

Reformed Spirituality.

by Johan D.Tangelder

"Calvinism is the most nearly perfect interpretation of Christianity. In final analysis Calvinism and Christianity are practically synonymous."

R.B. Kuiper. As To Being Reformed, 1926

Isn't Kuiper's assertion too presumptuous? Of course we must acknowledge there are many Christians who are not part of the Calvinist heritage. Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, evangelicals, charismatics, etc. have their own spiritual traditions and practices. Even within Calvinism there are different traditions as it took hold not only in Holland but also in countries such as Hungary, France, Germany, Poland, England, Scotland, Ireland, South Africa, and in the United States. In other words, the Calvinist family has a variety of ethnic customs.

In this article, I aim to stress the need for a Reformed expression of spirituality. Why emphasize the latter? Many argue that being a Christian in today's postmodern world is tough enough already. Why highlight the differences instead of what we have in common with other Christians? Do doctrinal differences really matter? Isn't the study of doctrine purely the instilling of head knowledge? Shouldn't we just experience our faith and feel good about it? Why not simply follow Jesus? These arguments have a familiar ring. Throughout history Christians have become captive to alien ideologies and spiritualities (Col. 2:8). Hence, it is vital for our spiritual well being that we look to the rock from which we were cut, and to the quarry from which we were hewn (Isa. 51:1).

DEFINITIONS OF SPIRITUALITY

How do we define spirituality? In their essay *Spirituality in the Ecumenical Movement*, Gwen Cashmore and Joan Pulse claim that it is a binding force on the journey towards church unity. They say that it draws Christians into a common discipleship; it involves ecumenical communities and projects as well as feminist solidarity.

Some regard spirituality as the special preserve for saints, ascetics, and Christians who have reached a high level of perfection. But Biblical Christianity is not for the elite only. It belongs to the domain of every Christian. It empowers, shapes, and motivates the “spiritually discerned” (1 Cor. 2: 14f.). It is also more than a quest for a religious experience. It focuses on the deepening of our faith life and on our relationship with Jesus Christ, recognizing in Him the fullness of life that God wishes His people to possess. It concerns spiritual growth, the nourishing and tending of our personal faith and its practice in every area of life. It is a life oriented toward God.

REFORMED SPIRITUALITY

What constitutes Reformed spirituality? Some have suggested that the Reformation and its heirs are devoid of spirituality. They even think that “Reformed spirituality” is a blatant self-contradiction. But those who make this claim misunderstand the Reformed faith. The Reformation was passionately committed to **Biblical** spirituality. Of course, we can’t pretend that we have a special corner on spirituality or piety. But Reformed spirituality is rooted in the principles inherited from the 16th century Reformation. They are the three “solas”: sola Scriptura, sola gratia and sola fide. (Scripture alone, grace alone and faith alone.) Rev. H.J. Hegger, ex-Roman Catholic priest and convert to the Reformed faith, suggest that we add to list Solo Christo - through Christ alone. He notes that Solo Christo did play a role in the days of the Reformation. We must emphasize today that the Roman Catholic Church gives more and more preeminence to Mary as the way to God, while the Bible proclaims Christ as the only way. I believe that Hegger is right. Pope John Paul II is well known for his veneration of the virgin Mary. In his encyclical *The Gospel of Life*, he calls Mary “the mother of the Life by which everyone lives, and she brought it forth from herself she in some way brought to rebirth all those who were to live by that Life.”

TRINITARIAN

Reformed spirituality is unashamedly and fully Trinitarian. With this affirmation it links itself with

the historic - apostolic - catholic - Christian faith. Abraham Kuyper appropriately noted:

"In its deepest logic Calvinism has already been apprehended by Augustine; had long before Augustine been proclaimed to the City of the seven hills by the Apostle in his epistle to the Romans; and from Paul goes back to Israel and its prophets, yea to the tents of the patriarchs."

The chief and highest end of man is "to glorify God, and fully to enjoy Him forever"(The Westminster Larger Catechism; Q&A 1). And the same confession declares that there are "three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost"(Q&A 8). The triune God alone is the object of our worship. He alone matters. We exist for His good pleasure. In our worship we are ushered into His presence.

The Reformers firmly believed that to know God was to be changed by Him. Once you have met God, life can never be the same again. Therefore, the knowledge of God and the knowledge of ourselves are the essential components of our spiritual life. John Calvin states this principle in the opening sentence of the 1559 edition of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

"Nearly all the wisdom we possess, that is to say, true and sound wisdom, consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves...We never achieve a clear knowledge of ourselves until we have first looked upon God's face and then descend from contemplating Him to examine ourselves."

BIBLE

Reformed spirituality focuses for its vitality and life on the centrality and the study of the inerrant Scripture. The Bible does more than communicate knowledge that includes historical and biographical details and useful information. It is God's own Word wherein He reveals Himself.

It confronts us with the living Christ, leads us to true faith, possesses relevance for every aspect of Christian life, and appeals to both the intellect and the heart. It shapes a coherent, consistent, and dynamic world and life view. Reformed Christians, as John Calvin remarked, "speak where Scripture speaks, and are silent where Scripture is silent." When spirituality becomes detached from Scripture, it will degenerate into a pursuit of religious experiences in whatever form they may present themselves.

TRADITION

In our fast food, instant-everything generation history and tradition are shrugged off as irrelevant. What can the past teach our modern, information-saturated times? It is easy to cut off one's roots, but it is difficult to build something new once the roots are gone. Roots give a sense of belonging, stability, and have a restraining influence on innovation. Christians who cut themselves off from the past deprive themselves of a rich heritage. They lose their identity and sense of mission. Allister E. McGrath observed:

"The Reformation represents a systematic attempt to return to the vision of the New Testament or apostolic church...To take our roots seriously is to allow the voice of the past to speak to us before turning, with renewed and informed mind, to face the issues of the present."

Reformed spirituality recognizes that our generation is not the first one to read and study Scripture. Our forefathers were also taught and led by the Holy Spirit. Throughout history our Lord used His people to build His church. Although we are living in rapidly changing times, the questions that are raised differ little from those raised by previous generations. Where do I come from? Why am I here? Where am I going? What must I do to be saved? How can I get close to God?

We remember the cloud of witnesses who have gone before us, who struggled with their relationship with God. We remember the Reformation and the Reformation tradition that followed it. We can't think about spirituality in isolation from the past. History is a great teacher. The truths discovered by the Reformation help us to lay solid foundations. They will serve generations yet unborn. They will prevent us from falling into doctrinal errors. We have a living continuity with the church of the Reformation and take as our guide Paul's charge to Timothy, "Guard what has been entrusted to your care" (1 Tim. 6:20).

CONFESSIONAL

Reformed spirituality draws its strength and inspiration from Scripture, but its view of Scripture

is interpreted and “fenced in” by the historic Reformed confessions - The Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Canons of Dort, and the Westminster Confession. Reformed spirituality believes and practices the Christian faith as confessed by these historic documents. Why confessional spirituality? When two people speak about God, church, sin, atonement, they may have different interpretations. When a Jehovah Witness speaks about Jesus Christ he does not confess Him as the second person in the Trinity. When a Roman Catholic speaks of the church, he thinks of an institution headed by the Pope and his teaching authority. Our Reformed forefathers wrestled with the great doctrines of Scripture. They wanted to defend, confess, and expound them clearly and concisely. The confessions testify of God’s great deeds and His wonderful work of redemption. They bear witness to the fulfillment of the promise that the Holy Spirit will lead the Church in all truth. The confessions are the treasures of the Reformed faith.

As a pastor I have had the privilege of preaching through the confessions. When we were serving as missionaries in the Philippines, the Heidelberg Catechism took on a whole new meaning as we ministered to Filipinos who were born and raised in pre-Reformation folk Catholicism. The Filipino converts loved the Catechism and its clear expressions of basic Bible doctrines. In my pastoral work I have often referred to the first question and answer of the Heidelberg Catechism, which sums up the heart and the hope of the Gospel.

Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong - body and soul, in life and in death - to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven: in fact all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to Him, Christ, by His Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me whole-heartedly willing and ready from now on to live for Him.

Do we still work with our confessions? Faithful study of the Reformed confessions will enhance our spiritual awareness and strengthen our faith.

JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH

A key Reformed doctrine is justification by faith. The latter sparked Reformed spirituality. It is a spirituality that looks to God alone for forgiveness and justification. It presents faith in Christ as the **ONLY** method by which men are delivered from sin and reconciled to God. There can't be true spirituality without the Reformed doctrine of justification by faith. We must know it not only intellectually but also experientially. No one gets to know God unless he becomes justified by faith in Christ. And we can't live a godly life without having been justified. Our works flow out of our relationship with God. This doctrine puts Christ central and leads to the gathering of believers into churches. Christ the Savior puts on us, undeserving sinners, His robes of righteousness. To be justified is to be right with God. Faith is the channel through which the benefits of Christ flow to us. For Martin Luther the doctrine of justification by faith was of such crucial importance that he even declared, "he would gladly yield to the pope on ecclesiastical matters if the pope would embrace the true gospel."

Although we rightly equate the doctrine of justification by faith with the Reformation, we may not overlook one of the clearest statements made about it by the 16th century Italian Juan Valdes (c.1498-1541), scholar, politician, and theologian, who recovered this doctrine through reading the Pauline epistles in the original language. He did not leave the Roman Catholic church; but his book *The Experience of Justification of Faith* did inspire the faith of many influential churchmen and scholars in Italy. This classic was reprinted in 1984 and it is still a spiritual treat.

Many in our modern North American achievement and self-help oriented society find this doctrine of justification by faith demeaning. They believe they have to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. Even Bible-believing Christians have become influenced by this self-made man philosophy. Modern Christians tend to be activists. They feel they have to do something for God to get His approval and to earn a good standing with Him, not sufficiently realizing that nothing can be added to Christ's benefits.

ELECTION

The doctrine of election is another defining truth of Reformed spirituality. Our salvation does not

depend on our seeking for God. Because of man's sinful nature, the unconverted don't even seek God (Rom.3: 11). God is sovereign in salvation. God searches for sinners. He reaches out to us before we reach out to Him. God "gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 54). The doctrine of election reveals God's graciousness and goodness. It encourages believers and assures them of "the joy and glory of heaven" (Heidelberg Catechism, Q&A 52).

One of the historic confessions, which carefully expounds the doctrine of election, has lost its luster for many Reformed Christians. This is unfortunate, and a detriment to a God-centered spirituality. The Canons of Dort pastorally testify to the wonder of God's electing grace. This marvelous confession should be read and reread for the upbuilding of our faith. A Dutch exposition of the Canons calls the latter *The Treasure of Christ's Bride* (De Schat van Christus' Bruid). A fitting description of its contents!

THE CHURCH

Reformed spirituality glories in the covenant of grace, another golden thread woven throughout the Scriptures. Our Christian faith is defined by our relationship to our covenant God and His people. Our spirituality is not restricted to individualistic piety: we are always a part of a network of relationships, of the communion of saints (1 Cor.12). The Christian community is a vital component of our spiritual life. Sadly, loneliness is often every bit as common among Christians as among unbelievers. Many Christians are waging solitary battles. Christians need bonding, encouragement, and mutual accountability.

The institutional church is a necessary and God-ordained means of spiritual growth and development through fellowship, worship and hearing the Word of the Lord. Personal appropriation of faith has never been understood by the Reformers as a rejection or weakening of the church. They were totally committed to the well being of the church.

HOLISTIC

The present age has produced an unprecedented split between the sacred and the secular. It has privatized faith. This situation is intolerable. The Reformed faith does not confine spirituality to the “sacred domain,” of church, family, and personal devotions, leaving the rest of the world to its own evil devices. All of life is lived in submission to the Lordship of Christ. The Bible does not distinguish between a secular workplace and a Sunday spirituality. The Biblical distinction is between grace and sin. The Biblically mature Christian offers his whole life - body and soul - as a living sacrifice to God (Rom.12: 1-3). The South African philosopher B.J. van der Walt notes that the Christian life touches on all spheres of life: commerce (Acts 4:32-35), justice (1 Corinthians 6:1-6), the relationship between master and slave (1 Peter 2:18), the relationship between husband and wife (Ephesians 5:21-32) and many more - even the food and drink we consume (1 Corinthians 10 : 31).

CONCLUSION

Does our lifestyle differ from our non-Christian neighbors? Do we draw strength for holistic living out of an authentic relationship with the Lord? Is our spirituality a personal and covenantal response of thanksgiving to God for all that He has done for our salvation? There is no reason for pride. Our times call for sober reflection on our Reformed heritage. Do we still prize and value it?