

The Faith Of The Reformation - An Overview

Reformed means we hold to those truths and way of life that were rediscovered at the time of the Reformation in the 1500's. But we believe that the reformed faith is not only a faith that is held by people today. We understand it is a faith that has been held by God's people in all ages. To be Reformed, I put it to you, is simply consistent Biblical Christianity. It is to hold not only what many of the Evangelicals of Britain held, what Knox and Calvin held, but also what Augustine held, and not only Augustine, but what the Apostle Paul, and believers back to Eden held. Again we propose that the faith of the Reformation is nothing less than consistent Biblical Christianity.

To hold to the faith of the Reformation is to be Confessional. To answer the question, "What is the faith of the Reformation" we need to turn to the Confessions of the Reformation. The men of the Reformation consistently saw the importance of the Church of Christ confessing its faith. This means confessing our faith not only in word and conduct, but in writing too. We commit to symbols what we confess as the truth of God's Word for faith and life. These written confessions are for the watching world, but also for the unity and continuity of the Church.

In looking at "What is the Reformation Faith", we will not be dealing with those areas of belief that we have in common with other professing Christians, such as a belief in the Trinity, the second coming of Christ, of how we are to preach the Gospel of Repentance and Salvation in Christ to the ends of the earth. We are to assume that these great truths are held to and believed for faith and daily life by the Reformed believer. What we are going to look at are some things that makes the faith of the Reformation distinctive.

Also, rather than simply go through a list, as it were, of doctrines Reformed people believe in distinction to other professing Christians, we will approach the subject "What is the faith of the Reformation" in more general terms. We are going to attempt to convey something of the Reformed faith's main animating features, its foundational principles and something of its spirit.

I believe there are four principles that are vital distinctives of the faith of the Reformation, and at the nub of what it means to be children of the Reformation – heirs of the faith of all ages. I suggest they are these:

- I. The Faith Of The Reformation Is Theocentric Or God-Centred.
 - II. The Faith Of The Reformation Is Covenantal.
 - III. The Faith Of The Reformation Holds To The Sovereignty Of God.
 - IV. The Faith Of The Reformation Holds To Particularism.
- Or
- I. The Faith Of The Reformation Is Theocentric Or God-Centred.

Surely one thing that that should strike us when we read the Bible, is that God is made the centre of all things. So, to be Biblically consistent we must be God-centred in our thinking and in our living. It is to realise the truth of what Paul writes in Romans 11:36. "Of Him, and through Him are all things to Whom be glory for ever. Amen." We understand the Westminster Shorter Catechism as correctly summarising this great Biblical concept in its first question and answer. We are asked, "What is man's chief end?" That is, for what purpose was man made? The answer is of course, "To glorify God and to enjoy Him for ever." In giving a proof text, it appeals to 1 Corinthians 10:31: "Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God."

This concept of God-centred thinking, means that all of our life is to be centred in the Living God. This includes our beliefs as well as our daily living, our knowledge, our work and play - in short, the totality of our life and existence. (They are truths for faith and life, for belief and behaviour - see The Westminster Confession of Faith Ch. I, Section VI)

For a reformed believer, the whole of life and learning revolves around the Lord and His revelation to us. All things must be related to Him and His glory. We confess that only when we take seriously the fact that all of life has been brought into existence for the glory of God, will man ever find true life and true knowledge and true happiness. The reformed faith witnesses against the compartmentalising of life. It stands against creating a dichotomy between our faith and our life. God and His truths are to be taken seriously in all areas of life. It gives us a faith and world lifeview where Christ is Lord of all. As Abraham Kuyper said, "There is no area of life where Christ does not place His foot and say, I reign here."

It is a body of beliefs, but it forms our very character and behaviour. (An example is Stonewall Jackson (I think) and the young soldier re the Shorter Catechism question and answer number one.)

We do not believe that a person can really have a true knowledge of biology, sociology, history or geography, nor such things as true family life and the correct preaching of the gospel, (to name just a few things of importance from life), UNLESS we see that all of these things are to be centred in the Living God. They must be built upon the revelation of truth He has given in His holy word, the Bible. This is surely the truth of what Christ our blessed Saviour was teaching us in the parable of the houses and the foundations of rock and sand, (Matthew 7:24-28). One of the great catch cries of the

Reformation was, SOLI DEO GLORIA - all to God's glory. It should be a motto of every believer - and certainly every reformed believer.

While we describe our faith as 'Theocentric', to be more accurate and specific, we hold to a Christ-centred, or Christocentric faith. This is because it is in the Lord Jesus Christ we see the Triune God-head fully revealed, (John 1:18, Matthew 11:27, II Corinthians 4:6, Colossians 2:9, and II Timothy 2:5). Thus it is to the blessed Son of God that every knee should bow, and every tongue should confess that He is Lord, (Philippians 2:10). We look to God in the Person and work of Christ Jesus for life. This latter truth is so beautifully expressed in the Heidelberg Catechism, No. 1: "Question: What is your only comfort in life and death? Answer: That I, with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ; who with His precious blood has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, wherefore by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life, and makes heartily willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto Him." One of the largest chapters in the Westminster Confession is devoted to the Person and Work of Christ - (Christ the Mediator).

To be God-centred is to be opposed to all man-centred thinking and living. Thus we understand the Reformed Faith to stand in opposition to all theologies, philosophies and ways of living which seek to explain life and to give meaning to the world around us only in terms of man and his understanding and the immediate world he lives in. We believe that the Reformed Faith is opposed to man being the ultimate reference point for life and the meaning of life. This is the reason why the Reformed Faith objects to such religio/philosophic teachings as Arminianism, Roman Catholicism, Secularism and Humanism etc. In these systems and beliefs, we find a man-centred view of life, and a man-centred view of salvation and of reality. Man is made the ultimacy, not God. Thus we dissent from them and confess that in every sense of the words, Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life, (John 14:6).

Being Theo-centric thus gives us a view of man where man has no place for boasting. It shows us we cannot place our confidence in man to give us a right view of life and happiness or to give us salvation in any sense whatever. This is because man suffers from depravity of mind, soul and will. While he has a will, that will is in bondage to sin or rebellion against God. By nature our backs are to God. By nature we are NOT God-centred, but rather constantly seek to set up the creature man, in the place that God alone should occupy, (Romans 1:25).

This is an area where we are out of step with the viewpoint of our society today. Though it is not new. It was part of the area of contention between the Covenanters and the Jacobites in the late 1500 and into the 1600's. (Eg. The incident between James I (VI) and Andrew Melville at worship).

To be God-centred is also to be taken up with a knowledge and love of the character of God. To be Reformed is to be a person who has a real desire to know the person and nature of the Living God from the heart, soul, mind and body, - even as Moses, in Exodus 33:12, 34:8.

Our comfort, our fear, our delight should be in the knowledge of the nature, character and Person of the Lord. We should know that the Living God is a Spirit, that He is eternal, that He is infinite and immeasurable. In all His ways and in all His acts He is just and true and good, and we are to love and honour Him as He reveals Himself to us in Christ Jesus. Our life in all of its manifestations is to be taken up in acknowledging the character of our good and great God. It is to have Him rule over us in Christ Jesus the Mediator as our Prophet, Priest and King. It is to fear and love God. It is to reverence Him above all else.

To become theocentric means that we must have a great work wrought in us by God Himself, whereby our hearts and essential nature are changed, so that we give God the homage and glory due to His great and holy name, (John 3:1-15).

When we say we believe in God-centred thinking and living, we also mean that in the area of salvation God is both the author and finisher of it. Thus we confess that we are saved by the grace of our God alone, and that it is God's work and not man's, (Ephesians 2:7-10). Sola Fide - Faith Alone; Sola Gratia - Grace Alone. So it is that often reformed believers speak of the reformed faith as the doctrines of grace.

Our first point then, is that to hold to the faith of the Reformation is to be God-centred in our hearts, minds and living.
II. The Faith Of The Reformation Is Covenantal.

To be Reformed is to recognise that the Almighty God is a Covenant God. We acknowledge in the Westminster Confession of Faith what the Lord Himself says and shows us throughout Scripture. It confesses that it is impossible for mankind to have any blessedness or reward; or any fruition in our life except God graciously condescends and comes down and relates to, and reveals Himself to man, which He does by way of His Covenant, (Westminster Confession 7:1).

The testimony of Scripture is that God deals with man in and by Covenantal relationships. The Covenant is the manner in which God has always dealt with His people. From Adam in the garden of Eden, through Noah, through Abraham and

Isaac and Jacob, and down through the kings and prophets and apostles, we are taught that God deals with us covenantally, as an examination of the Scriptures show. And it is in the Covenant the Lord Jesus comes to us, (Isaiah 42:4, Hebrews 8:6, etc.).

Our Reformed Faith emphasises the Biblical idea of Federalism. That is, the idea of representation. In the light of Scripture we grasp the idea of the first and second Adams or Covenant heads. The first Adam was a representative of all mankind, and in his tragic and awful fall, all mankind fell from communion and union with the Lord.

But Christ, the second Adam, coming and binding Himself in Covenant to His people, stands as the representative Head of another body of people. He does not fall as that first Federal representative and first Adam did. He has kept all the law, as well as paid the debt owed for His people breaking it, and so brings His people into a state of salvation, (Romans 5:12-21).

The principle of the Covenant opens up other areas of thinking which we believe are very important to us in the Reformed Faith too. It opens up to us the idea that the Church in the Old Testament is not a separate and different Church from the New Testament. There is an essential unity - it is essentially one Church not two. There certainly are differences in the way in which God dealt with His people in different administrations, but there is an essential unity of them. The faith of the reformation opposes then the idea of dispensationalism.

The essential unity of Scripture and of God's dealings with mankind from the beginning, leads us to the concept that the Church of Christ really began in Eden with Adam. It was there that God gave His Covenantal promise to the first man and woman, that one day a Saviour would come who would crush the head of the serpent, (Genesis 3:15). This is beautifully expressed in the Scotch Confession of 1560 (Also called Knox's Confession). "Of the Revelation of the Promise - chapter 4. 'For this we constantly believe, that God, after the fearful and horrible defection of man from His obedience, did seek Adam again, call upon him, rebuke his sin, convict him of the same, and in the end made unto him a most joyful promise, to wit, that the seed of the woman should break down the serpent's head; that is, He should destroy the works of the Devil. Which promise, as it was repeated and made more clear from time to time, was embraced with joy, and most constantly retained by all the faithful, from Adam to Noah, from Noah to Abraham, from Abraham to David, and so forth to the incarnation of Christ Jesus: who all, we mean the faithful fathers under the law, did see the joyful days of Christ Jesus, and did rejoice.' "

Another important Biblical concept we confess, that arises out of the principle of Covenantal thinking, is this. God does not deal with us simply as individuals. He deals with us in our relationships to other people. Christ came out of love for the Church, and died to save her. He laid His life down for the flock of His sheep. Notice how it is a body of believers, not simply individuals that is emphasised. Because of this importance of our relationship to others under the Covenant, we view our children and families and brethren in this light. Nor do we believe that we simply worship God as individuals. We are to also worship and belong to Him in our families, and the generations of our families and in the community of the Church. This community/relationship concept is the principle behind infant baptism, and how we view our children. (Genesis 17:1-7, Acts 2:39, Acts 16:14-15,31-34).

Covenant thinking also relates to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper as well as to Baptism. The Lord's Supper is a seal of the Covenant that is made in Christ with us, (1 Corinthians 11:25). It is not an individual thing, a private thing, but for the body of the Church. It is behind our view of our children - they are holy, covenant children - not heathens. (1 Corinthians 7:14 & Ephesians 1:1 & 6:1)

Because the Covenant is something that has been established in history from the Garden of Eden, down through the Patriarchs, to the time of Christ and beyond (Ephesians 2:11-22), it shows us God's people belong to a Church of all ages. Thus to have the faith of the Reformation is to have an appreciation of God's dealings with His people in times past and the Church of all ages. The Confessions of the Reformation are important to us. What went on at the Council of Chalcedon is important for us. And so we could go on, back to the early Church, to Christ's life and death, back to the captivity in Babylon, back to the events and times of the Kings and Judges, back to Eden. All of these things are seen as part of our OWN history from which we should learn. Johannes Vos wrote an interesting article, "Ashamed of the Tents of Shem" (Cf. Genesis 9:27) to argue this concept.

Covenant thinking is not to be seen merely as a formal, legal and intellectual thing. It is a thing of the heart. It is to see the Covenant as a living, daily life with the Lord in Jesus Christ our Saviour, where His covenant is written upon the very tables of our heart. This means we need an actual daily living relationship and walk with the Lord - in prayer, Bible reading, worship, singing of His songs, worship with the saints, hearing the Word preached, and participating in the Sacraments. In the Covenant there is to be union and communion with the Lord, and with His people.

Christ, and all that He is and means to wonderfully rescued sinners, comes to us in the Covenant. It is by the Covenant of God's grace that the Holy Spirit, the blessed Comforter comes to His elect and causes them to dwell with Him. He lives with them in their daily life; in the home and at work; in their rising up and sitting down, (Leviticus 26:9, 11-12, Deuteronomy 6:3-9, John 15, II Corinthians 6:16, Revelation 21:3 etc.).

Thus our second point is, that to truly hold to the faith of the Reformation is to be Covenantal. III. The Faith Of The Reformation Holds To The Sovereignty Of God.

The men of the Reformation, in the light of Scripture, saw the Triune God as having absolute and complete power over all things. He controls all things and whatsoever comes to pass in time and space. It means that whatever is happening in our world today is under the direct supervising hand of our great Almighty God. Even the hairs that fall from our head; even the sparrows that fall to the ground, are under the mighty and absolute power and control of God, (Psalm 135:6, Acts 17:25-28, Matthew 10:29-30). This truth is confessed in the Reformed symbols. For example, The Westminster Confession spells this out in chapters 3 and 5 - God's Decrees and Providence. The Shorter Catechism (Q & A's 7 & 11) succinctly explains it thus: "The decrees of God are His eternal purpose, according to the counsel of His will, whereby, for His own glory, he hath fore-ordained whatsoever comes to pass." & "God's works of providence are, His most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all His creatures, and all their actions."

When we speak of the Sovereignty of God, we not only mean the great planning and supervising power of God over all things. We also mean the idea that all authority is to be found only in Jesus Christ as the revelation of the Living God. The Sovereignty of God involves the whole idea of authority. Jesus Christ is Lord of all. Thus more specifically we mean, that all things in heaven and earth are bound by the duty of creatures and subjects, to acknowledge the authority of Jesus Christ and to function and exist in that light. He has all power and authority both in heaven and on earth. (Matthew 28:18).

We believe our calling is to acknowledge and to bow the knee before this authority. We are to do it in our salvation, in our manner of living and functioning in the family, in our work, in our Church life, in our scientific research and study, and in our recreational life. We confess the universal Lordship of Christ Jesus over all of life.

Again, with regard to our salvation, God is sovereign. He is the author and finisher of our faith. We are saved by Him in Christ and His works, not our own. (Ephesians 2:8-9 & Hebrews 12:2). Thus the catch cries of believers of the Reformation, Sola Gratia, Solo Christo, Sola Fidea!

The sovereignty of God also means to a reformed believer, that the principles and presuppositions of God's Word become the principles they believe the whole of their personal lives, as well as that of society, should be founded on - Sola Scriptura - Scripture alone. Thus we find that the Reformed Faith has maintained that civil governments and the nations of the world are bound to live under the rule of Jesus Christ, (Psalm 2 and Westminster Confession Ch. 23), and ably set out in the writings of such men as Samuel Rutherford and George Gillespie. It is the principle for which our Covenanter fathers and mothers in the faith lived and died.

The sovereignty of God and His authority over us, to the Reformed believer, means that the Church in its visible manifestation and its worship is bound to be ruled by Christ as its King, (Ephesians 1:20-23, 4:8-16, Westminster Confession Ch. 25). The organised Church is bound to acknowledge His rule and authority in its government and worship. Man may not put himself in God's place in the Church. (For this Margaret Wilson laid down her life)

Thus we believe, with the Calvinistic Churches of the Reformation, that in the worship of God we should only worship the Lord as He has ordained in His Word, because He is its head and authority, and not man. It is HIS WORSHIP that we are to render to Him, not that of our own invention - or will-worship, (Matthew 15:8-9, Col. 2:20-23).

There is a difference of opinion among professing Reformed believers today about the application and outworking of this concept in actual worship. Some, for example, hold to the older historic position of exclusive psalm singing in the worship of God. Others believe that man inspired songs may also be used. Whatever our view, or whatever differences there may be among reformed believers, the reformed principle is that our worship must be Biblically regulated. In worship, as everywhere the supreme rule and authority is that the Lord Jesus Christ is sovereign King over all things.

Another area of life where the Reformed faith has seen the sovereign rule of King Jesus over us, is education. The Reformed Faith believes in the education of our children, even in the things of this world, within the framework of Biblical truth - as sovereign or absolute truth. It is there also that Christ rules over us as our King and Prophet too. For example, The Reformation in Scotland and what followed made the establishment of Christian schools of most importance after the setting up Churches for the preaching of the Word and sacraments. Also Calvin's academy.

We often speak of 'full-time' service, and we think of missionaries or ministers as the only ones really doing the work of the Lord 'full-time'. However, we must understand that because the Lord rules sovereignly over all things, each person who names the name of Christ is called to 'full-time' service. We are to serve the Sovereign Lord in all things - our eating and drinking and whatsoever we do. His authority and the principles of His Word gives us the foundation for all of life's activities every hour of every day, (I Cor. 10:31, Eph. 5:22 to 6:9). This is from where the thinking behind the "Protestant work ethic" comes.

To hold to the faith of the Reformation is to hold to the Sovereignty and Authority of God in Jesus Christ the King over all things. IV. The Faith Of The Reformation Holds To Particularism.

The Reformation Faith, in the light of God's Word, holds that God does not deal with all men alike. He is particular and sovereign in His dealings with mankind. That He deals with some of mankind in a particular or different manner to how He deals with others, is founded upon His pure, holy, just and righteous character. He deals with all out of His own good will and sovereign pleasure, (Romans 9:6-23). Our belief in predestination arises from this understanding of Scripture.

In the area of salvation then, the reformed faith confesses that the Lord is not the Redeemer of all men; that Christ Jesus did not give His life an atonement for all; nor that His great intercessory work is for all of mankind. Rather it confesses that His love, redeeming and intercessory work is particular. His life is given for His sheep, for His Church, for those whom the Father has given Him, (John 10:11, Eph. 5:25, John 17:1-2,9).

Particularism, so we understand, also means that God rules over the whole world and deals with the whole of the creation, for the ultimate good and love of His Church, as we read in Ephesians 1:22, and Romans 8:28-31. The Church, not all men generally, are at the heart of God's works.

Thus we acknowledge that there are two types of people on earth and that there are two ways; the elect and the reprobate, the broad way and the narrow way, (Rom. 9:6-23, Matthew 7:13-14). We believe that there is a heaven and a hell. We understand that there are the two seeds, as we read in Genesis 3:15, the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent, and that there is an antithesis between them.

Truly, there is such a thing in the Bible as Predestination, where the Sovereign God deals in a particular way with different men, some awesomely being elected to life as vessels of His grace, and some awesomely being reprobated as vessels of His justice. All men are one or other, according to the good pleasure of the Lord from the foundation of the world, as Romans 9:10-23 & Ephesians 1:4-14 so clearly teaches us.

Because of particularism, we cannot agree with such concepts as the Fatherhood of God of all men. We understand that the Word of God teaches us that God is the Father only of His children in the Saviour Jesus Christ, and that only as we are found in Christ and His work of adoption, may we call the Living God, our Father, (Rom. 8:14-15 & see Westminster Confession Chapter XII). There is a sense, in which God is the author of all men by creation, but not in the sense of Fatherhood.

The Reformation Faith then, does not believe in universalistic theology, but is particularistic.

Within the world of those professing the reformed faith there is a difference of understanding as to God's grace and love. Some speak of a universal or common grace and love. Others argue for a particular grace - but whatever differences there may be in this area, the principle of particularism is a strong principle of the reformed faith. Conclusion

Let us also bear in mind that the above four points are all inter-related, and hold together as a unity, even though we have dealt with them as separate points.

How are Christians who trace their godly heritage from the faith of the Reformation different from other professing Christians today? We would understand that apart from all those doctrines which we hold in common with other professing believers, there are some distinctive doctrines that set us apart from them. The distinctive differences we believe are in the area of the above four points. That is, we are God-centred as opposed to being man-centred. We think and live in Covenantal concepts rather than individualistic and personal concepts. We hold to a Mighty Sovereign Lord God, Who deals with all mankind in a particularistic way.

There are many things we could say further. The above principles could be further spelt out and applied more fully to life and to our hearts and minds. However may this brief summary or overview of the Faith of the Reformation be blessed of the Lord to us.

May we seek to grown further in the grace and knowledge of the Triune God, our Father, our Saviour and our Comforter. May we study these matters in the light of God's Word, as the Bereans of old did. (See Acts 17:11). Can I encourage you to be prayerful about these matters, and as God gives us light, seek to live our daily life in the light of His Word.

Those who profess the Reformed Faith, seek to profess a wonderful and Great God, a sure Rock and Guide for all of life and eternity, a wonderful and certain hope in life and death.

Â Romans 11:36 "For of Him, and through Him, and to Him are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen."

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