

COVENANT PRES NEWCOMERS' CLASS

Class #2 -- Doctrine of the PCA: Reformed and Calvinist

Opening Question: Why are you a Christian?

- Possible answers: faith, works, intelligence, morality, etc.
- What's wrong with these answers? – they all point to something in us.
- The right answer lies in something outside of us – i.e., in God!

I. What does it mean to be Reformed?

A. In short, it's to subscribe to the theology of the reformed confessions, most of which were developed within 100 yrs of the Reformation (Westminster, Belgic, Heidelberg, Scots, 39 Articles, etc).

B. A friend writes of Reformed theology: "its genius and biblical character lie in its Godward direction and concentration. It starts and ends with our glorious Lord... especially in matters touching the life and salvation of men." It ascribes to God all power, all glory.

- In other words, where some theological traditions might focus on the Holy Spirit, or justification, the conversion moment, or repentance or holiness, Reformed thought focuses on the greatness of God and His working "all things according to the purpose of his will."

C. Reformed thought is distinguished from Calvinism, and Calvinism is distinguished from Calvin (it's a more rigorously rational expression of Calvin's thought — not always a good thing). In general, Reformed thinkers began with a vision of a great and glorious God, a vision that gave shape to the rest of their thinking.

D. Five *Solas* of the Reformation

1. *Sola Scriptura* – Scripture itself is the source of divine revelation. Thus, it is the final authority when it comes to faith and practice. This view does not negate the role that church councils, creeds, and confessions have played in the church, but they are secondary (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:19-20)
2. *Sola Fide* – one is justified before a holy God by faith alone. Faith is the instrument through which the righteousness of Christ is imputed. The sinner is declared righteous based on the merits of Christ (Rom 3:24; Gal. 2:15-16; Phil 3:9)

3. *Sola Gratia* – from beginning to end, salvation is entirely a work of God’s grace. Salvation is not earned or merited by good works; it is God’s gift (Eph. 2:8-9)
4. *Sola Christus* – Christ alone is the only way of salvation (John 14:6). He is the one mediator between God and men (1 Tim 2:5). Active obedience of Christ – his work in keeping the law for his people; passive obedience of Christ – his work in suffering for the sins of his people.
5. *Soli Deo Gloria* – all of salvation, everything, is for God’s glory alone (Rom 11:36)

II. Salvation in Reformed Theology (soteriology)

A. God alone is able to rescue us from “this body of death”: Rom 8:7-8; 7:14ff

B. TULIP -- (Calvin didn’t, and probably wouldn’t, formulate it; the acronym comes from the Synod of Dort, 1618-19)

Total Depravity – every part of humanity’s nature (mind, will, affections) has been corrupted by the fall. Thus, human beings are unable to save themselves (Eph 2:1; 1 Cor 2:14; Jer 13:23; Rom 3:10-12)

Unconditional Election -- God does not save based on merit or a condition man satisfies, such as faith. Rather, God elects to salvation those whom he has chosen (Deut 7:7; Eph 1:4-5; Rom. 9:11-12; Rom 5:8)

Definite atonement -- God does not “make men savable”, he actually saves them. “Christ’s atonement is sufficient for all, but efficient only for some” (Acts 13:48; Jn 1:12-13; 10:25-30; 17:12; Eph 1:11-14 & 2:1-10). The Gospel is offered sincerely to all.

Irresistible Grace -- God’s purposes cannot be stopped by the will of men; all those whom God has effectually called will come to saving faith in Christ. Everyone who hears the gospel receives the outward call, but only those who believe received the inward call of the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:48; John 6:37 & 10:27-30; Rom 8:29; John 1:13)

Perseverance of the saints -- what God does cannot be undone; all those who begin in faith will persevere in faith (Phil 1:6; Rom 8:1; Mark 4, parable of Sower)

- In any other theological framework, we dabble in making ourselves our own saviors.

- Fair question: “If this is all of God, then why are WE told to “come” and to “persevere”?”

» cf., Matt 11:27ff.

» The problems do not so much arise from the Scriptures as from the difficulty of the ideas for our minds -- mere subsets of the mind of God

C. How is all this so if He is “willing that none should perish”?

- Romans 9 -- not merely a “predestination text”, but speaking to the *specific problem* that predestination texts present to us
- Paul answers the very objections people raise about predestination, is God unjust? Why does he find fault? Who can resist him (9:14, 19)

D. A Biblical Pattern of Election

- Election/predestination is not a “reformed” doctrine; it’s a biblical doctrine.
- God chose Abraham, made a covenant with him, and promised to bless all the families of the earth through him (Gen 12:1-3) → God chose Isaac over Ishmael (Gen 17:21) → Jacob over Esau (Gen. 25:23) → Israel over all the other nations of the earth (Deut. 7:6-8) → Judah over other tribes (Gen. 49:10) → the Davidic line through which the Messiah would come (2 Sam. 7) → the twelve disciples (John 15:16; 17:6) → the church, believers (1 Thess. 1:4; Eph. 1:5, 6; Rom. 9:22, 23).

Discussion Questions

1. Where might you or someone struggle with these things?
2. What are some distinctives about the reformed tradition compared to other traditions (Lutheran, Anglican, Roman Catholic, etc.)?
3. How does election/predestination challenge us? comfort us?
4. What are some strengths and weaknesses of our tradition?

Optional Reading:

Five Solas: <https://reformationbiblecollege.org/blog/the-five-solas>

Tulip: <https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/canons-dordt>