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## Doesn't Everyone Believe the Same Thing?

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When I entered Bible college, I was as theologically green as a zealous young wanna-be preacher and theologian could be. Yet, it was not long before I realized that practically everyone in Bible college was as green as I was. And a large percentage of the students did not care to change. For most of them it was their first time away from home. And though they were in the sanitized environment of a Bible college, they nonetheless were out from under the watchful eye of Dad and Mom. For many it was more college than Bible. However, for me (and a handful of others) it was different.

### From a Christless Christianity

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I came to Atlanta Christian College from a life of Christless Christianity. I had never seen my father in church a day in my life; he died when I was ten years old. My mother, on the other hand, seemed to spend every free moment at church. Consequently,

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so did I. Professing faith at an early age was the folk religion of African-Americans in rural Michigan, and I was a *bona fide* convert to it. I don't recall how old I was when I stood before the church and said, "I believe in Jesus," but you can best believe I did—just as every one of my peers had done.

Church on Sunday was the obvious and obligatory destination of all children in my mother's house. When I finally left her house for college in 1985, I was no longer obliged to attend, and I didn't. Out from under the constraints of parental oversight, the Christlessness of my profession was exposed. And though I found myself in church from time to time, the effort was never anything more than a polite nod to my upbringing. Life outside of those infrequent church visits was licentious, hedonistic, and empty.

It was not until I moved to Atlanta in 1990 that I realized how empty my secular hedonism was. During my first year in Atlanta God arrested and changed my libertine heart, opened my eyes, and put Christ into my Christianity. Suddenly, the boy who could not wait to get away from church found himself wanting to be in church every day. This was the zealous yet naïve young man who arrived at Atlanta Christian College in January of 1992.

When I entered Atlanta Christian College, I was a nontraditional student. This was my second attempt at college. And this time, without the academically crippling distractions of athletic popularity, I was more focused on the task of education in general and of theological enlightenment in particular. I entered Bible college naïvely believing that everyone was zealous and had the same objectives. In fact, I believed that everyone believed the same thing. Man, was I wrong.

### Doesn't Everyone Believe the Same Thing?

Believe it or not, I found Atlanta Christian College by way of the telephone book. Having recently come to a true experience of Jesus Christ and having had my world turned on its head by a Savior whom I saw as worthy of all my life (1 Tim. 1:12–17), I decided to reenter college with the purpose of getting

a Bible education. As I searched around Atlanta for a Bible college, I looked for one that was fully accredited. I had dreams of attending seminary and did not want any complications due to my undergraduate institution. Atlanta Christian College (ACC) was the only fully accredited Bible College in the Atlanta area at the time. It was a no-brainer, so I thought. I took no serious thought concerning doctrine or practice, so long as it said Christian, taught from the Bible, and was accredited. After all, I was operating under the assumption that everyone believed the same thing. It was not long before it became apparent that I was woefully mistaken.

ACC is a college founded by, supported through, and affiliated with the Christian Churches and Churches of Christ. Though at the time I had no inclination what these were, I soon became aware of their history and doctrine. And when I was brought face to face with their teachings, clashes and discussions erupted in and out of class that significantly contributed to the man I would become. One such incident continues to stand out in my mind.

As a first-year student, I was required to take Christian Doctrine. One of the most respected and elder statesmen of this group of churches taught this particular class. In fact, he was the author of the two primary textbooks we used. It was clear that this man believed what he taught and had the courage of his convictions. He was just my type of teacher. Unfortunately, it became clear that we did not agree on our convictions, and one day in class everyone else learned that we did not agree as well.

As you might expect, the class discussion came to the all-important question, "What must a person do to be saved?" The position of the school and the professor was clear. Besides the evangelical understandings of faith in Christ and repentance from sin, the professor asserted the necessity of baptism by immersion. According to our textbook the reasons for baptism were:

1. In order to be saved (Mark 16:16).
2. For the remission (forgiveness) of sins (Acts 2:38).
3. For the washing away of sin (Acts 22:16).
4. For baptism into Christ (Rom. 6:3).<sup>1</sup>

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Anyone familiar with the Christian Church or Churches of Christ would know their convictions concerning the necessity of baptism. Yet, I was far removed from knowing such difference of opinion among those who called themselves Christian.

As the professor made these points, and as the vast majority of the class nodded in agreement, I had the naïve and ignorant audacity to raise my hand in objection. I could sense the class coming to a halt, and before I knew it I said, “Sir, if baptism were necessary for salvation, then we would expect to see baptism in every salvation occurrence in Scripture. But we do not see that, do we?” When the professor began offering his rebuttal, I realized that not everyone believes the same thing. In fact, I began to realize that my view was the decidedly minority view.

The professor confidently assured the class that the conditions he had set forth for salvation were biblical. Then he turned his attention to me and squarely asked, “If a man professed faith in Christ on his dying bed and had no opportunity for baptism, would you give him the assurance of his salvation?” Again, the overly zealous and green Bible student spoke quickly, “Of course!” I blurted, “If I believed his confession to be sincere, then yes.”

The aging professor answered with authority and voice raised, “You can’t play God! This man would have lived his entire life in disobedience to God and now you would want to give him the assurance of faith on his death bed. No. I would tell him that his salvation is in God’s hands and leave it at that.” By now, there was a hush in the room as the elderly gentleman made it clear that no non-Christian church student was going to upstage him in the classroom. It became clear that some sense of normalcy was going to be difficult to reestablish. Fortunately, the clock struck lunchtime, and we all know that nothing says “normal” like lunchtime on a college campus. Out the doors we went.

However, if I thought it was over, I was sorely mistaken. By the time I reached the cafeteria, word of the exchange had already reached the servers, and whispers could be heard throughout the place. “Did you hear that guy speaking to the professor like that?” Another said, “I’m glad someone finally said something.”

Still others quietly commented using words like “disrespectful” and “out of line.” This was new and strange territory for me. The exchange began to make my reputation around campus as a theological thinker. But I still was not clear on what my own thinking was. I began to be more conscious of theological differences and became more intent on knowing what I believed and why. And it was not long after this incident that the Lord began to show me the faith that my heart professed. I discovered it in the oddest of places doing the most menial of tasks.

### A Day of Discovery

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A proud young Bible college student is not much interested in the menial task of clearing Sunday school material out of a storage room. Yet this was my responsibility in the winter of 1994. The room was filled with outdated material. There were half-completed Sunday school lessons, teacher’s guides, overhead transparencies (remember those?), and piles and piles of Bible study books on just about every Bible theme. And there were some videotapes.

As I made my way through the material, a single videotape caught my attention. The case was dark blue with red lettering with the design of a cross on the front. The title on the tape case was *The Cross of Christ*, and the name on the case was R. C. Sproul. I had come across this Sproul guy during some of my readings, but had never seen him or listened to him. Yet, since I was into this cross thing and this Christ thing, I thought it would be a good idea to at least watch the tape before I threw it away. The video was actually part of a two-set video series. The first tape was missing; the second part to the series was all I had. Little did I know that the second part was all that I would need.

As I watched and listened to the stout, engaging, Pennsylvania-accented white man, I was riveted to the television screen. He spoke of justification by faith in a way that I had never heard. His illustrations were vivid, his enthusiasm infectious, and his theological insights and understanding impressive, to say the least. He spoke of the great exchange and how in justification

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my sins were imputed to Christ and Christ's righteousness was imputed to me. I had read books on justification and had heard preachers preach and teachers teach on justification. Yet, for the first time this wonderful, indispensable doctrine was made real to me, and I understood it. What God had done for me in Christ overwhelmed my soul. I did not know who this R. C. Sproul was, but I knew I believed what he believed. To this day, *The Cross of Christ* remains my favorite video series from R.C. Sproul. It was my first, but it surely would not be my last.

After watching the video, I called a couple of my closest friends and told them that they had to see R. C. Sproul. Later that evening we watched the video together. It was not long before we were ordering other video tapes: *The Holiness of God*, *Chosen by God*, *The Providence of God*, *Romans*, and many others. Before long, books by R. C. Sproul became a staple in our diet of reading. We not only read books by Sproul, but also books he referenced or recommended. I soon became aware that the Reformed theology I had embraced by default was the Reformed theology I was now embracing with all intent. I was learning as much theology out of class as I was learning in class. Soon it began to show.

Back at Atlanta Christian College, I had gained the reputation as the campus Calvinist. I recall that a certain church history professor, a rather gentle, amicable, humorous, and self-deprecating, yet most capable man, was teaching on the Reformation. One day the subject was the five points of Calvinism. As he wrote the letters for the acrostic TULIP on the board, he asked the class for the specific doctrine associated with each letter. Some one blurted out, "Total depravity." I was quietly encouraged by the accuracy. However, it was short-lived. Someone in the back said, "Unlimited atonement." Another said boldly, "Unconditional grace." Before it could get any worse, I offered, "Unconditional election." The professor acknowledged my affinity for Calvinism and asked if I would do everyone the favor of listing the other three. I gladly said, "Limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints." The campus Calvinist had spoken. There was no going back.

The remaining time of my Bible college tenure provided many opportunities for me to become more firm in what I believed and ready to give an answer for the hope within me. I have learned to appreciate my time at Atlanta Christian College, because I had to study more diligently in order to stand up for what I believed to be the truth. The professor and students who disagreed with me, for the most part, did so with grace and love. While I did not share some of their theological convictions, I did find good friends among the faculty and students. I also found that if you ever want to know how well you understand something, spend extended time among those who don't agree with you. It will break you of your belief, or make you all the more firm in it. Thankfully, for me it was the latter.

As graduation approached, one of my professors approached me and asked if I was interested in going to seminary. I told him, "Yes, I am." He asked if I would be interested in attending one of the seminaries associated with the college. I deeply appreciated his interest in me. It showed that as a man of faith, he could look beyond our obvious disagreements and see that I was, like him, serious about the ministry and training for it. He sincerely desired to see me in seminary and particularly in a seminary closely associated with his church. I took this as a compliment and thanked him for his interest in me. However, I informed him that I had been long enough in an environment where my views and convictions were ever challenged. I wanted to go where I could find theological affinity with fellow students and professors. When I did attend seminary, it was a welcomed respite to listen and learn in an environment that was not antagonistic to my growing love for Reformed theology. Reformed Theological Seminary (RTS) proved to be just the place.

### Orlando or Bust

The decision to go to seminary was not a question of "if" but "where." I quickly narrowed my decision to two choices: Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando or Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois. A visit to Orlando's

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campus in the balmy month of February sealed the deal. While most people probably think that the choice of seminary is a much prayed over and soul-examining decision, for me it was basically a decision of whether I wanted to be in Chicago in January and February or Orlando. Besides, R. C. Sproul was in Orlando. I did not need any more persuading.

Going to seminary was one of the best moves I have ever made. No doubt, it was an often difficult training ground. The work was heavy. Family life was demanding. And of course, money was tight. Yet, those years were some of the best, as I really fell in love with my wife even as we matured as disciples of Christ and as parents. Though the seminary years were difficult and taxing, I would not trade them for anything. More than the Bible (and I did learn much about the Bible), seminary taught me about me. And man, those were some important lessons. In fact, one lesson in particular continues to stand out as an epochal moment in my Reformed theological journey. And I have Richard Pratt to thank for it.

#### It Would Never Be the Same

When I entered seminary, my thinking and practices were being greatly influenced by some of the more popular evangelical and Reformed preachers of the day. I listened regularly to men like R. C. Sproul, John MacArthur, Steve Brown, James Montgomery Boice, Chuck Swindoll, and Ravi Zacharias. These men had regular radio preaching ministries from which I gleaned much of my approach to ministry and preaching. They were my contemporary heroes (with John Newton and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones being my deceased heroes). I wanted to be like them. I wanted to preach like them, if that were possible. Their preaching and teaching shaped my thinking and the attitude I had toward me and my gifts. This was true until I walked into Reformed Theological Seminary's mandatory first-year class taught by Dr. Richard Pratt. Nothing would ever be the same.

During my pre-enrollment visit in February 1996, I learned that R. C. Sproul had recently resigned his professorship at RTS

Orlando. As you can imagine, this was a hard pill for me to swallow. My host assured me that while Sproul would be missed, I would find Richard Pratt the teacher of choice around the seminary. I quickly learned how true his words were.

Pratt was the most popular professor on campus. Many students found his sometimes over-the-top approach refreshing and genuine, while others were turned off by it. He was rarely without controversy. He was unexpected, sharp, incomparably intelligent, witty, tall, and sometimes even awkward. He spoke of taking dancing lessons with his wife, but when I watched him walk, I could only imagine the pain and agony of his wife and instructor. He was a geek in a full beard, and yet you just got the sincere feeling that he desired to know you and relate to you.

However, he was also edgy, and when those edges got close to you and your worldview, they would cut. Suddenly, the professor you thought was your friend could become an antagonist as he deconstructed your notions of yourself and what you perceived to be true. One day he caught me off guard: he began to speak unflatteringly about some popular evangelical preachers who left no room for what he called “fuzzy areas.” In other words, they spoke and preached as if they were the keepers of biblical truth because they had so wonderfully and faithfully handled the history and grammar of New Testament Greek. Accordingly, when antecedents are properly identified and verbs rightly conjugated, the truth of the New Testament is always clearly known. Richard constantly warned us not to drink the Kool-Aid.

This was not the first time Pratt had spoken in this negative tone concerning many of the men I considered heroes. Yet, for some reason that day I had had enough. After class, I asked if I could have a word with him. I was seriously considering dropping the class. He graciously agreed to talk to me. My first question was, “Do you believe everything you say, or is it just for effect?” He smiled and replied, “Yes. I believe what I teach and much of it is for effect.”

He went on to explain to me that most of the men in the class were white, middle- to upper-middle-class southern Presbyterians. They had a view of the world that was skewed by

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their dominant cultural perspective. Yet, they were going to be sent to minister the gospel in a world where the vast majority of people was radically different than they were. Richard saw that his task was to shake them out of their skewed perspective and presumption, and hopefully open them up to ministry outside of themselves.

My next question was, “Well, what about me?”

Richard looked straight at me as we stood in the courtyard of RTS and spoke the words I will never forget: “The Holy Spirit wants to use the experiences God has given you to speak the truths of his Word through you.” When he spoke those words, I thought how God desired to use me as a black man to proclaim the truths of his Word. It dawned on me that God did not desire for me to become “white” or even to preach like James Boice or R. C. Sproul. Rather, God would take biblical Reformed theology and teach me to be me. My contributions to the kingdom of God would be not in how much I could become like my white heroes, but in yielding to the Holy Spirit and allowing him to use this black man to proclaim his truth. Studying, preaching, and teaching Reformed theology would never be the same for me.

From then on, Pratt became my favorite teacher. Often I would chuckle inside as some fellow student would experience one of Richard’s edges in class, and the student would be left wondering if he was really called to gospel ministry. By the end of the course that same student would join with every other student in giving Richard a standing round of applause for another course well taught—and for reassuring us that our confidence must not be in our culture, experiences, or even heroes. We must put our confidence and assurance in God and the Bible, his inerrant self-revelation.

Richard taught me to be Reformed, yet always be reforming (*semper reformanda*). I have never looked back. Today I am the living legacy of men like Augustine and John Calvin, John Bunyan and D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones. But also, and as far as I am concerned, even more gloriously, I am the living legacy of men like Olaudah Equiano and Lemuel Haynes, Francis Grimke and Daniel Payne, Carl Ellis and Ken Jones. Today I am an African-

American who embraces the biblical theology commonly known as Reformed theology. I rejoice to know that I am not the first to do so, and by God's grace, I will not be the last.

### What Difference Has Reformed Theology Made?

I will be the first to admit that I am not the sharpest tool in God's toolbox. Therefore, one of the important elements of my Christian experience has been the necessity of historical connections. In other words, I am always looking for men and women who have believed what I believe. I am not interested in being out on the theological island by myself without the help and confirming camaraderie of those who have gone before. One of the glories of biblical Reformed theology is that it is historical. We have the awesome blessing of knowing that there have been and continue to be others who confess the very same thing we confess today. True Christianity is never a faith in isolation. Our faith must be a continuous line of faithful men and women who testify to the faithfulness of God and give proof that our God has never been without a witness among the people of the earth. The Reformed tradition gives me confidence that I am indeed a part of that continuous line.

Reformed theology reminds us that we are connected. The great Reformed confessions and catechisms, along with the historical creeds, provide for us a theological and practical link to those who have gone before us.<sup>2</sup> When we read these confessions and recite these catechisms, we are reading and reciting the same biblical faith of saints centuries removed from us.

This allows and even encourages our connection with the saints of God who have been made perfect as they have gone on to their eternal bliss in the presence of Christ. The writer of Hebrews reminds us that New Testament worship is a truly multi-generational and celestial worship. Whenever we gather, we join in worship with the angels; the church triumphant is made up of the spirits of the righteous saints who have been made perfect and are in the presence of Jesus Christ, whose precious blood has made this worship possible (Heb. 12:18–28). The historical

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connections of Reformed theology have given me a sense that I am not alone in my faith. And thus, it has also made me a more intentional, thoughtful, and emotional worshiper.

Reformed theology continues to make me a better worshiper by giving me a bigger, more glorious picture of God and a more accurate assessment of myself. John Calvin begins his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with these essential points: “Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God,” and “without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self.”<sup>3</sup> It could be argued that the *Institutes* is essentially John Calvin’s unfolding of the biblical theology of the knowledge of God and the knowledge of humanity. True knowledge leads to a displeasure with oneself and ultimately to a desire for the pleasure and intimacy of God. Reformed theology has helped me to better grasp both of these truths.

For example, the doctrine of total depravity is a foundational truth of the Scriptures and thus of Reformed theology.<sup>4</sup> At first, even the sound of the words “total” and “depravity” can seem so final and irremediably bad because we believe that so few people, if any, are beyond reform. Yet, it was not until I came to grips with the depths of my own sinfulness that I really began to understand the glories of God’s grace. Great sinners require greater grace supplied by an even greater Savior.

The Bible and Reformed theology exalt grace so much because sin is so awful. When the Bible says, “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rom. 5:20), Reformed theology says, “Yes!” Thus, in response, the worship I experience is a worship seeking less of me and more of grace. The worship I experience is a worship that exults in the gospel of Jesus because I stand so in need of it. It is reflective of a boast and a glory in the cross and not me (Gal. 6:14). In other words, the worship I experience is a worship of a heart filled with the truth of Reformed theology, like that of John Newton.

It is no surprise that the most beloved hymn in all of Christianity was written by a confessing Reformed theology preacher. As a friend of mine is fond of reminding me that only a Reformed theologian could have written:

Doesn't Everyone Believe the Same Thing?

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound;  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost, but now am found;  
Was blind but now I see.

Every day of my life, my worship flows from the growing reality of my sinfulness and the ever-increasing glory of God's sovereign grace in the person and work of Jesus Christ on my behalf.

John Newton's eyesight was almost gone by the end of his life. He would enter his pulpit for only a few moments, and say, "I am a great sinner, but I have a great Savior." Reformed theology teaches us to echo the sentiments of Newton, and, as a wonderful consequence, makes us better fit for the worship of God.

