

# The Vocation of Teaching: Themes and Models from the Presbyterian Tradition

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**Abstract.** *Historically, the Presbyterian/Reformed tradition has placed a heavy emphasis on education and has honored teaching as an important vocation. This paper begins to explore insights and models that tradition offers to help teachers clarify their calling. The article discusses five themes in Reformed theology and how these themes play out in an educational context, providing examples from one Presbyterian college. The paper concludes by suggesting four ways to think about pedagogy in Presbyterian institutions that are both consistent with Reformed principles and practical in their relevance to teaching and learning.*

From their very origins, Presbyterians have been concerned with education and pedagogy. Many pedagogical methods have been used through the years. Yet it is important to ask whether our tradition offers insights and models that help us clarify our calling as teachers who are either teaching at Presbyterian institutions or are ourselves Presbyterian Christians. What light does the Presbyterian tradition shed on our calling as teachers? Does our heritage offer any guidance for our pedagogical tasks? Our goal in this paper is not to present a tightly argued defense of any “Presbyterian pedagogy.” Rather, we strive to raise the questions and stimulate discussion. To this end, we will begin with a brief summary of theological themes in the Reformed tradition in which Presbyterianism is historically grounded. We will suggest several implications these themes have for the vocation of teaching. We will explore a few of the

pedagogical methods and tools that have been prominent in our tradition, as well as some more innovative historical and present-day models that suggest that Presbyterians are open to a variety of approaches. From here we will move to the more recent past with a brief discussion of several exemplary teachers at one of our own educational institutions. It is not our intention to suggest that any of these individuals were perfect teachers. But we do want to emphasize that the vocation of teaching is lived out not so much when theologians reflect on the theory but when faithful men and women follow the call of God into the classroom and office, giving their lives in service to their students. Finally, we will close with some reflections on our vocation as Presbyterian or Presbyterian-related teachers today. To begin, then, we turn to a brief look at five prominent themes in the Reformed theological tradition.

## Five Themes in Reformed Thought

First, as is well known, the Reformed tradition emphasizes the “sovereignty of God.” As the Creator of all, God has authority over all that exists. Thus, from the Calvinist perspective, the purpose of all that is, and of human life in particular, is focused on relationship to God. Human beings “live to the end that they may know God,” wrote Calvin (Calvin [1564] 1960, 46). Knowing and lovingly obeying the sovereign God is the very purpose of human life. This central Reformed conviction has at least two related implications. It implies, first of all, that the world and

all that is in it, including every aspect of our lives, belong to God. Whatever we do, we are to do it in such a way that we “glorify” or give honor to God. And second, because all of reality and life is God’s, every corner of reality is related to, and reflects the nature and glory of, God. Accordingly, from a thoroughly Reformed perspective, there are no secular aspects of reality and life. There are no sacred places, if this implies that other places are profane. All the world is sacred. There are no parts of life that are not religious, because all of life is to be lived in relationship to the creator God who made us and continues to sustain and remake us into what was intended for us in creation.

Second, the Reformed tradition insists that all of life has been tainted by sin, including the life of the mind. Just as God’s rule covers all of life, so our turning away from God distorts the whole of life. Sin, the human rebellion against the Creator, mars the whole person and all of creation. Humans stand before God as profoundly corrupted beings, whose minds and wills are bent out of shape. As a result, humans, in their natural condition, apart from the special help of God, are unable to fully understand the truth. Sin has epistemological consequences, not just in regard to knowledge of God, but in regard to all of our knowledge. Since God is intimately involved in every aspect of reality, a broken relationship to God and a distorted understanding of God has the implication that one can have only a partial understanding, at best, of any aspect of reality.

Yet for Calvin the claim that all human thought is limited by sin does not imply that natural humankind is totally lacking in insight. The third theme that we highlight in Reformed thought is this: God’s grace has been bestowed upon all, both those on the inside and those on the outside of the Christian faith. In spite of the radical nature of sin and the distortion of understanding it brings, the Reformed view still affirms the presence of true insight in the scholarship of nonbelievers. Even in areas as central to religion as belief in God and moral understanding, Calvin teaches that God has implanted in human minds a degree of truth (Calvin [1564] 1960). Furthermore, Calvin emphasizes that Christians can learn from non-Christian thinkers. Over and over again, as a humanist scholar himself, Calvin quotes or alludes to classical literature to illustrate his own ideas. Even more explicitly, he affirms that the study of the arts and sciences enable the Christian to understand both the scriptures and the world more fully (Calvin [1564] 1960, 273). “Those men,” Calvin writes, “whom Scripture calls ‘natural men’ were, indeed, sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things. Let us, accordingly, learn by their example how many gifts the Lord left to human nature even after it was despoiled of its true good” (Calvin [1564] 1960, 274–

275). Thus, balanced with the claim that the mind has been despoiled and darkened by sin, Calvin’s affirmation is that Christians have much to learn from secular writers, into whose minds also God has poured insight.

Following Calvin, the Reformed tradition has consistently affirmed all insight and understanding are gifts from God, whether they are recognized as gifts to those to whom they are given or not. It follows that it is wrong to reject and ignore the ideas of secular or pagan writers. Rather, the task of a Christian is to sort through and learn from them, integrating the insights of both Christian and non-Christian sources with the recognition that it is God who is the source of all truth. It is worth noting here that Calvin’s appreciation for the arts and sciences was part of the impetus for the liberal arts curriculum as it developed in the United States. In fact, the planting of Presbyterian colleges throughout the States was an outgrowth of this commitment to a broad education.

These first three themes provide a framework within which the Reformed thinker understands the world. But if this were the whole picture, humankind would be left with only a partial, distorted vision of reality. Like all of human life, the understanding would be left in its corrupted state. But God has not left humankind to waste away in this condition. The Reformed worldview also affirms this fourth theme: Through the work of Jesus Christ, God is working to restore humankind to its full created goodness. With all Christendom, this tradition shares the conviction that in Jesus Christ God has acted to redeem humankind. In light of the Reformed view of the impact of sin as holistic impact, it is not surprising that the Reformed view of redemption is equally holistic. The gospel, or good news of Jesus is not just that humans can now return to their proper relationship with God. Nor is it that Jesus has provided a way for humans to escape this world and make it to heaven. The good news is that God loves this world and wants to redeem it. God wants to transform all of life in this world, by changing individual lives, by transforming human understanding, and by transforming social structures. God is working to restore the world in its entirety to its created goodness.

The fifth and final theme in Reformed thought we will consider here follows directly from those that we have already discussed. If God is working to redeem the fallen world, and if the purpose of human life is to live for God’s glory, then it is the responsibility of Christians to be involved in transforming the world into the place God wants it to be. Nicholas Wolterstorff argues forcefully that a unique feature of English Puritanism was its call for Christians to change the structures of society. Unlike others in their time, who saw these structures as God-created and

therefore not to be changed, these early Calvinists saw social structures themselves as corrupted and in need of reform (Wolterstorff 1983, 9). As Wolterstorff writes, the Puritans sought to “reform the social world in obedience to God” (Wolterstorff 1983, 11). The result is what Wolterstorff calls “world-transformative” Christianity. As the Puritans moved across the Atlantic to America, they sought to build a transformed society structured according to God’s law. Although the application of this conviction has taken different forms in various contexts, Reformed Christians have shared the conviction that God wants to do more than transform individuals, or even to create an alternative community. God wants, with the help of the faithful, to restore the world to its created goodness. Out of this conviction, Reformed Christians have been socially active in various ways throughout history. Rather than retreating from the world, or forming alternative communities, Presbyterians and others of the Reformed persuasion have sought to change the communities in which they lived to more fully reflect God’s righteousness and justice. Moreover, from the beginning of his tenure at the College of New Jersey (which became Princeton), John Witherspoon was deeply concerned to prepare students to serve beyond the college in all areas of civic life (Kuykendall 2001, 10, 12). His model was further emulated by the many Presbyterian colleges subsequently founded throughout North America.

#### **Four Applications to the Vocation of Teaching**

Presbyterians have attempted to transform the world through a variety of educational strategies. The Reformed perspective has encouraged and shaped these efforts. In particular, in this section, we will consider four implications of Reformed thought that both have shaped Presbyterian education efforts and can help form our understanding of the vocation of teaching today. Perhaps the most important implication of the Reformed perspective for our approach to teaching is this: Scholarship and academic activity, for both teachers and students, is a vocation, a calling from God. As we have seen, Reformed Christianity resists the division of life into the sacred and the secular. In a very real sense this view sees all of life as sacred, all of life to be lived to the glory of God. So it is not just priests or pastors who are called by God, but every believer who lives his or her life in response to Christ. The Reformed tradition has consistently emphasized that as each person pursues God’s call, his or her work becomes a vocation. Calvin emphasized that all humans are called by God to particular tasks. He wrote, “the Lord bids each one of us in all life’s actions to look to his calling” (Calvin

[1564] 1960, 724). It is the calling of each Christian to perform the function God has assigned to him or her. All of a person’s life, in work and play, is the means by which one responds to and gives glory to God. The teacher-scholar’s position is just as much a calling as is that of the pastor at the church which she attends, or that of the auto mechanic who fixes her car. No one in any of these positions, including the teacher-scholar should see his or her job as just a job. When performed in response to the gracious work of God, the work of scholarship, whether as a student, as a teacher or as a research scholar, is more than a job. Rather, it is a calling through which one can glorify God with one’s life. Further, this view of vocation implies that teaching itself, in whatever field, includes the important task of helping students discover and prepare for their special call or vocation in life.

In this regard, the Reformed understanding goes against the culture of our day. It implies that a very different attitude should be encouraged among both students and faculty. The student informed by the Reformed perspective understands that the wisdom of God can be discovered in every field. Whereas many of today’s students (and their parents!) see the educational enterprise merely as necessary preparation for a vocation or career, the Reformed perspective suggests that we should seek to help students see learning itself as a part of their vocation. Education, in this view, is not just career preparation. It is valuable in itself.

Yet education is also preparation, but not simply for a job. It is preparation for the continuing vocation the student will pursue after graduation. Students will be encouraged to view their future career in a much different way as well. The goal of life is not to make money. It is to glorify God. There is a radical difference between getting an education in order to get a well-paying job, and preparing for the vocation to which one senses he or she is being called. Teaching, writing, business administration, environmental research, scientific research, missionary service, aviation management, and many more, are all vocations to which students may be called by God. In short, the Reformed perspective suggests that teachers should foster an attitude of response to God in students as they look to the future, seeing both their education and their careers as part of their calling from God, not as hoops to get through to enable one to make the money to get what one wants.

A second implication that flows from the Reformed worldview is the conviction that proper human development, referred to in theological terms as the process of sanctification, is holistic. Teachers nurture whole persons in personal development that includes the intellectual, the spiritual, and the social dimensions of life. A good teacher will not just seek to impart

information, or to focus narrowly on the student's intellectual growth. He or she will be concerned for each student as a total person. Education, in the Reformed view, can never be purely a matter of learning information. Because the human understanding is distorted by sin and moral confusion, gaining information alone can never produce true understanding. Christian teaching must aim not only at intellectual growth, but also at spiritual growth. On the other hand, the teacher can approach his or her teaching, in whatever department or field, as a part of this holistic growth. Teaching science or economics or literature contributes to the spiritual development of the person. As we have seen, Calvin himself affirmed the value of an education in the pagan liberal arts for helping Christians understand the Scriptures. Similarly, if God is involved in every aspect of reality, one cannot fully appreciate the glory of God until one has a broad understanding of all that God has created. In sum, the Reformed view provides an impetus for education that integrates the educational process into a broader framework of human development, which includes growth in faith, character, and social responsibility.

Presbyterian colleges have consistently sought to provide a broad education for their students. Good teachers have shown a similar concern for the whole lives of their students. Here the Calvinistic roots of the liberal arts are clear. This type of education, as noted in the third theological theme above, is an outgrowth of Calvin's own emphasis on "arts and sciences" as part of a good education.

A third implication of the Reformed perspective is this: It is the task of Christian scholars, both teachers and students, to understand all of reality in light of God's truth. As we have seen, the Reformed perspective emphasizes that all truth is God's. But it also insists that our minds have been clouded by sin. In Jesus, God has begun the task of restoring human life to its created goodness. For our purposes, what is of particular interest is that this restoration includes the cognitive and epistemic dimensions of our lives. Salvation not only restores our relationship with God but puts us on the track to a restored understanding of reality. Does God suddenly wipe away our confusion and fill our minds with only truth? No. Reformed Christianity is painfully aware of our ongoing sinfulness and continuing intellectual confusion. But we look forward, in the Reformed view, with hope. Through God's work in Christ and through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, God is transforming our understanding.

An important part of this transformation process is God's work through communities of Christian scholars who work at understanding all of reality – including the natural world, the human world and the world of philosophical ideas – in light of God's truth as it is

revealed in both the living word, Jesus Christ, and the written word in the Bible. As teachers, these scholars can engage students in the common search, encouraging them to integrate all of their academic work within the framework of their faith. The goal is to provide students with not just a lot of knowledge, but a unified framework within which this knowledge can be placed. The student is not simply to store information about the natural world, but to understand that the natural world is a creation of God. The student is not just to learn about human achievements and social behavior, but to understand these in light of the conviction that humans have been created in the image of God. Although much of our work as teachers involves imparting the details and specific content of our fields, the calling of the teacher in the Reformed tradition goes beyond this. It is our task to help students see what they are learning in the broader perspective of God's truth.

Finally, the Reformed understanding of education looks beyond itself to engagement with the culture around it. As we have seen, the Reformed worldview sees God as transforming all of life, both individual and social. It is the Christian's task to join in this transforming work in the world. Presbyterian teachers and educational institutions have often aimed at cultural transformation. Reformed higher education seeks to nurture students in holistic growth. It encourages them to see both their current studies and future careers as part of their calling from God. These ideas already imply that students are being prepared for a mission. They are to serve God in the world. Although this emphasis takes on different flavors in different times, the objective of preparing students for service and mission in the world has frequently been a clear part of the articulated mission of Presbyterian higher education. If this is so, then surely the teacher at such an institution plays a crucial role. He or she must be an agent in the training of individuals who will not only serve others in their communities, but who at times will go against the prevailing culture in defense of the right, the good and the just.

### **Pedagogical Methods**

It is important to state at the outset that there is no philosophy of teaching or a pedagogical method that one could call the Presbyterian approach. Yet it may be helpful to mention four threads that can be found in many places throughout our Presbyterian educational heritage. We hope that this article will evoke discussion of whether, in the end, we see these threads as the source of inspiration, or aspects of the tradition that must be continually reformed, or both. Although probably not originating exclusively with Calvin, each of these threads can be seen in the Academy of Geneva

that he founded. These threads can also be found in the Scottish Universities working out of a Presbyterian ethos during the Scottish Enlightenment (see Kuykendall 2001, 6–13). In various ways, they continue through the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions in education in the United States as well.

The first methodological thread that one finds weaving through Presbyterian educational philosophy is an emphasis on discipline and order as a means to building character. Calvin, according to Ronald S. Wallace, believed that discipline “was essential if people were to live together in love.” As Wallace explains Calvin’s structuring of life in Geneva, he states that high moral standards must be “embodied in the educational system, in the current ideals for family and home life. They are upheld strictly by enlightened public opinion” (Wallace 1988, 32). As would be expected, the maintenance of order was enforced by sometimes harsh discipline. As Morgan reports concerning Puritan schools in England, “school hours were long, and discipline was severe; flogging and expulsion commonly awaited the unruly student.” Yet Morgan also notes that attitudes concerning how to raise children were changing in the period, with more and more schools introducing physical exercises and recreation. And “the age also seemed to show awareness that punishment could not be left completely unregulated,” with some complaining of too much use of “the rod” (Morgan 1986, 191). Although the standards and punishments may have changed, one can see in the documents from the early years of Presbyterian colleges in America a similar emphasis on rules of behavior with the purpose of producing graduates of good character, often with the intention of enabling them to be good citizens.

A second pedagogical thread that one can find in Calvin’s Academy and much of Presbyterian education in the past is a strong emphasis on the method of lecturing. Calvin himself took on the role of a teacher-preacher in his reformation movement and in the city of Geneva (McKelway 1990, 136). From the beginning, preaching played a prominent role in the Reformed tradition and the preacher was seen as a teacher within the church. In fact the ordained minister was called a “teaching elder” through much of North American Presbyterian history. Thus it is not surprising that in the Reformed educational ventures one finds the method of teacher as expositors of the truth through lectures having an important place. Among English Puritans, for example, emphasis was placed on hearing lectures and sermons and taking notes. John Morgan records that one Puritan “remembered that, as a young man, even before his conversion, he had found that taking notes on sermons changed his approach to religion by involving him more closely in the experience of the sermon” (Morgan 1986, 188). Moreover, the Presbyterian root of

this practice comes from the Scottish Enlightenment: Scottish universities developed a new pedagogical approach, “a combination of lecture and catechesis by individual professors in defined and designated fields of study” (Kuykendall 2001, 6).

One well-known Presbyterian of the past who thought the colleges were straying too far from this method was J. Gresham Machen. D. G. Hart writes that Machen “criticized contemporary educational reforms that emphasized students’ personal development at the expense of instructional content.” According to Hart, Machen favored “older educational methods and curricula that stressed learning the basics. . . . Rather than creating an environment where students could meaningfully integrate their world and express themselves, Machen believed the teacher’s sole duty was to lecture and that the student’s responsibility was to listen, take notes and memorize.” Although Machen recognized that students should learn to analyze, he believed students could only really think critically if they had an adequate grasp of the truth. “It is impossible,” he wrote, “to think with an empty mind” (Hart 1994, 106).

Emphasis on learning the basics, especially in terms of doctrine, suggests a third thread one sees in Calvin’s Academy and later in the Presbyterian tradition: the use of catechisms to provide students with a grounding in the basic tenets of the Christian faith. Although the idea of a catechism outlining the basics of faith was not an invention of Calvin and the other Protestants, it was certainly used by them. Many of the reformers wrote catechisms for the purposes of educating the people in the basic truths of Christianity. At Calvin’s Academy, students studied and memorized selections from the Catechism on a regular basis (DeGreef 1993, 54). At higher levels “editions of the Catechism were prepared in Greek and Hebrew to be used as basic texts in their study of the biblical languages” (Achtmeier 1992, 62). Along with the use of catechism was an emphasis on memorization. Students at Calvin’s school memorized the Lord’s Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the Apostles’ Creed, all of which were incorporated into many of the catechisms. Later, in England, the Puritans, some of whom were Presbyterians, commonly incorporated catechisms as a regular part of their schools (Morgan 1986, 184, 187). Moreover, catechesis provided a place for dialogue between professor and student. This method was incorporated into the Scottish University system and introduced in this country by John Witherspoon (Kuykendall 2001, 6) and spread throughout the States as new Presbyterian colleges were founded.

As higher education developed in the United States, it may not have been specific catechisms that played the role of laying out the basics of the faith for students. Many Presbyterian colleges for years required

all their students to take basic Christian doctrine and Christian ethics courses. Catechisms themselves are still valued in the Presbyterian tradition. In the Presbyterian Church (USA) several historical catechisms continue to be a part of our denominational constitution along with the historic Reformed confessions. Perhaps one reason they have been so important is the conviction that all Christians should see their lives from within a Christian worldview. If so, all Christians must have a knowledge of the basic elements of the Christian religion. The Reformed catechisms and confessions represent the attempts of our brothers and sisters of the past to summarize these basic elements. For many of us today, memorization of set answers to basic theological questions may seem empty and ineffective. Yet we must at the same time ask how we are communicating the crucial elements of the Christian worldview to others.

Last but not least, we should mention a thread that has been suggested earlier in this paper. Traditional Presbyterian pedagogy, although confessionally based, has encouraged the study of both Christian and non-Christian writers in the liberal arts. Included in this study was a strong emphasis on language and communication (McKelway 1990, 141–2). Wallace notes that Calvin encouraged the need to impart true understanding of all texts studied. He quotes Calvin's admonition that professors "are not to make invectives against the authors they expound, but they are to apply themselves to explicate the sense faithfully" (Wallace 1988, xx). Included in the humanist education that Calvin built into the curriculum was a strong emphasis on linguistic understanding and clear thinking. This broad humanistic approach continued in many ways among the Puritans as well, although the Puritan concern for godliness did lead to some attempts to limit what material was read in the classroom and encouraged the production of Christian texts (Morgan 1986, 179, 182, 187). As has been discussed above, Presbyterian colleges in America continued the pattern of seeking to provide a broad educational experience for their students, even if their purpose was focused on preparing individuals for ministry in the church.

These four threads have a rather conservative flavor when considered today. The methods suggested may seem dry, passive and overly content-oriented. Perhaps as we continue to reform our views, we must supplement these educational methods with others. The Reformed tradition has included innovators as well. In the next section, we will mention two interesting early examples of educational innovation found in the records of our Reformed and Presbyterian European roots. In addition, we will take up the first theological theme mentioned above in greater detail, looking specifically at how traditional notions regarding the sovereignty of God have been revised by several groups of scholars, as well

as the implications of those revisions for Presbyterian teaching.

### **Appropriation and Reformation of Reformed Approaches to Teaching**

The first innovation to be discussed comes from John Morgan, in his interesting work, *Godly Learning: Puritan Attitudes towards Reason, Learning and Education, 1560–1640*. There he mentions the work of John Brinsley, an English Puritan. Brinsley's concern was the education of young children, especially in giving them religious instruction and teaching them to read and write. According to Morgan, Brinsley was "a pedagogue sensitive to the playfulness and limited attention span of the very young." He "was interested in engaging young children in word play, in education by visual aids, and in encouraging enjoyment of the classroom process." Morgan wonders whether Brinsley's theories were motivated by religion or by years of experience "in front of classes" (Morgan 1986, 174–5). Either way, it is encouraging to those of us who have spent many class sessions in front of college students with limited attention spans to read of a teacher who sees the need to include various media and even fun in the process of teaching important truths.

A second interesting example of pedagogical innovation, which seems to have especially taken hold among Presbyterian Puritans, is the practice of prophesying. Morgan describes this as "a system of ministerial in-service training" (Morgan 1986, 222). Arising in England in the 1560s and 1570s, the practice consisted of clergy coming together under the leadership of one of their more educated colleagues to practice preaching. In the early days, only the more educated clergy would preach, while the others would study a biblical text and be tested on it. Later, however, the gatherings "tended to become more the functions of equals..." (Morgan 1986, 223). Through practice and discussion exercises, it seems, the Puritan clergy helped one another develop both in preaching and in understanding of doctrine. Similar exercises were called for in the Presbyterian Directory of Church-Government. Students preparing for ministry were to demonstrate their abilities at practice sessions. Exercises were also held among the ministers and selected others who were preparing for ministry to hear a pre-appointed moderator speak on a theological question followed by discussion. Although one sees a trace of hierarchy in these sixteenth century exercises, they were far more collegial than the prevailing pedagogical model we have seen above.

One person who repeatedly encouraged prophesying was Laurence Chaderton, a Presbyterian leader of the time. At Emmanuel College of Cambridge University, where Chaderton was a master, he

advocated various types of exercises similar to the prophesying meetings. He instituted exercises at which two or three speakers would expound a text and be evaluated by the rest of the gathering. Morgan writes, “Presbyterians rather emphasized the supremacy of ‘the whole company of Prophets’ to the individual. Great emphasis was thus placed on the pooling of talents for mutual edification.” Chaderton applied similar collaborative learning methods to a variety of educational needs. He proposed a “mutuall [sic] conference” that Morgan describes as “very much a Biblical study group” that would meet for around two years to study the Scriptures. Chaderton also recommended a series of disputations at which participants would discuss differences among themselves and sort out how Protestants and Catholics differed (Morgan 1986, 237). Chaderton does not represent all of Presbyterian pedagogues during this period. But he does, like Brinsley, provide an interesting model of innovation and concern for learning that can inform our discussion of the vocation to teaching today.

So far we have considered how several theological themes that undergird our mission as Presbyterian teachers have been applied to teaching in the early days of the Reformed movement. We turn now to a detailed discussion of a present-day example of innovation which puts into practice the fifth theological theme, that of transformation, by reforming the first theological theme, sovereignty of God.

### A Contemporary View of the Sovereignty of God

The first and central theme of Reformed thought, as noted above, is the sovereignty of God, which we also saw having important implications for teaching. However, this theme is untenable for many 21st century academics because they understand it in the classical sense, as referring to the omnipotence of God who dominates and controls the world. Rethinking this traditional Reformed theme in light of new knowledge and theological perspectives is consistent with the spirit of reform that is reflected in the phrase *reformata et reformanda* and offers the possibility of reflection on teaching that is both in harmony with the central theme and meaningful to contemporary teachers and learners. Such rethinking is also consistent with the concept of God’s sovereignty, which implies that God transcends or cannot be confined to any particular understanding of God.

The concept of God’s sovereignty has traditionally been understood in terms of the classical idea of omnipotence, i.e., God has control, power over all things. John Calvin relied heavily on the image of God as divine ruler in his discussions of sovereignty. Thus, the traditional model in the Reformed tradition has

been one of governance (Case-Winters 1990, 23). Even Calvin’s use of the term Father for God reflects the patriarchal father of his own time who rules over his children. While this ruling takes place within a relationship of love, that context in no way diminishes the power of the ruler or the dependence of the ruled (Case-Winters 1990, 48–49). No room is left for chance, and the only limitation on God’s power is that demanded by moral goodness (Case-Winters 1990, 45, 57).

The problems created by this understanding of omnipotence or sovereignty have been much debated, particularly in discussions of the problem of evil and, more recently, attempts to integrate Christian theology with contemporary scientific knowledge (Barbour 2000, 152–153). Process thinkers and feminist theologians have challenged the traditional view of power as well, the former because of its intellectual inadequacy in light of modern scientific discoveries and the latter because of its social consequences in assuming patriarchy (Case-Winters 1990, 206). Anna Case-Winters of McCormick Theological Seminary, in her book *God’s Power*, has suggested a possible revision of Calvin’s view of God’s sovereignty in light of insights from process and feminist approaches to theology. We would like to explore her reconstruction as a tool for thinking about pedagogy in the Reformed tradition in our contemporary setting.

Both process and feminist thinkers challenge traditional views of God’s power as domination and control, consistent with the model of the omnipotent ruler. Instead, they seek to understand power as relational, synergistic, involving being influenced as well as influencing, and persuasive rather than coercive. Relationality means that “connectedness, openness to the other, and mutuality” characterize power (Case-Winters 1990, 208). All things are interdependent, and God does not have a monopoly on power and freedom, for they are necessary qualities of all subjects (Case-Winters 1990, 208–209). God’s power is unsurpassable, not total. Nor are different powers necessarily competing with one another, for they can work together (Case-Winters 1990, 209). Because creatures have real power and freedom, they may choose not to respond to divine influence. Any response is due to persuasion, not coercion. Furthermore, not only does God influence creatures, but also God is influenced by the world (Case-Winters 1990, 212). Genuine relationship is not a one-way street; each participant is influenced by the other. Taking her cue from Charles Hartshorne, Case-Winters defines omnipotence as “the capacity to influence *all* and to be influenced by *all*” (Case-Winters 1990, 212). What distinguishes divine omnipotence from the power of creatures is that it is

unsurpassable and it has three unique capacities: “1) preserving and maintaining the world, 2) ordering the world by general natural laws that ensure against chaos and guarantee optimal conditions for the attainment of value, and 3) providing for every actuality an ideal aim to be integrated into its experience” (Case-Winters 1990, 214). While it is not transcendent in being a power over that dominates and controls, omnipotence is transcendent in going beyond the power of the world (Case-Winters 1990, 226f.). In other words, God’s power is not identical with the power of the creation, but it does work from within to empower rather than from above to control.

While God’s sovereignty, according to this view, preserves and maintains the world, orders it through natural laws, and draws creation toward an ideal aim, it does not require that the world be static or that the future is precisely determined. Change is implied in the idea of power exercised in the context of relationship, and some degree of open possibility for the future is suggested by the idea of genuine freedom of creatures. Thus, God’s sovereignty does not include the classical idea of immutability, for God is responsive to change in the world. This does not mean that God is unreliable, because God’s character, love, and perfection do not change, but God is responsive to and affected by humans and creation (Case-Winters 1990, 142). Such a view of reality as dynamic, changing, in constant flux fits what we know of the natural world from contemporary science much better than does a view of reality as static and shaped by divinely imposed structures that are unchanging and eternal (Barbour 2000, 152, 177).

A concept of God’s sovereignty that includes genuine interdependence, connectedness, and influence of all on all suggests a view of reality that is holistic. And this holistic view is also a central part of our Reformed heritage as described above. While creatures have genuine freedom and power, none is independent of influence by others. While God’s power is not identical to the power of the world, it does work within creation to empower and order and transform all of reality. While this approach agrees with the traditional view that divine sovereignty unites all of the world, it would speak of a unity “within” or “woven together” or “embraced by” God’s sovereignty rather than “under” God’s sovereignty (Case-Winters 1990, 226). Thus, this revised view of divine sovereignty is consistent with the tradition in its insistence on a holistic perspective, even as it explains the unity empowered by God differently.

### **Implications of This View of God’s Sovereignty for Teaching**

This revised vision of God’s sovereignty emphasizes the significance of God’s relationship to all of creation with the implication that education should be holistic. Viewing education as a holistic enterprise means educating whole persons, not simply imparting information, and recognizing that academic fields are not isolated, discrete bodies of knowledge but part of a web of connected fields that seek to explore a single reality, one that is ordered and maintained by the creative power of God’s sovereignty. Thus a holistic education encourages intellectual, spiritual, and ethical growth, so that it enables students to discover their own strengths and view their learning as related to all dimensions of life, not just a job or career. It also encourages them to make connections and understand the interrelatedness of various components of human society and the rest of the created world. As we have seen, this kind of holistic education flows from the Reformed worldview that defines human development holistically and understands scholarship and academic activity as a vocation or calling from God, not simply a job or preparation for a job.

When God’s sovereignty is viewed in terms of empowering all of creation toward fulfillment, all knowledge can be seen as part of God’s truth, and therefore, as legitimate subject matter for education. The classics and other humanistic learning are not to be scorned but mined for the knowledge they offer, a conviction shared by John Calvin, as we have seen. Thus, teaching involves exposure of students to a wide range of viewpoints and perspectives to enable them to evaluate critically and to make their own commitments.

An understanding of God’s sovereignty that views divine power as unsurpassable, but not as a monopoly of power, allows creatures to have genuine power and genuine freedom. Such an approach affirms human responsibility while acknowledging human limitations. Because humans are limited, claims of truth must always be made with a humility that acknowledges the possibility of error, and education must involve critical evaluation, not mere acceptance of information or authoritative theories and doctrines. Teaching seeks to transform individuals not through indoctrination, but through liberation from limited views of the world. While the Reformed tradition focuses on the sinfulness of humankind, it does not deny the goodness of humankind as part of God’s good creation. Teaching must, therefore, balance the emphasis on limited, partial knowledge with a confidence in the dignity and worth, the freedom and power, of each human such that students are empowered through education, not manipulated by it.

Power, according to this view, is relational and synergistic, involves being influenced as well as influencing, and is persuasive rather than coercive. When applied to pedagogy, teaching and learning take place within a relationship, the efforts of the professor and those of the students combine to empower learning, the professor is affected by the interaction and does not just seek to change the student, teaching empowers students to make connections between disciplines, and information and ideas are not imposed as absolute truths but are offered as invitations to new ways of thinking and being. While the professor may have more power than the students, he/she is not finally in control of learning. Instead, learning is the result of students freely responding to the teaching that nurtures and empowers but does not determine them.

One of the important changes brought about by the Protestant Reformation was the removal of priests as mediators between humans and God. That change did not eliminate the role of pastor or minister who serves, teaches, and nurtures the members of the congregation, but it did challenge the hierarchical arrangement of the church that placed priests between humans and God and made them the bearers of the truth. When God's sovereignty is understood in the traditional way, some sense that truth is handed down from on high often continues to shape concepts of education. However, a revised vision of power can eliminate the last vestiges of hierarchical models of teaching and learning and support a vision of the teaching vocation that focuses on empowerment of learners.

The spirit of reform further enhances the vision of teaching as a process of empowerment. If all knowledge is subject to revision, education is a matter not of learning to accept an existing body of knowledge but of learning to evaluate critically and understand both the strengths and weaknesses of current knowledge. Such education need not be cynical in denying the value of what is known, but maintains a healthy skepticism regarding claims of truth and an openness to new information, ideas, and paradigms. Furthermore, it provides the skills and motivation for graduates to view their education as the beginning of the process of lifelong learning.

Both the revised view of sovereignty and power and the spirit of reform contribute to the affirmation of teaching as vocation in important ways. First, all of life is interconnected and, therefore, sacred or related to God. There can be no sense in which this is just a job or is defined by principles unrelated to life's fundamental rootedness in divine reality. Commercial interests are not the prevailing values defining the work of teaching and learning. Second, because God's power is not total and humans have genuine freedom, the choice of how one uses one's life matters. Human efforts to make a difference for individuals, the

community, and the environment work synergistically with God's power to transform the world.

While a variety of theological traditions can contribute positively to reflection on pedagogy, and good teaching practices are not unique to the Reformed or any other Christian tradition, exploration of such themes as the sovereignty of God can provide distinctive points of departure for thinking about teaching in Presbyterian institutions or by Presbyterian professors. While these points of departure do not spell out specific applications to classroom teaching, some stories of teachers who exemplify them may provide a framework for thinking about pedagogy. The examples are taken from written histories of Maryville College and conversations with alumni/ae whose lives were impacted in important ways by their teachers. They are presented not as a claim that Maryville College is unique in exemplifying good pedagogy but to provide concrete illustrations similar to those that could be found at many of our institutions.

### **Narratives Suggestive of Reformed Pedagogy**

#### *Empowering Independent Thinking*

Maryville College was founded in 1819 as the Southern and Western Seminary by overture of Union Presbytery to the Synod of Tennessee at the instigation of Isaac Anderson, who was appointed to the first professorship as well as the presidency (Blair and Walker 1994, 2–3).

According to a College historian, "It was as a teacher . . . that Dr. Anderson was most influential and revered" (Blair and Walker 1994, 4–5). He combined catechetical and Socratic approaches that involved giving each student a set of questions or topics about which they were to read and write, exploring them from different perspectives. When they had progressed as far as they could on their own, he delivered lectures in the form of questions and answers on the topic (Wilson 1932, 61). While note-taking and memorization were important parts of the process, the goal was teaching them to think for themselves. Because all sources of knowledge were deemed appropriate subject matter, they encountered the classics and a variety of writers on different topics, and because all human knowledge is limited, they were expected to critically evaluate the materials and draw their own conclusions.

#### *Sharing a Vision of Interconnectedness*

In a recent conversation, Maryville graduate Dave Powell described the influence of Dr. Randolph Shields, former Professor of Biology:

Dr. Shields had the ability to help one see the world as a dynamic oneness. If I had had the wit at the time, I would have called his hikes in the mountains “Buddha walks.” To him anything and everything was a matter of importance, everything was related, nothing was beneath notice, everything was becoming, nothing was uncommon, everything was special. (Blair and Walker 1994, 323)

The lessons Dr. Shields taught were intellectual, spiritual, and ethical and bridged the gap between human society and the rest of creation. In this respect his teaching also exemplified the Reformed commitment to transformation by using that knowledge in service of the larger world.

Dave Powell returned to his alma mater to teach English, and in the tradition of his beloved teacher, he has empowered many students to make connections and view learning holistically through a three week experiential course he developed on the environment. Combining material from the sciences, social sciences, and humanities, the course was truly interdisciplinary and brought home to students the “dynamic oneness” that Dr. Shields had helped Dave discover years earlier.

Now, the entire freshman class is involved in a course titled “Perspectives on the Environment” in January. During the fall before the course, students are exposed to a nearly pristine segment of the Appalachian environment in the Smokies. During the course, they learn about the Cherokee interaction with the natural world through readings, video, and discussions and about the impact of early European settlers on the region’s environment through visits to a museum and additional readings and discussion. Then they explore the impact of current lifestyles on the local environment through trips to water treatment plants, national forests, garbage dumps, and power plants, and through hands-on projects that use data analysis, such as determining the value of logging the College Woods, analyzing one family’s garbage for a week, and studying water use on campus. Finally, they write their own environmental ethic outlining the impact of the course on the way they live their lives. While the pedagogical approach used in this class could not apply to every course, it does model the emphasis on holistic learning that enables students to make connections among disciplines, to see the interrelatedness of the natural world and human society, and to grow intellectually, spiritually, and ethically. Surely the English Puritan John Brinsley and Presbyterian John Witherspoon, mentioned above, would have approved of this use of a variety of engaging teaching experiences.

### *Empowering Learners to Grow as Whole Persons*

In addition to empowering students to think for themselves and to recognize connections and the interdependence of all of creation, examples of teaching at Maryville College also illustrate approaches that have empowered people to recognize their own talents and to grow as whole human beings. In the spring of 2000, Delores Ziegler, world-renowned opera mezzo-soprano and Maryville College graduate, gave a concert on the College campus. During the concert she stopped singing and spoke briefly. The concert, she said, was her gift to the College where faculty, staff, and peers nourished her. Expressing deep appreciation for the teachers she had encountered, Ms. Ziegler explained some of the important lessons that she learned. Dr. Shields, Professor of Biology, taught her that the physical world is important. Dr. Carlidge, Professor of Religion and Philosophy, encouraged her to read a book that was too difficult at the time with the expectation that she would read it again later with a different level of understanding. A voice teacher awakened her talent and made her realize that she had a voice. A theory teacher taught her that opera was great and that her life journey could go in that direction. She concluded with the statement that the College must continue to provide this kind of nourishment to all students, regardless of their talents and interests (Bonham 2000). Ms. Ziegler’s comments illustrate two points. First, the teaching she experienced encouraged her to grow as a whole person, not just as a musician, and second, learning took place in the context of relationships that empowered her through nurturing, encouraging, planting seeds, opening doors, offering opportunities, and drawing out her potential rather than shaping her in the image of her professors. Thus her experience illustrates the effects of pedagogy that is holistic and empowering and a view of education that runs counter to our culture as it views academics as the beginning of lifelong learning, a vocation, and an end in itself, not only as job preparation. While Ms. Ziegler did awaken to her vocation as a singer at Maryville College, she also began a lifelong journey of growth toward wholeness as a human being.

Also empowered to grow as a whole person, as well as to discover his professional vocation, was a young man named Sam, who came to Maryville College in the fall of 1918 with a reputation as a scalawag. Sam violated attendance policy by cutting class and broke numerous other rules by smoking, creating noise during the quiet hours set aside for studying, sneaking out after lights out and going to town. However, Sam did on occasion go to class, and he genuinely enjoyed physics with Professor Edgar Roy Walker.

Toward the end of that first semester, on a cold winter night, Sam suddenly realized that his physics lab manual was due the next day. The problem was that

Sam had neglected the manual and there was nothing in it. So Sam decided to try to create a diversion that would cause Prof. Walker to forget about the lab manual. As the teacher left his apartment the next morning to attend required Chapel, he was drenched by a bucket of water. Even though his heavy wool suit was soaked and his high starched collar wilted, Prof. Walker went on to Chapel.

Sam arrived at his first class of the morning, physics, only to find that despite his best efforts, a miserably wet Prof. Walker was standing there calling the students forward one by one to turn in their lab manuals. When Sam handed his manual to Prof. Walker, the teacher “flipped through it and then he said the most amazing thing. He said, ‘Sam, you are a scientist, and this manual is not worthy of what you can do.’ With that he tossed the manual out of the second floor window. Then he said, ‘Sam, I am going to give you an extension of three days to finish this manual, and because it will be late, I am going to give you an additional problem. Using the laws of physics answer the question: Which would hit the ground first, a lab manual tossed from a second floor window or a bucket of water tossed from a second floor window?’” (Hess 2000). Sam was stunned. Obviously, Prof. Walker knew that he had thrown the water. Apparently, the teacher was not going to have him expelled. What really amazed him, however, was that his esteemed professor had called him a scientist, not a troublemaker, not a scalawag or dimwit, but a scientist.

Sam completed the lab manual, passed physics, and finished college, majoring in science education. A dedicated teacher, he spent 35 years in the Knox County School system (Hess 2000). Because he knew his students, Professor Walker was able to identify the scientist in Sam in spite of his other failures. More importantly, he adjusted his teaching to meet the need of this student to discover his own ability and interest in learning. He did not use his power as professor to impose punishment, expel Sam, or fail him, but creatively empowered this young man to become a teacher in his own right. Through his teaching, Prof. Walker participated in the transformation of a human life, and through Sam, in transforming the lives of many young people.

Another type of transformation takes place when students come to college without being well equipped for the challenges. In the late 1970s a young student with weak academic preparation and limited experience was admitted to Maryville on the condition that he successfully complete Composition I. He squeaked through this and several other courses until he arrived in Professor Herma Cate’s class in Western World Literature. Prof. Cate was a forceful woman with a regal bearing, imposing presence, and

reputation as a demanding teacher. At the end of the semester, Don had an incomplete and an agreement with Prof. Cate that he would retake Composition I, specifically Prof. Cate’s section. If he passed that course he would pass Western World Literature. Every day during the following semester, Don could be found in Prof. Cate’s office, student and professor intensely working on his papers. He passed composition, he passed Western World Literature, and he went on to complete an engineering degree.

A few years later Don came to visit his mentors at Maryville College. He was working for an engineering company as a troubleshooter. He had been hired for this position because he could understand the engineering issues and he could write. It was that ability to communicate effectively, drilled into him by Prof. Cate, that enabled him to be successful and to travel all over the world as problem solver for a well-known engineering firm (Hess 2000). While Prof. Cate may not have recognized the significance that learning to write would have for Don’s future career, she focused on educating her student in an important facet of academic learning. It would have been easy to let him squeak by in composition because it was not particularly relevant to his future job prospects. However, this professor sought to enhance this skill because it was important to him in his growth as a whole person.

## Conclusion

None of the models and examples developed in this paper provide a precise methodology for teaching, nor do any of the suggested implications of Reformed theology for teaching provide specific pedagogical tools that can be applied directly to the classroom. However, this discussion does provide some ways to begin thinking about pedagogy in Presbyterian institutions that are both consistent with Reformed principles and practical in their relevance to teaching and learning. First, teaching should reflect the sovereignty of God in respecting God’s freedom from human constructs. God’s sovereignty can be understood in terms of empowerment and persuasion rather than control and coercion. Such a view encourages a pedagogical approach that is non-hierarchical and encourages independent learning and thinking.

Second, following from that idea and the reformed principle *reformata et reformanda* is the recognition that all human knowledge is limited and subject to revision as new knowledge emerges. Teaching in the college and university context may well mean, at some level, professing what one believes to be true and must include providing students with information and ideas from past and present, but always with the humility to

acknowledge the possibility of error and with openness to the possibility of new knowledge and understanding. Thus, students must be taught to think critically about the content they learn. Third, pedagogy should be shaped by a vision of education as holistic, i.e., it should seek to empower students to discover unrecognized talents that enable them to grow as whole persons and to make connections that acknowledge the interrelatedness of various disciplines and of the world they explore. Finally, understanding teaching as vocation means that pedagogy should reflect the conviction that this human enterprise is directed toward participation, synergistically, in God's transformation of individuals and the world.

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