

UNIT FIVE: WHO WE ARE AS THE CHURCH

SESSION THREE: WE ARE REFORMED, CONTINUED

Summary of the Twentieth Session of the Course

Before the class began, I wrote on the board the five principles or doctrines I had said last week were emphasized in the Reformed Tradition of Protestant Christianity:

The sovereignty of God
The sinfulness of human nature and conduct
The overwhelming grace of God
The election of the saints
The lordship of Jesus Christ

Below a line I drew after the fifth principle, I wrote, “The Church Reformed, Always Reforming.” In the previous session, we had discussed the first four principles or doctrines.

Review and Further Discussion

We know God only as God has come to us, and God has come to us in grace – unmerited love and forgiveness. The first two principles, God’s sovereignty and our sinfulness, make their true sense only in light of the third, God’s grace. God is under no obligation to care about us, but God does. We have no merit by which to earn God’s favor or forgiveness, but God loves and forgives us freely. Nothing binds God, but God has chosen to commit to us in a covenant of grace.

We talked about the problems caused by considering either God’s sovereignty or human sinfulness *outside the context of God’s grace*. If we think of God’s sovereignty apart from God’s grace, we end up with an all-powerful, all-everything God so far removed from us as to become irrelevant or even monstrous. If we think of our sinfulness apart from God’s grace, we can easily develop an attitude that is contemptuous of humanity and cynical about all human goodness and achievement. We also lose our necessary distinctions between what is good in life and what is blatantly evil. We fail to appreciate God or people.

Instead of moving on, we spent considerable time talking about grace and trying to clarify in our own minds its meaning and implications. One person said we have spent our lives trying to be good and not bad, to please God and earn God’s approval rather than punishment. If we are to live by grace, what are we to do? We imagined parents raising a child. Would they want her to

respond to their love and care by becoming loving and caring herself, or would they want her to be scrupulously obedient and good but hard-hearted toward other people and unforgiving? I asked the question, “Why are we trying to be good?” What do we hope to gain by it? Are we trying to earn something or just responding to God’s love? I referred to Jesus’ parable of the Great Judgment in Matthew 25 where the Son of Man judges the nations of people by the way they have treated the least important of Jesus’ brothers and sisters. When he says to the righteous, “I was hungry and you fed me,” they are surprised. *Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you?* They have not been trying to be good but have simply done what needed to be done for the person experiencing hardship. Their unselfconscious kindness is a parable in itself. They have not tried to earn approval and so have been unaware of their own righteousness.

Jesus would not allow himself to be good; he said, “No one is good but God alone.” One person in our discussion asked if Jesus still wasn’t good because, after all, wasn’t he God? No, that’s not what he’s saying in his objection to being called good; he’s not making a veiled reference to his own divinity. The interpretation that Jesus is secretly declaring his divinity destroys the sense of what Jesus is telling us – that no human being is good in himself or herself. Only God is good. Human beings live by God’s grace, and as a human being Jesus did so.

The reference to Jesus’ divinity raised its own questions for us. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says both, “I and the Father are one,” and, “The Father is greater than I.” We must not break the tension in that mystery. To say simplistically, “Jesus is God,” is to go beyond even the Gospel of John and break the tension. It is also to risk the classical heresy known as *Modalism*, in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were explained as one God in *three forms* or *modes*, rather than one God in three Persons. In Modalism, the Father simply transforms into the Son to walk among us, then transforms into the Spirit to dwell among us and within us. The analogy used is that of water, which is found in three forms: solid (ice), liquid (water), and gas (water vapor). The same H₂O molecules change from one form to another. In Modalism, however, the Father cannot love the Son or the Son the Father, and so we cannot be included in the love the Father has for the Son. In John, Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you.”

We recognized that the word “good” has many meanings, a factor which complicates our understanding of goodness and grace. If goodness means merit or smacks of deserving or earning God’s favor as a reward, then it is rejected; we cannot have that kind of goodness before God. If goodness means responsiveness to God which results in kindness, justice, mercy, love, peacemaking, and integrity, then it is the result of grace and not the alternative to grace. Whenever goodness serves as an alternative to our needing grace, it becomes an obstacle to our salvation. Remember, the temptation in the story of humanity’s rebellion (the Eden story) is, “You shall be as gods, knowing good and evil.” We were created to know grace, and any true goodness we can have flows from grace. I wrote the word “merit” on the board and put an “X” on it to cross it out.

We struggled for understanding, as people always do with the concept of grace. It is alien to us. In our world’s thinking, we should earn what we get and get what we deserve. I tried to follow a personal rule of mine: when theology becomes too complex and confusing, reduce it to

human relationships. The question of what kind of children we hope to raise seemed to help. Do we want them to grow up to be loving and caring people who are not strictly good and are not focused on their own goodness, or do we want them to be strictly good people whose goodness makes them hard-hearted and judgmental? Children of grace or children of law?

Reviewing the **doctrine of election** raised just as many questions. Who are the elect? Who are the others? How do we know we are the elect? Doesn't God love everybody?

I suggested we look at the doctrine of election always *within the context of salvation*, never *within the context of creation*. Following Romans 8, I suggested the knowledge that God chose us (not the other way around) serves to humble us when we grow proud or encourage us when we grow discouraged and are tempted to give up on ourselves. There is nothing in my salvation for me to brag about. It is not my accomplishment or even my choice. Yes, I need to respond, and my responses should grow into a way of life, but I did not choose Jesus Christ. He chose me. That's grace. Likewise, if I am discouraged or know I have failed at faith and life, I need to remember my salvation is not my work or my doing. God holds on to me. That's grace, too.

The doctrine of election has always tempted Reformed Christians to speculation. We want to reduce it to a plan, a scheme all worked out in advance (before creation). We want God to have foreknown and, therefore, really to have predetermined who will be saved and who lost.

Someone asked, "Isn't God all-powerful?" and seemed to include all-knowing, as well. These superlatives Christians have applied to God have often led us astray. If we start by defining God philosophically as all-powerful, all-knowing, and ever-present, we do not end up with same God we find in the Bible. Instead, we start with our own definition of perfection. We talked about the problem. This kind of philosophical perfection has God at the one point which is the very top of the peak ("that than which no greater can be conceived"); any step in any direction is a step down. Following this logic, theologians went on to say God was not only all-powerful, all-knowing, and ever-present but also immutable (unable to change or be changed) and impassible (incapable of passion, feeling, or involvement with others). The idea was that perfection was perfect and so could not change at all without becoming imperfect. So, Christian philosophy created a God who could not become angry, could not grieve or be saddened, and truly could not love. This God could not be moved. This God could not *become* anything, because becoming means changing, and the idea was that perfection cannot change or be changed without becoming less than perfect. This God could not truly even *do* anything. It was a static view of perfection. In Matthew 7, we are told we must become perfect as our heavenly Father is perfect, but there the perfection is that of love – a love that can even do good for its enemies. Eventually, the philosophers ended up with a God so static they said God could only think and, strictly speaking, could think only about his own thoughts. One wonders how such a God can be distinguished from a stone or a brick.

In biblical faith, we start with the God who comes to the rescue of slaves, who reaches out to touch and heal lepers, who commits in covenant to human beings and longs for their response. We need to take from the doctrine of election *only the truth that is in it*. Remember, doctrines are

not themselves the truth but only point or allude to the truth. The doctrine of election reminds us we did not choose Jesus; he chose us. We did not do anything which caused our salvation; God caused it. When we grow proud, this knowledge can help us find humility again. When we grow discouraged, this knowledge encourages us by reminding us that God has chosen us and will hold on to us faithfully, even when we are unfaithful.

Who are the non-elect? That question is not ours to answer, and even asking it can lead us astray. Our job is to represent Jesus to the world of people God loves. As we did not preside over our own election, we certainly should not try to preside over anyone else's. The elect are as many as the LORD our God shall call. Really, the doctrine of election should tell me about myself, not about anyone else. It should rebuke my pride and overcome my fears and discouragements. It is the parent's, "Don't worry; you belong to me, and I will not let go of you."

Wrong Thinking: Fatalism

We discussed the danger that the doctrine of election and its corollary, predestination, can lead Reformed Christians into fatalism. This discussion, also, was a review, and we did not spend much time on it because the group seemed satisfied that God is not the author of evil and that things happen in life in contradiction to God's will. The group also seemed gratified by the idea that God can and does bring good out of evil and, in that way, "make all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to God's purpose."

The Lordship of Jesus Christ: Jesus is "Lord of All"

Jesus is not Lord of religion only, but of all things, all people, all of life, and all of creation. So, Reformed Protestants do not separate life into sacred and secular; everything belongs to Christ and so to God, whether or not people know it. We have no sacred things, because all things are sacred (they belong to Christ). We have no sacred days or times, because all days and times belong to Christ. God is concerned with the whole of human life and with all the issues of justice and freedom in life. Jesus Christ is Lord in all realms: politics, business, sexuality, education, technology, health, and every other. I tell confirmation students (the kids) that nothing in the sanctuary is a sacred object. If they want to regard anything as a sacred object, it should be the one thing in the sanctuary (and out of it) created in the image of God: the other person. I also remind them, however, that, while neither the pulpit nor the Communion table are sacred objects, an act of deliberately abusing or defiling them would be, effectively, an offense against God and the people who worship in that sanctuary – because that would be the real meaning of such an act. We can pour grape juice left from Communion down the sink or feed the leftover bread to the birds. We would not, however, make a point of doing something degrading or mocking to the elements *because they have been used in Communion*, because then we would really be mocking Communion and Jesus who suffered and died for us.

This principle or doctrine, particularly our emphasis on Jesus' lordship over everything, is the one that makes Presbyterians politically and socially active. We have not allowed ourselves the luxury of retreating into religion. Our commitment to Jesus is a commitment to life and to wholeness in every part of life, which requires redemption in every part of life.

The danger in our emphasis arises when we forget (or choose to ignore) that Jesus is the Servant Lord, not the Monarch Lord. "The Son of Man came, not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." That everything belongs rightfully to Christ and so to God does not mean everything belongs rightfully to the church or to Christendom to govern and control; it means all of life is *our field of service*. The church should not be running countries, nor should we be dictating the morals and customs of society. Certainly, we should not be claiming privilege for ourselves or our churches as Christian. The church should serve the society and the world by faith and service, not by clout and force.

That Jesus Christ is Lord of all does mean that nothing else can be Lord of anything for us. There is no part of life in which Jesus is irrelevant, in which his teachings do not apply, in which his grace is an intrusion. We must subordinate all other loyalties to our one loyalty to him, including nationalism (patriotism). Nothing comes before him or ranks above him: not nation, church, family, or self; certainly not race, gender, or even goodness. He is Lord of all. We may have other loyalties and must, but all are to be subordinated to him.

We discussed the interesting dynamic of Jesus' lordship (and even of God's sovereignty) we find in the Bible. No other lord can be our Lord with a capital "L," because Jesus alone is truly Lord. But the one who alone is truly Lord did not come to be a lord but a servant. So, after we have eliminated all the would-be lords of life, we are left with the Servant who did not come to lord it over anyone. Jesus tells his followers not to fear those who can merely kill the body but to fear only the one who can destroy the entire person: God. Then, having eliminated all other lords or threats we might fear, leaving us only God to fear, Jesus tells us that God is the Father who cares about the fall of a sparrow, and he reassures us that we are worth more than many birds. It's like finding out the only real power in the universe is the very parent who loves you.

Semper Ref

The marines have "Semper Fi" which is short for *Semper Fidelis*, "always (ever) faithful." We have "Semper Ref," by which I abbreviated the slogan put forward by a disciple of John Calvin: *Ecclesia Reformata, Semper Reformanda*: "the Church Reformed, Ever Being Reformed (or Ever to Be Reformed)." This reminder of our humanity and our perpetual need for God's dynamic grace is the motto of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. Presbyterian and other Reformed dogmatists, however, despise it.

"The word of our God stands forever," but church doctrines, traditions, and formulations do not. Martin Luther's principle of "Scripture alone" forbids the canonization of any creed, confession,

or doctrine. In our own history, the threat came from the Westminster Confession of Faith and its Larger and Shorter Catechisms, the so-called “Westminster Standards.” Those confessional statements remain historic confessions in the constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), but they no longer hold the position of dominance they once held. In 1967, the church replaced the Westminster Standards with a *Book of Confessions*. The Westminster Standards were not dangerous in themselves, but some Presbyterians were attributing too much authority to them, threatening to make them absolute in their interpretation of scripture. Anything that becomes absolute in its interpretation of scripture thereby replaces the Bible as scripture.

The Protestant reformers insisted church tradition and doctrines could not be made absolute, and so they set us free to change and grow. The Reformation against the *one true church* was never meant to produce a new “one true church,” let alone several. Reformation, therefore, must be an continual process – unless, of course, we imagine we have reached perfection in doctrine, polity, practice, and belief. Clearly we have not. Actually, we could not. Doctrine alludes to the truth of God and speaks to people in its time. Jesus alone is the Word in the fullest sense, and he cannot be reduced to doctrine. The Word became flesh, not formula.

Doesn’t the principle of “always reforming” leave the church and its faith unstable and open the door for all kinds of false teachings, fads, and pagan practices? Yes. But stabilizing the church and its faith by absolutizing beliefs and doctrines makes the church idolatrous. Not only do we, then, worship and serve our own formulations, but we also use them to destroy people and drive people from Jesus. So, faith has its risks. We grow too fearful and defensive, however, when we imagine our formulations of Christ to be Christ, our doctrines of God to be God. The living God always meets people when and where they actually live. So, must the church. Expecting the world’s people or even the church’s people to conform their thinking to our formulations of belief is wrong and harmful to the gospel. Yes, “always reforming” opens up dialogue and invites opinion, and so conversation must be ongoing. But we cannot defend against heresy by closing discussion and burning people who express ideas. Remembering that our faith is in Jesus Christ and not in our *beliefs about him* helps free us from fear.

The real danger, however, is not fear but the will to dominate and control. The issue is not faith but authority. Many staunch *defenders of the faith* are not defending faith at all; they are defending their own authority. Real faith would never be so rigid, humorless, and mean as much that passes itself off to us as defense of the faith.

Time Ran Out. We never reached discussion of our being Presbyterian. So, we decided to forgo much the regular confirmation classes need to learn about Presbyterian polity, because the people in this course are ordained officers, except for one Lutheran. They have had officer training. We decided to meet two more times to discuss (1) worship and the sacraments as well as the faith principles behind Presbyterian polity and (2) the commitment to being disciples and to being Christ’s church. I did, however, distribute a 5-page summary of “Presbyterian Order” so questions can be raised.