

What is Reformed Tradition?

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What is Reformed tradition? I will answer it by finding historical roots of this tradition from the perspective of balance, whose concept is close to *Joongyong*, one of the great virtues in Confucianism, and points to the holistic aspects of life and their attitude that does not tilt against either to the right or to the left. In short, *Joongyong* connotes equanimity, harmony, justice and stability. In fact, implication of *Joongyong* approach in this essay is twofold. One is to recognize the importance of balance in terms of hermeneutical lens through which the Reformed tradition is explored and evaluated. The other is to envision a Reformed tradition in our time through a balanced perspective.

Features of the Reformed Tradition

Without question, the historical root of the Reformed tradition traces back to the Switzerland Reformation in the sixteenth century, that is, to the first Swiss reformer Zwingli (1484-1531) and to the second-generation reformer John Calvin (1509-1564), a prominent figure of this tradition.¹ In fact, the Swiss reformers did not initiate this tradition in a vacuum. Reformers never demanded a new Christian religion but sought only to re-form the distorted Christianity and to reclaim the gospel tradition that they understand it true. With this historical consciousness in connecting reforming ideas to the early church's tradition, reformers sought the one, holy, catholic church. The first feature of the Reformed tradition is a balance between the Word of God and the Holy Spirit.² As Warfield rightly observes, Calvin was "the theologian of the Holy Spirit."³ When this deviates to either way, we see other traditions emerge in our Christian history. For instance, the Anabaptists primarily resorted to the Spirit for their guidance, resulting in overwriting the Word of God. The Roman Catholic Church, on the other hand, clings to the ecclesial authority as an ultimate interpretive power.⁴ However, the Reformed tradition seeks to maintain a balance in ways the Word of God is witnessed and spoken through the Holy Spirit.⁵

The second feature of the Reformed tradition is a balance between head and heart, which means seeking both knowledge and piety. Calvin's definition of faith shows his sense of balance: "a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence . . . both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit."⁶

The third feature of the tradition is a balance between faith and life. Christian salvation through faith is not possessive but a lifelong process of sanctification. Christian life is possible through mortification of old life and through participation in new life in Christ. This emphasis on lifelong sanctification goes with a positive role of the law as guidance for Christian life.⁷ As opposed to Luther's conception of the negative function of the law, Calvin appreciates the positive side of the law, which guides Christians for right actions in their life.

The fourth feature is a balance between the private and the public. From the beginning of Swiss Reformation, both Zwingli and Calvin were involved in a public, political life such as in the city government. The church life and ordinary life were not separable. Rather, the Reformed tradition pursues wholeness – an indivisible wholeness between the spirit and the body, or between the private life and the public life. Boesak put it well:⁸

This lordship of Jesus Christ applies to all spheres of life . . . This includes the political, social, and economic spheres. The Lord rules over all these spheres, and the church and the Christian proclaim his sovereignty in all these spheres. Surely it is the holy duty and the calling of every Christian to participate in politics so that there also God's law and justice may prevail, and there also obedience to God and God's word can be shown.

The fifth feature is a balance between life and death. The presence of God is ever-present in persons' lives. This God is very personal, and reassures about God's love through the Holy Spirit, who seals faith in our heart and mind. In this regard, *A Brief Statement of Faith* of the PC (USA) speaks of the powerful message about our identity. It begins: "In life and death we belong to God, through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit . . ." We belong to God, not to any body or any thing. This notion of belonging to God sheds light on understanding of person's identity. The assurance of belonging to God is the basis of the Christian life. Similarly, *Heidelberg Catechism* begins with "what is your only comfort, in life and in death?" The answer is "That I belong - body and soul, in life and in death not to myself but to my faithful Savior . . ." "In life and in death" we belong to God. God's sovereign love reconfirms our address - which is, belonging to God. God loves us even in death and in life.⁹

The sixth feature, closely related to the fifth feature, is a balance between the present and the future. In every moment of Christian life, there is a tension between this life and the future. The Reformed tradition firmly confesses that there will be a final victory over evil, and the consummation of God's world. The balance between the present and the future is crucial to our faith journey. Even though we live in the present, our eyes and mind should see, hope, and believe about the future that is yet to come, as Abraham did so with unwavering hope and rock-solid faith in God.¹⁰

Theological Orientation of the Reformed Tradition

The first important theological emphasis of the Reformed tradition is a theocentric theology, which opposes every form of idolatry and "sets it over against every ethic of self-realization, against inordinate concern with the salvation of one's own soul, against excessive preoccupation with questions of personal identity."¹¹ For Calvin, God's attribute lay in "God's forceful reality and power" rather than "the eternal perfection of goodness, beauty, and truth."¹² Likewise, the important point is not the "self-centered personal salvation of creature" but God's glory.¹³ God is our song and an object of adoration. The majesty and the praise of God is the main theme of God-centered theology. The second theological emphasis is on the lordship of God, which derives from God's

majesty. God is present in every moment of our lives. Our being itself cannot exist without God's purpose and will. Our being is dependent on God. John Leith put it well:¹⁴
Human life is not the simple product of history and of natural forces. Personhood is rooted in the will and intention of God. God thought of every person before he was called into being and gave to him his individuality, his identity, and his name. Human existence is rooted in eternity, and its end is the praise of God. Hence the Christian lives in the quiet confidence that God is greater than all the battalions of earth and that life is at God's disposal.

Reformed theology emphasizes God's sovereignty over creation and us. Because of this emphasis on God's sovereignty, the doctrine of predestination emerges. Predestination means, "Human life is rooted in the will and intention of God."¹⁵ Confronted by the fact that some people did not respond to God's grace, Calvin had to root unbelief in the will of God. On the other hand, Calvin tried to soften his view of predestination as to be a "source of comfort in the dark night of the soul."¹⁶ In Reformed theology, Predestination is never a source of "arrogance and presumption."¹⁷ Rather, the point is a re-focus on the sovereign God who suffers with the suffering of the world.¹⁸

A New Reformed Tradition

It is necessary for the Reformed tradition to listen to various voices in this world - especially to those marginalized in a fragmented global community that involves all kinds of social problems of injustice, neo-colonialism, and racism. In this fighting, the Reformed tradition can be an important theological resource that the tradition seeks to renew society by challenging unjust ideologies of the power, and ultimately to embrace "all" people in the world. In other words, the spirit of the Reformed tradition should not judge who is right or who is wrong, or who is in or outside the church. Rather, if one can trust in the sovereign God of love and suffering, the focus of the Reformed tradition should shift to a more holistic, balanced picture of God who cares the whole cosmos with God's righteousness and justice. This focus of Reformed tradition will give a renewed eye to the solutions of the global issues such as poverty, injustice, a narrow theology of dualism and individualism, not to mention the prosperity gospel. By doing so, the spirit of the Reformed tradition that began in the sixteenth century will continue in our time and will move on.

In order to illustrate the new angle of justice and righteousness in this tradition, I will use the book of Amos: "But let *justice* roll down like waters, and *righteousness* like an ever-flowing stream" (Amos 5:24). In the Old Testament, these two words are used similarly, but its meaning is distinguishable and important to my purpose in this essay. Amos' powerful, poetic language is evident: justice *like waters* and righteousness *like an ever-flowing stream*. Righteousness, continually flowing like a small stream, quiet but steady, alludes to the essence of life without which survival is impossible - God's unconditional love like sunshine available for all people. Further, imagine that the stream is meandering with stops and goings along the way, sometimes making a new way to go through the stops, and passing over the obstacles in the way. Likewise, righteousness in our life should flow steadily notwithstanding human obstacles such as chauvinism and excluding theologies or ideologies. This stream should never stop insofar as there are places that need steady water. However, the reality in this world blocks the flow of God's

free love. That is why Amos challenges the ideology of a narrow theology when rich people wait for the Day of the Lord while uncaring the poor and the marginalized in society. For Amos, the abundant love of God should flow to all in society. But the problem is that people exchanged God's righteousness into their own righteousness.

Paul's text supports my reading of God's righteousness as such. In fact, one of the most difficult interpretive issues in Romans 3:21-26 has to do with how to read *dikaiosune theou*. I take side with those scholars who read it as "God's righteousness" rather than "a righteousness from God." Those scholars who value individual salvation with forensic image of law court prefer the latter option ("a righteousness given to human beings") to the former ("God's righteousness" as God's character or saving act, which cannot be owned by human beings). Given the scope of this essay, I cannot fully elaborate on why God's righteousness is more plausible in Paul's time and context, but one thing should be evident. Paul's theological issues, as seen in Romans 9-11, are not how individuals are saved but how Israelites and gentiles live together *righteously* before God. Taking this side of Paul as a reconciler or a harbinger of God's love to *all* people, what we should do is to let God's righteousness flow to all people, as the streams flow all the way. Let people not block this universal love of God with the cover of the theological doctrines or any boundaries at the price of marginalization of other people(s).

The other important key word in Amos is justice, whose parallel image goes with righteousness side by side. Justice in Amos has an image of *waters* that has roaring torrents of rain with large sound and energy. As image of righteousness is to God's universal love, the image of justice is to the explicit work of human beings that requires justice in an unjust world. Metaphor works here too. On stormy, dark days, justice should roar like rolling waters, like roaring Amos when there is no justice.

In conclusion, the Reformed tradition needs to be a channel for of ever-flowing stream, sometimes seeking to run violently as rolling waters. The Reformed tradition should retain its balance in diverse ways, and one essential part of that picture is a just world for which God's righteousness should flow all the time. Furthermore, in a changing world teamed with new issues arising, we continue to ask ourselves incessantly what it means to live with the Reformed tradition, and how we can maintain a balance in our Christian life. I suggested in this essay that one way we can live the tradition is re-contextualize the poetic, sharp image of justice and righteousness in Amos: "But let justice *roll down like waters*, and righteousness *like an ever-flowing stream*" (Amos 5:24). Then, the Reformed tradition continues to be a life of *balance* in which God is God of *all*.

Endnotes

¹ John Leith, *Introduction to Reformed Tradition* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 33. John Hesselink, *On Being Reformed* (Mich.: Servant Books, 1983), 6.

² John Hesselink, "The Charismatic movement and the Reformed tradition," ed. Donald K. McKim *Major Themes in the Reformation Tradition* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992), 380.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Richard C. Gamble, "Calvin's Theological Method: Word and Spirit, A Case Study," *Calviniana* (Kirksville, Mo: Sixteenth Century Journal Pub, 1988), 63-75.

⁵ Hesselink, *On being Reformed*, 84.

- ⁶ Calvin, *Institutes*. 3.2.7.
- ⁷ William Placher and Edward Willis, *Belonging to God* (Louisville: W/JKP, 1992), 114.
- ⁸ Allan Boesak, *Black and Reformed* (New York: Orbis Books), 34.
- ⁹ Placher and Edward Willis, *Belonging to God*, 37.
- ¹⁰ Book of Confessions (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, PC-USA, 1996), 28.
- ¹¹ Leith, *Reformed Tradition*, 96.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 72.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 104.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 105.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁸ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 248.