

# Truths of the Reformation (3) Glory to God Alone

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Our subject this morning is another of the 5 solas of the Reformation – glory to God alone. We are spending some time on some of the key truths of the Reformation as a way of remembering and celebrating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the beginning of the Reformation. Last week we looked at the doctrine of “Scripture Alone” which is the teaching that the highest authority in the church for doctrine and life is Scripture and there is nothing else that stands at the same level. Human traditions are important, but they always must conform to the teaching of the Bible.

The leaders of the Reformation also taught and emphasized the biblical teaching that the highest goal for everything is the glory of God. The purpose of creation is the glory of God. The purpose of salvation is the glory of God. The purpose of our lives is the glory of God. The word “alone” in the phrase, “glory to God alone,” conveys the idea that nothing is more important and central than the glory of God. In particular, the word “alone” means that God does not share his glory with man. Human beings are glorified in salvation, but the ultimate purpose of that is the glory of God. So even when man is glorified, the purpose of that glorification is not ultimately the glory of man, but the glory of God.

The teaching of the Reformation then was radically God-centered. It was God-centered as opposed to man-centered. All of the 5 *solas* put the focus on God in the place of man. Scripture alone means God’s Word alone is the highest authority – man’s word must conform to God’s word. “By Faith Alone” means that we receive the gift of justification by faith and not because of anything that we do. “By Grace Alone” is similar. Salvation is a gift of God and not something that we earn. “Christ Alone” means that Christ has done all that is necessary for our salvation. In each case the focus is on God rather than on man.

The errors of the Roman Catholic Church consistently expanded the role and the significance of man. Human tradition was placed on the same

level as God's word. Man's good works were understood to contribute to his salvation. The same is still the case in many of the errors that we find in the protestant church. The thinking of human beings is often placed at the same level or even above the word of God and man is understood to play a greater role in his salvation than the Bible teaches. The great tendency in all of our hearts by nature is to emphasize man compared to God. And the great emphasis in Scripture is that we are to be humble before God and to acknowledge that we exist by him and for him and that without him we can do nothing and that his glory is the great purpose of creation and history and salvation. John the Baptist expressed this well when he said of Jesus in John 3:30 "He must increase, but I must decrease."

Now what do we mean when we use that phrase "Glory to God." We have looked at the "alone" part, but what does it mean to give glory to God. It means to acknowledge that God is glorious. So, it means things like worshipping and praising God as well as living in such a way that reflects well on God. For instance, obedience to God's laws is a way of glorifying God because it honors him while disobedience does the very opposite. The Scriptures teach that God is glorious – he is great and beautiful and perfect and amazing and excellent and awe-inspiring.

Let's look at some passages that help us to see what it means to say that God is glorious. Psalm 19:1 is a good place to start. "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork." God made the heavens. And so, when we look at the heavens and are amazed at their vastness and beauty we are seeing something of the glory of God. God's glory is reflected in the wonder and the beauty and the intricacy of the creation. He made it and so it reflects his glory.

Another passage that gives us insight into the glory of God is Exodus 33 & 34. In verse 33:18, Moses says to God, "Please show me your glory." And in verse 19 God says, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.'" In the verses that follow two things happen. God hides Moses in a cleft of a rock, and passed by so Moses could see his back. Moses was not allowed to see God's face. So sometimes the glory of God can be seen. We do not know exactly what Moses saw, but he saw something as an answer to

his request to see God's glory. Scripture speaks of seeing the glory of God.

But the second thing that happened after Moses asked God to see his glory was that God proclaimed his name to Moses. We read that in Exodus 34:5-8, "<sup>5</sup>The Lord descended in the cloud and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the Lord. <sup>6</sup>The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, 'The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, <sup>7</sup>keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation.'" <sup>8</sup>And Moses quickly bowed his head toward the earth and worshiped."

God reveals his glory to Moses here by describing himself. He is merciful and gracious and slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness and he will by no means clear the guilty. All of these traits belong to the glory of God. We can learn from this that whenever God describes himself in Scripture he is describing his glory. God's glory is all of his attributes. God's mercy is part of his glory. God's power is part of his glory. God's wisdom is part of his glory.

God's glory is seen in Jesus Christ as well. Hebrews 1:3 says of Jesus, "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature." John 1:14 says, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth." 2 Corinthians 4:6 "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." So, Jesus reveals the glory of God. He is God and in him, in his words and his acts, we see a great revelation of the glory of God. We see perfect love. We see perfect holiness. We see perfect wisdom in Jesus Christ as he is described to us in the Scriptures.

So, God is glorious. He is praise-worthy. He is amazing in all the different aspects of his being. And his greatest priority is to demonstrate that glory and his greatest priority for us is that we acknowledge that glory and worship him for it and make that glory known by word and by deed.

We see this in many passages. Isaiah 42:8 “I am the LORD; that is my name, my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.” Habakkuk 2:14 says “For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.” That is God’s great purpose. Psalm 29:2 says, “Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name....” God’s people sing in Psalm 57:5 “Be exalted, O God, above the heavens! Let your glory be over all the earth!” And they say to one another in Psalm 96:3 “Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples!”

We see this desire for his own glory also in Jesus. In his prayer to his Father recorded in John 17, Jesus says in verse 5 “And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.” And in verse 24 he says “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me....”

This is ultimately the purpose of our salvation. In that great passage in Ephesians 1 in which Paul describes our salvation, he stresses that the purpose of our salvation is “to the praise of his glorious grace....” So, you see from Scripture that God is glorious and that his greatest priority is that he be glorified.

Now there are two questions that arise in our minds when we think of this idea that God’s first priority is his own glory. The first is, it sounds self-centered and egotistical. It would certainly be wrong for a mere human being to put his own glory before everything else. How can this be wrong for us but right for God? The reason is that God is truly glorious and so it is right and proper and necessary that he be acknowledged to be what he really is. God is in a category all of his own. He is perfect. He is awesome in every way. He has no flaws. He has no limitations. And so, it is profoundly right and proper that he be glorified. He is worthy of being glorified. And it is profoundly wrong if he is not glorified.

Furthermore, our greatest good and joy and satisfaction is experienced in glorifying God while the greatest harm for us is not to glorify God. We were made to find our greatest good in seeing and appreciating and worshipping and adoring God. The greatest blessing that we can know is

to be filled with love and adoration for God. And the greatest curse that we can know is to be without love and adoration for God. Life in the Bible is associated with loving and praising God and death is associated with not loving and adoring God. And so, for God to seek his own glory before all else is not only right, it is an expression of his love and generosity. Ascribing glory to God is our greatest good. There is no distinction between God seeking his glory and God seeking our wellbeing for we experience our greatest wellbeing by glorifying God.

So, the fact that God's first priority is his own glory is part of his goodness. If God were not to put his only glory first of all it would be wrong because it is absolutely truth that God's glory is the highest good. God is giving us the greatest blessing by seeking first his own glory. This point is seen in Scripture in the fact that the saints in heaven are praising and glorifying God. In Revelation 7:9-17, John describes the great multitude standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They are in heaven. They are experiencing the goal of their salvation. They are experiencing perfect blessedness. And what are they doing? They are saying, "Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen." They are experiencing the greatest good. They are glorifying God. So, when God is seeking his own glory, he is at the same time seeking our greatest good.

A second question that people might ask in connection with God giving his own glory his first priority is does that not diminish the human race more than is right and proper? Surely man is a glorious being. Does this great emphasis on the glory of God do justice to the glory of the human race?

The answer to this question is that God glorifies himself through the glory of man. Man is a glorious creature because God made us in his image. The glory of God and the glory of man go together. Mankind is at the pinnacle of creation. Psalm 8 says of mankind, "[Y]ou have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor." The word glory is used to refer to man. But that glory is not something that rivals God's glory. The glory of man is a reflection of God's glory. We are glorious because we are made in the image of God.

Now, of course, there is the fall to take into account. Man is not only glorious, he is also inglorious in many ways because of sin. Because of our sin we detract from our own glory and from the glory of God. And it must be said that because of our sin, we are greatly diminished.

Because of sin we are selfish and greedy and hateful and evil in many many ways. The glory that was ours before the fall is greatly tarnished. And certainly, it is necessary for us to acknowledge that and to humble ourselves before God as sinners.

But in salvation God restores his image in us and the word glory is used once again. Those who are saved will be glorified. Romans 8:17 says that if we suffer with Christ we will also be “glorified with him.”

Glorification is the end result of our salvation. But the key to speaking about the glory of human beings is that we never have any glory independent of God. It is the image of God in us that makes us glorious. And so, everything that is wonderful about human beings comes from God and is a manifestation of God’s glory. God’s glory and our glory are related because we are made in God’s image and renewed in God’s image in salvation.

And so, the end result is still the priority of the glory of God. Our glorification is not for our own praise, but for God’s praise. And you see the more we are like God the more we will reflect his own priority of seeking his glory more than anything else. We are most glorified when we focus on glorifying God and not on ourselves. We are most fully human when our greatest priority is the glory of God. We are not designed to flourish by seeking our own glory. We are designed to flourish by giving all our energy and effort to celebrate and promote the glory of God.

So, you see how radically God-centered the Bible is. Mankind is important in the biblical story, but his importance and his purpose has to do with giving glory to God. Everything else is subservient to this goal of the glory of God. And that means that life is not about us. We tend to prioritize our own goals and our own interests and our own pleasures, even our own reputations. But these are not God’s priority. God’s priority for us is that we prioritize his glory above all else. And that is at the same time our greatest wellbeing. We see this in a verse like

Matthew 6:33 which tells us to “[S]eek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.” We are not to worry about all the other things. God will look after them. We are to focus our energy and our efforts on the glory of God. Seeking the kingdom of God and seeking the glory of God are the same thing. And Jesus says that that is what is to be first in our lives.

This biblical emphasis has come down to us from the Reformation. One scholar has written, “Calvin’s true legacy is, indeed, not a system but a method, the method of striving to see everything – man, Christ, faith, the world, the Bible religion, life ... - not from man’s point of view but from the viewpoint of God” (quoted in Osterhaven, *The Spirit of the Reformed Tradition*, p. 167). In the light of what we have seen from the Bible, it is clear that Calvin and many others were simply reflecting the teaching of Scripture. Scripture is God-centered. That is why the Reformation was God-centered. And this is part of the legacy that we are called to maintain.

Now the problem that the Reformation addressed of a man-centered religion in the Roman Catholic Church is a problem that lives in each one of us by nature. One of the characteristics of our sinful nature is to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. And as part of that we are preoccupied with ourselves rather than God. We are preoccupied with our own desires and our own glory instead of being focused on what God wants and God’s glory.

2 Corinthians 5:15 expresses this point clearly. It says that Jesus “died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who for their sake died and was raised.” Salvation is being saved from living for ourselves. That is what we do by nature and that is what the sinful nature that remains in us after salvation continues to seek to do. This shows itself in many ways. We see it in how easy it is to stay at home and watch TV compared to how hard it is to go out to a prayer meeting. We see it in how easy it is to buy something that we really want to have compared to giving money for missions or helping the needy. We see it in how easy it is to read a novel compared with reading the Bible. Our sinful nature wants to live for ourselves. Our wants and our desires are the priority.

But 2 Corinthians 5:15 shows us how one of the results of Jesus dying for us is that we “not no longer live for [ourselves] but for” Jesus. Living for Jesus is living for the glory of Jesus which is living for the glory of God. That means that those who are truly related to Christ by faith will begin to live for Jesus rather than living for themselves. There will be on-going repentance of living for self and on-going choices that put God and his will and his glory first. We will never be perfect in this life. But where there is renewal through faith in Christ, there will be progress in putting God first in our lives.

We must take this seriously. If we are truly saved there will be something of this in our lives. We will be fighting against living for ourselves and we will be making choices that put Jesus and the glory of God first. There are many people in the church who are still living for themselves. And it is so important that we do not belong to that category.

But at the same time the gospel of salvation is that there is forgiveness because of what Jesus has done for us. This idea of living for ourselves is an idea that is very convicting. We will always fall short. We will always miss the mark as long as we are in this life. What a comfort that Jesus paid the penalty for our sins if we are trusting in him! We are not saved by how well we are doing. We are saved by what Jesus did for us by his life and his death. But if we are saved, there will be change. There will not be perfection, but we will be repenting of living for self and there will be something of living for the glory of God.

One of the other implications of this theme of the glory of God alone is the importance of humility for us. I’ve already quoted Isaiah 42:8 “I am the LORD; that is my name, my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols.” Our purpose is to celebrate and to worship and to make God’s glory known. We are not to seek our own glory in the sense that we want the attention to be on us rather than God. The godly attitude that we must cultivate is that expressed in Psalm 115:1 “Not to us, O LORD, not to us, but to your name give glory....” Or that of John the Baptist when he said of Jesus, “He must increase, but I must decrease.”

But again, our sinful nature seeks our own glory. The Bible has many warnings against pride. James 4:6 tells us that “God opposes the proud



but gives grace to the humble.” Proverbs 11:2 says “When pride comes, then comes disgrace, but with the humble is wisdom.” And Paul tells us in Romans 12:3 that no-one is “to think of himself more highly than he ought to think.” Jesus spoke of people who “loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God.” That is true of all of us by nature. David VanDrunen in his book called *God’s Glory Alone*, writes, “All of us, though some more than others, become obsessed with ourselves and are blinded by desire for praise and approval by fellow human beings.”

The Bible, however, puts us in our place and this theme of “Glory to God alone” is an important part of that. One of the results of salvation is that we become willing to humble ourselves before God and give him the glory that belongs to him. Paul tells us in Colossians 3:17, “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, **humility**, meekness, and patience....” And this is what we are enabled to do through the power of Christ in our lives.

“Glory to God alone.” This is one of the great themes of the Bible and it is one of the great themes of the Reformation and it is one of the great themes of the Reformed Tradition. Life is not about us. It is about the glory of God and everything else is a part of that. What this means in practices is that we repent of pride and self-centeredness and cultivate humility and God-centeredness. This is true for our individual lives. It is also true for our worship and church practices. What is important is not what pleases us but what pleases God. This is why we must seek to be God-centered in our worship and in our preaching. If the glory of God is the most important thing that means that we will dwell on God in our worship and we will be motivated by the glory of God in our lives.

And what a joy it is when by God’s grace we learn to love this truth of the priority of the glory of God. It is a great delight to give God the glory of which he is so worthy. It is a great delight to be given a measure of humility and to rejoice in the greatness and the wonder of God. David put it like this in Psalm 27:4, “One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple.” One of the things that we learn by grace as God’s people is the profound rightness of this truth “Glory to God Alone.” In God’s world, it

is a wonderful thing to know our place. It is not about us. It is about God and his glory. And it is our glory to humble ourselves before God and give ourselves to promoting his glory in our lives. As our WSC puts it, “Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”