

# The Influence of Reformed Theology on Our People in Regard to Word and Sacrament

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The topic is well chosen as to timeliness. Ours is an age that sees Reformed influence on Lutherans and Lutheranism at an all-time high. The large Lutheran body in the land is readying itself through dialog for altar and pulpit exchange with Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and even the Church of Christ. What was done in Europe at Leuenberg a decade ago may well be re-enacted by American churches in the new century and millennium. In such developments it is the Reformed spirit that dominates. Lutherans have to learn to talk about Christ's presence in the Sacrament and cease insisting on real presence.

One might want to write this off as still in the future and only problematic. One could even draw comfort from the fact that this, for the most part, only concerns church leaders who dwell far above the grass roots in their ivory towers of ecumenism. But the truth is the very grass roots are very much involved.

Never before have so many Lutherans been subjected to so much Reformed thinking and theology as in these days when the mass media reach into every home and every heart. For the time being the televangelists are in disarray because of the comeuppance they brought on themselves. Rest assured, however, that they will be back. And, having cleaned up their act and having learned from their mistakes, they will reach bigger audiences and confuse more people than ever before.

Fifty years ago Synod President G. E. Bergemann developed a technique to cope with the main mass medium of that day, the radio, that might well be revived in the age of television. Pastor Bergemann liked to visit parishoners on Sunday afternoons, but that was also prime time for radio preachers. When Bergemann called at a home where the radio was tuned to a religious broadcast, he would make a beeline to the radio, turn it off and say, "I am your pastor." And it didn't matter—as was usually the case—that the broadcast was Walter Meier's Lutheran Hour.

At the time I tended to view Bergemann's crusade against media sermons as, at best, an old man's idiosyncrasy and, at worst, a breach of personal etiquette and ecclesiastical brotherhood. Now a half century older and a little wiser, I'm sure Bergemann had something that stands emulation today when Reformed theology influences so many of our people and us.

The last word of the previous paragraph merits special emphasis. We have double reason to be on our guard. My theological teachers used to sound warnings about Reformed influence on the rise because pastors were reading less Luther and more Reformed theology. A whole generation and part of a second have passed since Wisconsin Synod pastors read Luther comfortably in the original language. Again, at the time I tended to classify these warnings as prime examples of exaggerated Teutonism and Luther worship. Now a lot older and a little wiser, I find much sense in what my theological mentors told me long ago.

Reformed influence is for our people and us a clear and present danger. In this closing decade of a century and a millennium the topic before us is timely in the  $n^{\text{th}}$  degree. That is not to say, however, that the problem to be considered is a brand new ecclesiastical phenomenon, previously almost nonexistent and only recently identified. The subject at hand, timely as it is, is actually old, almost as old as the hills, certainly as old as Lutheranism and Reformed theology themselves.

When Zwingli in 1525 published his dogmatics, *Commentarius de vera et falsa religione*, he referred to Luther's Lord's Supper doctrine as *opinio non solum rustica sed etiam impia et frivola*. A Lutheran-Reformed warfare with words resulted. A good outcome was that Luther was compelled to write *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper*, generally referred to as the "Great Confession."

The peace effort that Philip of Hesse mounted four years later led to the Marburg Colloquy. Here the battle lines were deadly drawn. There was agreement on fourteen doctrinal points and even four-fifths of the fifteenth on the Lord's Supper. The sticking point was real presence.

The long, drawn-out discussion on that point convinced Luther that he was dealing with people who had a “different spirit.” Luther realized that the problem was not just one single doctrine—serious as that in itself might be—but an erroneous approach to Scripture, an unwillingness to listen when Scripture proposed supernatural truth, a resort to human reason. Luther stood firm at Marburg but others were swayed by the alien spirit, among them the Strassburg men.

How much this influenced Philip Melancthon is not easy to determine. What is unfortunately clear beyond a shadow of doubt is that the author of the Augsburg Confession a decade later softened the Article 10 wording by substituting for the original *adsint et distribuantur* the much more general *exhibeantur*.

After Luther’s death in 1546, Reformed influence on his followers increased. The military defeats on the battlefields were far surpassed in importance by the doctrinal compromises with Roman and Reformed adherents that were attempted. Less than a generation after Luther’s passing the Reformed were gloating over their control in the Reformation’s stronghold of Saxony and the Romans were arguing in the courts that earlier legal grants to the Reformation should be revoked on the grounds that the Augsburg Confession was no longer being maintained.

When Lutheranism was forced to set its house in order, it used the Formula of Concord as the touchstone. The Reformed vehemently opposed the Formula because it so emphatically and clearly, especially in Articles Seven and Eight on Lord’s Supper and Christ’s person and Article Eleven on election, rejected Reformed error. A result was that substantial Reformed inroads were made in domains previously Lutheran.

After Pietism and Rationalism had undermined doctrinal concerns among both parties, efforts to bring them together mounted. The Prussian Union, beginning in 1817, is a familiar story, especially since it played such a large and detrimental role in the first decades of our own church body. Reformed influence on the infant Wisconsin Synod was strong enough to make Wisconsin a sort of house-divided-against-itself until finally a clear and decisive position was taken in the last years of the second decade.

A battle was won. The war continued and continues. This 1993 gathering of Wisconsin Synod pastors is still concerned about Reformed influence on our people in regard to Word and sacraments. An attempt will be made to trace this influence as it manifests itself in Reformed Rationalism, Legalism, Arminianism, and Subjectivism.

## I

Before the discussion turns to specifics in Reformed influence, a reminder is in place. The term *Reformed* is a theological catchall that includes a variety of denominations and movements, ranging from Calvinism to Arminianism, fundamentalism to liberalism, from old Zwinglianism to modern Presbyterianism. Scarcely anything could be said that fully applies to everything that falls between the ranges. An effort will have to be made to avoid beating dead horses and tarring the many with the brush that should only fall on the few.

The term *influence* is general enough to allow for a variety of interpretations. There are many such Reformed influences. Four will be treated: rationalism, legalism, Arminianism, and subjectivism. An effort will have to be made to minimize the duplication built into the broad categories and into their application to the several means of grace. Heading the list of Reformed influences is rationalism.

What was Luther especially thinking of when at Marburg on several occasions he told the Zwinglians, “You have a different spirit.” He was pointing to more than the specific doctrinal point of disagreement, the real presence of Christ’s body and blood in his Supper. What bothered Luther more than anything else was the difference in the way the two sides arrived at their respective Lord’s Supper positions.

For Luther the issue was settled by the one word of Scripture. He didn’t feel compelled to explain how Christ’s body and blood could be really present in, with, and under the bread and wine. He simply believed and stated what His Lord said and neither the argument of Zwingli nor the problems of his own mind could get Luther to recede from the Bible statement.

Zwingli operated doctrinally in a totally different manner. At the outset he put his own limitations on the communication of Christ's two natures, especially in the majestic genus. That caused him to reason that the Ascended Lord cannot be on altars. This then forced him to change the Bible's word *is* into *seems to be*. It was a very rational approach. It was rationalism. It was a different spirit.

The other Reformed father, John Calvin, repeated Zwingli's error, only more so. He tried to rationalize the answer to the old *cur alii prae allis?* question. The logical effort to safeguard sovereignty and total depravity resulted in double election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and perseverance of saints. Many of today's Reformed theologians may have repudiated some of Calvin's worst errors but they seem less able to rid themselves of his rational approach to Scripture and doctrine.

When rationalism gets its foot in the door, it will eventually push its way through. When one word of Scripture is rejected or ignored, then a chain reaction soon sets in. It has been said—in another sense—that the Pilgrim Fathers brought with them in the Mayflower Unitarianism. Two hundred years after the landing at Plymouth Rock, the steady doctrinal decline, that a rationalistic approach to Scripture had set in motion reached its nadir. Ralph Waldo Emerson preached in the pulpit that had once belonged to Cotton Mather and in Boston twelve of fourteen Congregational churches changed their name from Trinitarian Christian to Unitarian Christian.

Almost another two centuries have passed since that victory of rationalism over revelation paved the way for many others. The ranks of Bible believers have thinned in the meanwhile. Is it time that the cry, *Hostes ante portas!*, be sounded loud and clear?

There are warning signs. Aren't there in our midst those who are ready to say: "Of course I believe what the Bible says but that one passage has got to give because it cramps my lifestyle."

Perhaps the declaration takes this turn. "Certainly I go along with the Bible but it is an old book written for ancient times. We can't expect to apply its outmoded male chauvinism in a more enlightened time."

It could be that the thought has crossed our mind: "Wouldn't our outreach possibilities be enhanced if we toned down our fellowship principles a little without yielding anything else in the Bible. We would retain the gospel and be all the more able to spread it."

The old conflict between rationalism and revelation is still going on, even though no one admits anymore to being a rationalist. The name may be in disrepute but the spirit is alive and well. The leaven is still at work and even a little leaven never stays little. A theme that needs to be preached often these days and a lesson that must be clearly taught is the foundation truth that God's Word is inspired, inerrant, authoritative, and abiding, no matter what our or anybody's reason may assert to the contrary.

Reformed rationalism clashes with the clear teaching of Scripture concerning the sacraments even more blatantly than it does with Scripture itself. At Marburg, as has been previously mentioned, Zwingli let his reason drive him to a denial of real presence. The Reformed remained consistent in that denial even when Calvin went from Zwingli's gross sacramentarianism, or representation, to the more subtle, figurative sacramentarianism. The latter, as well as the former, rejects real presence.

When one hears these days that this or that Reformed-Lutheran dialog has reached a Lord's Supper agreement, he can be sure of one thing: the agreement involved a presence of Christ in the sacrament but not real presence, with the Lutherans contenting themselves with less than half a truth. Even in this ecumenical era, the Reformed are still denying real presence. That the denial is less polemical and judgmental than in previous centuries simply creates a greater danger for the unwary.

Is Reformed rationalism in the matter of the Lord's Supper adversely affecting our people? We hope that all our Lutheran communicants approach the altar with true repentance and firm faith, faith in Christ the Savior of sinners and faith that his body and blood are truly present and received.

That hope notwithstanding, however, we might fear that Reformed influence could create an erroneous view about the practice of close communion. At least one of our congregations recently suffered a membership loss over this issue.

It is clear that an open communion practice is quite consistent and compatible with the Reformed denial of real presence. If only bread and wine are offered and received, then no great harm can be done if the unworthy partake. For the Lutheran, however, real presence implies close communion. This again must be preached and taught emphatically.

Reformed rationalism has also consistently stood in opposition to two important elements of baptism that are to be cherished deeply: baptismal regeneration and infant baptism. In both instances the rational opposition finds ready and familiar argumentation. The line of thought is so obvious it needs no repeating here.

The result is that the miracle of grace worked by the Holy Spirit is denied and baptism is said to be no more than some kind of sign of something else. What the Bible says is a mark of the church becomes much less in Reformed thinking.

The Reformed differ in the matter of baptizing infants. Some simply prevent it, preferring to baptize only when they see proof that faith already exists. When the Reformed baptize infants it is with the reservation that the bigger and more important event is still, hopefully, going to take place in the future.

In our century it was the influential Reformed theologian, Karl Barth, who led the attack on the baptism the Scriptures teach and Lutherans confess. In his *Church Dogmatics* (IV, 4) Barth, who liked to refer to baptism as a “bad habit,” even denied the “sacramental or sacramentalistic” character of any baptism. Insisting it is the baptism with the Holy Spirit that brings repentance and renewal, he identifies any baptism with water as a mere liturgical response to a change already wrought by the Holy Spirit. He questions whether the church can be a mature missionary force in the come-of-age world if it continues to “dispense the baptismal water with the same disrespectful prodigality it has demonstrated” in the past.

When Barth spoke, his voice was heard even in some Lutheran seminaries. How much of the error has seeped down to the grassroots of Lutheran congregations is of course difficult to determine. Over in the original land of the Reformation a few years ago a sizable band of Lutheran candidates for ordination had to be turned back because they declared they would not baptize infants.

With the growing exposure to the more spectacular conversion experience, baptism, whether infant or adult, is being pushed into the background. Our people seem to understand and apply the truths about baptism less than those of the other sacrament. Perhaps it is time to revive the old custom of preaching on baptism on the Sunday called *Quasimodogeniti* with its introit beginning “as newborn babes.” We don’t have those sermons on baptism anymore. We don’t even have a Sunday called *Quasimodogeniti*.

## II

It has been said that every rationalist is a legalist. Or is it the other way around? In any event, the two go hand in hand, for the person who looks within himself for the important answers will inevitably find that there is in his head and in his heart the *opinio legis*, the self-righteous pride in works, and the desire to be saved by them. This is the heritage of all of us sinners, the essence of our old Adam.

We are all legalists by nature and can therefore be easily misled by dry legalistic elements in a theology. Reformed theology has its share of such elements that can exert a baneful influence.

Way back in Calvin’s Geneva days these elements were already asserting themselves. The election error that vitiated gospel comfort needed to be balanced by a system of works that would seek to motivate the self-righteous and encourage the stricken sinner. The system grew so large and burdensome that after two years the citizens of Geneva voted Calvin into exile.

But Geneva had gotten accustomed to Calvin’s yoke and actually missed it. After only two more years the city recalled him and he regulated Geneva from then on until his death twenty-four years later.

Calvin has been hailed by his admirers as the theologian of sanctification, in contrast to Luther and his theology of justification. Unfortunately, Calvin’s teaching of sanctification had a legalistic bent and basis that has survived in his followers to this day.

A characteristic of Calvin's Geneva and of his Reformed followers is the ability to add more and more commandments to the original list of ten. A prime example is Sabbath legislation. Another is anticipating a medical taboo on smoking by over a century. A host of other instances come to mind.

Sometimes the extra commandments had their origin in special erroneous viewpoints. Here one can think of the process of taking an Old Testament ordinance and insisting on its validity in New Testament times. An obvious case in point is tithing. Some Reformed church groups specialize in food regulations.

Another form of this kind of legalism is to allow nothing in the church and its worship that is not specifically endorsed in the Scriptures. Wittenberg was disturbed by this kind of thinking early in the Reformation but Luther had the good sense to risk the displeasure of his prince and his own life in order to set the Wittenberg people straight on the all important matter by the well-known series of eight sermons. Some of the Reformed, however, never corrected their error. In our day there is still to be found a branch of the Disciples known as non-instrumentalists

Then there are those who want to make a law out of what the Bible mentions, if at all, as a matter of form. They insist, for example, on using immersion in baptism and broken bread in the Lord's Supper with such vehemence that one feels compelled to resist as a matter of maintaining our Christian liberty.

This is the worst aspect of all these legalistic endeavors: they overthrow the liberty that Christ has won for us and undervalue his redemptive labor on our behalf. Christ has freed us from all the old ordinances. He has fulfilled the eternal and immutable will of God for us and kindles in us the desire to abide in it.

Not every Reformed believer or teacher is an advocate of every specific instance of legalism mentioned in the previous paragraphs, but the alien spirit permeates the large ecclesiastical grouping. The influence is always there and all of us, as was said before, have the itch to take the legalistic highway, to yield to the ultimate temptation.

From the days of Calvin's Geneva down to Falwell's moral majority the Reformed have sought to dominate the state and make it a tool to serve the church's ends. Over forty years after the First Amendment was adopted Massachusetts was still clinging to its Congregational brand of religious monopoly and trying to enforce a kind of corporate and community sanctification.

This aspect of Reformed attitude and activity merits mention here. It might seem that such political activity effects no harmful "influence in the matter of Word and sacraments."

It only seems so. The effect may be only indirect but it is telling. All around us we can see Reformed Church bodies—and some Lutheran too—who have made social concerns and political activity their top agenda items to the detriment of those agenda items the Lord and Savior has set down at the top of his priority list. Augustana VII names them: the Gospel rightly taught and the sacraments rightly administered.

Church bodies who traded in the Bible's message for a social gospel almost a century ago and who never properly prized the sacraments may well devote themselves to social and political concerns. Those who confess Augustana VII, however, will want to resist this Reformed influence to the utmost. It has its allure. Most of the believers in our congregations have something of the American activist in them and are easily swayed to overvalue a practical social program and to undervalue the Holy Spirit's means of grace. Church history, especially the American variety, sounds a loud and clear warning.

The very worst influence of Reformed legalism on Word and sacraments has not been specifically underscored up to this point, even though that influence has been ever present, lurking between the lines and waiting in the wings. The reference is to the anti-gospel nature of all religious legalism. Where legalism—no matter what form it takes or how trifling it may seem—lifts its head, the gospel in Word and sacrament is endangered. This point has been reserved for the conclusion of the second part because it leads directly into the third that treats Reformed Arminianism.

Calvin's double election and limited atonement left the sinner without the comfort of the gospel of free grace for all. In the absence of gospel comfort the Calvinist had to somehow assure himself by what he felt and did that God had chosen him for heaven and given him a share in the atonement. Great emphasis was placed on the conversion experience and the kind of life that followed. The result was the legalistic approach previously described.

Even some Calvinists soon sensed that there had to be a more comforting religion. Led by the Dutch theologian, Arminius, they sought to correct Calvin's denial of grace for all. In doing so, they fell into the trap of denying *sola gratia*. Man had a share in the regeneration effort. How large the share was claimed to be varied from theologian to theologian, from place to place and from century to century. But even when the share was small, *sola gratia* was denied; for grace, as Paul so emphatically explains, cannot exist side by side with any human work.

In the early years of the Calvinist-Arminian struggle Calvinism retained the upper hand. The Council of Dort condemned the Arminians and endorsed the famed five-point theology of Calvinism. Eventually, however, Arminians achieved the majority status. Today true followers of Calvinism are hard to find and even they usually waive the double election paragraph of their old creeds.

Arminianism rules the Reformed roost in this day, and its message is heard on America's radios and televisions. The message is at best a conditioned gospel, actually no gospel. At worst hardly any message at all remains. Christ the Savior has become a will-of-the-wisp kind of historical Jesus, a shadowy figure that can only serve as the never-never goal of a quixotic quest but not real enough to be anybody's Savior from sin.

Actually the last word of the preceding paragraph has become a *passé* in the religious jargon of the day. And if sin no longer exists, one need not be too much concerned about a Savior or a salvation. Each person can supply his own do-it-yourself salvation.

To such theology—theology is hardly the proper term—our people are being subjected by broadcast and telecast by press and by publication. How can this influence be counteracted? The answer does not rest in a resort to gimmickry in the pulpit or in an effort to out-huckster the huckster with a halo. The answer comes in three words: preach the gospel.

As never before, this is the time to preach and teach the gospel, to drive it with the Spirit's power deep into the hearts and lives of the people. This is the time to shun like the plague any presentation in pulpit or classroom or office of a conditioned gospel that needs the work of man before it can amount to anything. This is the time to avoid studiously any motivation for the life of faith that is not born and bred in the gospel. This is the time for *sola gratia*, as it is also the time for grace for all. Neither Reformed Calvinism, that wars with the latter, nor Arminianism, that clashes with the former, dare be allowed to influence our people and to undermine their faith.

This section can conclude with a brief application to the means of grace. The gospel, as had been amply demonstrated, is changed from the good news of what Christ has done to a kind of how-to-do-it manual of personal salvation.

The Arminian approach to baptism undermines the aspect of God's gracious work of regeneration and replaces it with the role of a person baptized. That person will have to get into the act. If he is still too young for that, he will have to be content with a symbol for the nonce until he can add real substance later on.

In the Lord's Supper it is no different. What is left after real presence and sacramental grace are denied is the human activity, the replay of an old church tradition, the fellowship of believer with believer. The purpose may be noble, the rite impressive but it is not the sacrament of Christ's body and blood given and shed for the remission of sins. This overemphasis on what the believer does in the sacraments at the expense of what God does is also an example of another Reformed influence on our people, a Reformed subjectivism that clashes with the objective aspect of the means of grace.

To be sure, there is an indispensable, abiding, subjective side to the Christian faith and life of faith. Nothing could be more personal and subjective than faith. It is on the pathway of faith that the elect and justified are led by the Spirit to the eternal goal.

At the same time, it is essential that this subjective faith have its object, the object that the means of grace provide. A theology that is based on the Bible will keep the objective and the subjective in the Christian faith and life in balance. Where there is a departure from Scripture, imbalance results. Reformed theology has a tendency to magnify the subjective element at the expense of the gospel in Word and sacrament. A few instances of the tendency, those that especially influence and mislead, are worthy of note here.

One that immediately and almost automatically suggests itself is the Reformed demand for a so-called "conversion experience." The New England Puritans limited full membership to those who not only had a conversion experience but who could also publicly relate it in a manner that convinced others that the experience was real and genuine. In our day we encounter those who want us to relate to them when and how we were born again.

There is certainly nothing wrong with a memorable, heartfelt conversion experience. One happened on the road to Damascus and from the moment Paul knelt in that highway's dust until thirty years later when he knelt in the dust of a highway leading from Rome in front of the executioner's block, he never forgot his conversion experience. At the same time, Paul never made such an experience a requirement for church membership, nor did he make it the foundation on which to anchor his hope of heaven.

When more attention is paid to the personal conversion experience than to the agent and means of conversion and the faith that is created, great harm can be done. Trust, that can only reliably rest on the promises of grace and forgiveness, is instead based on what was or is felt in the wavering, wayward human heart.

The implication of all this for the sacrament of baptism is obvious. What God has wrought in us in baptism is the source of strength for believing, for living, for dying. The hope of heaven rests on what God does for us. It makes no sense to risk that hope by seeking to build it on something we do or feel.

Concentration on a conversion experience can easily lead into conversion error as one seeks to understand and explain the mystery of the Spirit's working that is like the wind that blows where it lists. Amid all the emphasis on conversion experience in this day and age we need to point our people to their baptismal blessings that assure them that they are children of God and heirs of heaven.

Conversion error made its way into Lutheranism already in the early days of the Reformation. Later on it tainted American Lutheranism. There is today in our land a Lutheran denomination that rivals the Reformed in insistence on a conversion experience. We need to remind ourselves and our people of what the Formula of Concord so emphatically states (Epitome II, Conclusion of Affirmation): "With this Word the Holy Spirit is present and opens hearts so that they, as Lydia in Acts 16, 14, are attentive to it and are thus converted alone through the grace and power of the Holy Ghost, whose work alone the conversion of man is."

The Reformed subjectivism that stresses the conversion experience is manifested also in the method especially favored by church growth advocates for bringing about conversions. It has been called the "felt need" approach. Instead of proclaiming law and gospel, one might better offer, so goes the manual, what people feel they want and need. Then the chances for church growth are appreciably enhanced. The problem is that the growth may be in membership of a sort but not in conversions from sin and unbelief to faith in the gospel and life motivated by that faith. Again, it is a matter of placing the subjective reaction of the human heart above what the Spirit chooses to use as his means of conversion. Like Jesus himself and Paul, we will seek and utilize points of contact with those whom we want to win for Christ but we will not replace law and gospel with felt needs of some kind or other.

A large topic is being compressed, and perhaps overly simplified. The point, however, needs to be made that in our growing evangelism efforts we are to safeguard our people from the influence of Reformed subjectivism. Positively stated, we need to remind them and ourselves constantly that the Word and the sacraments are the marks of the church and the tools the Spirit employs to effect its building.

A recent issue of Time featured the phenomenon of the return to religion of the baby boomers of yesterday. A chief point made was that the return really involved an effort to find or create a church that suited the wants of that generation. While this is a subjectivism that cannot be placed entirely at the door of Reformed churches, it is one that has been fostered by their spirit and approach.

What is more important than assigning blame is that we react properly to this opportunity. What Reformed churches are doing is their concern. What we do is ours. First of all, we will take heed that the gospel is rightly taught and that the sacraments are rightly administered. No Reformed influence and no felt needs or desires dare turn us from that goal.

There are, of course, other situations where the issue is not so clear and decisive. With what kind of worship order should we confront these new seekers when their quest brings them to our churches? They would feel uncomfortable with what is customary among us, preferring a more friendly and folksy style of service.

This would give the Reformed no problem, but what should Lutherans with their liturgical tradition do? The answer may well be deferred to the workshop you have planned, where much more expertise will manifest itself than is present at this podium.

What is certain is that Reformed subjectivism, Arminianism, legalism, and rationalism are influences that can trouble our people, especially in matters of Word and sacraments. The little that could be said about this large theme in this hour simply underscored what Augustana VII said so eloquently so long ago about the church's need of the hour. That need revolves entirely around the right teaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments.