

Introduction to the Reformed Faith

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Part 2 of 2: “The Reformed Faith Teaches the Comprehensive Covenant Lordship of God”; and Conclusion

3. The Reformed Faith Teaches the Comprehensive Covenant Lordship of God

Let me now proceed to a more comprehensive summary of the Reformed system of doctrine. What I will argue is this: the biblical God is the “covenant Lord,” and all his work in creation and salvation is a working out of his covenant Lordship. “God is covenant Lord,” therefore, summarizes the biblical message. The Reformed faith can also be summarized in this way: all the essential elements of the Reformed faith can be seen as outworkings of God’s covenant Lordship. The fact that “covenant Lordship” is central to Scripture and also to Reformed theology is a major argument in favor of Reformed theology as the best formulation of scriptural teaching.

You will discover that “covenant” has been defined differently by different theologians, even within the Reformed camp. But the following seems to me to capture the essential elements of the biblical covenants between God and man. A “covenant” is a relationship between a “Lord” and a people¹ whom he has sovereignly called to be his. The people may be called the Lord’s vassals or servants. He rules over them by his power and law, and brings upon them a unique blessing (or, in some cases, a unique curse). To better understand “covenant,” therefore, we must better understand “Lordship.”

The Meaning of Lordship

“Lord” represents, first of all, the mysterious Hebrew term YHWH (generally pronounced “Yahweh,” sometimes found as “Jehovah” or “Lord” in English translations). It is somehow related to the verb “to be,” as in the “I AM” of

¹ Contrary to Dispensationalism, Reformed theology teaches (following Scripture, in my opinion) that there is only one people of God, embracing all of God’s elect, receiving the same blessings in Christ, the blessings promised to Abraham and his seed.

Exodus 3:14 (note the presence of YHWH in verse 15). Besides Exodus 3:12-15, there are several other passages in the Scripture that seem in some measure to be expounding the meaning of that mysterious name. See Exod 6:1-8; 20; 33; 34; Leviticus 18–19; Deuteronomy 6:4ff.; Isaiah 41:4; 43:10-13; 44:6; 48:12ff. In the New Testament, Jesus takes the name *kurios*, a Greek term used to translate YHWH in the Greek Old Testament. As He takes that name, he takes the *role* that Yahweh had in the Old Testament as the Lord, the head of the covenant. In my mind, that is one of the most powerful Scripture proofs of the deity of Christ. Therefore, certain passages in the New Testament are also important to our understanding of the biblical concept of Lordship, such as John 8:31-59; Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 12:3; Philippians 2:11.

In my lectures on the Doctrine of God, I shall examine these passages in some detail to show you how they combine to teach a certain concept of divine Lordship. In this paper, however, I shall merely present the conclusions of my study. You will find it edifying, however, to examine these passages, to see how the following concepts are interwoven through them.

My conclusion is that Lordship in Scripture involves three aspects: Control, Authority, and Presence.

(1) *Control*: The Lord is one who is in total control of the world. When God redeems Israel from Egypt he does it with a strong arm and mighty hand. He controls all the forces of nature to bring curses upon Egypt and to defeat the forces of the greatest totalitarian ruler of the time. See Exodus 3:8,14,20; 20:2; 33:19; 34:6; Isaiah 41:4; 43:10-13; 44:6; 48:12ff.

I have already expounded this biblical theme in connection with the doctrine of predestination. It should also be mentioned that, not only salvation, but also the entire course of nature and history, is fully in God's control. Ephesians 1:11 and Romans 11:36 state this truth specifically, and many passages of Scripture relate various happenings to God's direction. That includes such details as the falling of the sparrows and the number of the hairs of our heads.

Sin and evil also are part of God's plan. This is very mysterious, and we must be cautious in our statements. Nevertheless, Scripture does ascribe human sins to God's purposes. See, for example, Genesis 45:7; 50:20; 2 Samuel 24:1,10 (cf. 1 Chron. 21:1); 1 Kings 22:19-23; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28; Romans 1:24,26,28; 9:11-23.

How can we reconcile these facts with God's righteousness and goodness? I have discussed this "problem of evil" in some detail in my *Apologetics to the*

Glory of God, pp. 149-190. I do not believe that we can fully understand God's reasons for incorporating evil into his plan. Clearly, he does so for a purpose which in the total context of history is a good purpose (Gen. 50:20). Beyond that, it is best to emulate the silence of Job in the face of the mystery of evil (Job 40:4,5; 42:1-6). Certainly we may not compromise God's sovereignty by appealing to ideas like the Arminian concept of "free will," i.e. human acts which are not foreordained by God.²

Divine control does not, of course, imply that secondary causes, human choices, etc. are unimportant. God generally achieves his great purposes by using finite agents. Thus it is his purpose to spread the gospel throughout the world, not by miraculous revelation, but by human preaching and teaching (Matt. 28:19ff.). And there is no salvation (at least among adults) without human faith and repentance (John 3:16; Acts 2:38). Those who argue on the basis of divine sovereignty that evangelists should never call for "decisions" do not understand the biblical balance. God's sovereignty does not negate secondary causes; rather it empowers them, gives them significance.

The God of Scripture is not a kind of abstract opposite to the world, so that everything ascribed to him must be denied to creatures and vice versa. Rather, God is a person, and he has created the world according to his plan. Some divine prerogatives are denied to creatures, such as God's right to exclusive religious worship and his right to do as he pleases with human life. But most events in the world have both divine and creaturely causes; the one does not annul the other. Both Arminians and hyper-Calvinists err at this point.

(2) *Authority*. Authority is the right to be obeyed. The Lord supremely has that right. When he speaks, his word must be followed. Covenants always involve words, as we shall see in our study of the Doctrine of the Word of God. The covenant Lord speaks to his covenant people concerning his holy name, his past blessings to them, his requirements for their behavior, his promises and threats. The words are written in a document; and to violate the Lord's words in the written document is to violate the terms of the covenant itself.

When God comes to Moses in Egypt, he comes with an authoritative word for Israel and for Pharaoh — a word which they disobey at their peril. See Exodus 3:13-18, 20:2ff, Leviticus 18:2-5,30; 19:37; Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Luke 6:46ff. His authority is *absolute* in three senses: (a) He cannot be questioned (Rom. 4:14-20; Heb. 11; Job 40:1ff.; Rom. 9:20). (b) His covenant transcends all other loyalties (Ex. 20:3; Deut. 6:4ff.; Matt. 8:19-22; 10:34-38; Phil. 3:8). (c) His covenant

² There are, however, other concepts of free will which are fully biblical; see *Apologetics to the Glory of God*.

authority covers all areas of human life (Ex.–Deut.; Rom. 14:23; 1 Cor. 10:31; 2 Cor. 10:5; Col. 3:17,23).

(3) *Presence*: The Lord is the one who takes a people to be his. He becomes their God, and they become his people. Thus he is “with them” (Exod. 3:12). This presence of the Lord with his people is a wonderful theme which pervades the Scriptures: See Genesis 26:3; 28:15; 31:3; 46:4; Exodus 3:12; 33:14; Deuteronomy 31:6,8,23; Judges 6:16; Jeremiah 31:33; Isaiah 7:14; Matthew 28:20; John 17:25; 1 Corinthians 3:16ff.; Revelation 21:22.

Thus Yahweh is *near* his people, unlike the gods of any other nation (Lev. 10:3; Deut. 4:7; 30:11-14 [Rom. 10:6-8]; Ps. 148:14; Jer. 31:33; Jonah 2:7; Eph. 2:17; Col. 1:27). He is literally “near” to Israel in the tabernacle and temple. Later he draws near in Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit. And in his omnipotence and omniscience, he is never far from anybody (Acts 17:27-28). For in one sense, the whole creation is bound to him by covenant. See Kline, *Images of the Spirit*.

God’s presence is a means of blessing, but it can also be a means of curse, when the people break the covenant. See Exodus 3:7-14; 6:1-8; 20:5,7,12; Psalm 135:13ff.; Isaiah 26:4-8; Hosea 12:4-9; 13:4ff.; Malachi 3:6; John 8:31-59.

I shall refer to these three categories as the “Lordship attributes.” They are not separable; each involves the other two. The Lord’s control is exercised through his authoritative speech to the creation (Gen. 1); therefore “control” involves authority. That control is comprehensive and thus amounts to a divine presence throughout creation. Similarly, each Lordship attribute includes the other two. Each, therefore, presents, not a “part” of God’s Lordship, but the whole of it, from one particular “perspective.”³

The Centrality of Lordship in Scripture

“Lord” is the basic covenant name of God (Exod. 3:13-15; 6:1-8; John 8:58; Rom. 14:9). There are other names of God, but this is the name he bears as head of the covenant with his people. This is the name by which he wishes to be known by his covenant people.

It is found in the basic confessions of faith of God’s people within Scripture (see Deut. 6:4ff.; Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil. 2:11). The basic confession of the

³ Such “perspectival” relationships are common in Scripture, and I will introduce you to many others in your courses with me.

Old Covenant is “The Lord our God is one Lord.” The basic confession of the New Covenant is “Jesus Christ is Lord.”⁴

All of God’s mighty acts in creation and history are performed “so that they may know that I am the Lord” (Exod. 14:18; 1 Kings 8:43; Ps. 9:10; etc.). Again and again in Isaiah, the Lord announces that “I am the Lord, I am He” (e.g. Isa. 41:4; 43:10-13). The “I ams” recall Exodus 3:14.

The Centrality of Covenant Lordship in the Reformed Faith

The Reformed Faith also emphasizes God’s covenant Lordship over his people. The concept of covenant was not used systematically by Calvin, though particularly the constituent ideas of control, authority, and presence, are quite prominent in his thought. It was natural that among Calvin’s successors there was a very thorough development and application of the covenant idea, and that concept has been a major concern of Reformed theologians down to the present day.

(1) *Control*: Obviously, Reformed theology has emphasized God’s control, which “works all things after the counsel of His will,” Eph. 1:11. We have already expounded this emphasis in our discussion of predestination, and Reformed theology also emphasizes the sovereignty of God in creation and providence. With Scripture, it also maintains the importance of secondary causes. “Hyper-Calvinists,”⁵ verging toward fatalism,⁶ have sometimes denied the importance of

⁴ It should be obvious, then, that the Bible teaches “Lordship salvation,” as does the Reformed Faith. Those are saved who confess Christ’s Lordship from the heart. This does not, of course, mean that those who confess Christ’s Lordship must be perfect from the start in their devotion to Him. The *application* of Jesus’ Lordship to the Christian life is a process which is not complete until we get to heaven.

⁵ It is hard to define hyper-Calvinism. Often I am inclined to say that a hyper-Calvinist is somebody who thinks I am not Calvinistic enough! But it is probably best to associate hyper-Calvinism with the historic tradition which is represented in our century especially by the teaching of Herman Hoeksema and the Protestant Reformed Church.

⁶ Fatalism is the view that “what will be will be” no matter what we do. Biblical Christianity is not fatalistic, because it teaches an orderly relation between first causes, second causes, and eventual results. God’s plans will certainly be successful; but they will be successfully because God will provide the finite means necessary. It is not the case, for example, that the elect will be saved apart from the preaching of the gospel.

creaturely decisions and activity; but this does not represent the main Reformed tradition.

(2) *Authority*: The Reformed have always stressed, more than most other branches of Christianity, that human beings are subject to God's law. Some professing Christians have said that law and grace, or law and love, are always opposed, so that Christians have nothing to do with the law. The Reformed recall, however, that if we love Jesus we will keep his commandments (John 14:15,21; 15:10; 1 John 2:3ff.; 3:22ff.; 5:2ff.; 2 John 6; Rev. 12:17; 14:12). Of course, keeping the law does not bring us salvation. It does not justify us before God. Only the righteousness of Christ can do that. But those who are saved will keep God's commandments.

The Reformed have also stressed the continuing normativity of the Old Testament law, specifically, over the New Testament believer (Matt. 5:17-20). There is a controversy in Reformed circles over "theonomy," which is essentially a controversy over *how the Old Testament law is to be used* in the Christian life.⁷ Both "theonomists" and Reformed critics of theonomy agree that the Old Testament law has an important, edifying, governing role in the Christian life; both parties also agree that some Old Testament commandments no longer are literally binding, because we now live in a different situation from that to which these commands were addressed. The argument is over which commands belong in which category. All Calvinists believe that the Old Testament laws are the Word of God and profitable for "teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Particularly in the area of worship, the Reformed have stressed the authority and sufficiency of God's word. While Lutherans and Roman Catholics have argued that anything is permitted in worship which Scripture does not condemn, the Reformed maintain that nothing is permitted in worship which Scripture does not authorize. That is known as the "regulative principle of worship." There have been some debates within Reformed circles as to the concrete implications of this principle. Some have argued that it requires the exclusive use of Psalms in worship and prohibits the use of musical instruments, soloists and choirs. Others have argued that it requires a worship service modeled after the worship services used among the 17th century Puritans. My own analysis is different.⁸ I am not persuaded by the hermeneutics which have been used to reach these restrictive conclusions. And in line with the principles of

⁷ See the WTS symposium, *Theonomy: a Reformed Critique*, edited by W. Robert Godfrey and Will Barker, especially my essay in that volume!

⁸ See my *Worship in Spirit and Truth* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1996).

the Reformation, I see the regulative principle essentially as a principle which grants to us *freedom* from human tradition, binding us only to the Word of God.

That raises an important point of a more general nature. Reformed theology is not only a theology of God's Lordship, but also a theology of human freedom. Reformed theology rejects, of course, the Arminian concept of "free will," discussed earlier. But it recognizes the importance of creaturely decisions, as we have seen earlier. And it also sets us free from bondage to human tyrannies, so that we may be slaves only of God Himself. To be sure, God does ordain legitimate authorities among human beings, and he calls us to honor and obey those authorities. But when those authorities command something contrary to God's word, or when they place their own ideas on the same level as Scripture, we may and must dishonor their claims. We must obey God rather than man. Hence, you can see that the covenant authority of God is not a burdensome doctrine. It is the most sublime liberation.

The Reformed faith, therefore, is not in essence "traditionalist," although some Reformed people have had, in my estimation, an unhealthy reverence for tradition. There is a Reformed slogan, "*semper reformanda*," "always reforming." Hence, "*fides reformata semper reformanda est*," "the Reformed faith is always reforming." There is some division in Reformed circles between some who emphasize *reformata* (Reformed) and others who emphasize *reformanda* (reforming). Both are important, and both should be kept in balance. Our faith should be "Reformed," that is, in agreement with the fundamental principles of the Scriptures, as summarized in the Reformed confessions. However, it should also be "reforming," seeking to bring our thought and practice *more* in line with Scripture, even if that process requires the elimination of some traditions. The Reformers were both: conservative in their adherence to biblical doctrine, radical in their critique of church tradition. We ought to be the same. Beware, therefore, of people who tell you that you must worship, or think, or behave, in accord with some historical tradition. Prove all things by God's word (1 Thess. 5:21). Search the Scriptures daily to see if what you hear is really true (Acts 17:11).

Because the Reformed faith has, at its best, been critical of human traditions even within its own circles, the Reformed faith has the resources for effective *contextualization*. Contextualization is the attempt to present scriptural truth in terms understandable to cultures different from our own and different from the culture in which the Scriptures were written. Reformed preaching has been remarkably successful through history in the work of contextualization. Calvinism has profoundly affected cultures very different from the Swiss culture in which it began: Dutch, German, British, Hungarian, Korean. Calvinism had large followings in France and Italy until it was largely snuffed out there by force.

It is, therefore, entirely Reformed to say as I do in *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* that theology is the application of scriptural truth to human situations. Progress in theology is the continual *application* of Scripture to new situations and contexts as they arise. It is not the mere repetition of doctrinal formulations worked out in past generations, as some “traditionalists” might suppose. Rather, the work of theology engages our creativity, without compromising the authority and sufficiency of Scripture.

Calvinism has been a very “progressive” kind of theology. Reformed theology, typically, has not simply reiterated the statements of Calvin and the confessions. It has gone on to develop new applications of Scripture and Reformed doctrine. In the seventeenth century, there was a significant development in Reformed thinking about God’s covenants. In the eighteenth-century thinker Jonathan Edwards, there is new teaching on the subjective dimensions of the Christian life. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was the remarkable development, under Vos and others, of “biblical theology,” the analysis of Scripture as a history of redemption. In the twentieth century there was Van Til’s apologetics and Meredith Kline’s *Structure of Biblical Authority*.

The work of “reforming” under God’s authority is not limited, either, to theology and the church. Calvinists have often emphasized the “cultural mandate” of Genesis 1:28-30, that God commands the human race to take dominion of all the earth in his name. This means that all spheres of human life must be Reformed by the word of God. Abraham Kuyper, the great Dutch genius who made enormous contributions to theology, philosophy, journalism, education, and politics, argued that there should be distinctively Christian politics, art, literature, as well as theology.⁹ God’s word governs all areas of life (1 Cor. 10:31; 2 Cor. 10:5; Rom. 14:23; Col. 3:17,23). Thus Reformed people have stressed the need for distinctively Christian schools, labor movements, businesses, universities, philosophy, science, political movements, economic systems.

Understandably, then, Reformed theology is concerned, not only about individual salvation and piety (see below), but also about the structures of society. “Covenant,” after all, has to do with corporate relations to God more than merely individual ones.¹⁰ In covenant, God chooses a *people*. And Scripture

⁹ See his *Lectures on Calvinism*, a wonderfully moving, challenging, life-transforming book, which every Christian should read.

¹⁰ Although, there are certainly individual aspects to salvation and the Christian life: God calls on individuals to repent and believe.

makes clear that God chooses households, families. Therefore, Calvinists have typically believed in infant baptism. Infant baptism says that when God claims a parent, he claims the whole household to be his (Acts 11:14; 16:15,31-34; 18:8, 1 Cor. 1:11,16).

Considering the doctrine of divine authority helps us to see from another direction¹¹ the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Human beings are responsible because they are subject to God's commands. Therefore, Reformed teachers do not present human responsibility as some grudging concession to Arminianism. Rather, they *emphasize* human responsibility and *rejoice* in it. Human responsibility is a *Calvinistic* doctrine. It presupposes the meaningful structure of God's sovereign plan and the normative authority of God's sovereign law.¹²

Historically, people have sometimes wondered why Calvinists, believing as they do in the sovereignty of God, do not take a passive attitude toward life. In fact, Calvinists have been hard workers, zealous missionaries, eager to transform themselves and society into God's image. This remarkable energy is not a contradiction of their belief in divine sovereignty, but an implication of it. Calvinists serve a Lord who calls us to the utmost effort in His service. The results are in his hands, but we have the privilege of serving him in the greatest of tasks, that of bringing all of life captive to Christ.

(3) *Presence*: Reformed theology at its best has been profoundly devotional, aware of the intimate closeness of God to us at every moment of life. Of course, some Reformed thinkers have been, by their own profession, "intellectualist," and have disparaged any Christian concern with human subjectivity or inwardness. But that intellectualism does not, in my opinion, represent the best or the most typical Reformed mentality. Calvin began his *Institutes* by saying that the knowledge of God and the knowledge of self are interrelated, and "I know not which comes first." He was aware that since we are made in his image, we cannot rightly know ourselves without knowing God at the same time. God is, in other words, found in every corner of human life, including

¹¹ We have mentioned already the *importance* of human decisions and actions within God's overall plan.

¹² Arminian "responsibility" amounts to the power of the human will to perform uncaused events. But uncaused events are accidental, possibly bizarre, events without any connection to a pre-ordained rational structure. Performing actions which are sheer accidents is hardly "responsible." Further, responsibility in Scripture is always responsibility to God, not oneself. Therefore it presupposes God's law.

the subjective. He also insisted that the truths of God's word be written deeply on the heart, rather than merely "flitting about in the head."¹³ His emblem shows a heart in a hand, extended to God, with the inscription, "My heart I give you, promptly and sincerely."

Thus Reformed people have spoken of living all of life *coram Deo*, in the presence of God. This intense sense of God's reality encourages a rich piety, as well as energetic obedience in all areas of life.¹⁴

Conclusion

You can see that the Reformed Faith is exceedingly rich! Understandably there have been controversies among Reformed people, some of which I have mentioned here. There have also been many different emphases among Reformed theologians and churches. Some have focused more on the "five points," the "doctrines of grace." This emphasis is especially prominent among Reformed Baptists, but is found in other circles as well. Others ("theonomists") have focused on the authority of God's law. Still others (Kuyperians, Dooyeweerdians) have emphasized the application of God's truth to social structures.

Wolterstorff and others have suggested a way of distinguishing various theological mentalities within the Reformed churches (especially those of Dutch background). They speak of "piets, Kuyps and docts." The piets, somewhat influenced by pietism, seek above all a deeper personal relation to Christ. The

¹³ Calvin, therefore, is the source of the "head/heart" contrast that is so often belittled by Reformed "intellectualists." Calvin does not, nor would I, advocate an *anti*-intellectualism. The "heart" in Scripture is a heart which thinks. But there is a kind of intellectual knowledge which is accepted superficially, a knowledge that doesn't actually *rule* one's life. That is not the knowledge which Calvin and Scripture would urge upon us.

¹⁴ The Reformed attitude toward revivalism is somewhat divided. A. Hoffecker in his *Piety and the Princeton Theologians* argues that the professors at Old Princeton were much influenced by revival and were, along with their intellectual emphasis, aware of the need for a deep subjective relation between the believer and God. See also Jonathan Edwards on the *Religious Affections*. Some Reformed thinkers, especially in more recent years, have been opposed to talk of "emotions" and "subjectivity" in the Christian life. But as I said earlier, I think this pattern of thought does not represent Reformed theology at its best.

docts are concerned above all with maintaining theological orthodoxy. The Kuypers are concerned to bring great changes in society.¹⁵

It seems to me that there is room in the Reformed movement for all these different emphases. None of us can maintain a perfect balance of emphasis. And different situations require of us different emphases, as we “contextualize” our theology to bring God’s word to bear on the situations we are in. Also, God gives different gifts to different people. Not all are gifted in the area of political action, or the formulation of doctrines with precision, or in personal evangelism. We all do what we can do, and we do what seems most to need doing in a situation. Within the boundaries of the Reformed faith sketched here, we should be thankful for the different emphases, not critical of them. The different emphases supplement one another and complete one another.

¹⁵ In my terminology, these three movements are existential, normative, and situational, respectively.