

What Does It Mean to Be (a) Reformed (Christian)?

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Introductory Comments

There are many fine definitions of Reformational Christianity, and it is not my intention to vie with any of them for pride of place; however, it is not a bad idea to revisit the fundamentals of one's faith-upbringing and reflect on them later in life. Recently someone noticed I had just finished reading Calvin's *Institutes* and asked me, knowing I can be a bit long-winded, "Can you summarize John Calvin's ideas in one sentence?" A cacophony of topics and phrases filled my mind and, I'm ashamed to admit, I merely stammered something about humility and God's sovereignty.

This paper is my attempt at answering a related question—What does it mean to be (a) Reformed (Christian)?—using the limited resources at hand (i.e., primarily Calvin, Barth, Berkouwer, and Spykman)—and using considerably more than one sentence.

John Calvin

Is being Reformed synonymous with being Protestant? Does it all begin on October 31, 1517? What about the significant differences between Calvin, Luther, and Zwingli? Or does the re-forming of Christianity go back to "pre-reformers" such as John Hus or even Francis of Assisi? My Webster's dictionary is of little help: "...denoting the Protestant churches that follow the teachings of John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli." My understanding is that being Reformed is akin to being Calvinian, so let's start with Calvin.

Of course Calvin sees himself hearkening back to the early church fathers (especially Augustine (AI 13)) as a way of restoring the church to an earlier orthodoxy, one that pre-dates the tradition-based doctrinal accretions of the Roman church. Not unlike the US Tax Code, it desperately needed a good house-cleaning, a breath of fresh air. The ever-expanding *Institutes* was his answer: a simplified "code" of doctrine. Yet as Ford Lewis Battles points out, Calvin "is a Scriptural theologian first, and a user of philosophy, logic, rhetoric—all human tools of organization—only second" (AI 19). Battles, in another essay, writes, "The organizing principle

of the *Institutes*...is primarily pedagogical” (RCT 33). It is a work of “instruction” (ICR xxxiii), “an ‘experiential’ approach to biblical exegesis” (AI 17), and a “theology [that] lives in the real world and squarely faces it” (AI 18). It is this reality-facing, experiential approach that most interests me. Any survey of religion, Christianity, and Reformational theology ought to keep it in focus. In that vein, let’s attempt a brief summary of the salient points of Calvin’s *magnum opus* in order to create a tentative, sixteenth-century definition of Reformed Christianity.

In my own survey of the *Institutes* (ICR), with Battle’s *Analysis of the Institues* (AI) close at hand, I would outline the major topics in the following manner (including my own book headings):

- Book 1: Creator & Creation
 - Man is wicked; God is awesome
 - Real religion = fear of God
 - Creation = beautiful theater
 - Scripture = truth about God
 - Trinity
 - Providence
- Book 2: Man’s Fall & Redeemer/Redemption
 - Original Sin
 - No free will
 - Redemption in Christ
 - Law & Gospel
 - Christ’s nature
- Book 3: Christian Life
 - Faith = certainty
 - Repentance
 - Justification by faith
 - Prayer
 - Predestination
- Book 4: Church & State
 - True church
 - Contra papacy
 - Sacraments
 - Contra mass
 - Civil government

From this broad-stroke outline I sifted the topics and subtopics (not listed) into two categories: Basic Christianity (e.g., Christ as Redeemer) and what I felt to be uniquely Reformational (e.g. predestination). The latter I subdivided into positive (e.g., predestination) and negative (i.e., contra Rome, e.g., the papacy) assertions, as follows (ICR references in parentheses):

Reformational Christianity I

- Man = bad (1.1.1)
- God = awesome (1.2.1)
- No religious neutrality (1.3.3)
- *Sola Scriptura* (1.6ff.)
- No free will (2.2)
- Sola fide/sola gratia (3.11)
- Predestination/election (3.21)
- Only two sacraments (4.14)
- Lord's Supper (4.17)
- Civil government (4.20)

Reformational Christianity II: Contra Rome

- Scripture plus tradition (1.7.1)
- Penance (3.4.2)
- Confession (3.4.16f.)
- Indulgences/purgatory (3.5)
- Good works/merit (3.11.15)
- Intercession of the saints (3.20)
- Pope = bad (4.5)
- Sacraments: 2 not 7 (4.14 & 19)
- Baptism necessary for salvation (4.15)
- Mass = bad (4.18)

Basic Christianity

- Creator/creation distinction (1.5.5)
- Scripture = truth (1.6)
- Trinity (1.13)
- Theodicy (1.18)
- Original sin (2.1.5)
- Christ as redeemer (2.16)

To an uncomfortable degree, this last step feels arbitrary. Not being a historian of sixteenth-century Christianity, I am forced to divide Calvin's topics into two categories anachronistically, based on my twentieth-century education and experience of Reformational theology. I recognize that even my "Basic Christianity" category is porous. Christianity has never been monolithic, Rome's marketing strategies notwithstanding. There were unitarian churches in the first few centuries CE just as there are today. And there were/are the eastern Orthodox, Coptic, and the far-flung churches of Central Asia and the Far East—each with their own nuances on definitions of God, humanity, Jesus, Scripture, and pretty much every other aspect of the Christian religion.

The question of what it means to be Reformed implies *as opposed to what?* What exactly is being re-formed? In Calvin's case it seems obvious that his opposition is the Roman church. The other implication, given the context of this course and its readings (e.g., Spykman), is, what does it mean to be Reformed *today?* But here our problems literally multiply. *Which* Reformed? The Scottish Presbyterian tradition? The Dutch Calvinist? Which Dutch Calvinist denominations: CRC, RCA, URC? And the opposition is legion; the Roman Catholic Church has significant internal divisions, and the so-called Protestants are divided into tens of thousands of denominations. Which of the Reformed doctrines is not shared by anyone else? Exactly how many Reformed doctrines are there, and must one share *all* or *most* of them to be considered

Reformed? These are the questions giving me headaches as I attempt to boil the *Institutes* down to the bones: the Basics held by all (or most?) Christians, and those held by people and organizations that call themselves Reformed.

Finally, before turning to Karl Barth and determining his Reformationalness, we should not forget the legacy of the Dutchmen who drew up the Canons of Dordt some six decades after Calvin's final edition of the *Institutes* and, with their five heads of doctrine, inspired the now famous anagram TULIP as a representation of the Five Points of Calvinism: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints.

Karl Barth

"It would be a sign of real perception on our part were we to cease celebrating the Reformation and were we to learn seriously to regret it..." (ER 520). These words of Barth, taken out of context, would seem to answer our question of his Reformationalness with an emphatic No. In truth, Barth has this wonderful distinction between what he calls the Church of Esau (the "observable, knowable and possible...realm where failure and corruption may be found, the place where schisms and reformations occur" (ER 341) and the Church of Jacob ("the unobservable, unknowable, and impossible Church....[that] is simply the free Grace of God" (ER 342)). To "cease celebrating the Reformation," "to regret it," is to change our focus from brokenness to wholeness. Barth doesn't just look beyond the broken church, he looks beyond the church as a sign of a broken creation: "the Gospel dissolves the Church," and for those who prefer churchianity over truth, be forewarned: "the Church dissolves the Gospel" (ER 333).

I'd like to trust G. C. Berkouwer as an interpreter of Barth—for what other resources do I have at hand?—but early on in his book, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (TG), he discusses "the *danger* of presuppositions....[a] danger [that] becomes very real when basic significance is attached to the philosophical system from which one draws" (TG 20, his emphasis). He speaks of "a neutral use of philosophical conceptions" (TG 20), the "problem of... philosophical categories" (TG 21), and "that all manner of presuppositions in a given theology can darken the light of the gospel" (TG 22). Isn't that last statement a presupposition? In the Appendix, Berkouwer challenges Cornelius Van Til's assessment of Barth's philosophical presuppositions. Van Til, he says, divines Barth's assumptions and "thinks he can draw the lines of them *on through*" (TG 386, his emphasis), but ends up negating or distorting Barth's statements. Berkouwer concludes, "it does not surprise me that Barth says in *amazement* that

he *cannot recognize himself at all* in *The New Modernism* [Van Til's book]" (TG 388, his emphasis). So is Berkouwer's assessment of Barth presuppositionless? Is he able to remain neutral? The proof is in the pudding. In this case I found what Berkouwer is serving to be helpful; indeed it was *heel lekker* (even with his unacknowledged presuppositions).

So, to the questions at hand: is Barth Reformational? And if so, does he change the shape of Reformational theology? And if so, is it for good or for ill? Against the backdrop of the pessimistic "theology of crisis"—a "form of thinking in which No triumphs over Yes, and judgement over grace" (TG 24)—Berkouwer presents Barth's "triumph of God's grace" (TG 19). We should not be too hasty to dismiss the validity of a theology of crisis. Post-World War II, or indeed for any of us who have lived or continue to live through "hell on earth," God's No, God's abandonment ("Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?") is an ever-present reality. The triumph of God's grace is not always so easy to see. Nonetheless, Barth's more optimistic theology is also a theology of hope, for its Christocentrism reveals a basic creational goodness (in Christ (TG 54)) and a final eternalization of life over death (TG 151). According to Berkouwer, Barth's theology can be delineated as follows (TG page references in parentheses):

Creation

- Ontic meaning (goodness, including humanity's goodness (15)) found in Christ (54, 64)
- Covenant precedes creation (55)
- Versus uncreated chaos/sin/evil = irrational (62), impossible (88), absurd (216)
 - Not real (58, 63f., 70, 73)
 - Real (72, 217, 219)

Election

- Christ *for* the world (92)
- Double-predestination (102, 106, 119)
- Salvation = preserved from chaos (71)
- Condemnation falls on Christ not us (106)
 - Universalism? (112, 290, 292)
 - Barth says no (112, 115)

Eschatology

- Eternalized life, not finite continuation (158, 165, 328)

Contra Rome

- No self-justification (169)
- Mary = central (175)
- Scripture *and* tradition (177)
- *Analogia entis*: analogy of *being* between God and man (179, 183)
 - Know God via natural reason (125)
 - Barth: *analogia relationis* (181), a real analogy between our concepts and God (187)
 - Catholics feel misrepresented (190)

Comparing this list to Calvin's (see Reformational Christianity I & II above) one can easily find several important similarities: the centrality of Christ, election and predestination, and contra Rome, to name but a few. With Barth, all, even the triumph of grace, seems to hinge on Christ. His Christocentrism (TG 17) borders on Christomonism. Berkouwer says that Barth is "unwearied in his opposition" to "the theological disjunction between Christology and Theology" (TG 123) and points out that Barth is consistent in his "biblical Christian monism" (TG 258). This "Jesucentric thinking" (TG 258) is the alpha point from which Barth derives his distinctive views on creation, sin/evil, salvation, and eternal life. For him, creation is good (in Christ), therefore humanity is good (in Christ), evil is not real (more on this confusing concept below), condemnation falls on Christ not us (but this does not necessitate universalism), and we are eternalized (in Christ) in the atemporal afterlife. Christ in all and through all. Christ as the ontotheological constant. "A 'stepwise' succession of creation, fall, and redemption would, in Barth's view, work destructively upon this conception" (TG 258). It is not easy to neatly differentiate between Barth's similarities and differences with Calvin; Barth's theology is more of an organic outgrowth from Calvin's soil.

With Christ as the starting point for all of good creation (including humankind), whence cometh evil? Barth goes to great lengths to protect Christ-and-creation from the stain of evil but ends up making little sense. The original chaos (Gen 1:2) is "a world which God did *not* create" (TG 58, emphasis is original); sin "is solely *chaos, darkness...*[that] does not belong to the essence of creation and is not itself a creature" (TG 63f., emphasis in original); "chaos...has no cosmic reality....It is, but is not *really*. It 'exists' as the object of rejection at God's left hand" (TG 73, emphasis in original); "[t]he chaos...is *real*....The chaos is not a creature and still it has reality" (TG 72). All of these quotes are Berkouwer's and I will not presume to sort out a paradox that has him going in circles, yet the topic is important. Barth is wrestling with the (un)reality of sin while maintaining the integrity of the goodness of creation. This this-worldly emphasis is a crucial gift of Reformational thought (cf. A. Kuyper) especially in light of so much other-worldly (afterlife) attention throughout the rest of Christendom.

Another Christocentric spin-off is Barth's argument against Rome's *analogia entis*, the analogy of being between God and man. Although Barth is zealous to preserve man's creational/ontological goodness in Christ, he refuses to equate that goodness with *being* itself. Berkouwer calls this "the heart of Barth's polemic against Rome" (TG 179); indeed it is the heart of the Reformation's polemic against Arminianism. Arminius and Rome share the idea that "man

can, *quite apart from grace*, achieve knowledge of God” (TG 183, emphasis in original). Hence one of the Reformation’s banners: *sola gratia*. Analogy? Yes. Of being? No. Barth finds our analogy with God in our relationship, *analogia relationis*: “There is not in man a point of contact ‘in the sense of the native or acquired property of man,’ but *in* faith, *in* the relationship of faith, ‘God-likeness’ *comes into being*” (TG 181, emphasis in original, internal quotes are Barth’s words). Barth expands *sola fide* to include *analogia fides*.

So is Barth Reformed or not? *Sola fide* and *sola gratis*? Check. *Sola Scriptura*? Check. Total depravity? Sort of: Barth finds “[t]he doctrine of Original Sin” to be a “falsification of [Paul’s] meaning” (ER 171) not because we are angels but because Christ is the first Adam and “the righteousness [Christ] manifested to the world...[is] timeless and transcendental” (ER 171). As for the rest of TULIP? Barth’s ideas are expansive as he strives to counter the theology of crisis with a Christocentric triumph of grace. He seems in line with most of these Reformational touchstones even as he plays around the edges. He has been challenged, for instance, with regard to his ideas on election and predestination. Limited atonement or universalism? “Predestination is never a mankind-condemning No of God. It does involve rejection, but it is the rejection of *Christ*...Our rejection is borne in His and thereby it is borne away” (TG 106, emphasis in original). So is everyone saved (universalism)? Barth’s response is clear, even if his explanation is a bit cryptic: “No, for grace which would in the end automatically have to reach and embrace everyone and anyone would certainly not be sovereign, would not be divine grace” (TG 115, Berkouwer is quoting Barth). Berkouwer considers this a “revision and correction of the Reformational dogma of election” (TG 111). How much can one revise and correct Reformational dogma and still remain Reformed? Does the dogma define us or vice versa? To answer that we turn to Gordon Spykman’s new paradigm for doing dogmatics.

Gordon J. Spykman

Spykman was a genius.¹ His *Reformed Theology* is, in my opinion, the definitive compendium of Reformed Christian theology, both theoretical and applied, for the twentieth century, even if he calls it “no more than” an “outline” or “sketch” (RT 5). Unlike Berkouwer, he recognizes the impossibility of a philosophically neutral study and, immediately in the first chapter, names his influences: from the theological work of Calvin, Kuyper, Bavinck, Schilder, Van Til, Louis Berkhof, and Berkouwer to the philosophical work of D. H. T. Vollenhoven and Herman Dooyeweerd.

For every theology proceeds on the basis of certain pretheological assumptions and operates inescapably with certain philosophical perspectives....There are always pretheological, confessional, hermeneutic, philosophical issues, issues of religious stance, of faith commitment, of worldview and life-vision, for which we must render account as we move into dogmatics. (RT 96f.)

I purposely drafted this paper before going through Spykman's book carefully in order to struggle with Reformationalness on my own. The truth is he offers authoritative answers to our earlier inquiries. Although not everyone is a theologian—studying “the confessional (pistic, faith) aspect of life” (RT 103)—everyone does put their faith in something. And although not everyone is interested in dogmatics—“the cognitive, reflective side of faith as it takes shape in a body of basic beliefs and doctrines” (RT 107)—those who would call themselves *Reformed* Christians ought to at least have an inkling about *Reformational* doctrines. Of course, being Reformed is far more than just a checklist of doctrines; it is, ideally, an entire worldview and way of life (hereafter, “lifeway”). Obviously, those who would call themselves Reformed *Christians* wouldn't do so unless they felt it was the most Christlike way to live. So just what is this Reformed way of being a Christian?

The first part of Spykman's *Reformational Theology*, “Foundations,” answers this question with a historical survey. The litany of names above traces the Reformed tradition from the “Reformed-Calvinist wing of the Protestant Reformation—in distinction, for example, from the Lutheran, Anglican, Zwinglian, and Anabaptist traditions, and clearly also from the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions” (RT 5) to its “expression in the Dutch Reformed tradition in distinction from that of Scottish Presbyterianism” (RT 5f.). Fine. So now we know the lineage, but what types of “beliefs and doctrines” do Reformed Christians hold “in distinction from” Presbyterians and all the rest? In sum:

- *Sola Scriptura* (RT 76f.): Calvin brought us back to Scripture (ICR 1.6, RT 76f.) in a *via media* between Rome's traditionalism and others' spiritualism/affectism (cf. RCT 202, 216f., 292).
- Focus on covenant and kingdom: “in creation God covenanted his kingdom into existence....the original covenant stands forever as the abiding foundation and norm for life in God's world” (RT 11) (*alias* “already and not yet”).
- Holistic worldview: “repudiation of the tendency to read Greek philosophical ideas into the New Testament” (RT 11).

- Acknowledging our presuppositions: “Christian philosophy serves to clarify the underlying presuppositions of dogmatics” (RT 39, cf. 97ff.).
- Relational concept of truth: “God’s Word as the covenantal bond between God and his creatures” (RT 63); “This view holds revelation and response together, each retaining its identity, yet always in a religiously charged relationship” (RT 62, cf. 71, 74f.).
- God’s threefold Word: Scripture, creation (“God’s word and his works are equivalents” (RT 79)), and Christ (RT 90).
- Biblical story line: “from formation (creation), through deformation (fall) and reformation (redemption), toward consummation (restoration)” (RT 88).
- Structure and direction: “Structure refers to the orderliness of creation as it originally was and as God’s Word still impinges on it, calling it back to what it is still meant to be and to what it will one day become” (RT 109); “Direction refers to creational life” either *in* Christ or *apart from* Christ (RT 109f., cf. 264).
- Affirmation of creation: as opposed to the “world flight” mentality of evangelical Christianity, charismatic movements, existentialism, and process theology (RT 176f.). Our *cultural mandate* (Gen 1:26-31) is to make “every calling...a religious calling” (RT 179, cf. 256) as we “serve as God’s coworkers in the cultural development of creation’s potentials” (RT 193).
- Sphere sovereignty and universality: the individual identity and integral wholeness “of our various life relationships as they take shape within the several sectors of society” (RT 187).
- Life is religion: Not life is *religious*, as though our relationship to God were merely one part of our being; no, that relationship is at the “unifying center of man’s entire existence” (RT 218).
- Freedom/bondage of the will: “While structurally and functionally our wills are ‘free,’ yet directionally they are not ‘freed’ from bondage to sin” (RT 333).
- *Simul justus et peccator*: “Our whole life long we remain...concurrently sinful in ourselves and yet righteous in Christ” (RT 340).

These Thirteen Commandments of Reformational Theology are merely my subjective summation of Spykman’s encyclopedic survey. Other than a few comparisons with evangelical or liberal Christians, for example, nowhere does he make an exclusivist claim to any of these (or other) propositions. Church communities have always borrowed from each other, so theological

cross-fertilization is inevitable. In just the last 50 years, Vatican II brought Catholics closer to Protestants, hardly any denomination (including Catholics) has been untouched by the charismatic movement, and nondenominational megachurches have sprung up in every suburb (with their collage of predominately evangelical theology and conservative politics). Spykman's definition of being Reformed is, I believe, less a doctrinal checklist than lineage and lifestyle. Conservatives would argue with this, of course, as they did when the United Reformed Church split from the Christian Reformed Church in the 1990s. Some people will always be prone to measure their orthodoxy by carefully chosen definitions that they hope will stand the test of time. Others, like Barth, push (beyond) the boundaries. And some of us feel torn in two by the opposing forces.

Barth is an interesting case study. What does Spykman say about his Reformationalness? To begin with, Spykman says that, for Barth, “[t]he very idea of a Christian philosophy is a contradiction in terms” (RT 33). “All pretheological groundwork is therefore contraband” (RT 34). Not only does this violate one of the Thirteen Commandments (“Acknowledging our presuppositions”), but when “he argues that dogmatics must find its starting point in revelation itself”—without an interference from human experience—“Barth’s theology [becomes] a closed house, without doors or windows, cutting off all possibility of communication from within or from without. God is made to dwell in absolute transcendence” (RT 57). Christ is the sole (“Christomonist”) encounter of God and man, “[c]reation is at most a witness...[t]he result is a flight from [it]” (RT 169)—which is yet another broken commandment (“Affirmation of creation”). Barth “appealed to the ideas of the Reformation, seeking to update them for our times by offering what he regarded as a twentieth-century reinterpretation of Calvin’s theology” (RT 32). Does that make him Reformed? Spykman concludes perspicaciously, “Reformed theology must be sensitive to the healthy correctives in Barth’s dogmatics.” Broken commandments notwithstanding, “[i]t can learn from Barth and yet go a better way...” (RT 35).

It might seem anticlimactic to wrap up Spykman without a more definitive statement of being Reformational. What, for example, about Original Sin or predestination? Shouldn’t those be “commandments” too? One might subsume them under “Biblical story line” or give them their own commandment status. Either way, I believe Spykman’s message is, as he says of Barth, to learn from one another and explore new avenues as we try to “go a better way” taking the riches

of the Reformed tradition and applying them to our lives in the twenty-first century. *Semper reformanda*.

Experimental Theology

With a tip of the hat to Barth, I would like to conclude by trying my hand at reinterpreting Reformational theology for the present day. I take refuge in (and encouragement from) Spykman's words: "A certain playfulness, room to experiment with new ideas, should be tolerated in dogmatic theology, without immediately incurring suspicion or charges of heresy" (RT 110). I will begin by obeying the commandment "Acknowledging our presuppositions" and laying my cards on the table.

First, if Spykman's *Reformational Theology* and my thirteen-commandment précis can be considered a reliable "sketch" of the Reformed tradition, then I am consciously writing from that tradition, the tradition of my upbringing and education.

Second, my life experiences over the past decade have taken me far afield of that tradition, into other religions and philosophies as I've questioned the existence of God. I now believe that questioning God's existence is like a fish questioning the existence of water. It can be done, but doesn't get you very far.

Third, like the eastern parable of the blind men and the elephant, I have been shocked to discover that God is present in all of those other religions and philosophies (including atheism!).

Fourth, I am a teacher by calling and have been ever since I was an adolescent tutoring my precocious little brother. I am fascinated with the rhetoric of "translation" or, better, accommodation as a bridge "between the highly educated and the comparatively unlearned, between the convinced and the unconvinced" (RCT 22). Calvin's reference to "baby talk" (or motherese) is heartwarming (ICR 1.13.1); the incarnation as accommodation is profound. How might I share the insights of the Reformed worldview and lifeway with my Buddhist and atheist brothers and sisters?

Fifth, in order to accommodate my nonchristian and even nontheist interlocutors, I will attempt to meet them where they are by acknowledging that "[w]e cannot rise above our creatureliness to reach some supracreaturely vantage point" (RT 121). Even the biblical narrative itself presents a "down-to-earth, experiential concreteness" (RT 139).

Sixth, and finally, I am most concerned that the gifts of (Reformed) Christianity are going unrecognized as more people consider themselves "spiritual but not religious," and religious

wisdom goes unheeded in academia. This is more prevalent today than when Spykman wrote *Reformational Theology* two decades ago. The twenty-first century (and beyond) faces two massive challenges: (1) an economic inequality (due to unrestrained capitalism) every bit as oppressive as the Roman Empire in Jesus' time, and (2) an ecological imbalance unlike anything ever witnessed by humankind. All theoretics aside, I believe that Jesus' wisdom is a timeless solution for the first problem and, perhaps surprisingly, the biblical story line of creation/fall/redemption is a roadmap for the second.

To focus the task at hand, I will limit my exercise in experimental theology to reframing (translating, accommodating) the Thirteen Commandments of Reformed Theology in terms that might be acceptable (or at least thought-provoking) to a secular humanist.

Sola Scriptura. Often misinterpreted to mean that "Scripture is God's only revelation," Spykman clarifies that "the original meaning of this byword as coined by the sixteenth-century Reformers" includes God's revelation "in creation and in Christ" (RT 77). I would go further. To think of *sola Scriptura* as a third, and better, way between Rome's traditionalism and today's Pentecostals with their personal revelations ("God told me to tell you...") is to set up a false trichotomy. (I am taking a very consciously *experiential* approach to life/religion. It could be called "theology from below" (cf. RT 44f.) or a humanistic perspective, but I ask, what other perspective do we humans have? All revelation is either experienced by us or not. I prefer *experiential* over *humanist* because the latter is far too narrow, even by scientific standards.) The Catholics (and Jews) have a point. After all, what is the Scriptural canon if not a collection of wisdom/truth carried forth and approved by *tradition*? And the Pentecostals also have a point. Who are Moses and Paul if not people who said, "God told me to tell you..."? Of course, not everyone hearing voices is a true prophet of God. Their veracity must be approved by the community of believers—which brings us back to *tradition*, which itself is verified by personal and communal *experience*. So *sola Scriptura* does *not* mean "Scripture is the only revelation"; Scripture *is* the *tradition* of a few trusted individuals experiencing God. And rather than saying revelation is found in Scripture + creation + Christ, I would suggest it is found *only* in creation, for Scripture ("writings," wisdom, truth, etc.) is part of creation, and Christ is God *in creation*. *Sola Scriptura* is *in esse* about trusted revelation. I suggest we expand it to avoid a reductive misinterpretation: *sola creatio*. (If our secular-humanist friend is uncomfortable with the word "creation," we can just as easily use cosmos or nature: *sola natura*.)

NOTA BENE: The point of this exercise is not to convert our secular-humanist friend to a belief in God as God is described in the traditionally accepted canon of Scripture (Protestant or Catholic). The point is to reach out to him or her by seeking common *experiences* so that the veritable treasures of the Reformed worldview and lifeway do not remain locked up in our small communities but may become applied gifts for all with ears to hear.

Focus on covenant and kingdom. The previous commandment dealt with the trusted creational/natural source(s) of truth, but now we must go beyond that to our relationship to the Ultimate Source of Truth. Obviously, “God” is not a word that our friend will accept. The concept behind the word “God” is difficult, if not impossible, to define. We cannot truly speak of God’s transcendent *being* or *essence* without using creational/natural analogies. The apophatic tradition is an acknowledgement of this analogical dead end. Ken Wilber, a philosopher of religion, may be able to help us here. He describes our experience of God as more than just in the second-person “I-Thou.” Across various religious traditions, people experience God or the Ultimate Source or whatever in first-, second-, and third-personal ways (IS 208). Christians most often use second-person language, but our theology has room for all three: God the Holy Spirit in us (first-person) and God in creation/nature as Creator and Sustainer (third-person; cf. contemporary panentheism). We are afraid of bowing to the divine in others (as Hindus and Buddhists do) or of pantheism, but our integral relationship to/with self, others, the natural world, and God is inescapable. A *covenant* implies a special relationship, a promise, a duty (cf. J. Olthuis’s “troth”) to the other/Other. If we ever need to take our relationship with nature more seriously, to covenantalize it, now is the time. And by doing so, we build the “kingdom of God.” Perhaps “kingdom” is outdated. A secular equivalent might be “bringing things back into balance.”

Holistic worldview. Dualism is insidious. “The Word became flesh” (John 1:14) may be the strongest repudiation of Greek dualism ever spoken and yet Christianity has not only harbored that dualism from its earliest days (cf. gnosticism) but unleashed it into western culture where it has become common sense. The problem with dualism is that it introduces an artificial split into reality which leads to overvaluing one part and neglecting the other. One contemporary example is Christians valuing souls over bodies, emphasizing the afterlife (salvation) over this life, and thereby avoiding the hard work of “kingdom building.” Similarly, those valuing minds over bodies tend to emphasize idea(l)s such as peace, justice, or ecological responsibility over making the difficult choices to “get their hands dirty” actually *doing* something. Theory vs.

practice. Orthodoxy vs. orthopraxy. Jesus didn't seem to mind sacrificing his "standard of living" for the welfare of those around him. Nor should we. Faith without works is dead.

Acknowledging our presuppositions. There is no religious neutrality (cf. R. Clouser's book, *The Myth of Religious Neutrality*). When it comes to our core beliefs, to the things we hold most dear (sacred), to what we consider to be Ultimate, none of us is a *tabula rasa*. Pure objectivity, from a human standpoint, is an impossibility. Modern science concurs: we come "preprogrammed" with the genes we inherit which are epigenetically expressed in an almost infinite variety of ways due to environmental influences, and our culture continues to shape us in ways both conscious and subconscious (nature vs. nurture is another false dichotomy; it's all one integral, lifelong process). Why pretend otherwise? Masked presuppositions lead to frustration at best and war at worst. One of life's most important marks of maturity is learning to unmask one's own presuppositions so as to stop inadvertently lying to oneself and others.

Relational concept of truth. One of the great lessons of postmodernism is that knowledge/truth never stands alone. It cannot be isolated into discrete bits. This is no surprise to biblical wisdom which describes all things reflecting the Creator and all aspects of our lives lived *coram Deo*; yet modernism's illusion of objective knowledge (and technological enticements) has penetrated deeply into Christian thought (cf. body/soul split described above). Other religions have done a better job of emphasizing the interconnectedness of reality. Thich Nhat Hanh, a world-renown Buddhist monk, uses the term "interbeing" in his description of the interdependence of all things. The sciences of ecology and systems theory are challenging modernism on its own turf. A return to relational truth would do much to move us from our individualistic, short-term lifeways to a powerful social force for social justice and ecological balance.

God's threefold Word. This commandment was dealt with above with the suggestion that all three—Scripture, creation, and Christ—are experienced in creation/nature: *sola creatio/natura*; however, this is not meant to collapse them into an undifferentiated monism. They remain three distinct ways of experiencing truth via our only unified medium: nature. All three are interrelated and interdependent.

Biblical story line. The teleological structure of the biblical story line—creation, fall, redemption, and consummation—is considered to be a revolution of linear time over circular time. As opposed to the endless cycles of ancient paganism (and modern Hinduism and Buddhism), the religion of the Jews and Christians looks forward to an omega point, a coming

kingdom of peace and justice. I prefer a combination of cycles *and* a forward movement into new territory: a spiral. Either way, even without a belief in God, the biblical story is a story of hope, a story of good over evil. This is not merely wishful thinking or empty hope. History bears this out; tyrannical regimes do not last. Even evolution branches forward, filling niches with survivors. Every living thing today is descended from a line of survivors. This is a powerful and inspiring message contra the pessimisms (e.g., existentialism, nihilism, anarchism, etc.) of our time. And it is a sobering message for those on either side of the climate change debate. Creation/nature has its times of destruction (“fall”) but built into its fabric (laws) is the coming revivification (“redemption and consummation”). In other words, the question isn’t: will we ruin the planet? The planet will be fine. It has survived much worse over its long history. The question is: how will our relationship to the interbeing of Earth change? How much damage will we inflict on ourselves and our environment in the name of greed or lifestyle or religion before we come to our senses? Everything is connected, and we can be sure of better times in the future, but how *far* into the future depends on the choices we make now.

Structure and direction. These two concepts in a creational context, explained so well in A. Wolters’s *Creation Regained*, has been a boon to Christian thought and really ought to be used more widely (i.e., outside of Christian circles). To wit, when questions of ethics devolve into personal preferences (based on unexamined presuppositions), it helps to get grounded in the ground (i.e., nature), to remind ourselves that the *structure* of God’s good creation has no evil intentions. The hurricane that tragically destroys lives is neither evil in itself nor God’s vengeance; it merely follows the laws that are integral to its being. Humans, on the other hand, are constantly making choices that affect everyone and everything around them. The *direction* of these choices is good or evil—defined, for Christians, as *in* Christ or *apart from* him, respectively—and defined, for nonchristians, in terms of interrelational ideals (e.g., justice, truth, love, etc.—which, by the way, are also part of the structure of God’s good creation). You don’t have to believe that Jesus was God to recognize the reliable structure of the natural world or strive to live according to universally recognized ideals.

Affirmation of creation. Hopefully it is clear by now that this commandment is a theme running through several of the other commandments (e.g., “God’s threefold Word” and “Structure and direction”) which should not surprise us since everything is interconnected (cf. “Holistic worldview” and “Relational concept of truth”). To reiterate, nature is not the enemy. We *are* nature. We are called stewards “over” (or, better, “within”) creation because we are the only

species (we know of) that can purposely choose to do things for good or for ill (cf. “Freedom/bondage of the will”). But nature itself—including us—is beautiful and ugly and wonderful and scary and whole just as it is.

Sphere sovereignty and universality. The idea of historically differentiating spheres of society and their interrelatedness seems to have been in the air during the time of Abraham Kuyper, who wrote and spoke extensively on the concept from a Christian perspective. Perhaps it was an outgrowth of the atomistic tendencies of the Enlightenment, and, to its credit, it has engendered justice with regard to challenges such as the relationship between church and state, to name but one example. Harvard science professor and atheist Stephen Jay Gould made famous the separation of the *magisteria*: science and religion. Despite its usefulness, I believe Christians and nonchristians alike would do well to pay more attention to the “universality” part of the equation. The societal spheres (e.g., church, state, family, business, etc.) may have a horizontal structure—no one is sovereign over another—but their individuality must be balanced with a recognition of their interrelatedness, another term/thread running through these commandments.

Life is religion. This little phrase, coined by professor Evan Runner in his lectures and Groen Club meetings, has never gained the traction it deserves. One problem is that the word “religion” has fallen on hard times as more people seem to prefer the nebulous term “spirituality” to describe their faith life. But Runner’s expression isn’t really about organized religion; it’s about one’s ultimate commitment, not a commitment that is merely a *part* of life, but the commitment that lies at the *core* of life itself. Being human is nothing if not being in relation to the Ultimate (i.e., God). That relation is there (as it is with all of creation) whether we acknowledge it or not. “Religion” is Runner’s term for “in relation to the Ultimate.” It doesn’t matter what religious tradition you choose to follow; being human is being *imago Dei*. Even our secular-humanist friend must admit that all things have a common origin (an Ultimate Source) and that humans have the unique (as far as we know) ability to reflect on such a profound genesis.

Freedom/bondage of the will. Spykman uses the commandment “Structure and direction” to explain this one. It is worth quoting him again: “While structurally and functionally our wills are ‘free,’ yet directionally they are not ‘freed’ from bondage to sin” (RT 333). In other words, the structure/function of our brain/mind (the location of our “will”) follows its creational laws just like a hurricane or any other natural phenomenon. However, the direction of the choices made (“willed”) depends on the outcome of the struggle between the competing forces

in the almagam of our conscious self. In religious terms, good (love, compassion, etc.) pulls us one way and evil/sin (selfishness, greed, etc.) pulls us in another. Is the “will,” the motivating drive/desire mechanism of our mind/heart/self, “free” or “in bondage”? Both. Christians describe this as God’s heart-melting grace vs. sinful human nature. Freud saw the desires of the “I” (*ego* or self) in a tug-of-war between the “it” (*id* or our animal instincts) and the “more than self” (*superego* or societal/traditional mores). Either way describes the same experience: we feel both free and not free to make the right choices (cf. Paul’s struggle in Rom 7:14ff.).

Simul justus et peccator. Simultaneously just and sinful. Both good and bad at the same time (cf. the previous commandment). The “Biblical story line” commandment includes the reminder of sin, a concept that has fallen out of favor during my lifetime (along with institutional religion). Nonetheless, it is an important reminder in our bipartisan era that both good and bad lie within all of us. Republicans vs. Democrats. Pro-life vs. pro-choice. Israel vs. Palestine. We are too quick to angelize our own and demonize the other. The dividing line between love and hatred is found within.

In retrospect, the “Structure and direction” commandment may be the most helpful rubric in organizing and summarizing the Thirteen. Under the heading “structure” we find the major threads of (1) all truth/revelation/knowledge is experiential/creational/natural, (2) reality unfolds in a spiral (progressive cycles), and (3) everything is interconnected, interrelated, and interdependent (interbeing). Under “direction” we find (1) life is religion (in relation to an Ultimate), (2) that commitment to an Ultimate shapes our presuppositions (about which we should be open), and (3) the possibility for good and bad is within each one of us. For an atheist or secular humanist floating in the currents of relativity and nihilism, I believe these Reformed Christian insights can add both structure and direction to his or her life (pun intended).

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Endnote

¹ I am biased. He was my grandfather's friend, my graduation speaker (Dordt College, May 1988), and a kind and humble man. It was my honor to have known him.