

“Thinking Theologically: About the Reformed Tradition”
The Second in a Series of Sermons Preached at
Grace-Trinity Community Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota
June 15, 2008 - the Eleventh Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Last week, believe it or not, my sermon had a simple point, namely, that we should not have to feel apologetic about having the particular, historical faith we have. We’re Christian, and not some other faith. We pay homage to a Jew who lived two thousand years ago in Palestine and who we think is the last word on who God is and what he demands of us. That’s okay, I said. It may feel awkward to be so tied down to this one man in that one place at that one time, but that’s the way revelation works: we learn about the infinite God through the finite, historical revelations he offers. And Jesus was and is God’s pull-out-all-the-stops first and last word.

But I’m sorry this wasn’t especially clear. The subject I wanted to address, pluralism, is a big one, and it has a long and complicated history, some of which I wanted to impart. But I fear I only obscured the thing I really wanted to leave you with, which is that we may and we should approach other faiths by way of our own faith, our own particular, historical faith, and not by way of some neutral place that doesn’t really exist. Our faith is not an awkward burden we must bear; it’s our greatest strength. But I admit you had a lot of extra stuff to wade through in order to get to that simple point.

Alas, thinking theologically is like that. There is a lot of stuff to wade through. It’s like you’re launching a boat out into the river, and you’re not really sure you want to do this. But you’ve been told it’s something you should do, it’s something you want to do! But once out there, you discover everyone else is so much more experienced than you are. How are you ever going to keep up? It’s all so overwhelming—which begs the question: Should you be on the river at all? Maybe it’s not a good idea. Maybe you should leave these things to the professionals. A little bit of theological knowledge can be a dangerous thing, you know. And there are perfectly serious religious traditions that are more than happy to look after you. Take their advice; don’t go out there. You’ll never have to worry about coming up with an answer to the question, Do you believe in double-predestination?

Well, the Reformed tradition is not one of those religions. And the business about double-predestination is one of their historic questions.

But let me step back a bit and begin with a much broader brush stroke. Not “The Reformed Tradition, What Is It?” But “How Did We in the Reformed Tradition Get Here?”

It all started with Calvin. Martin Luther began the Reformation, but John Calvin began the Reformed tradition. He thought that Luther didn’t go far enough when it came to communion. Luther, you see, still harbored the belief that the body of Christ really was present in the bread, just like the Catholics said it was, and the blood of Christ really

was present in the wine. Calvin thought it was more subtle than that. Communion was more than a memorial, as Zwingli thought, but less than a ‘real presence,’ as Luther thought. It was ... a sign. The bread and the cup were visible signs of an invisible grace. Taking them brought the faithful into union with their Lord in heaven.

There was something else: Calvin thought Luther was far too casual when it came to organizing things, and especially the church. Luther once said, in a sermon no less, that he preached the Word, drank beer with his friends, and then went home to bed. And while he did that, the Word—capital W—accomplished everything. Calvin thought more was required and, good lawyer and academic that he was, he would take care of it. So he wrote a *Book of Order*, which he actually titled *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, and then went to Geneva, Switzerland, to put his ideas into practice. Good order, it seems, is a hallmark of what it means to be Reformed.

What are the other hallmarks?

Well, there are a variety of directions we could go here, and the fact that there are a variety is telling. Is there an essential core set of beliefs every Presbyterian believes, and thus is duly constituted as of the Reformed faith?

Maybe. There are, of course, the dreaded Five Points of Calvinism—TULIP, as they are known—total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of the saints. I say dreaded because the points represent a hardening of the lines. TULIP was not drawn up by Calvin himself, but by the Synod of Dordt in 1618 and 1619. I also say it because, generally, when people hear more about what the points represent, they usually say “Really??!!!”

Well, if not TULIP, then how about the five essential doctrines drawn up by the General Assembly in 1910? This was at the height of the fundamentalist / modernist controversy, you should know. I am following, by the way, a line of argument developed by a very distinguished Reformed theologian, Brian Gerrish. So, if this seems unduly critical—an unkind swipe by the Baptists, as it were—bear with me. There is method in Brian Gerrish’s madness. The five points were: 1. the inerrancy of the Bible, 2. the Virgin birth, 3. substitutionary atonement, 4. the bodily resurrection of Christ, and 5. Christ’s miracles. Later, Christ’s second coming was added, and so was heaven and hell.

Or you could use the list given in the *Constitution* of the PC(USA)—a much better list—there is one central theme, the sovereignty of God, and from that flows four related themes: election for service as well as for salvation, covenant life marked by a disciplined concern for order, faithful stewardship in the use of God’s gifts, and, in recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, the call to work for justice.

The thing about all these lists, as Gerrish says (“Tradition in the Modern World: the Reformed Habit of Mind,” available on the website for the Institute for Reformed Theology), is that they change. It’s not likely the sovereignty of God will ever go away, or the penchant for order, either, but they’re grouped in different ways, and some of them, like double-predestination—the elect are predestined to go to heaven, while the damned are predestined to go to hell; it can’t be helped (“Really??!!!”)—they receive greater or, more likely, lesser emphasis. Or they disappear altogether. Puritan Calvinism was not Calvin’s Calvinism was not Zwingli’s Calvinism was not even the Westminster

Confession's Calvinism. They all stressed different things.

Was there anything they held in common?

Putting together such a consensus is a task every generation of theologians must do, and that includes all of you. If the tradition is rich enough, there will be plenty of resources to do the job. The Reformed tradition, I assure you, is plenty rich enough, and you need not worry whether your heritage can make it into the 21st century. It can. It's interesting, Calvin was not all that keen on lists. He was insistent on the proper way of doing things, but on hard and fast lists, well, there were more important matters to consider. When pressed, he said there were a few bedrock issues—God is one, Christ is the Son of God, and our salvation rests on God's mercy—and when pressed further, he said it really all boiled down to just one thing, cleave to Jesus Christ, the only foundation of the church. What's interesting is that this is not a doctrine at all. It's a call to action. It is, as Brian Gerrish points out, the one habit of mind that distinguishes not just the Reformed tradition, but Christians everywhere. Cleave to Christ, the only foundation of the church!

Gerrish adds five other habits that flow from this clarion call, and out of which each generation may develop whatever lists it deems necessary. The five habits are:

1. A certain deference to the past, to the apostolic order. Reformed peoples do not believe they are creating something new, they are not. They are keeping alive something old. This does not mean they are not up on what's new—more about that in a moment. It simply means they are conversant with their past, because the past knows a thing or two about what we're facing. Chesterton—not, strictly speaking, a Reformed theologian—called it “the democracy of the dead.”

2. A critical habit of mind. Deference, yes, but not blind adherence. The Reformed tradition breeds an educated clergy, it is said, and the reason why is because the tradition demands it. It must not be passed on uncritically. It is fruitful and rich, and petty and short-sighted as well, just like the humans that produced it. So it is that the tradition has adopted as its motto *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda*, the church reformed, always being reformed, and expected a clergy with critical insight to lead them in this work.

3. A certain openness of mind to wisdom and insight wherever they may be found. Calvin had his quarrels with the classics, but he read them faithfully throughout his career spent reforming Geneva. The Christian faith was never meant to be insular and protective. It was meant to join with truth wherever it was found, because all truth came from God, whose Spirit is the one fountain of truth.

4. Good order—“unabashedly practical,” Gerrish says. And that affected the practice of theology as well as the government of Geneva. Calvin had no time for idle speculation. Concerning the number of angels, he wrote “in reading the Scriptures we should constantly direct our inquiries and meditations to those things which tend to edification [and] not indulge in curiosity, in studying things of no use.... The duty of a theologian is not to tickle the ear, but confirm the conscience by teaching what is true, certain, and useful.” And lest you think he was advocating a private religion, let me add that the practical knowledge Calvin sought had “nothing less than the transformation of

society into a mirror of God's glory" about it (Gerrish, "Tradition..."). The private life of the faithful was to be well ordered, and so was their public life as citizens of the heavenly commonwealth.

5. Last, but not least, Gerrish adds "servants of the Word of God." This is by no means unique to the Reformed tradition, he admits. It belongs to the "evangelical habit of mind" in general, he says. But the Reformed tradition is nonetheless happy to champion it. Cleave to Christ, and do so by being servants of his Word.

If this sermon has also proved to be a bit much, then I am sorry for that. I think it's in the nature of the work: thinking theologically is a demanding work, and whenever we engage in it, we're always going to think we're drowning in ink, or heavy thoughts, as the case may be. But know this as well: that inclination we have to characterize ourselves and our opponents by lists of what we believe as opposed to what they believe? It's not the heart of the gospel. The heart of the gospel is thoughtful, critical service that has the happy end result of reflecting the glory of God through the well-ordered lives it has helped establish. And the Reformed tradition has helped bring us there.

Thanks be to God for all who were and are faithful members of it. Amen.