
WHAT IS REFORMED THEOLOGY?

Session 5: The Difference Between Roman Catholic and Reformed Doctrine

FOUNDATIONAL DIFFERENCE

- Creeds are *required standards* while Confessions of Faith are *generally held convictions* of a religious body.
- The Roman Catholic Church (RCC) is *creedal*, with its foundations and requirements in the Apostles and Nicene Creeds.
 - One reason that the RCC is widely divergent in theology is that it has few “have to believe” documents.
 - The RCC does have various catechisms that keep them fairly uniform. In 1992 Pope John Paul II produced a catechism which is the “standard,” but it is not required and is specifically stated that it does not “replace the local catechisms duly approved by the ecclesiastical authorities” of each diocese.
- The Reformed Churches are *confessional*, with their foundations and requirements in their various *confessions of faith*.
 - While the confessions are not “required creeds,” the effect of them is required because they are used in denominational seminaries and institutions and become the *de facto* creed.

DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCES

IN SCRIPTURE

- RCC:
 - *“The Son is his Father's definitive Word; so there will be no further Revelation after him.”* – thus all Scripture is read *Christologically*.
 - *“All Sacred Scripture is but one book, and that one book is Christ, because all divine Scripture speaks of Christ, and all divine Scripture is fulfilled in Christ”*
 - *“Interpretation of the inspired Scripture must be attentive above all to what God wants to reveal through the sacred authors for our salvation.”*
 - In interpretation, *“The Gospels are the heart of all the Scriptures”* because they are our principal source for the life and teaching of the Incarnate Word, our Saviour.”
 - *“The task of interpreting the Word of God authentically has been entrusted solely to the Magisterium of the Church, that is, to the Pope and to the bishops in communion with him.”*
 - The RCC canon includes 6 additional books of the Old Testament and combines Jeremiah and Lamentations as one book.
- Reformed:
 - Also takes a Christological approach to Scripture.
 - Also takes a “Gospel-centered” approach to interpretation.
 - Concerning *“the Magisterium”* Reformed theology does not hold the position as strongly as the RCC, but does say, “It belongs to synods and councils, ministerially to determine controversies of faith and cases of conscience; to set down rules and directions for the better ordering of the public worship of God, and government of his Church.” (Westminster XXXI)
 - Rejects the RCC canon.

- Analysis:
 - Both RCC and Reformed Theology (RT) take a Christ-centered, Gospel-centered (i.e., the four Gospels) approach to interpretation. This has a good sound, but a detrimental effect, namely that it fails to distinguish the dispensations.
 - Both RCC and RT place emphasis on the interpretation of broader authorities outside of the individual believer or the local church.

IN CREATION AND PROVIDENCE

- In Creation:
 - RCC takes a “science friendly” approach to creation, and gives emphasis to *why* rather than *when*.
 - RT (in its confessions) takes a stronger creationist position. In modern reality, RT is not unified on the issue.
- In Providence:
 - RCC takes a *free will* approach to the activity of mankind.
 - Archbishop George H. Niederauer: *“Catholic teaching on free will recognizes that God has given men and women the capacity to choose good or evil in their lives. The bishops at the Second Vatican Council declared that the human person, endowed with freedom, is “an outstanding manifestation of the divine image.”*
<https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/column/free-will-conscience-and-moral-choice-what-catholics-believe-1087>
 - RT takes an approach that says God ordains all events and that any freedom of the will is simply a secondary cause used by God to distance Himself from the sin He ordained.
 - God “ordereth them [all things] to fall out, according to the nature of second causes, either necessarily, freely, or contingently.” (Westminster IV, I)
- Analysis: the doctrine that God orders all things is a reformation doctrine alone.

IN THE FALL AND ORIGINAL SIN

- The Roman Catholic Position
 - RCC: *God... can be known with certainty from the created world by the natural light of human reason. Without this capacity, man would not be able to welcome God's revelation. Man has this capacity because he is created "in the image of God".*
 - RCC: *man stands in need of being enlightened by God's revelation, not only about those things that exceed his understanding, but also "about those religious and moral truths which of themselves are not beyond the grasp of human reason, so that even in the present condition of the human race, they can be known by all men with ease, with firm certainty and with no admixture of error"*
- The Reformed Theology Position:
 - RT: man is *wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of the soul and body*” (Westminster VI, II).
 - RT: Before the fall man was *“capable in all things to will agreeably to the will of God”* and after the fall he is *“wicked, perverse, and corrupt in all his ways.”* (Belgic, XIV).
- Analysis:
 - The doctrine of original sin is largely a RT doctrine.
 - This is because the RCC does not hold to a “fallen capacity” view of mankind.
 - It is also because the RCC does not hold strongly to a singular couple from which mankind originated: *“Very few people today other than fundamentalists and creationists believe in an actual first couple named Adam and Eve who physically bequeathed their sin to the human race.”*
<https://www.uscatholic.org/articles/201211/what-original-sin-26603>

IN GOD'S COVENANTS WITH MAN

- Because the *Covenant of Works* and the *Covenant of Grace* in RT is based on the doctrine of original sin, the Catholic church is not in need of the man-made doctrine of covenants.

IN THE IDENTITY OF THE CHURCH

- RCC: *"We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church"* -The Nicene Creed
- RT: *"The catholic or universal Church which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect"* (Westminster XXV, I).
 - RT (out of practical necessity) added the idea of the "invisible" church (all the elect), while the RCC only teaches a "visible" church (those in the institution of the church).
- Both churches believe that salvation is only possible within the church.
 - RCC:
 - *[The Church] has received the keys of the Kingdom of heaven so that, in her, sins may be forgiven through Christ's blood*
 - *By Christ's will, the Church possesses the power to forgive the sins of the baptized and exercises it through bishops and priests*
 - RT:
 - outside the church *"there is no ordinary possibility of salvation"* (Westminster XXV, II)
 - *"To these officers [of the church] the key of the kingdom of heaven are committed: by virtue whereof, they have power respectively to retain, and remit sins..."* (Westminster XXX, II)

IN THE SACRAMENTS OF THE CHURCH

- RCC: *The Church was made manifest to the world on the day of Pentecost by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The gift of the Spirit ushers in a new era in the "dispensation of the mystery" the age of the Church, during which Christ manifests, makes present, and communicates his work of salvation through the liturgy of his Church, "until he comes." In this age of the Church Christ now lives and acts in and with his Church, in a new way appropriate to this new age. He acts through the sacraments in what the common Tradition of the East and the West calls "the sacramental economy"*
- RT: *"In every sacrament is a spiritual relation between the sign and the thing signified" so that the "effects of one is attributed to the other."* (That is, the effect of the cross is attributed to the sacrament of the Lord's Supper).
- Analysis:
 - Outside of the number of sacraments and minor differences of the means through which God works in sacraments, the sacraments are seen as essential elements of receiving God's grace in both RT and RCC.
 - In RCC sacraments are a "sign and instrument" while in RT they are a "sign and seal" of God's grace.