sabbath in our last class. Even though Reformed leaders agree that the Sabbath is obligatory and the application is for Sunday, what is allowable is nevertheless debated. So even if there is agreement on whether a law is moral, what is specifically forbidden in the application of the Sabbath is still not clear.

With the third use of the Law in using the Law of Moses in application to Christians, the door opens to teaching what is for Israel as binding for the Church. In addition to the Sabbath, there are other laws that are commanded by God that are not repeated in the New Testament. Reformed teachers view most of these laws as ceremonial but the basis for their view is partially subjective. Some are viewed as ceremonial because they are specifically changed in the New Testament, such as the dietary law or the sacrificial system.

But there are other laws that are not specifically spoken to in the New Testament. Certain financial dealings regarding interest payments, on inheritance, on restrictions of certain marriages, the obligation of brothers to widows who are childless, the use of tattoos, shaving the corners of the beard or the sides of your head, the prohibition against destroying fruit trees, and certain restrictions in agriculture and the breeding of animals, to name a few. Festivals and special days in the Old Testament Law are similar to the Sabbath but are typically not seen as obligatory.

Which Old Testament Law is considered to be part of God's moral law depends upon the perspective of the individual teacher. When a practice is considered sufficiently negative, it becomes a moral law and when it is viewed as acceptable it becomes a ceremonial law. A recent example in most of our lifetimes is the question of tattoos. Many will consider the law against tattoos to be binding on the Christian but this view is being held by fewer and fewer people as tattoos become more culturally common.

When Reformed theologians argue that we are only free from the ceremonial and civil portion of the Law, they neglect the direct teaching of the New Testament. The law that Paul refers to in Romans 7 is the moral Law, not what people consider being the part of the Law that is ceremonial. When Paul says "we have been released from the Law" in Romans 7:6, he is specifically speaking about the Ten Commandments. This is evident from the following verse, Romans 7:7, which says "I would not have come to know sin except through the Law, for I would not have known about coveting if the Law had not said, "you shall not covet." This explicitly debunks the idea that we are only released from some ceremonial part of the Law. We are free from the Law—all of it.

Certainly, what a Christian is responsible to do in their walk with God is directly related to their sanctification. When Christians become burdened with the Law they suffer unnecessarily and when Reformed teachers do this to believers they are guilty of putting God to the test (Acts 15:10). God is put to the test by being expected to rescue these Christians from the unnecessary danger of Law keeping (cf. Matthew 4:6-7).

3. The Reformed view of ministry

In our class on the order of Reformed churches, we learned that they are organized under a hierarchy of a General Assembly which oversees a regional body called the "presbytery" (in Presbyterian churches) or "classis" (in Reformed churches). The presbytery oversees the local churches which themselves are governed by a "session" (in Presbyterian churches) or "consistory" (in Reformed churches).

The session overseeing a local church is made up of the ruling elders and the teaching elder. The teaching elder is an ordained minister. These ordained ministers may advance to sitting on the presbytery in oversight of regional churches and ultimately to the General Assembly.

In order to become an ordained minister in Reformed churches, a person must hold an undergraduate degree and a seminary degree, pass exams and appear before the presbytery (or classis). It is a lengthy process and leads to the professional pastor model of ministry. This along with the formal nature of the churches makes of a clear clergy/laity distinction in the body of Christ.

The clergy/laity distinction has developed for multiple reasons. The history of the Reformation arising out from Roman Catholicism led to the early leaders being former priests themselves. There was not familiarity with a church that understood the members as serving alongside the pastors and so professional pastor ministry model continued.

In a real sense, while the leaders of a local church (the session or consistory) include the clerical teaching elder and the lay ruling elders, they are under the authority of the presbytery. The presbytery consists of professional pastors so while the authority of a single pastor may seem limited, he is connected to the presbytery as a fellow clergyman. This organization then invests the clergy with even greater authority than he has through his role of being the main teacher of the church.

The result of this on sanctification can be seen in the evaluation of who is able to assist believers in the sanctification process. The first result is the advancement of people who have gone through a process of study and examination being “ordained” for ministry but who are not adequate for effective ministry leadership (or who later become unqualified). They have a title and standing for an office that may not correspond to their actual effectiveness.

In addition to the problem of people being unqualified for ministry are those who might be capable but are not cleared for ministry by the process. A person without a completed degree may be unable to function in church ministry capacities in the same way as a less capable person with the appropriate credentials. So people are overlooked unnecessarily as their maturity is undervalued and their performance with a certain standard of measure is overvalued.

One example of how Reformed theology influences the issue of qualifications to minister is in the area of biblical counseling. When Jay Adams, a Presbyterian pastor, began the biblical counseling movement with *Competent to Counsel* in 1970, he wrote as a pastor to pastors first and foremost. One chapter is titled, “the pastor as a nouthetic counselor,” and teaches the specific role that pastors have in the counseling process. Pastors by their position in the church were considered competent to counsel and are encouraged to take the lead in their role in the church. This was a much-needed encouragement but it grew from the Reformed perspective of the minister.

Over time, there became a realization that people needed help to counsel others in areas of spiritual growth effectively. This led to certifications to qualify people for the role of a biblical counselor, initially through Adams' National Association of Nouthetic Counseling, which has now become the Association of Certified Biblical Counselors. The certification process is not unlike the ordination process, with the expectation that after the requirements have been completed then the certified counselor is able to counsel effectively.

Obviously, there have been a great number of believers today and throughout history that are uncertified but are very able to assist people in areas of counseling. This is particularly true with the vast majority of situations that are so common to man. The Biblical Counseling Movement advocates to 2 Corinthians 1:3-4, "Blessed by the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort; who comforts us in all our affliction so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." This is true for believers who have been comforted by God, not just for those who have been comforted by God and certified by man.

Certainly, Adams began a movement that incorporated a great number of people who were not part of the Reformed clergy into biblical counseling. But this has led to a movement to certify counselors who are approved. No doubt that all churches are selecting those who are capable of ministry but the quantification of what is entailed in the selection process is left in general terms in the New Testament. Even for the critical role of elder in a church, the list of qualifications are subjective and not something that an entity can evaluate without significantly meaningful personal involvement.

The formality of ministry leading professionalism is certainly present in Reformed churches. This can look much like the secular counseling rather than a church ministry. There is an allowance for charging fees for counseling. The approach to the structure of appointments, attire, offices, paperwork, etc. and can give the impression of a professional/client relationship. This business-like environment can undermine the ministry of sanctification by promoting the counselor to the role of problem solver who is the expert. The church is all too filled with people who consider themselves to be experts regarding the lives of others.

4. The Reformed view of forgiveness

The subject of forgiveness is critical to our sanctification. We must forgive for lack of forgiveness is characteristic of an unbeliever (Matthew 6:14-15). Teaching believers of their responsibility to forgive is imperative for ministry. When people fail to forgive they are opposing their own sanctification. Unfortunately there is a minority view of forgiveness that is influential within Reformed thinking that limits the universal statements of forgiveness found in verses such as Ephesians 4:32, "forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you."

The foundational belief that limits the universal application of forgiveness is the perceived requirement to repent prior to forgiveness being granted. This perspective has come to be known as “transactional forgiveness.” The transaction of the granting of forgiveness occurs when the one being forgiven has repented. This is considered to be how God has forgiven us—based upon our repentance.

On the most basic level, God forgives us but not on the basis of our repentance for specific sins. In fact, we are unaware of a large majority of our sin that the Lord forgives us for upon belief. It is impossible to understand that we have been forgiven based upon our understanding and repentance of specific sin. It is unbiblical to require people to repent of their sins before we grant them forgiveness. In practice, this leads to an examination of the one who has sinned to evaluating whether they are sufficiently repentant. This ends up being the same practice as much of the world forgives, if the person meets our demands on them.

Transactional forgiveness is not technically a doctrine of Reformed churches. But the Reformed influence in biblical counseling has advanced this teaching. There are reasons why Reformed people are inclined to be sympathetic to the teaching of transactional forgiveness.

The first reason why counselors from a Reformed theological perspective are more likely to believe in transactional forgiveness is because of their view of the Old Testament. While the Law was given through Moses, grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). The grace of God in forgiveness for all apart from works is a New Testament emphasis. The punishment of the sins of God’s people is consistent with the Old Testament. While the Old Testament spoke of forgiveness, its manifestation was seen in the New Covenant. The proper view of the Old Testament will help us to understand the Christian life of grace through forgiveness instead of demanding satisfaction for the sins of others based upon their acts.

A second reason why Reformed counselors are more likely to believe in transactional forgiveness is regarding the perceived logical consistency of the process. As with other doctrines that we have looked at, such as limited atonement and infant baptism, there is an emphasis in Reformed theology upon logical deductions even when there are specific Bible texts teaching the opposite of the belief that has been arrived at. There is an inability to accept the clear statements when there are passages that imply something different that fits with a predetermined belief.

With transactional forgiveness, Luke 17:3 is a key text. Jesus says regarding a brother who sins, “rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him.” The logical conclusion is that if the brother does not repent then forgiveness ought to be withheld. However, this is not actually stated. In fact, the context speaks only to the requirement to forgive; it does not speak to the cases where the person does not repent. While this passage may seem to imply withholding forgiveness, this is not stated, it is not the context, and other verses explicitly say otherwise. This is an example of taking the Reformed tendency to fit biblical teaching into a person’s predetermined belief of what makes sense to them.