

Pastor's Papers | Ronald H. Gann
Ministry/Church

My Theology Of Ministry
Original Essay | Ordination Thesis

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A pastor's personal belief system, along with his preaching and teaching, carries with it eternal and temporal consequences. Bound by Scripture, his chief responsibility is to safeguard the church's doctrinal borders, and over which neither he nor his congregants must step. As Paul admonished Timothy and Titus in his respective pastoral letters, a pastor must "teach what is appropriate to sound doctrine" (Titus 1:9) and "encourage others by sound doctrine" (Titus 2:1), while not equivocating to "whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine" (1 Timothy 1:10).

Like most evangelical Christians and professional clergymen, my personal theology has matured over the years on account of studious research, prayerful contemplation, laborious reading, and due diligence. To date, seven Reformed principles, together with five core doctrines and four secular articles, comprise my theology of ministry. Cemented in historical orthodoxy and chained together by tradition, they are the anchor by which my pastoral ministry is biblically grounded.

In a word, I am *Reformed*, particularly as it relates to soteriology and Theology Proper (although not necessarily eschatologically or Covenantally¹). Reformed Theology is generally considered synonymous with Calvinism and most often, in the Western church, is associated with the theology of the magisterial Reformers and the historic confessions of the medieval church, such as the Westminster Confession of Faith. The purpose of this ordination paper, therefore, is to flesh out in greater detail the various beliefs to which I subscribe and my reasons for holding them. Each principle or doctrine informs *what* I teach from the pulpit, and the manner in which I preach it.

Seven Reformed Principles

1. To be Reformed is to be Protestant, whereby the *Five Solas* of the Reformation are affirmed.

The *Five Solas* are five Latin phrases, borne out of the Protestant Reformation, which emphasize the major distinctives between Protestantism and Catholicism. Each *Sola*—meaning "alone" or "only"—stands in distinction to its Catholic counterpart. More specifically, the *Five Solas* clarify and crystalize the Reformed doctrines of justification, authority, sufficiency, and salvation. They are as follows:

- *Sola Scriptura* (“Scripture Alone”): Scripture alone is our highest authority.
- *Solus Christus* (“Christ Alone”): We are saved through the work of Christ alone.
- *Sola Fide* (“Faith Alone”): We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone.
- *Sola Gratia* (“Grace Alone”): We are saved by grace alone, through faith alone.
- *Soli Deo Gloria* (“Glory to God Alone”): We are saved for God’s glory alone.

The *Five Solas* of the Reformation were, and continue to be, a strong corrective to the faulty practices and beliefs pontificated by man-centered and works-based religions. As evangelicals, we are called to combat such error by a strict adherence to Scripture *alone*, upholding salvation by grace *alone* through faith *alone* in Jesus Christ *alone* whereby God *alone* is glorified.

2. To Be Reformed is to be biblical, whereby a high view of the sovereignty of God is affirmed.

The Lord is utterly self-ruling and in control of all things (Proverbs 16:4 cf. Romans 8:28). Everything that operates in the universe does so because God sovereignly made it so, according to His good pleasure. Far more than simply a King who exercises supremacy, God’s sovereignty is *creative* (He generates), *decretive* (He ordains), *active* (He brings to fruition), and *legislative* (He is all-controlling). Nothing exists outside of that which God sovereignly ordains—to include the existence of evil, for which He permits but does not create. His sovereignty, in other words, is *all-encompassing*. That God is in complete control over history and ordains the affairs of His creative order in accord with His predetermined purposes is the collective voice of both the Old and New Testament.²

3. To be Reformed is to be Calvinistic, whereby God is seen as the author of salvation from beginning to end.

First, Reformed Theology teaches that God, before the foundation of the world, chose certain individuals from among Adam’s ruined race to be the objects of His underserved favor. These, and these only, He purposed to save. His eternal choice to elect some individuals for glory (while leaving others in their sin) was not based on any foreseen act or response on the part of those chosen, but was based solely on His own good pleasure and sovereign will (Ephesians 1:5 cf. 2 Timothy 1:9). Thus, election was not determined by, or conditioned upon, anything that men would do in their lifetime but was the result of God’s self-determined purpose in eternity past. In a word, it was *unconditional*.

Second, the New Testament reveals that the names of those in eternity past whom “God ... destined ... to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thessalonians 5:9)—that is, the Elect—were “written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8 cf. 17:8). That is to say, “He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world ... having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself ... being predestined ... according to the counsel of His will” (Ephesians 1:4, 11). The salvation of the Elect, in other words, was decided upon and catalogued in a divine ledger long before creation ever came to be. This truth is spotlighted in the clearest terms in 2 Timothy 1:9 where Paul writes that God “saved us and called us ... before the beginning of time” (see also Titus 1:2).

Lastly, according to Reformed tradition, God draws to Himself in time and space those whom He decreed to save in eternity past. In the words of the Canons of Dort, elect sinners come to Him at the appointed time “sweetly and powerfully,”³ acting on their own accord and from renewed affections. The Holy Spirit creates within them a new heart or a new nature whereby they *can* understand spiritual truth and *will* most surely believe it. Stated differently, what a sinner *could not* and *would not* do in his state of reprobation, God enables him to do through the miracle of spiritual regeneration. The intended effect is always successful and unavoidably certain. Those whom God elected and predestined in eternity past, He regenerates and effectually draws to Christ in time and space. And those whom He regenerates and draws to Christ in time and space, He most certainly will save and glorify in eternity future.

4. To be Reformed is to be creedal, whereby the great creeds of the historic, orthodox church are affirmed.

While no creed or confession is spiritually binding, *per se*, Reformed Christians nevertheless uphold many traditional documents as beneficial for having guided and illuminated the universal church for centuries. These formal declarations—such as the Apostles’ Creed (c. 180), the Nicene Creed (c. 325), and the Athanasian Creed (c. 415)—preserve the advancements made in the knowledge of Christian truth; they discriminate the truth from false teaching; they serve as the basis of fellowship for likeminded believers; and they exist for our instruction by summarizing in succinct terms the totality of the Bible’s teachings.

5. To be Reformed is to be confessional whereby the great confessions of the historic, orthodox church are affirmed.

It is true that the ancient confessions of the church are exempt from inspiration and do not vie for our allegiance in the same manner as Scripture. But it is equally true that we embrace our confessions because they define for us the rich history from which we have come, theologically-speaking, and maintain our course, doctrinally-speaking, in where we are going.

While a confession is a “rule” in one sense of the word, it is more accurately a metaphorical boundary-line or fence, dividing the safe (or correct) areas from the unsafe (or incorrect). For this reason, many confessions summarize the basic points of belief, because as boundary-markers their purpose is to define the lines of demarcation. The church has gone to great lengths historically to formally flesh out these truths and to safeguard these lines in Reformed confessions and catechisms, such as in the Augsburg Confession (1530), the Belgic Confession (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1576), the Canons of Dort (1619), and, most famously, the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646).

6. To be Reformed is to be evangelistic, whereby the Great Commission of the church is preached and practiced.

The *ordinary means* by which God gathers the Elect into the sheepfold is through sent messengers who herald an *extraordinary message* (cf. Romans 10:15). In short, God, by virtue of His sovereignty and as the Author of our salvation, not only ordains the end (salvation) but also the *means* to the end (the proclamation of the gospel). When properly understood and sincerely believed, Reformed Theology emboldens God’s people to greater action as witnesses for Jesus Christ. (In point of fact, the Reformed tradition is responsible for spawning some of the greatest evangelistic revivals in history).⁴

Because God has graciously granted our involvement in His redemptive purposes, Reformed Theology fuels the fires of evangelism. It sees “the gathering of the Elect” (through the work of evangelism) as a privilege to be practiced and a duty to be discharged.

7. To be Reformed is to be evangelical, whereby a distinctly Christian worldview permeates all of life.

The term “evangelical” comes from the Greek word *euangelion*, meaning “the good news” or “gospel.” By definition, therefore, a Reformed evangelical places a heavy emphasis on the “good news” of salvation offered in Jesus Christ. Four distinctives define evangelicalism, as published by the *National Association of Evangelicals*.⁵

- **Conversionism:** The belief that [human] lives need to be transformed through a “born-again” experience and a lifelong process of following Jesus.
- **Activism:** The expression and demonstration of the gospel in missionary and social reform efforts [and in personal sanctification and holiness].
- **Biblicism:** A high regard for, and obedience to, the Bible as the ultimate authority [in all matters pertaining to Christian life and theology].
- **Crucicentrism:** A stress on the [atoning] sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross [in penal-substitution for the sins of the saints].

The Reformed tradition insists upon a personal relationship with Jesus Christ—one that transcends intellectual assent and religious liturgy—and upholds as paramount the authority and sufficiency of Scripture. Moreover, these distinctives impact the core convictions of an evangelical in such a way that it informs their personal politics, religion, and worldview.

Five Core Doctrines

1. **BIBLIOLOGY**: I believe that the Holy Bible is the *inspired* (Spirit-breathed), *inerrant* (without error), and *infallible* (incapable of error) Word of God.

Because it is the revealed Word of God in both the Old and New Testaments and was transmitted without error through men who were “carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21), the Holy Bible is therefore the supreme authority concerning all matters of life, faith, conduct, teaching, doctrine, and training. Furthermore, the Word of God is neither open to private interpretation (beyond that which the evangelical church has historically taught)⁶ nor open in perpetuity (beyond that which the evangelical church has previously canonized). In short, because the canon of Scripture is closed (cf. Jude 3), so then are the recorded words, revealed will, and revelatory prophecies of God.⁷

2. **THEOLOGY**: I believe that there is only one true God who exists as three eternal and co-equal Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Trinitarianism: Within the unity of God there exists a *tri-unity* of co-eternal and co-equal Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Although one in nature, substance, and purpose they are distinct in their respective roles as Creator (the Father), Redeemer (the Son), and Intercessor (the Spirit).

Theology Proper: As the first Person of the Holy Trinity, God the Father is the Creator of all things. He is perfect in holiness, wisdom, power, justice, and love, and in whom no flaw or imperfection subsists. He concerns Himself with the affairs of His created order, hears and answers the prayers of His creatures, and graciously and mercifully saves sinners from sin and death when they come to Him in repentance and through faith in His Son, Jesus Christ.⁸

Christology: As the second Person of the Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ is both the Son of God *and* God the Son in whom resides the *hypostatic union* of complete humanity and full deity (i.e. dual-natured). In a word, He is the *theanthropos* (God-Man). In His sinless humanity, Christ is the only begotten Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin, “born in the likeness of men” (Philippians 2:8), without spot or blemish, and who lived a life of abject perfection (in thought, word, and deed). In

His sinless divinity, Christ's death on the cross was as a vicarious sacrifice (in penal-substitution) for the Elect thereby atoning for their sins—after which He physically resurrected from the grave in the very body in which He was crucified and ascended to the right hand of the Father in heaven (having effectually and effectively redeemed those whom the Father gave Him in eternity past).⁹

Pneumatology: As the third Person of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit is currently present in the church, sent by the Father and the Son, to convict the world of sin and to testify in the hearts and consciences of men to the redemptive work of Christ. He also holds the role of regeneration, sanctification, and empowerment for all who believe in Jesus Christ. Additionally, the Holy Spirit indwells every believer in Christ, acting as a spiritual helper, teacher, and guide and is, by very nature and in every essence, equal with the Father and the Son.¹⁰

3. SOTERIOLOGY: I believe that salvation is by grace *alone*, through faith *alone*, in the finished work of Jesus Christ *alone*.

All human beings are sinners by nature and by choice (Genesis 3; Isaiah 53:6; Romans 3:10–12). For this reason, all human beings are born in a condemned state of being and spiritually separated from God. However, God, in His grace, has provided the means by which guilty sinners can be legally justified (in Him), genuinely forgiven (by Him), endlessly reconciled (to Him), and eternally saved (for Him). In brief, justification, redemption, reconciliation, and salvation are attained solely by God's grace through faith in the finished work of Jesus Christ, irrespective of human effort, deeds of service, meritorious conduct, or good works (Ephesians 2:8-9 cf. Romans 6:23). While not denying the value of good works (since good works testify to a redeemed life in Christ), the combined blessings of justification, redemption, reconciliation, and salvation (whereby hell is avoided and heaven gained) are attained "through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

4. ESCHATOLOGY / LAST THINGS: I believe in the personal, visible, and imminent return of Jesus Christ to earth and the establishment of his Kingdom, as well as the resurrection of the body, the final judgment, the eternal joy of the righteous in heaven, and the eternal suffering of the wicked in hell.

The hope of the ages is the return of Jesus Christ—no longer as the sin bearer and object of contempt and rejection by sinful men, but as the sovereign Judge of the cosmos, whose glorious appearance will trigger the events known in Christian theology as "The Day of the Lord."¹¹ Also referred to as "the blessed hope" of the church (Titus 2:13), the Lord's return "with the clouds" of heaven (Revelation 1:7) will appear "as the lightning comes from the east and shines as far as the west" (Matthew 24:27); will ransom his church to eternal glory and immortality (cf. 1

Thessalonians 4:17); and will break the power of death over the bodies of Christians (cf. 1 Corinthians 15), after which Christ “will judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:30-31).

The various views concerning the *eschaton* (the climax of history) or *parousia* (the second coming of Christ) are vast and nuanced and go beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say, however, that I am ambivalent when it comes to the three end-time views promulgated today—namely, *Premillennialism*, *Amillennialism*, and *Postmillennialism*. Moreover, I remain equally undecided about rapture theology—*Pre-tribulation*, *Mid-tribulation*, or *Post-tribulation*—and question whether the concept of a rapture and a future tribulation period are even viable to begin with. Each viewpoint has its theological and philosophical strongpoints, to be sure, but each also have equally significant weak points that cannot be dismissed insofar as I understand them. Be that as it may, putting their particulars aside, I stand in universal agreement with all of them in that Christ’s return is historical, biblical, literal, and imminent.

5. **ECCLESIOLOGY**: I believe that the church is the spiritual body and bride of Jesus Christ made up of all born-again persons from every tongue, tribe, and nation.

In Protestant theology, the “Body of Christ” describes the universal federation of believers (past, present, and future) who, through the monergistic work of spiritual regeneration, confess Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. In this sense, all true Christians (from every tongue, tribe, and nation and irrespective of culture, country, and creed) are collective members of Christ’s body (spiritual church)—not because of their identification with the physical institution of the church, but through their identification with Christ directly through faith (Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27; Ephesians 3:6; 5:23; Colossians 1:18, 24). As such, Jesus Christ is the “head” of the body, as Lord and Savior, and Christians make up his individual body parts, as servants and disciples.

Likewise, the New Testament also uses the imagery of a “bride” to describe the spiritual church. Jesus Christ, as the Bridegroom, has sacrificially and lovingly chosen the church as his wife-to-be (Ephesians 5:25-27). Just as there was a betrothal period in biblical times during which the bride and groom were separated until the wedding, so the bride of Christ is physically separated from her Bridegroom during the church age. Her responsibility during this betrothal period is to remain faithful to him in love, purity, and fidelity (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:24). At the Second Coming of Christ, the bride will be united with her Bridegroom, and the official “wedding ceremony” will take place whereby the eternal union of Christ and His followers will be consummated (Revelation 19:7-9; 21:1-2).

Four Secular Articles

1. **HUMAN SEXUALITY:** I believe that God created human sexuality as a gift and has reserved sexual activity and/or intercourse for the union of marriage.

The Bible restricts all sexual activity to the marriage bed—between one man (husband) and one woman (wife). Any and all forms of homosexuality, lesbianism, bisexuality, bestiality, incest, orgies, fornication (premarital sex), adultery, polygamy, and pornography are sinful perversions of God’s gift of sex, monogamy, and marriage (Genesis 2:24; 19:5, 13; 26:8-9; Leviticus 18:1-30; Romans 1:26-29; 1 Corinthians 5:1; 6-9; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8; Hebrews 13:4).

2. **ABORTION:** I believe that human life begins at the moment of conception and that an unborn child is a living human being.

Notwithstanding rare situations where a baby in utero endangers the life of its mother, abortion constitutes the *unjustified* taking of an unborn human life and is therefore equal to, and in every sense, murder. Any teaching or political philosophy that suggests otherwise (for instance, rape, incest, birth defects, gender selection, birth or population control, or the *mental* well-being of the mother) is a clear contradiction of Scripture (Job 3:16; Psalm 51:5; 139:14-16; Isaiah 44:24; 49:1, 5; Jeremiah 1:5; 20:15-18; Luke 1:44).

3. **LAWSUITS:** I believe that Christians are prohibited from bringing civil lawsuits against other Christians or the local church to resolve personal disputes.

The church—both local and universal—possesses all the resources necessary to resolve personal disputes between fellow believers. It is biblically unconstitutional for a Christian to bring litigation against another, particularly in cases where repentance is made and/or when reparations are offered to the offended party or persons. However, in cases where the offender refuses to seek repentance, rebels against church authorities, or absconds his responsibility to make appropriate reparations to the persons or party offended, civil litigation is permissible. Pertaining to *criminal* matters, a Christian (or local church) reserves the right to invoke secular authorities in the event a crime is committed against them, the church, or the state (1 Corinthians 6:1-8; Ephesians 4:31-32).

4. **GOVERNMENT:** I believe that God has ordained the governing institutions of 1) the home; 2) the church; and 3) the state, to which all Christians must submit.

Every person is subject to an authority, be it in the home, in the church, or in the government. However, each of these institutions (and the authorities who lead them) is answerable to God and is to be administered according to His Word. The home, the church, and the state are equally sovereign in their respective spheres of responsibility to which all Christians must oblige when governed in accordance with Scripture (Romans 13:1-7; Ephesians 5:22-24; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 2:13-14).

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¹ Covenant Theology (or Federal theology) is a prominent feature in Presbyterian and Reformed churches, which views redemptive history under the framework of three overarching theological covenants: the Covenant of Redemption, the Covenant of Works, and the Covenant of Grace. These three are called "theological covenants" because although not explicitly presented as covenants, they are, according to covenant theologians, implicit in the Bible.

² See Genesis 4:25; Exodus 4:11; 21:12; Deuteronomy 10:22; 32:39; Ruth 4:13; 1 Samuel 2:6-7; Proverbs 16:33; Ecclesiastes 7:13-17; Isaiah 45:5-7; Lamentations 3:37-38; Amos 3:6-7; Matthew. 5:45; 6:26, 30; 10:29-30; James 4:13-15)

³ The Canons of Dort, Article 16

⁴ The Great Awakening (1731–1755) and the Protestant Reformation (1517) were spawned by Calvinists who had a high view of evangelism.

⁵ <http://www.nae.net/church-and-faith-partners/what-is-an-evangelical>

⁶ While I readily admit that churchmen throughout all ages have taught and believed various things, often in contradiction to one another, it is universally accepted that the church stands in united agreement over the essential doctrines of the historic faith—to include the inspiration of Scripture, the Holy Trinity the Deity of Christ, the divine nature of the Holy Spirit, justification by faith alone, the resurrection of Christ, the return of Christ, and eternal hell and heaven.

⁷ See Psalm 119:89; Matthew 24:35; John 17:17; Romans 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:16–17; 1 Peter 1:12; 2 Peter 1:19.

⁸ See Genesis. 1:1, 26; Deuteronomy 6:4; Psalm 18:30; Isaiah 6:8; Matthew 28:19; John 1:1, 14; 3:16–17; Romans 5:8; Ephesians 2:4–5; Hebrews 12:9

⁹ See Isaiah 7:14; John 1:14, 18; 6:37-40; Philippians 2:5–11; 1 Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 1:23; 1 John 1:7; 1 Thessalonians 4:16–17; Acts 1:10–11.

¹⁰ See John 14:26; 16:7–15; Acts 5:3–4; Romans 8:14–17; 1 Corinthians 2:10–11; Ephesians 1:13–14; 4:30.

¹¹ See Isaiah 2:12; 13:6, 9; Ezekiel 13:5, 30:3; Joel 1:15, 2:1,11,31; 3:14; Amos 5:18,20; Obadiah 15; Zephaniah 1:7,14; Zechariah 14:1; Malachi. 4:5; Acts 2:20; 2 Thessalonians 2:2; 2 Peter 3:10) cf. Revelation 6:17; 16:14.