

The Possibility of the Renewal of Reformed Theology
In the Church

by
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I have been asked to speak on the "renewal of Reformed theology" from the perspective of one who serves as the pastor of a church. From that point of view it seems clear to me that any significant "renewal of Reformed theology" must begin, not with theology itself, but with a recovery of the faith that gave rise to the Reformed theological tradition. That faith centers in a compelling sense of the awesome majesty of God. As I see it, there is little or no possibility for the renewal of Reformed theology apart from the recovery of a vivid awareness of the majesty of God.

That is not a theological task. It is a pastoral task. It is a pre-theological task that must first be addressed, not by the academy, but by the church and its ministry. A gathering such as this hardly needs to be reminded of the role which an overwhelming sense of the majesty of God played in the life of John Calvin.

Recently, while preparing a sermon for Reformation Sunday, I read Calvin's account of his "sudden conversion" in the preface to his commentary on the Psalms. I was struck by how often he referred to himself as a "timid, mild, and cowardly scholar." Unlike so many self-appointed modern "prophets," Calvin clearly did not choose to become a reformer and a leader of the Reformed cause. He was chosen by God and "thrown into the game" very much against his own inclinations and personality. What overcame his personal reluctance and timidity was an overwhelming sense of the majesty of God. Calvin writes:

Then I, who was by nature a man of the country and a lover of shade and leisure, wished to find for myself a quiet hiding place--a wish which has never yet been granted me; for every retreat I found became a public lecture room. When the one thing I craved was obscurity and leisure, God fastened upon me so many cords of various kinds that he never allowed me to remain quiet,¹ and in spite of my reluctance dragged me into the limelight.

Again, speaking of his return to Geneva after his previous banishment, Calvin says,

I was compelled, against my own will, to take again my former position. The safety of that church was far too important in my mind for me to refuse to meet even death for its sake. But my timidity kept suggesting excuses of every color for refusing to put my shoulder again under so heavy a burden. However, the demand of duty and faith at length conquered, and I went back to the flock from which I had been driven away. With how much grief, with how many tears, and in how great anxiety I went, God is my best witness.²

First and foremost, the renewal of Reformed theology in our time depends on a recovery of an authentic sense of the majesty of God. But such will not come easily in our day. Conditioned as we are by our culture to be suspicious of virtually any power and authority, there is precious little respect left for anyone or anything in our society. Perhaps that is one of the prices we pay for a "democratic egalitarianism" that has replaced heroes and leaders with "celebrities." In our time we will not be able to recover a sense of the majesty of God in the same way Calvin experienced it, but still it is something that we must give our best efforts to recover if there is to be an authentic renewal of Reformed theology.

How may a sense of majesty be recovered in our time? Obviously, it cannot be recovered merely by gimmicks or tinkering with the mechanics of worship. It is not something that can be programmed or that we can create ourselves. But a sense of the majesty of God can be elicited. It can be welcomed. It comes through a serious and disciplined wrestling with the scriptures. It comes through prayer and devotion. It is closely related to a sense of the wonder of life and an awareness of the great mysteries in which our lives are grounded, sustained, and completed. Surely one of the most important tasks of Reformed pastors today is to help people rediscover a sense of wonder in life and to life. Deeper than all the problems we can solve or puzzles we can unravel are the mysteries that the more we ponder, the deeper and more wonderful they become. A major part of preaching today is not to give answers, and never to give simple answers to the perplexing ironies and antinomies of life, but to set before people the great and deep mysteries of life in creation. We can and must labor to elicit a sense of wonder. We must help people recover a sense of transcendence that is far deeper than the sterile secularism that would reduce the great mysteries of life to the one-dimensional trivialities of mass culture.

As an interesting aside, it is beginning to appear that television may be a strange ally in this task. The irony of the matter is that the mindlessness of so much programming on television is leading to a backlash as people experience a new hunger for substance and for personal contact. A good many people I know are getting fed up with the mindlessness and the manipulations of television and are eager for that which the Reformed tradition has always sought to offer--thoughtful preaching that both illumines the mind and moves the heart, and faithful pastoral care in a community of faith.

II

That leads us to a second matter which is needed in a renewal of Reformed theology, and that is a recovery of the distinctive life of the Christian congregation. Issues of ecclesiology need to be high on the agenda of the Reformed tradition. The Presbyterian Church, which has been so comfortably and securely established as a part of upper-middle class American culture, is being forced to rethink what it means to be distinctively the church of Jesus Christ. The integrity of the church is very much at stake today. Over against the alluring seductions of ideologies of both the right and the left (and middle, too, I suppose

should be added), the church must struggle with what it means to be faithful to its own distinctive agenda and vocation as a witness to the majesty and grace of God, made known decisively in Jesus Christ. The church is not called to "lord it over" the world. It is not called to "transform the world," as if it possibly could. The church is called to bear witness, without anxiety and without coercion, to what God has done, is doing, and will bring to completion in Jesus Christ. The proper role of the church is as a witness, not as an errand-boy for other ideologies or as a ruler over others.

On the most practical level, this concern for the recovery of the distinctiveness and integrity of the church involves a kind of "working congregationalism." I know that in saying that I may be playing into the hands of the congregationalism that is so much a part of the religious culture in which I and many of us live. But there is simply no alternative to a healthy concern for the life of the particular congregation in which by the providence of God our lives are set. Despite all that may be said against "creeping congregationalism," the reality is that the fundamental unit of mission in the church is and always has been the congregation, the fellowship of believers. We who are ordained and installed as pastors must give the majority of our time to seeking to build up the community of faith. That is much harder and much more threatening than running off to meetings "to run the church," but the life of the church depends, as it always has, on the renewal of congregations as vital centers of Christian faith, devotion, and practice.

The church will not be renewed by utopian dreams and idealistic visions. It will be renewed by those who care enough to work at building up particular communities of faith. Will Willimon, in his book What's Right with the Church, calls our attention to words from Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Life Together that speak with particular significance to our situation today:

Every human wish-dream that is injected into the Christian community is a hindrance to genuine community and must be banished if genuine community is to survive. He who loves his dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer. . . . God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. The man who fashions a visionary ideal of community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God himself accordingly. . . . He acts as if he is a creator of the Christian community, as if his dream binds men together. When things do not go his way, he calls the effort a failure. When his ideal picture is destroyed, he sees the community going to smash. So he becomes, first an accuser of his brethren, than an accuser of God, and finally the despairing accuser of himself.³

To that Willimon adds, "The church is not reformed by idealists and romantics. It is formed by realists who know that commitment to Christ must be realistically embodied if it is to be faithful to the way of Christ himself."⁴

Such concrete formation of the community of faith requires that pastors and officers engage in the practical tasks necessary for building and sustaining the fellowship of believers, namely, a serious study of scripture throughout the life of the church, responsible preaching week in and week out, faithful pastoral care and caring, and the dedicated passing on of faith and understanding to new generations of God's people. Those tasks are not as glamorous as "envisioning the future" or "changing the world," but they are what build the Body of Christ, which is the necessary context for any significant renewal of Reformed theology.

Closely related to the rediscovery of the distinctiveness and integrity of the church are a whole series of complex and difficult issues in the relationship between church and state, Christ and culture. A renewal of Reformed theology will necessarily involve a serious consideration of the Reformed way of being the church, a way which combines elements both from the "churchly" and the "sectarian" traditions. The Reformed tradition has walked a middle way between the extremes of radical withdrawal from the world and complete accommodation to the values and power systems of the world. Obviously, we American Presbyterians come very close to the pole of cultural accommodation. Many of us are very comfortable with our upper-middle class orientation. Yet we are being forced both by fellow Christians and by the gospel itself to rethink our relationship to American culture. (As an aside, a future Calvin Colloquium could profitably focus on this whole issue of church-state relations in the thought of Calvin.) At the heart of these issues of church-state relationships is the integrity of the church. The church must continually be on guard against the ideological captivity of all powers and authorities that would seek to seize it or seduce it into their own service. A major contribution the Reformed tradition can make to this whole concern is its emphasis on the church as an intentional faith community that cares about the whole of life. The church of Calvin is one that is clear about its own unique identity and which out of that identity seeks to influence culture in accord with the just and compassionate purposes of God.

III

This brings us to a more specifically theological issue that is involved in the renewal of Reformed theology today, and that is a reconsideration of POWER. To speak of the sovereignty of God, as our tradition has so emphatically, is to speak of power, its nature and use. Increasingly I am convinced that in our consideration of the power of God we have used the image of Caesar on the throne instead of Christ on the cross. We have understood power as intimidation, the ability to force one's will on others. Such a view of power is clearly not what is seen in the cross, which as Paul insists is both the "wisdom and power of God." A reconsideration of power in the light of the cross would lead us away from the sovereignty of force and intimidation to the sovereignty of a love that is vulnerable yet invincible, tender yet triumphant. As I see it, the sovereignty of God is best understood in terms of the winsomeness of love, the persuasiveness of truth, the efficacy of grace, not the coerciveness of force. Such an understanding of

God's power has very important ramifications for our understanding of human power and its proper use. What is all too clear in the politics and polity of our church today is that we are still operating on the Caesarist view of power. We still are fundamentally concerned to win temporary majorities for our positions. In a system "not designed to work without trust and love," we continually try to win out over each other and then wonder why the church is so fragmented and ineffective. If we really believed in the majesty of truth and the ultimate invincibility of grace, our life together would take a very different shape under the rule of grace.

To sum up, I would suggest that the renewal of Reformed theology in the church today involves:

--the recovery of a vivid and compelling awareness of the majesty of God, which is more important than all our self-promotion--out of which comes courage;

--a sense of wonder before the mysteries of life in creation--out of which comes reverence, humility, and worship;

--a sense of realism in which the church is renewed by engagement in tasks of caring for real people in the real world, not by utopian dreams--out of which comes integrity of witness;

--a renewed sense of community in the church in which mutual service and upbuilding are more important than short-term political victories over one another--out of which comes wholeness and reconciliation;

--a renewed understanding of power, understood in terms of the winsomeness of love, the persuasion of truth, and the efficacy of grace, not intimidation--out of which comes effectiveness in mission without arrogance;

--a renewed concern to see Christ formed in us and our communities of faith--out of which alone comes the transformation of character that enables us to be "salt and light" in the world Christ loves and even now and even through us is redeeming according to his own purposes.

Notes

¹Calvin: Commentaries, vol. XXIII in The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, p. 52).

²Ibid., p. 54.

³Quoted in William H. Willimon, What's Right with the Church (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), p. 26. From Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Life Together, trans. J. W. Doberstein (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1954), pp. 27-28.

⁴Ibid., p. 26.