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Different Yet Related -- Reformed Tradition, John Calvin ©

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Scripture: Proverbs 16:1-4; Romans 8:26-30; John 6:35-40

If there is any phrase that stands above all others to describe the Reformed movement, it would be "*the sovereignty of God*". As our reading from Proverbs says, *The Lord has made everything for its purpose...*" For the Reformed tradition there is nothing that happens outside of the control and will of God. Remember this as we talk through the Reformed movement.

The Reformed movement was fully expressed with the other towering intellect, along with Martin Luther, of the 16th century – Jean Calvin. Calvin was born in Noyon, France, which is in the northern part of France, near the borders of Belgium and Luxembourg, in 1509 – 25 years after Luther was born. Calvin wrote a few letters to Luther and received responses early on in his career, so they knew of one another. During persecutions of Lutherans in France, Calvin fled Paris, where he was teaching at the time, to Switzerland. My teacher on Calvin, Paul Capetz from United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities, believes Calvin was a Lutheran and we should read everything Calvin wrote as a systematic working out of Luther's theological ideas. Or, to put it another way, Calvinism is refined Lutheranism. Calvin's work culminated in one of the most extensive systematic theologies ever written, the Institutes of the Christian Religion (ICR), which Calvin revised several times during his life.

Calvin is forever tied with the city of Geneva in Switzerland because he was instrumental in setting up one of the first Reformer governments of that city. There's a very strong belief in the Reformed tradition that the Christian is the mustard seed or the yeast that transforms the political and secular world for the sake of God. Part of why those who follow Calvin's teachings are called Reformers is because they would go into towns and attempt to reshape the politics and administration of the town, attempting to run it in what they saw as a Biblical and Christian way. What they mean by that is there is no separation between the Old Testament and the New Testament, so the elders of both church and town could invoke Old Testament Law in the society. As a result, Right Belief and Behavior become very important for Believer and Non Believer alike.

Geneva was essentially a city organized like a church under Calvin and his board of elders. It was an early attempt at a theocratic utopia, which worked very well – until it didn't. Calvin died in 1564, loved by many and hated by many. After Luther, very few had more influence on Christian theology than Calvin.

With Calvin's deep explanation of the faith in the ICR, there is a shift in the Reformed church from the primacy of Liturgy to the primacy of Doctrine. Liturgy is how we DO the faith. Doctrine is how we THINK about the faith and right doctrine determines how best to worship God. Calvinists, Reformed tradition people, are always concerned about the right thinking about all things of the faith. This is, in part, because Calvin was exceptionally well-studied in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. His commentaries on Scripture draw from multiple strands of thought, including rabbinical teachings and the early church fathers. Calvin believed that all worship, theology, and Christian practice must be wholly grounded in the Word of God.

Early on, followers of Calvin and Lutherans were indistinguishable from one another. The Reformed movement has several strains of influence, among them Zwingli, who essentially believed that the Lord's supper was purely symbolic and had no meaning except as an act of remembrance. Zwingli lived at the same time as Luther and the two of them argued vehemently with one another. Some of these extreme thinkers press into what became known as the Anabaptist movement. Anabaptists believe, among other things, that there is only one baptism which must be made consciously and reasonably by every believer, and they also believe that the state has no power over faith and belief. Luther also railed against this.

Calvin cuts between Zwingli, the extremists and Luther. In many ways, Calvin's ideas were closer to Luther, but where they differ primarily is around the presence of Christ in the Lord's Supper. Lutherans believe that the presence of Christ is 'in, around, and through' the bread and the wine. Calvin and his followers take a view that is halfway between Zwingli's memorialist view and Luther's almost Catholic view.

For Calvin, the elements of the Lord's Supper become the body and blood of Christ once the bread and the wine encounter the belief of the one who partakes of the elements. We 'eat the faith' as Calvin says in one of his commentaries on the Psalms. That difference with the Lord's Supper between Calvin and Luther is the primary place where the Reform tradition breaks

from the Lutherans.

For our purposes, and leading up to next week when we talk about the Congregationalists, The ICR and The Westminster Confession are the two guiding documents for the Reform Tradition. The Westminster Confession was written in Westminster, England, by early Puritans in loose association with the relatively new Church of Scotland, which was started by the Calvinist John Knox, in 1649. The Westminster Confession is the foundational document for the Reform Tradition, along with the ICR, and, of course, Scripture.

WORSHIP

When we talk about the Reformed movement and Calvinists, the two things we need to remember is that everything must relate directly to Scripture and that God is sovereign over all things.

Worship, then, derives from Scripture and the primary purpose of worshiping together is to be taught the Word correctly and receive the sacraments. This, according to Calvin, is how you determine whether a church is a Christian church – wherever the Word is correctly taught, the sacraments are delivered, and the discipline of the faithful is present. Discipline here, by the way, means exhortation, admonishment, correction, and excommunication when necessary.

In terms of Reformed worship, it's what we do here at Rockland Congregational Church on any given Sunday. In early days worship was focused around chanting the Psalms, preaching and teaching, and prayer. The Lord's Supper became irregular rather than common. Reformed churches sought to eradicate any possibility of idolatry in the church (statues, icons, stained glass windows, crosses, even the church structure itself). We would be the height of idolatry for a good Calvinist, with our stained-glass images violating the 2nd Commandment. A rigorous attention to doctrine and theology in prayers, songs and sermons was, and still is, continually present in Reformed churches.

THEOLOGY

Theology is the rigorous, serious, and attentive understanding of the revelation of God through Creation, Christ, Christian Life, and the Social Order. A lot of people break down Calvin into 5 separate points, called the Calvinist TULIP:

Total Depravity of the human being

Universal Sovereignty of God in God's Trinitarian being

Limited Atonement of Christ's sacrifice

Irresistible Grace of God's will

Perseverance of the Saints in the face of suffering and persecution

As with any movement, there is what the person said and was trying to say, and then there is what the followers say their leader says. This is very true of Calvin. The TULIP explanation limits some of the incredible beauty of Calvin's insights and writings. Calvin was very focused on God's Grace, just as another famous Calvinist from our tradition was, Jonathan Edwards.

If you're focused on God's Grace, one is led in interesting directions. One of those ideas is limited election - Who is Christian and who is not?

Determining that is God's purview, but most Calvinists would say there are limited number of Christians and there is nothing we can do about God's predestined choice. And that is another idea that is very strong in Calvin – predestination¹. God predestines who is saved and who is not saved, an idea which is an expansion on our reading from Romans 8 today. Here is a quote from ICR:

“We call predestination God's eternal decree, by which he compacted with himself what he willed to become of each man. For all are not created in equal condition; rather, eternal life is fore-ordained for some, eternal damnation for others.” (ICR 3.21.5)

It IS possible to read Calvin differently than this. Karl Barth, a strong Calvinist himself, implies there is a very strong tendency in Calvin that God will save everyone.

OUTREACH

When we speak of outreach in the Calvinist / Reform Movement, it is primarily about ONE thing: getting the Gospel out to people who have not heard it. Helping people is merely a method of getting the Gospel to people. Calvinists are aggressive about proselytizing and sharing the Gospel. Many Bible translation publishers are out of the Reformed movement.

¹ Long ago, I saw a definition for *predestination* which I can no longer find. It is first and foremost a maritime term for traversing the ocean. The predestination point is just before the horizon. If you put the destination point on the horizon, you never get there because the point always moves. The predestination point is what we can barely know and see before we enter the mystery of God's infinite horizon.

Outreach is tempered by the potential of the Fear of Works Righteousness, the need to do things to gain God's favor. Any Outreach to people who are suffering that begins to approach works righteousness, or to appear self-aggrandizing in any way, will END that outreach. Before we get judgmental about that, think about why you do what you do to help other people? What are the reasons? Do they serve God, or do they try to gain the favor of God? For both the one serving, and those being served, our answer to that question can have powerful repercussions.

STRUCTURE

Reformed churches, except for the Congregationalist movement, are at once structured and more localized: each church has a board of elders and groups of churches are overseen by local presbyteries, as in the Presbyterian Church and the Church of Scotland. So nowadays there might be a national association that manages the presbyteries but the national association has little or no authority over the local presbyteries.

You can see how we're funneling down from the expansive, top-down governance of the Catholic Church to the regional and national scope of the Orthodox Church to the regional focus of the Lutheran Church, and then to the town and local sensibility of the Reformed church.

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

The spiritual disciplines of the Reformed movement comprise Prayer, Psalms, and Reading. Reading here is first and foremost the reading of Scripture and then reading teachings on the Right Thinking about Scripture. If there is any spiritual discipline that the Reformed church specializes in, it is creating a personal and communal participation in the individual constantly, unrelentingly submitting to the will of God.

All of this -the theology, the worship, the structure- sounds intense and even dark. Personally, I have some great sympathies in this direction. Even though historically Calvinists tend toward extremism, (Calvinists started the fundamentalist movement in America), they often also bend toward grace and humility.

Here's what good about Calvinism and the Reformed movement:

John Calvin first and foremost was a HUMANIST. As a humanist, he believed (and most Calvinists believe) that there is a way of bettering the individual and the society in which we live and that way is the rigorous application of faith in the sovereign God of the universe through education, government, church life, and social interaction. Lest we think that this is just extremist thinking, I believe we can legitimately trace back to Calvin the core elements of DEMOCRACY, our movement toward EMANCIPATION for slaves, women, and the expansion of civil rights to all, and the expansion of self-sufficiency as expressed in the rise of Capitalism as a Force for Raising up Society. The arc of God's will for the Calvinist is progressive in the sense that our submission to the will of God creates a better world for all.

This is not because of who we are, but because of what God is doing through us in our families, churches, local governance, economies, and world leadership. Self Sufficiency, Freedom and the idea of Progress as forces of good, healing, growth are all straight out of Calvin's Institutes of Christian Religion.

Let me end with one of the most beautiful quotes from this book, of which there are many. This is from Book 3, which is on the Christian life, from the section on Self-Denial:

The great point, then, is, that we are consecrated and dedicated to God, and, therefore, should not henceforth think, speak, design, or act, without a view to his glory. What he hath made sacred cannot, without signal insult to him, be applied to profane use. But if we are not our own, but the Lord's, it is plain both what error is to be shunned, and to what end the actions of our lives ought to be directed. We are not our own; therefore, neither is our own reason or will to rule our acts and counsels. We are not our own; therefore, let us not make it our end to seek what may be agreeable to our carnal nature. We are not our own; therefore, as far as possible, let us forget ourselves and the things that are ours.

On the other hand, we are God's; let us, therefore, live and die to him (Rom. 14:8). We are God's; therefore, let his wisdom and will preside over all our actions. We are God's; to him, then, as the only legitimate end, let every part of our life be directed. O how great the proficiency of him who, taught that he is not his own, has withdrawn the dominion and government of himself from his own reason that he may give them to God! For as the surest

source of destruction to men is to obey themselves, so the only haven of safety is to have no other will, no other wisdom, than to follow the Lord wherever he leads. Let this, then be the first step, to abandon ourselves, and devote the whole energy of our minds to the service of God. (ICR, 3.7.1)

SOLI DEO GLORIA!