

## An Introduction to the Reformed Faith

Nov. 5. Introduction  
Nov. 12. History and variations  
Nov. 19. Heidelberg Catechism  
Nov. 26. Westminster Standards

Dec. 3. Salvation, Election, Predestination, Providence  
Dec. 10. Covenant; Christ as Prophet, Priest, & King  
**Dec. 17. Culture and Society**

Belgic Confession (1561): Article II, "By What Means God is Made Known Unto Us." We know him by two means: first, by the creation, preservation, and government of the universe, which is before our eyes as a most elegant book, wherein all creatures, great and small, are as so many characters leading us to contemplate **the invisible things of God**, namely, **his eternal power and Godhead**, as the Apostle Paul saith (Rom. 1:20). All which things are sufficient to convince men, and leave them without excuse. Secondly, he makes himself more clearly and fully known to us by his holy and divine Word; that is to say, as far as is necessary for us to know in this life, to his glory and our salvation.

Westminster Confession (1646): Chapter 5 (p. 851) concerning Providence focuses on personal salvation (and the church), but its statements link that focus to a comprehensive perspective. Providence extends to "all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least." It stresses the importance of "second causes." It explains that "God in his ordinary providence maketh use of means."

### The Big Picture:

- (1) God created the world as a demonstration of his power, and the physical world is good.
- (2) God's providence extends over every area of life.
- (3) God created humankind as a demonstration of his power and love.

Implication 1: We may have confidence in efforts that explore and explain the physical world.

Implication 2: We should respect and try to understand the human institutions that God has made or made possible.

### Biblical grounding for a comprehensive view of God, the world, humankind

- The creation mandate (Genesis 1:26-31)
- God controls all creation (Job chapters 38 & 39)
- Humans are small/tiny/hardly noticeable yet tasked with dominion (Psalm 8:3-9)
- Nature and humanity are corresponding parts of the creation (Psalm 19)
- All humanity can know something of God and the world (Acts 17:22-28)
- In Christ all things hold together (Colossians 1:17, and coordinated with redemption)

### Standpoints

- A deep commitment to creation as good (or potentially good) and a corresponding belief in God's providential control/supervision/regulation of all creation.
- An intense commitment to Scripture, reading Scripture, and systematizing Scripture (all begun as strongly anti-Catholic, yet with Catholic instincts about having Christian faith provide a full system for life and thought).

- Scripture understood as describing three uses of the law (a mirror revealing the personal need for God; restraint of evil and pointer to justice on earth; guidance for believers)
- Salvation understood in many dimensions (a point in time + over time; personal + church + "spheres" in the world)

### Societies with substantial Reformed influence

- 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup>-century Geneva ("a perfect school of Christ")
- Scotland (poor, marginal, but literate and determined)
- 17<sup>th</sup>-century Holland (established yet tolerant)
- Puritan New England (the covenant as integrating rationale)
- 19<sup>th</sup>-century U.S. ("evangelical America": church-state separation & Christian republicanism)
- 19<sup>th</sup>-century Holland ("pillarization," "sphere sovereignty," common grace + antithesis)
- 20<sup>th</sup>-century South Africa (apartheid, but gospel spilling out to non-whites)

### Implications

- Work** as "calling." John Calvin: "no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight.)
- Family**. Graced with covenant privileges, including marriage and sexuality embraced as positive and the family crucial as a center of faith-formation.
- Education**. Supremely important because of the need to know and systematize the Scriptures. Leads to missionary impetus, especially for translating the Bible.
- Government**. Emphases differed as Christendom (church-state united) gave way to post-Christendom (legal separation). Usually a commitment to layers of authority with checks and balances but not full democracy.
- Church**. The center for prayer, worship, sacraments, and devotion, but also a spur to activity (works of mercy in the world) and a staging ground for the cultural mandate.
- Science**. Commitment to studying Scripture upset Aristotelian traditions (reasoning downward from principles to what "must" happen in nature) and spurred empiricism and induction (reasoning from particulars of experience to general "laws").
- Art**. Suspicious of images (2<sup>nd</sup> commandment) and church ornamentation (=Catholic), but some remarkable achievements (Rembrandt [1606-69], Jacob van Ruisdael [1628-82]<sup>1</sup>)
- Music**. Suspicious of anything elaborate or professional (again anti-Catholic), but psalm-singing vital for early Reformed spiritual life. Musical psalm settings could be very well done (e.g., Louis Bourgeois [1510-59], 1, 14, 197, and others in *Trinity Hymnal*).

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<sup>1</sup> E. John Walford, *Jacob van Ruisdael and the Perception of Landscape* (Yale University Press, 1991), 204: "the Dutch [in van Ruisdael's 17<sup>th</sup> century] were encouraged to see in the beauty, variety, and order of creation, evidence of the creative majesty of God. The corruption of all earthly matter and the constant state of flux, the mutability of all things under the sun, human life included, left man dependent, ultimately, on the all-sufficient, unmoving and unchanging Creator. This outlook seems to have produced both the capacity and desire to celebrate all the diverse elements of God's creation in art and science."