Test Results

Theology
1/31/2014

Section I
Confessional Heritage

OPEN BOOK REQUIRED

THE BOOK OF CONFESSIONS ONLY

During a retreat with the session of the congregation you serve as pastor, you are leading an orientation to the Book of Order. In the Foundations of Presbyterian Polity, you come to a list of great themes of the Reformed tradition, including:

The recognition of the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny, which calls the people of God to work for the transformation of society by seeking justice and living in obedience to the Word of God. (F-2.05)

The following conversation ensues:

Sarah: I think it is a sin the way we worship sports figures as though they are gods. I hate the way sports teams hold cities hostage, demanding money for a new stadium.
### REQUIRED RESPONSE

Write an essay from a Reformed perspective in which you discuss *the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny.*

Use and discuss at least one (1) citation (e.g., 0.000) from each of three (3) different documents in *The Book of Confessions.*

**Answer**

Since the fall of humankind, all people have a tendency toward idolatry and tyranny. The Bible teaches that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God and *The Book of Confessions* discusses the tendency toward idolatry and tyranny by explaining four keys ideas: 1 All people are prone to sin 2 We know what is sin through Scripture 3 We are prone to rebel against God and worship other things, and 4 Even Christians, though justified, still continue to have a tendency toward idolatry.

In the Scots Confession, the writers explain our tendency toward idolatry as coming from the fall when "the image of God was utterly defaced in man, and he and his children became by nature hostile to God, slaves to Satan, and servants to sin" (3.03). In other words, by nature all humankind is prone to turn from God. We are prone to worship idols instead of worshiping the living God.

The Lord Jesus Christ calls us into right living with God and gives us Scripture that we might know God's purpose and turn away from idolatry, which is defined as "to imagine or possess something in which to put one's trust in place of or beside the one true God" (4.095). The Heidelberg Catechism teaches that we learn of our sin from the Law of God (4.003), and the Larger Catechism specifically addresses the sin of idolatry in its section on the Ten Commandments. In the second commandment, God calls us to not create and worship anything but the one true Lord God (7.049).

In our culture today, we are prone to worship many things other than the Lord Jesus Christ. Some worship sports, others money, and some put their trust in governmental systems instead of in the living God. The Brief Statement of Faith says it this way, "We rebel against God...ignoring God's commandments. We violate the image of God in others and in ourselves" (10.3). In other words, we confess that we often ignore God and turn attention toward the things of this world in a way in which we turn even good things that God has given us into objects of worship instead of turning to God as the one worthy of praise.

The Confessions also speak about how Christians have a tendency toward idolatry and tyranny. Though they are justified in Christ and forgiven from their sins through the work of Jesus Christ (6.068), Christians still continue to sin. The Westminster Confession says it this way, "there abideth still some remnants of correction in every part...the flesh lusts against the Spirit and the Spirit against the flesh" (6.076). In other words, when we become Christian, although we are forgiven in Christ and are given the power to do good works through the Holy Spirit (6.089), we still have the tendency to sin. We still struggle to truly worship God alone and not to glorify the word around us.

The *Book of Confessions* makes clear that humankind is prone toward idolatry and tyranny. All humankind falls short of the glory of God, and even Christians who are justified by Christ are still prone to sin.
Reader Responses

S While almost too brief, this was a real, structured essay. Nicely written and organized. It would be stronger with more elaboration.

S This response provides the citations required by the exam and uses them in a way that demonstrates an understanding of and an ability to explain the human tendency to idolatry and tyranny.

Section II

Constructive Statement of Christian Doctrine

OPEN BOOK REQUIRED

THE BOOK OF CONFESSIONS ONLY

Young adults in the congregation you serve as pastor are struggling to understand their lives as service to God. Some are doubtful about their jobs, and some can’t find work. They are eager to respond to God’s call, whatever it may be, whether it’s their job or other service. Some of them come to you for advice on how they might discern the life to which God is calling them.

REQUIRED RESPONSES

1. Write an essay discussing a Reformed understanding of the doctrine of vocation, particularly as it places emphasis on a life of gratitude. Use at least two (2) of these resources: the Scriptures, classical theology, contemporary theology.

2. Drawing on Required Response 1, identify and briefly discuss two (2) spiritual practices the young adults could use to help them discern the life to which God is calling them.

Answer

1. The Reformed faith teaches that because we have been reconciled by the love and sacrifice of Jesus Christ, we can live lives of gratitude, giving thanks to God with our whole lives. Living a life of gratitude is not dependent upon our vocation; it is not only those who are called into ministry who are called to serve the Lord but all Christians. We can live a life of gratitude by living in service to God and others each day and by living a life of prayer.

The Heidelberg Catechism’s structure itself teaches us about the Reformed teaching on gratitude. It is divided into three parts: [Humankind]’s Misery, [Humankind]’s Redemption, and Thankfulness. In the section on thankfulness, we are taught that no matter what our vocation, our lives can be lived in such a way that they bring glory to God and show our gratefulness for Christ’s work in our lives. The Heidelberg Catechism shows that we can live out our gratefulness to God by dying to our old selves and living into the new life that Christ gives (4.038). Living in accordance with Christ’s purpose includes keeping the commandments of God (see 4.091ff) and living a life of prayer (see 4.116ff).
Throughout both the Old and New Testaments, we are taught how to live a life of gratitude. The prophet Micah asks, "What does the Lord require of you?" and comes to the conclusion that God desires us to "seek justice, love kindness and walk in humility with God." Living in this way is not dependent upon having a specific vocation, but living a life that is set upon doing the will of God because God has loved us and called us God's own. Jesus summarizes the commandments by saying that the Greatest and Second commandments are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our strength, and to love our neighbor as ourself. When we keep these commandments, we show gratitude to God for what God has done in our lives.

Furthermore, the Bible teaches that God has given us each different gifts for use for God's glory. Paul explains in 1 Cor 12 that we are all one body with any parts. Not everyone is given the same gifts and abilities, but we are all needed for the work of God. The Confession of 1967 reminds us that these gifts are to be used in "all relationships of life: in employment, housing, education, leisure, marriage, family, church, and the exercise of political rights" (9.44). In other words, the gifts that God has freely given are rightly used when they are put to the purposes of God in all spheres of life. Regardless of vocation, we live lives of gratitude when we use the gifts God has given us to serve God and humankind.

As in the Heidelberg Catechism above, Calvin emphasizes that one of the greatest ways we can live out a life of faith is through prayer. He speaks about many different aspects of prayer saying that in prayer we give thanks, we show our dependence on God, and we trust in God's sovereign love and power to align all of our loves within God's purposes.

2. When given the opportunity to speak to young adults about discerning the life that God is calling them toward, I would give the same advice that is found in the Heidelberg Catechism. Regardless of what they are doing (looking for work, serving in a "religious" capacity, or a "secular" capacity), they can follow two spiritual practices which can help with discernment and which can help them know they are living lives of gratitude to God. 1) They can ask themselves, "will this vocation help me serve both God and neighbor?". If the answer is, "Yes," they are glorifying God. 2) Are they living a life of prayer? If they are listening to God in prayer and asking for God's will to be done, they are already doing the will of the Lord.

Reader Responses

| S | This response is nicely organized and provides insight enough to meet the essay requirements. The second part could use more discussion of the spiritual practices and might consider ways to offer more pastoral and communal support to those seeking vocational discernment in their lives. |

| S | This response ties in gratitude well with the vocation to which God calls Christians. The citation of the Heidelberg Catechism's section on thankfulness serves as a springboard to reflecting on the doctrine. The scriptural reference to the spiritual gifts with which each Christian is endowed serves to identify how each person can respond to God's grace, which is put forth both as a response and a responsibility. The two required spiritual practices are suggested and explained. |

Section III
Application to Ministry, Option A

OPEN BOOK REQUIRED

THE BOOK OF CONFESSIONS ONLY

(CHOOSE ONE: A or B)
A.

In the past, the congregational care committee of the congregation you serve as pastor has received mixed reactions when they have tried to console members with statements like:

It’s God’s will.

She’s in a better place.

God won’t give you more than you can handle.

This may be a blessing in disguise.

The committee invites you to its next meeting. They want help in thinking through their ministry with members of the congregation facing hard times, disaster, tragedy, or grief.

REQUIRED RESPONSE

In response to the committee’s request, write a presentation discussing a Reformed understanding of God’s providence and presence in the midst of human suffering. Base your presentation on your knowledge of Reformed theology, using at least two (2) of these resources: the Scriptures, classical theology, contemporary theology.

-- OR PROCEED TO NEXT PAGE FOR OPTION B --

Answer

Congregational Care Committee, Thank you for inviting me to come and think with you theologically about how we can provide for our members in times of tragedy and grief. I am thankful for the way that you all care for our congregation and the love that you show them, especially when they are going through difficulties.

Today I would like to take some time with you to think both Biblically and in light of our shared Reformed heritage about the providence of God even in times of suffering.

One of the foundational truths of the Christian faith is that God is not a God who distant, but instead, our God is one who enters into the very heart of suffering. We know from John 1 that that the God of the universe chose to come to earth fully as a human being in the person of Jesus Christ. As Scripture teaches “Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” While Jesus was on earth, he was completely human and completely God, and as human he suffered just as we do. Philippians 2 teaches that God humbled himself greatly, even so much that he was willing to suffer death on the cross. Therefore, when we suffer, whether we are suffering loss or facing persecution or any kind of tragedy, we can know that God can understand our pain. And Jesus promised before his ascension that he would not leave us alone, but instead would send the Holy Spirit, the comforter, to be with us always, even to the end of the age.

In other words, Scripture does not deny that there is evil and suffering in the world. Scripture does not minimize our pain, but instead shows that God understands fully and is with us in the midst of our suffering.

The good news is, however, that sin and death and suffering do not have the final word. Instead, God is sovereign and God is over all things. Our Reformed faith puts a beautiful emphasis on knowing that God is the one in charge. We usually call this doctrine “God’s providence” and in the Book of Confessions, the Second Helvetic Confession explains it this way, “All things in heaven and on earth, and in all creatures, are
preserved and governed by the providence of this wise, eternal and almighty God" (5.029). In other words, even in times of great trial, we can trust that the God who is creator of all is also sustaining and governing all things. We can trust that in the midst of hardship, "God acts with justice and mercy to redeem creation" (10.3). Although sin is very much in this world, God is redeeming us; God is making all things new and fulfilling his purposes for all of creation. The Confession of 1967 says it this way, "God's redeeming work in Jesus Christ embraces the whole of [human] life...It is the will of God that his purpose for human life shall be fulfilled under the rule of Christ and all evil be banished from his creation" (9.53). In other words, we can trust that God has a plan and a purpose for us and for all aspects of this world. And though we may not see it all the time, God is working all things together in accordance with God's purposes.

Calvin says in the Institutes that the doctrine of providence can give us hope and comfort. We do not need to live in fear because we know that God is ultimately in charge and will bring about all things in accordance to his purposes.

Therefore, as you go out to continue caring for our congregation as you have been doing so faithfully, let us remember to give pastoral care doing two things. 1) Let us simply sit with our congregation members in their suffering, just as Christ meets us in our suffering. We do not want to minimize the pain and sin in the world. It is real. And God has entered into this world. But 2) let us remember that God is ultimately in charge. We can trust God even in the midst of our pain for God is sovereign and reigns over all things.

**Reader Responses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S</th>
<th>This presentation would be helpful to those charged with caring for members of a church who are in times of grief, pain or suffering. It should stimulate discussion of how to be present without the use of inept platitudes.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>This presentation speaks well to the Reformed understanding of God's providence and presence in the midst of human suffering. It provides good use of several of the Confessional documents and weaves together a good description of God's activity in the world and the lives of God's people.</td>
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**Overall Evaluation**

**General Comments to Examinee and/or Presbytery**

Please include here any comments about the examination as a whole or notes for the presbytery committee/commission overseeing the examinee's preparation for ministry.

**Reader Responses**

While these responses would be stronger with more fully developed discussions, the writing is clear and organized and the directions for each part of the examination were followed well.

This paper certainly shows an understanding of the theology in such a way as to allow a pastor to serve and minister among the people of a congregation.