

B-P Distinctives

Session 2 – Reformed Calvinist Tradition

A brief outline what we are doing today

1. To understand our reformed Calvinist tradition better, it is important to go into history and study how the *Reformation* started. We will look at key events in the lives of the Reformers through some videos. We will also look very quickly and succinctly, at how God providentially provided preparation for the *Reformation* to take place.
2. We will look at the first Protestant churches that arose from the Reformation and some of our Reformed Calvinist heritage or positions especially with regards to the Lord's Supper and Calvinist positions on the doctrines of Grace
3. Thirdly and Finally, a short summary of some of our Reformed Positions as compared with other Protestant churches.

Introduction:

Before the 16th century Protestant Reformation, the Roman church and clergy kept the most part of the church steeped in superstition, spiritual darkness and ignorance. Then, God raised Wycliffe, Huss, Tyndale, Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, Knox. Light then dawned upon this darkness. These key Reformers from the 16th Century Reformation made immense contributions to our understanding of doctrine, salvation, worship, sacraments, church government, work, family, economics etc, etc. Three of the most prominent reformers are Martin Luther, John Calvin and John Knox, with the last 2 most associated with our Calvinistic, Bible-Presbyterian roots.

Martin Luther

Martin Luther did not intend to reform the church. He was concerned for his own salvation. And out of that search for truth and peace with God he found a way of salvation by grace through faith in Christ alone. In the process, God opened his eyes to the false religion practiced and taught by the Roman church. Hence when Indulgence papers were sold by the Pope that promised to remit sins and reduced time in purgatory, Luther felt moved to discuss this issue. By nailing the famous *95 theses* to the church door of Wittenberg, Luther meant to discuss this issue with his students and fellow professors. But what he wrote struck a chord with the German population who translated the theses into German and it spread like wild fire across Europe. Still his greatest contribution was the translation of Bible from Greek and Hebrew into German.

John Calvin

"Other than John Calvin, there is no man in the history of mankind who had done more good for the Christian faith" *Theodore Beza*.

Whether it be areas of doctrine, worship, sacraments, church government, work, family life, political system, there is not one aspect of our life not touched by Calvin's reforms in the church and city of Geneva, which became the model city for the Protestant Faith.

Many people who think of Calvin remember his most famous contribution - a systematic theology book for the Reformed Faith called the *Institutes of Christian Religion* written in his twenties, refined 5 times through his life. But many people do not know that he was also a prolific Bible expositor. But despite being a theological giant, Calvin was an ordinary man who went through stresses of life, bodily illness and pain. He suffered from kidney stones, gout, arthritis, skin sores. Although he enjoyed marital bliss, he suffered much grief at loss of three infants and then his beloved wife to the plague.

John Knox

Can a Christian who is small in size, weak in body, and timid in heart be of use to the kingdom of God? John Knox's life tells us that the answer is a big yes!

He was a disciple of John Calvin who studied in the Genevan Bible seminary and founder of the first Presbyterian Church in Scotland. In fact, while at study in Geneva John Knox and a few others prepared the first study bible known as the *Geneva Bible*. This was the Bible Puritans brought with them on the Mayflower into America.

Mary the Queen of Scots, champion of the Roman Catholicism, said “I fear John Knox’s prayers more than all the assembled armies of Europe”.

But one controversial aspect was – Knox believed in raising arms in the fight against Catholicism.

The Five Sola’s:

The rally call of the Reformation was condensed into 5 Latin phrases called the “5 Sola’s”. They were aimed at correcting the excesses of the Roman Catholic Church and as a positive Biblical declaration.

Sola Fide – Justification by Faith Alone. It is a free gift of God vs buying indulgences or even trying to please God to bribe Him for our salvation.

Sola Gracia – Salvation by Grace Alone. Salvation comes from what God through Jesus has done, not what we can do.

Sola Scriptura – By Scripture Alone. The bible (2 Tim 3:16-17) being God-breathed, ALONE is the sole authority. This contrasted against the absolute authority of the pope, sacred traditions.

Solus Christus – In Christ Alone. The catholic church placed intercessors like priests to hear confessions. Reformers emphasised the role of Christ alone as High Priest (Heb 4:15)

Soli Deo Gloria – To the Glory of God Alone as the goal of each of our lives, not to strive to please leaders, please rules, please even ourselves and our own interests. But, whatever we do, do all to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31).

Pre-Reformation:

Renaissance is a French word for Rebirth - revived classical forms of thought, expression and action through human studies of poetry, history.

The Renaissance humanist was pro-Christian – he saw God-given (intrinsic) meaning and worth in the present life, and life after death, springing regeneration in true humanity after the Dark Ages, characterised by ignorance, superstition.

One example of a famous humanist pre-reformer was: *Lorenzo Valla*, Italian priest engaged by Pope Nicolas V to lecture read and write. Valla read Augustine’s books and became critical of many Catholic traditions. He was condemned.

In 1450, *Johann Gutenberg* of Mainz set up the first printing press. The first book he printed was the Bible! God sent! The German Renaissance avoided the Scholastic way of interpreting Scripture by allegorical methods (hidden, deep theological and spiritual meaning in every statement). They adopted Antiochene school of grammatico-historical interpretation (understanding the Bible’s words and statements in the most obvious sense with its contexts of culture and history).

Other famous pre-reformers are William Farel, John Colet, Erasmus. These all laid the foundation for 16th century reformation.

Reformed Calvinist Heritage:

One distinction that came out among the Protestant churches was on the Lord’s Supper or Holy Communion.

- Roman Catholic Church - Transubstantiation means at the Priest’s pronouncement, the bread becomes the actual body of Christ, the cup with the wine becomes the actual blood of Christ. The RC church sees Holy Communion as a *redemptive* exercise with Christ sacrificed again and again on every pulpit, church throughout time.

- Lutherans - Because of Luther's RC background, he was clearly influenced. The word Con in Con-
substantiation means to co-exist. The substance of Christ's body and his blood coexists with the bread and the wine. There is still a redemptive element of the bread and wine.
- Baptists – the extreme right view communion as a *pure commemorative ceremony*. The elements are just symbolic representations.
- Reformed & Presbyterian - The Holy Communion spiritually nourishes and strengthens our union with Christ. Christ does that by being spiritually really present during HC.

The 5 Points of Calvinism:

As Reformed Calvinists, we believe in a position which John Calvin thought was closest to the Biblical interpretation on how God saves us in what is also known as the doctrines of grace.

Total Depravity – Bible - Corrupt, dead in trespasses and sin, i.e. we cannot save or make alive ourselves

Unconditional election – God's choice before creation (before how you will turn out), unmerited favour, His will, no conditions attached, does not depend on your faith.

Limited atonement – for some, not all. The work on the cross was for a purpose: it was definite and for His people. It cannot be Christ died for all, and some were lost and could not be saved.

Irresistible grace – or *effective calling*. Whatever God wants will happen, and whoever God calls, He will make them respond.

Perseverance of the Saints – once saved always saved. Believers are sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise (Rom 8:9-13)

This is not meant to be an exhaustive course on the doctrines of grace. But I quote George Whitfield, one of the most famous 18th century revival evangelists, a staunch Calvinist. You can perceive how deeply Calvinism forms George Whitfield's beliefs from this quote.

Where do we differ from other Reformed Churches?

I am just going to state some of our distinct, BP positions vs other reformed churches.

Pre-millennialism – Christ will come back or return physically before the Millennium, a literal one-thousand-year age of peace. How we interpret Scripture and views on distinction between Israel (Jews) and church (Body of Christ). I will not go into this as it is an eschatological topic by itself.

Separation of Church and State – We do not live in a theocracy, or God being our State king like in the times of promised land right up to Judges. The State instead protects religious freedom for all to practice their faith at level terms.

Christian Liberty – does not mean the strict definition of Christians being liberated (or freed) from penalty of sin by faith. This we all believe. This has to do with activities that are not expressly prohibited in the Bible. It normally deals with smoking, moderate drinking, tattoos, etc. But we hold on to basic principles of Romans 14: not affecting our own spiritual growth or stumbling others. So, we don't go into expressly encouraging for e.g. someone to smoke.

Biblical Separation - will focus more in next session