

# FIRST THINGS

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## A CHURCH FOR EXILES

WHY REFORMED CHRISTIANITY PROVIDES THE BEST BASIS FOR  
FAITH TODAY

*by Carl R. Trueman*

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**W**e live in a time of exile. At least those of us do who hold to traditional Christian beliefs. The strident rhetoric of scientism has made belief in the supernatural look ridiculous. The Pill, no-fault divorce, and now gay marriage have made traditional sexual ethics look outmoded at best and hateful at worst. The Western public square is no longer a place where Christians feel they belong with any degree of comfort.

For Christians in the United States, this is particularly disorienting. In Europe, Christianity was pushed to the margins over a couple of centuries—the tide of faith retreated “with tremulous cadence slow.” In America, the process seems to be happening much more rapidly.

It is also being driven by issues that few predicted would have such cultural force. It is surely an irony as unexpected as it is unwelcome that sex—that most private and intimate act—has become the most pressing public policy issue today. (Who could have imagined that policies concerning contraception and laws allowing same-sex marriage would present the most serious challenges to religious freedom?) We are indeed set for exile, though not an exile which pushes us to the geographical margins. It’s an exile to cultural irrelevance.

American Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism start this exile with heavy baggage.

Evangelicalism has largely wedded itself to the vision of America as at heart a Christian nation, a conception that goes back to the earliest New England settlers. An advertisement for *The American Patriot's Bible* (2009) proudly boasts that it “connects the teachings of the Bible, the history of the United States and the life of every American” while “beautiful full-color insert pages spotlight the people and events that demonstrate the godly qualities that have made America great.” Yet a nation where the language of “choice” and “freedom” has been hijacked for infanticide, the deconstruction of marriage, and a seemingly limitless license to publish pornography is rather obviously *not* godly. That’s a hard truth for those who believe America belongs to them by right.

For Roman Catholics, the challenges of our cultural exile are different. Rome has somehow managed to maintain a level of social credibility in America, despite holding to positions regarded as intolerable by the wider secular world when held by Protestants. Her refusals to ordain women or sanction the use of contraception do not seem to have destroyed her public reputation. But if, for example, tax-exempt status is revoked for educational and social-service nonprofits opposed to the increasingly mandatory sexual revolution, the Church will face a stark choice: capitulate to the spirit of the age or step out into the cold wasteland of cultural and social marginality. When opposition to gay marriage comes to be seen as the moral equivalent to white supremacy, it is doubtful that the Roman Catholic Church will be able to maintain both her current position on the issue and her status in society. She too will likely be shunted to the margins.

Elsewhere—in France and in Poland, for example—Rome has, of course, proved resilient in much worse circumstances. Yet in America, in recent history, she has no real experience of the ignominy of marginalization from which to draw strength. The Know-Nothing era was long ago. It seems to me most Catholics today are very comfortable in, even jealous of, their place in mainstream America. They may not buy patriot Bibles, but Catholicism’s institutional footprint is so large—and Catholic theological (and emotional) investment in it so significant—that the temptation to preserve the Church’s place in society will be very great. This preservation will require compromise, even complicity, and it will very likely blur the clarity and undermine the integrity of

complexity, and it will very likely start the clarity and unclarity of the integrity of Christian witness.

Perhaps I am mistaken and have portrayed my Christian brothers in a way that over-emphasizes weaknesses and downplays strengths. But of this I am convinced: Reformed Christianity is best equipped to help us in our exile. That faith was forged on the European continent in the lives and writings of such men as Huldrych Zwingli, Martin Bucer, and John Calvin. It found its finest expression in the Anglophone world in the great Scottish Presbyterians and English Puritans of the seventeenth century. It possesses the intellectual rigor necessary for teaching and defending the faith in a hostile environment. It has a strong tradition of reflecting in depth upon the difference between that which is essential and that which, though good, is inessential and thus dispensable. It has a historical identity rooted in the wider theological teachings of the Church. It has deep resources for thinking clearly about the relationship of Church and state.

It's not surprising that Reformed Christianity equips us well for exile, because it was itself forged in a time of exile, often by men who were literal exiles. Indeed, the most famous Reformed theologian of them all, John Calvin, was a Frenchman who found fame and influence as a pastor outside his homeland, in the city of Geneva. The Pilgrim fathers of New England knew the realities of exile, and the conditions that it imposed upon the people, only too well. Winthrop's famous comment about being a city on a hill was not a statement of messianic destiny but a reminder to the colonists of the fact that their lives as exiles were to be lived out in the glare of hostile scrutiny. Exile demanded they have a clear and godly identity.

The Reformed Church has its own baggage, but given the nature of its origins and our own moment, it is the right baggage: light when it needs to be light and heavy with the Gospel when it needs to be heavy. A marginal, minority interest in America for well over a century, she does not face the loss of social influence and political aspirations that now confront Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism. We do not expect to be at the center

of worldly affairs. We do not imagine ourselves to be running indispensable institutions. Lack of a major role in the public square will cause no crisis in self-understanding.

This does not arise from indifference or a lack of substance, but instead from clarity and focus. Doctrinally, the Reformed Church affirms the great truths that were defined in the early Church, to which she adds the Protestant doctrine of salvation by faith alone. She cultivates a practical simplicity: Church life centers on the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments, prayer, and corporate praise. We do not draw our strength primarily from an institution, but instead from a simple, practical pedagogy of worship: the Bible, expounded week by week in the proclamation of the Word and taught from generation to generation by way of catechisms and devotions around the family dinner table.

**W**hat, one may ask, about liturgy? Is the naked Word preached by itself, without the force of an institution to support it, sufficient for nourishing a vibrant Christian faith, particularly in times of difficulty? Is there not an element of corporate performance beyond simply listening to the Word that is vital in shaping our understanding of who we are and of the world in which we live? Every time we switch on the television or go on the Internet, we are bombarded with a myriad of liturgies that exert an arcane power to shape our identities in ways of which we are often unaware. Can a thirty-minute sermon once or twice a week possibly counteract such insidious subversion? Don't we need ballast to prevent us from being pushed this way and that by every wind of secular doctrine?

Reformed theologians understand this point. James K. A. Smith highlights the liturgical nature of all of life and the need for the Reformed Church to be self-conscious in its own liturgical performance. David F. Wells underscores the need for an intelligent and well-constructed liturgy that reflects our theological convictions. Reformed worship has always involved more than preaching, even though the sermon is central. Its liturgical form flows directly from our commitment to the Word and to the catholic foundations

of our faith. The Gospel according to the Reformed faith is straightforward: We are dead in sin and need to be united to Christ, the God-man, who lived and died and rose again for us and for our salvation. United with him, we look beyond the ephemera of this world to the eternity beyond.

Reformed worship places the Word at the center because the declaration of the truth of the Gospel is central. Ideally, this truth shapes the liturgical actions of the Reformed community. For example, in the church service, the minister reads the Decalogue and brings words of judgment down on God's people, reminding them of their death in Adam. He leads them in a corporate confession of sin and then reads words from Scripture, pointing toward the promise in Christ of comfort, forgiveness, and the final resurrection to come. Fall, death, forgiveness, resurrection: The basic elements of the Christian message find concise and precise expression in Reformed liturgical practice.

The congregation responds with a hymn of praise to God for his goodness. Here, the beauty and the distinctiveness of the Reformed faith become evident. The congregation, reminded of who they are—sinners who stand before God condemned for their unrighteousness and uncleanness—receive the promise in Christ that, grasped by faith, seals forgiveness upon their hearts and moves them to praise and thanksgiving.

This singular focus—the drama of sin and redemption inwardly known—is a great boon in times of exile. To retain an identity in the face of a hostile culture, one must belong to a vibrant community of people who know who they are. This is the New Testament pattern of Christianity. When we hear, in clear and unequivocal words, who we are declared to us in the sermon each week and when we participate in liturgical action embodying that identity, we are well prepared for the hostile liturgies and gospels of the world we encounter from Monday to Saturday.

**W**e must also have practical confidence in our own identity and destiny as a Christian people. Paul grounds the imperatives of the Christian life, from domestic duties to social and political engagement, in the reality of our life

in Christ. The apostle writes, "For as many as are united to Christ, they will live by his life" (Gal. 2:20).

in Christ. There is a robust confidence at the heart of the New Testament's description of what it means to be a Christian, and it was vital to Christian flourishing in the world of the first century.

It is important to understand that the medieval Church's failure to produce a theology that instilled this New Testament confidence contributed in significant ways to the Reformation. Luther's notion of Christian freedom depends upon our clear knowledge of our identity in Christ. The bonds of sin are broken by faith's secure hold on the truth of the Gospel. The way in which faith gives us a place to stand over and against worldliness was picked up and elaborated by Calvin and other Reformed theologians. The New Testament note of confidence—we really can know and give ourselves to the saving power of Christ—was cultivated by preaching and liturgy. This enabled Protestants to survive and then to thrive in the hostile world of sixteenth-century Europe. Our identity was not mediated by priest or sacrament. Then and today it is grasped by faith in the Word.

Indeed, robust confidence of our life in Christ lies at the heart of what it means to be a Reformed Protestant. The first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism, one of the great statements of Reformation faith, express it succinctly:

What is your only comfort in life and death? That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yes, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him.

THE HEIDELBERG CATECHISM (1563) | <http://www.heidelbergcatechism.org/>

THIS ROBUST CONFIDENCE will serve us well at a time when the indifference or hostility of the world presses upon us and encourages crises of self-confidence. We know who we are. We belong to Christ.

Closely connected to assurance is one of the key theological emphases of the Reformed faith: providence. Many see the Reformed doctrines of predestination and providence as harsh and cold preoccupations of pathologically unhinged people. In fact, they have both a deeply catholic pedigree and a profoundly pastoral purpose.

The doctrines of predestination and providence were not innovations of the Reformation, but have a history through the Middle Ages back to the early Church. Love him or hate him, Augustine provided the West with its basic interpretation of Paul on grace and salvation, and his influence on both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism remains powerful. One could argue that the Reformation was itself a debate over the interpretation and application of Augustine's theology of grace to reflections on the nature of the Church. Yet even as they drew on Augustine and his medieval followers, Reformed preachers and teachers found the doctrines of predestination and providence helpful for strengthening believers in times of difficulty.

For those in physical exile, for those suffering for their faith, for those despised and marginalized by the world around them, the knowledge that history is under God's control provides encouragement. However weak the Church appears to be, however many setbacks it faces, the end of history is already determined in Christ. This knowledge allows believers to taste here and now something of the delights of the end of time. Indeed, combined with the rich New Testament teaching on resurrection and on the fact that death is not the final word for those who live in Christ by faith, a strong doctrine of providence is not only a means of construing the metaphysical connection between God and his creation, but is also a source of personal strength, comfort, assurance, and hope for Reformed Christians.

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Once again, there is a liturgical aspect to this. Providence often leads Christians to dark places, personally and corporately, and yet even as we know that these temporal trials will ultimately culminate in death, we know that in the resurrection light triumphs over darkness, life over death. This is why the Psalter has been so central to Reformed worship. The Psalms' many notes of lament, of longing for future rest, and of present discomfort and disillusion with the status quo reinforce in the minds of the Reformed that our citizenship is not ultimately in this world. It provides realistic horizons of expectation for this world—and for the next. It gives us a vocabulary with which to praise God in the midst of the contradictions of life lived out under the burdens of the Fall. It reminds us that, whatever good things this world has to offer, they can only be of passing value. And when suffering comes, we acknowledge and sorrow over its reality but regard it as nothing compared to the weight of eternal glory that is to follow. Every time we gather for worship in church or around the family Bible, the very songs of David we sing speak of exile—and of hope for the better country we seek.

This recognition of exile and the hope we find in the Psalms permeate historical Reformed worship and theology in a way that is not so obvious in other Christian traditions, even Protestant ones. For example, the worship of the American Evangelical Church of the last few decades has been marked by what one might call an aesthetic of power and triumph. Praise bands perform in churches often built to look more like concert venues than traditional places of worship. Rock riffs and power chords set the musical tone. Songs speak of tearing down enemy strongholds. Christianity does, of course, point to triumph, but it is the triumph of resurrection, and resurrection presupposes prior suffering and death. An emphasis on triumph, often to the exclusion of lament, will not prepare people for life *this side* of resurrection glory. It will not prepare us for a life of exile. I fear we are laying the foundations for disillusionment and despair.

Christianity needs to be realistic both in its theology and in its liturgy. With the central place it gives to the singing of the Psalter, the Reformed tradition ministers to the hearts



and minds of Christians set for cultural exile. The transitions through which we are living are confusing and at times painful. The Psalms offer us a means of expressing that confusion and pain in our praise to God, and no tradition has so placed their corporate use at the heart of its worship as much as the Reformed.

**T**he argument so far has been that Reformed worship can sustain the believer in a time of trial. Yet in the past the Reformed faith has been a dynamic force in the public square. Reformed theology contributed to the rise of the theory of just rebellion, played a role in the English Civil War, inspired the Scottish Covenanters, and gave John Winthrop a vision for building a city on a hill in the New World. The Reformed faith resists being reduced to a type of private pietism. On the contrary, it has often proved a potent social force, even in situations of marginality and exile.

Take John Calvin as an example. His popular image is that of a ruthless Reformed ayatollah who ruled Geneva with a firm, icy hand as he imposed a reign of terror on an unwitting populace. He seems an almost revolutionary figure, a kind of Robespierre in the Reformation. It is true that he spent much of his adult life in Geneva and was very influential in the city. But he was a foreigner, a Frenchman abroad, not even a citizen of Geneva for much of his time. He was never even powerful enough to persuade the magistrates to allow him to celebrate communion on a weekly basis. In short, Calvin was an exile, and he wrote his theology from the perspective of an exile. But this did not prevent him from speaking powerfully into the world where he found himself. Indeed, the condensed concentration of Reformed piety gave him not only an enduring identity in exile, but also firmness of purpose, allowing him to stand with confidence *contra mundum*, against the world.

Today's world is becoming a colder, harder place. Even so, we have ongoing civic responsibilities. Shaped by our faith, we too can speak to those in power. We must remind them of their responsibilities to protect the innocent and to punish the wicked. We must remind them of the fact that they, the magistrates, will ultimately answer to a higher authority. It is this consciousness of civic responsibility—and of a firm place to

stand in Christ—that frames Calvin’s *Institutes* and has served to make Reformed Christianity such a powerful force for change in history, from the Puritans to Abraham Kuyper. There have certainly been excesses in the history of the Reformed Church’s engagement with the civic sphere, but Reformed theology at its best is no clarion call for a religious war or a theocratic state. It is rather a call for responsible, godly citizenship.

Here, the Reformed share a great deal of common ground with Roman Catholics. As David VanDrunen has shown, both affirm natural law, a better basis for social thought than the mythological constructions of the *American Patriot’s Bible* or the belligerent sense of national identity of the old-style religious right. Yet there are differences between the Reformed and Rome. Calvin is no Thomas, and the Reformed faith is not Roman Catholicism. Where Thomas saw sin as exacerbating the limitations of nature in a fallen world, Calvin saw sin as bringing a decisive ethical darkness into the world.

**T**his difference is important and gives Reformed theology a more realistic understanding of Christian life in the public square and thus of the limits to what we might expect to achieve. People do not call evil good and good evil primarily because they are confused or not thinking clearly. They do so because they are in basic rebellion against God. It sounds a tad paradoxical: The Reformed use natural law for public engagement but expect little or no success. We believe that the world was created with a particular moral structure. Yet we also believe that fallen humanity has a fundamental antipathy toward acknowledging any form of external authority that threatens our own ultimate autonomy. This injects a basic irrationality and emotional passion into moral debates. This distortion of conscience and reason explains the apparent impotence of otherwise compelling arguments. And it surely reflects our actual experience as Christians in exile in twenty-first-century America.

Today people describe what was once quite ordinary moral reflection about sex and marriage as a “hate crime.” Do we need firmer evidence that debates about same-sex marriage, as well as abortion and the like, are not reducible to rational discussion? And Reformed theology knows why. Human beings in this fallen world consistently refuse to

acknowledge the obvious: that they are creatures of God and thus accountable to him. And thus our moral convictions challenge that most basic belief of the modern world, namely, that the individual is the autonomous measure of all things and accountable to no one. Reformed theology understands this dark fact about our fallen humanity. We do not underestimate the ruthlessness of the opposition. We expect cultural exile. It actually confirms our deepest convictions about the way the world is.

When I first came to America in 1996, I remember sitting in a service in a church where the preacher declared that the tragedy of the town in which he lived was that only one person in two would be in a place of worship that morning. What was a tragedy then would look like a third Great Awakening today. Christianity is moving to the margins of American life, and Christians are heading into cultural exile. The question is: How will we survive? The answer is: as Paul did in the first century. First and foremost, we need the simple proclamation of God's Word in church week by week, reminding us of our identity in Christ. We need liturgies and worship saturated with that Word. We need engagement with the world consistent with the identity formed in us by a clear and confident faith in that Word. In short, we will survive—indeed, we will thrive—through a vibrant commitment to exactly what the historic Reformed faith has emphasized.

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