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The Personal Testimony, "Becoming Reformed," of the First Native American Member of the World Reformed Fellowship

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Dr John Norwood is the first Native American member of World Reformed Fellowship. In this testimony he describes how he and his wife and eventually his church were lead to embrace the Reformed Faith.

We can also now congratulate him for his PhD that he has earned at the North-West University in South Africa in Missiology.

May his testimony encourage many of our members around the world.

Becoming Reformed - My Journey

The Rev. JR Norwood, PhD

"Regeneration precedes faith"... The first time I read that statement, I thought it was preposterous! Today, I am an adherent of Reformed Theology and serve in the pastoral ministry of an independent Reformed congregation. While I began within the "Arminian camp," now I am a "convinced Calvinist." The distance between the two positions was quite a journey. It was not mere exposure to Reformed Theology that sent me on the journey; rather, it was the testimony of one who had traveled the path before me which had initially incited me. As his witness was a blessing to me, I pray mine is to someone also. This is my testimony about that journey.^[1] ^[1]

I was raised between the Methodist and the Episcopal churches in the United States. My mother is Methodist and my father was Episcopalian. As a child, many Sundays I would rise before dawn to go with my father to be inspired by the reverent pageantry of the early morning "smells and bells" worship, after which Dad would take me to the Sunday school classes at Mom's church where would also be blessed and stirred by the morning "tapping and clapping" style worship. Each of their families had been firmly planted in their respective congregations. Each had positions within their churches. And yet, each supported the other's congregation as much as possible. In fact, when my father was called from labor to reward, thirteen Methodist ministers attended his funeral wondering why it was at an Episcopal Church. They presumed he had been Methodist, because he had been so active in the Methodist Church. I was raised as a child of the church, with an ecumenical and

catholic understanding of the Body of Christ. I cannot recall a time in my life that I did not believe in Jesus. But, there did come a time when overwhelming conviction, repentance, and a deep trust in the Lord and Savior produced a desire to be his in a whole new way... to surrender to him and devote my life to him so that I would be with him eternally. This burst of maturing faith and overpowering sense of his love demanded a personal profession, which I did publicly within the Methodist church. It was only a few years later that I took my first unsteady steps in response to a powerful sense of divine calling to a lay-preaching ministry, which was graciously tolerated and supported by my pastor and congregation. I was "green and unseasoned" as a boy lay-preacher at the tender age of fourteen. The novelty of my youth afforded me invitations to preach in many different settings and across denominational lines. As it turned out, my ministry experience was as eclectic and ecumenical as my upbringing. I was eventually ordained a Methodist, trained at Presbyterian seminary, spent a season as a substitute teacher at a Roman Catholic primary school, [2] [2] and served as an adjunct faculty member of a Baptist seminary.

My initial exposure to the Reformed tradition had not shaken my firm Methodist perspective. I was Semi-Pelagian (even though at the time I had a very limited familiarity with the term), soteriologically a synergist, and fully convinced that this strange thing called "Calvinism" could not possibly be correct. Prior to attending seminary, the only exposure to Reformed Theology I had was a pejorative description of predestination as a type of fatalism in which one's predetermined eternal destiny had nothing to do with their belief or choices in life. According to this skewed presentation, the unrepentant sinner could wind up in heaven while the devoted, morally upright, Christ-loving church goer could wind up in hell because of unmerciful determinism. Moreover, Calvinistic Reformed Theology had been poorly presented during my years in an "ultra" liberal seminary. where some of the Theology professors taught a human-centered pseudo-Calvinism which sought to reinvent a Reformed Theology that was palatable to non-Reformed, and even non-Christian, academics. In their view, God was not sovereign, scripture was not infallible or inerrant nor was it binding on the conscience, the Resurrection of Christ need not have been a physical event but was more of an allegorical moral lesson, substitutionary atonement was an archaic theological construct, and the elect were chosen because of the divine ability to foresee their choice of him. Supposedly, without our help, God was incapable of working out his divine hope for humanity, which unfolded in ways he could not always predict. If this was Calvinism, it made little sense to me.

I had served as a college and military chaplain and was serving as the pastor of my second Methodist congregation when I was pressed a prodded by the Holy Spirit to do one of the things I had feared most... to leave my Methodist denomination and plant an independent, non-denominational, congregation. It was not any doctrinal dispute or theological difference which caused the separation; rather, it was an ethical frustration. It was my disillusion over the traits of institutional corruption within the denomination and the seemingly increasing focus on promoting and protecting the denominational hierarchy, combined with a loss of focus on the mission to make disciples.[3] [3] My departure was prompted by the denomination's systemic disregard of its responsibility to support and empower the local churches instead of viewing of the local church as being primarily a resource to be depleted in order feed institutional greed. While certainly not all who were in national or international leadership were corrupt, the system provided an environment in which corrupt practices were so commonplace that they often were disregarded. Accountability was rare and the priority of a missional approach to ministry was greatly diminished from the denomination's noble beginnings.

The movement of the Holy Spirit wrestled me from denominational ministry. I became an independent, nondenominational pastor with a nascent congregation, but my theological perspective was unchanged. However, what I would not have examined further while within the denomination, I now felt obligated, and even freed, to investigate. It was incumbent upon me to continually reflect upon and challenge my own presumptions and to continue learning in order to properly feed and care for the flock which Christ had called me to shepherd. I was prodded by the Spirit to reflect on my preaching and teaching to ensure that what I fed the flock was wholesomely

biblical. In order to ensure that I could defend my perspectives, I sought the arguments for other positions. The pursuit eventually led me to re-engage Reformed Theology. In doing so, I discovered that I had not been afforded an accurate presentation of Calvinism while in seminary. In my readings, I selected R. C. Sproul's book *Chosen By God* and felt fully prepared to refute the Calvinist's predestinarian presumption. My eyes fell on Sproul's own testimony regarding the fact that he had not begun his Christian journey as a Calvinist, but as an Arminian (Sproul, 1986:11-12). [4] [4] That fascinated me. How could he have changed?

In my reading, I was then confronted by the statement ... "regeneration precedes faith" (Sproul, 1986:72, 118). The Reformed *ordo salutis* was an affront to what I held dear. I was certain that I knew what had happened when I was converted and it was the reverse of what I was reading: I had chosen Jesus and then he gave me new birth; my repentant faith had caused my regeneration; I had opened myself to the Lord and he graciously came into my heart. Jesus had knocked on the door and I had answered. I thought, "faith certainly precedes, or at least accompanies, regeneration... doesn't it?" I had to set aside my personal bias and examine the claims and counterclaims with as much objectivity as I could muster. I restrained my disgust and continued to read. The ironic problem (or blessing) was that providence had prepared me for this moment of spiritual and intellectual wrestling long before I had considered the issue. My undergraduate degree had been in Philosophy, and in spite of an emotional estimation of my own experience of salvation, a logical review of the competing arguments shook the ground upon which my long held perspective rested. The logic of the reformed *ordo salutis* was inescapable. Every argument to the contrary fell in on itself. How could election and regeneration be synergistic and still be devoid of human merit and allow God to be both just and the justifier? How could I reconcile Ephesians 2:8&9 (ESV)... "For by grace you have been saved 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" ... if I was in any way able to boast of my own choice of and cooperation in regeneration? If my choice of him was the cause of his choice of me, then God was subjected to me and not truly sovereign. If regeneration was the result of a profession of conversion brought by repentant faith, from where did the repentant faith originate? How could repentant saving faith in Christ be produced by an unregenerate sinner who was "...alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds" (Colossians 1:21 ESV)? If it was not self-initiated meritorious faith, implying holiness initiated by wickedness, light created by darkness, then what was it? It was not that there were no responses from the proponents of synergism; it was that the answers were appearing to be logically flawed.

I had once held to a synergistic view which placed regeneration as a result of a genuine heartfelt repentant belief and trust in Jesus. Yet, in my wrestling with the Reformed *ordo*, I was increasingly persuaded that scripture revealed that regeneration was not the result of such a genuine heartfelt repentant faith, but was its cause. If the grace that brought salvation was through a faith that was in no way a work of my own, but was bestowed as a gift from God, then the gracious gift preceded and initiated saving faith in me. If this regeneration was monergistic and not synergistic, then God's election of me was not the required response to anything he foresaw me do or choose or profess; God was not bound to choose me at all.

Mongerists and synergists divide on how predestination is defined and interpreted; However, the Bible clearly teaches predestination...

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, 4 even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love 5 he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, 6 to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved (Ephesians 1:3-6 ESV)

I realized that any definition or interpretation that binds God's choice would render his will subordinate to mine. How could God be sovereign if he was subjected in any way to my free will?

How could my freedom be in any way a limit to God's freedom? The divine will of the Creator is not, and cannot, be bound by the will of the creature.

Divine omnipotence and omniscience preclude the possibility that my election was the divine response to God's awareness of what I would do... because what an omniscient and omnipotent deity knows - is. It is the divine knowledge of the Creator that is primary and essential, the actions of the creature are secondary and derivative. The God of the Bible does not guess or hypothesize. His perfect knowledge and almighty power makes what is possible, actual. What he knows will be, will be. God does not merely know what will be, his knowing it is what allows it to be. Saint Paul states, "29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. 30 And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified" (Romans 8:29 ESV). This "foreknowing" spoken of by the Apostle was not some form of passive precognition; rather, it was the determining factor of my divinely appointed regeneration. I came to realize that as much as it felt as though my rebirth was when I chose Jesus, by the time I had determined to do so, my predestined regeneration was already accomplished or I would have never come to saving faith at all. I was not saved because of me... I was saved in spite of me. My repentance and profession of faith were like a baby already born and naturally taking its first breaths of air. I could no more take credit for my spiritual rebirth than I could my physical birth. I believed *because* I had been born again. Regeneration was the gracious cause of my belief. Regeneration produced my saving faith. And, that regeneration was solely because of divine grace. I believed *because* I had been graciously given ears to hear and a new heart that was inclined toward the Lord and irresistibly drawn to him.

This slow process of illumination pressed me from denial, to wrestling, to frustration, to conviction, to acceptance, and finally to praise. All along my journey, I had been sharing my struggle with my wife, who was initially as resistant as I had been. But, the Holy Spirit also sent her on her own journey to become a "Convinced Calvinist." We spent many hours reflecting upon scripture, praying together, and sharing our thoughts. We gained a new and deeper understanding of the Gospel of Grace, and it was truly amazing. We also gained a new understanding of the true spiritual state of the unregenerate human, and it was eye-opening. This illumination led me to reexamine the Westminster Confession of Faith and to do more reading in Systematic Theology. Even now, years later, I am still in process... Reformed and reforming by the grace of God. As my preaching and teaching reflected my new conviction, over time, the Holy Spirit also convinced the congregation. It has been quite a journey, guided by the Holy Spirit. It is a continuing journey, bringing the blessing of greater discernment and an ever deepening sense of awe at the Grace of God. By grace alone, though faith alone, in Christ alone! To God, alone, be glory!

References:

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The Holy Bible. 2001. English Standard Version. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles.

About the Author:

JR Norwood serves as pastor of the Ujima Village Christian Church in Ewing, New Jersey (USA), is a co-researcher for North-West University, Potchefstroom (SA), and is a tribal leader of the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape Tribal Nation of Native Americans.

[1] [5] This is not intended to be an academic analysis or defense of Reformed Theology. It is a personal reflection and testimony.

[2] [6] I taught general education courses. As a Protestant, I was never allowed to teach the "Religion classes" at the Roman Catholic school. My students were shuffled away to learn from either a priest or nun. Interestingly, many of them, who were not Roman Catholic either, would return to my class with questions about what I believed in comparison to what they had just been taught.

[3] [7] It should be noted that there are numerous Methodist denominations in the United States. The lack of specificity as to which one I had been a part of is intentional. There were, and are, many faithful disciples serving the Lord in that denomination. My sense of calling to depart does not diminish the fact that I remain grateful for the nurture I received while in that denomination. I am still blessed by the continuing fellowship enjoyed with those who remained.

[4] [8] Years later, I was blessed to be able to meet R C Sproul and attend a worship service at St. Andrews Chapel in Sanford, Florida (USA).

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