

Spiritual Direction and The Reformed Tradition

Richard H. Herman

“Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda”
“The church reformed, always reforming.”

“To Form” – “to mold or give shape; to fashion; to make; to develop.” To re-form is to do it again. To be *reformed*, is constantly to be shaped, formed, molded and sculpted more toward the image of God. A genuinely “reformed” Christian is *always* in process and progressing and is willing to live into that process of *becoming* though not “arriving” in this life.

While the “Reformed Faith” grew out of a historic movement (the “Protestant Reformation”) within the European church of the sixteenth century, it’s more than just a notable rending of ecclesiastical relationships that created church associations separated from the Roman church. The cry of church reformers of five centuries ago *“Ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda”*, though about challenging and changing the *church’s* moral, structural, practical and theological life, also applies to *individual* followers of Jesus Christ. *Each* of us is reformed as, in Paul’s words, a “new creation” but we’re constantly being *re-formed*: *hominis reformata, semper reformanda* – the person reformed, always being reformed.

For me, to “be reformed”, is to be accepting of, expecting or anticipating change and transformation. Reformed Christians affirm God’s constant work of shaping lives by movements of the Holy Spirit. So, we are a most hopeful people. We’re not stuck in “what is” presently but we see God is at work changing us and others. We can’t become fixed or fixated in one place since God is constantly doing a “new thing.”

When a “reformed” spiritual director meets a directee, he or she comes to that meeting with the unbridled anticipation that God *will* do something between the three present—directee, director and Holy Spirit. We may not know exactly what it will be, but God is never done re-shaping any of us. He is always at work.

However, a more technical, theological description of “the Reformed Faith” usually rotates around a stream of doctrinal affirmations whose headwaters are found in the life and thinking of John Calvin in Geneva and his followers, like John Knox in Scotland.

While one familiar, popular acrostic uses a flower (TULIP) to mark how it understands key distinctives of the Reformed Faith in five affirmations, I come from a tradition that sees the Reformed Faith in light of Ten Basic Tenets:

The Ten Basic Tenets of the Reformed Faith

Basic Beliefs of the Presbyterian Tradition

The Universal (“Catholic”) Christian Church

1. The Mystery of the Trinity
2. The Incarnation of the Eternal Word of God in Christ

The Protestant Reformation

3. Justification by Grace through Faith
4. Scripture as the Final Authority for salvation and a Life of Faith

The Reformed Tradition

5. God’s Sovereignty
6. The Covenant Life of the Church Ordering itself according to the Word of God
7. A Faithful Stewardship of God’s Creation
8. God’s Choosing (“Election”) of People for Salvation and for Service
9. The Sin of Idolatry which makes Anything Created Ultimate, rather than Worshipping the Creator
10. Obedience to the Word of God which Directs Us to Work for Justice in the Transforming of Society

From Chapter Two
The PC(USA) Book of Order
Form of Government

The first four “tenets” are *not* distinctly Reformed, being universal to all Christians and/or the heritage of all protestant believers. In the history of theology and spirituality, what makes us distinctly “Reformed” are the last six.

(5) God’s Sovereignty

Most often when we think of sovereignty in general, and God’s sovereignty in particular, we do so in terms of power. Sovereignty is seen as an attribute of God which means He is always in control, He is above and over all things and events, and in power and authority—He is superior to all others. But raw power can be (or should I say usually *is*) intimidating or even coercive for most of us. For some, to see God as sovereign is frightening; but it need not be so.

That kind of fear can come from seeing God’s sovereignty as an *isolated* attribute that stands alone. But, like we who are made in His image, God is a fully *integrated* being. Each of His attributes affects and is affected by His other attributes. For instance, if God’s sovereignty is not isolated from His love, He is lovingly sovereign and sovereignly loving. That means whatever He does in His power is directed by love; i.e., He does it for love’s sake ... AND it means that his love is so empowered that it cannot be thwarted or overcome. Therefore, the New Testament can declare that “in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us,” ... that nothing in all creation “will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” and that God can work all things together, as a whole, “for the good of those who love Him” (fr. Rom. 8).

If the driving energy at the heart of spiritual direction is God’s love longing for us and love’s longing for God (and it is!), then to know His love cannot be thwarted whenever and wherever it’s present brings with it a most wonderful assurance to both director and directee.

Now long ago I came across the story of a farmer who placed a weather vane inscribed with the words “God is love” on top of his barn. One day a traveler stopped by the farm and watched the weather vane moving with the breeze. Then, with a smirk on his face, he asked, “Do you mean to say that your God is as changeable as the wind?”

The farmer shook his head and replied, “No. What I mean to say is that no matter which way the wind blows, God is love!” That’s *sovereign* love.

The same applies to God’s other attributes. There is always *mutual* affecting of one attribute with another one. God’s justice is sovereign and His sovereignty is just – what a wonderful affirmation when assisting those oppressed by injustice to see and know the working of God’s Spirit. God’s grace is sovereign and His sovereignty is gracious. His mercy is sovereign and His sovereignty is merciful. His goodness is sovereign and His sovereignty is good. And so on and so on

To know as directors that our God is sovereign in His dealings with us as human beings is not fatalism, as some think. Rather, it is an impetus to great faith, a source of great hope, an encouragement to great love, and it is most certainly a great mystery as He welcomes us into His unique and marvelous movement for and within each directee. At each appointment, we may wonder, “What’s going to happen when we meet today? I don’t know, but when God is in it ... something wonder-filled will occur.”

(6) Ordering of Our Relationships by the Word of God and (10) An Obedience to that Word which Directs Us to Work for Justice in Transforming Society

Here we see the Reformed assertion that it’s the Word Incarnate in Jesus *and* the Word “Inscripturate” in the Bible that forms and reforms individuals, relationships and communities thus bringing real health and wholeness to fruition, and bringing

justice and righteousness to light. As “Reformed Christians” we’re heirs of the reformation “sola’s”+, including Sola Scriptura.

As a Reformed spiritual director, I want to be aware that God’s Word, as revealed in Scripture, must enter into the direction sessions as a catalyst for the soul’s forming and reforming. That’s because it’s the forming and transforming Word uttered at creation as “let there be ... and there was ...” (fr. Gen. 1); it’s the renewing, strengthening, hope-giving, enlightening, directing Word that the Psalmist affirms (fr. Psa. 119); it’s the fiery Word that purifies and tempers according to Jeremiah (23:29); and the Word that Jesus says feeds our souls (Mt. 4:4). It’s the Word of Elijah’s “still, small voice” (1 Kings 19:13) and the Word Jesus still utters as we tune the ear of our souls to the Shepherd’s voice (Jn. 10:3-4, 14-16). So, whether in Lectio Divina shared in a direction session, the simple reading from a Psalm of David at a session’s beginning or texts shared at the Spirit’s prompting throughout, the life-giving Word found in Scripture is a key component to direction. In the hand of the soul’s Great Physician, God’s Word in Scripture is a sharp scalpel that cuts deep for healing and restoration of the individual’s own spiritual life (Hb. 4:12,13).

But, the creating, forming Word in Scripture also brings healing and restoration to communities, family systems and networks where we live and work as directors and directees in relationships with family and neighbors, colleagues and strangers, the rich and the poor, the church and the world. When relationships aren’t right—we’re

+ **The Five Reformation Solas**

Sola Scriptura (*Scripture alone*) Scripture is the sole source of written divine revelation, which alone can bind the conscience. The Bible alone teaches what’s necessary for salvation and provides the benchmark for Christian behavior.

Solus Christus (*Christ alone*) Our salvation is accomplished only through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ which is sufficient for our justification and reconciliation to God.

Sola Gratia (*Grace alone*) In salvation we are rescued from sin’s consequence by God’s grace alone. It is the Holy Spirit’s supernatural work that brings us to Christ by freeing us from bondage to sin and bringing us into spiritual life in Him.

Sola Fide (*Faith alone*) We are restored to a right relationship with God by His grace alone through faith alone because of Christ alone.

Soli Deo Gloria (*God’s glory alone*) Because our salvation is all of God and has been accomplished entirely by God, it is to His glory from beginning to end. We must live our entire lives before God, under His influence or mandate and for His glory alone.

not right and we're not in a healthy relationship with God; hence the counsel of Jesus that "if you're offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to that person; then come and offer your gift" (Mt. 5:23-24). Even the spiritual practice of worship is affected by relationships out of order with God's Word.

(7) *A Faithful Stewardship of God's Creation*

God's Creation provides many natural "thin places" where I (and others) encounter the Divine and caring for it is no insignificant part of our *raison d'être* as those originally charged (even *before* sin's entrance into the equation) to "tend, guard, keep and watch over" creation (Gen. 2:15). Is it any wonder that spiritual retreats in the wilderness, or the simple pleasure of turning over and handling the warm soil while preparing a spring garden, can bring us into God's formative presence and reveal His person? In these kinds of times and places we discover something about our God – the architect and artist who designed and formed it all; and about ourselves as those made in His image and created for relationship with Him. Creation holds within it, the first "self-portrait" of our God, for it is there that "God's invisible qualities—His eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen" (even before we came on the scene); and it is there that "the basic reality of God is plain enough. Open your eyes and there it is!" says Paul. "By taking a long and thoughtful look at what God has created, people have always been able to see what their eyes as such can't see: eternal power, for instance, and the mystery of his divine being" (Rom. 1: 19, 20 *TNIV* and *The Message*). And this is a basic tenet of the Reformed faith!

As a spiritual director, I need periodic retreats "into the desert" several times a year; and I must also pay attention to the possibility that for a directee it also might be in the backside of the desert where he or she will meet God anew, perhaps in a burning bush or perhaps not in a way quite so dramatic ... but just as real.

(8) God's Choosing ("Election") of People for Salvation and for Service

Of all the Reformed doctrines of grace, God's choosing of His people (i.e., "election") is one of the most misunderstood and troubling. For me, however, it's one of the most glorious as I liken it to the *love that "chooses"*, as seen in the images of adoption [*God's choosing for salvation*] on the one hand and team participation [*God's choosing for service*] on the other.

God's choosing for salvation means that He wants me (and any child of His) *for his very own*. God's choosing means that we don't just stumble into a life-giving relationship with Him but rather that He initiates the relationship by an act of His loving will. *And*, God's choosing for service means He wants us on His team and that He will equip and train us to do what calls us to do.

How many of us remember the schoolyard angst of picking up teams to play ball. Will I be chosen? Am I wanted? *Election means we are wanted!* And we're wanted for a great task, a special calling, a grand purpose that God has for us: that we might participate in something bigger than ourselves, something that can make a *real* difference. It means we *are* valuable and our lives *do* count for something. That's good news to anyone who wonders whether he matters or whether she is worthy of the calling.

Is the adopted child loved any less than the biological child? No. I might even argue he or she is loved *more* because the adoptive parents did not have to choose her or him. But they did! The child was not thrust upon them by biological accident or surprise. That child was singled out by their love and for their love. What a great truth to the child who needs to know *he or she is loved* ... and don't we all need to be reassured of that truth!

There is also great security and assurance in God's choosing, as well. For while we change our minds with each commercial we see on TV or when a

sale comes along at the department store, and we love something one day and throw it away the next, *God's love does not change*. God is immutably loving – God's love does not change or lessen; and He is lovingly immutable – He does not change His being because He loves us. He is constant love. (It's like what I said earlier about sovereignty.) That's His nature. Because the love relationship I have with God is grounded in His immutable and sovereign love for me rather than in my fickle and changing love for Him, I can rest in that love *always*: not just when I've got my act together but also when I don't; not just when I love Him back but even when I don't! Even if I let go of His hand – His love won't allow Him to release mine. His love holds me fast ... always! What does that do for a director or directee who struggling to know how God feels about him or her today or any day? I can only imagine. What a boost.

Without an affirmation of God's choosing love for us, our relationship with Him is up for grabs—forever uncertain, depending only on our momentary choosing of Him. Frankly, I couldn't live with such uncertainty; nor could I trust Him with the broken heart of a directee. As a reformed director, I can say without equivocation to a directee – “My sister, my brother: God cannot love you any more than He does (He loves you that much!); and He will not love you any less...ever. You *are* His beloved, chosen child.” [*Note addendum*]

(9) The Sin of Idolatry Is Making Anything Created Ultimate, rather than Worshipping the Creator

This Reformed affirmation is a warning of what can bring death to the soul rather than life, like substituting cyanide for Cipro, or anthrax for Arithromycin. As such, it sensitizes a spiritual director to what may block a directee's experience of the fullness of the gracious gifts God offers. In Jeremiah's time, God's people “exchanged their Glory [God Himself] for worthless idols” and so had “forsaken (Him), the spring of living water, and dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold

water' (2:11,13). Paul warns the Roman Christians of those who "claimed to be wise but became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles" (Rom. 1:22-23).

Here God's injunctions concerning idolatry apply—the most significant of which are found in the Old Covenant statement from Sinai:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.

You shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an image in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; ... (Exodus 20:2-5a);

as does Jesus' declaration in response to a questioner who asked, "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?":

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your neighbor as yourself." All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments" (Matthew 22:36-40).

What is idolatry but misplaced love. It's to put anything or anyone in place of where God is intended to be – such as finding our identity in personal achievement or career success rather than in God's affirmation that "You are my beloved" or seeking the peace that comes in security from what we can hold in our hands rather than our being held in God's hand. As I have heard it said, idolatry also happens when we "love things and use people instead of loving people and using things."

So, as a Reformed spiritual director, my tradition gives me ears to listen for idolatries which may temporarily impede or divert the working of God's Holy Spirit in a directee's heart and soul; and can suggest paths to tread in our journey together toward experiencing God's love more fully.

So, I must conclude that like so many other Christian traditions, the Reformed tradition has special gifts to offer to spiritual direction, gifts for both director and

directee, gifts for which I am grateful; and which make me glad to be one whose heritage is the Reformed tradition.

Thanks be to God!



Addendum :

Friends, reflecting further on my previous thoughts about the “troubling” affirmation of *God’s Choosing (“Election”) of People for Salvation and for Service*, please let me offer these additional comments on this particular Reformed distinctive with my apologies in advance for those who want something maybe more “definitive” and “final”.

Personally, I view it as a *misuse* of this affirmation to utilize it for trying to divine those who are spiritually “in” or “out” at any time. Nor, is this affirmation seen as part of the message proclaimed abroad to the world. Rather, I see it as akin to the “family secret” that is useful for bringing assurance, hope, and peace, as well as a sense of identity, to anyone who calls himself or herself a “child of God”, and is useful for motivating them to live into the family-likeness of a big brother who “came not be served but to serve and give His life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). However, the affirmation of *God’s Choosing (“Election”) of People for Salvation and for Service* does not make any authoritative declaration about those who do not (yet?) bear the family name any more than one child’s adoption means all others are thereby “unloved.” As a spiritual director, I dare not make an arrogant assumption about who is and who is not “elect” but embrace whoever comes to me as children of God—loved and so “elect”. If I err as a Reformed director committed to the “doctrines of grace”, I prefer to err in making a gracious assumption of God’s love than to err in the other direction.

For those (like me) who usually like to tie up all our loose ends into tidy bows and put all our loose pieces neatly into clean boxes with lids and labels, I confess this is a messy affirmation without easy answers to our wonderings.

- Who is “elect” and who is not? I don’t know—and if anyone says definitively that they do, they’re probably deluded about other things, too. So, I prefer to leave that to the One whose knowing is infallible (and that’s not me!).
- If God chooses us, do *we* do anything? I.e., do we have *to respond*? Yes! The Good News is *not* “You’re elect!” It is “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand!” (Matt. 4:17). It’s

that “...to all who receive Him, to those who believe in His Name, He gives the right to become children of God” (see: John 1:12; and, interestingly enough, John continues his thought saying, they are “children born *not* of natural descent, *nor of human decision* or a husband’s will, but born of God” – v. 13, and so putting God’s choice and our response together in the same sentence!). Though God’s decision and action precedes ours, it does not preclude the necessity of our making a decision and acting on it. So, there are times when a director and a directee must do more than rest in God’s love: we must also *act* on it, too.

- I also want to remember that the fact someone is seeking spiritual direction is itself a pretty good indicator that the Spirit of the Lord is lovingly active in and toward that individual, that God is drawing that person to Himself with cords of His love, creating the thirst which draws a man to the Spring of Living Water or fostering the hunger that brings a woman to the Bread of Life – where they can drink and eat. Thus, as a director in the Reformed tradition, I am confident in doing spiritual direction from the context of God’s love for *any* directee.
- How do we know, *really know*, that we are His child? Is it by being able to say we raised our hand, walked an aisle or said a “sinner’s prayer” on a particular day, at particular time and in a particular place? I don’t think so. For me, it’s a mystery how we know. Maybe it’s just that “we know that we know” we are His child and therefore assured of our own “election.” Or maybe it’s in Paul’s affirmation that we have received the Spirit that brought about our adoption as God’s sons or daughters and that that “Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Rom. 8:16); or that we recognize the voice of our Shepherd “calling our name” and “leading us out” (see: John 10: 3, 4). In any event, that means sometimes the work of a spiritual director (Reformed or not) is to help someone to hear the Spirit’s testimony and to discern their Shepherd’s voice as we quietly sit and listen together; and so in those moments to help them to *know* that she or he is loved by God.

I find great personal help from the following counsel offered by James I. Packer in his classic book *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (IVP, 1961) when he speaks of “antinomy” as follows:

All theological topics contain pitfalls for the unwary, for God’s truth is never quite what man would have expected This is because in thinking it through we have to deal with an antinomy in the biblical revelation, and in such circumstances our finite, fallen minds are more than ordinarily apt to go astray.

What is an antinomy? *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary* defines it as ‘a contradiction between conclusions which seem equally logical, reasonable or necessary’. For our purposes, however, this definition is not quite accurate; the opening words should read ‘an *appearance* of contradiction’. For the whole point of an antinomy—in theology, at

any rate—is that it is not a real contradiction, though it looks like one. It is an *apparent* incompatibility between two apparent truths. An antinomy exists when a pair of principles stand side by side, seemingly irreconcilable, yet both undeniable. There are cogent reasons for believing each of them; each rests on clear and solid evidence; but it is a mystery to you how they can be squared with each other (pp. 18f).

I have learned to become more comfortable with mystery, and in this case with one that is a theological antinomy. For, as a dear Wesleyan-Arminian friend/mentor and I would affirm joyously together over breakfast each week – there are two sides to this one coin, and we can hold both together while favoring one side over the other to live and serve in every day.

RHH