

Last week was a busy week because of the General Synod and other matters and so the elders gave me permission to use an old sermon to commemorate the Reformation which usually do in some way around this time of year. This sermon was first preached in 2014 and so if you remember it, you have a really good memory. I suspect for most of us it will be as if I wrote this sermon this week.

The traditional date for the beginning of the Reformation is October 31, 1517 when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door at Wittenberg.

Some years ago Robert Rothwell wrote on the Ligonier Ministries blog, that Reformation Day “commemorates what was perhaps the greatest move of God’s Spirit since the days of the Apostles.” And it is certainly a Biblical idea to commemorate significant events in the history of God’s kingdom. The Lord’s Day (which is every Sunday) is a commemoration of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The Lord’s Supper is a commemoration of Jesus’ death and his giving of himself for us and to us. So it is a good thing for the church to remember and to celebrate the reformation.

As a confessional Presbyterian church we are heirs of the reformation. Of course all Protestant churches are heirs of the reformation in some sense. There are different traditions that trace their roots back to the reformation. There is the Lutheran tradition. There is the Anabaptist tradition. And there is the Reformed tradition. We belong to the Reformed tradition. As Reformed believers we certainly have profited from many of the insights of Martin Luther. But the real fountain of the Reformed tradition historically is John Calvin.

It is not hero worship to remember and to celebrate the influence of these great men. The Bible certainly highlights the contributions of significant figures in the history of salvation such as Moses and David and the apostle Paul. We are thankful to God for them. And so it is with men like Luther and Calvin. They were gifts of God to the church. Through them God rescued much of the church from the errors of Roman Catholicism. God raised up these men and others to be instruments of reformation in the church. And we today have an accurate understanding of the message of the Bible because through these men that he raised up, God led his people to a renewed appreciation for the authority of the Bible and the recovery of a whole slew of biblical truths that had been lost in the corruption of the majority of the church in the preceding centuries.

October 31 1517 is considered to be the beginning of the Reformation. Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg. Of course this event was part of something that had been going on for some time, but it was a significant event and it is appropriate to consider it as an important turning point in the history of the church. Those 95 theses were 95 propositions that detailed errors in the Roman Catholic teaching according to Martin Luther. They were soon printed and spread throughout Germany and Europe. And in the months and years to follow, more and more people were influenced by them and the renewal took place that we call the Protestant Reformation.

But edifying and interesting as church history is, it is not to be the content of our preaching. What I'd like to do this morning is to highlight three biblical themes that were important in the Reformation. I've called this sermon, "Some Reformed Emphases" because these are a few of the biblical themes that were recovered and expounded during the Reformation and are an important part of the teaching of Reformed churches. I could have picked different ones. For instance, justification by faith is a key biblical truth that was rediscovered during the Reformation. I'm not going to focus on that in this sermon because there are other themes that are important to consider. So I have chosen three biblical themes which were important in the reformation and which are significant emphases in churches that call themselves Reformed or Presbyterian. We will consider the authority of Scripture and the sovereignty of God and the doctrine of vocation.

The authority of scripture. One of the key controversies between the Roman Catholic church and the reformers had to do with this matter of the authority of Scripture. In the Roman Catholic understanding the highest authority in religious matters was the church. Certainly the Roman Catholic church believed in the authority of the Bible, but the church stood between the Bible and the people. It was the church's teaching about the Bible that was the highest authority not the Bible itself. Along with this, the church taught much that was not taught in the Bible at all and that teaching was considered authoritative as well. So while the Bible had a place, it was not the highest and final authority in the doctrine and life of the church.

The reformers insisted that the Bible is the ultimate authority in matters of faith and life. The church must teach the Bible, and all that it teaches must conform to the Bible. It cannot teach things as absolute truth that are not found in the Bible. And its teaching is always open to critique based on the Bible. So in the Roman Catholic Church leaders would say, you must believe this or that because the church says so. In the Reformation tradition the leaders would say, you must believe this because the Bible says so.

An expression of this teaching is found in our Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 1, para. 10 "The supreme judge by whom all controversies of religion are to be settled ... can only be the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture. With his decision we are to be satisfied." That of course includes this matter as well. The Westminster Confession of Faith is a summary of Reformed teaching. Notice it does not say that all controversies of religion are to be settled by appeal to the WCF. It says that they are to be settled by an appeal to the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture. That means that the WCF has no authority except in so far as it can be shown that what it teaches is based on the Scriptures. A document like the WCF should be taken seriously because it is the product of the study of Scripture by many godly faithful men and it has been examined and re-examined for centuries. But it is only authoritative insofar as it can be shown to an expression of biblical teaching.

How can we show this point from the Bible? First of all by noticing that God himself is the highest authority. The opening chapters of the Bible teach us that God created everything including human beings and in his interactions with Adam and Eve he shows that his word is to be obeyed. In Genesis 2:16-17 we read, "And the

Lord God commanded the man, saying, “You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, <sup>17</sup>”but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”” God speaks with absolute authority. Adam and Eve are required to do what he says. There is no higher authority. In the NT we read Jesus saying, in Matthew 28:18 “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.” That is the first part of the biblical teaching that the Bible is the highest authority. The Bible teaches that God has the highest authority.

The second part of this argument is that the Bible teaches that God speaks in the Bible. The Bible teaches that the Bible is the Word of God. A key text here is 2 Timothy 3:16. “All Scripture is breathed out by God.” Scripture comes from God. Now Paul here was thinking in the first place as the OT, but he also taught that his own inspired teaching was the word of God. We read for instance in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 where Paul says to the Thessalonians, “when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God.” So the apostolic teaching is the word of God and that is what we have in the NT.

This is a crucially important doctrine. There is no higher authority in matters of faith and life than the Bible. What this means is that God speaks to us directly through his Word. No one can bind our consciences by requiring us to believe or do things that are not found in the Word of God. No church is allowed to say that we must believe this or that or do this or that just because the church says so. God must say so. And he does so through his Word.

That is why the WCF says in chapter 20:2 “God alone is the Lord of the conscience and has left it free from the doctrines and commandments of men which are – in anything – contrary to his Word, or which – in matters of faith or worship – are in addition to it.” John R. de Witt says in a booklet called *What is the Reformed Faith*, “The Reformation rediscovered and accentuated afresh the authority of the Bible. It threw down the tyranny of a corrupt ecclesiastical hierarchy that had set itself above the Word of God, and repudiated the authority of ecclesiastical tradition coordinate with that Word, insisting with a vigor rising from a new-found truth that Jesus Christ is Master in his own house ...” (5)

If you believe something simply because the Church says so – then the church is Lord of your conscience. If you believe something because the Bible says so – then Jesus is Lord of your conscience. The supreme authority of scripture is one of the truths recovered during the reformation. And the fact that it is still part of our confession today is reason for thankful celebration.

This is not to say that the teaching of the church is unimportant. We stand in the line of the saints who have gone before us and what they have discovered in God’s word is extremely helpful for us to understand God’s word. The Confessions are really helpful for us in learning what the Bible teaches. There is much that is valuable in the traditions that have been passed down to us. But we must always make a clear distinction

between the authority of the Bible and the authority of anything else. The Bible is always the highest authority.

The second truth that was prominent in the Reformation and which continues to be prominent in Reformed Churches which are true to the Bible is an emphasis on the sovereignty of God. Now that term “sovereignty” simply means that God rules over all things. In the usage of the reformed tradition that term means that nothing happens outside of God’s control and that in salvation what God does is of decisive importance rather than what man does.

First we will look at the idea that God rules over all things and nothing happens outside of God’s control. This is called the doctrine of God’s providence. The WCF expresses this teaching in chapter 5 paragraph 1, “God – the great Creator of all things – upholds, directs, disposes, and governs all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least.”

Now because we are heirs of the reformation and believe that our doctrines must come from the scriptures we need to see where the Bible teaches that God controls and governs all things. Consider the following verses. Proverbs 16:33, <sup>33</sup>“The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.” A lot was like a dice. This verse is saying whenever you throw dice, the outcome is from the Lord. Whenever you flip a coin, the outcome is from the Lord. That is how much God is in control of all things. Matthew 10:29 says that not a sparrow will fall to the ground apart from our Father. You see a dead bird at the side of the road. That bird did not die apart from the control of our heavenly Father.

1 Samuel 2:6–7, <sup>6</sup>“The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. <sup>7</sup>“The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low and he exalts.” So whether people live or die is under God’s control. Whether people are poor or rich is under God’s control. Daniel 2:21, <sup>21</sup>“He changes times and seasons; he removes kings and sets up kings; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to those who have understanding;” Romans 13:1 “there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” Psalm 33:10–11, <sup>10</sup>“The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. <sup>11</sup>“The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the plans of his heart to all generations.”

These are just a few verses that show how comprehensive God’s government and control is. An important summary statement is Ephesians 1:11 which says that God works all things according to the counsel of his will. So God sends peace or war. From God comes poverty or prosperity. The course of history is controlled by God. The roll of the dice is determined by him. The fall of a sparrow is under his control.

And all this in such a way that does not make human beings puppets. Humans make meaningful choices for which they are responsible. We are responsible for our actions. There is going to be a judgment at the end of the age. What we do or fail to do makes a difference in our lives. The actions of the decision makers in the places of power have real influence and lead to real results. The wellbeing of nations is effected by the

wisdom of their leaders. The course of our lives is effected by the decisions that we make. God's control does not mean that human actions are without meaning. And yet in some way far beyond what we can understand, nothing happens apart from God's will.

This is part of what is meant by the term the sovereignty of God. God is in control of all things. This also means that God is in control of salvation. God decides of who gets saved and when someone is saved, it is God who is doing the saving. The decisive action in the salvation of a sinner is God's action and not man's action. It is not that we come to God first and he responds to us by saving us. God comes to us first and confers salvation upon us. God's choice of us is the decisive choice. Our choice to seek God's salvation comes after God acts upon us.

Part of this is the doctrine of election. WCF 3:2 says, "By God's decree, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestined to everlasting life and others are foreordained to everlasting death." This is a display of God's sovereignty. God decides from eternity already who is going to be saved and who is not going to be saved. God is sovereign in salvation. He is king in salvation. He does not just throw the possibility of salvation out there and see what will happen. He is in absolute control.

We see this taught in Ephesians 1. Paul says in verse 4 that God the Father "chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world." In verse 5 he says that he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ. Notice that Jesus Christ is at the center of our salvation even in election. We are chosen in Christ. We are predestined to be adopted through Jesus Christ. But it is clear from this that we are saved not because we chose God first of all, but because he chose us. If we choose him it is because he first chose us.

We see this sovereignty of God in salvation also in Ephesians 2. Verse 1 tells us that before we are saved we are dead in trespasses and sins. But then verse 5 says that "even when we were dead in our trespasses" God "made us alive together with Christ." Verse 8 of Ephesians 2 says "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God."

These biblical truths about the sovereignty of God in his control of all things and in salvation were truths that were rediscovered and emphasized during the reformation. In the centuries leading up to the reformation these truths had been lost to a large degree because of the corruption of the church. It was man-centered rather than God-centered. The reformation followed the Bible in putting God in the center. And in the reformed tradition this biblical emphasis has been preserved... at least in some parts of the reformed tradition.

That is not to say that this has only been preserved among those who call themselves reformed or Presbyterian. There are unquestionably teachers and churches who continue this emphasis who do not use these labels. But it is also true that there are many churches in which these truths about the sovereignty of

God are denied or ignored or simply not emphasized and what happens then is that as God moves to the periphery, man moves to the center.

One scholar has written, "Calvin's true legacy is, indeed, not a system but a method, the method of striving to see everything – not from man's point of view but from the viewpoint of God." (Osterhaven 167) And that certainly accords with what we read in our Scripture reading from Romans 11. Verse 36 "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen." That is the biblical emphasis and it has been an emphasis of the reformed tradition following the Bible.

The third biblical theme that is a reformed emphasis is the doctrine of vocation. That is vocation not vacation. Vacation is a good thing but it is not really a reformed emphasis although reformed people like vacations as much as anyone else. What do we mean by the doctrine of vocation? Vocation is another word for calling. And the doctrine of vocation is that our daily work is a calling from God and is therefore spiritually significant. An important and significant part of the way that we are to serve and honor and glorify God is through our daily work.

John Calvin wrote in his Institutes ""no task will be so sordid and base, provided you obey your calling in it, that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight" (III,x,6)

Now during the middle ages the view had arisen that if you really wanted to serve God you had to hold an office in the church or you had to join a monastery or convent. The everyday work of ordinary people was not considered to be service to God. It was there. It had to be done. You had to eat. But the work of farming or cleaning house or having a trade or being a merchant was not considered to be meaningful as far as serving God was concerned. Luther and Calvin and others rejected that view on the basis of biblical teaching. They understood and taught that that kind of distinction between secular work and sacred work was contrary to biblical teaching. They taught that all work was to be done to the glory of God. They taught that every legitimate job was a calling from God and that it was through these callings that much of our service to God is offered.

Eugene Osterhaven in his book, *"The Spirit of the Reformed Tradition"*, gives a good summary of the effect that this teaching had. "It would be impossible to exaggerate the significance of this teaching, found first in the writings of the Reformers, proclaimed from hundreds of pulpits, and accepted by multitudes of Christians who heard the new teaching. It gave strength to the Christian ethic and cheer to the hearts of men. It encouraged the sick and feeble, gave hope to the forgotten, and wrought iron into the souls of many. Peasants bound to the soil found their toil to have become meaningful, women felt less the drudgery of their tasks and people everywhere came to see that the worth of labor depends not on office or station in life but rather on the spirit of consecration in which it is performed. Called to service, before the face of God, they believed the tasks of a day to be filled with blessing when done "unto him."

Where to do we find this in the Bible? The foundation of it is found in the original mandate given to Adam from God – often called the cultural mandate. In Genesis 1:28 we read that “God blessed them [Adam and Eve]. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.” In Genesis 2:15 we read that “The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to work it and keep it.”

This is the task that God gave to humanity at the beginning of time. To fill the earth, to subdue it, to have dominion over it, to work in the garden and to keep it. This is the original command for mankind to work to the glory of God. God wanted to be glorified through people working in his creation and drawing from it the things that they needed to sustain their lives and to make life easier and more enjoyable. From this has come the knowledge and the technology that we know today. And we are all involved in one way or another. We all have work and responsibilities. And we are to do them not just because we have to. We are to do our work because it is an important part of our service to God. We are to pray and read our Bibles and live holy lives and all of that. But we are also to work. God’s purpose for us is that we serve him through our everyday work.

This truth is also taught in 1 Corinthians 10:31 “So whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” This text is absolutely comprehensive. Everything that we do, we are to do to the glory of God. That includes our public worship and our private worship and our family worship. That includes evangelism and mercy ministry. But it also includes our rest and our leisure and it includes our work – whether that is at home or in school or at the job site or in the office.

This gives dignity and meaning and significance to our everyday work. Some jobs seem more significant than others. But every job is significant in our service of God. By doing it well because we are serving the Lord, by serving other people through it, by participating in the great task of keeping human society and culture going we are serving the Lord. Work is spiritual if it is done to please and serve the Lord.

So those are just three biblical themes that were part of the teaching of the Reformers and that have been passed down to us through the reformed tradition. As I said there are many more. But these are some of what we celebrate when we remember the Reformation and are thankful for it: the Scripture as the supreme authority for our faith and life, the Sovereignty of God, and the doctrine of vocation.

These and other reformed and biblical themes lead us to a God-centered faith and life. Life is not about us and our glory. It is about God and his glory. We are helpless in our sins. God is our great Saviour.

I did not say anything about justification by faith. But it is an essential part of the picture both in the Bible and, following the Bible, in the reformation and the reformed tradition. We are justified by faith through Christ and not by our works. Because what Christ has done for us we are right with God if we believe on him.

And as those who are right with God, we bow before his word as our highest authority, we acknowledge God as the one who controls and governs all things and who sovereignly chooses us for salvation and applies that salvation to us, and with God as the one to whom and through whom we live, we seek to please him not only by our prayers, but also through our everyday work.

We have much reason for thankfulness that God has revealed these truths to us in the first place, restored them to the church in the reformation and preserved them through history so that we may confess and cherish them and live them in our day