



The Five Reformation Principles

Study 1: An Introduction (Psalm 19:1-14)

- o The five “solos” of the Reformed Faith are fundamental principles that characterise the theology of Protestantism over against Roman Catholicism. How did they come about? What are their relevance to us today?

I. Events leading to the Reformation.

1. The early disciples carried out the GC, “from Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:8). John, after exile to the island of Patmos, was based in Ephesus until his death in AD 98. Mark brought the gospel to Egypt, Thomas to India.
 - Missions and intermittent persecutions kept the early churches pure in membership and doctrine. There are clear statements of adult baptism upon conversion in the early writings, and no mention of infant baptism. Infant baptism was first mentioned by Tertullian only around AD 220.
 - The Episcopal form of church government began to develop after the death of the apostles. Bishops ruled over many churches in geographical regions called dioceses or parishes, helped by lower officials. The Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox churches practise this form of church government. The Church of England, and the Methodist and Lutheran denominations, also practise this form of church government.
2. The Roman emperor Constantine (272-337 AD) professed faith in AD312 but did not get baptised until he was on his deathbed. (Some scholars question the genuineness of his conversion, wondering if it was a political tool to unite the empire.) He issued the Edict of Milan in AD 313 which commanded official toleration of Christianity and other religions.
 - Heresies of various kinds - notably on the Trinity and the person of Christ - appeared and were dealt with at the various “ecumenical councils”, some of which were chaired by the Roman emperors. Church and state began to be intertwined.
 - The church of Rome, being located at the capital of the empire, began to grow in prominence. The title “Pope” (meaning Father) was generally used of all bishops by the early third century. Pope Stephen I (254-257) was the first bishop to explicitly claim primacy, although opposed by others. Pope Damasus I (366-384) was the first pope to claim primacy based on Matt. 16:16-19.
3. Medieval Christianity split into the Eastern Orthodox Catholics and the Roman Catholics when Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne, King of the Franks, as Holy Roman Emperor in 800. The Eastern Emperor and the Byzantine Empire felt slighted after having withstood the Germanic barbarian invasions and upheld the faith for centuries. (The nomadic tribes in Asia were pushing the Germanic tribes westward.)

- Back of the political-social divide were disputes over papal authority. The East-West Schism was formally sealed in 1054 when each excommunicated the other.
 - The dissenting groups were persecuted by the establishment churches. These groups included the Albigenses, the Paulicians, the Bogomiles, the Waldensians, the Lollards, and the Anabaptists. They largely kept to believer's baptism, although holding to some doctrinal peculiarities as well.
4. At the eve of the Reformation, the Roman Catholic Church was particularly influential in the West. Governments were under its influence, immoral priests who were ignorant of the Scriptures were propagating superstitious ideas and upholding the human traditions of the church.
 - A priest and theologian by the name of Martin Luther (1483-1546) struggled to find peace with God through asceticism. He finally came to peace with God through faith in Christ, whose imputed righteousness alone assured him of acceptance before God. He began to preach the doctrine of "justification by faith, in Christ, alone".
 - The sale of indulgences for the dead ("certificates to heaven") by one Johann Tetzel outraged Luther. The many abuses of the Roman Catholic Church drove Luther to nail the "Ninety-five Theses", a list of questions and propositions for debate, to the door of the Wittenberg Castle church in Germany. This event, on 31 October 1517, marked the official beginning of the Reformation.
 5. Martin Luther was called to the town of Worm and urged to renounce his teaching, to which he responded, "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they have often erred and contradicted themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. May God help me. Amen."
 - The doctrine of "sola scripture" had been boldly proclaimed. It became known as "the formal principle of the Reformation", upon which rest the other principles.

II. The Spread of Reformed Theology

1. As the Reformation spread, other notable Reformers were raised up by God, including Philipp Melanchthon, Heinrich Bullinger, Martin Bucer, Ulrich Zwingli, and William Farel.
 - Another was John Calvin (1509-1564), who trained as a lawyer in France, and escaped to Switzerland after his conversion in 1533. Upon being challenged by William Farel about his selfish seclusion for academic pursuit, Calvin came to Geneva to preach. By his preaching and writing he developed the system of theology later called Calvinism, which included the doctrine of predestination and the absolute sovereignty of God in salvation of the soul from eternal damnation.
 - Calvin spent his final years promoting the Reformation in Geneva and throughout Europe. One of his students, John Knox, brought the Reformation to Scotland.
2. The Reformation spread to Britain from the late 16th century to the end of the 17th century.
 - A religious reform movement, known as Puritanism, arose within the Church of England which spilled over to other denominations. The Great Ejection of 1662 caused 2,000 Puritan ministers to join the Non-conformists in the work of reforming the church.

- The Puritans were well-known for their preaching and pastoral care. Their writings were most influential, even up to today. They became known as “the second-generation Reformers”.
3. Although not expressed as a list until later, the five principles of Reformed theology were clearly characteristic of the teaching of the Reformers and the Puritans. The Latin word “sola” means “solely” or “only”.
 - (i) Sola Scriptura, by Scripture alone; (ii) Sola Fide, by faith alone; (iii) Sola Gratia, by grace alone; (iv) Solus Christus, through Christ alone; (v) Soli Deo Gloria, glory to God alone.
 - The Reformed church was troubled by the spread of Arminianism from 1610. The Canons of Dort, published in 1619, helped to stabilise the situation, giving rise to the Five Points of Calvinism, not to be confused with the five principles of Reformed theology.
- = We believe that the Reformed faith is the closest expression of the system of teaching taught in the Bible, requiring us to carry out practical reforms in personal and church life.

Review Questions

1. Describe the five “solos” of the Reformed Faith.
2. What two things kept the early churches pure in membership and doctrine?
3. What two things about the church developed after the death of the apostles?
4. What was the date the Reformation started?
5. What is the doctrine of “sola scriptura” also known as?
6. Name some of the leading Reformers other than Martin Luther.
7. Who are the Reformers associated with Geneva and Scotland?
8. What event caused the Puritans in Britain to join the Non-Conformists?
9. What were the Puritans known as?
10. State the five “solos” of Reformed Theology.

Assignment/Discussion

Discuss the concluding statement, “We believe that the Reformed faith is the closest expression of the system of teaching taught in the Bible, requiring us to carry out practical reforms in personal and church life.”

Memory Passage (Psalm 19:7-11)

7 The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul;
The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple;
8 The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes;
9 The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.
10 More to be desired are they than gold,
Yea, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
11 Moreover by them Your servant is warned,
And in keeping them there is great reward.
