

Reformed view of God

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Date: 02 August 2017

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[0 : 00] It was great to be here last week and hear Rhys, to hear his historical insights into the life of Martin Luther. It was great to hear how Martin Luther arrived at what we now think of as the foundational principles of Reformation theology.

Salvation by grace alone, by faith alone, through Christ alone, revealed in scripture alone, to the glory of God alone. Now I feel a bit of a fraud following Rhys, I'm not really a historian, so I won't be able to match the rich human interest of his presentation.

But what I want to do tonight as a theologian is try to offer a kind of wide-angle camera view, perhaps a kind of Google Earth view, of the ways in which the Reformation shaped the way we think today as Protestant Christians.

I'm going to use a simple framework taken from John Calvin. At the start of his Institutes of the Christian Religion, he says, Nearly all true wisdom we possess consists of two parts, the knowledge of God and knowledge of ourselves.

Man never achieves a clear knowledge of himself unless he has first looked upon God's face and then descends from contemplating him to scrutinise himself. But at the same time, the knowledge of ourselves not only arouses us to seek God, but also, as it were, leads us by the hand to find him.

[1 : 21] So with that in mind, what I want to do tonight is to talk about how the Reformation changed the way we conceive of God and approaching God and his relationship to the world.

And next week, we'll talk about God's relationship to humanity, how we think about ourselves in the light of the Reformation. Before I begin, I just wanted to issue a quick disclaimer.

In these talks, I'm going to be drawing some stark contrasts between Reformation theology and Roman Catholicism. And I'm going to be, of course, arguing that the Reformation got it right.

But I don't want this to come across as a wholesale dismissal of Catholics and Catholicism. It seems to me that the Catholic Church is kind of like a house owned by a family of hoarders who can't bear to throw anything away.

There are some fabulous treasures in that house. And there's some terrible junk as well. And we look in one place and we find a Stradivarius stuffed in a drawer with about 75 McDonald's Happy Meal toys.

[2 : 32] Or we go down the hallway and we find a painting by Leonardo da Vinci stuffed under a pile of old women's weeklies. That's what the Catholic Church is like.

There are some great heroes of the faith who love the Lord Jesus and could teach us a lot about how to serve him. And there are many others who are just stumbling around trying to pick their way through the clutter.

The side point here, of course, is that the Reformation, in one sense, was a kind of accident. The Reformers never set out to start new denominations.

They just wanted to clean the house. They wanted to get rid of the rubbish and open the windows. The fact that they ended up being cast out of the Church for their troubles, and even worse, that the Catholic Church ended up officially rejecting their reforms at the Council of Trent, is a tragedy.

And in recent decades, many Catholic theologians have been willing to admit that the Reformers were at least partly right. Unfortunately, however, the big issues remain.

[3 : 35] The modern Catholic Church isn't the same as the late medieval Church, but it isn't entirely different either. And the big changes wrought by the Reformation that I want to talk about tonight are still things that the Catholic Church would need to hear, and we need to hear as well.

So what are they? What are the ways in which the Reformation changed the way we think about God? Well, the first way is the Reformation offered a clear view to God through Jesus.

A moment ago, I likened the Catholic Church to a house owned by a family of hoarders. Well, one of the problems with houses like that is that it's often quite hard to get from the front door to the back door. There's too much stuff in the way.

And the trouble with the Catholic system is that it can be very hard to see a clear path to God. There's so much spiritual bric-a-brac blocking your path. There are priests and other religious orders whose job it is to intercede between you and God.

There are complicated rules for different kinds of sin that make it hard to work out where you stand with God. There are sacred buildings and prayer beads and pilgrimages and incense and special oil and water.

[4 : 52] There are sacred images and even body parts of dead saints, all of which are meant to help you with your relationship to God. There are saints in heaven whom you can ask to pray for you.

There's purgatory, a place between here and heaven where most Christians expect to go before they are clean enough to get into heaven. Sometimes there are further layers to reality beyond that.

If you read Dante's classic *Paradiso*, there are seven stages of heaven corresponding to the seven medieval planets between you and the presence of God himself.

Now if you ask an informed Catholic, they'll probably offer you reasonable sounding explanations for all of these things. They'll insist that none of them are meant to take anything away from a simple trust in Jesus.

They'll tell you that sacramentals like holy water or rosaries are just optional extras. They'll say that praying to dead saints is just like asking other Christians in your church to pray for you.

[5 : 53] It's not meant to be an alternative to Jesus, but an expression of faith in him. But the usual effect is that all these things make it harder for people to feel like they have a direct and personal relationship to God.

The more the church adds rituals and customs to help people with their faith, the more it can feel like you can't get to God without them. Even Bernard of Clairvaux had trouble here.

Bernard was a medieval champion of simple Christian piety and somebody greatly admired by the reformers. But listen to what Bernard says to Christians who are worried about the state of their souls and are scared to come to Jesus.

He says, perhaps you fear to approach Christ, the divine majesty, because although he became a man, he remained nevertheless God. In that case, if you want to have someone who pleads for you with him, then turn to Mary.

How unlike the Bible that is. The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is a merciful high priest and that because of his work on the cross, we can draw near to God into the most holy place with a sincere heart and with full assurance of faith.

[7 : 11] But Bernard suggests that we would look for someone more approachable. Paul writes to Timothy that there is one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus Christ.

But Bernard points to Mary, his mother. By way of contrast, listen to how the reformed Belgic Confession of 1561 puts it. We believe that we have no access to God except through the one and only mediator and intercessor, Jesus Christ the righteous.

But this mediator, whom the father has appointed between himself and us, ought not to terrify us by his greatness so that we have to look for another one. For neither in heaven nor among the creatures on earth is there anyone who loves us more than Jesus Christ does.

For the reformers then, Jesus does everything to clear the way and bring us to God. There's no need for priests or penance or purgatory or special buildings or saints in heaven.

None of these can add anything to Christ's work, nor will they do you any good if you don't have Jesus. They just get in the way and add confusion. Now, the simplified vision of the universe that the reformers offered here fostered a radically different spiritual imagination.

[8 : 42] And it had a range of other implications, too. Many historians and sociologists have suggested that it contributed to the rise of science and the end of magic. Because reformed religion imagined a world run directly by a single law-giving God rather than a host of lesser spirits, it encouraged people to look for those laws and to expect them to remain constant.

This way of looking at the cosmos also affected economies. In the medieval period, vast sums of money were poured into the church to pay for private masses, which were supposed to help souls get out of purgatory and into heaven.

The effect of this was to remove money from the economy and to boost church bureaucracy. But all that came to an end with the Reformation. Clergy numbers dropped radically because they weren't needed anymore.

People could get to God directly through Christ. A related point is that the Reformation broke down the idea that ordinary people had less spiritual lives.

Because everybody had equal access directly to God through Jesus, all believers in some sense were priests. And all of life could be lived coram deo, as the reformers said.

[10 : 01] That is, under God as an act of worship. Calvin writes, In other words, There weren't religious bits of life or religious orders and the rest of us were less spiritual or secular.

All of life belonged to God. Every profession needed to be brought to Christ. Martin Luther puts it similarly. The work of monks and priests, however holy and arduous they may be, Do not differ one whit in the sight of God from the works of the rustic labourer in the field or the woman going about her household tasks.

All works are measured before God by faith alone. So the Reformation offered a clear view to God through Jesus. That's our first point.

Our second is that the Reformation put the focus back on God's righteousness and mercy. Now the Catholic tradition is a vast and complex one with many different strands and aspects and emphases.

There's the contemplative or mystical tradition. There's the philosophical tradition. There's the social justice and charity tradition. There's a sacramental aspect and an aesthetic aspect and a personal piety aspect.

[11 : 31] Now this diversity is partly a strength. But again, it can lead to confusion in our sense of who God is and what he wants from us. So within these Catholic traditions, some Catholics imagine God as little more than a benevolent spiritual presence who can be found in everything that's good and beautiful.

Others imagine God as a social activist whose primary gospel is about serving the poor and trying to improve the world. Others stress the mystery and unknowability of God.

Thinking that the way to get close to God is through meditation and feelings of transcendence. Now each of these ideas is based on a truth. God is revealed by everything that's good and beautiful.

God does want us to care for the poor and oppressed. God is far beyond our understanding. But the Bible also makes it clear that there is one key aspect of God's character that deserves our most urgent attention.

And that is his righteousness. God is a God who is absolutely committed to justice and purity. He sees straight through our lies and excuses.

[12 : 46] He hates evil of every degree from genocide to gossip. And he's going to judge us for our sins. Of course the Catholic Church has always known this.

It's precisely because of fear of this aspect of God that it allowed all those buffers and intercessors to build up in religious life between the Christian and God.

Purgatory was to save sinners from getting to God before they were clean. Praying to the saints seemed less scary than praying to a holy and righteous God. Confessing your sins to a priest seemed easier than talking to Jesus.

But all those buffers simply delayed the problem. How could purgatory ever make a person good enough for God? How could anyone ever be sorry enough or do enough to make up for their sins?

How could sinners ever satisfy a truly righteous and holy God? This was the problem Martin Luther faced. When he was a monk, he kept working harder and harder at his spiritual devotion.

[13 : 49] But it didn't give him any peace. As he writes in 1545, Although I was an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience.

And I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore, I did not love a righteous and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him.

Now, I just want to pause here and say that if you put your hope in any way in your own goodness when it comes to approaching God, then you will always end up either with this kind of level of distress or having to fudge things.

By fudge things, I mean you'll either be tempted to pretend that God doesn't really care about sin, that he's not really righteous and holy, or that God is a long way off, or that you'll try to make excuses for yourself.

You'll have to justify your own sins. But the Bible, of course, urges us to face up to the truth. None of us can be good enough for God, and we don't need to try because God has already offered us a complete pardon.

[15 : 05] As Paul says in Romans 3, All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

God presented Christ as a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of his blood to be received by faith. Have a listen to how the 39 articles of our own, Anglican Church puts it in articles 10 and 11.

The condition of man after the fall of Adam is such that he cannot turn and prepare himself by his own natural strength and good works to faith and calling upon God.

Wherefore, we have no power to do good works pleasant and acceptable to God. But we are counted righteous before God only for the merit of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ by faith, and not for our own works or deservings.

Wherefore, that we are justified only by faith is a wholesome doctrine and very full of comfort. And of course, it is a wholesome and comforting doctrine.

[16 : 14] It's wholesome because it stops us lying to ourselves about God's character and our own nature, our own righteousness. And it's comforting because it shows us a God who is full of mercy as well as righteousness.

When Martin Luther came to understand this, it turned his whole world upside down. First his personal world, then the world around him. Night and day, he says, I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the Romans 1.17 statement that the righteous shall live by faith.

Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which, through grace and sheer mercy, God justifies us through faith. Thereupon, I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise.

A whole of scripture took on a new meaning. And whereas before the justice of God had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love.

This passage of Paul's became to me a gate to heaven. Before we go on, I think it might be helpful for us to perform a quick mental test on ourselves to find out whether we think like the reformers on this point.

[17 : 36] Here's the question. Are you a dimmer switch person or an on-off person when it comes to God? What I mean is this. Many of us, I think, when we think about our relationship with God, imagine it like a dimmer switch or a volume knob on a stereo.

When we pray or go to church or read the Bible or try to be good, the switch gets turned up a little bit. When we sin or let ourselves get caught up in day-to-day life or when something goes wrong, the knob gets turned down.

Sometimes we feel close to God and other days we don't. But for the reformers, it's more like an on-off switch. You're either under God's judgment or under grace.

You're either alienated from God because of your sins with no hope of satisfying him or you're perfectly right with God through Jesus. That doesn't mean you don't feel closer to God on some days than others.

It doesn't mean that you never sin or never suffer. But if you put your trust in Jesus, then according to the reformers, all those ups and downs are like quarrels within a family, things that happen within your relationship with God.

[18 : 58] As the Westminster Confession says, believers may have the assurance of their salvation shaken and diminished by negligence, by falling into some special sin which wounds the conscience and grieves the spirit.

Yet they are never utterly destitute of that seed of God and life of faith, that love of Christ. Christ, in other words, has made us objectively right with God if we put our trust in him and return to God through him.

So there are our first two ways the Reformation changed the way we think about God. The Reformation offered a clear view to God through Jesus and the Reformation put the focus back on God's righteousness and mercy.

The last way, I think, in which the Reformation changed our way of thinking about God was through changing the way we think about getting information about God.

That is, the third point is the Reformation declared Scripture as the only sure way to know God. How were the Reformers able to achieve the insights they did? How were they able to work out which parts of the Church's doctrines and practices were junk and which were valuable?

[20 : 06] How were they able to recover the central importance of God's righteousness and mercy? Well, I think the main answer is that they went back to the Bible. Over the centuries, the Catholic Church had developed and it still has a more expansive view of how we get information about God.

It looks to natural theology, that is, to knowledge of God that we build up using our reason and philosophy. It also has a very high opinion of its own tradition.

The Church itself is the authority behind the Bible, says the Catholic Church. The Bible is true because the Church says it's true. And we know what the Bible means because the Church tells us what it means.

And the Church might even add things to that revelation. Since the Church and the Pope have inherited the authority of the Apostles, they can effectively add to the Bible.

Tradition for the Catholic Church is still living and growing, in other words. But the Reformers were very dubious about all of this. First, they were unimpressed by the Catholic Church's claims to apostolic authority.

[21 : 23] How vain and frivolous the popish bishops are, writes Calvin, to brag that they are successes to the Apostles. And he goes on to explain that they don't fulfill the requirements of Acts 1.22.

None of them went around with Jesus. None of them was an eyewitness to the resurrected Jesus. Elsewhere, Calvin points to Ephesians 2.20. He says, Paul says that the Church is founded on the Apostles and Prophets.

If that's true, then it's the message that comes first and builds the Church. Not the Church that establishes and authorises the message.

Second, the Reformers were far too suspicious of human sin and self-deception to put any confidence in reason and philosophy. Certainly, they conceded, God has revealed something of himself through creation, but it is limited and it is continually misunderstood by humans who, as Paul says in Romans 1.18, suppress the truth by their wickedness.

Calvin likens us to people with aged or defective vision. When we look at the world, we don't see it as it really is. We need the spectacles of Scripture before we can properly make use of God's general revelation.

[22 : 46] Luther argues the same thing. For him, God's chosen revelation is the humble and foolish spectacle of Christ, especially Christ crucified. So he says, philosophers and natural theologians are looking in the wrong place.

They are looking where God cannot be found. Therefore, let your own thoughts and feelings go, he says, and think of the Scriptures as the loftiest and noblest of holy things, as the richest of minds, which can never be fully explored, so that you may find the wisdom of God that he lays before you in such foolish and simple guise.

That will quench all pride. Here you will find the swaddling clothes and the mangers in which Christ lies, and to which the angel points the shepherds.

Notice how Luther links Scripture and Christ. Scripture is the swaddling clothes of Christ, the manger of Christ. Modern theologians sometimes try to pit one against the other.

However, we follow the incarnate word, not the written word, they say. But for the Reformers, the Scriptures are kind of part of Christ's incarnation.

[24 : 08] The Old Testament Scriptures are part of Jesus' life, because he obeyed and fulfilled them. They all pointed towards him. And the New Testament Scriptures are too, because they are inspired by his spirit.

And they're the products of the apostles that he commissioned to bear witness to him. And this brings us, finally, to the overarching point I want to finish with. We've talked about how the Reformers cleared out the traditions that got in the way of our relationship with God.

We've talked about how they focused on God's righteousness and mercy. How they insisted on Scripture as the only reliable authority. But each of these is really one.

They're all about Jesus. Because it's only Jesus, and only Jesus, who has the ability to bring us into God's presence. It's Jesus, and only Jesus, who truly reveals God's righteousness and mercy.

It's Jesus, and only Jesus, who shows us the face of God and the true meaning of Scripture. It's all about Jesus. In the church where Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses on 31st of October 1517, there were 17 altars where priests were continually conducting private masses for the living and the dead.

[25 : 29] There were 19,000 relics of dead saints that were calculated to reduce a person's time in purgatory by 127,799 years and 116 days.

There were confessions and fasts and indulgences and prayer to the saints. It was all a desperate attempt to do what Jesus had already done.

It was a fearful and superstitious religion that left people groping in the dark toward a God who could never be reached or known. But the Reformation changed all of that.

It took us back to the Gospel, back to the Bible, back to Jesus and his work. It gave us a reason to love God and rejoice in him for his righteousness and his mercy.

It awakened hearts to gratitude and obedience. Let me conclude with a glorious quote from the very first item of the Heidelberg Catechism. The question is this, what is your only comfort in life and death?

[26 : 38] Answer, that I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and death, to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ.

He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood and has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my Heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head.

Indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for him.

What a great thing for us to hear on this 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Amen.