

“Thinking Theologically: About the *Un-Reformed* Tradition”
The Third in a Series of Sermons Preached at
Grace-Trinity Community Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota
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This is the third in our series of sermons devoted to thinking theologically. Last week zeroed in on the Reformed tradition, which is the Presbyterian half of this church. Today, it's the *Un-Reformed* tradition, which is the Baptist half.

Why *un-reformed*? Because, generally speaking, Baptists and their ilk can be classified as charismatic, as servants of the Spirit. The Reformed tradition is a servant of the Word; the *Un-Reformed* tradition is a servant of the Spirit. And yes, it is true that the two really are inseparable. You can't have Spirit without Word, not if it comes from God. And you can't have Word without Spirit, either. The two are one, and both are in the Father, making them three ... in one, a holy Trinity. But alas, we Baptists have managed to separate them. Yes, I admit it: I am a Baptist—an American Baptist, I hasten to add, so as not to be confused with those *other* Baptists. (There are so many *other* Baptists!) And since what I usually get when I declare myself is “You're a Baptist?!” I usually have to say it again. Yes, I am, and we look to the Spirit to tell us what to do.

So, a rub: the Reformed tradition defers to the Word, and especially as it has been handed down in its confessions and theological writings, and the *Un-Reformed* tradition defers to no one. With us, it's all about freedom: soul freedom, freedom of conscience, the freedom to interpret Scripture as we see fit, the freedom to worship God as we must, the freedom to stand before the throne of grace thanks to our *personal* relationship with Jesus Christ. It's also freedom from the civil authorities—Baptists are champions of the separation of church and state—and, really all kinds of governing authorities (including *The Book of Order*). It's even freedom from the Law itself, from the Torah, that is. Why, us Baptists, we can go straight to hell in hand basket if we want!

Or not. It all depends upon how we use our freedom. We can choose to pursue the thing blessed by God and that he's been itching to implement, if only we'd let him. Or we can pursue something else—never mind what those Calvinists are trying to tell you!

Buckle your seatbelts. We have arrived in Double Predestination. It is time for some history. I have to tell you first, however, that I'm using Baptists here as shorthand for the *Un-Reformed* tradition, but only because Grace-Trinity is both Presbyterian and Baptist. What I am calling the *Un-Reformed* tradition is more often called the Radical Reformation, and sometimes the Free Church tradition, because it includes more than just the Baptists. It includes the Pilgrims, the Congregationalists, the Mennonites and Hutterites, and, rather loosely speaking, all the churches that do not defer to higher governing authorities, be they bishops or presbyteries or what have you. Alas, you can't make Baptists do *anything*, much to the annoyance of their executive ministers.

So, the spiritual ancestor of the Baptists is Jacobus Arminius, or, Arminius for short and Arminian for long. These are fighting words. Arminius (1560-1609) took a different road in the Reformed yellow wood, and right at the time when the tradition was anxious about who it was and who it was not. And because he dared to question the just barely established orthodoxy of his day, he was condemned by his Dutch Reformed colleagues, not to mention a host of others who followed in their footsteps right on down to the present day. I marvel at the power the word “Arminius” has to stir some men’s souls. In 16th century Leiden, they would have loved to see him burned at the stake. The trouble was, he had impeccable Calvinist credentials. He was an accomplished Reformed scholar and beloved teacher as well. And he taught that the doctrine of predestination was basically sound, it just needed more work. God doesn’t predestine people to go to hell, he thought, he simply foresees that they choose to go there for themselves. But that was not good enough for the hardliners. It sounded like people had ... *free will!* They could resist the grace of God! And that was unthinkable. No can resist the grace of God! (That’s why it’s called “irresistible grace”—the letter “I” in the Reformed TULIP.) Arminius said I’m not so sure. It seemed to him that humans played a role in their own destruction. He couldn’t agree with the idea that some are predestined to eternal damnation. If that were true, then why be born at all?

You can see, I trust, why it is that having Baptists and Presbyterians joined at the hip in this church is so strange. Once upon a time we were sworn enemies. We had unprintable names for each other. And our enmity made for particularly grim times. The Reformation from the start was divided into those that deferred to the authority of the Word and those that championed the cause of the Spirit. And their quarrels made for a lot of violence and death—although not for Jacobus Arminius, who died peacefully in bed, I am happy to say. By leading an upright life alongside his growing conviction that something was not right in Double Predestination Land, he managed to evade the bent-on-hell authorities. I guess it was foreordained.

Is there a moral for us? Grace Presbyterian Church and Trinity Baptist Church were more like each other than not when they first came together. Even so, they chose to ignore their historic differences. They came together thanks to a similar outlook and, more to the point, an agreed upon mission. Along with a handful of other congregations, they began NIP, the Neighborhood Involvement Program. That is how they discovered each other and that is how they defined each other—as partners in a mission worthy of undertaking. Or so I am told. The story may be apocryphal. There may be more to their coming together than NIP can account for. Still, it’s a good story and I intend to hold on to it. *When people bury their differences, good things can happen.*

This is a useful reminder regardless of whether we’re thinking theologically or not. If we are thinking about worship, for example, and how we can accommodate all of our differences, it might be better to bury them instead, and to go with the worship we *can do* together, the worship we *want to do* together. I do not wish to say anything more about this. It was identified as the “elephant in the room” at the last Council of Elders meeting. But I am more than confident that we have the resources and the people of good will to address it. I would prefer to end my sermon, instead, with a tale of woe turned to

joy that happened to me.

It happened this past Thursday, the day I went down to Iowa to attend a Ministers Council meeting for my Baptist, led-by-the-Spirit denomination. I am the treasurer for the Council in this region. You may recall that I had thought the meeting was the previous week. Fortunately, I caught my error in time to drive down to Ames, Iowa, on the correct day, the day it turned out ... there was no meeting. The chairman of our little group had gone on vacation—completely forgotten about it altogether—and didn't tell any Council member he was going. Worse, no one but me showed up! The executive minister for the region, Marshall Peters, tried, but when he couldn't get confirmation there was a meeting, he stayed home.

So there I was, thoroughly annoyed that my time had been wasted. It was true that I had another reason to drive down to Iowa. I was bringing the church's handbells with me to deliver to a fellow in Ankeny, Iowa, just south of Ames, who is going to refurbish them. But I wouldn't have made that trip just for the sake of the bells. It was only because I had to go to my Council meeting that I agreed to take the bells as well.

And then I let go of my anger. It wasn't worth holding on to. I let go of whatever differences I had with the chairman, and I just let the day happen. And, you know, I had a vision of what the church could be like. I kid you not! I was driving along, and all of a sudden ideas for what worship could be like, what the Christian education program could be like, what the church year could be like—they all began tumbling into my head. I felt positively giddy! I had to pull off the highway in order to write them down—that, and grab a bite to eat at the local Dairy Queen.

I still have the napkin with all my jottings from this revelation.

The point was, *when I buried my differences with the chairman of the Council, good things happened.* They were just itching to happen. I only had to let them in.

Maybe grace is irresistible. I blush to think what I might have missed had I held on to my righteous anger.

In any case, I did not hold on to it. I let it go and I let God in. And now I'm bursting with energy and excitement and I can't wait to get to work on this new thing.

It could happen to you.

I hope it does.

Amen!