

What is the Reformed Faith?

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How do I go to God?", someone asked the Scottish Presbyterian, Horatius Bonar. The parson answered, "It is with our sins that we go to God, for we have nothing else that we can truly call our own."

Much like Lutheranism, the Reformed tradition was forged out of the mighty storm known as the Protestant Reformation. John Calvin (1507-64) was a Frenchman who, through his own study of the Scriptures and reading the tracts of Luther and other older Reformers, became a convert to the "evangelical" faith. Like Luther, Calvin was anxious about the state of his soul. How does a sinner become acceptable to a pure and holy God who cannot tolerate sin and who has told us that He has prepared a place of eternal torment? "Just love the Lord," they told Calvin. "Love Him?" he asked. "How can you love a God who is always pointing His finger at you, just waiting for your foot to slip?" But then a marvelous discovery came to the French scholar, much the same way it came to Luther, and in no small measure through that great Reformer's writings. The Bible declares that Christians are justified by faith in Christ and not by anything they do. That revolutionized this timid, shy Frenchman and made him, reluctantly, a major influence on the Western world.

But what did Calvin teach that was so revolutionary in his day? Or Edwards or Whitefield in theirs? What made Charles Spurgeon such an amazing evangelist and launched the modern missionary movement, with William Carey, Hudson Taylor, David Livingstone, and John Patton? What caused the Great Awakening and the Evangelical Revival in Britain and Europe? And why do we think these ideas-- which are no more than the ideas of the Bible itself, could cause another revolution or reformation in thought and life today? First, the basic beliefs.

This Is My Father's World

Calvin wrote much on the beauty of the world as a "theater" in which God's attributes were displayed and highlighted. "As ever in my taskmaster's eye," wrote the famous Calvinistic poet, John Milton, expressing the sense of belonging to this world the Christian ought to feel. Of course, we are ultimately bound for eternity, but this life really does count.

That's why the Reformed tradition has always had a high doctrine of creation. If a cheap piece of pottery falls from the cupboard, it's no worry--just sweep it up and that's that. But what if the vase is a priceless antique in a museum, a master's signature edition and it is destroyed? Surely this would be a great tragedy. The difference doesn't lie in the quality of the material (both may have been clay pots), but in the greatness of the artist and the uniqueness of the work. So too, humans are not merely spirits caged in the prison-house of a body, but great works of art intended to have a certain enthusiasm and sense of dignity about being human.

Reformed theology has always emphasized the fact that everything has a reason-- and that we have a reason. Nothing happens by chance, but is organized by the Great Director. And we are all "actors" on God's stage, as Shakespeare put it.

Far from making our own decisions and actions meaningless, it renders them truly significant. Who would ever say that the significance or freedom of Sir Laurence Olivier or Kathryn Hepburn is diminished by the existence of a script? Without a script, how could their acting have any meaning at all?

This means, too, that God did not create a separation between "secular" and "sacred," as many Christians today often do. Christians were meant to participate alongside non-Christians in every aspect of life. Reformed theology has no place for "Christian cruises" and "Christian media," "Christian books" and "Christian music." There is no "full-time Christian ministry" and "secular work," but vocations or callings for everyone. In creation, too, there is the gift of "common grace." "The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike," Jesus told the disciples.

The Fall Is Worse Than You Think

Sometimes we tend to view sin mainly in terms of actions: doing this or not doing that. But sin, according to Scripture, is mainly a condition which produces actions. "We sin because we're sinners," as the saying goes. Reformed theology takes sin seriously and argues with St. Paul that believers "were dead in trespasses and sins" and that "the unbeliever doesn't understand the things of the Spirit of God; neither can he know them...."

Think of it: Spiritually dead! Have you ever had a good conversation with a corpse? Just try it sometime. It's a bore! Similarly, we can expect no life from fallen men and women until God decides to dispense His grace. "No one understands, there is no one who does good, no one looks for God, no not even one," lamented the Apostle Paul. This, of course, does not mean that we simply sit around and wait for unbelievers to be regenerated before we tell them the Gospel. Rather, we expect the Gospel, together with the Spirit, to regenerate them through our message.

The Reformed, like other Protestants, take the Fall in the garden of Eden seriously. We actually inherit the moral corruption and the guilt of Adam. We enter the human race as God's enemies, guilty enough to be condemned even before our first actual act of disobedience. "In sin," the Psalmist confessed, "my mother conceived me." This means that it is impossible for us to lift a finger to cooperate with God in our own salvation. Free will, the idea that everybody has the ability to accept Christ, is unbiblical and the root of serious misunderstandings from the Reformed point of view.

Election

"Just as He chose us in Christ before the creation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. In love He predestined us to be adopted as His children...In Him we also have an inheritance, having been predestined according to the will of Him who works out everything in conformity with His own plan and purpose" (Eph.1:4-11).

Here, as in so many places, the Bible tells us that God had His eye on us long before we had ours on Him. "Herein is love: not that we loved God, but that He loved us." I grew up with the illustration, "God has cast His vote for your soul; Satan cast his, but you must cast the deciding ballot." This, however, doesn't square with the Apostle Paul's remark that, "It does not depend on man's decision or effort, but upon God's mercy" (Rom.9:16). Election is not only a prominent doctrine in the Bible, but is of immeasurable comfort to those who are always anxious about whether they are doing enough to secure their salvation. Election teaches us, in Christ's own words, "You did not choose Me; I chose you and appointed you to bear fruit that would last" (Jn.15:16).

The Incarnation

Reformed theology has also emphasized the fact that "God became flesh and lived among us" (Jn.1). I can remember in Sunday school singing, as a child, "Jacob's Ladder." We would make climbing motions while we sang it. But this is not sound theology, is it? For the ladder Jacob saw in His dream was not a ladder we were to climb up to God, but a ladder God climbed down to us. Do you notice a common theme here? God's doing all the work. He's the initiator, the One moving toward us while we are helpless.

The incarnation also teaches us that God took on our own nature, sanctifying it. While it was humbling for the Son of God to be subjected to the miseries of a fallen world, He was pleased to become a human being just like us.

Christ's Life

Wait a second...Christ's life? We hear about His death, but what did His life accomplish for us?

In Reformed theology (as in Lutheranism), we speak of Christ's active and passive obedience. His active obedience is His thirty years of perfect obedience to the Law of His Father. It wouldn't be enough, you see, for Christ to have died for our sins. The glass can't just be empty of guilt; it must be full of perfect righteousness, and we don't have it. Christ perfectly fulfilled the Law in our place. The "impossible dream" was finally realized by a human being--one of us, and He won the prize for us as though we were there with Him in every act of obedience.

His "victorious Christian life," therefore, replaces our own failings and we are saved because He lived for God, even though we do not.

The Cross

Then there's the other part I mentioned--the passive obedience of Christ. We are saved not only by His life, but by His death; not only because He lived for the Lord, but because He surrendered all to the Lord even when that meant His own judgment in our place.

We all know what a substitute is. He stands in for someone else. Christ stood in for us and took the rap that was justly meant for us. Hanging on that cruel Roman scaffold, Jesus Christ was considered the greatest sinner who ever lived, carrying the sins of the world and enduring the outpouring of Divine wrath and hatred for those sins.

The Resurrection

I used to live at Lake Tahoe, high in California's Sierra Mountains. First, there would be an ominous cover of dark clouds which could turn noon-time into evening in minutes. There was a storm and it would last for hours. The next day, I would step outside, blinded by the sun as it reflected off of the fresh snow and the skies would be painted in the deepest shade of blue on the spectrum.

In a similar way, the cross was the judgment of God on Christ as the believer's substitute. But the storm passed and the resurrection of Christ confirmed Him as the King of creation, the Lord of redemption. "He was crucified for our sins and was raised for our justification," according to the Scriptures.

It's important to remember, too, that all of this is historical. Jesus did not simply rise from the dead allegorically or as a myth which teaches us about new life. It was real space and time history, which hostile witnesses could not successfully refute.

Justification and Union with Christ

The central doctrine of the Reformation was justification by grace alone through faith alone. We believe that by trusting in Christ alone for our salvation, we are declared righteous. All of Christ's perfect obedience is charged to our account and our sins are regarded as having been paid for at the cross.

Through faith, we are united to Christ and through that union we share everything in common with Christ Himself. Is He righteous? Then we're righteous! Is He holy? Then so are we! Of course, this does not mean that we share His divine attributes, but everything He accomplished in His life, death, and resurrection is ours.

Many other religious groups believe that somehow, somewhere, we have something to do with our own salvation. We make some contribution. For some, that may be as little as "making a decision" or "walking an aisle" or "saying a prayer"; for others, it may demand a great deal more. But in this view, God's grace is seen as a substance, something that is infused or implanted within the believer, to enable him or her to live a godly life. In this perspective, the Holy Spirit and his guidance is the gospel, rather than the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ as our righteousness before God.

That's why the Reformers said that it was not sufficient to say that it was all God's grace from beginning to end. That's a good start, of course, but the Bible requires a further safeguard to the gospel: Not only are we justified (declared righteous or just) before God by grace alone, but it is by grace through faith alone. In other words, we do not become righteous before God, in a process of Christian growth, as we cooperate with the Holy Spirit; rather, we are declared righteous before God in

an instant, as the merit of the perfect life and atoning sacrifice of our Lord is imputed or credited to our account. This kind of righteousness was not something that we produced; nor was it even produced by God within us. For that is sanctification, and in this life, even the holiest among us make only a short beginning in that kind of righteousness. What we need is this "alien" or "foreign" righteousness; that is, a righteousness that belongs properly to someone else, but is given to us as though it really were our own. Besides the banking image of credit, the Bible uses the image of a white robe that covers our sinfulness and shame.

It was this robe that God used to cover Adam and Eve, when they realized that their fig leaves would not hide them from God's judgment. And it was this covering that was prefigured in the sacrifices, until John the Baptist declared, "Behold! The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

If this were really believed in our churches today, there would be awakening and reformation. Every great movement in church history has found its impulse in a recovery of these truths. In a movement that claims to adhere to the Protestant Reformation heritage, evangelicalism bears hardly any resemblance to that great work of God. The emphasis, once again, is on what's going on inside, in one's heart, in one's spirit. Gone again in our day is that objective proclamation of Christ crucified for our sins and raised for our justification outside of us, two thousand years ago in a city in the Middle East. "Steps To Victorious Living" have replaced the preaching of Christ's victorious life and death for sinners who cannot keep up a charade and give God the righteousness his holiness demands.

But for those who, by faith alone, have received this gift of righteousness, there is a process of growth in holiness. Although it is never the foundation for acceptance before God (for it is always an imperfect holiness), sanctification is the process through which the Holy Spirit gradually conforms us to Christ's image. Chipping away at our sinful habits and deeply-rooted beliefs, the Spirit is the Divine Sculptor who seeks to bring glory to the Savior by making "busts" of him in every place of business, in every institution and home, in work and in leisure. While the believer continues to struggle with sin, to the extent that the person even questions whether he or she has really been born again, the Scriptures promise that the resurrection of Christ, when applied by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel, raises that person from spiritual death and attaches him or her to the Living Vine, Christ Jesus. Knowing that godliness is not something that one must achieve in order to be accepted by God and received or kept in his family, we can live for the first time as grateful and obedient sons and daughters, rather than slaves.

The Christian Life

Because all of that is true, those who emphasize these truths, as the Reformers did, understand the Christian life to be something very different from what many Christians are used to. First, it is liberty within the bounds of God's law that forms the motivation. Fear of punishment and hope of rewards is not a motivation one will likely see intentionally articulated or followed by those who take these truths seriously. If, when I am engaged in "spiritual" activities, God smells my fear, will he not be offended rather than pleased? And if he smells my selfish lust for crowns and mansions, will he not sooner accuse me of sin than of good works?

For the Reformed believer, "grace is the essence of theology and gratitude is the essence of ethics," as the Dutch theologian G. C. Berkouwer put it. Instead of analyzing every motive, often paralyzing the exercise of good works for fear doing them "in the flesh," the believer is to serve God and neighbor simply because that is what a gracious and loving Father has commanded. It is not simply because he is all-powerful and may, therefore, command whatever he wants, but because he is all-compassionate and has transferred us from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of his own Son. Therefore, we belong to him--at the cost of his own blood, not to ourselves.

All of this means, too, that the Reformed believer can turn his attention from his own salvation to the salvation and welfare of others. There are so many out there who are lost and who need to hear this liberating message, the good news of freedom from sin's bondage and guilt. Furthermore, there are so many out there who are hurting, homeless, in pain or suffering, grieving, experiencing the ravages of sin--both as victims and perpetrators. That is where the Christian must be--out in the world, not stuck in a monastic community of super-spiritual zealots who want to polish each other's halo. To be sure, we need the fellowship of the saints and, more important even than that, the regular reception of Word and Sacrament, but all of this is for a life of service in the world, before the face of God.

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