

## Sovereign Ruler of the Skies

*John Ryland (1753–1825)*

Sovereign Ruler of the skies,  
Ever gracious, ever wise!  
All my times are in Thy hand,  
All events at Thy command.

Thou didst form me in the womb;  
Thou wilt guide me to the tomb:  
All my times shall ever be  
Ordered by Thy wise decree.

Times of sickness, times of health;  
Times of penury and wealth;  
Times of trial and of grief;  
Times of triumph and relief:

Times the tempter's power to prove,  
Times to taste a Saviour's Love:  
All must come, endure and end,  
As shall please my heavenly Friend.

O Thou gracious, wise, and just!  
Unto Thee my life I trust;  
Know that Thou art God alone;  
I and mine are all Thine own.

Thee at all times will I bless:  
Having Thee, I all possess.  
How can I bereavéd be,  
Since I cannot part with Thee?

## ΤΩ ΚΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

### *In the Nick of Time*

#### On Using Labels

*Jon Pratt*

In the movie classic “The Princess Bride,” Vizzini repeats the word “inconceivable!” again and again as the masked pursuer of him and his ruffians keeps gaining ground. Finally one of his cohorts, Inigo Montoya, proclaims, “You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.” Indeed.

Have you ever felt this way when you see or hear any of these adjectives describing someone's theological position? Evangelical, dispensational, reformed, complementarian, cessationist, Calvinistic, Arminian, baptistic, fundamentalist, charismatic. The truth is that we all formulate definitions when hearing words like these. Unfortunately like Vizzini, these definitions tend to be clear only to ourselves. While it is true that terms like complementarian and cessationist have meanings most would generally agree with, the rest of this group often constitute a minefield of confusion. For example, when Kevin Bauder writes extensively and precisely about the meaning of “fundamentalist,” we still hear a cacophony of disagreeing responses.

The same holds true for the other labels in this list. While I could spend a lot of space discussing each of these controversial terms, I would like to consider just one of them in this essay: Reformed. In discussing this adjective I hope to achieve two objectives. First, I desire to provide some helpful suggestions in regard to the larger discussion of author/speaker intent and reader/listener understanding. Second, because the “Reformed” label is so frequently misunderstood, I hope to provide a bit of clarification to clear the fog in much of our conversations and writing.

Perhaps it will be most helpful to consider the various words with which “Reformed” is joined. First, we have the *denominational* usage in which people are thinking of one of the several church groups whose names bear the “reformed” title. The largest of these include the Christian Reformed Church of America and the Reformed Church of America. These denominations are very similar to conservative Presbyterian denominations such as the Presbyterian Church of America.

Second, some describe *seminaries* with this term. This group of seminaries is not beholden to one particular denomination, but these graduate institu-



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tions would fully embrace the doctrines of grace, require the reading of Calvin's *Institutes* in systematic theology courses, and wholeheartedly affirm the Westminster Catechism. Seminaries such as Westminster Theological Seminary, Reformed Theological Seminary, and Covenant Theological Seminary would fit here.

Third, "Reformed" often refers to a *theological* position. This is the place where the most confusion takes place. I like to divide advocates of reformed theology into the Reformed with a big "R" camp and the reformed with a little "r" group. Capital R theologians are strong believers in all five points of Calvinism (typically referred to as the doctrines of grace, including Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, and Perseverance of the Saints), covenant theology (a hermeneutical approach to Scripture issuing in paedobaptism and amillennialism), Calvin's third use of the law (some take this to the extreme position of Theonomy and its resultant postmillennialism), and an ecclesiology that involves a distinction between ruling and teaching elders, coupled with a representative form of church government that extends above and beyond the individual congregation, is bounded by constitutional agreement, and focuses on agreed standards (e.g. Westminster standards for Presbyterians and the Three Forms of Unity for continental Reformed).

Small r theologians are usually comfortable using "reformed" to describe themselves with reference to soteriological aspects of the faith. Thus, they affirm the doctrines of grace (though some are uncomfortable with Limited Atonement, preferring to distinguish the sufficiency and efficiency of the application of Christ's blood to unbelievers) and the reformed view of sanctification (as distinguished from a Wesleyan, Keswick, or Pentecostal perspective). But this group would share different perspectives on all the other aspects of big R theology. For example, we know of reformed Baptists, reformed dispensationalists, reformed premillennialists, and reformed congregationalists. By the same token we should avoid classifying a particular viewpoint on apologetics (e.g. presuppositionalism) or counseling philosophy (e.g. nouthetic counseling) as reformed simply because some famous advocates of these ideas are big R people.

So what shall we say about the Reformed label? I believe it will help to understand the context in which this term is used, whether denominational, educational, or theological. And in regard to its theological employment, understanding the big R and little r adoption of the term will help to provide clarification and caution when someone chooses to use this term to describe oneself or another.

Hopefully, this short and general treatment of "Reformed" helps us with the larger discussion of authorial intent and reader/hearer interpretation. Here are four summary statements:

1. When people use terms like those listed in the first paragraph, be sure to understand what they mean by their use of those terms. Avoid the temptation to foist one's own interpretive grid onto the other person's choice of words. Remember that you cannot say, "I agree," or "I disagree" before you can say, "I understand."
2. Whenever we use terms like those listed in the first paragraph, be sure to know your audience and to nuance your meaning. Do this in such a way that your hearers and readers understand those descriptors in the same way as you do.
3. Realize that disagreement does not necessarily constitute misunderstanding. I may use a label in a particular way and someone else may disagree with my usage, but this does not need to mean that they have not understood how I was using that term. They may simply see things differently.
4. How do we make sure we understand? Whenever possible, a) ask clarifying questions (e.g. what do you mean when you say "dispensational?"); and b) state in your own words what you think the other person means and then confirm with that person that you have interpreted their language correctly (this is easy to do when having a conversation with someone but more difficult when trying to understand something written—in these cases one should seek to interact with the author in some way).

Is it *inconceivable* that fallen humans like ourselves can use labels accurately in such a way that both speaker and hearer can agree on their meaning? I don't think so. By God's grace we will speak and write using words that can be understood by those who hear and read.



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This essay is by Jon Pratt, Vice President of Academics and Professor of New Testament at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.

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