

UNIT FIVE: WHO WE ARE AS THE CHURCH

SESSION NINETEEN: WE ARE REFORMED

Summary of the Nineteenth Session of the Course

Before the class began, I drew on the board the concentric circles representing our identity as believers. First, we are creatures, created beings. The temptation in the story of the Garden of Eden begins, “You will be as gods” We are not gods but creatures.

Among the creatures in God’s world, we are human. Among human beings, we are by faith Christian because we believe in Jesus the Christ, following and serving him. Among Christians, we are Protestant. Among Protestants and the Protestant churches, we are identified as members of the Reformed Tradition and its various denominations.

Among Reformed Protestant Christians, we are Presbyterian. Other Reformed Protestant Christian denominations may be called Congregational, Reformed (such as Dutch Reformed) or something else such as the United Church of Christ or the United Church of Canada.

Among Presbyterian denominations, we are the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) The PCUSA is a member of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, which maintains its headquarters in Geneva, Switzerland where the Reformed Tradition began under the leadership of John Calvin.

The purpose of this session was to see what it means to be Reformed.

Why Not Just Protestant?

All the Christian churches are Christian; they all follow the same religion, no matter how differently. All the Protestant Churches are Protestant, no matter how different they may seem or actually be. Mostly, the differences among Protestant churches may be found in:

- What we *emphasize* in our Christian beliefs.
- Our manner or style of worship.
- Our historical roots in particular countries or cultures.
- Our historical and cultural roots in our present land (in our case, the United States).

- What we believe about some particulars of faith or practice (for example, infant vs. believer baptism or our various understandings of the way Christ is present with us in the Lord's Supper).
- Our views of authority and the nature of Christian life.
- The ways in which we order (govern) our churches.

This session focused on the beliefs and theology (faith thinking) of the Reformed Tradition by identifying five doctrines that have been and continue to be important to us as a tradition within Protestant Christianity. These doctrines represent the *emphasis* of Reformed faith in Jesus the Christ. It is important to remember that our faith is Christian. We believe in Jesus, not John Calvin.

The five doctrines are:

1. The Sovereignty of God.
2. The sinfulness of human nature and conduct.
3. The overwhelming grace of God.
4. The election of the saints.
5. The lordship of Jesus Christ, emphasizing that Jesus is *Lord of all*, not of the church only.

The Sovereignty of God

A sovereign is a supreme ruler, and the adjective sovereign has come to mean self-governing, as the United States became a sovereign nation by its liberation from British authority. The sovereignty of God is unique because God alone is truly sovereign. All human sovereignties, whether of monarchs or nations, are limited and relative. Only God is truly sovereign and free.

Freedom is the other side of sovereignty. God can command the universe, but no one can command God. There is no way to put God under obligation or summon God to judgment. God is absolutely free, accountable to no one, and dependent upon no one.

God owes me nothing. With respect to God, life is neither my right nor my possession but God's gracious gift to me. With respect to other people, of course, life is my right because God has given it to me.

No one is God's equal. We can even go further and say that no one is anything at all in comparison with God. There is no comparison with God. Even our superlatives (all-knowing, all-powerful, ever-present, etc.) fall short and may actually misrepresent God, who cannot be labeled or defined. Only God can give God a name. In response to Moses (Exodus 3) who asks God's name, God says, "I will be (to you) who I will be" (or "I am who I am").

So, for Reformed Christians, all praise, honor, and glory are due to God and to God alone. Nothing else is to be praised alongside God. All worship is to be given to God alone. God must not be made to seem the servant of human goals, systems, or institutions – neither nations nor churches. So, the Westminster Shorter Catechism begins by telling us the main purpose or goal of humanity is to glorify God and enjoy God forever.

Like all human doctrines and more so than most, the doctrine of God's sovereignty can be abused. This doctrine may actually be the most susceptible to misuse because, in a sense, it violates the very truth it seeks to proclaim. It describes the indescribable. God is sovereign and free, even from our doctrine of God's sovereignty. We don't get to make the rules for God, and our most sublime descriptions of God or of God's attributes may fall short of the child's simple faith.

Theology which begins with the sovereignty and power of God is dangerous. Almost inevitably, it feeds human power, pretense to majesty, and cruelty. So, I asked the group to put this doctrine and the second in my list on hold until we reached the third. In the Bible, all proclamations of the power and majesty of God are subordinate to something else; they never stand alone. So, I asked the group to wait until we reached that something else before drawing conclusions or seeking implications.

The Sinfulness of Human Nature and Conduct

Goodness and right belong only to God and come only from God. We have no goodness or right of our own, apart from God. All human beings individually and collectively are sinful by nature as well as by conduct. Our distinctions between good and evil, right and wrong, are all limited and relative, and they all exist within the context of sin. Remember, the temptation in Genesis 3 is to the knowledge of good and evil.

Nothing we do or can do is unstained by sin. As we exist in this world, sin is natural to us from birth to death. A newborn cannot be a sinner in terms of his or her conduct, but our human nature itself is sinful and prone to sin.

This whole idea sounds offensive and almost absurd, like some sick and twisted form of self-denigration before the power of God, until we realize the opposite of sinfulness is not goodness but grace. We are not meant to live by our own goodness or merit but by God's grace – God's freely given love and mercy.

So, we are not to hold ourselves or others in contempt. We are not to look with cynicism and scorn upon all human efforts at the goodness of justice, mercy, kindness, peace-making, and love. I was told once of a church school teacher who told preschoolers or kindergartners they all had "black hearts" and showed them a drawing of a child with a black heart. That teacher, I'm sure, believed she was teaching the Reformed doctrine of human sinfulness (classically called "the total

depravity of man”), but she was not. She was afflicting children wrongly with her misunderstanding of the doctrine.

The self-understanding to which we are being led is that of the person who relies upon God’s grace alone and not upon any notion of his or her own goodness, worthiness, or rightness. Jesus objected when someone called him good. He replied, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” Our hope for salvation and true life cannot be found within us or among us. Humanity cannot save itself from corruption, destruction, and death. We will not evolve by nature or our own efforts at virtue into the people God created us to be. We cannot free ourselves from sin by good works, education, religion, correct belief, social progress, morality, or even by our love. Every aspect of human life is corrupted by sin, including our love: what we call good as well as what we call evil.

As Christians, we cannot bring about the kingdom of God, the world God wants. Only God can do so.

If we were to stop here and put these first two doctrines together, we would have what seems a hopeless situation. God is completely good, and we are utterly sinful. God is supreme, and we appear to be without redeeming virtue of any kind. It would seem the only reasonable solution would be for God to destroy us.

The Overwhelming Grace of God

The first two doctrines we have discussed serve only as the context for this one, and without this doctrine of grace they would be worse than meaningless; they would be misleading and destructive to faith in Jesus. God has come to us in grace, and we know God only as God has come to us. The first two doctrines tell us God’s grace truly is grace, one hundred percent. Why has God come to us with love and mercy? Nothing in us or our world explains it. Nothing obligates God to do it. Grace is the mystery of God who loves and does not need to explain why.

The God who owes us nothing gives us everything. God who cannot be put under obligation to anyone freely commits to us. God who could by all rights condemn us without appeal chooses, instead, to forgive us. The seemingly worthless is prized above heaven. The God who cannot be contained in the universe chooses to be at home with us. The unknowable truth becomes flesh and lives among us. The One for whom lord is too poor a title suffers and dies for us.

All the talk of sovereignty and depravity is only to make us see that grace is indeed grace: love with no justification but itself, mercy with no cause but God’s own love. To speak of God’s sovereignty or our depravity for any other reason is to leave the path of biblical faith and venture off into speculation that leads to tyranny and cruelty. Such is always the danger within our Reformed Tradition. We are not invited to speculate about God’s sovereignty, nor does Jesus permit us to

indulge in scornful judgments upon human sinfulness. We can respond only with grateful trust in God and dedication to the grace by which God redeems the sinful and gives hope to the hopeless.

We say God is sovereign so we will know God loves freely and forgives with no obligation to do so. We say we are sinful in nature and conduct so we will know life, hope, and freedom come only and always, now and forever, from God's grace and not from any merit or goodness in us.

Wrong Thinking

When not subordinated to grace, the doctrines of God's sovereignty and human sinfulness lead us toward coldness and cruelty. The sovereignty of God gives no license for human tyranny of any kind, including doctrinal tyranny. The doctrine of God's sovereignty is not itself God's sovereignty. It is only a doctrine: a signpost to help faith walk toward the truth. The truth of God is Jesus. The Word became flesh, not doctrine. Doctrines are not the truth but only allude to the truth, and no doctrine should ever be mistaken for the truth to which it alludes. To declare doctrine the truth itself is idolatrous. The doctrine then becomes our idol, to which we will inevitably sacrifice people.

Knowing the sinfulness of human nature should not make us contemptuous of people and their (relative) goodness. Kindness, compassion, trustworthiness, mercy, and love are still expressions of God and of our true humanity in an otherwise cruel and brutal world. Our confession that salvation cannot come from education, social progress, religion, good works, or any other human effort does not negate the value of such things but, rather, gives them their true value. We are free to delight in the goodness of God's creation and even in human achievements. God did not make us to be loveless and judgmental. We are to live by grace and with grace, and without grace the other two doctrines become false teaching. Indeed, without grace, anything is false and sinful. By sending Jesus into it, God has made the world infinitely valuable. If we look upon the world with scorn, we do not know the grace of God.

The Election of the Saints

The first problem is the word "saints." Who are they? The word "saints" means "holy ones." They are the holy ones set apart by God's grace for God's grace – holy ones who have no claim to holiness except God's grace. They are not meritorious Christians; as Protestants, we have rejected any notion of merit in God's eyes and any understanding of sainthood based upon merit.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his disciples, "You did not choose me, but I chose you." Here is the truth to which the doctrine of election alludes. Our salvation is not our choice but God's. We do not accept Jesus so much as he accepts us. The decision by which we are saved is not ours but his. Our choice in the matter of our own salvation is much like that of a drowning person who is dragged to shore by a lifeguard. If I were the one rescued, would I go around for the rest of my

life bragging about the day I chose the lifeguard who rescued me? Maybe I grabbed onto him, maybe not. Maybe I stopped struggling and cooperated, sort of. Not much to brag about.

The doctrine of election tells the truth of God's grace in such a way as to keep us from either pride or despair. Since my salvation is not my doing, I cannot brag about it or consider myself better than other people because of it. Since my salvation is not my doing, I must not despair of myself because I am unworthy of it. The answer to either danger is to trust God, but that answer is heard differently in different circumstances. In Romans 8, Paul addresses both pride and despair, with emphasis on despair since he has been negating pride all along in his letter. The Spirit we have received does not lead us back into a life of fear but forward into a life of hope. No, hope does not yet see that for which it hopes, but it holds on anyway because it trusts the one who has made the promise. The Spirit helps us in our weakness, taking to God the prayers we cannot put into words. Indeed, God makes all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to God's purpose (which is for human redemption). Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Nothing. God is faithful even when we are not. God holds onto us even when we let go.

The doctrine of election goes terribly wrong whenever we use it to speculate about who is saved and who is not. The Calvinists even tried to sneak behind God – before Creation (how did they get back there?) – and peek over God's shoulder to see who was written in the book of life and who was not. That's nonsense. Jesus tells Peter (in John 21) it's none of his business to ask about the destiny of the beloved disciple.

If we start to speculate, we trap ourselves between two follies. One is called universalism, which suggests all people will be saved inevitably (*a priori*, meaning as a given before any else is said or done). Why, then, did Jesus have to suffer and die? What is our message: that we have no message because it doesn't matter? Calvinists hate universalism: rightly, because it reduces the gospel and all of human life and history to nonsense; wrongly, because it dares to hope for the salvation of all instead of insisting upon (and sometimes even seeming to delight in) the "doctrine" that some or even most people will be damned forever. We should reject universalism but should also reject speculation, and we should run from any satisfaction in the knowledge that some people may be lost. We should go even further and, like Abraham and Moses, protest to God and argue for the salvation of those who might be lost. We should never settle down comfortably with a neat explanation of why it is right that some should perish.

Here again we must face the limits of our knowledge and not try to impose them upon God. Salvation comes from Jesus the Christ – witness the often quoted, "No one comes to the Father but by me" (in John 14). Salvation from Jesus the Christ, however, is not bound by our formulations of how it happens. We cannot set limits upon God or make rules God must follow. Jesus has sheep in other folds. Do we think we know exactly what that means? Who has given us the power or knowledge to set the limits on God's grace? How much did Jesus achieve for human salvation by his suffering and death? Suppose he achieved more than we yet realize; are we going to argue with God? How much of a triumph of life did God achieve in Jesus' resurrection? If God says,

“Redeemed!” are we going to shout, “No, no, damned!”? Yes, we should feel the urgency of the message committed to us, more than we do. No, we should not be setting ourselves up as the umpires who say when God’s grace has committed a foul by claiming the wrong person according to our rules. Why don’t we apply our beloved doctrine of God’s sovereignty to our own speculations about who and how many God may have our permission to save?

Worse yet, we have taken it upon ourselves to name the damned. We don’t usually say which specific people, but we do say what kinds of people are beyond salvation. Can’t we wait for Christ to be the judge? Remember, Jesus told the religiously correct in his own day on earth that the tax collectors and prostitutes would go into the kingdom of God ahead of them. Our part is to proclaim, live, and share the grace of God and learn to love the world (yes, the world!) as God does.

Calvinists have even argued that God does not really love the world but only the elect. I have heard it affirmed that God supposedly created people God never intended to love – that God created people to hate forever! The justification given was a foolish misinterpretation of the statement in Genesis, “Jacob have I loved and Esau have I hated.” In the Hebraic way of speaking, that statement says God chose Jacob (the second-born) over Esau (the firstborn). The “hate” is a Semitic way of saying that, in that situation of choice, God did not pick that one. In this context of a choice, “I love this one” means, “I choose this one.” “I hate that one” means, “I reject that one (in this choice).” Genesis does not mean God forever hated Esau, who, by the way, goes on to prosper and even to forgive his treacherous brother Jacob.

In a later time, when the Israelites have grown smug about their own election, Amos the prophet asks them if the LORD who brought them out of Egypt did not also bring other peoples out of their lands of bondage. The doctrine of election is meant to point us away from smugness not toward it, and no doctrine should ever point us away from grace because away from grace there is only darkness and death.

The doctrine of election is no excuse for apathy or lethargy, indifference or laziness. We cannot sit back and bask in our election. Jesus Christ has plenty for us to do, just nothing for us to brag about doing.

More Wrong Thinking

Reformed Christians are always tempted to turn the doctrine of election and especially its corollary, *predestination*, into fatalism. Christians are not fatalists. We must not speculate about God’s omniscience (all-knowing) to make God the author of evil. Yes, there is Old Testament justification for naming God as the author of evil, but Jesus rejects it. God redeems what was evil and redeems us from it by bringing good out of evil, but that truth of grace does not mean God ordained, willed, or even “allowed” the evil itself to happen. If Jesus went to the cross to overcome the evil, how can we say God allows it? Giving your life to stop something is not equal to allowing it. If everything which happens in this world were the will of God, why would Jesus have taught us

to pray for God's will to be done on earth? If everything that happens were already happening in accordance with God's will, why did Jesus have to suffer and die to change the way life happens to people and to change our destiny?

What will be will be? No, what will be shall not be! Jesus came to redeem: to turn the tide and change the destiny of the world. Redemption is God's, "No!" to fate. Jesus has negated the world's self-destruction and mine. He has overruled fate. In Greek mythology, the Fates govern even the gods; not so for the living God. The fates of this world will not have the final world, because God's final word has become flesh and lived among us, suffering and dying to release us from our fate. What fate says will be shall not be. *Que sera, no sera.*

A Question that Must Remain a Question

When I refused to set limits upon God's grace in and through Jesus Christ (the way, the truth, and the life), someone asked if I was talking about opportunity for salvation after a person has died. It had not occurred to me that I was, and we have no such doctrine or belief. But I recalled a phone conversation with a newly retired Presbyterian pastor who, knowing we had no such doctrine, nonetheless shared with me his thought (he didn't call it a belief) that God may not be done with us when we die. He was not affirming Purgatory, which Protestants reject. He was just a pastor troubled by his experiences with people who died without having had a chance to live. His knowledge of God had come into conflict with his doctrine. He belief (trust) in God's grace was straining against his Reformed theology. He drew no conclusions but left the ache inside him as a question, and so it must remain. The strict dogmatists, of course, will simply declare the lost to be lost and go home to their supper. The rest of us will just have to live with the question. But this much I do know: we can trust God to be more loving and more merciful than our doctrines might allow. To countless Pharisees, scribes, and other legalists, Jesus says so.

We did not get to any discussion of Jesus' lordship or of the persistent need for reformation. Next week.