

It is Based on Orthodox Christian Doctrine

The Protestant Reformers had all been Roman Catholics and accepted the Creeds of the Church, particularly the "Apostles" and Nicene Creeds. They shared the orthodox catholic faith in God, the Trinity and the Incarnation. The Reformers were orthodox Christians. We shall see that many younger Evangelicals are throwing out Reformed Doctrines that have at least a 1600 year history and heritage. But the most fundamental of Christian Doctrines are also being challenged and found lacking. The most serious example is classic understanding of God (Theology Proper). It is being replaced with an entirely new understanding of God that is known as "Open Theism". Instead of God knowing all things, including the future, and having fixed purposes and plans for us, the new thinking is that God does not know the future and will grow and change as it happens along with us. God, it is now said, does not know our choices until we make them and will change His own plans accordingly. He is "open" to doing this. This is not Reformed Theology!

It has a particular Doctrine of "Man"

The Reformers held strong views about the sinful nature of "Man" and the need for Grace. They believed what became known as "Total Depravity" and the bondage of the human will to Sin. This in turn was important for the conviction that if anyone were to be saved it would be only and completely by the grace of God. Man on his own never would or even could chose to accept Christ or change himself apart from God's work first changing his heart, setting his will free. Both of these doctrines are not popular today. Younger Evangelicals are much more inclined to believe in the basic goodness of human beings and their innate ability to change themselves, make progress on their own ("just do it!") and do good. They are much less inclined to regard (if they do not outright deny) their utter sinfulness and helplessness to change themselves. They certainly do not like the idea that people do not have free will and can not freely chose to accept Christ, if given the opportunity. Complete free will and total freedom of choice (especially in matters of belief, behavior and moral matters) are very highly valued by young people, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary that these do not exist. Their convictions about all this fly in the face of Reformed Theology and its view of sinful human nature. The concept of salvation by grace alone makes no sense without that Reformed view. It follows that young people (actually almost all people) see no need for the concept of Salvation by grace alone and "grace" itself becomes merely the help, the nudge, that God gives to sinners to do the right thing.

Its Classic Doctrine of Atonement

Basics of Reformation Theology

Written by Calvin Fox

Tuesday, 03 November 2009 10:29 - Last Updated Tuesday, 16 February 2010 11:22

The Reformers' basic understanding of the death of Jesus as penal and substitutionary atonement for the sins of the world rests on the concept that a God who is holy and just must demand satisfaction for the transgressions against Him. His nature would not allow Him to simply overlook and forgive sins, which are debts owed to Him (note the 3 versions of the Lord's Prayer used today: "forgive us our debts..." or "our transgressions..." or "...our sins") The very idea that people sin against God is missing today. The popular view is that people hurt other people.

The good news (the Gospel) is that God Himself would provide the necessary satisfaction on behalf of the world in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. He Himself would bear the consequences for our sins, transgression and debts to God by dying on the cross. This concept also includes teaching about the relationship of Christ and His Death to the Elect or the Church (as the Head of the Body). Finally, the Protestant Reformers added one other aspect to the Satisfaction view of the Cross. They taught that Jesus not only offered his death as Atonement but he also offered his obedient life and suffering. This led to the concept of imputed righteousness which is part of the Doctrine of Justification (below). This Satisfaction View of the Cross has been replaced by many younger Evangelicals in favor of what is called the Moral Influence View. Jesus' death was primarily an inspiring example of love. In his dying for others, Jesus modeled suffering servanthood, influencing us to lay down our lives in the service of others, especially people marginalized by Society. That God would require "satisfaction" for our sins, a blood sacrifice, is considered morally repugnant. That God could or would impute righteousness to sinners is considered to be nonsense.

Authority of Scripture Alone is its Formal Principle

The most fundamental Doctrine of the Reformation is the absolute primacy and ultimate authority of Scripture- not simply the Bible itself, but the Bible as the absolute primary and ultimate authority. This is known as its Formal Principle because it is the major source or foundation of all its other Doctrines. It "forms" them. They stand or fall on it.

The Church Fathers and Church Councils and Creeds and Church Tradition, the hierarchy of the Church itself (as well as political powers) were all vying for absolute primacy and ultimate authority in matters of faith and life. The Reformers boldly broke with all of them and put Scripture ahead of all others. The others had value and were taken into account, but they were not to be first or ultimate. All teaching necessary or essential for faith and life, especially for Salvation, must be tested by the written Word and rejected if it does not pass this test. This was revolutionary.

The corollary was also radical: private interpretation of Scripture and the corollary of that is freedom of conscience. I have witnessed to Roman Catholics with their own approved version of the Bible and asked them what they thought specific verses mean. They wouldn't go there. They would not exercise private interpretation or freedom of conscience. Actually, the same scenario has played out with members of non-Catholic churches, both Liberal and Conservative. That is not Protestant!

However, private interpretation is often misunderstood. In fact Peter warns us about it. (2 Peter

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1:20,3:16) "Scripture alone (sola scriptura)" does not mean "Scripture according to me alone"! The Scripture is inerrant, but our understanding of it is not. The Reformers, especially John Calvin, gave great importance to the inner witness of the Holy Spirit within the Believer. The Spirit inspired the Book and illuminates the reader. But this witness is also within the Church. The Church does not have ultimate authority (only the Bible has that) but the Church does have authority. The Reformers took great pains to study what Believers before them had learned and said. I, too, make great pains to not invent any Doctrine. I constantly seek the wisdom of those who have gone before me. We may be led to see or interpret and apply the Scripture in a different light, that is fine, but whatever conclusions we come to (always a work in progress) about what we think the Bible says must be in harmony with the 2000 year History and Heritage that Christians share in common (I am talking about core, fundamental doctrines here) That Heritage includes the Creeds and the Church Fathers and the major Confessions of Faith that came out of the Reformation. If my "new" understanding defies or contradicts that Heritage (as in the case with Open Theism) I must cast it aside. Today's Evangelicals of all ages seem loath to do that kind of "fact checking". Most seem content with whatever Scripture or some teacher says that gives them immediate help. "Well, the Lord spoke to me..." Again, Scripture alone does not mean Scripture according to me alone. That is not Reformation Theology.

Some Evangelicals say that they accept the authority of Scripture but then destroy it by saying that its authority is only for them personally but it is not for other people or it is the authority for them only on certain subjects and not other subject. Many younger people today live with contradiction and inconsistency. Being rational, or reasonable and logical, is not important, especially in matters of faith and life (morals) Their true authority is their "heart" or gut feelings. When they sing or say, "Jesus is Lord" that is what they mean and not His Word.

The entire Scripture was considered to be verbally inspired Revelation from God and therefore inerrant (absolute Truth) and was interpreted according to the common sense meaning of its words (the "historical-grammatical" method). Many "Evangelicals" today do not accept the Reformers' definition of what the Bible is or it is a matter of indifference and not important. By the early 19th Century, many Christians who rejected the Bible as ultimate authority began to accept inner, subjective experience in its place. They became "Liberals". Neither the Book nor any other external authority were as important as the authority as the internal testimony of the heart. Many of today's "Evangelicals" still confess belief in the Bible, but in practice follow what they believe the Spirit of Jesus in them wants them to do (not all that different from the Liberals) This is the same as saying they will follow the spirit of love. The Rule of Love (especially for the marginalized of Society) is today's authority for many who call themselves Evangelicals. Scripture is the story of how God has loved Humanity through the centuries, but it is no longer considered to be His inerrant revelation of absolute Truth. This not Reformation Theology!

Justification by Faith Alone is its Material Principle

The most important Doctrine of Reformation Theology (known as the Material Principle or Main Teaching) is Justification by Faith Alone. God reaches the sinner's heart through [his] hearing of the Gospel preached and He regenerates that heart by grace alone. All efforts to qualify for salvation by doing good works totally irrelevant. Regeneration precedes conversion. God gives the gift of faith (and repentance) to the regenerate heart and, at that moment, the sinner by that

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faith alone (plus nothing) enters into union with Christ. [He] is adopted as a child of God and declared forgiven of all sin. More than that, being in Christ by faith, God imputes the righteousness of Christ to the believing sinner and [he] is justified, pardoned and in right standing with God, forever.

The transaction is immediate and instantaneous between God and the sinner. There is no mediator and no physical means involved or necessary. No Sacraments or Priest is essential to the transaction. The Priest may act as "midwife" at the new birth (helping, guiding, praying) and then he may give the pledge, sign or token from God (i.e.- Baptism) to the new Believer. The Baptism is an outward sign to the newly regenerated believer that [he] has in fact been regenerated and is now in union with Christ, a forgiven and adopted child of God (the spiritual reality the sign signified). Having that sign will strengthen the Believer's soul in the days of doubt and struggle to come.

The faith that saves is faith ("forsaking all I take him") toward Christ, but especially faith that the death of Jesus is the complete satisfaction for sin. It is faith that the dead Jesus rose from the grave and is now alive and reigns above as Lord and will come again (faith believes "Christ has died! Christ has risen! Christ will come again!"- for me!)

The faith that saves is all sufficient and stands alone, but it does not remain alone. The Holy Spirit now lives in the justified sinner and the righteousness imputed or reckoned to [him] now becomes actual. The process of sanctification begins. The fruit and the gifts of the Holy Spirit within begin to manifest themselves. They are the evidence that salvation has come and is real in this person's heart. The sinner made right with God will live righteously.

All of this is the main, iconic, "material" teaching of Reformation Theology. Today's younger self-styled Evangelicals disavow just about all of it. It seems for many of them Salvation is understood as simply a wonderful love relationship with the Jesus they read about in the Gospels and experience in music

Its corollary is Believers' Church

Applying the Doctrines of Grace, the 5 "solas" (Scripture alone, Grace alone, Faith alone, Christ alone, the Glory of God alone) has radical implications for understanding what Church is. Long story short- Ecclesiology begins from the bottom up. "Church" begins with the Believer and then a congregation of Believers in whose midst Christ is present ("where 2 or 3 gather in my Name") All Believers use their gifts and minister to each other ("known as the "Priesthood of all Believers") Leaders are selected and ordained by the congregation to preach the Word (there primary function), administer the Sacraments (Baptism and Holy Communion) and maintain discipline and order in the congregation. Whatever your Doctrine of the Church is (Ecclesiology) these are the marks of the Church according to the Reformers. Ironically, this is probably the one teaching of the Reformers that younger Evangelicals come the closest to believing.

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Conclusion

This concludes my short, simple overview of the key elements of Reformation Theology. It is important to know that originally "Reformed", "Protestant" and "Evangelical" were all interchangeable names. Why aren't they today? It seems they have gone their separate ways in different directions. I do not believe a person can honestly be one without being all 3. Will they ever be reunited? What is the future for Reformation Theology? Who will preserve it?