

Reformed Theology Seminar

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February 13, 2008

A HISTORICAL BACKDROP

1. Problems in the Church that led up to a cry for reform in the 16th century:
 - a) Abuse of rising power in the papacy. For example, “*ex cathedra*” is the dogma of papal infallibility.
 - b) Growing hierarchical structure that served the institution to the neglect of its people.
 - c) Proliferation of monasteries & monks removed Christianity from common life and the average person.
 - d) A hierarchical priestly “class” that concentrated spiritual authority in clergy.
 - e) Lack of access to scripture in the common language.
 - f) Abusive “fencing of the table” by selling indulgences.
2. There were several movements before and during the 16th century that set out to reform the abuses of the Roman Catholic Church.
 - a) The Council of Constance (1414): moral & administrative reform.
 - b) The Council of Trent (1545): doctrinal & theological reform.
 - c) Martin Luther (1483-1546): Famous for “*95 Theses*” in 1517.
 - d) Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531): If it’s not in the Bible it’s idolatry.
 - e) John Calvin (1509-1564): Famous for *Institute of the Christian Religion*.

- f) John Knox (1505 -1572): Condemned Roman Catholicism and helped author the Scots Confession.
- g) Reformation theme: Justification by grace (sola gratia) through faith (sola fide).
- h) Goal of Protestant reformers: Return Christianity to its biblical roots.
- i) The “cry” of the Reformation: “*The Church reformed, always reforming according to the Word of God.*” (ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda).

DEFINING TERMS

1. “Presbyter” is the Greek word in the Bible for “elder.”
2. The name “Presbyterian” defines specifically how we are governed. (cf. episcopacy and congregationalism)
3. The word “Reformed” defines what we Presbyterians believe.
4. The “Reformed Tradition” is but one theological “stream” that resulted from the Reformation.
5. Other Reformation streams: Lutherans, Anglicans and Anabaptists.
6. The Reformed church is a “confessional” church.

THE ETHOS OF THE REFORMED TRADITION

1. The majesty and the praise of God are central to our identity and worship.
2. A healthy “fear” of idolatry.
3. The working out of Divine purposes in history.

4. Faith and holiness are a response to our holy and faithful God.
(sanctification follows justification)
5. The life of the mind as the service of God.
6. The distinction between Creator (“Wholly Other”) and creature. (The finite cannot contain the infinite... *Finitum non est capax infiniti*)
7. God’s presence is not uniquely tied to objects or architecture.
8. A high view of the authority of scripture (sola scriptura). (2 Tim.3:16-17)

DISTINCTIVES IN REFORMED WORSHIP

1. Worship is Word -centered (...the Word revealed, written and proclaimed).
2. Communion is a spiritual sharing in the Lord’s Supper, not a recapitulation of Christ’s sacrifice.
3. “The true church is found where there is the pure preaching of the Word of God and the right administration of the sacraments.”

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL DOCTRINES

1. The Sovereignty or Providence of God.
 - a) God is the “ first cause” of all things, but we must also consider “second causes.”
 - b) God uses negative events (“second causes”) to bring good. (Romans 8:28; Acts 2:22-24)
2. Predestination (Romans 9:22-24; Ephesians 1:4-5)
 - a) A doctrine of authorship as it emphasizes that “human life is rooted in the will and intention of God.” (Leith)
 - b) A doctrine of comfort because the God who elects is none other than Jesus.

- c) A doctrine of comfort because God deals with us as persons, not from afar.
 - d) A doctrine of clarity as Christians are elected to the service of God, not to privilege.
3. The Centrality of Grace.
- a) By God's electing grace we are chosen by God before we "choose" God. (Psalm 139:13-16)
 - b) By God's prevenient grace the Holy Spirit assists the will to have faith. (1st Corinthians 12:4-11; John 6:63; Romans 8:14)
4. Original Righteousness.
- a) We were created in God's image (imago dei), pure and undefiled. (Genesis 1:26)
5. Total Depravity.
- a) Our fall from grace is complete and utter. (Romans 3:23)
6. Priesthood of Believers.
- a) Every Christ-follower is called to participate in the priestly ministry of Jesus. (1st Peter 2:5&9)
7. Community of Faith
- a) Our faith identity is communal before it is personal. (1st Peter 2:10)
 - b) We are bound together as a covenant community (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 9:15)

References used and useful:

Introduction to the Reformed Tradition by John Leith
Faith Seeking Understanding by Daniel Migliore
Institutes of the Christian Religion by John Calvin
The Book of Confessions (Presbyterian Church U.S.A.)
The Reformed Imperative by John Leith
Presbyterian Creeds by Jack Rogers
Christian Doctrine by Shirley Guthrie