

# *Meditations on Reformed Thinking*

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Following are 31 “meditations” (I call them) on “Reformed Theology.” Some of my thoughts revolve around specifically theological topics, others are more related to “Reformed” practice and fellowship—or, a sectionalization of fellowships. Some of my meditations related to certain personalities who were either influential to me or representative of the Reformed “guild” with which I was familiar. I quit at 31 meditations 18 months ago because frankly, I couldn’t think of anything else upon which to reflect.

Now, I have one more reflection – I see Reformed Theology as the most well developed and truest overall approximation of pure New Testament theology. Their luminaries of thought and theological output are so overwhelmingly important and beautifully evolved in their doctrine that I cannot help but be inspired by them and proud of them. This begins with Calvin, Know and Owen, continues through the large collection of Puritanism, to Edwards (generally acknowledged to be the greatest American theologian), down to Spurgeon and through the establishment and growth of generally Reformed evangelicalism of today. That is not to dismiss the Wesleyan tradition completely—their contributions are eminent too. But fundamentally, for me, the Reformed juggernaut is the finest version of Christian theology to date, all things considered.

There are a few blind spots, in my estimation, but in general I think that a healthy Reformed understanding of theology overall is the best overall witness for systematic, historical and biblical theology that there is—so far. I see Reformed Theology as sufficiently distinct from the other main “Christian” schools of theological thought, in broadest terms:

- Roman Catholic theology
- Eastern Orthodox theology

- Higher Critical (liberal, Protestant or Catholic) scholastic theology
- Pentecostal theology
- Anabaptist and Arminian theology

All of these of course, share certain overlapping commonalities—but not enough to celebrate a general, Christianity-wide unity, in my view. My own loyalties lie with the Reformed camp for the most part, with a few notable points of divergence... which we will all be debating for the rest of our lives probably. Our common song is, given originally by King David (Ps.119:105)—

יְרֵ-לְרַגְלִי דְבַרְךָ אֶאֱוֹר לְנִתְיָבְתִי *Your word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my path.*

### Meditation #1 Sep 4 2020

In the summer or fall of 1972 I began attending College Baptist Church in Blacksburg Virginia. I was a new believer in Christ and also participating in Christian activities on campus with the Navigators and others. But the young pastor of the church, Martin Clark, impressed my 8-year younger mind with his carefulness with teaching and preaching, joined with a notable pastoral concern and warmth to college students. As I remember it, the little church had twenty or so Va Tech students attending.

Pastor Clark, in the Sunday evenings (as I remember it) was doing a pulpit series called “The Sovereignty of God” and used the book by the same name by the late British writer, A.W. Pink. Born in 1886 in Nottingham, married in 1916, **Pink** lived until 1952 and died at 66 (I was born later that year). This was my first official introduction to “Reformed” thinking or at least sovereignty-of-God thinking. And other than reading that first set of Jack Arnold Notes, this was my first introduction to the word “sovereignty”, which I remember thinking, “yeah that’s a cool word”, it never being in my personal vocabulary before. The book, in PDF form (free), is [here](#). Written first in 1918. Its Table of Contents is

Introduction

Chapter 1 – God’s Sovereignty Defined

Chapter 2 – The Sovereignty of God in Creation

Chapter 3 – The Sovereignty of God in Administration

Chapter 4 – The Sovereignty of God in Salvation

Chapter 5 – The Sovereignty of God in Reprobation

Chapter 6 – The Sovereignty of God in Operation  
Chapter 7 – God’s Sovereignty and the Human Will  
Chapter 8 – Sovereignty and Human Responsibility  
Chapter 9 – God’s Sovereignty and Prayer  
Chapter 10 – Our Attitude Toward His Sovereignty  
Chapter 11 – Difficulties and Objections  
Chapter 12 – The Value of This Doctrine  
Conclusion

I obtained the book, read it, listened to Pastor Clark’s preaching and elaboration on the subject and well, it just made sense to me.

### [Meditation #2 Sep 11 2020](#)

One more tale of Martin Clark, relating to my own Reformed history – in the late Spring of 1973 he invited me to attend with him, in Roanoke, a pastor’s group of which he was a part. I was an engineering student and a new believer and no inkling yet of going into ministry... The group was called the “Sovereign Grace Theological Society” (catchy title, eh?) It was a monthly gathering, attended by about twenty Reformed or highly Calvinistic pastors from the region involving presentations of papers, fellowship and lunch. I remember Pastors Al Smith, Ron Young, Dick Horner and Randy Pizzino and there was also a book table managed by the late Pastor Lloyd Sprinkle—a Baptist from Harrisonburg, haha (“sprinkle”)—and he peddled wonderful historic reprint books which he himself published, and sold many others (also my first introduction to The Banner of Truth Trust.) It was my first exposure to the world of Reformed *writing*, mostly older titles from the early 1900s and 1800s. From Sprinkle’s book table I first learned of R.L. Dabney and other 19<sup>th</sup> century luminaries. The pastors were all a ‘twitter with talk of Sprinkle’s forthcoming re-publication of Dabney’s 1865 biography of Stonewall Jackson (which would not be published as I remember it, until 1976)—I knew of Jackson because he was given the nickname “Stonewall” fifteen miles from where I grew up, at Bull Run. I was also impressed with the *host church* of the group, called “Grace Church”, which I remember seemed a succinct and plain capture of what these men were all about: grace. It’s pastor was Dr. Jack L. Arnold. I had met him the previous summer at Bill Gibbs’ *Nav home* in Blacksburg. That day in Grace Church, Dr. Arnold glanced at me and said, “Howdy, pardner.” (Three years later I

would be married in that church; five years later I would join the staff of that church and nine years later I would be ordained in that church).

It was also at this Spring meeting that randomly, Professor Robert Whitelaw (Mechanical Engineering at Va Tech), and also a “sovereign grace” man I was told, was presenting a paper on scientific evidences for creation. Whitelaw introduced me to a local high school senior named Renée English (she was 18 and she and her friend Sue were interested in Reformed thought and also attended.) Whitelaw himself had just met this beautiful young lady that day too and learned that she would be attending Virginia Tech in the fall as a freshman. I still remember the exact spot in the church where she and I were introduced by this professor. I think it was predestined! So many brief but important moments had begun to prime me for the belief that God was in control, was gracious and had a plan. Pastor Clark invited me for that particular meeting. I met the woman who would bless me immeasurably, bear our two children, partner with me in ministry for a career (though I could never have imagined it then). I was in the church that would come to mean so much to me. I heard meaty and quality and intellectually respectable teaching. I met a number of pastors who would later have a part in my life (I sat in a small group with the aged Ron Young *recently*, 48 years later). I heard for the first time about the great old Reformed writers. One particular day, in spring of 1973, orchestrated by a wonderful, loving and sovereign God, a plan for my life was planted. Little did I know....

### [Meditation #3](#) [Sep 19 2020](#)

When Renée and I were married, we lived in Falls Church and I worked in McLean, Virginia for the Navy. We had a taste for and were accustomed to Reformed teaching although we did not really yet have that word. We landed in a small Baptist church for eighteen months before entering the ministry back at Grace Church (where we had been married.) Our church for that time was small, independent, Cedarville-connected and family run. There was no interest at all in talking about or promoting the “doctrines of grace.” And while we *grew* in that little church in other ways (Evangelism Explosion, Word of Life, good mentoring and good friendships) we were in a “Reformed”-free zone. Simply, no one was interested. I brought it up a few times but neither the pastor nor the deacons (no elders) had any interest at all in the Reformed ethos. They were either unacquainted with the particulars of Reformed thinking or just not interested. So, since we had chosen

that church for other attractions, we had to wait until later to again indulge a Reformed diet.

#### Meditation #4 Sep 26 2020

When Renée and I were married, forty-five years ago this next Sunday, we had begun our relationship the previous year on solid ground. As we began dating (Spring 1974) and enjoyed many conversations about spiritual things, it became clear that she was further along in a Reformed view than I was. But she had none of the tenacious and combative demeanor about theology that I would find in others in years to follow. She just possessed a confident, settled perspective on how God works. (She still has this). Renée had been taught well and had taken in Dr. Jack Arnold's perspective and enthusiasm for viewing God as sovereign with a great ease. I remember chatting in her parents' basement about the First Epistle of Peter. As we read places like "who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father...", "has caused us to be born again to a living hope", "who are protected by the power of God" and on and on, it simply felt very natural, I remember, for her to speak of God in a Reformed way. Clearly the apostle Peter believed God to be wonderfully sovereign in His goodness and grace. And so did Renée. She was 19 and I was 22.

#### Meditation #5 Oct 3 2020

Most of us would like to believe that we have come to believe what we believe because we have studied it out, made completely mindful and careful decisions, deciding on the best exegetical and hermeneutical path, bathed in prayer and counseled by fully trustworthy teachers. With these factors brought together, we come up with what we feel are the most biblically responsible and Spirit-filled convictions, theologically and ethically.

The term "the doctrines of grace" as I have heard it used, seems to refer primarily to the interwoven Five Points of Calvinism and also to other attendant beliefs, launched in late 16<sup>th</sup> century and early 17<sup>th</sup> century Holland and Switzerland, and quickly imported to Scotland, England and parts of France and Germany. When someone *actually* uses the expression "the doctrines of grace" it is almost always been with warmth and affection. More derisive terms, referring usually to the same doctrines, might include "hyper Calvinism" and "determinism". I am wondering and

what I have noticed sometimes is that certain *personalities* seem more receptive to the high teachings given by the Reformed tradition and others seem more resistant. This idea must not be pressed too far and I, of course, am no psychologist. But we are still creatures of psychology and when we develop our personal convictions about many things we cannot completely detach from our own psyches, can we? We do not form our affinities just by genetics or by chance, happening to access some powerful Reformed teacher who impresses us so much. But still, it is my experience and observation that some of us seem more naturally aligned with the idea of a high divine sovereignty and others, perhaps of greater independent-mindedness, seem more fundamentally resistant. BOTTOM-LINE: I was taught early that we should make our decisions on this and other theological points first and last by careful and ongoing Bible study, “examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so” (Acts 17:11). But do all of us, do *only* this when developing our theology?

What I wonder is, quite apart from upbringing and training, if some of us just find it harder to buy into the doctrines of grace (while still loving *grace*), and others of us easily are taught “total depravity”, “irresistible grace”, etc. because of our baseline personalities? Could it be that some of us are just more “wired” to hear and receive a Reformed viewpoint than others of us? As I have shared from my own experience, I came into a high view of sovereignty even before I actually came to faith in Christ. And since 1972 I have not altered my view of soteriology at all, at least consciously. Then, I was taught well and richly over the next ten years by the likes of (nary a slouch):

- Martin Clark
- Jack Arnold
- S. Lewis Johnson
- Howard Hendricks
- Walter Kaiser
- Edwin Blum
- John Hannah

...and happily introduced to the lingering theological teachings and works of

- Martin Luther (+ P. Melancthon)
- John Calvin (+ T. Beza)
- Huldrych Zwingli
- John Owen (+ Peter Toon)

- John Cotton and Cotton Mather
- John Favel, Richard Sibbes and Thomas Manton (whom I found impossible to read ☹ )
- Jonathan Edwards (whom I found *almost* impossible to read ☹ )
- Richard Baxter
- Charles Spurgeon (who was easy to read ☺ )
- J.C. Ryle, W.G.T. Shedd, A.H. Strong
- Karl Barth, C. S. Lewis, R.L. Dabney etc.
- Eta Linneman

This is not to say that a good upbringing doesn't serve us well. If a person was raised by a high-sovereignty-believing set of parents, was instructed well in the church as a young person, and then also fortified that belief system with a good reading program and ongoing personal Bible study, it should not surprise us if that person naturally comes into a set of convictions which are fully compatible with the doctrines of grace. Many cases of this can be cited.

All of this, bringing us back to the question “how does someone come to love the ‘matchless grace of Jesus, deeper than the mighty rolling sea’?” If someone is convinced, as were [the Remonstrants](#), that the true and correct blueprint of salvation, in fact, includes a *conditional* election by God, *an unlimited* atonement by Christ, grace which is ultimately *resistible* (if tragically so) and only a *conditional* preservation of the saints, coupled perhaps with even (in darker situations) a Pelagian view of sin (which even the Remonstrants rejected), is it possible that this person is predisposed to that system even before they open a Bible?

Going one step further, I wonder if deep within some—even when fairly and graciously introduced to the doctrines of grace--there does not lie a deep root of frustration and even just disbelief, being predisposed to a more Enlightenment or Renaissance view of things, therefore finally rejecting the entire Reformation system of soteriology, the wonder and warmth of sovereign grace escaping them?

A thing of meditation to me... and a thing I find myself observing and pondering privately.

**Joining the Grace Church Staff.** It was a momentous decision for me—to leave the good job I had, and was doing well in, with R.M. Vredenburg & Company in McLean, Virginia. I was a management engineering consultant, a young engineer, brought on as an experiment in a small firm of all senior engineers. All our work was for Naval Sea Systems Command. I worked on the Encapsulated Mk 46 Torpedo, the CAPTOR, an ASW weapon. I had a great boss and I was learning so much. Resigning from that job—it having been such an unlikely opportunity for a fellow with such marginal undergraduate grades, infuriated my parents. How could a young person with such opportunity be so stupid? Renée and her family were supportive but certainly not pushing the idea. Renée easily may have lived all these years with an engineer...

One of my Va Tech roommates had joined the Grace Church staff as an **intern**—a pretty new concept, modelled on Ray Stedman’s Peninsula Bible Church in Palo Alto, CA. For some reason he thought of me. The idea was to join the internship group, be paid \$200 per month and raise the rest of whatever we would need to live on, in support, as a missionary does. This we did. I started January 1<sup>st</sup> 1977. (Renée finished her A.A. degree in legal secretarial science at VWCC and found her first job as a legal secretary, in Salem).

I joined the Staff which had Dr Jack Arnold as senior pastor, John Moy as Director of Discipleship Ministries, Yetime Davis as main secretary, Theo Hodges, Jeanne Pratt and Ida Wells as a rotating part-time team of secretaries. Previous, there had been assistant pastors George Gardner and David Hoover in various capacities. In 1978 we would be joined by Gary Arnold (Jack’s brother) as Christian Education pastor, Tim Moser as Headmaster of the new Grace Academy and Randy Pizzino as Associate Pastor. The interns in my time included Emily Hall (Wycoff), Andy Deadwyler (Smith), Dan Richards, Doug Clark and initially, Lorenzo Bean. I became great friends with them all. The church had a very active and engaged Board of Elders, my first exposure to that form of church polity—I had been in Baptist churches only to that point, with a pastor and deacons. Among the elders at that time, Paul VanHorn seemed to me most approachable and I also liked how he preached. We were all so young and even Dr Arnold was but 42 when I joined the staff. Doug Clark and I took every RIBS course we could, and it was then that I met Dan Esau! As George Gardner before and Jack Arnold, Dan was a Dallas Seminary



Master of Theology graduate. After my internship was complete, I was hired to replace Lorenzo (who had become Director of Campus Ministries and then left to begin grad school back at Virginia Tech) a post which I held happily for two years. My little volunteer “staff” included singles Pam Barden, Mark Gaking and Bob Gordon, Karen Carter sometimes assisted by Kevin Law and Russell “R.B.” Knouff. And Renée helped a lot too, of course. For our two summer beach trips we were accompanied by Joel & Becky Gurley. The church had a small bookstore and a growing library and I was put in charge of both—and given a budget (I spent every penny). We put in many Reformed books and sets, and added hundreds of cassette tapes by the likes of R.C. Sproul, S. Lewis Johnson and others.

Coincidentally (are there coincidences in Reformed thinking?), the church was the church in which Renée had spent her teen years. While still in high school she hung out with what she still calls “the Christ Reformed kids”, shepherded mainly by Richard Pratt. They had been taught well and mentored by Jack Arnold but broke off to form their own fellowship (called Christ Reformed Church) before I joined the staff. The still-wafting smoke of this fracture was my first sniff of “Reformed people can disagree about stuff?”

As I enjoyed my 2 years, 8 months on Staff, I found myself immersed in a Reformed world-view and culture. And yet as I remember, Grace Church was not quite fully admitted to the Reformed *guild* and somewhat held suspect for its premillennial eschatological position, despite its plain and aggressive teaching of Calvinism, elder government and promoting of a classically Reformed reading program. It was in that time that I learned the word “dispensation” and then quickly learned how Reformed people hate, loath, detest that word although I could not for the life of me understand why? I had immediately begun to read systematic theologies and found writers like Louis Berkof who actually *used* the word. I could not grasp why the hatred for dispensationalism? Yikes! In this time also, Jack Arnold carefully (and we all thought fairly) taught about all the various eschatologies among evangelicals and he simply included dispensational premillennialism among them. There was no twitchy-eyed bowing to the Scofield Reference Bible, as was implied by the more *purely* Reformed. The Baptist circles in which I had previously travelled were almost completely premillennial, so this disparity about the details of Jesus’ second coming was a growing pain for me. When Dr. S. Lewis Johnson came to Grace Church in May of 1977, I had many questions for him. Here was a two-doctorate fellow who was premillennial, Calvinist, Plymouth Brethren and Jack Arnold’s one of Dr.

Arnold's own mentors. That was cool enough for me! Dr. Johnson's love of Reformed priorities without being loyal *only* to Reformed associations made a deep impression on me, which would only deepen as I camped on his doorstep once we got to Dallas.

In addition, in those days Grace Church practiced a stern ministry of church discipline—a classic sign of Reformed-mindedness (they would say, Bible-mindedness). Weekly Staff meetings often included and were animated by discussion of church members' various states of spiritual growth. But in addition to Dr Arnold's premillennialism, the church didn't *smell* so Reformed because it was connected to other non-Reformed ministries: mission boards, parachurch ministries, campus outreach groups, evangelistic programs. So I, as a rookie, was introduced to a Reformed-sympathetic but not fully card-carrying Reformed church. I became more and more aware of this interesting and distinct feature of Grace Church and of our staff. I was being mentored by a man who could speak skillfully (and loved the "doctrines of grace" but who also had a great heart for evangelism. We loved to *talk* Reformed stuff but we were not very *tribal* about hanging out only with Reformed people. I had "cut my teeth" in independent Baptist ministries, separate, proud to remain so and quick to distance themselves from anyone who wasn't. For a short while as a new Christian, that tasted good but gradually began to smell a little off. Among Reformed people, I felt the same elitism as among the independent Baptists but in Grace Church there was a decided, "Well we're not like that" feeling. In this environment, I prospered and in August 1979 Renée and I were off the Dallas to begin at Dallas Seminary. That's another story....

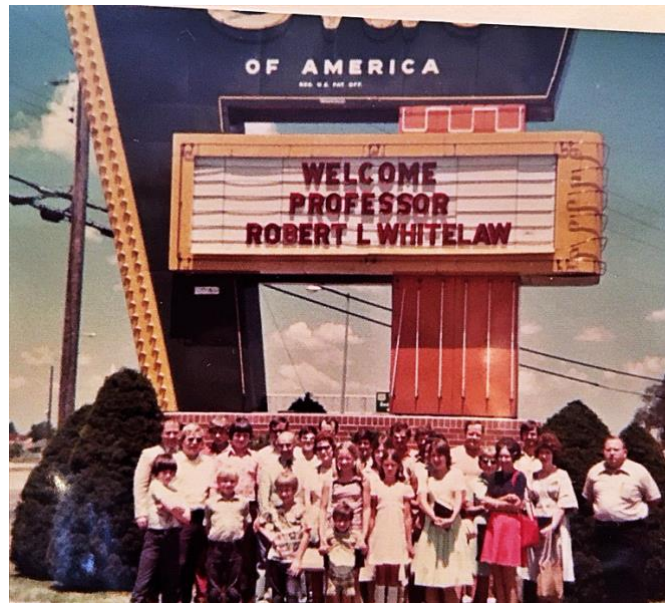
#### Meditation #7 Oct 15 2020

**While still in college** and just after, Professor Robert Whitelaw (1917-2008) was influential in my life and the development of my theology—or at least attitudes about theology. His obit is [here](#).

He was not a card-carrying Reformed thinker in a party-line way (could not have cared less about the term "the Westminster standards"), but was generally *in sync* with a Reformed world-view and certainly sympathetic to much of what is historically Reformed theology. In my last two years of college, I spent more than a few hours in



Professor Whitelaw's office, receiving counsel, hearing stories and jawing about engineering matters. On our first vacation after we were married (when I was working for the Navy), Professor Whitelaw and his wife, Clara, invited Renée and I to accompany them on a trip! After visiting the Missionary Tech Team in Longview, TX, Renée and I took a bus from Dallas to Oklahoma City where we rendezvoused with Professor and Mrs. Whitelaw. He was giving a conference there,



and a another one after in Springfield MO, at a tiny Reformed Baptist church. It was on this trip that it began to become evident to me that most Reformed churches are definitively small. At both conferences his focus was “scientific creationism” and also his own new term “Gospel millennialism”. Neither of these were terms you would hear in typical Reformed circles but they were views adhered to *in* those two circles (Oklahoma City and Springfield). As we travelled (by car, from Oklahoma through Missouri and back to Blacksburg) with the Professor and his wife, we spent long hours talking about doctrine and theology. He was 59 years old, from a rich heritage of Christian upbringing in China and Canada, a respected engineer and professor of nuclear engineering at Virginia Tech. I was 23 and barely a recent undergrad graduate, also of engineering. I hung on his every word—which in an unguarded time, delved into politics (mainly African), the story of his design of the nuclear reactor on the *NS Savannah* (which Bob & Karen Gordon and I toured in Charleston harbor in 1982), and many other less theological things.



Professor Whitelaw exemplified a man who was certainly loyal to Reformed teachings (albeit Baptist) but also *more* animated and studious of other issues. In other words, here was a scholar who if queried about Reformed theology, would say, “Yes, yes, of course. But let’s talk about these other things which are more interesting!”

#### Meditation #8 Oct 8 2020

I’ve mentioned him before but Dr. S. Lewis Johnson had a significant impact on my perception and understanding of Reformed thinking between my first meeting him in 1977 through my friendship with him until about 1995 or so when I last saw him. He passed away in 2004.



More reflection on his value to me, reminds me of other aspects of his “speaking into” the question, “What is ‘Reformed’?” Dr. Johnson was not a northerner. He was not a Presbyterian nor a Baptist nor a Congregationalist. He was Plymouth Brethren, or simply “Brethren” as was F. F. Bruce. Dr. Johnson, was to me a prime example of being a New Testament scholar before being Reformed, Calvinist, premillennial, Brethren, etc. He was those things because he was committed first

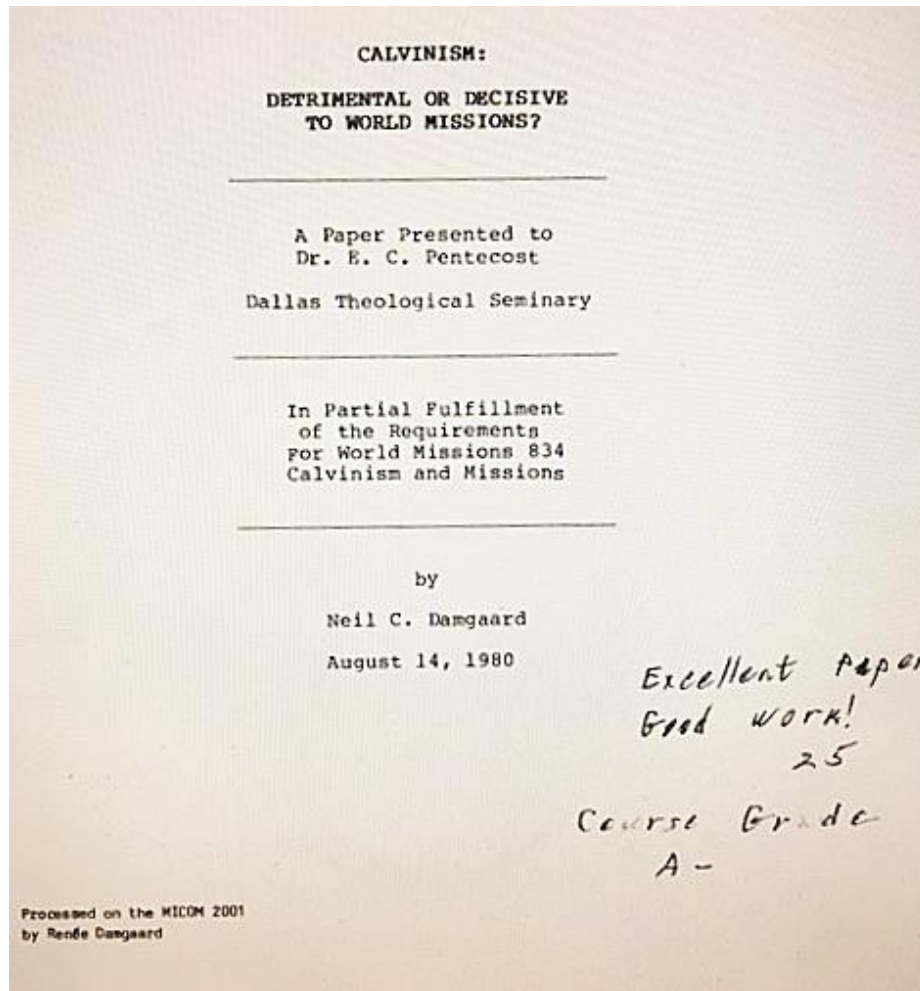
to embracing the most thorough and honest biblical scholarship possible, in his opinion. He was respectful, a good listener, ingratiating and possessed a southern kind of whimsy and charm which I felt only made him more respectable.

I visited him in his home in Dallas twice, at my own request, which he graciously accommodated. As I had sent him a book as a gift one time (I don't remember what), when I arrived at his home he presented me with a book as a gift too—the biography of Andrew Bonar. I asked him questions about interacting with Church of Christ theology, with which he was very helpful. After attending Believer's Chapel, when we first moved to Dallas I asked if the Notes from the previous week were available? He said, "No, one has to get them on the Sunday the message is preached." But then he took me into his office and fished out a whole set of his Notes on the Gospel of John for me to take—which I left in the library at Dartmouth Bible Church; a treasure (I hope they don't "dumpster" them). His Notes were not smarmy or shallow. They were scholarly and required some thought to absorb. But his teaching quality lit a path for me and displayed an integrity which is so needed in a young student of the Word.

Dr. Johnson was an older man (born in 1915), but he never lorded it over me. Many came to love him, especially Sam Storms, who was a little ahead of me at the seminary. Jack Arnold was also fairly impacted by Dr. Johnson as well. I am afraid I was directed away from a tribal loyalty to Reformed parties and denominations as much by Dr. Johnson as by anybody.

#### Meditation #9 Oct 28 2020

In 1980, while at DTS, I took a "missions" course called Calvinism and Missions, taught by Dr. Ed Pentecost (bro of the famous Dwight). I wrote this 10-page paper at the conclusion of the course... (which Renée typed for me on the Micom 2001!)



At the time, it was commonly claimed by quite a few in the forum of theological discussion that Calvinism, in fact, was disabling to any personal motivations to share the Gospel of Christ with people. They said, “if everyone is predestined, as Calvinism says, why share the Gospel at all? Why trouble ourselves with attempting to introduce the Gospel, persuade people to consider it, defend it or to support its propagation?” I heard this occasionally among fellow students, usually from Methodism or Wesleyanism or from one of several foreign countries—Korea in particular. (Incidentally, I cannot ever remember hearing it in my 36 years in New England—I guess we were just consumed with a different spiritual environment.) But at the time I judged that sentiment to betray a very shallow understanding of Calvinism. I would then often say, “I have never heard a single Calvinist say, ‘the Great Commission is not relevant to me because of predestination.’” That usually ticked them off and they would walk away from me. LOL.

In fact, at the time, I could not think of anything more preposterous or UNtrue! I reasoned, if Calvinism is a correct interpretation of the genuine soteriology of the NT, that would or should motivate me even more! If the elect ARE present in a town, then they will respond to *some* preaching, teaching, sharing of the Gospel. I do not need to agonize so much over who is the elect, since I know they will eventually “surface”. All the MORE reason to get out there are see who will listen? My Calvinism did not disable my desire to share Christ (in 1980) and it does not now. In fact, it inflames it! In 1980, my 8<sup>th</sup> year in the faith, I was confident that whatever feeble attempts I might use to share the good news of Christ (even Chick tracts!), God would be bringing the elect to grace anyway—yes, He was not dependent on me. But in His goodness, He often chooses to use our feeble attempts, our inconsistent and shaking “model” of a disciple, our not-fully-mature theology, to get the name of Christ heard and known. Now still, I feel the same. I always loved Paul’s words to the Corinthian church, “For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” (1 Cor. 2:2).

#### Meditation #10 Nov 8 2020

Somewhere along the way, it occurred to me (or perhaps I was told), “Reformed” thinking is more than just the five points of Calvinism; indeed, more than just the “doctrines of grace”. This seemed intuitive to me because my snarky personality would have said, “why invent another word that is just redundant?” Indeed, the word “Reformed” does mean more than just Calvinism. In his little 24-page booklet *What is the Reformed Faith?* (1981) John R. de Witt (1935-2018) explained what he viewed as the hallmarks of the Reformed faith – which his fans call nothing less than “the truest and highest form of Christianity”: the centrality of the Bible; the sovereignty of God; the wonder of grace; the quality of the Christian life; the place of the law and the gospel; the biblical view of the world; the importance of true preaching. DeWitt’s “seven points” do indeed address more than the 5 points. They circumscribe a world-view, one with which I have been and continue to be comfortable. It is not a perfectly defined world-view of course. There are issues and philosophical challenges unaddressed within it still. But in general, I have found no better overall picture of the mission of the church, the conditions of humanity or the hope of the future. (By the way, I don’t know what I was thinking, but while at DTS I used to purchase 10-copy packets of *What is the Reformed Faith?* and place them in the Student Center for anyone to take. The stack always disappeared quickly.)

What puzzled me though, is that these are nothing different from what I was taught and shown at DTS, a school which would not self-identify as “Reformed” and is sometimes even hated by Reformed people. DeWitt’s seven points would be ascribed to, at least in general terms, by every faculty member that I had in Dallas. So where is Reformed thinking (if DeWitt’s description can be taken as valued writ), different from the general evangelicalism (in the Ockenga/Henry/DTS tradition) with which I had come up? It is in the nuances and the subtle “flavor” or Reformed churches, I am convinced. Technically, no church that I have ever been part of, including my 36-year pastorate in Massachusetts, would deny or diminish any of DeWitt’s seven points. But the flavor and emphasis (for instance on the Law, or in the “primacy”, almost *sacrament* of preaching) would distinguish Reformed churches from those in which Renée and I have felt comfortable. Indeed, any church which is not fully Calvinistic would differ from the Reformed tradition. But every church with whom I have been close—and there have been many—would certainly ascribe to each of DeWitt’s seven distinguishing points. And each of the seven is important, to be sure. A liberal thinker will notably marginalize or relativize the place of the Bible as authority. He will quietly sniff at the idea of a sovereign God. He will redefine grace away from the understanding of the Puritans and the Reformers and cast it as some smarmy gesture of a collaborative God. He will likely define the Christian life less pietistical and more good-works oriented, being careful to defer to whatever modern moral redefinitions are chic and trendy, currently. He will have little-to-no use for the Law, accommodate an evolutionary view of the world and trim sermons to something easily digestible by the crowds.

No, and alas... Too many “evangelical” churches today are little interested in classically Reformed thinking, if their leaders can even converse about these issues. But the evangelical mainstream under which I came up was pretty Reformed in every point, as I judge it. The denominations and movements that I knew—the Bible Church movement, the Evangelical Free Church, the Baptist General Conference, the Plymouth Brethren churches, the early PCA—these seem to me to have all been essentially Reformed in their core beliefs, with the sometimes exception of the doctrine of particular redemption, the “L” in TULIP—which I will address in a later “meditation”. Even Kenn Gulliksen/John Wimber’s Vineyard (started in 1975 and comprising 2,400 churches today in 95 countries) was based in Calvinism, although I doubt that came up much.



So what's my point? It is that sometimes we get pretty proud of what we perceive to be our own *tribe* or our own distinctions—even if we are not all that distinct. To me this is counterintuitive to what the Holy Spirit is doing among us, and confusing to a watching world. I am not saying that Christians shouldn't collect themselves together in associations or like-minded fellowships. Just that we shouldn't always take ourselves so seriously—especially if it involves a carnal kind of pride or smugness. Of if it devolves into spiritual abuse or a Pharisaical “I thank Thee Lord, that I am not like this publican.”

### Meditation #11 Nov 14 2020

For the first five years of my Christian life, I encountered no opposition to the core ideas of the Reformed soteriology I was beginning to assume. As yet, no one that I knew questioned it. But in the spring of 1977, after S. Lewis Johnson's visit to Grace Church I was confronted by a church member who had attended a seminary in the Midwest, earned a Master of Divinity degree and with whom I had lunch occasionally. He worked for a family business and I would meet him at his office. One lunchtime he confronted me with what he said were the errors of Calvinism-- I was surprised, first to hear someone object to TULIP and second that he happily attended our church. He said he thought unconditional election, irresistible grace, most certainly limited atonement and probably the perseverance of the saints were all wrong. He conceded, as I remember, total depravity. He said he loved our pastor's preaching and the body life of the church. As I remember it, he thought the emphasis on the sovereignty of God was naïve and false teaching. Of course, I immediately ratted him out to the pastor. But Dr. Arnold already knew of my friend's objections and somewhat underhanded attempt to coax me away. I remember that he chided me for being so easily intimidated by a “decided Arminian.” My friend told me to read Robert Shanks' books, *Elect in the Son* and *Life in the Son* and I. Howard Marshall's *Kept by the Power of God* (as answer to the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints). He also said that, in his opinion, S. Lewis Johnson was no real scholar, at least not compared to the likes of I. Howard Marshall. I remember that my snarky answer was, “Well, Dr. Johnson begins his name with his first initial just like Dr. Marshall. Dr. Johnson MUST be his equal.” My friend was not impressed with my humor. I shared all this with the pastor, who suggested we read *Elect in the Son* together as a Staff, and discuss a chapter a week in our weekly Tuesday morning Staff meetings, which I remember that we did.

Later, in seminary, somehow, I gained the reputation for being Reformed, or Calvinistic, or something or maybe I was just a rabble-rouser. And a Korean classmate made me his target. I tangled with him on only a couple of occasions but I remember his vicious hatred for any notion of a sovereign God. Yikes. (He was in the vast minority at DTS, of course). I trust his ministry career was far more fruitful and productive than mine—if Reformed ideas are in error, than he would likely be more motivated to appeal to people’s free will, their only-partially depraved consciousness (the “will” being exempt from sin) and driven with a greater frenzy than me to “win souls.”

Then I did 36 years of pastoral ministry, created and led a Bible institute for 7 years, etc. etc. and never again was challenged for my doctrines. Hmmm. Reformed thinking was just not the mandated issue in New England, I suppose.

#### [Meditation #12](#) Nov 21 2020

In 1977 I visited Covenant Theological Seminary (St. Louis, with John Moy), Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Chicago, with John Moy) and Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia, with Doug Clark and Richard Pratt) with a view to seeking the Lord’s direction as to where to eventually attend. My pastor and boss, Dr. Jack Arnold, recommended such trips and visits and wholly supported a broad exposure to what we felt were the best seminaries in the nation. (I never visited Reformed Theological Seminary in Mississippi and Renée and I had enjoyed a brief visit to Dallas Seminary the previous summer).

At Westminster I met Professors Cornelius Van Til, Edmund Clowney and Vern Poythress. We sat in Dr. Van Til’s living room and fired questions at him—and he gave us each a stack of his books. We sat in classes with Drs. Clowney and Poythress. On the drive back to Virginia we visited the Banner of Truth in Carlisle PA and purchased a few books.

At Trinity, I met Drs. Walter Kaiser and Harold O.J. Brown and sat in classes with both. We also “hung out” with former Navigator and Va Tech Hokie Terry Bestja (and US Air Force vet of the Tet Offensive). At Covenant we visited no classes but had an interview with then President Dr. Robert Rayburn who was very gracious and helpful.

This was all exposure (except Trinity) to the wider Reformed world, on the graduate school level. I wanted really to go to Westminster and applied there. My application was rejected, the explanation given to me was that I had no philosophy courses in my engineering undergrad transcript. I was learning that the Reformed world, like the Baptist world and my later exposure to the Pentecostal, Nazarene, Brethren worlds, included its own jargon, loyalties, protocols and prejudices. I remember feeling at the time, “can I cut it in that world? Will they think me deficient? Is trafficking in talk of Bultmann, Kant, Tillich, etc. a necessary expertise for a man who wants to shepherd and disciple and preach? I ended up at Dallas, rigorous also but delightfully so, and with a non-sectarian flavor.

### Meditation #13 Nov 28 2020

While I wrote in a previous meditation that the basic idea of Calvinism seemed inherently reasonable to me even before my coming to faith in Christ, and thus of no influence by other people, it occurs to me since, that I have been greatly influenced, led and mentored by a large number of mentoring Reformed people. We would like to believe that all our theological convictions are driven solely by the pure study of the Bible with no or little influence by other people. How naïve. I have mentioned a single dissenter to Calvinism (the “recon platoon” of Reformed thinking) along the way. Now I mention a second.

The encounter was completely unexpected by me, blind-sided me and led me to think about some new aspects of theological thinking. In the summer of 1983, I was the brand-new pastor of Dartmouth Bible Church in Southeastern Massachusetts. I was completely new to that area and knew nothing of its church history or its current theological climate. The local newspaper ran an article about our arrival and focused on my having been an engineer and my having graduated from Dallas Theological Seminary. I quickly wanted to find some other evangelical pastors with whom to become acquainted and by fall had entered a guild of about 20 pastors. Two were very kind and enfolding, one Reformed and the other a BGC Baptist. A third, whom I will call “D”, invited me to lunch on the phone which made me feel good. I was being reached out to. As he picked me up in his car, he immediately and in a very animated way said, “Neil I am a 2-point Calvinist. I have no interest in being lectured about the other 3 points.” I was a little unnerved by this. I certainly had mentioned *nothing* about Calvinism in our one brief phone conversation and even my own church people had brought up nothing specific to soteriology or

Calvinism or Reformed stuff at all. I asked “D” why he brought this up while assuring him that any friendship we might hammer out would not be dependent on such matters. I just needed friends.

Subsequent to that day I learned that he (or his church) had experienced some controversy over Calvinism and apparently had lost some members because of the conflict. He was a preacher of the Gospel to be sure (and a Moody Bible Institute grad) and a respected Bible teacher. He was loved by his people and had maintained a strong history of leadership. His two “points”, he said that day—isn’t it funny that I remember this?—were total depravity and the perseverance of the saints. He had no use for “ULI.” I remember thinking then, as I do now, that the particulars of an honestly biblical articulation of the Gospel should not divide brothers of the faith. Should they? And yet they do. The historical development of the “doctrines of grace” ought to have bonded brothers and sisters together over the sovereign goodness and decree of God. No?

I was able to develop a cordial friendship with “D” for my first ten years of my pastorate. He retired in about 1992 and invited me to speak in his church on a couple of occasions. “D” is with the Lord now, and surely full of light and Christ’s glory. But I wish he had lasted longer—I could have used his wisdom in later years.

#### [Meditation #14 Dec 4 2020](#)

I noted previously that we all wish we could say, honestly, that our personal theology had been founded and refined JUST by Bible study. It is perhaps a little bit humbling to admit that when younger, we were impressed by one mentor or another, and motivated by that mentor’s personality, power, depth of conviction, intellectuality, history of being well-read, etc. to deepen our own commitments to various theological points.

When I first entered the ministry, I was in the environment of four men, whom I have barely mentioned to this date in these “meditations.” They were the late Pastors Allen Smith (1928-2020)—introduced to me initially by Pastor Martin Clark—and Lloyd Sprinkle (1939-2019) and Pastors Ron Young and Randy Pizzino, each of these two with whom I am still acquainted. I have met several Reformed thinkers who were cocky, defensive, too aggressive and way too separatist for my taste. But

these four men exemplified strongly Reformed thinking, laced with a deep experience of grace.

All four were godly and caring shepherds, all of great capacity to think and talk about the signal doctrines of grace. They were all also anxious to discriminate the differences and nuances between them and their own passion to ponder and love their biblical theology until they breathe their last. Pastor Smith struck me in those first tender years of my own theological development as a kindly and quiet man. Pastor Sprinkle, whom I only saw in my early days behind his famous book table, seemed a lover of church history. Pastor Young, was the loudest preacher I ever heard—I will never forget a sermon I heard of his once on “hope” which was burned into my brain by volume if nothing else. I met him recently once again in the Jonathan Edwards discussion group that I have joined. Pastor Pizzino has been one of the most careful thinkers in theology that I have known, and a very capable preacher. I could listen to him *longer* than most preachers I have had the privilege to sit under.

It is interesting to me that with others I have known, several of these men went to Piedmont Bible College, started in 1945 and now called Carolina University.

People impact us. That is not unbiblical at all. Perhaps some have developed their theology and world-view unfiltered—nothing but the Bible. But I thank the Lord for what has almost been an embarrassment of riches in fine mentors whom I have enjoyed and from whose ministries I have benefited.

#### Meditation #15 Dec 13 2020

This “meditation” is concerned with self-identity. As we arrived in Dallas in fall of 1979 my affiliations with Christians began to go wider than just with Reformed Christians. Perhaps that was predictable, in beginning studies at Dallas Seminary, now living in a modern Texas city of a million people, with big evangelical churches of all stripes everywhere. In Dallas there were Reformed ministries around but not many, and those we sampled felt too “tribal”—strangely, they were also rabidly anti-premillennial (an almost malicious odium that even today I fail to grasp). As to my fellow seminarians there were some who were militantly Reformed and who (it seemed to me) made that identity central in their presence on campus. There were not many but there were a few. I came to know them by their outspoken posture

in classes, usually the church history or systematic theology classes. They would write, distribute and post articles, and cite the Reformers as if *their* commentaries were the only tools worth using. I met no Presbyterians in our four years in Dallas, although once upon a time several DTS faculty members had pastored in Presbyterian churches. But the Reformed Baptists were evident—I barely knew, yet, that such a breed existed (other than our 1976 trip to Oklahoma City and Springfield, MO).

Unconsciously, my awareness was growing that the body of Christ extends to a far wider population than only the Reformed groups. I had aspired to attend Westminster Seminary and in that first year at DTS I found myself a little uncomfortable because I really thought of myself as “Reformed.” We also began to attend a Plymouth Brethren-style church, which was a church plant out of Believers’ Chapel. (As much as admired Dr. S. Lewis Johnson, the Chapel seemed very cold to us.) The church we selected was Reformed without calling itself Reformed. The main teaching-elder was Dr. Edwin Blum, a classmate of Jack Arnold, a double-doctorate and the man who would become my main professor over the next four years. His scholarship was impeccable, sparkling with a clear focus on Scripture and impressive in its background (his second doctorate was the D.Theol. from Basel, Switzerland.) In my fourth year the church hired me as part-time Jr. High minister, and Dr. Blum tutored me in the reading of *Calvin’s Institutes*. Can it get more Reformed than that? But neither he, nor the church called themselves “Reformed” and that, at the same time, confused me and made me happy. [HERE](#) is a recent and somewhat cheeky (17July2019) Q&A time with Dr. Blum in Arizona... And [here](#) is an article by Dr. Blum dealing with the question of eternal punishment and universalism from the viewpoint of apologetics.

I began to value a non-sectarian kind of biblical scholarship, without *first* making it Baptist, Presbyterian, Reformed or any other presuppositional hermeneutic. The message seemed to be, at least often enough, “let’s see what the Bible says, what its writings meant at the time, and go from there.” That appealed to me and it tempered my attitude about “tribal” leanings for the next 40 years. I remain that way, with an immediate raising of the eyebrow when someone says, “Well, you’re not much of a \_\_\_\_\_, are you? Call me naïve. I am content to be intelligently, biblically Christian.

## Meditation #16 Dec 19 2020

Dr. Stan Toussaint (1928-2017) exemplifies an aspect of Reformed ministry that is a little counterintuitive. [Here](#) is a taste, from the year before he died (at 89), from Psalm 19 in a DTS chapel talk. You will notice that lovely, deep Minnesota accent! You will also notice the way he makes good eye contact with the audience. I had Dr. Toussaint for three English Bible classes. I delighted in each one and made it a point to not miss a single class taught by this man. Each class would deal cleanly with the exegesis of whatever biblical section we were doing that day. And then for the last few minutes of each class, he would say, “Now let’s see some practical applications...”. These to me were invaluable jewels. He had an exceptional insight into the value of any biblical text for daily living. This demonstrated a love for Scripture, not just for its information but as much for its power in our lives.

Why I think of Dr. Toussaint in *these* meditations is that I don’t ever remember any comment from him (in three semesters sitting under his instruction) of anything from Reformed or denominational thinking. He was a godly man. He was a lover of the Word of God and far more capable with the knowledge of it than I will ever be. He was a keen thinker of biblical theology and doctrine. He engendered trust and great admiration. He held the respect of anyone who knew him, to my awareness anyway. I guess he was a Calvinist, at least in some form, as were most of the faculty at that time. But there was no axe to grind in terms of *making a point* about one aspect or another of soteriology. Toussaint almost seemed to be above the need to draw lines in the sand or identify “camps.” He was content to be a pastor and a Bible teacher just consumed with the text itself. This impressed me. This is not to indict the professors of Westminster, Covenant or Reformed seminaries that I met in earlier times. I am sure they all love the Word of God in the same way. But Dr. Toussaint exuded a love for the Word with no or little attached loyalties.

Postscript – In June 2008, I was in Dallas with Renée, Jocelyn and Susanna for my Doctor of Ministry graduation. As part of the weekend, the seminary had a little luncheon-reception for all the D.Min. grads that year and their families. Dr. Toussaint hosted, and after we had lunch he said, “Let’s spend a few minutes in the Word” and he had us turn to a brief passage in Galatians for about ten minutes. I was never so proud, and delighted! Renée and our daughters had the chance to sample a little bit of this man’s warmth and depth. They will not remember him, but it was icing on the cake for me. Dr. Toussaint was among the finest examples

of a pastor/scholar/disciple I have ever met. Technically I suppose he was Reformed enough. But more important was to be Christlike, full of a love for the Word and faithful to his calling.

### Meditation #17 Dec 27 2020

In the winter of 1981-82 I was in my third year of the Th.M. program at Dallas Seminary. By then I was sure that I wanted to pursue vocational and pastoral ministry as my career. It occurred to me that it would be practical to have been ordained *before* I began the application process for various church pulpits. I contacted my former pastor and “boss” Dr. Jack Arnold to see if ordination by Grace Church—where I had worked for 2.7 years before seminary—might be possible. At that point I understood “ordination” to mean a recognition and affirmation of calling, training and character by a recognized governing board of ecclesiastical elders (in Catholic thinking it is one of the seven “sacraments”). It would conclude with a laying on of hands by that board of elders and a commissioning of sorts, for whatever ministry to which the Lord called the man. It was not “licensing” as some denominations practice, but a general approval and “sending out.” Dr. Arnold, reeling from a storm of controversy himself at that time, responded in the affirmative to my request. (Perhaps my request provided for him a pleasant distraction and as it went, his ministry’s ending in Roanoke coincided with the beginning of mine in Dartmouth—and five years later he would bring a wonderful week-end Bible conference to our church). Requirements for ordination would be to provide, well in advance of the ordination exams, three papers: an exegetical New Testament paper; an exegetical Old Testament paper; and a theological paper, encapsulating my own theology and philosophy of ministry. These should be provided to the Grace Church elders no later than May of 1982, anticipating an August weekend of examination. I provided these papers and Renée and I made plans to be present at the church August 19-22 for exams and potentially, an ordination service. I would submit myself to three oral exams, one by a board of local pastors—four Presbyterians and two independents (Jack Arnold and Larry Eenigenburg), incidentally, both of my seminary; a second exam by the board of elders and a third by the general congregation of Grace Church. Renée was pregnant with our first child but was present for the third exam (we don’t remember her being asked any questions). If the consensus was positive from these three oral exams (not a foregone conclusion), I would be ordained in the regular



morning service, by the laying on of hands by the board of elders on Sunday August 22<sup>nd</sup> 1982, just before my fourth and final year of seminary.

The exams were stern and challenging. The pastors focused on my theological development and pushed me to recall details of the ecumenical councils, give explanation and defense of various theological constructs and development (my focus in seminary was historical theology and so I was well prepared for this element.) They also wanted to test my commitment to Reformed thinking. The elders' exam focused on character and consistency in my Christian walk and the ordinances. The general church examination (as well as I can remember) focused on things like church leadership, time management, counseling and preaching particulars. In all these I do not remember being asked about missions, my anticipated role in a local community, my attitudes about collaboration across denominational boundaries or any political issues. And I remember (I had been told in seminary to anticipate this), I was asked to recite the books of the Bible—which I did successfully. On August 22<sup>nd</sup> 1982, I was ordained by the seven elders: Jack Arnold, Howard Burford, Dick Ericson, Daniel Esau, Bill Hall, Russell Knouff and Bob Saville and by the general affirmation of the membership of Grace Church (of which I think we were still members). Dr. Arnold preached, and then I was given a few minutes (after 12 noon, I remember) to preach a bit. I think I selected Hebrews 4:14-16 to expound in about 15 minutes.



What all this has to do with Reformed thinking, was the method and seriousness of consideration of a man's "call" to ministry. I was proud to have undergone the process. In later years I would be asked to endorse other men's sense of "call," with little to no academic background, but surrounded by enthusiastic supporters. My own exposure to the Reformed process prepared me well for the gravity and sobriety of being on the other end of ordination. I was joined by other pastors in the process, and in two cases they joined me in the battle to not just "rubber stamp" popular candidates but to seriously examine their preparation and fitness for vocational ministry. Neither case ended happily and both men left our ministry. My own experience with Reformed pastors and elders had, in my mind, set a pattern of high expectations and demand, a thing which seems to have lost much of its power in recent decades in our culture. Incidentally, those two men are in the ministry today, despite us shaking our heads at the time. I am sure a couple of those Presbyterians were shaking their heads at me in 1982 as well. This taught me that ordination is not "high church" or Catholic-like. It is an approximation of calling, and there will still be risks, uncertainties and as yet still uncovered weaknesses in a candidate which can only really be tested by real-time exposure on the "front lines."

Two months after ordination, I found myself in initial communication with the leaders of Dartmouth Bible Church in Massachusetts, desperate for a pastor, and to which I would still not be available for another seven months. I was delighted to tell them that in addition to my training, I had undergone rigorous ordination exams, completed two internships and had been at least officially affirmed for ministry. The Reformed community in Roanoke had taken my exploration of a call seriously, examined me thoroughly and "sent me out" to wherever the Lord might call us. I would do my entire career in one city and one church, always with the fond memory of those elders "backing me up." Some ten years later, when Grace Church itself was again facing a pastoral vacancy, I applied. I was not called, but that was alright—the Lord knows what He is doing. Our church in Dartmouth grew, prospered, established itself as a known and well-thought-of Gospel entity in our city, developed numerous small groups, engaged many collaborative ministries with other churches and para-church organizations, allowed me to volunteer (delightfully) as the sole Protestant chaplain at the major university down the street, searched for and found a larger denominational family with whom to affiliate, endorsed and supported my obtaining an earned doctorate, raised up and trained many new elders and deacons, merged with one inner city church and

absorbed several other groups of refugee-believers from toxic situations, developed a wonderful ministry among Chinese intellectuals, built a beautiful new facility, signed on with many missionaries, grew a staff, etc. As I meditate on my early Reformed connections I can give thanks to the Lord for their ministry to me when I was so young. This had little to do with the usual markers of Reformed theology but had *everything* to do with the depth and heritage of Reformed concepts of polity and leadership.

### Meditation #18 Jan 2 2021

In my fourth year of seminary, I did an independent study with Dr. Ed Blum, in the reading of John Calvin's 1559 *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. For my brain it was a herculean task. I read the F.L. Battles translation although the Beverage translation was cheaper--I found it very hard to read and Dr. Blum recommended I invest in the more expensive translation. The *Institutes* is 1,521 pages which I read as best I could in my final semester of seminary in 1983. I was also working almost full-time cleaning pools; Renée and I had a new baby, and we were already anticipating placement in Massachusetts upon graduation. But the project was a blessing, and I am glad I completed it.

Calvin divided his *Institutes* into four main sections:

- I. The knowledge of God, the Creator
- II. The knowledge of God, the Redeemer in Christ
- III. The way in which we receive the grace of Christ
- IV. The external means or aids by which God invites us into the society of Christ and holds us therein

Calvin's Calvinism is much broader and quite different from that which evolved into T-U-L-I-P in later years. His comprehension of "truth" was much more comprehensive and was crafted in the heavily Catholic and European times in which he lived. Seldon Strong wrote (1909) in *The Essential Calvinism* that "It is extremely unfortunate for Calvinism that such an easily remembered formula was ever given to the world, seeing that in its origin it was a negation, and in its scope limited to the subjects of a certain theological controversy. Not only did it present a very limited view of Calvinism, but it also tended to perpetuate its peculiarities in

an exaggerated form in the minds of those who sympathized with the Dutch Calvinists as over against the Arminians.”

Did this project contribute to my Reformed thinking at the time? It seems like all Reformed people revered John Calvin and his place in church history as well as his writings (I also purchased the complete set of Calvin’s *Commentaries* while in seminary and used them occasionally in my pulpit ministry—interestingly he declined to write a commentary on the book of Revelation!). I left this set in the library in Massachusetts. But it is good to have heroes and Calvin stands as one hero to me still. If you read the *Institutes* looking for ammo to fight modern battles with other Christians, you will be disappointed. The things he emphasized were a different caliber than what we might wish for today. In that way, he widened my awareness of theology and bigger issues than just the five points. In his time he would have been a force to be reckoned with. Am I a Calvinist? Of course. Am I a 16<sup>th</sup> century French/Swiss anti-Catholic city-state despot? Not much. But I give thanks to the Lord for my exposure to the *Institutes* and the chance to taste some of the greatest thinking that the church has produced.

#### Meditation #19 Jan 16 2021

I heard the expression “T.R.” when I was on staff at Grace Church (1976-79) but cannot ever again remember hearing it. “T.R.” seems to have stood for “totally Reformed”. I never heard “T.R.” used in Dallas and certainly never in New England. As I remember it, “T.R.” was a simple and somewhat adolescent assessment of *how* Reformed someone was. It assumed 5-point Calvinism but also factored in such questions of how conversant one was with such things as covenant theology, Presbyterian or semi-Presbyterian polity, whether one was willing to at least consider covenant (infant) baptism, how much in love with reading the Puritans one was, and how broad (or narrow) one’s boundaries and practice of fellowship would be (especially with other clergy.) I was never able to achieve or wear the “T.R.” elite status—although I certainly subscribed (with various qualifications) to the Augsburg Confession, the Westminster Confession, the London Confession, the New Hampshire Confession, the Savoy Declaration, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Religious Affections, etc. I also used to claim to be a 6-point Calvinist. When asked what the 6<sup>th</sup> point was, I would reply, “If you don’t hold to the first five you are a heretic.” No one ever seemed to think that was funny.

Isn't it interesting the categories we set up to distinguish ourselves from one another.

- Are you "T.R" or Amyraldian?
- Are you supralapsarian or infralapsarian?
- Are you Presbyterian or Baptist?
- Are you northern Presbyterian or southern Presbyterian?
- Are you Southern Baptist, Reformed Baptist, GARB Baptist, independent Baptist?
- Are you postmillennial, amillennial or (gasp) premillennial?
- Are you continuationist, cessationist or semi-cessationist?
- Are you episcopal, elder or congregational rule?
- Are you young earth or old earth?
- Etc.

## Meditation #20 Jan 24 2021

I think we arrived in southern New England with a sub-conscious expectation (since it is the Land of Jonathan Edwards and the Pilgrims) that we would soon run into plenty of Reformed-minded brothers and sisters. This was not a conscious hope—I just expected that where people studied the Bible seriously and took the Gospel at face-value (the “power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also the Greek”) there would be automatically Reformed perspectives on a sovereign God, a grace that no one could resist and a destiny that was not distractable. How naïve it turned out that I was. In my first year there I met two pastors—Ken and Bob—who had a Reformed perspective. Ken would become a good friend and Bob would disappear from the local scene not long after we arrived, and then reappear years later (as Director of the New England Institute for Religious Research). I met them both on the same night! At the time Ken pastored (although he did not use that designation) the First Christian Church of Hixville (founded in 1780) and Bob pastored the First Congregational Church of Middleborough (founded in 1696). I was drawn into learning the history of each of these churches, both grounded in classically New England culture and heritage. Reformed thinking was embedded in each church but there was no over-fellowship of Reformed passions to which either church was affiliated. This was a small case of the wider environment in which we lived, of the low number of generally evangelical churches that existed in southern New England in that time. So each

nurtured a quiet Reformed style and flavor while not embracing the luxury of separatism and distancing from any other evangelical ministries.

This insistence of *being*, in essence, Reformed without automatically distancing from anyone who was NOT Reformed impressed me in my young ministry. I am unaware of anyone in either Hixville or “the Church on the Green” (as First Congregational was called—with a long history) who was NOT Reformed. But I had people in the church which I pastored who were unsure of anything Calvinistic. We had all young and new believers, nourished on the Bible alone with no denominational or long historical sensitivities. As I taught my way through numerous Bible books from the pulpit, engaged new ministries and outreaches, endorsed a whole new team of leaders I was simple-minded enough to just teach the Bible. We adopted the motto, “the Bible as it is, for people as they are.” And so I contented myself with fellowship wherever I (and we in our church) could find it, collaborations with anything evangelical and within a few years, All Things Reformed faded into my past. I stopped speaking “Reformed” and began to trust and enjoy fellow ministers and sister churches who loved the Word, were committed to most of the same visionary priorities that I was and who supported each other well. It is no surprise to me then, that after 36 years there (held there by the providence of God), that when I came to Roanoke, I had lost the language, forgotten the boundaries and found that I am just not energized by the “tribal” connections that once were a bit more important to me. I suppose this makes me suspect and unneeded within the Reformed brotherhoods locally. So be it. In my heart I know how God has worked. Here I stand. I can do no other.

#### [Meditation #21 Jan 31 2021](#)

In the midst of the dearth of Reformed resources and connections that I was experiencing in southern New England, I became aware of a Reformed Baptist conference that would be happening quite close by to me. It was to be held on the campus of Wheaton College (the Norton, Massachusetts one, not the Illinois one) and was to feature Pastor Al Martin. I remember it was called a “Family” conference. In addition, it would feature a good friend of mine from Grace Church days, Pastor Randy Pizzino. So, I decided to take a day and attend part of the conference.

I had collected a number of Al Martin tapes over the years and was familiar with his style, emphases and content. I was also happy for the chance to see Pastor Randy once again; it having been some ten years since I had last seen him. I heard two messages from Pastor Martin. In person, I was very unsettled at his pulpit power and more, the feeling of humiliation that I was receiving. Perhaps this was just me. I was a pastor myself of some years, a ThM grad of Dallas Seminary and engaged the conference with a positive anticipation. The gathering as I remember was perhaps 50 people. I knew almost no one there however, and so after Pastor Martin's second message I left to return home. My spirit was troubled, I still am not completely sure why. As I returned back to South Coast on Route 24, I must have been speeding because I was pulled over and received my first and only speeding ticket. That was certainly not Pastor Martin's fault. But something about either my lack of spiritual preparation for the conference, to receive the "meal", or something else was unnerving to me. I would attend a few Reformed events thereafter—John Bunyan Conference, Banner of Truth Pastor's Conference, seminars at RTS-Charlotte. But that day was marked in my thinking. I asked myself, "Do I have the same effect on the people of my own church? Do I intimidate them? Do I have an unconscious urge to belittle them?" Perhaps in this regard that conference was a healthy thing for me. But at that point I decided that a Reformed philosophy should never frighten people. It should not, ever, in itself, have a diminishing, dehumanizing ethos to it. For that, to me, is not the Lord Jesus. Conviction, repentance, godly sorrow, good works of repair and reconciliation, and whatever other words might come to mind all seem appropriate. But what I felt that day, under the banner of "Reformed" somehow, did not seem right. It also did not seem healthy. It was the culture, I think, that backed me off.

### Meditation #22 Feb 6 2021

In pondering the effect of Reformed thinking in my life, independent of any specific biblical or theological issues I must admit to two big *emotional* attractions, which have been a) the heroic legacy of the early Reformed leaders and b) the sense and aura of certainty. I am aware that Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Pentecostalism, comprising most of "Christendom" today, are as yet unimpressed with the insistent postulates and corollaries of Reformed thinking. Nevertheless, I choose to keep this meditation within the scope of traditional/orthodox Protestantism. Also, I do not mean to suggest that other creeds, religions, parties or camps do not possess these two qualities. Courage and certainty are not the sole

possession of the Reformed. But among some of the Reformed, I saw these two qualities and was attracted to them there.

a. THE HEROIC LEGACY OF THE EARLY “REFORMED” LEADERS. I have always loved stories of heroism, courage and valor. Wycliffe, Tyndale, Hus, Savonarola, Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Knox, Bunyan, many of the earliest English Puritans—especially the Axminster congregation (Bartholomew Ashwood et al) and many other small, independent and unfranchised churches of the time—as well as, of course, Robinson, Brewster, Winslow and the Pilgrims of Plymouth—and certainly noting and not forgetting their wives. While they surely all had their shortcomings, their character, their insistence on *sola Scriptura* and their vigilance to rediscover and refine good theology inspired my own feeling of God’s presence in their vision. Conversely, I never learned of any great quality of character among the Arminian leaders with the exception of John Wesley. Perhaps this is unfair, but in my pondering (and in the time when I was most intently reading church history) *I just never came across many stories* of free-will theologians, i.e., the Remonstrants, doing much of a heroic nature. Yes, the opponents of Calvin in Geneva were sometimes persecuted but to suffer for a God who orders things in a semi-Pelagian or Arminian way, just never impressed me with any desire to emulate them.

b. A SENSE AND AURA OF CERTAINLY. Reformed writers, preachers and luminaries always insist, or exude, that they are right. One friend of mine indicts them for “always having to be right” and feels that I reflect this attitude too. Some in Reformed circles sometimes state their certainties with a harsh mean-spiritedness (perhaps here are Warfield, Dabney, Gerstner, MacArthur and maybe Sproul—whom I heard be publicly very harsh against DTS on one occasion) but in my exposure, the good ones have a clean and refreshing certainty about them. These would include Edwards, Hodge, Berkhof, Plumer, Brooks, Thornwell, Bavinck, Spurgeon, Shedd, Owen, Ryle, Schaeffer, Stott, Packer, McGrath, Keller, D.A. Carson, Piper, and on and on. Among modern women thinkers of a generally Reformed sympathy, I would include Eta Linneman, Edith Schaeffer, Elisabeth Eliot, and Joni Eareckson Tada—who while not generally referenced as a theologian, has certainly and bravely earned the designation “thinker”. To me, these all give off a feeling of confidence, being well-read, articulate, intellectually clean and thoroughly acquainted and quick with a good handling of Scripture. If they are ever dismissive of objectors, the ones I have admired have, when compelled to, disagreed charitably and honorably. As a military parallel these seem to me more



like Eisenhower, Marshall, Bradley, Nimitz, O. O. Howard, Lee and Grant; less like MacArthur, Patton, Halsey, Montgomery, Sheridan, Butler, Forrest or Hunter—who, even so, did each have their own strengths and importance.

Almost independent of the particular issues, the Reformed luminaries gave or give off a feeling of being sure. And while I have not agreed personally with every jot and tittle, they are rarely vague or admit to being uncertain about doctrinal, exegetical or purely theological questions as developed from a Scriptural baseline. It doesn't make them correct. But it makes them attractive to me. Many European theologians of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have wielded their influence with a rationalistic, Renaissance and deeply philosophical baseline, glancing up against Scripture here and there perhaps. They are today's heroes of much of mainline Protestantism, Unitarianism and New Light thinking. But those ministries radiate little to no sense of certainty. Every new line of thinking is indulged and probed for help. Every divergent interpretation of theology is woven into the world-view. Little is settled and therefore little is dependable and accommodation seems to be of highest value.

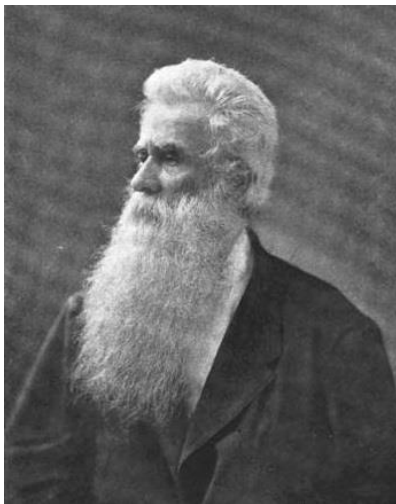
Is it wrong or dysfunctional to be certain that a thing is true? Is relativism so completely infused into modern thinking that anyone who is sure what they believe should be automatically designated as "Dangerous"? Is it a narcotic of "safety" to say, "everything is debatable. Nothing is certain." Not for me. I have always been strengthened by the preachers and theologians and missionaries too, who while equipped with certainty on basic theology and world-view are also clothed with humility, grace and compassion... This has always smelled good and pleasing to my spirit. Even if I myself have occasionally been polemical, dismissive or arrogant. May the Lord have mercy on me. But the Reformed insistence on the



*five solas* remain sure to me. And to me, these five certainties have graced the most honest and straightforward handling of what the biblical authors have taught.

### Meditation #23 Feb 14 2021

Among all the many Reformed books that I collected over the years, One of my favorites is the commentary on the Book of Psalms by W.S. Plumer. It is exhaustive, theological and very warm with a section of practical notes after each section. (He also wrote commentaries on Romans and Hebrews). I left the massive Psalms commentary in the Durfee Library at Dartmouth Bible Church. Reading about Plumer himself (1802-1880), he was a southern Presbyterian but who ministered in the north too. Part of that time taught at what was then Western Seminary in Alleghany Pennsylvania. From the 2013 brief BIO by Presbyterian pastor Caleb Cangelosi (Cookeville TN), this paragraph...



“Plumer’s time at Western Seminary came to an end in 1862, as members of the Central Presbyterian Church (which he had pastored since 1855) became upset that he would not during corporate worship ask “God’s blessing upon the Government of our country in its efforts to suppress rebellion,” nor would he “give thanks to God for the victories which God has granted our armies.” Some have interpreted his inaction as due to pacifism. It is more likely that he was motivated by a conviction that the question of the war was a political question with which God’s ministers had nothing to do as such, coupled perhaps with Southern sympathies. Further research would be needed to discover the truth, but in any event, he

resigned both pulpit and seminary chair, and five years later the Southern Presbyterian Church elected him to fill Dr. Thornwell's chair of Didactic and Polemic Theology at Columbia Theological Seminary. During those intervening years, Dr. Plumer continued to write. Some of his most familiar books, including treatises on the law of God, experimental piety, and a commentary on the Psalms, were produced during this time."

Fired by his seminary and his church, for political reasons, Plumer was undaunted and adjusted, rolled with it, continued his work of writing until picked up by Columbia Seminary in S.C. in 1867. It was in that time that he wrote his Romans and Hebrews commentaries. Cangelosi notes though, "Unfortunately, though, his time at Columbia ended on a low note, as he was embroiled in disputes with other seminary professors, and many became disillusioned with his pedagogical effectiveness. At the 1880 General Assembly he was, against his wishes, made Professor Emeritus. A few months later, following complications from kidney stone surgery, he died." His wife preceded him in death two years earlier.

All going to show that being Reformed (and Presbyterian at that!) does not immunize us against frequent transitions, getting fired or war. But God's grace prevails and even with kidney stones at 78, Plumer ended his life in the victory that Christ procured. May I be as stalwart in my faith.

#### [Meditation #24 Feb 28 2021](#)

For all their marvelous strengths, there are some things I never heard talked about much by Reformed people. Of course, the truth is so "deep and wide" it would be unfair to expect any one camp in Christianity to cover everything. But since most Reformed thinkers fancy themselves the very apex and most advanced form of theological practitioners--perhaps I can indulge—to my awareness at least—a few items where they have been strangely quiet. It seems to be the calling to other thinkers to elucidate and dwell on these subjects:

THE SECOND COMING OF CHRIST. AS if this were some obscure teaching in the New Testament. So far at least, I have never heard an exposition of 2<sup>nd</sup> Tim. 4:8 c: *πᾶσιν τοῖς ἠγαπηκόσιν τὴν ἐπιφάνειαν αὐτοῦ, to all those who have loved His appearing.* I do not say they never preach this passage and the truth of His appearing, just that I have never heard it referenced, unless in a "bashing" lecture against premils in general or against dispensationalists in particular. Do Reformed people love the

second coming of Christ? As to the “Westminster Standards”—the Confession, the Larger Catechism and the Smaller Catechism—there is hardly any mention at all of this doctrine except in reference to “the day of final judgment.”

THE TREMENDOUS THEOLOGICAL CHALLENGE TO THE FAITH BY PENTECOSTAL PNEUMATOLOGY. I would have hoped—and perhaps there *has* been a response and I just didn’t see it yet—that some of the Reformed thinkers from Westminster Seminary, RTS, Knox or elsewhere would have resounded since 1960 or so, to the tenets of Pentecostal theology on the Holy Spirit. Specifically, that the Holy Spirit has initiated a “second and third wave” of indwelling, supernatural empowering and a whole new church growth movement.

### Meditation #25 Mar 7 2021

I have never understood the great chasm that has been created between Christians who call themselves “covenant” theologians and those who call themselves (or *used* to call themselves) “dispensationalists.” Against the backdrop of the wider world out there—especially the current one—this chasm is sad to me. In all my times at DTS I never heard a mean or unkind word uttered by any faculty member against covenant (or Reformed) theologians. In my class on eschatology, my professor laid out both amillennial and postmillennial systems with great respect before presenting the premillennial system. My ear was cocked for any sarcasm or disparaging remarks. None came.

And yet many times I have heard covenant and Reformed people almost choke to say the word “dispensation.” Why is there such animosity? Is it Hal Lindsey’s fault? Tim LaHaye’s? J. N. Darby’s? Is the idea that God has chosen to manage history with a progressively unfolding series of differing “economies” so nauseating? Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof said as much and in fact, used the word “dispensation.” He did not see seven distinct “economies” but three (as do I). I do not know how a biblically minded person cannot see Old, New and Future economies?

I remember Jack Arnold saying, with some humor, in a staff meeting, “I think I am a covenant dispensationalist.” I took that to mean a blending of the two systems, seeing them both in the Bible. I shared that comment with a PhD student when I got to DTS, who had also attended Virginia Tech with me (chemical engineering) and he was so freaked out at the idea that he said, “What?” And stood on his head.

Literally. What is so incompatible and hatred-driving that there is such a chasm? Is it that dispensationalists see a future role for Israel and cannot accept that most of the book of Revelation is about 70 AD? Is it that covenant theologians cannot imagine anything about the kingdom of Jesus Christ which is not now happening and reserved for after His second coming? Well OK, fine. But to maintain the moat between the two evangelical, Gospel-of-grace-defined camps, to me, is a grief to the Spirit.

I had classes with John Walvoord, Charles Ryrie and many other DTS scholars. My favorites were Edwin Blum, John Hannah and Donald Sunukjian—all three possessed two earned doctorates each. They were not dummies. They were godly, well-read and spiritual men. They each had their shortcomings, of course, I am sure. But their pursuit of biblical thinking was above question. I have the same respect for Reformed men like Edmund Clowney, Cornelius Van Til, Robert Rayburn, Harold O. J. Brown and Vern Poythress, all of whom I met and gauged my own estimate of their demeanors. All passed with flying colors! So why is there, out of the seminaries and out here in the fields among the pastoral guild, such distaste among us? As I think about the current spiritual landscape, I fear we need to find a more gracious appreciation for what we share in common and while maintaining our theological distinctives if we must, present together a less toxic and more interwoven picture of the Church.

### [Meditation #26](#) [Mar 13 2021](#)

I have probably sounded pretty critical of my Reformed roots. But I am not disdainful of those beginnings and associations. My “path” just took me out of the closed social cliques that Reformed loyalties seem to propagate. Actually, however, I am systemically connected. Here are a few random attractions:

- I love the idea of a completely sovereign God. Since even before my regeneration, I have had no sympathy and found no biblical honesty with, and have had no love for any god who is other than completely sovereign. I’m sure the sovereign God of the Bible doesn’t need my ratification but I love He who is identified by Reformed thinking.
- Flowing out of a general Reformed thinking, flows the best notions of authority. Systems, preachers and theologians who subconsciously resist authoritative centers generally are not comfortable with Reformed thinking.
- It is the Reformed thinkers that champion the science of systematic theology,

which I love. The idea of systematization of theology wasn't invented of course after the Reformation but it was clearly the Reformers who developed, popularized and made systematic theology more comprehensive.

- From my perspective it is from within the guild of Reformed thinkers—men and women—where the nobility of biblical manhood and womanhood gains the highest and best defended esteem.
- The mysteries and antinomies (learned that word from J.I. Packer) of Scripture, which are unavoidable, are best and most honestly managed by Reformed thinking. They are done, in my opinion, a disservice by European rationalism and its latter day twentieth and now twenty-first century proponents who seem to be passionate to find excuses for God and wish “Him/Her” to evolve rather than receive Him as self-revealed.
- To my taste, Reformed thinkers breed better publishers and music.

#### Meditation #27 Mar 21 2021

Non-Reformed Reformed thinkers (NRRTs). NRRTs would be people who are “high” Calvinists, embracers of the 5 *solas*, committed to Reformed polity and readers of the Puritans. They are also to some extent wanderers, unconnected to any official Reformed *ecclesiastica*. My NRRT examples would include my two seminary mentors, Drs. Edwin Blum and John Hannah, Dr. David Macleod, Bible Church people and lots of other DTS peoples when I was there. It would include a few baptistic pastors I knew in New England, not so enamored with the Reformed guild, small though it was in Massachusetts. It would include a number of Plymouth Brethren teaching elders, a number of Anglican pastors and church members—notably people I met from All Souls Church in London, and a number of African thinkers (specifically people from Ghana and Cameroon), and a number of Chinese immigrants, who seemed to have little problem with core Reformed teaching although they were not taught the finer distinctions of association as practiced by Americans. It would include some people I met in Northern Ireland who while Presbyterian of the strictest sort (Martyrs Memorial Presbyterian Church), were detached from the wider stream of Reformed fellowship by virtue of their politics. I suppose the NRRTs would probably also include me...

## Meditation #28 Mar 27 2021

Being “Reformed” seems to include at some point beginning a long-term project of reading “the Puritans” which seems to include other writers, post 17<sup>th</sup> century as well. The first Reformed writer I ever read was Arthur Pink and his book *The Sovereignty of God*. I learned of this book in my second summer in the faith when Pastor Clark was preaching through the same subject, utilizing Pink’s outline as I remember. My next Reformed writer was J.I. Packer and his book *Knowing God*. Over the years many books followed, some being read by me in their entirety and others only partially. Puritan writings are not easy to read, being very literary. This is no reading-brag-a-thon. I am a slow and ponderous reader and grow impatient with the very long and wordy treatises of the Puritans. But the things they focused on were very appealing: working out the theology of the Reformation, exploring that theology’s impact on daily living, all the various church-related issues, always maintaining a witness to the Catholic context, various political issues of their times. I guess they didn’t have videos to watch! As I have previously mentioned I grew to love books published by the Banner of Truth Trust, Presbyterian & Reformed Publishers, Kregel Publications and Baker Academic. I learned of the great John Owen, Thomas Manton, Thomas Brooks, Richard Sibbes, John Knox, Richard Baxter, J.C. Ryle, John Cotton, Cotton Mather, Jonathan Edwards, Charles Spurgeon, W.G.T. Shedd, R. L. Dabney, W.S. Plumer, James Henley Thornwell, John Murray, B.B. Warfield, J. Gresham Machen as well as the more European Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, Huldrych Zwingli, Martin Bucer, AND OF COURSE John Calvin. (I read *The Institutes of the Christian Religion* in my fourth year of seminary as an independent study.) I also occasionally used his commentaries. There were also more modern writers who while not technically Puritan were of the same sympathies: Packer, Louis Berkhof, G.C. Berkower, William Hendriksen and Simon Kistemaker, R. C, Sproul, Donald Gray Barnhouse, Sinclair Ferguson, Francis Schaeffer, Vern Poythress, Cornelius Van Til, Edmund Clowney, J. Oliver Buswell, etc. I was never informed of many female Puritan writers (except poet Anne Bradstreet), sadly, or even very many modern female Reformed writers (except more recently, Rosaria Butterfield). I suppose Elisabeth Eliot and Edith Schaeffer were Reformed... But reading these writers raised the bar for my appreciation for good theology, good exegesis of the Scripture and good *experimental* Christianity. Today we have John Piper, Timothy Keller, plus a few younger men as well as a great many journal articles constantly being published which retain the Puritan insinences, and their warmth. Reading the Puritans *aloud*, I found, helps in

appreciating their power. If I ever go blind, I hope there will be someone around to come read to me from the Puritans.

### Meditation #29 Apr 3 2021

It is only among Reformed people that I ever heard the phrase “the primacy of preaching.” With the Reformed, the preaching of the Word during a worship service is *almost* akin to a sacrament. I was even told recently by one Reformed preacher that he believes that learning the Word of God by Christians is intended to primarily be *through* the listening of sermons. Clearly preaching is thought to be the centerpiece of Sunday morning worship. And as one who generated over 6,000 pages of sermon manuscripts—I always preached from a full-text manuscript, a habit I learned from Jack Arnold and S. Lewis Johnson—I am no stranger to the importance of preaching.

The assumption seems to be that regardless of the skill, appearance and ethos, training or the personality (or personableness) of the preacher himself (no herself btw), the listener will be blessed and spiritually instructed just by accessing pulpit ministry if they will just access it often enough, honor it and recognize its central importance. Having heard plenty of Reformed preachers over the decades—some good, many scary—and a great many non-card-carrying Reformed preachers, of the premise of the “primacy of preaching” I am not sure. Again, it was my job and so I loved preparing, praying over and delivering sermons. I studied the craft lots. I took preaching classes from Haddon Robinson, Donald Sunukjian, Duane Litfin and Ramesh Richard. I also have learned to listen to a sermon (in person, YouTube and mp3) and not be too critical, but ask the Lord, “what would you have me hear?” But as for its sacramental place? No. I see it as a tool, an important tool no doubt, but only one of several good tools for us to access to help us hear God’s voice to us. Of course, I have no use at all for any preaching which is liberal, modernist, higher-critical, hipster or progressive-themed. These kinds of preaching put me to sleep faster than ZZZquil. And when I remember the good Reformed preachers I have heard, I am thankful for their love of Scripture, their attention to detail and a biblical author’s original intent and driven by the goal to get to good application. Good Reformed preachers seek to honor God, humbly get their messages from the Spirit and finally exalt God’s glory in Christ. And so, may I never recede to any satisfaction in any preaching less than that.



Meditation #30 Apr 10 2021

Most evangelical seminaries utilize similar content for their standard, three-year professional ministry degree, the Master of Divinity (MDiv). Some are “hipper” than others (i.e., Fuller Theological Seminary) but each school usually acquaints the student with two years of Greek, one year of Hebrew, courses in basic theology, church history, basic Bible content (English Bible) and various courses in ministry issues plus some emphasis on missions. The Reformed seminaries (I looked at four: Westminster, Covenant, Reformed and Knox) aim at the same core curricular foci, plus an added emphasis on apologetics and a somewhat heavier look at systematic theology from a Reformed perspective. Church history offerings are sometimes a bit more focused on Reformation themes. These days more flexibility is offered with greater specialization tracks available. Here is an example of a first-year program (Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson):

SUMMER SEMESTER			FALL SEMESTER			WINTER SEMESTER			SPRING SEMESTER		
No.	Courses	Cr. Hrs.	No.	Courses	Cr. Hrs.	No.	Courses	Cr. Hrs.	No.	Courses	Cr. Hrs.
<b>JUNIOR YEAR</b>											
OT502	Hebrew I	3	OT506	Hebrew Exegesis	3	CE514	Edu. Ministry of the Church	2	OT508	Genesis–Deuteronomy	3
OT504	Hebrew II	2	ST503	Doctrine of Scripture	2				ST601	Covenant Theology	2
		<b>5</b>	HT502	History of Christianity I	3			<b>2</b>	PT506	Intro to Preaching	2
			PT502	Intro. Pastoral/Theol. St.	2				ST526	Sanctification	1
			HT504	Hist. Phil./Christian Tht.	3				HT504	History of Christianity II	3
			MS518	Missions	2				ST540	Christian Encounter with Islam	2
									Elective	2	
					<b>15</b>						<b>15</b>

Here is the current first year curriculum for Westminster Theological Seminary:

## FIRST YEAR

<b>Summer</b>	OT 011	Hebrew 1	3
	OT 012	Hebrew 2	3
		Total:	6

<b>Fall</b>	NT 001	Greek 1	3
12 weeks	AP 101	Intro. to Apologetics	3
	PT 111	Intro. to Past. Ministry & Th.	2
	NT 111	NT Introduction	3
	OT 013	Hebrew 3	3
	ST 113	Doctrine of God	
	or	or	3
	ST 101	Intro. to Systematic Theology	
		Total:	17

<b>Winter</b>	NT 002	Greek 2	3
4 weeks		Total:	3

<b>Spring</b>	NT 003	Greek 3	3
12 weeks	NT 123	Hermeneutics	4
	PT 343	Theo. of Evangelism & Missions	2
	OT 113	OT Introduction	3
	ST 113	Doctrine of God	
	or	or	3
	ST 101	Intro. to Systematic Theology	

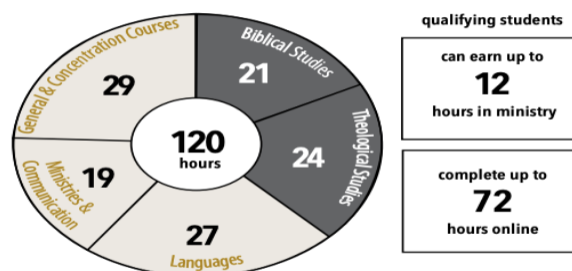
Here is the current first year curriculum for Covenant Theological Seminary:

FIRST YEAR		SUMMER	FALL	JAN-TERM	SPRING
NT302	Greek I	4			
NT304	Greek II	2			
AT310	Christian Formation & Calling~		3		
CM310; CM320	Communicating the Scriptures; Preaching the NT*		3		
NT305	New Testament Exegesis		3		
ST300	Covenant Theology		3		
	Electives‡			2	
CC310	Foundations for Apologetics & Outreach				3
NT320	Gospels				3
ST310	God & Humanity: Foundations of Counseling~				3
WM310	God's World Mission				3
<b>TOTAL HOURS: 32</b>		<b>6</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>12</b>

My own seminary (DTS) follows a similar path of theological learning, although DTS offers the Master of Theology (ThM) instead of the MDiv, with a required fourth year.

<b>BIBLICAL STUDIES</b>		<b>21</b>
BE5101	Bible Study Methods and Hermeneutics	3
BE5102	Old Testament History I	3
BE5103	Old Testament History II and Poetry	2
BE5104	Old Testament Prophets	3
BE5105	The Gospels	2
BE5106	Acts and Pauline Epistles	3
BE5107	Hebrews, General Epistles, and Revelation	3
NT5110	New Testament Introduction	2
<b>THEOLOGICAL STUDIES</b>		<b>24</b>
HT5101	The Church to the Modern Era	3
HT5102	The Church in the Modern Era: Europe and North America	3
ST5101	Theological Method and Bibliology	3
ST5102	Trinitarianism	3
ST5103	Angelology, Anthropology, and Hamartiology	3
ST5104	Soteriology	3
ST5105	Sanctification and Ecclesiology	3
ST5106	Eschatology	3
<b>LANGUAGES</b>		<b>27</b>
NT5101	Elements of Greek	3
NT5102	Elements of Greek	3
NT5103	Intermediate Greek	3
NT5104	Introduction to New Testament Exegesis	3
NT5105	Exegesis of Romans	3
OT5101	Elements of Hebrew I	3
OT5102	Elements of Hebrew II	3
OT5103	Hebrew Exegesis and Old Testament Introduction I	3
OT5104	Hebrew Exegesis and Old Testament Introduction II	3

<b>MINISTRIES &amp; COMMUNICATION</b>		<b>19</b>
BC5101	Pastoral Counseling	2
EML5101	Designing and Leading Effective Ministries	3
PM5101	Christian Life and Witness	3
PM5103	Expository Preaching I	3
PM5104	Expository Preaching II	3
PM5110	Capstone Preaching	1
RS5101	Orientation and Research Methods	1
WM5101	Introduction to World Missions	3
SF5100	Spiritual Formation	0
<b>GENERAL &amp; CONCENTRATION COURSES</b>		<b>29</b>
INT5130	ThM Ministry Formation Internship	3
	Senior Research Seminar or Thesis	2
	Electives: Ministries and Communication	9
	Electives: Custom Concentration	15
<b>Total</b>		<b>120</b>



In contrast, here is from the current catalog of Harvard Divinity School where required courses are few:

## REQUIRED COURSES AND COURSES LISTED BY INSTRUCTOR

Courses at Harvard Divinity School are typically offered as follows: courses offered on a weekly basis for one full semester (four unit courses); courses offered on a weekly basis for the entire year (eight unit courses); courses offered biweekly, or on a schedule set by the professor, for the entire year (four unit courses). Credit for courses meeting for the entire year is awarded only upon enrollment and completion of both semesters. The course listing encompasses required degree program courses and listings by academic year and instructor including projected offerings through spring 2023. For complete information and course descriptions visit [my.harvard.edu](http://my.harvard.edu).

### MASTER OF DIVINITY REQUIRED COURSES

HDS 2933 Meaning Making - Thinking Theologically about Ministry Experience: Seminar  
HDS 4510 Introduction to Ministry Studies  
HDS 4515 Theories and Methods in the Study of Religion  
HDS 4516 Field Education  
HDS 4591 Master of Divinity Senior Seminar

What my little study reveals is that in general the evangelical/Reformed seminaries mirror the same emphases with some small distinctions among each. The evangelical/Reformed schools see the same urgencies in Bible knowledge, theological preciseness, the importance of outreach and missions and the centrality of the Gospel. My observation is that in the bigger picture, all believers see a sovereign God, offering a fabulous Gospel, purchased by a beautiful Savior to a sinful world and surrendering the results to Him.

### [Meditation #31 Apr 18 2021](#)

One thing I have always appreciated about those in the Reformed families, is their deep historical sense of what is important. Pentecostals, for instance, are convinced that what they believe God is doing *right now* is the most important thing to pay attention to. They're not without appreciation for things God has done in the past but their focus is on the NOW. Catholics seem animated by the maintaining of their principal traditions and the good works which accompany those traditions, and attach so much importance to those things that all else seems to fade. That sense does, in fact, overlap with evangelicals on some things but also diverges away on other things. Liberal Protestants are all tangled up with enlightenment thinking and issues of what are marketed as social justice—they generally possess (it seems to me), at best, a cursory interest in the Bible. Many general evangelicals give their greatest attention to evangelism, adapting ministries to attract newcomers and holding themselves together in an era of

increasing skepticism and criticism. Reformed people, yes, standing alongside general evangelicals in a great many doctrines, still pride themselves with being immune to some evangelical practices. They remain ever-enamored with the vital issues raised during the Reformation and the decades following. They are endeared to their Confessions and catechisms (which, I find, if we actually read them, find ourselves quite edified.) They are also interested in evangelism although not, in my judgment, feverishly so. They are also permanently devoted to the stating and refining of systematic theology. In this they shine and have far outclassed any other tradition. I love this. At heart, I am a systematic theologian and draw most heavily on those theologies written by Reformed people. By the way, that is almost completely men, and how I wish there would have been more women to draw from. I wonder what a “systematic theology” written by a woman would look like?

The Reformed have a deep, abiding commitment to the historic *dogme théologique* of orthodox Christianity, unapologetically drawing on its development from Augustine, Anselm, Luther, Calvin, and Edwards + a long list of important second-stringers. They do not apologize for their assumptions and presuppositions and certainly not for their epistemology. They reject the *trajectory* hermeneutics that are so *chic* today. Reformed thinking keeps its crosshairs on the Bible, always probing it, refining and upgrading their internalization of it and (when Spirit filled at least) listening carefully to others for any good help. I suppose my appreciation for this element of Reformed thinking makes me Reformed, although I am a “citizen without a country” in other ways. But I judge that my Reformed brothers and sisters generally do focus on what is truly important.