

The Gospel  
in the Reformed Faith  
The Sovereignty and Grace of God

# Introduction

- Roman Catholics recite the Rosary prayer, which begins with the Apostles' Creed, after which they say "The Hail Mary":
- Hail, Mary, full of grace,  
the Lord is with thee.  
Blessed art thou amongst women  
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.  
Holy Mary, Mother of God,  
pray for us sinners,  
now and at the hour of our death.  
Amen.

# Who are you?

- What descriptors would you use to define your identity?
- What does it mean to be Reformed?
- Reformed Christianity is rooted in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, when Protestant reformers protested against the corrupt teachings and practices of the Roman Catholic church
- The Reformed tradition identifies with the life and work of John Calvin and the basic doctrines of the Protestant Reformation
- Reformed doctrinal beliefs are summarised in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms

# Who are you?

- Presbyterianism is a subset of the Reformed tradition
- The term “Presbyterian” refers to a Greek term, *presbuteros*, meaning “elder”
- The Presbyterian Church governing body is based on a system of elders, ruling and teaching elders or ministers, who are ordained and responsible for the discipline, nurture and mission of the congregation

# The Sovereignty of God

- At the heart of Reformed Theology is belief in **God's sovereignty**
- Reformed people believe the Scriptures teach that God is in complete and absolute control of his creation
- “To put it simply, when we talk about God as sovereign, we mean that God is King” (Lucas 2006, 15)
- Therefore, we depend on him for all we have and are

# God's Sovereignty and Divine Control

- Evil exists within the mystery of God's divine sovereignty (Gen 50:19-20; Isa 10:5-16)
- <sup>19</sup> But Joseph said to them, "Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? <sup>20</sup> You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen 50:19-20)

# God's Sovereignty and Divine Control

- “Woe to the Assyrian, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath! <sup>6</sup> I send him against a godless nation, I dispatch him against a people who anger me, to seize loot and snatch plunder, and to trample them down like mud in the streets. <sup>7</sup> But this is not what he intends, this is not what he has in mind; his purpose is to destroy, to put an end to many nations. <sup>8</sup> ‘Are not my commanders all kings?’ he says. <sup>9</sup> ‘Has not Kalno fared like Carchemish? Is not Hamath like Arpad, and Samaria like Damascus? <sup>10</sup> As my hand seized the kingdoms of the idols, kingdoms whose images excelled those of Jerusalem and Samaria—<sup>11</sup> shall I not deal with Jerusalem and her images as I dealt with Samaria and her idols?’” <sup>12</sup> When the Lord has finished all his work against Mount Zion and Jerusalem, he will say, “I will punish the king of Assyria for the willful pride of his heart and the haughty look in his eyes” (Isa 10:5-12)

# God's Sovereignty and Divine Control

- Divine sovereignty establishes human existence and choice
- Divine sovereignty and human choice are compatible
  - God is sovereign but this does not mitigate human responsibility; and
  - Humans are morally responsible creatures but our actions do not make God contingent



# God's Sovereignty and Divine Control

- “Embedded in these passages is the teaching that God is good. In his sovereignty, he stands asymmetrically behind good and evil. He stands behind good until the good is finally creditable to him. He stands behind evil in such a way, although it never escapes the boundaries of his sovereignty, the evil is always creditable only to secondary causalities” (Carson 2015)

# God's Sovereignty and Election

- Paul describes the human race as separated from God (Rom 3:9-18). We are spiritually blind (Rom 1:18-23; 2 Cor 4:3-4)
- No one seeks God (Rom 3:9-11)
- Because humans are sinners and spiritually dead, this condition requires God's election
- As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, <sup>2</sup> in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient (Eph 2:1-2)
- Reformed people believe that God chooses specific individuals to salvation, not groups of people

# Terms Denoting Election

- Heb term *yada* refers “to know” or “regard with favor” (Gen 18:19)
- Terms such as *bachar* and *eklegomai* mean “to choose” or “to select”
- The term *proorizo* means “to predestine” (Rom 8:29)
- The term *proginosko* could mean “foresight” or “foreloving”
- Based on the terms *yada* and *ginosko*, it likely refers to an intimate relationship (Rom 8:29; 1 Pt 1:1-2)

# Unconditional Election

- Gen 18:19—intimate knowledge (*yada*) beyond advance knowledge
- 1 Pt 1:2—The elect “...have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit”
- Christ was foreknown before the foundation of the world:
- “He was chosen before the creation of the world, but was revealed in these last times for your sake” (1 Pt 1:20)
- Rom 8:29—foreknowledge is both divine determination and advance knowledge

# Calvinism

- Calvinists believe that God chooses individuals to be saved based on nothing but his own free decision. Nothing a person has done or will do—not even faith—has any bearing on God's choice
- As Augustine, in some ways a forerunner of Calvinism, puts it, “God does not choose us because we believe, but that we may believe” (*Predestination of the Saints*, 17.34)

# Total Depravity

## **CALVINISM**

- Humans are unable to savingly believe the gospel. The sinner is spiritually dead, blind, and deaf to the things of God. Human will is not free. It is in bondage to his evil nature, and therefore cannot choose Christ or good until the Holy Spirit initiates the work of regeneration.

## **ARMINIANISM**

- Humans are not in a state of total spiritual helplessness. His will is not enslaved to his sinful nature. Each sinner possesses free will to cooperate with God's spirit to receive or to reject him. Faith is man's response that precedes regeneration and contributes to salvation.

# Unconditional Election

## **CALVINISM**

- God's choice of certain individuals to salvation before the foundation of the world rested solely on his sovereign will. God's choice of particular individuals was not based on foreseen response on their part. God gives faith and repentance to those whom he selected.

## **ARMINIANISM**

- God's choice of certain individuals was based on his foreseeing that they would respond to his call. Election was determined by or conditioned on what a person would do. God does not give faith, but humans possess free will to embrace or reject Christ.

# Definite Atonement

## **CALVINISM**

- Christ's redeeming work intended to save the elect only and actually secured salvation for them. The gift of faith is infallibly applied by the Spirit to all for whom Christ died, therefore securing their salvation.

## **ARMINIANISM**

- Christ's redeeming work made it possible for everyone to be saved but did not actually secure salvation of anyone. His death did not actually put away anyone's sin. Redemption only becomes effective if a person chooses to accept it.



# Divine Grace

## **CALVINISM**

- The Holy Spirit extends a special call to the elect that inevitably brings them to salvation. The general or outward call is often rejected. But the special or internal witness of the Spirit cannot be rejected; it always results in conversion.

## **ARMINIANISM**

- The Spirit calls inwardly all those who are called outwardly by the gospel invitation. Due to free will, one can resist the Spirit's call. The Spirit cannot regenerate a sinner until he believes. Human faith precedes and makes the new birth possible.

# Perseverance of the Saints

## **CALVINISM**

- All who are chosen by God, redeemed by Christ, and given faith by the Spirit are eternally saved. They are kept in faith by the power of God and will persevere to the end.

## **ARMINIANISM**

- Those who believe and are truly saved can lose their salvation by failing to keep up their faith.

# Conclusion

## **CALVINISM**

- This system of theology was affirmed by the Synod of Dort in 1619 as the doctrine of salvation contained in Scripture.

## **ARMINIANISM**

- This system of thought contained in the “Remonstrance” was submitted to the Reformed Church in Holland in 1610 for adoption. It was rejected by the Synod of Dort in 1619 as unscriptural.

# Prevenient Grace

- Arminians and Wesleyans insist that prevenient grace savingly engages all people:
- <sup>9</sup> The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world (Jn 1:9)
- <sup>32</sup> And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself (Jn 12:32)
- <sup>8</sup> When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment (Jn 16:8)

# Effectual Grace

- Reformed people limits the efficacy of human free to the elect
- Effectual grace refers to the life-transforming work of the Spirit in that he effectually brings people to himself
- Jer 24:7—“I will give them a heart to know me”
- Jn 6:37— “All those the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away”
- Jn 6:44— “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day”
- Rom 6:18— “You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness”
- Eph 2:4-5—Imparts spiritual life to the dead

# The Priority of Divine Grace

- Calvinists: God's grace is prior (cause) to human decisions and actions are consequences (result)
- Arminians: God allows human freewill (cause) and is logically prior to the divine plan (result)

# Question of Human Free Will

- How can God exert divine providence without doing violence to human freedom?
- Compatibilistic freedom (soft determinism)
- Libertarian freedom (incompatibilistic)

# Libertarian Free Will

- **Libertarian free will** “means that our choices are free from the determination or constraints of human nature and free from any predetermination by God. All ‘free will theists’ hold that *libertarian freedom* is essential for moral responsibility, for if our choice is determined or caused by anything, including our own desires, they reason, it cannot properly be called a free choice. Libertarian freedom is, therefore, the freedom to act contrary to one's nature, predisposition and greatest desires. Responsibility, in this view, always means that one could have done otherwise” (Olson 2006, 20)



# Conclusion

- Reformed people think of the gospel as the good news of God taking action to save people by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
- Arminian or Wesleyan think of the gospel as the good news of God taking action to provide the possibility of salvation for people by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ
- Reformed people insist that repentance and faith are brought about by God's elective grace, while the Wesleyan believer insist that all humans have the benefit of prevenient grace to repent and believe
- For Calvinists, regeneration precedes faith
- For Arminians, faith precedes regeneration

# Discussion Questions

- Do you struggle with the belief that God is King? Why?
- How does God's sovereignty comfort you in the midst of pain and struggles?
- How does our commitment to God's sovereignty and grace provide us with confidence and assurance?