

Cautions about the Reformation and Its Theologies

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- I. It was not a primitivist movement – restoration of the NT ideal – but rather a reformatory movement – restoration of the ideal of catholicity
 - A. Affirmed scripture's sole authority but embraced the 5th century father Vincent of Lerins' formula that the catholic faith is "What is believed everywhere, at all times, and by all."
 - B. Viewed "catholicity" as an ideal achieved in the early church and still desirable
 - 1. "The distinctive ideas which thinkers such as Luther and Calvin held to underlie Christian faith and practice had been obscured, if not totally perverted, through a series of developments in the Middle Ages. According to these and other reformers of that age, it was time to reverse these changes, to undo the work of the Middle Ages, in order to return to a purer, fresher version of Christianity which beckoned to them across the centuries. The reformers echoed the cry of the humanists: 'back to the sources' (*ad fontes*) – back to the Golden Age of the church, in order to reclaim its freshness, purity and vitality in the midst of a period of stagnation and corruption" (Timothy George, *Reformation Thought*, 3-4).
 - 2. Mainline reformers constantly quoted Augustine and other church fathers to establish the antiquity of their theology. This is understandable because the Catholics were claiming the church fathers for their many theological aberrations, and their claims were clearly not true.
 - 3. But the church fathers, including even Augustine, got a long of things wrong, and the ultimate appeal needed to bypass them and go directly to the Scriptures.
 - 4. To this day, evangelicals sometimes convert to Catholicism (Francis Beckwith), Eastern Orthodoxy (Hank Hanegraaff – the Bible Answer Man), or Anglicanism (one of my former students) because of the historical antiquity of these faiths.
- II. Therefore, it started with assumptions that the mainline reformers failed to challenge:
 - A. The state-church, or Christendom
 - B. The parish system
 - C. Infant baptism
 - D. Visible means of grace
 - E. Clergy-laity distinctionLet's briefly consider each of these:

III. State-church

- A. The state-church went all the way back to Theodosius in the fourth century. Popes and emperors had vied for power across Europe for centuries, but it was assumed that every political unit could have only one church.
- B. The church was the guardian of morals and, therefore, worked with the state to ensure law and order. If the church was removed from the political sphere, God's law would be removed from morality, and chaos would ensue.
- C. The Lutheran, Reformed, and Anglican churches sustained this model, the Lutheran in Germany and Scandinavia; the Reformed in Zurich, Geneva, and other Swiss cities, in the German Palatinate, in Scotland, and in the Netherlands; the Anglicans in England.
- D. Zwingli, shortly before his death in 1531, said: "The Christian man is nothing else but a faithful and good citizen and the Christian city nothing other than the Christian church."
- E. Peace of Augsburg: "Whose the rule, his the religion."
- F. Logical steps to Reformation:
 - 1. Win the king, the prince, the city council
 - 2. Get reforming measures established by law
 - 3. Set out to convince everyone within that jurisdiction of the truth of the reforming measures
 - 4. Those who reject these changes are now breaking civil law and can be expelled or punished
- G. Results of this system:
 - 1. Widespread nominal Christianity – churches filled with people who were not quite sure why they had been Catholic last week and were Lutheran this week, but "I'm sure Frederick the Wise knows what he's doing."
 - 2. Persecution of dissent – Grebel, Blaurock, Manz, Sattler, Hubmaier, Denck, Hut, Hutter in the 16th century; every significant Baptist pastor in the 17th century

IV. Parish System

- A. Assumes replacement theology – the church should function like OT Israel.
- B. Everyone born into a given parish belongs to that church and should grow up Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, or Catholic, just as a child born in Jerusalem grew up an Israelite, part of God's people.
- C. Political power and religious power are mingled in this system. Religious challenges are regarded as sedition. Allegiance is divided. "Who is my final authority: the king or the Scriptures?"

V. Infant Baptism

- A. The sacramental prop to this system was infant baptism, which was regarded as Christian circumcision.
- B. In *The Institutes* Calvin wrote, “The truth and completion of baptism is the truth and completion of circumcision, since they represent one thing... baptism is the same thing to Christians that circumcision formerly was to the Jews... the promises of both signs, and the mysteries which are represented by them, agree... the apostle makes the one to be not a whit more spiritual than the other” (4.16.11).
- C. Infant baptism had a different role in different Protestant theologies:
 - 1. Lutherans and high-church Anglicans taught baptismal regeneration. God infuses faith into a baby at baptism, giving him or her a new heart. For Luther elect babies were regenerate and would persevere. Absence of perseverance proved that the person was non-elect and hence unregenerate. For later Lutherans, all babies were regenerate but only those persevering would finally be justified. A person could fall away from his regeneration. Anglicans adopted both positions depending on how Calvinistic they were.
 - 2. For Calvin and some of his followers, baptism planted a seed of regeneration in an elect baby that would eventually bear fruit in repentance and faith. This is presumptive regeneration. This is much better than the first position because at least it calls for the child to be converted at some point. However, it implies at least some level of regeneration years before conversion.
 - 3. For the majority of the Reformed tradition, baptism is promissory that the child will one day repent and believe if he or she is elect. The child is baptized into a covenant relation with the church that usually results in the child later “owning the covenant.”
- D. All of these theologies put unregenerate people into the fellowship of the church, and all of them are subject to the problem that baptized people who go to church and lead relatively moral lives are often inclined to think they do not need anything else.

VI. Visible Means of Grace

A. Sacraments

- 1. The mainline reformers maintained the RC view that grace is communicated through visible activities, called sacraments. A sacrament makes one holy by communicating grace through a physical action that signifies and seals a spiritual result.
- 2. The reformers rejected the RC idea that sacraments are *ex opera operatum*, i.e., that the participant receives grace automatically if the priest properly performs the sacrament. This idea went back to Augustine; he taught that the grace

cannot be dependent on the worthiness of the worshiper or of the priest. It must come from the sacrament itself.

3. Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and the rest argued that faith is necessary for the sacrament to be beneficial. This is a big step in the right direction.

B. Baptism

1. For Luther, though, God bestows the faith on the infant whose believing parents bring him for baptism. Luther believed this arrangement glorified election because a baby is completely passive when he receives this gift of faith. "Faith" is being used in a distinctly unbiblical sense, however. A baby cannot believe.
2. For Calvinists, the faith is the inevitable fruit of regeneration, and baptism either plants the seed or places one into a covenant relation that makes conversion probable.

C. Lord's Supper

1. Catholics, of course, taught transubstantiation, that the bread and wine literally become the body and blood of Christ via the miracle of priestly consecration. Fortunately, the reformers rejected the miracle of the mass.
2. Luther replaced it with consubstantiation. The body and blood of Christ are "in, with, and under" the bread and wine, so that the faithful feed on the body of Christ as they are feeding on the bread. In this theology feeding on Christ provides grace to all those who eat and drink in faith.
3. The Reformed rightly rejected any notion of the body of Christ being present "locally" or physically in the sacrament. Rather, Christ is spiritually present in the bread and wine, so that believers feed on Him spiritually when they celebrate the Supper. This sounds harmless; after all, surely we Baptists hope to commune with Christ whenever we celebrate the Lord's Table. Calvin, however, emphasizes that believers are spiritually feasting on the risen body and blood of Christ but only as the Spirit makes it present to them by faith as they eat. Just as in the other views, this makes the Lord's Supper a unique and essential avenue for receiving sanctifying grace.
4. Baptists believe the Supper is a memorial of the finished work of Christ, and we receive grace when we partake in the same way we receive grace through hearing preaching, reading the Word, etc., i.e., by believing the promises of God vouchsafed to us through Christ's finished work. The means of grace for Baptists is faith, and there are many vehicles by which the Word comes to us for us to believe it. Therefore, we call baptism and the Lord's Supper ordinances rather than sacraments.

VII. Clergy-laity Distinction

- A. Once one posits grace in visible ecclesiastical activities, then it is essential that the church manage these activities and that the right people be in place to mediate them.
- B. The reformers affirmed the priesthood of every believer, and they are often eloquent on the sacred calling of every believer. As I mentioned in the sermon, Baptists are heirs of this beautiful teaching, which corrected centuries of Roman Catholic abuse.
- C. Sacramental means of grace, however, required clergy, men ordained to dispense grace to the faithful.
- D. In some subtle and some not so subtle ways, sacramentalism inserts the church between the sinner and God. Instead of the church assembling as a body of priests, members go to church to receive from the appointed clerics the grace necessary for Christian growth.

VIII. Lessons

- A. Baptists value church history and believe we have many allies scattered across the centuries. But we jump straight to the Scriptures for all legitimation of our faith and practice. One hundred church fathers cannot override the clear meaning of one verse of Scripture.
- B. The church and state can thrive only when they are maintained in separate spheres. The church is corrupted by political power, and the state is not competent to render religious decisions.
- C. Churches should be autonomous and congregational, so that Christ can be clearly recognized as the sole Head.
- D. Infant baptism is unscriptural, has no relation to circumcision at all, and has led to the proliferation of nominal Christianity wherever it has been practice.
- E. God gives grace via the Word alone, not through sacraments. Therefore, a Baptist pastor is not a cleric with power to dispense sacramental grace. He is another member of the body gifted to proclaim the Word of God.