

campus in the balmy month of February sealed the deal. While most people probably think that the choice of seminary is a much prayed over and soul-examining decision, for me it was basically a decision of whether I wanted to be in Chicago in January and February or Orlando. Besides, R. C. Sproul was in Orlando. I did not need any more persuading.

Going to seminary was one of the best moves I have ever made. No doubt, it was an often difficult training ground. The work was heavy. Family life was demanding. And of course, money was tight. Yet, those years were some of the best, as I really fell in love with my wife even as we matured as disciples of Christ and as parents. Though the seminary years were difficult and taxing, I would not trade them for anything. More than the Bible (and I did learn much about the Bible), seminary taught me about me. And man, those were some important lessons. In fact, one lesson in particular continues to stand out as an epochal moment in my Reformed theological journey. And I have Richard Pratt to thank for it.

It Would Never Be the Same

When I entered seminary, my thinking and practices were being greatly influenced by some of the more popular evangelical and Reformed preachers of the day. I listened regularly to men like R. C. Sproul, John MacArthur, Steve Brown, James Montgomery Boice, Chuck Swindoll, and Ravi Zacharias. These men had regular radio preaching ministries from which I gleaned much of my approach to ministry and preaching. They were my contemporary heroes (with John Newton and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones being my deceased heroes). I wanted to be like them. I wanted to preach like them, if that were possible. Their preaching and teaching shaped my thinking and the attitude I had toward me and my gifts. This was true until I walked into Reformed Theological Seminary's mandatory first-year class taught by Dr. Richard Pratt. Nothing would ever be the same.

During my pre-enrollment visit in February 1996, I learned that R. C. Sproul had recently resigned his professorship at RTS

Orlando. As you can imagine, this was a hard pill for me to swallow. My host assured me that while Sproul would be missed, I would find Richard Pratt the teacher of choice around the seminary. I quickly learned how true his words were.

Pratt was the most popular professor on campus. Many students found his sometimes over-the-top approach refreshing and genuine, while others were turned off by it. He was rarely without controversy. He was unexpected, sharp, incomparably intelligent, witty, tall, and sometimes even awkward. He spoke of taking dancing lessons with his wife, but when I watched him walk, I could only imagine the pain and agony of his wife and instructor. He was a geek in a full beard, and yet you just got the sincere feeling that he desired to know you and relate to you.

However, he was also edgy, and when those edges got close to you and your worldview, they would cut. Suddenly, the professor you thought was your friend could become an antagonist as he deconstructed your notions of yourself and what you perceived to be true. One day he caught me off guard: he began to speak unflatteringly about some popular evangelical preachers who left no room for what he called “fuzzy areas.” In other words, they spoke and preached as if they were the keepers of biblical truth because they had so wonderfully and faithfully handled the history and grammar of New Testament Greek. Accordingly, when antecedents are properly identified and verbs rightly conjugated, the truth of the New Testament is always clearly known. Richard constantly warned us not to drink the Kool-Aid.

This was not the first time Pratt had spoken in this negative tone concerning many of the men I considered heroes. Yet, for some reason that day I had had enough. After class, I asked if I could have a word with him. I was seriously considering dropping the class. He graciously agreed to talk to me. My first question was, “Do you believe everything you say, or is it just for effect?” He smiled and replied, “Yes. I believe what I teach and much of it is for effect.”

He went on to explain to me that most of the men in the class were white, middle- to upper-middle-class southern Presbyterians. They had a view of the world that was skewed by

their dominant cultural perspective. Yet, they were going to be sent to minister the gospel in a world where the vast majority of people was radically different than they were. Richard saw that his task was to shake them out of their skewed perspective and presumption, and hopefully open them up to ministry outside of themselves.

My next question was, “Well, what about me?”

Richard looked straight at me as we stood in the courtyard of RTS and spoke the words I will never forget: “The Holy Spirit wants to use the experiences God has given you to speak the truths of his Word through you.” When he spoke those words, I thought how God desired to use me as a black man to proclaim the truths of his Word. It dawned on me that God did not desire for me to become “white” or even to preach like James Boice or R. C. Sproul. Rather, God would take biblical Reformed theology and teach me to be me. My contributions to the kingdom of God would be not in how much I could become like my white heroes, but in yielding to the Holy Spirit and allowing him to use this black man to proclaim his truth. Studying, preaching, and teaching Reformed theology would never be the same for me.

From then on, Pratt became my favorite teacher. Often I would chuckle inside as some fellow student would experience one of Richard’s edges in class, and the student would be left wondering if he was really called to gospel ministry. By the end of the course that same student would join with every other student in giving Richard a standing round of applause for another course well taught—and for reassuring us that our confidence must not be in our culture, experiences, or even heroes. We must put our confidence and assurance in God and the Bible, his inerrant self-revelation.

Richard taught me to be Reformed, yet always be reforming (*semper reformanda*). I have never looked back. Today I am the living legacy of men like Augustine and John Calvin, John Bunyan and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. But also, and as far as I am concerned, even more gloriously, I am the living legacy of men like Olaudah Equiano and Lemuel Haynes, Francis Grimke and Daniel Payne, Carl Ellis and Ken Jones. Today I am an African-

American who embraces the biblical theology commonly known as Reformed theology. I rejoice to know that I am not the first to do so, and by God's grace, I will not be the last.

What Difference Has Reformed Theology Made?

I will be the first to admit that I am not the sharpest tool in God's toolbox. Therefore, one of the important elements of my Christian experience has been the necessity of historical connections. In other words, I am always looking for men and women who have believed what I believe. I am not interested in being out on the theological island by myself without the help and confirming camaraderie of those who have gone before. One of the glories of biblical Reformed theology is that it is historical. We have the awesome blessing of knowing that there have been and continue to be others who confess the very same thing we confess today. True Christianity is never a faith in isolation. Our faith must be a continuous line of faithful men and women who testify to the faithfulness of God and give proof that our God has never been without a witness among the people of the earth. The Reformed tradition gives me confidence that I am indeed a part of that continuous line.

Reformed theology reminds us that we are connected. The great Reformed confessions and catechisms, along with the historical creeds, provide for us a theological and practical link to those who have gone before us.² When we read these confessions and recite these catechisms, we are reading and reciting the same biblical faith of saints centuries removed from us.

This allows and even encourages our connection with the saints of God who have been made perfect as they have gone on to their eternal bliss in the presence of Christ. The writer of Hebrews reminds us that New Testament worship is a truly multi-generational and celestial worship. Whenever we gather, we join in worship with the angels; the church triumphant is made up of the spirits of the righteous saints who have been made perfect and are in the presence of Jesus Christ, whose precious blood has made this worship possible (Heb. 12:18–28). The historical

connections of Reformed theology have given me a sense that I am not alone in my faith. And thus, it has also made me a more intentional, thoughtful, and emotional worshiper.

Reformed theology continues to make me a better worshiper by giving me a bigger, more glorious picture of God and a more accurate assessment of myself. John Calvin begins his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with these essential points: “Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God,” and “without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self.”³ It could be argued that the *Institutes* is essentially John Calvin’s unfolding of the biblical theology of the knowledge of God and the knowledge of humanity. True knowledge leads to a displeasure with oneself and ultimately to a desire for the pleasure and intimacy of God. Reformed theology has helped me to better grasp both of these truths.

For example, the doctrine of total depravity is a foundational truth of the Scriptures and thus of Reformed theology.⁴ At first, even the sound of the words “total” and “depravity” can seem so final and irremediably bad because we believe that so few people, if any, are beyond reform. Yet, it was not until I came to grips with the depths of my own sinfulness that I really began to understand the glories of God’s grace. Great sinners require greater grace supplied by an even greater Savior.

The Bible and Reformed theology exalt grace so much because sin is so awful. When the Bible says, “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom. 5:20), Reformed theology says, “Yes!” Thus, in response, the worship I experience is a worship seeking less of me and more of grace. The worship I experience is a worship that exults in the gospel of Jesus because I stand so in need of it. It is reflective of a boast and a glory in the cross and not me (Gal. 6:14). In other words, the worship I experience is a worship of a heart filled with the truth of Reformed theology, like that of John Newton.

It is no surprise that the most beloved hymn in all of Christianity was written by a confessing Reformed theology preacher. As a friend of mine is fond of reminding me that only a Reformed theologian could have written:

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound;
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind but now I see.

Every day of my life, my worship flows from the growing reality of my sinfulness and the ever-increasing glory of God's sovereign grace in the person and work of Jesus Christ on my behalf.

John Newton's eyesight was almost gone by the end of his life. He would enter his pulpit for only a few moments, and say, "I am a great sinner, but I have a great Savior." Reformed theology teaches us to echo the sentiments of Newton, and, as a wonderful consequence, makes us better fit for the worship of God.