

THE GOSPEL LESSON 13

REVIEWING REFORMED THEOLOGY – PART 1

Definition, History, and Hermeneutic

Acts 17:11; 1 Corinthians 4:6; Proverbs 30:5-6 - Now these were more noble-minded than those in Thessalonica, for they received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so. Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us you may learn not to exceed what is written, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other. Every word of God is tested; He is a shield to those who take refuge in Him. Do not add to His words Or He will reprove you, and you will be proved a liar.

REVIEWING THE GOSPEL OF YOUR SALVATION

For five lessons, we have examined Lordship Salvation distinctive by distinctive, letting Scripture answer each claim on its own ground. But those claims did not arise in a vacuum. The insistence that "genuine" faith must persevere in obedience, that behavior is the test of belief, that assurance is read off the believer's life rather than God's promise, these are the practical outworkings of a much older and much larger system: Reformed Theology. To weigh the claims rightly, we need to understand the system that produces them.

This lesson has a different shape than the ones before it. Before we can evaluate Reformed Theology against the text, we must first state it accurately, and one ground rule will govern everything that follows: the system will be described in its own words, quoted from its primary proponents and its official confessions, not from its critics. If we later find it wanting, it will not be because we misrepresented it.

I. WHAT REFORMED THEOLOGY IS — AND WHAT IT IS NOT

Reformed Theology is not, first of all, a set of five points about salvation. It is an entire confessional system: a doctrine of God's eternal decree, a covenant framework spanning the whole Bible, a doctrine of the church and sacraments (including infant baptism and communion), a view of the Law, and an eschatology, all bound together and codified in official church confessions — the "Three Forms of Unity" of the Dutch and continental churches (the Belgic Confession of 1561, the Heidelberg Catechism of 1563, and the Canons of Dort of 1618–19) and the Westminster Standards of the Presbyterian churches (the Westminster Confession of Faith and its Larger and Shorter Catechisms, completed 1646–48). The five points commonly called "Calvinism" are one piece of that structure, and by Reformed Theology's own account, not a free-standing piece.

No one has said this more plainly than Richard A. Muller, the leading historian of Reformed scholasticism, in his essay "How Many Points?":

"It would be a major error — both historically and doctrinally — if the five points of Calvinism were understood either as the sole or even as the absolutely primary basis for identifying someone as holding the Calvinistic or Reformed faith. In fact, the Canons of Dort contain five points only because the Arminian articles, the Remonstrance of 1610, to which they responded, had five points. The number five, far from being sacrosanct, is the result of a

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particular historical circumstance and was determined negatively by the number of articles in the Arminian objection to confessional Calvinism." (*"How Many Points?"*, Richard A. Muller, *Calvin Theological Journal*, 1993)

Muller opens that same essay with a story worth hearing in full, because it draws exactly the distinction this lesson is after:

"I once met a minister who introduced himself to me as a 'five-point Calvinist.' I later learned that, in addition to being a self-confessed five-point Calvinist, he was also an anti-paedobaptist who assumed that the church was a voluntary association of adult believers, that the sacraments were not means of grace but were merely 'ordinances' of the church, that there was more than one covenant offering salvation in the time between the Fall and the eschaton, and that the church could expect a thousand-year reign on earth after Christ's Second Coming but before the ultimate end of the world... here was a person, proud to be a five-point Calvinist, whose doctrines would have been repudiated by Calvin. In fact, his doctrines would have gotten him tossed out of Geneva had he arrived there with his brand of 'Calvinism' at any time during the late sixteenth or the seventeenth century... He was, in short, an American evangelical." (Muller, *"How Many Points?"*)

And his conclusion:

"There cannot be such a thing as a 'five-point Calvinist' or 'five-point Reformed Christian' who owns just those five articles taken from the Canons of Dort and who refuses to accept the other 'points' made by genuinely Reformed theology... If some of the less-famous points of Reformed theology, like the baptism of infants... the identification of sacraments as means of grace, the so-called amillennial view of the end of the world, and so forth, are stripped away or forgotten, the remaining famous five make very little sense." (Muller, *"How Many Points?"*)

Notice what Muller is conceding on behalf of the system: the five points are not independent theological findings. They are load-bearing beams in a larger building, and by his own admission they "make very little sense" apart from the building. That building, not merely the five beams, is what we will be examining in the lessons ahead.

Calvinist Is Not a Synonym for Reformed

This distinction matters because in common usage "Calvinist" has come to mean simply "someone who holds some or all of the five points about salvation." By that usage there are many Calvinists who are not Reformed at all. Consider Dr. Thomas Ice, the longtime dispensational scholar and executive director of the Pre-Trib Research Center. Ice holds forms of predestination and affirms aspects of the preservation of the saints (that God keeps the believer saved forever) while rejecting the perseverance of the saints as Dort defines it. He is, on soteriology, substantially Calvinistic. He is, by every confessional measure Muller lists, not Reformed: he is dispensational, premillennial, and holds that God administers His

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plan through distinct economies rather than one covenant of grace. Muller's five-point minister and Tommy Ice would recognize each other immediately.

Keep two terms distinct here, because the difference between them will carry through the TULIP series. Preservation is God's action: He keeps the one who has believed, seals him with the Spirit (Ephesians 1:13-14), holds him in His hand (John 10:28-29), and will never lose him. Perseverance, as the Reformed confessions define it, is the claim that those whom God preserves will themselves necessarily continue in faith and holiness to the end, so that continuing is the evidence of belonging. A person can affirm the first and deny the second. The Reformed system affirms both and binds them together, and that binding is precisely where Lordship Salvation's tests of "genuine" faith come from.

One more piece of history belongs in this section, because it surprises most people: the acronym TULIP is not Reformed, not confessional, and not from Dort. The Canons of Dort were written in Latin in 1619 and do not spell a flower. The earliest documented use of the acrostic is a popular lecture given in 1905 by Cleland Boyd McAfee before the Presbyterian Union of Newark, New Jersey, recorded by William H. Vail in a 1913 article in *The Outlook*; it was popularized by Loraine Boettner's *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (1932). The system is seventeenth-century Dutch; the acronym is twentieth-century American. We will still use TULIP as our outline in the coming lessons because it is the form in which the doctrine actually circulates today, but we should know what it is: a teaching device, not a confession.

To summarize: Reformed theology is a complete confessional system in which the five points are embedded, and its own historians insist the points cannot stand alone. Many who are called "Calvinists" hold pieces of the soteriology without the system and are therefore not Reformed. With the terms now defined, we can ask where this system came from.

II. WHERE IT CAME FROM

The Reformed branch of the Reformation began not with John Calvin but with Ulrich Zwingli, who began preaching systematic exposition in Zurich in 1519, two years after Luther's ninety-five theses. From early on, the Swiss movement was distinct from the Lutheran one; the two branches met at Marburg in 1529 and divided over the Lord's Supper, and "Reformed" became the standing label for the Swiss and allied churches as distinct from the Lutherans. Zwingli's successor in Zurich, Heinrich Bullinger, published one of the first treatises on the covenant as a unifying biblical idea (*De testamento*, 1534). This was the seed of what would become Covenant Theology.

John Calvin arrived in Geneva in 1536, the same year the first edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* appeared; the final Latin edition of 1559 became the most influential single work of Reformed doctrine. But Calvin was one voice in an international movement, alongside Bullinger, Peter Martyr Vermigli, and others, and the movement's doctrine was

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fixed not by any one man's writings but by church confessions: the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), and the Second Helvetic Confession (1566).

The five points came two generations later, and they came as a rebuttal. Jacobus Arminius, a professor at Leiden, raised questions about unconditional predestination; after his death in 1609 his followers issued the Remonstrance of 1610, five articles softening the Reformed doctrines of election, atonement, grace, and perseverance. The Dutch national synod at Dordrecht (1618–19), with delegates from eight countries, answered the five Arminian articles with five canons: the "five points." As Muller noted above, the number five belongs to the Arminians, not to the Reformed. Dort's canons were then set alongside the Belgic Confession and Heidelberg Catechism as the third of the Three Forms of Unity.

A generation later the English Parliament convened the Westminster Assembly (1643–48), which produced the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms — to this day the doctrinal standard of Presbyterian churches worldwide, and the fullest confessional statement of covenant theology. That covenant framework was worked out in detail by seventeenth-century theologians such as Johannes Cocceius (*The Doctrine of the Covenant and Testament of God*, 1648) and Herman Witsius (*The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man*, 1677).

From there the system was carried into the modern era by the old Princeton theologians (Charles Hodge, B. B. Warfield), the Dutch line (Abraham Kuyper, Herman Bavinck), and Louis Berkhof, whose *Systematic Theology* (1938) became the standard classroom text for generations. In our own day it has been popularized by Loraine Boettner, J. I. Packer, R. C. Sproul (*What Is Reformed Theology?*, 1997), Michael Horton, and the broader resurgence journalists dubbed "Young, Restless, Reformed," a resurgence, it should be said, that is largely Calvinistic in soteriology while frequently Baptist and non-confessional, illustrating once more the gap between "Calvinist" and Reformed. John MacArthur himself belongs to this pattern: Calvinist on the doctrines of grace, dispensational in eschatology, and therefore not confessionally Reformed, yet his Lordship teaching leans its full weight on the Reformed doctrine of perseverance. That is why our review of his system led us here.

That is the history: a Swiss reformation, consolidated by confessions, sharpened into five canons at Dort, given its covenant architecture at Westminster, and carried to the present by a line of systematic theologians. We turn now from where the system came from to what it actually teaches, in its own words.

III. THE SYSTEM IN ITS OWN WORDS: ONE DECREE, ONE COVENANT

Everything in Reformed theology begins with God's eternal decree. The Westminster Confession states it in its third chapter:

"God from all eternity did, by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so, as thereby neither is God the

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author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established." (*Westminster Confession of Faith* 3.1, 1646)

"By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life; and others foreordained to everlasting death." (*WCF* 3.3)

Calvin had said the same a century earlier:

"By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every man. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation; and, accordingly, as each has been created for one or other of these ends, we say that he has been predestinated to life or to death." (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* 3.21.5, *John Calvin*, 1559)

The decree is then administered in history through covenants. Here is the architecture, again from Westminster:

"The first covenant made with man was a covenant of works, wherein life was promised to Adam; and in him to his posterity, upon condition of perfect and personal obedience." (*WCF* 7.2)

"Man, by his fall, having made himself incapable of life by that covenant, the Lord was pleased to make a second, commonly called the covenant of grace; wherein he freely offereth unto sinners life and salvation by Jesus Christ; requiring of them faith in him, that they may be saved, and promising to give unto all those that are ordained unto eternal life his Holy Spirit, to make them willing, and able to believe." (*WCF* 7.3)

Two covenants (works with Adam, grace with the elect) and, in the developed system, a third behind them both: the "covenant of redemption," an agreement between the Father and the Son in eternity past to save the elect, worked out at length in Witsius. The entire Bible, from Genesis 3 forward, is read as the administration of the one covenant of grace. Westminster is explicit that this covenant is one:

"There are not therefore two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations." (*WCF* 7.6)

Calvin before them:

"The covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same. Yet they differ in the mode of dispensation." (*Institutes* 2.10.2)

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And Berkhof after them:

"The covenant of grace, as it is revealed in the New Testament, is essentially the same as that which governed the relation of Old Testament believers to God." (Systematic Theology, Louis Berkhof, 1938). Under his own section heading, the covenant "is essentially the same in all dispensations, though its form of administration changes."

Israel under Moses, the church under Christ, there is one covenant, one people of God, differing only in administration. Every major distinctive of the system flows from this: infant baptism (the children of believers belong to the covenant community, as circumcision signified under the old administration), the church as the continuation of Israel, the moral law as the standing rule of covenant life, and (most relevant to this series) a single way of reading every text in the Bible.

The Reformed writers themselves acknowledge one further fact. Scripture names its covenants: the covenant with Noah, with Abraham, with Israel at Sinai, with David, and the new covenant of Jeremiah 31. Nowhere does the text name a "covenant of works," a "covenant of grace," or a "covenant of redemption." These are theological constructions, and the Confession itself tells us what warrant it claims for them:

"The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture." (WCF 1.6)

"By good and necessary consequence may be deduced," that clause is the hinge of the entire system, and it brings us directly to the question of hermeneutics.

IV. THE HERMENEUTIC: WHY THEY BELIEVE WHAT THEY BELIEVE

The most candid description of the Reformed way of reading Scripture comes from one of its warmest modern advocates. J. I. Packer, introducing Witsius's *Economy of the Covenants*, wrote:

"What is covenant theology? The straightforward, if provocative answer to that question is that it is what is nowadays called a hermeneutic — that is, a way of reading the whole Bible that is itself part of the overall interpretation of the Bible that it undergirds. A successful hermeneutic is a consistent interpretative procedure yielding a consistent understanding of Scripture..." (*"Introduction: On Covenant Theology," J. I. Packer, in Herman Witsius, The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man, 1990 edition*)

The definition is candid: the covenant framework is "a way of reading the whole Bible that is itself part of the overall interpretation of the Bible that it undergirds." The framework validates the readings, and the readings validate the framework. Packer does not blush at this; he presents it as the system's strength. He goes on:

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"The gospel of God is not properly understood till it is viewed within a covenantal frame... the Word of God is not properly understood till it is viewed within a covenantal frame... Covenant theologians insist that every book of the Bible in effect asks to be read in terms of these unities, and as contributing to the exposition of them, and is actually misunderstood if it is not so read" (*Packer, "On Covenant Theology"*).

Among the "unities" Packer lists is this one:

"...the one people of God, the covenant community, the company of the elect, whom God brings to faith and keeps in faith, from Abel, Noah and Abraham through the remnant of Israel to the worldwide New Testament church of believing Jews and Gentiles." (*Packer, "On Covenant Theology"*)

One people of God from Abel to the church. This is why, in Reformed hands, what God said to Israel is read as said to the church; why the demands of the Sermon on the Mount, addressed to Israel under the old administration, become the standing description of "genuine" Christian experience; why warning passages addressed to specific congregations in specific crises become universal tests of salvation. The framework requires it: if there is one covenant people, then every text is ultimately addressed to that one people, and the question "to whom was this written?" loses most of its force before the reading ever begins.

The confessions supply the two remaining tools. First, the "analogy of faith":

"The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly." (*WCF 1.9*)

Second, as we saw, "good and necessary consequence" (*WCF 1.6*): doctrine legitimately deduced from Scripture carries confessional authority alongside what is expressly stated.

Set out plainly, the machinery works like this. Begin with the eternal decree and the one covenant of grace. Read every passage as a covenant document addressed to the one covenant people. Where a text seems to resist the system, it is by definition one of the less clear places, to be governed by the clearer ones — and the system itself identifies which places are clear. What the text does not state may be supplied by deduction, and the deduction binds. Grant the starting premises, and the five points follow with real internal coherence. And that must be said plainly: Reformed theology is not sloppy. It is one of the most rigorously consistent systems in the history of the church. The question we will press in the coming lessons is not whether it coheres, but whether its premises came out of the text or were brought to it.

Here a brief word about the difference in method is enough, because we have practiced ours openly for twelve lessons. This series reads each text literally in its normative sense, according to its grammar, in its historical and cultural setting, asking first: who wrote this, to whom, when, and why? Both methods compare Scripture with Scripture. The difference is

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the direction of travel. Our method moves from the text toward conclusions and revises the conclusions when the text resists them. The covenantal hermeneutic, by its own advocates' description, moves from a framework toward the text — "a way of reading the whole Bible" that each reading then confirms. And where Westminster grants deduced consequences a standing alongside express statements, we have limited ourselves to what the text states, to whom it states it. The reader will see both methods at work, side by side, through every lesson that follows, and can judge which one lets Scripture speak.

To summarize: Reformed theology reads the whole Bible through the decree and the one covenant of grace; its own proponents call this framework a hermeneutic method; its confession authorizes deduced doctrine alongside express statement; and its readings and its framework confirm one another. Why do they believe what they believe? Because inside that frame, everything fits. Whether the frame itself is Biblical is the question the rest of this series will test.

V. WHY THIS MATTERS, AND WHAT COMES NEXT

We did not take this detour for its own sake. Lordship Salvation's tests of "genuine" faith are the pastoral application of the Reformed doctrine of perseverance; MacArthur's system makes sense only inside this larger one. Having now defined the system, heard its history, and let its own proponents describe how it reads the Bible, we are equipped to examine its soteriology piece by piece.

The next five lessons will take the five points one at a time, in the TULIP order in which they circulate today: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints. Each lesson will follow the pattern of our Lordship review: the claim stated in its proponents' own words, the strongest case for it, the key Scriptures cited, and then the texts themselves, read in their context, addressed to their audience. After TULIP we will take up other aspects of the system — the covenant framework's reading of Israel and the church, the sacraments as "means of grace," and the place of the law.

We end where the series always ends. "In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation — having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise" (Ephesians 1:13). Heard, believed, sealed. Whatever we find as we weigh this system, that verse will remain the measure: the gospel is a message to be believed, and the one who believes it is sealed by God's own Spirit on the authority of God's own word.